THE CULTURE OF 'THE CULTURE': UTOPIAN PROCESSES IN IAIN M. BANKS'S SPACE OPERA SERIES

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

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Abstract

This thesis provides a comprehensive critical analysis of Iain M. Banks's Culture series, ten science fiction (SF) texts concerned with the Culture, Banks's vision of his "personal utopia": *Consider Phlebas* (1987), *The Player of Games* (1988), *Use of Weapons* (1990), *The State of the Art* (1991), *Excession* (1996), *Inversions* (1998), *Look to Windward* (2000), *Matter* (2008), *Surface Detail* (2010), and *The Hydrogen Sonata* (2012). I place this series within the context of the space opera sub-genre, and – drawing upon a critical toolkit developed by Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. in *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (2008) – I explore the extent to which Banks achieved his goal of reshaping the sub-genre for the political Left. Due to the complexity and ambiguity of Banks's creation, this research addresses the central question: what is the Culture? I argue that the Culture constitutes a utopian variation of Csicsery-Ronay's *technologiade*, challenging the notion that Banks's creation represents an empire or imperialist project. I consider the Culture *as a culture*: peoples linked by a shared value system and way of life; a method of development and nurturing; a system of utopian processes. Drawing on *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005), I argue that the Culture series demonstrates Frederic Jameson's notion of 'thinking the break', with Banks's writing constantly affirming the possibility and desirability of radical sociopolitical change. I identify six key radical moves away from the non-utopian present – characterised as shifts, breaks or apocalypses – which form the Culture's utopian processes, with each chapter exploring the extent to which the Culture has overcome a fundamental obstacle impeding the path to utopia. The Culture has moved beyond material scarcity, alienated labour, capitalism, and the class-system, maintaining State functions. Culture citizens are notable for significantly adapting their own bodies and minds – controlling senescence and ultimately death itself – but motivated by the desire to improve rather than transcend their humanity. The Culture has achieved a form of equality between the sexes and removed patriarchy, yet is still coping with the implications of sex and gender fluidity. Despite relying upon seemingly quasi-religious innovations, the Culture is entirely secular, having moved beyond any kind of religious or faith-based worldview. Finally, the Culture is perhaps an example of what Jameson has called 'the death of art', as creative and artistic practice seems to have become part of everyday life, which contrasts with the numerous artworks produced on its margins.

Contents

Acknowledgements

When I first met Nick in 2010 to discuss my ideas, he said that this project "had legs" – thanks so much to him for helping it to walk, guiding it down the road, and steering it away from potholes. Thanks also to all from the Department of Arts and Humanities who have supported my research during this time. I could not have funded this research without the various employers with whom I've worked during my time studying: especial thanks to Rachel Huckvale, Alex Buchanan, Trudi Hale, Rob Wannerton and Andrew Kershaw. Further thanks to all my friends, colleagues and fellow intrepid-PhD-adventurers who've helped keep me sane. Cheers to Barbara and all in the Brunel branches of Costa and Starbucks: your caffeinated beverages are the lifeblood of the University. Mum and Dad – to say that I could not have done this without you is a massive understatement: you've always supported my decisions, however unorthodox. Thanks for years of love, slap-up dinners, lifts, London jaunts, and everything else. Thanks to all who attended 'The State of the Culture' conference in 2013 where many ideas from this thesis were discussed, but especially Ken MacLeod for participating at such a difficult time. Thanks to Gary Lloyd for discussing the music he created with Iain, as well as for providing unique insight into his friend's musical tastes and background.

Finally, more thanks than I can effectively articulate in words to Em who has been helping with this project in many ways from the outset. I really appreciate you reading my thesis and various drafts thereof, and thanks for putting up with my occasional meltdowns, usually late at night. Most importantly, thanks for your love and affection.

Then there's the man himself: Iain (M.) Banks. It's a pretty strange thing to hear the author you're working on has died suddenly, right in the middle of your research. Even though I can only claim to have known Iain in a vague, vicarious way from reading his writing and hearing him speak, he was clearly a wonderful guy, not to mention a talented and fearless writer. I toast both Iain Banks and Iain M. Banks, figurative whiskey in hand.

List of Abbreviations

All references in this thesis pertain to the editions listed in the Bibliography, except those below that refer to date of initial publication.

<u>The Culture Series</u>

- ❖ *Consider Phlebas* (1987) – *CP*
- ❖ *The Player of Games* (1988) – *PoG*
- ❖ *Use of Weapons* (1990) – *UoW*
- ❖ *The State of the Art* (1991) – *TSotA*
    - o 'The State of the Art' – 'TSotA'
    - o 'A Gift from the Culture' – 'AGftC'
- ❖ *Excession* (1996) – *E*
- ❖ *Inversions* (1998) – *I*[1]
- ❖ *Look to Windward* (2000) – *LtW*
- ❖ *Matter* (2008) – *M*
- ❖ *Surface Detail* (2010) – *SD*
- ❖ *The Hydrogen Sonata* (2012) – *THS*

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[1] *Inversions* is often considered something of a *de facto* Culture novel: it is generally published without the label 'A Culture novel', unlike the other texts; yet is widely regarded as depicting Special Circumstances agents operating *in cognito*, as is discussed in Chapter One. Therefore, in this analysis, I treat *Inversions* as an integral part of the Culture series.

"When I was a child, when I was an adolescent, books saved me from despair: that convinced me that culture was the highest of values"

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Woman Destroyed*.[2]

"Not even sure of our own identity: just who is Culture? Where exactly does it begin and end? Who is and who isn't? [...] no clear boundaries to the Culture, then; it just fades away at the edges, both fraying and spreading. So who are we?"

Iain M. Banks, *Consider Phlebas* (334).

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[2] Simone De Beauvoir, *The Woman Destroyed*, (New York: Pantam, 1969) 22.

Introduction

The present thesis provides a detailed and comprehensive critical analysis of a set of ten science fiction (SF) texts published by Iain M. Banks between 1987 and 2012 concerned with the 'Culture', which is henceforth known as the Culture series. This series is certainly Banks's most famous creation within SF, and its popularity is arguably growing enough to deem it his most famous work in general. My research began by asking a seemingly straightforward question: what is the Culture? Given that it forms the principal concern of this series, it would be reasonable to assume that providing a short, accurate and relatively straightforward definition of the Culture would not be difficult. Yet, despite a small but significant volume of critical works concerned with the Culture, it has proven difficult to define in a quick, all-encompassing manner that fully encapsulates its diversity and accurately explains its complexity. Few existing definitions are free from complication or contradiction; and attempts to define the Culture merely in one word or sentence often result in a narrow and reductive simplification. However accurate such definitions may arguably be, however convincing they may seem, they inevitably fail to take into account some of the Culture's most crucial elements.

While Banks held a firm personal interpretation of his creation from the outset, of which he remained convinced throughout his career, he nevertheless foregrounds the slipperiness of the Culture's meaning from the start of the series, as exemplified by the epigram above, taken from the first published Culture novel, *Consider Phlebas*. Here the character Fal 'Ngeestra airs her uncertainties and insecurities about the exact nature of the Culture to which she belongs, asking: "So who are we?" It is significant that 'Ngeestra is a 'Referrer' for the Culture: an individual marked out for their insight and understanding, often specifically drawn upon for assistance in solving intractable problems. The implication is clear: if even the sharpest individuals from the Culture struggle to understand the nature of something to which they belong, their own environment, then it seems that few can. 'Ngeestra's language seems ambiguous and confused: initially, she describes the Culture using the pronoun 'it', then, in the following sentence, she uses the pronoun 'us'. The Culture, then, seems amorphous, fluid, indistinct. Does the term refer to a

particular group of people, the 'us' to whom she refers? Or does it refer in fact to a place, a physical location, in which they live, a kind of civilisation? Or is she asking what *kind* of civilisation? and where does it begin and end? Maybe it is nothing physical at all, instead representing a shared way of thinking, an outlook, a philosophy. It is of course essential for any reader of this series to ask such questions in order to follow Banks's narratives; in fact, as readers, we are forced to do so constantly as the answer at which we arrive can vary from text to text, chapter to chapter, even line by line. These complications and contradictions, which seem almost to epitomise the Culture are, it seems, entirely deliberate, helping Banks form a unique and truly original literary creation, which benefits from continual (re)evaluation and analysis.

      As well as offering a critical examination of the series, this thesis builds evidence to support, and present, a definition/redefinition of the Culture, responding to the complexity and nuance of Banks's series. Such complexity in the series was made clear to me from the outset of my reading. Having discovered Iain Banks's 'mainstream' fictions as an undergraduate, I later learned of the SF string to this author's already fearsome bow, reading first *Matter* then *Excession*. Beginning so late in the series, and initially reading without consideration of the order of publication or internal chronology, is perhaps not an advisable method of beginning such a task; I think, however, it emphasised the beguiling intricacy and subtlety of Banks's writing, as well as eventually helping me to develop my own interpretation of this series, which perhaps would have been different if I had read them in the order of release. Upon delving deeper into the subject through the small body of preexisting critical works on the Culture, I realised that it has predominantly been defined either as a kind of utopia or as a kind of empire – two terms that could be seen as contradictory and which certainly raise further questions: how can one society be considered as both a kind of ideal society and a system innately characterised by subjugation and oppression? By which definition of these complex terms can the Culture be most effectively understood? How can I develop a methodological structure that enables me to analyse the Culture in a fresh manner, which addresses such issues and provides informed answers to these questions?

      In this thesis, I argue that the Culture *is* culture: a way of life; a method of social/personal development and nurturing; a utopian procedure. This process is the manifestation of humankind's progressive tendencies that galvanises likeminded

people into action to build a utopia. This utopia has been established over a long period of time by attempting to effect radical changes – six of which are explored in this thesis – to the societies from which the Culture originated, removing obstacles from the path of progress. The society that now stands at this point is artificial: a 'second nature', in the Marxist sense, described by Istvan Csicsery-Ronay JR. as "the creation by human labour and technology of a humanely constructed world."[3] Such a second nature, which develops a structure over those who live underneath it to allow them freedom, achieves a positive, utopian purpose; yet this structure has the potential to be used for negative, dystopian purposes, such as establishing an empire. In order to stop such an imperial shift from occurring, the Culture is constantly subject to self-analysis; to ensure that it does not become stagnant, the Culture's culture is constantly in a state of flux, becoming the means by which it achieves continual growth and development.

In the remainder of this introduction I provide a biographical overview of Iain M. Banks, detailing key aspects of his personal and professional life, followed by a short overview of the Culture as he developed it over the years, for the purpose of explaining to/reminding the reader about key aspects of Banks's sequence to aid their reading. I then place Banks's Culture series within the context of other works of SF, and Banks himself within the context of other SF writers, with particular focus on the SF sub-genre of 'space opera' with which Banks is closely associated. I then outline the methodological approach taken in this thesis, and provide an overview of the key terms that have been applied to the Culture in order to define it.

As explained, the wider critical motivation for this study is a desire to move towards a clearer and more specific definition of the Culture, which builds upon those previously discussed by other scholars, and draws a nuanced all-encompassing conclusion. A large-scale literary creation of such complexity is best suited to discussion as a thesis, due to the depth and breadth of analysis that this form allows; therefore this study will draw upon the existing range of critical material available that discusses the Culture to inform its arguments, building upon these pre-existing ideas and assimilating them into a new critical framework. I hope that my work will

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[3] Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2008) 80. See also: Darko Suvin, *Positions and Pressupositions in Science Fiction* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1988), 70; and Georg Lukács, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," from *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. (MIT Press. Cambridge, MA: 1971) 83.

inspire and inform the work of subsequent scholars, particularly those also working on Banks' oeuvre, and in SF studies generally. I intend this study to be a detailed and all-encompassing evaluation and critical analysis of the Culture, providing the substantial length and breadth of analysis that it deserves.

Iain M. Banks (1954-2013)

Before this analysis can begin, it is essential to understand something of Banks's personal background as well as his literary career. Iain Banks was born in Fife, Scotland, on 16 February 1954 to middle class parents: his mother was an ice skater whilst his father was an officer in the Admiralty.[4] Banks claimed he wished to be "a Writer" from age 11, as well as an actor.[5] Whilst attending Gourock and Greenock High Schools Banks met Ken MacLeod, who became a life-long friend, and also forged a successful career writing SF. Banks studied English, Philosophy and Psychology at the University of Stirling,[6] where he began writing poetry and experimenting with novel writing, graduating in 1975. In his youth he travelled around Europe and North America, and lived in London for several years working in various roles.[7] Throughout his career as publishing writer he published 13 works of SF as Iain M. Banks, and 15 so-called mainstream fictions, a poetry collection and memoir as Iain Banks, this split writing personality adopted at the request of his publisher, although *Transition* (2009) was published as mainstream fiction in the UK and SF in the US.[8] Banks won the British Science Fiction Award twice: for the non-Culture SF novel *Feersum Endjinn* in 1994, and *Excession* in 1996.[9] Banks's third non-Culture SF novel *The Algebraist* was nominated for a Hugo Award in 2005.[10] Banks identified himself as an atheist,[11] humanist,[12] and feminist,[13] throughout his

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[4] Colin Hughes, 'Doing the Business', The *Guardian*, 7 August 1999, www.theguardian.com/books/1999/aug/07/fiction.iainbanks (Accessed 4 October, 2015); Isobel Murray, ed., 'Interview with Iain Banks, 29th November 1988,' in *Scottish Writers Talking 2*, 2-3.
[5] Colin Hughes, 'Doing the Business'; and 'A Writer's Life: Iain Banks', the *Telegraph*, 3 November 2003. www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/3605692/A-writers-life-Iain-Banks.html (Accessed 4 October, 2015).
[6] Murray, 'Interview with Iain Banks', 13.
[7] Hughes, 'Doing the Business'.
[8] 'Obituary: Iain Banks', the *Telegraph*, 9 June 2003. www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/culture-obituaries/books-obituaries/10108884/Iain-Banks.html (Accessed 4 October, 2015).
[9] 'About the British Science Fiction Awards', www.bsfa.co.uk/bsfa-awards/ (Accessed 3 October, 2015).
[10] The Official Site of the Hugo Awards, '2005 Hugo Awards'. www.thehugoawards.org/hugo-history/2005-hugo-awards/ (Accessed 2 November 2015).
[11] 'Profile: Iain Banks', Secularism.org. www.secularism.org.uk/iainbanks.html

life, as well as a socialist[14] with complex Left-wing political views.

Banks was a long-term 'Old' Labour voter, who became disillusioned with the party in the 'New Labour' years, under the leadership of Tony Blair from 1979-1990. According to MacLeod Banks "switched his practical vote to the Scottish National Party [SNP] and his protest vote to the Scottish Socialists" and probably the UK Green Party.[15] On Banks's support of the SNP, MacLeod points out this "didn't come from nationalism but from reformism," but instead reflected Banks's "life-long, heart-felt hatred for the Conservative and Unionist Party."[16] Voting for Scotland to leave the United Kingdom, then, was for Banks the only way that his country could separate itself from an unwanted Tory government for whom they had not voted, rather than a specific dislike of the union itself. [17]

On matters of Western Imperialism, with which his Culture series engages extensively, MacLeod states that Banks "opposed every war the British state waged in his lifetime, with the one exception of NATO's war over Kosovo," most notably the Iraq War in 2003 to which Banks was "vehemently opposed".[18] In response to Blair's invasion of Iraq, Banks performed one of several idiosyncratic acts of political protest for which he became known throughout his life: physically cutting up his passport and posting it to the Prime Minister at Downing Street.[19] Seeing the Iraq War as illegal and immoral, to Banks the blame lay squarely with Blair despite Gordon Brown's involvement: "There is the technicality of cabinet responsibility," Banks argued, "but it was Blair who bowed to Bush in the first place, and Blair who convinced the Labour party and parliament of the need to go to war with a dossier that was so close

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[12] 'In memoriam: Iain Banks, novelist, humanist, 'evangelical atheist'', The *Examiner*, 9 July 2013. www.examiner.com/article/in-memoriam-iain-banks-novelist-humanist-evangelical-atheist (Accessed 3 October, 2015).

[13] *The Wasp Factory* "was supposed to be a pro-feminist work" – 'Out of this World', Book Club: Iain Banks, the *Guardian*, 12 July 2008. www.theguardian.com/books/2008/jul/12/saturdayreviewsfeatres.guardianreview5 (Accessed 4 October, 20105).

[14] "Being a liberal, on the left, a socialist" – Scott Beauchamp, 'The Future Might Be a Hoot: How Iain M. Banks Imagines Utopia', The *Atlantic*, 15 January 2013. www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/01/the-future-might-be-a-hoot-how-iain-m-banks-imagines-utopia/267211/ (Accessed 3 October, 2015).

[15] Ken MacLeod, 'Ken MacLeod on Iain Banks', *Internationalist Socialist Network* website, 23 July, 2013. Available at: http://internationalsocialistnetwork.org/index.php/ideas-and-arguments/analysis/193-ken-macleod-on-iain-banks-use-of-calculators (Accessed 4 January, 2017).

[16] MacLeod, 'Ken MacLeod on Iain Banks'.

[17] MacLeod, 'Ken MacLeod on Iain Banks'.

[18] MacLeod, 'Ken MacLeod on Iain Banks'.

[19] Stuart Jeffries, 'Man of Culture', 25 May, 2007 www.theguardian.com/books/2007/may/25/hayfestival2007.hayfestival (Accessed 3 October, 2015).

to lying that it makes no difference."[20] Following this, in 2004, Banks became a signatory on a campaign to impeach Tony Blair on the grounds of "Misleading Parliament and the country over Iraq", "Negligence and incompetence over weapons of mass destruction", "Undermining the constitution", and "Entering into a secret agreement with the US president".[21] The campaign, however, which was reportedly also signed by up to 23 MPs and included other celebrities such as Brian Eno and Susan Wooldridge, was ultimately not selected for debate in the House of Commons.

Banks regularly wrote letters to national newspapers, especially the *Guardian*, expressing firm views on topical political issues.[22] Known for his passion for whiskey, Banks's hobbies also included driving classic cars and composing music.

Banks announced his diagnosis with terminal gallbladder cancer on his website in 2013, and was widely praised for the bravery with which he handled his final few months. Banks died on 9 June 2013, shortly before the publication of his final novel *The Quarry* in the same year. An asteroid, '(5099) Iainbanks', was named in his honour the same year. According to Banks's wishes, a volume of poetry featuring both his own work and that of MacLeod was published in 2015. In the same year, MacLeod revealed that towards the end of his life Banks had asked him to continue writing Culture novels in his own style; Banks, however, had been unable to leave notes on his latest ideas, which – coupled with MacLeod's already conflicted feelings on the request – therefore unfortunately leaves this prospect unlikely.[23]

Banks, SF and Controversial Beginnings

While Banks's oeuvre is connected to several modes and genres of writing – crime thriller, gothic horror, *bildungsroman*, etc. – it is the genre of SF with which it is most closely associated. Banks traces his love of SF back as far as his formative reading experiences in junior high school in Gourock, Inverclyde, circa. 1963:

In the Gourock library there was an absolute mine of all those wonderful yellow

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[20] Stuart Jeffries, 'Man of Culture'. 25 May, 2007.
https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/may/25/hayfestival2007.hayfestival
[21] 'Blair impeachment campaign starts, 27 August, 2004
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/3600438.stm
[22] For example, on 5 April 2013, Banks wrote a letter to the *Guardian* entitled 'Why I Support a Cultural Boycott of Israel': www.theguardian.com/books/2013/apr/05/iain-banks-cultural-boycott-israel (Accessed 3 October, 2015).
[23] Xantha Leatham, 'Dying Wish of Scots Author Revealed', The *Scotsman*, 15 February 2015. www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/dying-wish-of-scots-author-iain-banks-revealed-1-3690835 (Accessed 1 April, 2016).

Gollancz covers, and Ya-haa! I only realized years later that I'd read lots and lots of stories by people like Robert Heinlein, but I never bothered with the titles of the books, or the name of the authors. If it was a yellow Gollancz, it was an SF book. That was for me.[24]

The Gollancz series in question includes notable SF classics, such as: *The Terminal Beach*, by J.G. Ballard (1964); Heinlein's *Orphans of the Sky* (1941); and *Dune* by Frank Herbert (1965). Banks submitted manuscripts of his early SF material to Gollancz, years later, although they were rejected.[25] This series was reissued, complete with replicas of the original yellow jackets, in 2011 to mark 50 years of the Gollancz imprint of Orion publishing. As a teenager in the 1970s, Banks wrote what he considered at the time to be his first ever novel-length work, entitled *The Hungarian Lift Jet*: while it was not overtly SF, Banks acknowledges its roots in genre narratives, describing the 10,000 word manuscript as "based on television", one of many "adventure stories about secret agents and spies" that occupied his mind on sleepless nights.[26] Although somewhat reluctant to divulge many details of his early, unpublished works that were written prior to *The Wasp Factory*, which some accounts number as many as six,[27] he has stated that the title *The Hungarian Lift Jet* refers to "a piece of technology", suggesting that the preoccupations of his later work were present from a young age. When Banks was an undergraduate between approximately 1972-1975, following a second longer novel attempt that he describes as "this incredible 400,000-word long mega blockbuster that wouldn't end," he wrote the unnamed novel that he considers as his first work of SF.[28]

It wasn't until 1987, however, that Banks would officially publish anything in the SF genre. Banks's debut *The Wasp Factory* was published in 1984, after several rejections, under the name 'Iain Banks'. Despite this, Banks's passion for SF can be understood to permeate most of his work to a certain extent, including his debut. During the summer of 1980 when he was writing *The Wasp Factory*, Banks admitted that he "had deliberately turned away from science fiction" because there were more available outlets for mainstream publishing, and therefore more chances for him to secure some kind of publication and begin his career. Yet he had not really turned

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[24] Murray, 'Interview with Iain Banks', 7.

[25] Ibid., 16.

[26] Ibid., 14.

[27] Thom Nairn, "Iain Banks and the fiction factory", in G.A. Wallace and R. Stevenson, eds., *The Scottish Novel Since the Seventies: New Visions, Old Dreams* (Edinburgh University Press, 1993) 127-35; 128, quoted in Middleton, 1999, 6.

[28] Murray, 'Interview with Iain Banks', 15.

away from SF. Describing writing *The Wasp Factory*, Banks stated that: "I had quite deliberately chosen a book which still had a setting and a character that gave you some of the freedoms you have in science fiction, making up your own society and religion […] There is some feeling of remoteness of the island almost being another planet."[29] It is significant that Banks decided to locate this 'other planet' – an island belonging to the Cauldhames, the family of the protagonist – off the coast of Scotland, as it suggests that his thematic and political preoccupations were present from the start of his career. Further strengthening ties between Banks's debut and his Culture series, the Cauldhames' island remains unnamed, suggesting that Banks had no particular location in mind, and that the island does not exist outside Bank's fictional iteration of Scotland: it is, therefore, literally *Outopos*: the Greek term for "no place", from which Sir Thomas More originally derived the neologism 'utopia' – one prominent understanding of the Culture. As observed by a *Mail on Sunday* reviewer, the quality of a "total reality" present in *The Wasp Factory* again reflects the complete, unitary environments of Banks's Culture fiction, which he had been unsuccessfully attempting to publish at the time. Tim Middleton has argued that, "while the politics of the Culture are (in all senses) light-years away from those of 1980s Scotland", the series engages with "moral and social concerns which can, if the reader wishes, be related to Scottish culture and society in the late Twentieth Century."[30] In turn, the Culture has been described, like Scotland itself before the Scotland Act of 1998, as a "stateless nation".[31]

The location of the Cauldhames' island – whether fictional or not – is also significant because it marks a trend in Banks's work right from the outset: as Tim Middleton observes, "Banks draws extensively upon Scottish history and culture, both for densely realized locales and specific set-piece scenes and sequences."[32] Clearly this is most explicit in Banks's more mimetic, realist fiction where characters such as Prentice McHoan in *The Crow Road* (1992) and Stewart Gilmour in *Stonemouth* (2012), follow in their author's footsteps and do – as Banks himself did between December 1979 and 1983 – the "standard Scottish thing of moving down to

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[29] Murray, 'Interview with Iain Banks', 29.
[30] Ibid., 6.
[31] Middleton, Tim. 'The Works of Iain M. Banks: A Critical Introduction', *Foundation*, 76 (Summer 1999), 6.
[32] Ibid., 5.

London."[33] Also, as an individual who has voted for the Scottish National Party, largely as a protest vote, on several occasions,[34] Banks's work is often concerned with political tensions between England and Scotland, with characters such as Stephen Poole from *Dead Air* (2002) passionately challenging the so-called "cultural Imperialism" inherent in the nature of the United Kingdom. [35]

While Banks was no doubt aware that the themes of his debut and the nature of his protagonist – a sadistic child killer – may prove controversial to some extent, he could never have predicted the torrent of outrage and moral panic that broke out in the British press upon publication of *The Wasp Factory*. Banks introduced an unsuspecting literary world to protagonist Frank Cauldhame, whose isolation on a remote Scottish island leaves him free to construct an elaborate "personal mythology" involving ritualistic animal sacrifice, and the calm, calculated murder of young relatives. Against a background of social and political conservatism under the government, then led by Margaret Thatcher, the portrayal of violence and sadism in *The Wasp Factory* led it to become embroiled in hysteria surrounding the prevalence of gore-filled horror films – or "video nasties" – at the time. Reviews in right-wing newspapers echoed this reaction by frequently denouncing Banks's debut. *The Times* described it as "mediocre", "crassly-explicit" and "perhaps a joke"; the *Sunday Express* called it "a silly, gloatingly sadistic and grisly yarn"; and a reviewer for the *Sunday Telegraph*, whilst giving Banks credit for "a polished debut", concluded that "enjoy it I did not".[36]

To other publications, however, *The Wasp Factory* displayed the signs of a promising young writer, and preempted some of the key features of Banks's works that would follow in later years: according to *Punch*, "*The Wasp Factory* is […] a minor masterpiece", filled with "death, blood and gore", but lightened with "dark humour" and "surreal touches"; *The Financial Times* called it "a Gothic horror of quite exceptional quality"; and *The Mail on Sunday* conceded, despite its largely negative review, that "these pages have a total reality rare in fiction."[37] In later years, while the anger and gusto of these initial reactions waned considerably, *The Wasp*

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[33] Murray, 'Interview with Iain Banks', 16.

[34] Iain Banks, 'Scotland and England: what future for the Union?' The *Observer*, Sunday 28 August 2011 www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2011/aug/28/scottish-independence-snp-iain-banks (Accessed 11 November, 2011)

[35] Iain Banks, *Dead Air* (Orbit: London, 2003) 151.

[36] Iain Banks, *The Wasp Factory* (London: Macmillan, 1984). Inside front cover.

[37] Ibid.

Factory and its surrounding infamy continued to be regularly mentioned during discussion of the text and its author's career, in academic and broader literary contexts.

If *The Wasp Factory* provided Banks with a framework flexible enough to incorporate some of the "freedoms" allowed by SF that were important to him whilst still publishing under his mainstream moniker, then some other novels – in particular *Walking on Glass* (1985), *The Bridge* (1986) and *Transition* (2009) – allowed him even greater capacity to integrate SF tropes into otherwise mainstream fiction. These texts can be understood as works of "slipstream" fiction, where science fictional or fantastic tropes bleed into an otherwise recognisable iteration of consensus reality: "a kind of sf-tinged fiction", which occasionally "enjoys something of the success of mainstream fiction."[38] In *Walking on Glass*, Banks gradually interwove three initially unrelated sub-narratives, linked by the supposed delusions and paranoia of character Steven Grout, a road mender and avid SF reader. Two sub-narratives are set on a realist Earth – one concerned with Grout, the other with Graham Park, an artist in love – are eventually suggested to be connected to a third SF plot-line concerned with two prisoners, Quiss and Ajayi, locked in a castle amidst a galactic war. Grout is convinced that he is in fact really an Admiral embroiled in a similar war, possibly that of Quiss and Ajayi; and the reader is left to decide if this connection is real or a merely product of Grout's delusion. Developing a similar conceit for *The Bridge*, Banks uses three protagonists – John Orr, Alex and the Barbarian – suggested to be different aspects of one central character. After Alex crashes his car on the Forth Bridge at the start of the novel, John Orr awakens on The Bridge, a surreal Kafka-esque bureaucracy, to be plagued by nightmares in which he becomes the Barbarian, a parodic hero reminiscent of Greek myth. Returning to a similar style several years later, *Transition* is perhaps the most generically slippery of Banks's novels. Featuring several characters who can move from the mundane "real" world, into a parallel version of Earth known as Calbefraques, *Transition* was published as an Iain M. Banks – therefore 'officially' SF – book in the United States, and everywhere else as a mainstream novel, without the 'M.' In press for the novel, Banks quipped that

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[38] David Ketterer. 'Locating Slipstream', *Foundation*, 40; 11, Spring 2011, 7. Conversely, this definition shares certain resonances with Farah Mendelsohn's concept of 'intrusion fantasy', outlined in *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008).

Transition is "51% mainstream".[39] Shortly before his death, Banks acknowledged that his SF novels had "started to achieve something like parity in sales" with his mainstream work.[40]

While other 'Iain Banks' novels such as *Dead Air* are more easily identified as works of mimetic realism, at the very least Banks could not resist making passing reference to SF within this framework: with characters discussing SF cinema, for example, comparing the relative levels of scientific accuracy in the *Star Wars* and *Aliens* film franchises (321). Other texts such as *The Business* (1999) often read in a similar manner to SF, with a focus upon nascent technology – automobiles, aircraft, personal entertainment – and its effect upon the human user, yet set in the present day.

The Culture: an Overview

Given the complex nature of Banks's creation, as outlined above, it is necessary to provide an overview of the Culture which describes its key features in as straightforward a manner as possible. Therefore the following description adheres to the facts as explained by Banks in his fictions and other writings about the Culture, providing as objective an account as possible.

The Culture is a kind of society, and/or a group of individuals. One of the most objective descriptions was provided by Banks himself in 1994: "The Culture is a group-civilisation formed from seven or eight humanoid species, [...] which established a loose federation approximately nine thousand years ago."[41] According to the fictional timeline of the series, the texts cover event that precede our own time, occur concurrently, and also in our relative future: *Consider Phlebas*, the first text in the series, is set in 1331 AD, while the final text *The Hydrogen Sonata* takes place in approximately 2375 AD. The Culture is located within our galaxy, which is imagined to be populated by a diaspora of humanity, artificial intelligences (AIs), as well as a multitude of extraterrestrial life forms. Culture citizens live on a variety of artificial habitats, especially huge planet-sized spaceships called General Systems Vehicles (or

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[39] Iain, comment on mckryn66, 'Live Webchat: Iain Banks', the *Guardian* books blog, Wednesday 6 July 2011, (13.27), www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2011/jul/06/live-webchat-iain-banks (Accessed 7 September, 2015).

[40] Jim Jordison, 'Iain Banks's The Bridge: the link between his mainstream and SF work ', the *Guardian*, 23 September 2014, www.theguardian.com/books/2014/sep/23/iain-banks-the-bridge-link-mainstream-literature-science-fiction (Accessed 07 September, 2015).

[41] Iain M. Banks, 'A Few Notes on the Culture', *Vavatch* , 10 August, 1994, [n.pag.] www.vavatch.co.uk/books/banks/cultnote.htm (Accessed 14 January, 2015)

GSVs) and large artificial habitats known as Orbitals (or Os); having reached an extremely advanced level of technoscientific development, these environments offer almost unlimited freedom for all, as well as extensive control for Culture citizens of their own physiology and their immediate environment. Other civilisations that have achieved a level of technological development equivalent to the Culture, of which there are several, are known as the Involved. The Culture is spread widely across the galaxy, although is said to be wary of the extent of its influence, and seemingly imposes no restrictions or formal processes upon allowing others to join. The Culture is said to have moved completely beyond material scarcity as well as mandatory labour.

The Minds are AIs whose intellectual capacity greatly exceeds that of human beings, and who maintain the day-to-day bureaucracy of the Culture as a mere fraction of their potential capabilities. While the Minds technically have no need to exist in physical space, they often manifest as Avatars, humanoid figures who control GSVs and Os and interact with Culture humans. Drones are also AIs, somewhere between people and the Minds in intelligence, who are known for Culture people in their daily lives, seemingly voluntarily. Both the Minds and drones are considered equal in status to Culture people; therefore they are also considered citizens.

Contact is a division of the Culture concerned with establishing and maintaining peaceful diplomatic relations with other civilisations in the galaxy. While the Culture has now moved entirely beyond conflict within its own environments, Contact developed from earlier Culture military organisations, and performs military functions when necessary. Special Circumstances (SC) is a division of Contact that handles more difficult relationships, especially when the Culture feels it necessary to intentionally affect the course of another society's development. SC's work is frequently controversial, and for this reason it sometimes employs mercenaries from outside the Culture to carry out its missions, although Culture people, as well as the Minds and drones, are also drawn upon.

Everyone in the Culture has free and mostly unlimited access to its hugely powerful data network: available to AIs through direct link, and for people through terminals and/or a neural lace. A terminal is a small, convenient device that enables instant communication with others in the Culture, which can take seemingly any form according to personal preference. Most Culture people are fitted with neural laces: a kind of synthetic mesh that grows with an organic brain, allowing for a huge range of

benefits, including instantaneous data access, mood control, storage of memories and personality, even resurrection.

The Sublimed are mysterious enlightened entities who exist within the realm of the Sublime, which exists in another dimension. While they have very little contact with people, some from the Culture claim to have met them in some capacity. Many civilisations are able to become Sublimed themselves at a certain of development, often making this conversion *en masse*, yet the Culture is known for discouraging Subliming amongst its citizens. Contact has the highly secretive division of Numina, exclusively responsible for managing relations between the Culture and the Sublimed.

Initial Responses

A sense of confusion and ambiguity has been associated with the Culture series from the outset. When published in 1987, the first Culture text *Consider Phlebas* (also Banks's first book under the M. Banks name) received largely positive reviews in *The Times* and *Foundation*, with a lukewarm response in *Interzone*.[42] Many reviewers expressed uncertainty about the tone and ultimate intentions of Banks's novel in relation to genre. Did the author intend for the book to be read as straightforward space opera or was Banks satirising this sub-genre? Did *Consider Phlebas* simply mark a return to a previously maligned sub-genre, albeit better written; or was there something more politically radical occurring under the surface of Banks's fast-paced, violent work? John Clute in his *Interzone* review, for example, commented that "what began as seemingly orthodox space opera, turns into a subversion of all that's holy to the form."[43] Colin Greenland, however, writing in *Foundation*, was disappointed that *Consider Phlebas* "does not transcend genre, but conforms throughout" as Banks's three previously published novels at the time – *The Wasp Factory*, *Walking on Glass* and *The Bridge* – demonstrated "a determination to work in original and distinctive areas and shapes."[44] Further contradicting Clute's views, Greenland stated that: "There is no reason to suspect that Banks has written *Consider Phlebas* as an exercise in cynicism, or calculation, or anything other than pure love".[45]

Ironically, though, Banks's motivations for writing the Culture series did include exactly this mixture of cynicism, calculation and pure love. While *Consider*

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[42] See: David Haddock, ed., *The Banksonian*, issue 4, 7.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Colin Greenland, 'Consider Phlebas by Iain M. Banks', *Foundation: The international Review of Science-Fiction*, 93.
[45] Ibid.

Phlebas was published in the late 1980s, the seeds of the Culture were sewn approximately a decade previously in the late 1970s, inspired by a sense of disillusionment with the state of his favourite sub-genre that Banks was experiencing at that time. As David Haddock – editor of *The Banksoniain* – notes, the "underlying idea" of the Culture texts was the need for a "moral, intellectual high-ground in space opera that had to be reclaimed for the Left"',[46] as a "reaction against the 'right-wing, dystopian SF' that he read as a kid."[47] In particular, Haddock cites Robert Heinlein as an example of this sort of traditional space opera author against whom Banks intended his own space opera to be a reaction, noting that Banks's first Culture novel was written as "a radical version of *Starship Troopers*," which could also be read as "an old-fashioned space opera."[48] Banks's polemical stance was in part inspired by the famously radical and confrontational views regarding traditional SF and space opera expounded in the publication *New Worlds Quarterly*, under editorial command of Michael Moorcock, which Banks and MacLeod read as young men in the 1970s.[49] MacLeod identifies M. John Harrison as an especially influential writer of the New Wave, explaining that Banks and himself initially read Harrison's *The Centauri Device* (1974) "naively" as "straight space opera", before later developing an understanding for Harrison's "desire to shake some humanity and sense" into the sub-genre by reading articles in *New Worlds*.[50] In this manner, it is clear that the developing reactions of Banks and MacLeod to *The Centauri Device* mirror those of Clute toward *Consider Phlebas*, which the latter ultimately came to see as subverting the form of space opera rather than affirming it.

The initial confusion and ambiguity towards *Consider Phlebas*, then, would seem to indicate a degree of success in Banks's aims: deliberately creating tension between a desire for his work to be recognisable as belonging to a certain mode of SF, whilst simultaneously deconstructing and critiquing it: appealing to space opera fans and acknowledging his own influences, whilst foregrounding the sub-genre's faults. In part, this effect is achieved by the perspective through which Banks chooses to tell

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[46] Oliver Morton, 'A Cultured Man', *Wired* magazine, 2.6, June 1996, yoz.com/wired/2.06/features/banks.html (Accessed 20 April, 2016)

[47] Interview with Kim Newman, in *Interzone* 16. Cited in David Haddock, ed. *The Banksonian: An Iain (M.) Banks Fanzine*, Issue 4, page 6. Nov, 2004.

[48] Ibid., 16.

[49] See: 'New Worlds', *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/new_worlds (Accessed 15 December, 2015).

[50] Ken MacLeod, during telephone interview conducted for *Express* magazine, Brunel University London, on 2:05pm, Friday 17 May, 2013.

his story: the novel's most prominent view-point character is Bora Horza Gobuchul, a morally-dubious and self-motivated mercenary similar to *The Centauri Device*'s protagonist John Truck; both characters are aggressive with little to endear them to the reader. The story of *Consider Phelebas*, concerned with a war between the secular Culture and an almost equally-powerful religious race the Idirans, is one of clashing ideologies; yet, unusually, as Andrew M. Butler describes, "the mercenary hero, Bora Horza Gobuchal, is actually fighting for the wrong side, against the Culture."[51] Horza hates the Culture, but harbors few ideological sympathies with the Idirans either, and is merely allied with them temporarily against a common enemy; his identification with either side is free to fluctuate, based on personal whim. Again similarities can be drawn in this regard between *Consider Phlebas* and *The Centauri Device*, as, in the latter, Martin Lewis notes: "Both the capitalism of the Israeli World Government and the socialism of the United Arab Socialist Republics comes equally under attack."[52]

Horza, therefore, is positioned interstitially, both in terms of politics and narratives; and it is primarily this fact that enables the text's ambiguities. Banks's most impressive manoeuvre in the text is – despite having absorbed Horza's continual disgust for the Culture throughout the novel, supported by the Idirans with whom he often closely engages – the reader will generally side with the Culture. While Horza may challenge the Culture in his thoughts and comments, his actions are violent, and his motives largely amoral, again in a similar manner to John Truck. Through his continual disavowal of the Culture, a positive counter image emerges, which places the Culture in a dialectical relationship both in relation to alternative views of itself and with other civilisations. In *Consider Phlebas*, this relationship is mediated by Perostock Balveda, an "agent of the Culture" (11); by effectively saving Horza's life on at least two occasions in the novel, she demonstrates the Culture's moral upper hand: committed to preserving life and maintaining peace, even when dealing with violence from sworn enemies.

The effect achieved in *Consider Phlebas* of simultaneously affirming and subverting elements of space opera was also enabled by a canny decision on Banks's part regarding the publication order of the Culture series. As David Haddock explains, "Iain had been working on the Culture as a setting for novels since […] 1974 when he

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[51] Andrew M. Butler, 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at the British Boom', *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 3, Nov., 2003, 374-393; 383.
[52] Martin Lewis, 'The Centauri Device, M. John Harrison', sfsite.com Reviews, 2002 www.sfsite.com/04a/cd125.htm (Accessed 15 December, 2015).

started the first draft of *Use of Weapons*."[53] In fact, by 1987, Banks had already written early drafts of two other Culture novels, which would later be published as *Use of Weapons* and *The Player of Games*, meaning that *Consider Phlebas* was the first Culture book published but technically the third written. Given that its protagonist despises the Culture, the very civilisation which forms the subject of the series the novel is intended to introduce, choosing to publish *Consider Phlebas* first can be considered an unusual move, as this text provides the least obvious introduction to the fictional universe of the Culture. It seems, surely, that a clearer way of outlining the seemingly egalitarian, communitarian nature of the Culture – so at odds with the galactic civilisations of prior space opera, and therefore so indicative of Banks's goals – would have been to release *The Player of Games* first, or adopt a similar perspective: of a Culture citizen, guiding the readers around Banks's society, as in traditional utopian fiction, before the narrative requires him to leave. Yet Banks clearly decided upon the final publication order of the first three Culture novels in order to achieve the subversive effect that he intended.

Regardless of the final order of publication, Banks explains that the Culture was actually developed following an idea for a particular kind of character, with the nature of this character's context arriving afterwards: "the Culture was created more by accident than design," he explains, beginning with Zakalwe, the protagonist of *Use of Weapons*: "a mercenary, a bad guy, but without knowing it he was working for the good guys. And it [the Culture] sort of grew from there."[54] Banks envisioned the Culture, then, as "these galactic good guys who occasionally had to stoop to using this kind of person," referring to Zakalwe; "I wanted him to be working for the unarguably good guys so that the emphasis would be on his morality, not theirs."[55] That the Culture are "unarguably" good is – of course – a matter of debate that has been taken up by various subsequent scholars of Banks; and discussion of this issue forms a major thread in this thesis.

Picking up on these intentionally created moral ambiguities, Andrew Butler confirms that, "in Banks's space opera, it is no longer possible to identify heroes and villains with any certainty."[56] Here Butler potentially refers to Zakalwe, Horza or several other Culture characters, whom Banks utilises as another device to subvert

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[53] David Haddock, ed., *The Banksoniain*. Issue 4, 6.
[54] Hughes, 'Doing the Business, Profile: Iain Banks,' (n.pag.)
[55] Interview with David Garnett, *Wired* journal #1, quoted in *The Banksoniain*, issue 9, page 6.
[56] Ibid., 21.

earlier space operas which frequently adopted clear-cut moral stances towards their protagonists. In a work of classic space opera, Horza would have been unambiguously the hero of the work, one of the "good guys", his actions and outlook validated by the logic of the narrative, and inevitably exonerating him for his 'brave' deeds in its conclusion. Instead, his character is three-dimensional – at least compared with those from earlier works of space opera – and the morality of his actions inspires contemplation. As Banks outlines, "Utopia spawns few heroes. The idea being that people have such a good time in the Culture that it just doesn't produce maniacal *Rambo* types."[57]

A further crucial influence on the Culture, especially in regard to *Use of Weapons*, was the influence of Ken Macleod, who discussed Banks's ideas with him from the outset and read drafts of the Culture novels as they were written.[58] As Haddock attests, Macleod played a significant role in the development of *Use of Weapons*, helping Banks to reconfigure the complex interweaving narrative strands of the novel into a more coherent overall work; and Banks directly acknowledged the help of his friend in the novel's preface.[59]

Banks's enthusiasm for the possibilities stemming from AI further influenced his conception of the Culture, as Nick Hubble identifies. During the mid-1970s, Hubble argues, when "tougher responses to the ongoing political and cultural changes in British society were being incubated":

> a young Iain M. Banks earning money during his student vacations, witnessed the way manual workers were using newly-available pocket calculators to check that they weren't being cheated in their pay packets. From this small example of the social benefits arising from artificial intelligence was born the idea of the Culture, a pan-galactic Utopian collective of machines and people.[60]

The exact role that these machines play in the political and social nature of the Culture, as well as the nature of their relationship with its people, will be explored later in this thesis.

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[57] David Garnett, 'Interview with Iain Banks', *Journal Wired*, Winter 1989, 51-69, 64.
[58] *The Banksoniain*, issue 9, page 6.
[59] "I blame Ken Macleod for the whole thing. It was his idea to argue the old warrior out of retirement, and he suggested the fitness regime too." Acknowledgement in preface of *Use of Weapons*.
[60] Nick Hubble, 'British Science Fiction' in *Sense of Wonder: A Century of Science Fiction*. Ed. Leigh Ronald Grossman. Wildside Press, forthcoming 20117/18.

The Culture and Space Opera

Critics such as Roger Luckhurst and Gary Westfahl have identified Banks's Culture novels, as well as his other SF works such as *The Algebraist* and *Against A Dark Background* to a lesser extent, as key works of 'New Space Opera': a conscious reformulation and rewriting of the sub-genre, developed in the late-1980s and early-1990s. In his history of the genre, *Science Fiction* (2005), Luckhurst cites *Consider Phlebas* as one of the "most important" texts in this "major revival."[61] Hartwell and Cramer have described Banks's SF as "the foremost model" for the New Space Opera movement.[62] Also, Westfahl notes that, of all authors working in this sub-genre, "Banks's Culture novels are those most frequently described as postmodern space opera," [63] due to certain stylistic aspects of his series.[64]

Before the aspects of Banks's work that help identify it as New Space Opera can be identified and examined it is necessary to outline the history and conventions of traditional space opera. In *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*, Csicsery-Ronay describes this sub-genre as fiction:

> signifying spectacular romances set in vast, exotic outer spaces, where larger-than-life protagonists encounter a variety of alien species, planetary cultures, futuristic technologies (especially weapons, spaceships and space stations), and sublime physical phenomena.[65]

While Csicsery-Ronay has located the origins of space opera in romance fiction, Brian Aldiss identifies the sub-genre as part of a tradition dating back as far as epic narratives such as *The Odyssey*, as well as in fairy tales, describing its conventions as follows:[66]

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[61] Roger Luckhurst, *Science Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 222.
[62] David G. Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer. *How Shit Became Shinola: Definition and Redefinition of Space Opera*. www.sfrevu.com/ISSUES/2003/0308/Space%20Opera%20Redefined/Review.htm (Accessed 23 April, 2012).
[63] Gary Westfahl, 'Space Opera', in *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, eds. James Edwards, Farah Mendlesohn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 206.
[64] This is the case despite Banks himself dismissing postmodern fiction as "shite" in favour of traditional storytelling: "I love plot, I love stories. I hate these novels that just stop. I think, "Hello? What happened? Did they run out of words?" People seem to think that that's a clever way to end novels. Well, I don't think it's good enough. I want closure, I don't want any of this post-modern shite, pal. I want a story, with an ending", quoted in Colebrook, 'Reading Double, Writing Double: the fiction of Iain (M.) Banks', 29.
[65] Csiscery-Ronay, *Seven Beauties*, 218.
[66] Brian Aldiss, ed, *Space Opera: An Anthology of Way-Back-When Futures* (London: Book Club Associates, 1974) 10.

> Ideally the Earth must be in peril, there must be a quest and a man to match the mighty hour. That man must confront aliens and exotic creatures. Space must flow past the ports like wine from a pitcher. Blood must run down the palace step, and ships launch out into the louring dark. There must be a woman fairer than the skies and a villain darker than a Black Hole. And all must come right in the end.[67]

Both emphasise the sense of huge interplanetary, even intergalactic, scale necessary for such narratives and the prominence of encounters with radical Otherness, with Aldiss adding the importance of a central quest narrative, violent conflict, clear-cut morality, patriarchal gender norms (the hero is a man in search of a female love interest), and conservative narrative closure. As suggested by such conventions, space opera often necessarily features "many novums": arguably the defining feature of the sub-genre is its integration and interplay of a huge variety of 'new things' into a complex and coherent story.[68] Also, space opera narratives often rely upon the interweaving of many narrative threads – focused upon different characters and races – into one climactic clash at the text's culmination.

Generic space opera is frequently understood to first appear during the 1920s in pulp publications such as *Amazing Stories* and *Astounding Science Fiction* (although there are prior texts such as George Griffith's *A Honeymoon in Space* [1901] that draw upon similar ideas and can be considered proto-space opera). The sub-genre became most established during the first Golden Age of SF, identified by Peter Nicholls as occurring between 1938-1946, where narratives of heroic galactic exploration, conflict and conquest, often permeated with the language and logic of 'hard' science, dominated the field. During this time writers such as E.E. "Doc" Smith, A. E. van Vogt, Leigh Brackett and Edmond Hamilton produced expansive, complex narratives depicting rough-and-ready heroes blasting round the cosmos in dazzling spaceships, fighting wars on alien habitats with laser weaponry, and discovering strange artifacts and new technologies. Brackett wrote SF from a young age, her first published book *No Good From A Corpse* (1944) was written in a hard-boiled detective mode; following soon after, however, Brackett produced early planetary romance tales, and – especially during the 1950s – the space opera for which she was best known. Earning herself the nickname as the 'Queen of Space

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[67] Brian Aldiss, ed, *Space Opera: An Anthology of Way-Back-When Futures* (London: Book Club Associates, 1974) 10.
[68] Csicsery-Ronay, *Seven Beauties*, 218-219.

Opera', [69] Brackett's work was characterized by the *Encyclopedia of SF* as "swashbuckling but literate",[70]

It is due to the sub-genre's heavy reliance upon such immediately recognisable SF tropes that space opera is sometimes regarded as "the quintessential form of sf narrative", as Csicsery-Ronay has argued. [71] It is also due to the uniqueness of these generic tropes that space opera is often directly conflated with SF itself, in the public sphere, where the terms are commonly used interchangeably.[72] For many, the mode will always be best exemplified by blockbusting Hollywood films, such as the *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* franchises, which utilized the best special effects technology of their respective eras to capture the "wide-screen baroque" effect of space opera, as famously described by Brian Aldiss.[73]

Despite its initial popularity and close association with the Golden Age, however, Westfhal observes that space opera had by the 1940s cemented its reputation as the "least respected form of science fiction."[74] Space opera had developed from a term almost synonymous with science fiction itself, fundamentally shaping its conception in the public eye, into its least respectable and most embarrassing form in merely a few years. So little respect has been afforded the sub-genre that its etymology, and most quoted definition, originate from derogatory sources: in 1941, as Westfahl has explained, Wilson Tucker famously compared the "hacky, grinding, stinking, outworn spaceship yarn" with low grade mass entertainments, such as television Westerns, known as "horse operas", and "morning housewife tearjerkers", known as "soap operas" – hence the term "space opera."[75] The unpopularity of the sub-genre peaked in the following decades, during the 'New Wave' of Science Fiction in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1963 Michael Moorcock controversially used a guest editorial in *New Worlds* magazine to bemoan the state of

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[69] Andrew Liptak, 'Happy 100th Birthday to Leigh Bracket, Queen of Space Opera', 12 July, 2015 http://io9.gizmodo.com/happy-100th-birthday-to-leigh-brackett-the-queen-of-sp-1746714014 (Accessed 23/12/2016)

[70] John Clute, 'Leigh Brackett', *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/brackett_leigh (Accessed 3 January, 2017).

[71] Westfahl, 'Space Opera', 197.

[72] Ibid.

[73] 'Widescreen baroque,' in The Oxford Dictionary of Science Fiction, Prucher, Jeff, ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195305678.001.0001/acref-9780195305678-e-865. (Accessed 3 October, 2015).

[74] Westfahl, 'Space Opera', 197.

[75] Ibid.

SF at the time; when he spoke of fiction that suffered from serious deficiencies in "passion, subtlety, irony, original characterization, original and good style, a sense of involvement in human affairs, colour, density, depth", he was undoubtedly referring to space opera.[76] Such impassioned mission statements expounded the challenges faced by Moorcock and other New Wave writers, such as William Burroughs and J.G Ballard, who used the pages of *New Worlds*/*New Worlds Quarterly* magazine to publish SF of a more 'literary' and experimental nature. When discussing Moorcock's period as editor of *New Worlds,* Brian Aldiss explicitly identifies key elements of space opera as tropes that Moorcock actively disliked and excised from the magazine: "galactic wars went out; drugs came in; there were fewer encounters with aliens, more in the bedroom."[77] Westfahl confirms the lack of authors publishing space opera during this time, noting that what little there was available was largely written in a satirical mode, using the limitless field of outer space as a source of comedy, rather than for serious political or social commentary.[78]

Westfahl is surely here referring to Douglas Adams's famous 'Hitchiker's' trilogy: *The Hitchiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979)*, The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* (1980) and *Life, the Universe and Everything* (1982). These books, forms of quasi space opera, seem to have influenced Banks's work directly: as *The Hitchiker's Guide to the Galaxy* website notes, the scene from *The Hydrogen Sonata* in which SC agent Tefwe visits the oldest known Culture citizen, QiRia, to hear an important message echoes Marvin the Paranoid Android hearing God's Final Message to the Universe in Adams's own series.[79] Adams may have influenced Banks in a more indirect manner, also, in the way that the former's series uses a specifically mad-cap, surreal style of comedy which has parallels with that of the latter.

Writing in his introduction to the seminal collection of short stories *Space Opera* (1974), published during the time in which Banks first begun developing the Culture, Brian Aldiss's takes a cautionary, even derisory, approach to its contents, stating that "this is not a serious anthology", whilst calling space opera "escapist" and "for fun", featuring "screwy ideas".[80] This collection provided reprints of many

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[76] Moorcock, Michael, 'Guest Editorial', *New Worlds*, 129 (April 1963), 2 and 123. Reprinted in: James, Edward, *Science Fiction in the 20th Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) 168.

[77] Brian W. Aldiss, *The Detached Retina* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1995).
[78] Westfahl, 'Space Opera', 197.
[79] http://h2g2.com/edited_entry/A87878524
[80] Aldiss, *Space Opera,* 9-10.

obscure space opera stories, which included famous and less well-known authors, ranging from 1900 to the time of publication. Aldiss may well have adopted this stance in response to the popularity of the sub-genre at the time, which was depleting amongst critics, at least, if not amongst the reading public. It is as if Aldiss felt the need to qualify the existence of such a collection at this time, justifying its existence and keeping it clearly separate from more supposedly 'literary' endeavors. Yet, immediately following these comments, Aldiss states of his collection that "the stories are one of the repositories of narrative art; furthermore, they say a great deal about fundamental hopes and fears when confronted by the unknowns of distant frontiers",[81] therefore rendering his message more ambivalent. While Aldiss's less complimentary comments may perhaps have baring on some stories in the anthology, it is important to note that the tales selected are essentially serious, and not obviously comic and/or satiric, in tone, as Westfahl explains was more common at the time.

While many SF authors did turn away from the sub-genre during this time, writers for film and TV at the time were compelled toward space opera none the less, with two of the highest grossing franchises of all time in any genre screening during the 1960s and 70s: the *Original Series* of *Star Trek* run from 1966-69, followed by the *Animated Series* – which featured an episode 'The Slaver Weapon' written by Larry Niven, based on his short story 'The Soft Weapon'[82] – in 1973-74; while the original *Star Wars* film trilogy began with *Episode IV – A New Hope* in 1977. In the following year Leigh Brackett completed an early draft of *Star Wars: Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back* for George Lucas, but died of cancer before she could see the film fulfilled.[83] While the amount of Brackett's direct impact on the final script has been debated, with Laurent Bouzareua reporting Lucas's dislike of the direction in which Brackett took the story and his rewriting process,[84] her prior development of the sub-genre as a whole is perhaps strong enough for her influence to persist in the final *Star Wars* series. First published in the June 1949 edition of *Thrilling Wonder Stories* as a short story entitled 'Sea Kings of Mars', with an extract published in Aldiss's *Space Opera* anthology, Brackett's novella *The Sword of Riannon* is about a Martian

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[81] Aldiss, *Space Opera,* 9-10.
[82] See the following entry on Niven's personal website: www.larryniven.net/kzin/star_trek_vs_kzinti.shtml (Accessed 14 December, 2015).
[83] Andrew Liptak, 'Happy 100th Birthday to Leigh Bracket, Queen of Space Opera'.
[84] Empress Eve, 'Early Draft of Empire Strikes Back Reveals Alternative Star Wars Universe', 15 May, 2010 http://www.geeksofdoom.com/2010/05/15/early-draft-of-empire-strikes-back-reveals-alternate-star-wars-universe

archaeologist whose greed for near magical golden artifacts leads him to be accidentally transported back in time, and achieving his dream of studying ancient Mars in a very literal manner. While this narrative is not overtly similar to *The Empire Strikes Back*, it is typical of Brackett's tendency to move the sub-genre away from hard SF toward science fantasy, and featuring strong heroic, romantic and mythical elements.

Another notable literary exception to Westfahl's assertion is Niven's *Ringworld*, published in 1970 and awarded the Hugo in that year as well as the Nebula and Locus awards in the following year. The novel is considered a canonical space opera text, and Niven has been praised for bravely returning to a hard science approach at a time when it was considered unpopular.[85] Forming an influence on Banks's Culture series,[86] *Ringworld* is an important link between traditional space opera, and the writers of New Space Opera that emerged roughly a decade later, mainly in Britain, whom Luckhurst has identified as "working in the wake of the avant-garde ambitions of the New Wave."[87]

In his article 'The British Boom: What boom? Whose boom?' (2003), Andrew M. Butler places Banks alongside British contemporaries such as Steven Baxter, Ken MacLeod, Alastair Reynolds, Colin Greenland and M. John Harrison, as key writers aiming to make space opera 'new'.[88] As young men Banks and MacLeod read *New Worlds Quarterly* avidly, drawn to it by the diatribes published there against the space opera sub-genre with which they were becoming increasingly disaffected; and, alongside their contemporaries, they demonstrate a desire similar to that of *New Worlds*: reviving and renewing this sub-genre and reclaim it as a serious mode of philosophical and political expression. Rather than rejecting space opera outright – a sub-genre which has, for better or for worse, fundamentally shaped the nature of SF – or using its devices for parodic effect, writers of New Space Opera aimed to breathe fresh life into its decaying corpse, replacing its malfunctioning vital organs and reanimating it in new forms. As Brian Aldiss notes, "space opera has certain conventions which are essential to it, which are, in a way, its raison *d'etre*; one may either like it or dislike those conventions, but they cannot be altered except at expense

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[85] Lev Grossman, 'Lord of the Ringworld: In Praise of Larry Niven', June 13 2012, *Time* magazine. entertainment.time.com/2012/06/13/lord-of-the-ringworld-in-praise-of-larry-niven/ (Accessed 7 October, 2015).
[86] See discussion of Culture 'Orbitals' in *A Few Notes*.
[87] Luckhurst, *Science Fiction*, 222.
[88] Ibid., 222-223.

to the whole."[89] Therefore, many writers of New Space Opera – Banks especially – aimed to subvert these existing conventions rather than replace them altogether, and thus still writing unabashed works of this sub-genre.

Butler's article, which examines the apparent phenomenon of a 'boom' of interest in British SF during the early-2000s, draws attention to the unusual fact that the majority of prominent space opera revivalists, including Banks, originate in Britain, despite the origins of the sub-genre in American pulps. As Luckhurst confirms, the popularity of this "major revival of the form" is "mildly odd", due to the vehement negative criticism it had previously often received; therefore, "it seems *strikingly* odd that this quintessentially American sub-genre should reappear in Britain."[90]

Alfred Bester's *The Stars My Destination* (1957) is a distinctive example of space opera published just on the cusp of the New Wave, and notable for the ways in which it provides an early reconfigurement of the sub-genre's tropes. The protagonist Gully Foyle is pitched, as Butler has observed of Banks's morally-grey characters, somewhere between hero and anti-hero: "in Banks's space opera, it is no longer possible to identify heroes and villains with any certainty."[91] In fact, as Neil Gaiman observes, Gully Foyle, our hero, is a predator […] everyman, a nonentity […] single-minded, amoral".[92] Whereas Banks imagine a civilization seemingly entirely beyond material scarcity and class differences to critique the inequalities of the time in which he wrote, Bester's novel also moves away from space opera's frequent concern away with the noble and upper-classes of society, detailing Foyle's frequently violent exploits amongst criminal underclasses at the bottom of a succession of starkly economically-divided locations. As with Banks's later Culture texts, Bester has a "penchant for textual experimentation" that recalls "the work of the surrealists". [93] Just as Bester's use of unusual textual layouts and graphics "is vaguely reminiscent of William Burroughs",[94] the last page of *Excession* is a long stream-of-consciousness style, punctuation-less, surreal monologue from a presumed extra-dimensional entity that recalls Samuel Beckett.

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[89] Aldiss, *Space Opera*, 10.
[90] Ibid., 222.
[91] Butler, 'British Boom', 384.
[92] Neil Gaiman, 'Of Time, and Gully Foyle', in, Alfred Bester, *The Stars My Destination* (London: Millenium, 1999) ix.
[93] http://www.strangelibrary.com/post/98790844024/the-stars-my-destination
[94] Hipster Book Club, 2011 http://hipsterbookclub.livejournal.com/1251762.html

New Space Opera and the 'British Boom'

As Ursula Le Guin argues, in traditional space opera:

> Socialism is never considered as an alternative, and democracy is quite forgotten.
> Military virtues are taken as ethical ones. Wealth is assumed to be a righteous goal
> and a personal virtue. Competitive free-enterprise capitalism is the economic destiny
> of the entire Galaxy.[95]

If space opera were to enjoy a renaissance, then, in Banks's view, it would necessarily
have to be shorn of its reactionary politics and ideologies, and brought up to date with
the era in which he was writing. Interestingly, perhaps offering something of an
explanation for Luckhurst's querying of the British reclamation of space opera, Banks
explicitly identifies American space opera as politically problematic.[96] Even a brief
survey of classic works in the sub-genre would easily identify texts that arguably
exemplify Banks's views. In works such as Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* (1952) and its
sequels, and Smith's *Lensman* novels (including *Galactic Patrol* [1937] and *First
Lensman* [1950]), the galaxies imagined by the authors seem to be mere extensions of
the author's lived environment – ripe for the greed, wealthy and powerful to expand
and dominate under the guise of protection and safety. If, in the galactic empires and
wide-spread unitary environments of 'old' and pre-dominantly American space opera,
"military virtues are taken as ethical ones", then Banks's work should reduce the
presence of its military to a minimum, consider ethical values as paramount, and
consider almost obsessively any decision to commit acts of violence or intervention,
in the name of peace and harmony.

Banks's criticism of earlier works of space opera has not been confined to
economic or military politics. He has described the Culture as "a post-sexist
society,"[97] repeatedly stating that he intends the Culture novels to challenge and
critique the patriarchal, sexist values imbued in most traditional space opera.[98] Whilst
developing the Culture in the mid-1970s Banks almost certainly drew influence from

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[95] Ursula Le Guin, 'American SF and the Other', *Science Fiction Studies*, #7, Vol. 2:3, November
1975. http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/7/leguin7art.htm (Accessed 5 October, 2016).

[96] "Literary merits aside, and generalising unfairly, the field as Iain found it presented a dilemma:
American SF was optimistic about the human future, but deeply conservative in its politics; British SF
was more thoughtful and experimental, but too often depressive." – Ken MacLeod, 'Iain Banks: A
Science Fiction Star First and Foremost', the *Guardian*, Monday 10 June 2013.
www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jun/10/iain-banks-ken-macleod-science-fiction (Accessed 6
October, 2015).

[97] 'The English Programme: Scottish Writers: Iain Banks', 2-5; (Warwick: Channel 4, 1996) 5.

[98] See: David Garnett interviewing Iain Banks, *Journal Wired*, Winter 1989. 51-69, and 'Inversions:
An Interview', *Dillons Review*, Issue no. 16, May-June 1998.

the writers and activists of Second-Wave feminism, which developed in the 1960s and continued throughout the 1970s, especially SF authors associated with the movement such as Ursula le Guin; and Le Guin's 'Hainish Cycle' (including *Left Hand of Darkness* [1969] and *The Dispossessed* [1974]) clearly proved a strong degree of inspiration for the Culture series. Following a less explicit influence, like Le Guin, Banks's novels regularly feature strong female protagonists, actively foreground feminist values and critically engage with issues relating to gender and sexuality. In the phallocentric universes of much traditional space opera, female characters are – as in the adventure/romance mode from which they originated – often relegated to roles as passive 'damsels-in-distress' in need of rescue, two-dimensional love interests included only to develop the character of the male hero, mere sexual objects, or are simply omitted entirely. Banks's female leads, such as Diziet Sma (featured in *Use of Weapons*, *The State of the Art*, and *Surface Detail*) are spirited, independent and sexually liberated, and – often working as operatives of SC – are active agents in the political outcome of his novels. As he states, Banks's feminist agenda is in fact embedded even deeper into the Culture novels: "the future the Culture represents is more female than male in its demeanor."[99] Gone, Banks implies, are the pugnacious, aggressive attitudes of 'masculine' imperialism and domination; instead, replacing them with the 'feminine', cultivating Culture where violence is supposedly an abhorrence and a deeply regrettable last resort.

Another important work of revivalist space opera from the mid-1970s is Samuel Delany's *Triton* (1976). As has been argued of the Culture, Butler's work describes a radically libertarian society with a form of representative government but no formal system of law, in which individuals are free to modify themselves, sometimes radically, often in regards to gender and ethnicity, through advanced technology.[100] Subtitled 'An Ambiguous Heterotopia', Delany describes the moon Triton on which the novel is set using Foucault's term that distinguishes between the hegemonic utopia and the heterotopia of unsettling difference – the latter a term which has also been applied to the Culture.[101]

Published in the same year as *Use of Weapons*, *Take Back Plenty* (1990) is the first and most popular of Colin Greenland's 'Plenty' trilogy (also featuring *Seasons of*

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[99] 'The English Programme: Scottish Writers: Iain Banks', 5.
[100] See Chapter One of this thesis.
[101] See Chapter One of this thesis.

Plenty [1995] and *Mother of Plenty* [1998]), which Michael Moorcock has compared with *The Stars My Destination*.[102] Greenland's original novel is comparable with Banks's work for the character Tabith Jute, a woman spacepilot, and the relationship she maintains with her sentient and highly intelligent starship itself, Alice Liddell. In some chapters of the novel, Jute holds long dialogues with Alice, reminiscent of the Minds' dialogues from Banks's Culture texts such as *Excession* and *The Hydrogen Sonata*, especially for their formatting which appears similar to that of email.

While the product of an American writer, Dan Simmons's *The Hyperion Cantos* (1989-1997), published as the same time as *The State of the Art*, *Excession*, and *Inversions*, is notable for – amongst many things – its frequent allusions to the poetry of John Keats and to Norse mythology, much as Banks's *Consider Phlebas* and *Look to Windward* enter into dialogue with 'The Wasteland' by T.S. Eliot, such literary intertexuality being something of a rarity in space opera up until this point.

The Kefahuchi Tract trilogy – *Light* (2002), *Nova Swing* (2007) and *Empty Space* (2012) – marked M John Harrison's return to writing SF/fantasy after publishing work in various other styles since the 1980s. The three novels are linked by the Kefahuchi Tract itself, a kind of space-time anomaly, which is perhaps somewhat comparable to the Excession featured in Banks's Culture book of the same name; and, like *The State of the Art*, *Light* features scenes set in a relatively mimetically rendered representation of Earth, especially in London, again something of a rarity for space opera. Harrison makes passing reference to *The Stars My Destination* in *Light* as well as to various other non-SF television programs and songs.[103]

Writing amongst such other works of New Space Opera, each reshaping and subverting the familiar tropes of the sub-genre, Banks's series can probably be considered one of the most successful amongst readers, and perhaps amongst critics too.

The Dialectic of Utopia and Empire

Critical consideration of Banks's SF has emerged sporadically since he begun publishing the Culture series, significantly increasing in volume shortly before and especially after his death in 2013; critics have paid more attention to his 'mainstream'

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[102] Michael Moorcock, 'Introduction, *Take Back Plenty* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990).

[103] At one stage, Harrison repeats Bester's line describing the vacuum of space as "smelling like lemons".

work than his SF, generally speaking, although his place in the canon seems far from secure.[104] The majority of critical material available that does consider Bank's SF focuses on the Culture series, with consideration of non-Culture SF novels such as *The Algebraist*, *Feersum Endjinn* and *Against a Dark Background* forming the least discussed of his works. Those who have discussed the Culture – fans, reviewers, Banks himself – seem to agree, in its most basic form, that the Culture is a kind of society or civilisation, but their understandings of the exact nature of this society differ greatly, and can be grouped into two general categories, which exist potentially in a dialectical relationship. As Sherryl Vint correctly observes, "much of the criticism on Iain M. Banks's Culture novels" reads the series in accordance with its author's intentions to some extent, focusing on "the question of whether the Culture can be considered a utopia."[105] Yet there are just as many critics – Vint herself included – who read the Culture as in fact asserting some kind of imperialist project, and describe who describe the Culture as a kind of empire.

Affirming the popularity of a utopian reading, not to mention the prestige afforded to the series generally, a first edition of Banks's partly Culture short-story collection *The State of the Art* was featured in a display on utopian fiction, alongside classic works in this genre such as Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) and Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888), as part of a wide-ranging British Library SF exhibition *Out of this World* that ran during 2011. In fact, following Vint, there are as many different varieties of utopian form attributed to the Culture as there are different critics making such arguments. When examining these different varieties side by side, they form a reasonably comprehensive taxonomy of the various utopian forms that exist generally, despite their application to only one society. In no particular order the Culture has been called: a "limitless utopia";[106] a "critical utopia";[107] an "ambiguous utopia";[108] a "techno utopia";[109] a "liberal utopia";[110][111] a "political utopia";[112]

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[104] See: Martyn Colebrooke, 'Reading Double, Writing Double', *The Bottle Imp*, Issue 8, Nov. 2010, 5.
[105] Sherryl Vint, 'Cultural Imperialism and the Ends of Empire', *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, Vol.18; No.1; Winter 2008.
[106] British Library, 'Exhibitions and Events: April – August 2011', 10.
[107] Simon Guerrier, 'Culture Theory: Iain M. Banks's "Culture" as Utopia', *Foundation: The International Review of Science-Fiction*, 76, 1999; 36.
[108] Allan Jacobs, 'The Ambiguous Utopia of Iain M. Banks', *The New Atlantis: A Journal of Science Technology*, Summer 2009, 45-58.
[109] Ronnie Lippens, 'Imachinations of Peace: Scientifications of Peace in Iain M. Banks's *The Player of Games*', *Utopian Studies: Journal Of The Society For Utopian Studies*, 13.1 (2002): 135-147; 1.
[110] Chris Brown, '"Special Circumstances": Intervention by a Liberal Utopia,' *Millennium - Journal of International Studies*, December 2001 30: 625-633.

"anarcho-communist";[113] an "ostensibly utopian meta-civilisation"[114]; a "spacefaring socialist minarchy";[115] and an "anarchist",[116][117] "socialist"[118] and/or "communist utopia" (*CP*, 35). Suggesting a similar definition, Hubble uses the term "pan-galactic Utopian collective";[119] Garnett echoes this with the phrase "Galactic Cooperative";[120] and Thomas Christie has called the Culture an "astro-political community" and a "quasi-technocratic civilisation which is loosely structured upon utopian ideals."[121] By focusing upon the perceived utopian aspects of Banks' society, then, these descriptions portray the Culture in a largely positive light.

Similarly, descriptions of the Culture that highlight its less positive aspects are equally varied, paying less attention to utopian readings or issues of utopian verification. For example, the Culture has been described as: a "hedonistic" and "essentially decadent" society;[122] as "imperialist propaganda";[123] as a "hegemony";[124] as a "fallible dystopia";[125] a "liberal empire";[126] as a "Galactic Empire";[127] and as a

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[111] Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and James Heilman, 'Outside Context Problems': Liberalism and the Other in the Works of Iain M. Banks', in, Hassler and Wilcox, *New Boundaries in Political Science Fiction* (South Carolina: University of South Carolina, 2008), 235-258. 257.

[112] 'The State of the Art, reviewed by Mike Christie', *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction*, 49, 80.

[113] Stephen Poole, 'Culture Clashes: Review" *Matter* by Iain M. Banks', the *Guardian*, 8 February, 2008. www.theguardian.com/books/2008/feb/09/fiction.iainbanks (Accessed 23 November, 2015).

[114] Felix Danczak, 'T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land as a Template for the sf of Iain M. Banks', *Vector*, no. 264, Autumn 2010. 23- 29. 23/

[115] Farnell, 'Preemptive regime change in Iain M. Banks's *The Player of Games*', *Fukuoka University Review of Literature & Humanities*, Fukuoka University, 2010/03, 41, 4, 1505-1520; 1506. ci.nii.ac.jp/naid/110007530075/en/ (Accessed 23 March, 2016).

[116] Banks, 'A Few Notes'.

[117] Patricia Kerslake, *Science Fiction and Empire*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007) 177.

[118] Banks, 'A Few Notes'.

[119] Nick Hubble, 'British Science Fiction' in *Sense of Wonder: A Century of Science Fiction*, ed. Leigh Ronald Grossman, Wildside Press, forthcoming 2017.

[120] Interview with David Garnett, Journal Wired #1, quoted in *The Banksoniain*, issue 9, page 6.

[121] Thomas Christie, 'Chapter Two: Iain M. Banks's *The State of the Art* (1989) and Ken MacLeod's *The Stone Canal* (1996) ', in *National Identities: Ideology, Genre and National Identity in Popular Genres*, 25-71 (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013) 28.

[122] Farah Mendlesohn. 'The Dialectic of Decadence and Utopia in Iain M. Bank's Culture Novels.' *Foundation: The International Review of Science-Fiction*, 2005; 93, Vol:34; no.1. 116- 124.

[123] *The Shrieking Man*: A blog about South African Politics, entry: 'Iain M Banks: Imperialist Propagandist?' March 23 2008 hismastersvoice.wordpress.com/tag/iain-banks/ (Accessed 16 October, 2015).

[124] William Hardesty, 'Space Opera without the Space: The Culture Novels of Iain M. Banks'. *Space and Beyond: The Frontier Theme in Science Fiction.* Praeger; 2000-01-01:115-122; 116; and Iain Banks, *Excession* (London: Orbit, 1996).

[125] Darko Suvin, 'Theses on Dystopia 2001', in, Michal Kulbicki, 'Iain M Banks, Ernst Bloch and Utopian Interventions', *Colloquy: Text Theory Crtitique*, 2009 – 08 -0177; Aug. 2009; 17: 34-43;1.

[126] Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and James Heilman, 'Outside Context Problems': Liberalism and the Other in the Works of Iain M. Banks', in, Hassler and Wilcox, *New Boundaries in Political Science Fiction* (South Carolina: University of South Carolina, 2008), 235-258; 257.

[127] Christopher Palmer, 'Galactic Empires and the Contemporary Extravaganza: Dan Simmons and Iain M. Banks', *Science-fiction studies,* 1999-03-01; 26;73.

"meta-empire".[128] Alongside Vint, Farah Mendlesohn and Patricia Kerslake are amongst the most prominent critics to propound such definitions – problematising readings of the Culture as a realised utopia, free from the exploitation of capitalism, the tyranny of imperialism, and operating according to a clearly positive moral framework; therefore, I pay particular attention to their arguments in Chapter One of this thesis.

Kerslake's *Science Fiction and Empire* (1997) is the first book-length publication to discuss the Culture series in sustained detail. While Kerslake is concerned with providing a history and criticism of imperialism and 'neo-empire' in the SF field generally, her book locates Banks's space opera texts specifically within it, providing an interesting and complex reading of the Culture as 'meta-empire'. When addressing the question 'What happens after an empire is displaced?', Kerslake briefly outlines conventional examples of such images offered from classic works of SF, before celebrating the ways in which "occasionally an author will experiment with a completely new concept, offering the reader a new alternative such as Banks's 'Culture'."[129] Therefore, by identifying Banks as offering an alternative vision that is radically new, Kerslake places Banks's at the forefront of innovation in SF. What she understands by the completely new concept to which she refers is "the Culture novels of 'meta-empire'", described as an "unknown place where options of both neo-empire and political atrophy are eschewed and a new form of political structure is embraced."[130] The first chapter of this thesis, Post-Imperialism, addresses such themes, engaging with the work of critics such as Vint, Kerslake and Mendlesohn.

At the time of writing, there is one critical monograph dedicated to the Culture: *The Culture Series of Iain M Banks: A Critical Introduction* by Simone Caroti (2015). As Caroti makes clear, his book "is meant as an introduction to the Culture series, not any sort of presumptive final word on it."[131] Therefore his book is arranged in chronological order of the Culture texts' publication, and charts Banks's development as a writer and thinker as well as providing a critical companion to the series. Caroti's book is more concerned with providing a meticulously researched account of the above topics than advancing a particular reading of the Culture,

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[128] Brown, '"Special Circumstances": Intervention by a Liberal Utopia'.
[129] Kerslake, Science Fiction and Empire, 168.
[130] Ibid., 169.
[131] Simone Caroti, *The Culture Series of Iain M. Banks: A Critical Introduction* (North Carolina: MacFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2015) 2.

although, in general terms, he clearly identifies it as a utopia and challenges those who claim it to be otherwise.

One edited collection of essays dedicated to Banks's work has been published to date, *The Transgressive Iain Banks: Essays on a Writer Beyond Boundaries* (2013), while another focussed exclusively on his SF is currently in progress.[132] *The Transgressive Iain Banks* collection focuses almost exclusively on Banks's non-SF works, covering themes such as nationality, genre, gender and gameplay, including one essay about the Culture novels, written by myself, 'Digital Souls and Virtual Afterlives in the Culture Series', which contains material later developed for Chapter Five of this thesis.

There are also three other PhD theses completed at U.K. universities to focus on Banks's work, with one dedicated to analysis of the Culture series. Jude Roberts completed 'Culture-al Subjectivities: Iain (M.) Banks's Culture and the self' at the University of Nottingham, in which she explores the "vulnerability of the subject" in the Culture, exploring the "constitution of the self in light of, and at times in excess of, current critical and cultural theories of subjectivity."[133] Roberts argues that, following Judith Butler, Banks conceptualises "the subject as fundamentally and foundationally vulnerable",[134] and her work is addressed in the Post-Human chapter of this current thesis. Martyn Colebrook completed 'Bridging Fantasies: A Critical Study of the Novels of Iain Banks' at the University of Hull, which traces "a trajectory in post-1970s British fiction", "identifying the many intertexts and analogues" within Banks's novels, "as well as examining questions of genre, narrative and the idea of Banks as a chronicler of contemporary culture."[135] Moira Martingale completed 'Iain Banks: the Renovation of the Gothic' at the University of Bristol, which was later self-published as *Gothic Dimension: Iain Banks – Timelord* (2013).[136]

Martingale's work does cover some aspects of the Culture as part of her broader argument that Banks's work is permeated with influence from, and consideration of, the Gothic. In Chapter 2 of *Gothic Dimensions*, Martingale discusses

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[132] *The Science Fiction of Iain M. Banks*, of which I am a co-editor alongside Nick Hubble and Esther MacCallum-Stewart, has been scheduled for publication in 2017 by Gylphi Publications.

[133] Jude Roberts, *Culture-al Subjectivities: Iain M. Banks's Culture and the Self*. Unpublished PhD Thesis. University of Nottingham.

[134] Ibid.

[135] Martyn Colebrook, *Bridging Fantasies: A Critical Study of the Novels of Iain Banks*. Unpublished PhD thesis. University of Hull.

[136] Moira Martingale, *Iain Banks: the Renovation of the Gothic*, University of Bristol; and *Gothic Dimensions: Iain Banks – Timelord*, (Quetzalcoatl Publishing, 2013).

dual narratives and the trope of doubling in *Use of Weapons*, comparing this text with *The Bridge* and *Complicity*. In Chapter 5, Martingale discusses Banks's depictions of gender roles, sexual violation and "cyber females", making brief reference to several protagonists from the Culture series. In her final chapter, Martingale challenges the notion that Bank's fiction adheres to a strictly Suvinian, secular framework through analysis of the Culture's attitude towards AIs, as well as its interactions with other civilisations – I especially engage with Martingale's work in Chapters Four and Five of this thesis.

In one regard, the importance of Banks' authorial intentions for, and personal views on, the Culture, should be respected, and they are undoubtedly useful in trying to gain a deeper understanding of it; but it must also be accepted that there are underlying subtleties and nuances in his work – as in the work of any author – that may render his creations very differently from his intentions. Kerslake discusses the Culture explicitly as an empire, despite Banks' denouncement of this definition in terms of accuracy and usefulness. While she does link her arguments to this point, Kerslake comments elsewhere in her book, that "It is ironic that […] authors may […] tap into cultural or personal values of which they are unaware, perhaps into notions that, consciously, they would not even approve".[137] This serves as a fitting justification for both herself and I exploring the Culture according to this definition. As far as the other basic understanding (the Culture as empire) goes, Banks has been very dismissive, stating that while it *could* be argued that the Culture is a kind of empire, in a very loose sense, he has never intended to write it as such, nor is this a definition that he would advocate using. Banks completely dismisses 'empire' as a useful term for understanding or defining the Culture, in any way.[138]

A Very Different Kind of Post-Apocalypse

So that I can best engage with the complexities of Banks's series, I have developed my own research methodology. In order to gain an authoritative and nuanced understanding of Banks's series, and especially of the Culture within it, this thesis engages with a broad range of key themes across all of the Culture series, rather than focusing on a single specific aspect in just one or a selection of Banks's texts. In each

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[137] Kerslake, Science Fiction and Empire, 45.

[138] David Smith, 'A Conversation with Iain (M.) Banks: an Interview Conducted with Iain Banks in 2010', Covent Garden Hotel, London, 19 October, 2010, in *The Science Fiction of Iain M. Banks* (forthcoming 2017 Glyphi Publications).

chapter I provide analyses of one of these general themes, or sometimes several that are closely related, to explore different aspects of the Culture, different ways in which it has been understood or might be understood, and the significance of my findings for its definition.

Due to the nature of my project, which covers a wide range of themes, I have drawn upon various critical and theoretical sources as relevant to the content of each chapter, and the nature and relevance of each source is explained in the appropriate place below. There are, however, two particular critical sources on which my research relies more generally – Frederic Jameson's *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005), and Csicsery-Ronay's *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (2008) – which provide critical frameworks that have helped me to develop my methodology, as explained below.

The content of each thesis chapter is characterised as a kind of radical shift away from perceived flaws, errors or otherwise unwanted elements of many real-world societies through which the Culture aims to pass, or seems to have already passed – the cumulative effect of which enables the Culture to exist in the form that it does in the series. Each chapter identifies a particular shift, provides a historical/textual/critical and/or theoretical context, and delivers readings of a specific Culture text or texts as relevant in order to establish the extent to which this shift has occurred. I also explore the ways in which Banks uses the Culture series to comment upon each particular theme or themes in the real-world context in which he wrote. Some of these shifts were identified by Banks himself and formed part of his utopian philosophy: as responses to perceived flaws prevalent in many non-utopian societies – such as that in which he was writing – that the Culture must overcome in order to render it as the utopia that he desired. Questions such as the extent to which these shifts have been achieved, and the manner in which the Culture goes about achieving them, are crucial in establishing an accurate definition of the Culture.

During my research, it became quickly apparent that any serious discussion of Banks's series must concern itself, at least in part, with the concept of utopia and utopianism. While I consider various ways in which the Culture might be conceived, the theoretical material on utopia provided by Jameson in *Archaeologies of the Future* proved fundamental to my research. In *Archaeologies* Jameson discusses this idea of identifying errors and flaws in a current social system in the process of reform,

emphasising the complexity of any social system in a project of radical change:

> A reform which singles out this or that vice, or this or that flaw or error in the system, with a view towards modifying that feature alone, quickly discovers that any given feature entertains a multitude of unexpected yet constitutive links with all the other features in the system […] Thus, in order adequately to represent such changes, the modification of reality must be absolute and totalizing; and this impulsion of the Utopian text is one with a revolutionary and systemic concept of change rather than a reformist one.[139]

So, while Jameson acknowledges the desire to isolate and address specific social flaws, the reality is that these flaws are often interrelated on a deep level within a system: these flaws can therefore only be properly addressed *en masse* as part of a complete transformation of the system's totality, which defines the scale of the utopian project. Therefore, this thesis approaches the six fundamental shifts with which it is concerned as part of a project of radical, systemic change that the Culture seems to have undertaken or still to be undertaking, emphasising the links between these shifts and the ways in which they often operate in tandem. For example, in Chapter Three of this thesis, I examine the ways in which the Culture seems to have identified and eradicated flaws in human nature that preclude us from achieving a utopia, asking if the Culture in fact constitutes a society in which certain of its inhabitants have transcended the fundamental category of human being. This potential shift, however, is very closely related with another shift through which the Culture seems to have passed: moving beyond a patriarchal system of gender inequality, which forms the subject of Chapter Four.

One way in which these shifts could be characterised is as 'apocalypses', according to a new understanding of the term developed by Evan Calder Williams in *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse* (2011). Apocalypse is closely linked with SF, especially in relation to post-apocalyptic dystopian fiction, which issues warnings about the potential degradation of society if it were to continue in its current form. The term is often synonymous with an event of huge scale destruction – often financial, environmental or political – which prefigures a narrative of bleak survival in a newly feral, chaotic and amoral environment. While these narratives draw upon the Biblical understanding of apocalypse as "the complete final destruction of the

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[139] Frederic Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* (Verso: London, 2007) 39.

world,"[140] they place less emphasis upon the meaning implied by the ancient Greek translation of apocalypse as revelation: "lifting of the veil", an "uncovering".[141] By emphasising this inherent process of uncovering, or revealing that which lies beneath, Calder Williams redefines apocalypse as something potentially *con*structive rather than merely *de*structive. Furthermore, by developing this understanding within Marxist theory, Calder William seeks to distance our understanding of apocalypse from purely religious contexts. As Calder Williams writes:

> The sense we pursue, instead, is the end of a totality, here meaning not the sum of all things but *the ordering of those things in a particular historical shape* […] this doesn't mean total destruction but rather *a destruction of totalizing structures*, of those universal notions that do not just describe "how things are" but serve to prescribe and insist that "this is how things must be." What is revealed is what has been hidden in plain sight all along. Previously only caught askance from the corner of our eye.[142]

So, in this understanding, there is an inevitable element of destruction to apocalypse, but it is the destruction of a "totalizing structure", rather than the destruction of the entire world: not the end of the world, but merely the end of the world *as we know it*.

Such an apocalypse, then, following the logic of Jameson's comments quoted above, could in fact prefigure a utopia: when the particular ordering of society at a specific historical moment ends, new and potentially utopian ways of shaping that society will become visible. For example, in Chapter One, I argue that the Culture has passed not just beyond the totalising structure of Capitalism and a market economy, but beyond any need for a unit of financial exchange whatsoever, entering a new era of Post-Scarcity; and it is perhaps this shift more than the others that reveals radically new shapes into which this nascent Culture might potentially be moulded, shapes that were previously "hidden" behind self-serving conservative ideology. Therefore, these shifts that Banks describes in his series articulate what Jameson describes as "thinking the break", arguing that one of utopia's most important purposes is to keep radical political ideas alive at a time when the political Right works hard to convince us that there are insurmountable barriers in place prohibiting radical alternatives to the status quo. Each stage through which the Culture seems to have passed is another instance

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[140] 'apocalypse', *Oxford Dictionaries*, Oxford University Press. www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/apocalypse (Accessed October 30, 2015).
[141] Ibid.
[142] Evan Calder Williams, *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse* (Zero Books: Winchester, 2011) 5. Emphases added.

of thinking and articulating such a break from conservative thought, with each break clearing an alternate path, several of which will intersect or run in parallel, and all of which aim to lead toward the goal of utopia.

Apocalypse, then, can be understood as the act, event or process that makes this boundary apparent, revealed as inhibitive and unwanted. Rather than marking the start of an intractable crisis, from which it may take years to recover society to the preceding level of development, let alone progress beyond it, apocalypse can in fact instigate the dawn of a new, more positive world order. I argue that this new order could become a utopian one, following a series of such apocalypses, which systematically reveal the fundamental problems, the present totalising structures inhibiting progress in current society: once these totalising structures have been revealed, they can be removed; once they have been removed, that which is left can become the basis for utopia.

The Culture itself represents the ongoing product of such a process, and Banks narrates its continuing struggles to maintain and develop its current form. The Culture series, therefore, can be understood as describing a very different kind of post-apocalyptic outcome to that conventionally explored in SF.

Each chapter of the present thesis, then, explains a different apocalypse, shift or break through which the Culture appears to have passed, and analyses the extent to which this is true, asking whether the Culture has truly moved beyond the totality in question, or whether residual elements remain. As such, the title of each chapter refers to these totalities – scarcity, imperialism, gender, etc. – using the prefix 'post'. This prefix has become ubiquitous in various fields, especially that of critical theory, and has accumulated different meanings in different contexts, and according to the presence or absence of a hyphen. I have chosen to stylise the totalities mentioned throughout this theses without a hyphen, according to the reasoning articulated by Ian Buchanan, as outlined specifically in relation to the term 'postcolonialism':

> Literary studies has deleted the hyphen and with it the precision of reference it had in history, thus allowing the term to encompass the analysis of virtually any aspect of colonization, from the Early Modern or pre-colonial period of European exploration of the globe up to the present day. The deleting of the hyphen should be regarded as an essentially polemic gesture problematizing the very idea that colonialism is something that belongs safely in the past.[143]

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[143] Ian Buchanan, *A Dictionary of Critical Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010)

Here Buchanan stresses the significance of the latter usage, *with* a hyphen, which indicates the temporal, historical meaning 'after', whereas the former usage, *without* a hyphen, indicates a broader, more all-encompassing meaning, problematising the former usage. Similarly, therefore, I have chosen to omit the hyphen in all such instances within this thesis to highlight the fact that, within Banks's series, the extent to which these totalities belong safely in the past remains unclear, and addressing such questions forms an integral part of the analyses within. My first chapter, for example, is entitled 'Postimperial, Postempire' because it examines the extent to which the Culture and the Culture series have moved beyond Imperialism in various forms: while some critics have argued that the Culture exists in an era entirely beyond imperialism, others have in fact argued the contrary, as explained above.

Supporting this process of totality and break is Csicsery-Ronay's notion of the *technologiade*: the immense project of transforming an interstellar society into a technological one, which, as outlined in *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*, he considers to form a kind of metanarrative for all of SF but especially in relation to space opera.[144] In this thesis, I argue that Banks's Culture series articulates a particular, utopian version of such a *technologiade* metanarrative by the various shifts through which it seems to pass. The process of spreading technoscience throughout the galaxy is inextricably linked with the Culture's utopian vision, enabling all of its radical shifts to be potentially achieved. Woven into the present thesis, therefore, are six tropes of *technologiade* fiction, as outline by Csicsery-Ronay, which form a toolkit for analysis of space opera as outlined below.

Tracing the history of this meta-narrative through gothic, colonial adventure fiction and proto SF, Csicsery-Ronay charts the development of these six tropes and motifs up until the ways in which they manifest in contemporary SF. The protagonist of *technologiade* fiction is known as the 'Handy Man', a rational explorer and ambassador for his home culture, who frequently faces an antagonist known as the 'Shadow Mage', often a direct ideological inversion of the Handy Man from an equally technologically-developed environment. The technological apparatus through which the Handy Man masterfully manipulates his environment – gadgets, computer code, spacecraft, weaponry, etc. – are known as the 'Tool Text', which are necessarily

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[144] Csiscery-Ronay, *Seven Beauties,* 216-217.

produced from the 'Fertile Corpse', or the source from which they require energy is drawn and exploited. The Handy Man may be assisted on his quest by a 'Willing Slave', often a robot or AI, presented as voluntarily assisting its human counterparts on equal grounds, or created for servitude, unable to be exploited as the machine employs no will of its own. The Handy Man may cling to a 'Wife at Home' figure, a far-away source of comfort and potential refuge, which is as likely to be a human being as they are a home planet or culture.[145]

Thesis Structure

These tropes of the *technologiade* are woven into the six chapters of the present thesis, each concerned with a different shift through which the Culture has passed. My analysis takes a thematic approach to Banks's series, therefore, and I deal with the Culture texts in a different order to that in which they were published or written, as best suits my structures; while each chapter tends to include detailed analysis of one or two Culture texts in particular, there is not one chapter dedicated to each text as such, and references to texts across the sequence may occur at any point as appropriate. While it is not my intention to provide a history of the Culture as such, these shifts are presented in the approximate order of occurrence as far as possible, suggested by the fact that some would not be able to have occurred without first passing through earlier stages of development.

Chapter One questions the extent to which the Culture has moved beyond practices of imperialism and empire-building, and how the series engages with issues relating to globalisation. I provide a reading of *Inversions* showing the challenges of bringing humanitarian aid into such a relatively-undeveloped region, as well as the ideological changes this brings with it. Chapter Two explores the extent to which the Culture has moved beyond capitalism and a competitive, market-based society, the different ways in which the Culture's political organisation might be read, and it provides a reading of *The Player of Games* focused upon the themes of possession and sentimentality related to both economics and sexuality. Chapter Three questions the extent to which Culture citizens can still be considered human – given their radical physical alterations – by examining the themes of senescence, rejuvenescence and immortality in *Use of Weapons* in particular, and in the series more generally.

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[145] See: Ibid., 255.

Chapter Four focuses on Banks's portrayals of gender and sexuality in the series, asking to what extent patriarchy has been overcome in order to establish gender equality, providing readings of and character studies from *Matter*, *Excession* and *Surface Detail*. Chapter Five questions the extent to which Banks's envisioning of the Culture as a completely rational, secular society is undermined by his development of a quasi-religious framework in the series, as well as broader ways in which the series engages with issues of religion and secularism in society. Finally, Chapter Six explores the role of art and creativity in the Culture and the series in general, and the extent to which it seems to have entered a postaesthetic state, by providing analyses of works described in *Look to Windward*, *Surface Detail*, and *The Hydrogen Sonata*.

Chapter 1: Postimperial, PostEmpire, Postcolonial

"Utopia spawns few warriors" — from the poem 'Slight Mechanical Destruction', Iain M.
Banks (*UoW*, Prologue)
"Don't fuck with the Culture" — Iain M. Banks (*LtW,* 333)

This chapter explores the Culture series in relation to notions of imperialism and
various understandings of empire, including the traditional, centralised model,
Kerslake's notion of meta-empire, and Hardt and Negri's conception of Empire,
asking to which of these – if any – the Culture might conform. I explore the extent to
which the Culture itself is representative of a system that has passed beyond
imperialism altogether, or whether such practices remain. I demonstrate the ways in
which the meta-narrative of Banks's series provides an important example of
Csicsery-Ronay's notion of the *technologiade*, and explore the links between this idea
and notions of global/galactic dominance. Finally, I provide a close reading of
Inversions, focussing on the ways in which the text demonstrates the practices of the
Culture's SC division from within societies with whom Contact has established
relations.

1.1 Space Opera, Empire and the World System

At the heart of space opera – characterised by an epic scale of galactic proportions –
is the assumption that the expansionist tendencies of real-world power structures
would, if possible, continue beyond the planetary sphere and into outer space. As
Csicsery-Ronay observes in *Seven Beauties*, "space opera finds it hard to resist the
trope of the world-system […] turning the cosmos into a scene of political conflict
between competing interests".[146] Indeed both space opera and new space opera are
replete with such systems, with different authors developing huge networks of
interlinked planets, moons, ships and other habitats arranged according to different
political, social and economic frameworks, which clash or collude with each other to
varying degrees; and which offer utopian/dystopian possibilities dependent upon the
nature and extent of their governance. Smith's *Lensman* series, for example, which
started with the serialisation of *Triplanetary* in *Amazing Stories* in 1934, provides a
broadly representative example of traditional space opera as well as of such a world
system. Featuring a "galactic fellowship of free, independent, and co-operative

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[146] Csicsery-Ronay, *Seven Beauties*, 224.

worlds,"[147] Smith's narratives are in general concerned with the methods of the Galactic Patrol, an interstellar combination of military fighters and law-enforcement patrollers dedicated to protecting these worlds from 'evil', and in particular the formation of the Patrol's elite officers known as the 'Lensmen'. Airing for the first time a few decades later in 1966, the original series of *Star Trek* developed by Gene Roddenberry introduced television audiences to the now famous United Federation of Planets, which – due to its post-capitalist, egalitarian and humanitarian nature – provided an example of a much more politically progressive, world system in space opera. Published in the same year, Le Guin's debut novel *Rocannon's World* (1966) is the first installment of her loose Hainish Cycle, featuring SF classics such as *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and *The Dispossessed* (1974), and is concerned with the Ekumen: "not a kingdom, but a co-ordinator, a clearing-house for trade and knowledge."[148] Featuring "three thousand nations on eighty-three habitable worlds", the Ekumen are motivated by "Material profit. Increase of knowledge. The augmentation of the complexity and intensity of the field of intelligent life. The enrichment of harmony and the greater glory of God. Curiosity. Adventure, Delight."[149]

This sub-genre, then, given such prominence of its world system trope, seems particularly suited to discussions of imperialism; and space opera authors have frequently imagined world systems that subjugate the environments under their control in authoritarian regimes of some variety. This is certainly the case in the history of the Culture's fictional universe, which, like the history of our planet, is fraught with races, civilisations, kings, religious leaders and nations who have tried to achieve dominance over others using various forms of colonialism and imperialism, as well as a variety of other civilisations whose structures and motivations are, like the Culture itself, more complex. The Culture – as a collective of planet-sized habitats, linked through information and communications networks – is therefore one world system among many, albeit quite a loose one, and a primary concern of Banks's texts is the political relations between the Culture and other civilisations in the galaxy.

Csicsery-Ronay identifies space opera as "one of two dialectically related forms" of the *technologiade*, his vision of SF's quintessential narrative form: "the

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[147] E.E. Doc Smith, *First Lensman*, (Granada publishing ltd: St Albans, 1971) 242.
[148] Ursula le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, (Orbit: London, 1992) 28-29.
[149] Ibid.

epic of the struggle surrounding the transformation of the cosmos into a technological regime".[150] Positioned effectively as the meta-narrative of the entire genre, Csicsery-Ronay coins and expounds this term in response to critics who argues that SF has no "distinctive myth or storytelling formula", but merely combines elements of other pre-existing "host plots", and colours them with different varieties of nova.[151] He explains that, alongside space opera, the *technologiade* can also take the form of the *techno-Robinsonade*, which, drawing on the tropes of Daniel Defoe's Ur-text *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), focuses on an individual or a small group's attempt to bring technoscience to, and effectively colonise, isolated, 'uncivilised' planets. After *Robinson Crusoe*, the *technologiade* appears in the form of various utopias, Gothic fictions, modern colonial adventure novels and other works of proto SF.

It is relatively straightforward to identify the Culture series, according to Banks's authorial intentions – with its humanist, rationalist drive to spread its utopianism through technoscientific transformation of the galaxy – as demonstrating a version of the *technologiade*. Csicsery-Ronay calls techno-utopia "the city of handiness, for the ways in which it represents the successful result of social and political planning, actualised mainly by the use of technology, and mechanical engineering.[152] The Culture is part of the Involved, "space-faring species beyond a certain technological level which are willing and able to interact with each other," (*LtW*, 71) who, by their very nature represent a high point of civilisation; yet, as demonstrated by other civilisations in Banks's texts – the Idirans, a cruel, warrior empire from *Consider Phlebas*; the fascistic Empire of Azad from *The Player of Games*; or the Affront from *Excession*, for example – a society reaching a certain level of technological sophistication does not necessarily mean it bears a corresponding level of utopianism. In this manner, the Culture – which supposedly matches technological sophistication with utopian success – sees itself as the zenith of civilisation and the instigatory example of that to which all other societies aspire, and – from the Culture's perspective at least – are *entitled*, to be. Banks's texts, all concerned with the social and political relations between the Culture and these other systems, form an epic series in which his particular iteration of that struggle is

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[150] Csicsery-Ronay, *Seven Beauties*, 217.
[151] Ibid., 216.
[152] Ibid., 249.

narrated. The *technologiade*, then, describes the meta-narrative of the Culture series itself.

Yet clearly not every world system is a techno-utopia like that of Roddenberry's Federation or an egalitarian anarchy such as the planet Anarres from within the Ekumen system; and the transformation at the heart of narratives of the *technologiade* is only as politically progressive and utopian as those holding power over that system. The systems constructed by Smith, Roddenberry and Le Guin are merely three examples of world systems in space opera – all of which Banks was very likely to have been aware and influenced by, and some of which he implicitly intended to subvert and re-imagine the key tropes. While the Galactic Patrol, the Federation and the Ekumen are similar in some general respects to the Culture, they differ in other fundamental details. Smith's series, for example, explores methods for achieving galactic peace but seemingly demonstrates ambiguity regarding democracy whilst showing support for authoritarianism, elitism and martial values[153] – everything that the Culture claims to reject. While Le Guin's Ekumen is certainly egalitarian and altruistic, its desire for material profit and to appeal to the "greater glory of God" would seem to clash with the Culture's postscarcity values and secular society (albeit that Le Guin's reference to a deity in the quotation above, suggesting the Ekumen as a religious system, may well be merely a casual turn of phrase). Given its fundamental utopianism, the Federation seems ideologically very similar to the Culture, but differs regarding international relations: the Federation's 'Prime Directive' expressly forbids them from interfering in the development of other civilisations, whereas the Culture operates according to an exactly opposite procedure – as Banks states, "when in doubt, intervene."[154]

Having established that Banks's creation operates within the general framework theorised by Csicsery-Ronay, the crucial question remains: specifically what *kind* of a world system and technological regime is the Culture?

1.2 The Problem of Intervention

It is generally because of its policy of intervention that various critics have argued for the Culture as an imperialist system, and/or as a form of empire, despite Banks's firm

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[153] The Galactic Council operates in a fairly diplomatic manner, but is attended only by the elite Lensmen; also objectionable politicians are shown to gain popularist support whereas at one stage a hero suggests instigating a military coup to solve an intractable issue. See Smith's *First Lensman*.
[154] David Smith, 'A Conversation with Iain Banks'.

intention to create the Culture as a utopia that is ideologically opposed to imperialism in all forms: it would be much more straightforward to classify the world system of the Culture as a utopia if it were not for the fact that it actively engages with other systems, and sometimes attempts to affect the course of their development to a certain degree. One of the key problems in Banks's series, then, is how the Culture can ensure that it does not end up mirroring the imperialism it tries to end, and becoming an empire like those it opposes, given its seemingly expansionist and assimilatory tendencies. As Vint suggests in 'Iain M. Banks: the Culture-al Body', the relationship between utopianism and imperialism is often more complex than to position the terms as polar opposites: "the seductive danger of any utopia is the desire to convert others and the risk of imperialism that accompanies the evangelical impulse. The central tension in Banks's work between benevolent imperialism and its inevitable discontents is linked to this rejection of utopianism."[155] Kerslake, too, propounds the argument that "the most common attraction of empire is not through dystopia […] but through utopia […] where everyone is free to explore and colonise at will, and where even the colonized subjects appear happy about their condition."[156] This suggests that her thinking – which presents utopianism as, at best, a naively misguided practice, or, at its worst, as little more than bait offered by imperialists to subtly achieve their ends – is essentially anti-utopian. In *Archaeologies*, Jameson examines a similar issue in what he calls post-revolutionary Communist utopias, contrasting "the closure and international secession of that enclave called 'socialism in one country' with "a Utopian imperialism of further worlds to conquer, both geographically and scientifically"[157] – his phrase "Utopian imperialism" neatly encapsulates the contradictions present in Banks's work, as well as in related real-world systems. Essentially Vint and Jameson suggest the same paradox at the heart of much utopian/dystopian fiction: that within utopia lie the potential seeds of dystopia, and *vice versa*.[158]

Similarly to Vint, Michal Kulbicki has identified "moral black holes" in Banks's series, produced when such a utopia supposedly contradicts its own intentions and intervenes into other societies using violence. Writing in 'Iain M.

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[155] Vint, 'The Culture-al Body', in, *Bodies of Tomorrow: Technology, Subjectivity, Science fiction* (London: University of Toronto Press ltd, 2007), 86.
[156] Kerslake, Science Fiction and Empire, 132.
[157] Jameson, Archaeologies of the Future, 20.
[158] Which Margaret Atwood has identified as 'Ustopia' in her book *In Other Worlds*: *SF and the Human Imagination* (St Ives: Virago press, 2011).

Banks: Ernst Bloch and Utopian Interventions', Kulbicki argues that the Culture ultimately resists "a totalizing vision" of imperial hegemony due to its fundamental multiplicity, openness and continual state of flux.[159] Yannick Rumpala has interpreted the intervention described in *The Player of Games* as an example of 'Preemptive Regime Change', and reaches the ambivalent conclusion that the Culture, "in its ongoing struggle to survive as a utopia among other civilizations, is forced into morally difficult positions" that sometimes "violate its own internal moral precepts of individual freedom from interference."[160] In '"Special Circumstances": Intervention by a Liberal Utopia', Chris Brown argues that the most interesting aspect of the series – SC's missions – make it simultaneously similar to and different from the real-world West, as these missions do resemble Western military intervention to some degree. He concludes that "the Culture is most definitely not the 'West', it is a liberal utopia that represents to Banks the best of what, in the absence of scarcity, the West could become".[161] Robert Duggan also draws parallels between the Culture's interventions and those of the United States, reading *Consider Phlebas* and *Look to Windward* in the context of "the aftermath of the first Gulf war" and "looking ahead to terrorism in the post-9/11 world."[162]

It becomes clear that the Culture division of Contact and its sub-division SC are crucial to the issues surrounding the Culture's classification. As Banks explains in 'A Few Notes', "Contact is the part of the Culture concerned with discovering, cataloguing, investigating, evaluating and – if thought prudent – interacting with other civilisations".[163] Contact represents the Culture neutrally through ambassadors, and maintains ongoing peaceful political relations; it is a "relatively small part of the whole Culture" and the "average Culture citizen will rarely encounter a GSV or other Contact ship in person."[164] The fact that Contact is necessary demonstrates that the Culture does not and perhaps cannot exist as an enclave or system of enclaves cut off from other civilisations, and disconnected from wider politics: it is unable to avoid interaction with other societies, races, and organisations. If it was not for SC, then

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[159] Michal Kulbicki, 'Iain M Banks, Ernst Bloch and Utopian Interventions', Colloquy: Text Theory Crtitique, 2009 – 08 -0177, 2009 Aug; 17: 34-43.
[160] David Farnell, 'Preemptive Regime Change in Iain M. Banks's *The Player of Games*', 1505.
[161] Brown, '"Special Circumstances': Intervention by a Liberal Utopia", 631.
[162] Robert Duggan, 'Iain M. Banks, Postmodernism and the Gulf War', *Extrapolation: A Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy,* Vol. 48, No.33 (Winter 2007), 558-577.
[163] Banks, 'A Few Notes'.
[164] Ibid.

Contact would appear not dissimilar from Rodenberry's Federation: a political organisation underpinned by values of compassion, benevolence, cultural relativism and diplomacy. Yet SC, even smaller and more secretive than Contact, is primarily concerned with actively effecting change in other societies: sometimes known as the Culture's 'Dirty tricks' or 'Black Ops' division, it is as close as the Culture comes to a military body, which organises missions into intergalactic territories that can be considered interventions of a kind.

Drawing on Vint's comments quoted above, then, the key concerns that must be addressed in order to ascertain the extent to which the Culture can be considered imperial are as follows: how can a utopia that feels a responsibility to other, non-utopian societies, end the suffering and exploitation of others without actually resorting to underhand methods such as manipulation and subterfuge to achieve its goal? Is it acceptable to risk war and domination in the name of achieving peace and freedom? At what point do the Culture's interventions – if that is in fact what they are – stop being benign and utopian, and start being malicious and imperial?

1.3 Banks on SC and Contact

While he did acknowledge that many of the narratives within the series sought to address potential problems that arise from the Culture's interventions, Banks condoned the activities of SC from the outset and regularly reaffirmed his vehement view that the Culture – in both its structure and actions – is not an empire, should not and cannot be described imperialist in any regard, and any attempt to do so would be pointless.[165] Banks justified the Culture's spread and its interventions – its geographic and scientific "conquering" – because they are motivated only by a desire to ensure that as many beings as possible are allowed to experience the freedoms it has achieved for its own citizens and he argued that the interventions are carried out in as peaceful-a-manner as possible, precisely in order to end such suffering and exploitation, and spread its utopian message, with no subsequent attempt to reassert a system of control or power. As Banks explains, the Culture "can prove statistically that interfering is the right thing, the morally right thing, to do"[166] – suggesting that SC's missions are instigated, planned and enacted according to the logic of careful,

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[165] Smith, 'A Conversation with Iain Banks'.
[166] Ibid.

rational analysis based on numerical data, and according to a utilitarian ethical framework.

Banks also argued that the Culture offering its citizens the opportunity to explore other societies on diplomatic missions for Contact or espionage missions for SC is related to the so-called problem of boredom in utopia – explored in depth in Chapter Three of this thesis – as these missions provide Culture citizens with a sense of moral obligation and purpose. When working for Contact and/or SC, Banks argued that Culture people will

> feel good about themselves. I mean, there's nothing in a sense for them to strive for personally. In a sense at any given level, whatever fractal scale you look at of the society, it's kind of done it all. It's got everything. So what is left? What is left is looking out into the rest of the galaxy and seeing mayhem, anarchy, disease, warfare and bad behaviour in general. So they are going on saying 'Well, we can help affect this, we can do something.'[167]

Active intervention, then, is seen as a moral duty to extend the freedom and peace the Culture has achieved for itself as a utopia to other, non-utopian societies – it would be irresponsible and morally wrong to passively enjoy peace while others suffer. Therefore, the Culture operates according to the philosophy that – when absolutely necessary, and conducted in the least harmful, exploitative or imperial manner possible – it has a responsibility to intervene in the development of other civilisations, offering political, intellectual and material support throughout the process, and in the future. In turn, these 'good deeds' help the Culture to provide a sense of value and purpose for its own people, providing further evidence that a utopian system like the Culture's is desirable for all: even so, the Culture offers merely the *possibility* of others becoming like themselves if so desired, without actually forcing or actively coercing others to do so. The Culture aims to be a key force that drives the *technologiade*'s technoscientific transformation of the galaxy without breaking its own fundamental axiom that nothing and nobody is exploited.[168]

1.4 Traditional Empire

As mentioned above, critics such as Vint, Mendlesohn, Rumpala, Duggan, Palmer and Kerslake have challenged Banks's understanding of the Culture, labelling it

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[167] Ibid.
[168] See: Banks, 'A Few Notes'.

explicitly as a kind of empire or suggesting so by exploring it within an imperial context. In order to properly examine such arguments, it is necessary to explain that none of these critics seem to suggest that the Culture is an empire in the traditional, pre-World War Two understanding of the term:

> a large political body which rules over territories outside its original borders. It has a central power or core territory – whose inhabitants usually continue to form the dominant ethnic or national group in the entire system – and an extensive periphery of dominated areas.[169]

Yet, superficially at least, the Culture does have some parallels with such a system, The Culture is a body of habitats, many of which have become associated with it from outside its original borders, and some of which operate in a peripheral relationship; also, the Culture's inhabitants are predominantly human beings, or beings derived from humans (as well as AIs), and so operate effectively as a dominant 'ethnic' group.[170] There are crucial differences, however. As explored in the following chapter of this thesis, the Culture has no central core territory, being spread equally across many habitats, and the Minds are too limited and uninterested in those citizens less developed than themselves to be called a power as such, and too dispersed and unorganised to be considered centralised in any way. Given that they must have core territory as well as a periphery, "empires, then must by definition be big, and they must be composite entities, formed out of previously separate units. Diversity – ethnic, national, cultural, often religious – is their essence."[171] Placed within the expansive galactic scope of Banks's series, it is easy to assume that the Culture is a very large system, occupying a huge amount of physical space – yet this is not the case. As Banks explains in *Excession*, the spread of the Culture is quite small in relation to the size of the galaxy and in comparison with other civilisational groups, occupying approximately 5% of each galactic region (59). The Culture *is* composed from entities that were previously separate, and its many habitats *do* seem to be diverse; yet "in many observers' understanding", empire "cannot be a diversity of equals".[172] If such a system features "no relation of domination between 'core' and

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[169] Stephen Howe, *Empire: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). 15

[170] "The Culture is a group-civilisation formed from seven or eight humanoid species", Banks, 'A Few Notes'.

[171] Howe, Empire: A Very Short Introduction, 15.

[172] Ibid.

'periphery'" as seems to be the case with the Culture, "then the system is not an empire but deserves a title such as 'commonwealth'" – a "free association of equals."[173]

Writing in *The Player of Games*, Banks offers a definition of empire that concurs with that offered above, especially through his emphasis on dominance and centralisation:

> Empires are synonymous with centralised – if occasionally schismatised – hierarchical power structures in which influence is restricted to an economically privileged class retaining its advantages through – usually – a judicious use of oppression and skilled manipulation…In short it's all about dominance (74).

Banks argued that the Culture could only be considered an example of such a structure if the term empire was used in a problematically broad and vague manner: the term empire,

> at its widest definition […] becomes so wide and so loose it really starts to lose any genuine utility. You could call it [the Culture] an empire but it doesn't really work that way. It's too intrinsically self-contained and of course […] empires exist because a group, a state […] with power, is able to go out and basically take over and enslave and exploit […] I think... if you insist on calling it [the Culture] an empire, it can be, but I think it's kind of pointless. […] You might as well call it an agrarian commune or something. That makes about as much sense."[174]

He goes on to reassert his conviction that exploitation and enslavement are fundamental to empire and therefore anathema to the Culture, who intend to "lift the yoke of oppression" from others, rather than impose it.[175] Furthermore, the first two published texts in the series, *Consider Phlebas* and *The Player of Games*, provide fictional examples of societies that conform much more clearly to Bank's definition of empire – the Idirans and the Azadians respectively – which sharply contrast with the nature of the Culture. (An extended analysis of the Empire of Azad can be found in the next chapter of this thesis.) It seems clear then that however we choose to classify the Culture, it is not an empire in the traditional sense of the term.

1.5 Meta-empire

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[173] Ibid.
[174] Smith, 'A Conversation with Iain M. Banks'.
[175] Ibid.

The term empire has of course acquired a much more complex meaning following World War Two, when the various imperial structures of old eventually collapsed, at least in their traditional, centralised forms, and we entered what has become known as the postcolonial era. Writing in *Science Fiction and Empire*, Kerslake argues that the Culture novels, written between the early 1970s and 2012, "offer the clearest concept yet [in science fiction] of a postcolonial future".[176] As Stuart Hall explains:

> postcolonial is not the end of colonisation. It is after a certain kind of colonialism, after a certain moment of high imperialism and colonial occupation – in the wake of it, in the shadow of it, inflected by it – it is what it is because something else has happened before, but it is also something new.[177]

Kerslake, then, considers the Culture within this context, and as part of a broader literary project that unpicks the threads of traditional models of empire and colonialism as they were woven in previous centuries. Crucially, she emphasises her reading of the Culture series as a somewhat unique vision in SF that takes us "*beyond* an awareness of our own imperial history" into what she understands as the realm of "*metaempire*: an unknown place where options of both neo-empire and political atrophy are eschewed and a new form of political structure is embraced".[178] Here, then, Kerslake, affirms Banks's place at the vanguard of an already progressive genre by arguing that, with the Culture, he offers a radically different vision to the standard options offered through SF that result from the fall of traditional empire.

Yet, alongside this, Kerslake's reading of the Culture emphasises the complexities and contradictions frequently faced when attempting to define Bank's vision; and her own analysis contains certain ambiguities. Initially Kerslake argues that "Banks's Culture books are utopian" for the ways that the needs of everyone are met in this decentralised, postscarcity society, and because "everyone is as physically and intellectually perfect or imperfect as they want to be."[179] Banks's texts, too, "share common ground with anarchism and socialism", and illustrate a "utopianist

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[176] Kerslake, *Science Fiction and Empire*, 7. Parenthesis added.
[177] Gary A. Olson and Lynn Worsham, eds., 'Cultural Composition: Stuart Hall on Ethnicity and the Discursive Turn,' in *Race, Rhetoric, and the Postcolonial* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999) 230, quoted in 'What was postcolonialism?', Bob Hodge, Vishay Mishra, New Literary History 36.3 (2005) 375-402. muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.brunel.ac.uk/journals/new_literary_history/v036/36.3mishra.html (Accessed 10 January, 2016).
[178] Kerslake, Science Fiction and Empire, 169.
[179] Ibid., 175.

form of anarchy".[180] Kerslake assures us that, "in Banks's novels, empire has finally become obsolete" and "imperialism of any form is redundant".[181] Yet, later in the book a shift occurs in Kerslake's argument, which appears to contradict her previous statements. She describes the Culture as "far from utopian",[182] then later, more emphatically, "non-utopian",[183] and, through its intention to "sacrifice individuality for the benefits of assimilation", that the Culture is "the metaphorical embodiment of a deeply imperialism rationale, in that its very elitism and superiority render it supremely attractive to 'lesser' groups".[184] Kerslake sees the Culture as having achieved, or at least capable of achieving, an imperialist, galactic hegemony – different from more familiar models of empire, as its power is achieved, not through force or even through the active coercions of SC, but through the persuasive force of its very status as an achieved utopia. As a utopia, then, to Kerslake, the Culture represents a lofty, elitist civilisation

> which does not need to flaunt its ideological superiority over others; it simply exists in such a manner that all competition and all competitors are outranked before they begin. The only way to 'win' in a confrontation with such ideology is to become one of 'them'.[185]

According to this understanding, the Culture participates in a galactic struggle of ideology and power where it could eventually rise to dominate as a uniform *mono*culture, absorbing and assimilating all others, simply because its success is so supreme and self-evident that none would fail to succumb to its attractions. Banks's utopia poses the danger of becoming not just *a* culture amongst many others, but *the only* Culture, as all others eventually sacrifice their identities to become part of it. Vint, too, discusses the Culture as a kind of imperialism of the body, where physical differences are ultimately effaced as part of a homogenous conformist project.[186]

Unpacking this argument, it is necessary to consider the extent to which the Culture achieves galactic hegemony in such a manner, as well as the extent to which its allows for cultural diversity. Vint and Kerslake's reading tends towards an oversimplification of Banks's series and of the Culture's relations with other

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[180] Ibid.
[181] Ibid.
[182] Ibid., 169.
[183] Ibid., 170.
[184] Ibid., 47.
[185] Ibid., 45.
[186] See: 'Iain M. Banks: The Culture-al Body'; and Chapter Three of this thesis.

societies. Kerslake refers to confrontation between the Culture and others as if misunderstanding, violence and authoritarianism characterise such relations; yet it is not clear that this proposed game of galactic power struggles actually exists. Smug, self-satisfied and pompous it may seem at times, but the examples provided in the series demonstrate that the Culture only actively affects the development of a 'lesser' group if the continued existence of that group would inhibit the freedom or the very existence of others to a significant extent. If the Culture does act like an empire and achieve "the suppression of one culture by another",[187] as Kerslake suggests, it focuses exclusively on those cultures practicing violence, intolerance, slavery, genocide and fascism, etc. – an important distinction – and even then prefers to suppress those specifically negative traits, rather than that culture in its entirety. The extent of any subsequent assimilation becomes therefore entirely voluntary.

In *Consider Phlebas*, for example, the Idirans essentially lost their conflict with the Culture, although they "technically never surrendered" (462). In the aftermath, the Idirans' computer network became "a Culture Mind in all but name", suggesting that they would be capable of achieving a postscarcity society similar to the Culture (as discussed in the following chapter of this thesis). While much of the Idiran empire was destroyed or broken up, only "a few" of those who remained actually joined the Culture; many went into exile, escaped to other planets, or even established "independent, nominally non-military habitats within other spheres of influence (under the Culture's eye)" (462). The Culture's response to winning the largest war in its history, therefore, was far from the total annihilation of an opposing culture, or an imperialistic process of assimilation. In *The Hydrogen Sonata*, also, the Culture performs an action with potentially radical effects upon a slightly less-developed society: revealing crucial hidden information to a race called the Gzilt about the nature of their religion by essentially debunking their holy book (111). Following such a revelation, an imperially-oriented society might use the resulting turmoil as the basis for a secular transformation and cultural assimilation. Instead, however, the Culture does very little in response – seeing this revelation as part of their duty to uncover an important truth to those affected by it, who would otherwise remain ignorant – and the Gzilt continue to Sublime as intended, as their religion dictates, at the end of the novel (see Chapter Five of this thesis).

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[187] Kerslake, Science Fiction and Empire, 132.

Many of the problematic aspects of Kerslake's conception of the Culture arise from her understanding of the terms empire and imperialism themselves, which directly contrast with Banks's, and those of other politically Left-oriented and postcolonialist thinkers. As quoted in full above, Banks understood empire to be an innately flawed and negative political system because of its focus on the dominance of one class over another, use of "skilled manipulation" and suppression of dissent and non-hegemonic cultures. Kerslake argues, however, that the concept of empire is effectively neutral, and "not intrinsically wrong; it is outward evidence of the social needs of the human species to develop, progress and grow".[188] Suggesting that empire is only as good or bad as the powers in charge, Kerslake argues that "empire is not itself an evil thing, yet our histories demonstrate that those who have created empires do not do so in order to produce a state of peace and beauty."[189] Clearly Kerslake's understanding of empires as potentially contributing towards human progress and development clashes dramatically with Banks's understanding, which Kerslake describes as "politically revealing".[190] Perhaps Banks's series demonstrates that utopia and empire can express ideologically-opposed variations of the same basic impulse towards expansion, the former favouring egalitarianism, and the latter hierarchy.

1.6 'Empire' and Utopian Globalisation

Like Kerslake, Hardt and Negri consider the nature of imperialism following the collapse of traditional empires around the world, in their influential book *Empire*, focusing upon the nature of neo-liberal globalisation in the twenty-first century.[191] It is important to examine the Culture in relation to their concept of Empire with which it has important parallels, as Vint has begun to do in her two essays on Banks's work.[192] In *Empire*, Hardt and Negri suggest that, rather than fading away completely, past imperialisms in fact persist in a different, subtler form as neo-liberal globalisation, where a new form of sovereignty has emerged, "composed of a series of national and supranational organisms united under a single logic of rule. This new global form of sovereignty is what we call Empire."[193] Hardt and Negri contrast

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[188] Ibid., 164.
[189] Ibid., 171.
[190] Ibid., 70.
[191] Antonino Negri, Michael Hardt, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).
[192] See: Vint, 'The Culture-al Body', 2007; and 'Cultural Imperialism and the Ends of Empire', 2008.
[193] Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, xii

Empire with traditional imperialism, stating that:

> Empire establishes no territorial centre of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers. It is a decentered and Deterritorializing apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers.[194]

Empire, therefore, boundaryless and limitless, refers to a regime "that effectively encompasses the spatial totality", that "effectively suspends history and thereby fixes the existing state of affairs for eternity", and aims to rule "social life in its entirety" by seeking "directly to rule over human nature."[195]

Following these descriptions, it is possible to draw clear parallels between the Culture and that of Empire. The similarities between the language used by Banks and by Hardt and Negri to describe the spatial organisation of their respective systems, for example, are immediately striking. Just as Hart and Negri state that "Empire is characterised fundamentally by a lack of boundaries", Fal N'geestra asks of the Culture, "Where exactly does it begin and end?", concluding: "no clear boundaries to the Culture, then; it just fades away at the edges, both fraying and spreading" (*CP*, 26). In some ways, too, Hart and Negri's conception of Empire is actually quite similar to the notion of utopia, if we refer to the etymological root of the latter term in a literal sense: 'utopia' stemming from the Greek words *ou* 'not' and *topos* 'place'.[196] For, as Hardt and Negri explain, with Empire, "no subjectivity is outside, and all places have been subsumed in a general "*non-place.*"[197] Yet, despite their decentred natures and the somewhat abstract nature of their power, of course both Empire and the Culture do exist to some extent in a physical manner, even if it is within a fictional framework. The Culture's citizens live in various artificial environments spread across the galaxy, which are autonomous, yet are potentially interconnected by means of communication and methods of sharing information, forming a web across the galaxy. Echoing this notion Mendlesohn pithily compares the Culture directly with the real-world West, stating that "the Culture has become McDonaldsised".[198] Here, Mendlesohn draws upon George Ritzer's term for "the imposition of uniform

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[194] Ibid., *Empire*, xii
[195] Ibid., xv.
[196] 'utopia', Oxford Dictionaries. Oxford University Press, 12 February 2015. www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/utopia (Accessed 12 February, 2016).
[197] Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 363.
[198] Mendlesohn, 'The Dialectic of Decadence and Utopia in Iain M. Banks's Culture Novels', 2005.

standards that eclipse human creativity and dehumanize social relations," resulting from the wide-spread adoption of "socio-cultural processes by which the principles of the fast-food chain are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world."[199] Mendlesohn compares the structure of Banks's civilisation to global capitalism, then, asking readers to liken the Culture's GSVs, for example, with the blandness and banality of corporate franchises, due to their self-sufficient, self-replicating nature.[200]

Vint, too, has portrayed the Culture as a kind of monoculture, noting that it strives "to be a utopia, offering consolidation, rather than the more challenging heterotopia that disturbs the given orders of things."[201] Referring to the concept developed by Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things* (1971) and 'Des Espace Autres' (1986), Vint implies that the Culture's purpose is to offer comfort by assimilating disparate elements into sameness, rather than productive discomfort through difference and separation: a utopian yet hegemonic space free from 'undesirable' elements that operate outside the accepted order. For further discussion of this issue, see Chapter Three of the present thesis.

As with traditional models of empire, Banks vociferously challenged any association of the Culture and its practices with such a system; in the following quotation, Banks draws upon marketing terms, denying that the Culture partakes in any such homogenising activity, and emphasises the latter's focus on freedom rather than power and exploitation:

> part of the idea of the Culture is that they're not trying to turn everyone deliberately into, you know, little versions of themselves. I think this is probably what's going to happen anyway at the higher end of civilisation. They're not trying to […] impose their own sort of *brand of utopia* on […] everybody else. They just want to get on with their own lives basically and having the freedom to do it. They don't want to impose another sort of, you know, imperial or even philosophical sort of template on the people that they are attempting to free.[202]

The reality of one society interfering in the development of another makes the kinds of impositions that Banks refers to here very difficult to avoid, as Vint explains: "Good works are a part of the Culture's mission, and they define good works in terms

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[199] Steger, A Very Short Introduction to Globalisation, 73.
[200] Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 85.
[201] Vint, 'The Culture-al Body', 86.
[202] Smith, 'A Conversation with Iain M. Banks'.

of policing the universe to ensure that other civilizations move in the direction of the enlightened standard they represent."[203] Farnell, too, argues that part of the Culture's *modus operandi* whilst affecting a system of "regime change" is to "discredit the cultural basis of its negative hierarchical structure".[204] Yet, as demonstrated by the analysis of *Inversions* that follows below, it is far from clear if the Culture does in fact police the universe in a similar manner to the Galactic Patrol, as Vint suggests; also, Farnell does not suggest that the discredited culture must necessarily be replaced with that of the Culture itself, making it clear that this would only be the case when dealing with an especially oppressive regime.[205]

So, while the Culture undoubtedly bears resemblance to Empire in some respects, it is important to emphasise its differences. As explored in the next chapter of this thesis, fundamental aspects of the Culture's existence are underpinned by its reliance upon a postscarcity economic system, which is enabled and overseen by powerful AIs: this system is clearly radically different from a neo-liberalist society as it completely dispenses with financial markets, and in fact with all need for any unit of financial exchange whatsoever. It seems therefore that – similar to Kerslake's discussion of the Culture and (meta-)empire – the discussion here is really to do with the similarities between the Culture and the notion of globalisation itself, as broadly defined, rather than the specific neo-liberal manifestation of it, known as Empire. Manfred B. Steger offers a more neutral definition of globalisation, or what he calls globalism:

> a multidimensional set of social processes that create, multiply, stretch, and intensify worldwide social interdependencies and exchanges while at the same time fostering in people a growing awareness of deepening connections between the local and the distant.[206]

Steger outlines "three types of globalism" that "compete for adherents around the globe", which he calls market globalism, jihadist globalism and justice globalism.[207] In relation to this third type, which refers to the various groups and organisations around the world on the political Left sometimes referred to as the Anti-Globalisation

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[203] Vint, 'The Culture-al Body', 80.
[204] David Farnell, 'Preemptive Regime Change in Iain M. Banks' *The Player of Games*', 1505-1520; 1517.
[205] Ibid.
[206] Manfred B. Steger, *A Very Short Introduction to Globalization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 13.
[207] Ibid, 99.

movement, Steger makes the important point that often this latter description is inaccurate: it is commonly not the process of globalisation *per se* that is challenged by affiliates of this movement, merely the neo-liberal, market-driven iteration of this process known as market globalism or Empire. Preferring the phrase 'alter-globalisation', Steger defines justice globalism as "an alternative vision of globalization based on alternative ideals of global solidarity and distributive justice",[208] which in many ways could refer to the Culture. Identifying the Culture as an example of justice globalisation, then, invites us to view it as Banks's vision of one of the possible outcomes of such anti-capitalist forces, if they were somehow able to achieve their goals and replace the current model. The Culture, then, could perhaps be considered a form of utopian globalisation.

1.7 The Culture series as *Technologiade*

Writing in *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, Csicsery-Ronay potentially links Empire to his notion of the *technologiade*, arguing that the goal of the "ruling orders" is a "technological empire, whose systems of communication, commodification and control infiltrate, and indeed saturate, all formerly 'natural' relationships, from the institutional to the biological."[209] So the *technologiade* in SF, which aims to transform the cosmos into a technological system, articulates the same fundamental deterritorialising, decentralising impulse as globalisation but extrapolated beyond planetary limits, and continuing into outer space; and it therefore has the potential to take the form of a hierarchical, imperial project or enable an egalitarian, utopian system.

With his Culture series, Banks exploits the huge scope of the space opera sub-genre to narrate the relationships between the Culture and its Others with complexity and depth, in the process telling different iterations of the *technologiade*. The following is a brief overview of the narrative sequence of Banks's texts in chronological order of publication, with particular emphasis on the Culture's interaction with other societies, in order to convey a sense of the narrative arc of the series as a whole, as they relate to the *technologiade*.

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[208] Ibid.
[209] Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., 'Empire', in Mark Bould, Andrew M., Roberts, Adam, and Vint, Sherryl. Eds., *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2009) 362-372; 364-365.

Starting with *Consider Phlebas*, Banks pits the Culture against an empire of equivalent power, the Idirans – who wish to transform the universe into a fundamentalist religious and militaristic regime, obliterating all other forms of life and culture – in the most significant war of its history: an example of jihadist globalism. Conveyed from the perspective of an individual who is an outsider to both parties, the story's outcome is that the Culture defeats the Idirans, with huge losses on both sides, leaving their empire scattered: a small minority of surviving Idirans join the Culture. In *The Player of Games*, Culture protagonist Gurgeh facilitates the last stage in the structural implosion of the cruel, Fascistic Empire of Azad, by literally beating them at their own game, in a narrative that comes closer to the intensely-focussed scale of the *techno-Robinsonade* than the "wide-screen baroque" of space opera, with no other sub-narratives focussed on the outer galaxy and its politics. In *Use of Weapons*, Culture Handy Man and outsider Zakalwe makes a career of bringing the Culture's technoscience to remote corners of the galaxy, yet exploits his position to accomplish personal vendettas. In 'The State of the Art', the Culture considers altering the development of Earth, which – portrayed as complex and beautiful yet also violent, illogical and reluctant to change – is cleverly positioned alongside some of the other galactic 'backwater' locations discussed in the series, before deciding ultimately to leave 'us' as a control experiment for the *technologiade* campaign. In *Excession*, the Culture and other civilisations in the galaxy, all with differing views about the process of galactic redevelopment, come to understand that the Excession – an entity from beyond the known universe – may be part of a process similar to the *technologiade*, but on an even grander scale, and conducted by entities of previously unimagined power. As suggested by its title, *Inversions* flips the standard perspective of the *technologaide*, presenting two personal narratives from *inside* two very different civilisations that are slowly, without their knowledge, being transformed into more technological regimes, as implicitly instigated by the Culture. *Look to Windward* is concerned with the failure of the Culture's *technologiade* and the grief, violence and deep-seeded hatred that can result, as well as with the Culture's attonement. In *Matter* Banks contrasts the development of a feudal society, Sarl, with the galactic-scale machinations and rivalries of warring civilisations and species; following the uncovering of deep corruption within Sarl's monarchical system, a Culture Handy Woman (see Chapter Three of this thesis) sacrifices herself to avoid the destruction of the planet, and a new political leader from within the Sarl

is implicitly appointed to begin a positive transformation. In *Surface Detail*, the Culture brings down the CEO of a very powerful business empire – a known murderer, slave-owner and rapist – and ends a network of environments that this individual maintained, which equated to something like a barbaric, digital inversion of the *technologiade*. Finally, *The Hydrogen Sonata* examines the relationship between the Culture and a civilisation, the Gzilt, who have embraced technoscience to develop their society to a similar level, yet, for religious reasons, choose to enter a different part of the universe, the Sublime, where technoscience seems to be irrelevant.

Viewing the narrative of the whole series through this lens of the *technologiade*, therefore, reveals the interplay of opposing themes: the barbarian and the civilised; science and superstition; the personal and the political; the dominant and the submissive; freedom and control; peace and war. Following the trajectory of the series in this manner, Banks's texts read as a thorough examination of the nature of power itself, and while they clearly seem to support the act of universal techno-transformation inherent in Csicsery-Ronay's concept, the Culture novels form a prism through which his notion can be viewed and critiqued from various perspectives, as can real-world strategies of political power, expansion and dominance. To begin examining the ideological character of Culture's *technologiade*, then, it is pertinent to begin with the text in which Banks shows how such a process operates from within the society being transformed rather than from without.

1.8 *Inversions* as *Technologiade*

Describing his *de facto* sixth text in the Culture series, Banks once stated that "*Inversions* was an attempt to write a Culture novel that wasn't,"[210] drawing attention to the fact that the novel is something of an anomaly in relation to the rest of the series. As explained below, many of the text's anomalous aspects – relating to genre categorisation, narrative style and identification as Culture text – allow *Inversions* to provide insight into the fundamental nature and practices of the Culture in a manner those others in the series cannot. In relation to discussion of imperialism and empire in the series, *Inversions* provides detailed examples of the role that Contact and SC emissaries play within other societies, following the methods they use to potentially

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[210] Nick Gevers, 'Cultured futurist Iain M. Banks creates an ornate utopia', *Science Fiction Weekly*, 15 May 2008. archive.is/FgDHg (Accessed 6 October, 2015).

influence the development of these societies, and demonstrating ways in which other cultures become more like the Culture, through choice rather than coercion. If, as Vint explains, "Empire is a useful model for understanding Banks's Culture," as the expansion of both is effected far more often through their "way of life" than through sheer military might,[211] then *Inversions* demonstrates how Banks's creation aims to offer less-developed societies the means by which they may become *something like* the Culture, leading a *similarly-utopian* way of life, but without the other society necessarily becoming fully assimilated or eventually forming a clone-like version of the Culture.

Inversions combines elements of several genres, including high fantasy, detective fiction, romantic fiction, and of course SF. It is the only text in the Culture series – with the possible exception of *The Player of Games* – that can be considered more in alignment with the land-focused sub-genre of planetary romance, rather than with the epic, universe-spanning scope of space opera.[212] Banks alternates only two narrative strands as opposed to at least three or four in other Culture texts, such as *Surface Detail*, *Matter*, and *The Hydrogen Sonata*. These two perspectives, depicting two one-time Culture citizens Vossil and DeWar, run concurrently in alternating chapters, with each focused upon one character in their separate locations; while the characters never physically meet in the text, their former relationship is revealed alongside detail about their lives in the Culture prior to the events of the novel. With this narrative structure, Banks uses *Inversions* to effectively convey the process of the Culture's *technologiade* in a different manner to that adopted in the other texts in the series, with the action confined to events within Vossil and Dewar's respective locations. It is using this tightly-focused narrative structure in *Inversions*, therefore, that Banks is able to depict Culture citizens covertly embedded within the societies where they effect change, rather than upon the events leading up to the instigation of this process or its related preliminary ethical and political debates.

Vosill and DeWar live in two separate societies, Haspidus and Tasassen, upon a planet resembling Europe in the Early Modern period. Prior to the events of the novel, Haspidus and Tasassen were both part of an empire that dominated the planet, yet, following the empire's fall, they now oppose each other in constant war. Vosill

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[211] Vint, 'Cultural Imperialism and the Ends of Empire'.

[212] Tony Keen, unpublished paper given at 'The State of the Culture: a One-day Symposium on Iain M. Banks's 'Culture' series', Brunel University London, 11 Sep. 2013.

holds the position of doctor to King Quience of Haspidus, while DeWar is bodyguard to General Urleyn, the Prime Protector of the Protectorate of Tasassen. Haspidus is a feudal nation, with a monarch appointed by Providence, "the name of the mystical, divinely inhuman Court before which we wish our actions to be judged" (Prologue, 2) and organised according to martial and patriarchal values, similar in these respects to Sursamen from *Matter*; while Tasassen is a secular society, established following the murder and supersession of the Emperor by the General Urleyn. Both sub-narratives are characterised by mystery regarding their narration: Doctor Vossil's story is openly told by her apprentice Oelph, yet the identity of his "Master", for whom the narrative is documented, is not revealed until the text's conclusion; whereas DeWar's narrative is described as a "Closed Chronicle, in which […] one has to guess the identity of the person telling the tale" (22).

One of the most interesting and anomalous aspects of *Inversions* concerns the fact that, unlike many other texts in the series, it was initially published without the note 'A Culture novel' on its cover, prefiguring the fact that no explicit reference to the Culture is made within the novel. In this way, Banks treats his series playfully, leaving readers to interpret implicit, coded references that are scattered throughout the text. If read without prior knowledge of Banks's work – without an understanding of the Culture and its interest in developing other societies – Vosill and DeWar would be inevitably understood at face value, and the underlying complexities of their actions and comments, in the Culture context, missed. To the inhabitants of Haspidus and Tasassen, whose knowledge of the people and places beyond their boundaries is very limited and largely based upon hearsay, rumour and folk tales, comprehending a society as complex as the Culture is almost impossible, and both Vosill and DeWar are left to allude to it, pretending that it is as a far-away place located on the same planet. In Doctor Vossil's narrative, the Culture is referred to in casual conversation as "the archipelagic republic of Drezen" (Epilogue, V), whereas, in DeWar's story, veiled references to the Culture are made in the form of a fairy tale. Whilst entertaining a child, DeWar and his friend, court concubine Perrund improvise many tales set in the land of Lavishia, where everybody was "as happy as they could be". In Lavishia lived

> two friends, a boy and a girl […] They were the best of friends but they disagreed on
> many things. One of the most important things they disagreed about was what to do

> when Lavishia chanced upon […] tribes of poor people. Was it better to leave them alone or was it better to try and make life better for them? Even if you decided it was the right thing to do to make life better for them, which way did you do this? Did you say, Come and join us and be like us? Did you say, Give up all your own ways of doing things, the gods that you worship, the beliefs you hold most dear, the traditions that make you who you are? Or do you say, We have decided you should stay roughly as you are and we will treat you like children and give you toys that might make your life better? (104).

To Banks's readers, Lavishia is clearly the Culture, while it becomes quickly apparent that the boy and girl are in fact DeWar and Vosill; furthermore, it is possible to infer from this that Dewar and Vosill are connected with SC or Contact, or at least that they were at one time.[213] This story, therefore, which obviously outlines debates surrounding cultural relativism in a simplified manner appropriate to a children's story, foregrounds important themes from Banks's series as a whole. Constantly playing with the titular theme of inversion, Vosill and DeWar both originate in the Culture yet harbour directly opposing views on questions of foreign policy, further reflected by the roles they perform in the novel: Doctor Vosill as nurturer, and DeWar as destroyer of life. Vosill believes in a moral duty to actively affect change in others less privileged, and became a doctor, while DeWar is duty-bound to protect the Protector, but achieves this through assassination and violence. Banks, too, inverts the expectations associated with different political systems: while Haspidus is a monarchical society, supposedly divinely ordained, its King achieves a high level of freedom and peace within his realm, whereas Tasassen, despite being a Republic, maintains inequality and authoritarianism.

Doctor Vosill's narrative explores the effects of introducing very advanced medical science into a relatively primitive society whose attitude to healthcare is coloured by folk superstition and conjecture. Much of the knowledge, and any of the methods, used by the doctor are so far advanced, in fact, that they demonstrate Arthur C. Clarke's famous third law, and are indistinguishable from magic in the eyes of the people of Haspidus. The most prominent example of this is the emergence of a knife missile – one of the Culture's most advanced technologies – later in the book, which Vosill uses to save herself from rape, torture and death: as Martingale notes, "Banks's

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[213] It is suggested that Dewar left the Culture, and is operating as an independant agent. There are similarities between Dewar's position and that of Zakalwe from *Use of Weapons*, as discussed in Chapter Three of the present thesis.

voice-activated knife-missiles are pure magic".[214] Doctor Vosill is very aware of this fact, and uses it to her advantage, choosing to communicate scientific ideas in quasi-magical terms to King Quience in order to bridge the gap between her advanced knowledge and his relatively primitive views. Vosill asks the King to use an ointment, in order to treat a wound on his leg. Unconvinced, yet trusting of the Doctor, the King acquiesces. "As you feel, sir, it dulls the pain," Vosill states, "also it fights the particles of ill humour which infest the air, and it aids the healing process" (50-51). Similarly, Vosill corrects Oelph for wearing a bandanna around his mouth to fend off "ill humours" and instructs him that "infectious agents are transmitted in breath or bodily fluids, even if they are insect bodily fluids […] A bad smell by itself will not make you ill" (84). Vosill's use of the phrase "ill humour" deliberately draws on a term used in Greek and Roman medicine, as well as in medieval Europe: 'Humours', or 'humoral theory', was used to refer to one of four distinct bodily fluids – blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile – believed to cause illness when insufficiently balanced in the body.[215] Vosill does not believe this, of course, actually using the term to mean bacteria, which would be unfamiliar to King Quience.

Later in the novel, Vossil gradually introduces more accurate, contemporary terminology into her practice, replacing pseudo-scientific magical phrases with the language of biology and physics. Describing the neck wound of a murder victim, Vosill says, "It severed all the major blood vessels, the larynx—" but is cut off by a rival, Doctor Skelim: "The what?" Following her scientific explanation, Vosill is written off as a "quack" who deliberately obscures her lack of knowledge with "foreign words" (189). Continuing to compare Vosill to "priests of old" who read entrails "to find the murderer's name" (189), Skelim's response is heavily ironic in this context because, to Banks's readers, that it exactly how the rival doctor himself appears.

At points, Vosill tries to directly challenge the King's superstitious beliefs. When King Quience talks of "old stories" about giant kings tearing strange creatures in half with their bare hands in order to smite their enemies, Vosill asks "Might these not be simply legends, sir?" (52). The king circumvents her question by accusing Vosill of interrupting him, a great act of rudeness, and her question is forgotten.

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[214] Martingale, *Gothic Dimensions*, 26.
[215] 'Humours', The *Science Museum*, www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/broughttolife/techniques/humours.aspx (Accessed 6 October, 2015).

Vosill, demonstrating her characteristic calmness and patience, answers: "I will try never to interrupt you again" (52) – yet she continues to do so later in the novel on several occasions. While at first her deeds seem motivated by personal and professional concerns, as the reader begins to suspect her relationship to the Culture, it becomes clear that Doctor Vosill's acts in accordance with the broad aims of the Culture, providing culturally and politically neutral information. In the first chapter, Vosill is called to the Chief Torturer's chamber to attend to a victim; she carefully challenges the legality of the interrogation – "*does* the King know?" (13) – before exercising compassion and putting the victim out of his misery, easily fooling the guards into thinking this death their own doing. Doctor Vosill's behaviour – her unfailing moral responsibility for the health of all people regardless of background – challenges much of that which those around her have grown up to believe. The chapters concerned with Vosill are narrated in first person by her assistant Oelph, who is quickly revealed to be spying on her for his unnamed "Master". Clearly deeply in love with this strangely assertive, intelligent and beautiful doctor, Oelph's account reveals the extent to which Vosill's progressive tendencies affect him. In the second chapter, Oelph becomes shocked, indignant and derogatory when Vosill responds to a cry for help by a child from a poor district: "The King's physician was about to pay a call in a storm, not on anyone noble, likely to be ennobled or indeed even respectable, but on a family of slack-witted all-runt ne'er-do-wells, a tribe of contagiously flea'd happen-ills" (43). Having grown up in this rigidly hierarchical, monarchical society, it takes a long time for Oelph to succumb to Vosill's patient wisdom and parental scolding before he starts to overcome his class prejudice. Similarly, Oelph lives in a highly patriarchal society, describing "the facts of life which dictate the accepted and patent preeminence of the male," (9) and Vosill is the only woman who – with her clearly advanced knowledge of science, far-away territories, quick-thinking, and wit – can convince him otherwise. The narrative makes it explicit that Oelph – after Vosill moves on to another place to continue her work – continues developing his medical skills: in the novel's Epilogue, Oelph reveals that he is appointed a doctor, and finally as Royal Physician.

Vosill is able to effect and maintain this power due to her close relationship with the King: no matter how suspicious her actions are deemed by others, the fact of her good relationship with the King, and that her role is seeing to his health, ensure that Vosill is generally trusted and her actions are seen merely as eccentric rather than

untrustworthy. The fact that Vosill's treatments and medicines – replacing crude, pre-scientific techniques such as leeches and "burn-glass veining" (45) – are clearly effective on a regular basis, ensures that the King keeps her in his service. Furthermore, her close relationship with King Quience allows her potential leverage in his thoughts and decision-making. The manner in which Vossil conducts herself, however, as *incognito* ambassador for the Culture in a position of potential power in the court of Haspidus, is a demonstration of the Culture's broader utopian rather than imperial attitude towards its relations between other societies. If she were the ambassador of a society concerned with the imperial accumulation of territory, Vossil could use her power and influence as the basis for a transformation of Haspidus into a colony, eventually subordinating this territory to the hegemony of her own culture. Yet her actions demonstrate neutrality toward Haspidus, with no short- or long-term benefits to be gained from such empire-building on behalf of the Culture: to borrow Banks's phrase, quoted above, Vossil demonstrates that the Culture has no intention to impose its own "brand of utopia" upon others.

One key element of Doctor Vosill's sub-narrative is concerned with the murder of Nolieti, the King's Chief Torturer; and Banks introduces many tropes from classic crime fiction, with Doctor Vosill effectively assuming the role of detective, in order to further establish the Culture's empiricism which she represents. First, Banks establishes the *sjuzet*: the known facts of the crime as they are presented to the 'detective' in a jumbled order.[216] Gathered around Nolieti's corpse, most key players within the Haspidus court, including King Quience, Doctor Vosill, Doctor Skelim, Guard Commander Polchiek and Oelph, discuss the details of the crime in an attempt to solve it. The murder proves difficult to solve, however, as Banks incorporates the device of a "locked room mystery", familiar from many works of crime fiction.[217] Following inaccurate and biased suggestions made by Doctor Skelim and Polchiek – mostly based upon facile observation, guesswork and flimsy logic, and guided by prejudice and self-interest – Doctor Vossil eventually solves the crime using an objective process of deduction, estimates based upon firm empirical evidence and

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[216] Scott McCracken, *Pulp: Reading Popular Fiction*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998) 54.

[217] There are numerous examples across media, including 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' (1841) by Edgar Allen Poe; *The Sign of the Four* (1890) by Arthur Conan Doyle; and much more recently *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2005) by Steig Larseen. For a more detailed outline of the trope, see: 'The Locked Room', Donald E. Westlake, *Murderous Schemes: An Anthology of Classic Detective Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

clear, logical thinking; and the *fabula*, or the chronological order of events, is revealed to the investigators.

> Discussing detective fiction, Scott McCracken observes that

> the history of the contemporary genre is closely linked with the history of the modern legal process. One of the characteristics of modernity is the use of the law instead of arbitrary power. The detective narrative emerged at a time when the collection of evidence and the presentation of a case were replacing the extraction of confession by torture.[218]

Following this statement it is easy to see how, using the Nolieti murder story, *Inversions* directly plays out the replacement of the "extraction of confession by torture" by the "collection of evidence and the presentation of a case". A further irony is added to the story by the fact that the Chief Torturer himself was murdered, yet his particular vocation – practiced for this sole purpose – was not deemed necessary to solve the crime. At one stage, Banks makes the arguments for and against the use of torture explicit: Doctor Vossil arguing emphatically that "the barbaric custom" of torture "produces not the truth but rather whatever those commanding the questioner wish to hear", while King Quience, describing people as "lying beasts", argues that "the only way to get the truth out of them sometimes is to wring it out of them" (195-196). It also becomes clear, therefore, that with her Vosill brings the potential for the development of such a "modern legal process", in order to replace the current system of Haspidus, which clearly adheres to the "arbitrary power" of the pre-Enlightenment medieval period. While Vosill (and therefore the Culture) represents the overturning of arbitrary power, she brings with her the potential for another kind of power: as McCracken argues, "the judicial process plays an important part in establishing the consent for hegemony" in "societies governed by the rule of law." [219]

By presenting the ways in which the *technologiade* process operates from deep within those societies undergoing this technoscientific change, and largely from their own perspective, Banks demonstrates how the Culture's utopian aspirations are maintained, even when conducting a process that could easily become more imperialistic. The relationship between emissaries of the Culture, as represented by Vossil, and people from less-advanced societies is less that of hegemon and subaltern, and more of teacher and pupil: they exist in an unequal relationship due to circumstance, but one that inherently enables an eventually equal outcome. Close

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[218] McCracken, *Pulp*, 51.
[219] Ibid., 51.

analysis of *Inversions*, especially King Quience's gradual acceptance of Doctor Vosill's treatments, suggests that Haspidus may gradually adopt those core utopian elements represented by the Culture – science, technology, logic, empiricism, rational thinking, law, medicine and democracy – in a manner free from the exploitation, coercion and subjugation necessary in an imperial system.

1.9 Conclusion

Space opera – premised on an interlinked galaxy, populated by human diaspora – assumes all along that a globalised future is inevitable; and Csicsery-Ronay has identified an increased acceptance of SF more generally as "a cultural mediation for the regime of globalizing hypermodernism."[220] Yet, with the Culture series, Banks suggests that the *politics* of globalisation, with its thinly veiled economic imperialism, rather than the *form* itself, is at fault. Hardt and Negri's conception of Empire has undeniable overlaps with Bank's conception of the Culture, providing the possibility for a reading of the series as a reflection of the political *status quo* of neo-liberalism, yet their book *Empire* is positioned against Capitalism and not necessarily against the particular, globalised form which it currently inhabits *per se*. If *Empire* begins to offer ways of thinking beyond the neo-liberal order as the End of History, then Banks's Culture can perhaps be viewed as a system that inverts the political ideology underpinning that order, but drawing upon the fundamentally interlinked and decentralised nature of globalisation to the advantage of the Left.

Before returning to this topic in the conclusion of the present thesis, it is necessary to shift focus from the peripheries of Banks's civilisation to the internal nature of its habitats – its political, social and economic structures – which appear to have been shaped in radically utopian form by the absence of material scarcity, any unit of financial exchange, or of class boundaries, as well as the presence of AIs vastly superior in intellect to its human citizens.

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[220] Csicsery-Ronay, 'Empire', 362.

Chapter 2: Post-Scarcity, Post-Capitalism and Post-Singularity

"Money is a sign of poverty" – Iain M. Banks, 'A Gift From The Culture' (*TSotA*, 10)

This chapter examines the Culture as an example of a 'Post-Scarcity' society. With a focus on critical analysis of Banks's novel *The Player of Games*, I argue that – through key elements of its composition such as its fair and equal distribution of resources, its non-hierarchical political structure, and the resultant effects upon human behaviour – the Culture seems to be, in this regard, quintessentially utopian. First, it is necessary to briefly outline the history of the relationship between conceptions of utopia and the notion of overcoming material scarcity.

2.1 Utopia

Sir Thomas More famously coined the term 'utopia' for his eponymous 1516 text by combining the Greek terms '*topos*' (meaning 'place' or 'where') and the prefix 'ou' (meaning 'no' or 'not'). Since then, utopia has been defined in many different ways by many different thinkers, with Lyman Tower Sargent suggesting that related and analogous concepts have in fact been in existence for long before this term was coined.[221] Both Tower Sargent and Frederic Jameson have explained the need to distinguish between these different definitions and understandings, as well as between the related but distinct concepts of utopia and utopianism. Tower Sargent has defined the "broad, general phenomenon" of utopianism as "social dreaming – the dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live".[222] Sargent's concept of social dreaming is similar to the first of three broad delineations that Jameson makes in *Archaeologies of the Future*: the Utopian wish, a kind of impulse to seek better and happier ways of living that manifests in many aspects of daily life; Utopian political practice, or the various historical attempts to actually construct utopian societies; and the Utopian text, referring to writing in

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[221] See 'Chapter 1: Good places and bad places', in Lymann Tower Sargent, *Utopia: A Very Short Introduction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 10-11.
[222] Lyman Tower Sargent, 'The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited', *Utopian Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1994), pp. 1-37.

which authors attempt to describe such improved, perfected or harmonious places.[223] In turn, Tower Sargent offers a roughly analogous trinity of utopian forms, referred to as 'the three faces of utopianism': the literary utopia; utopian practice (intentional communities); and utopian social theory.[224] Regarding the Culture, it is clearly with Jameson's notion of 'Utopian text' or Sargent's 'literary utopia' that we are primarily concerned; although many aspects of Banks's thought and writing clearly demonstrate a utopian impulse, and the Culture novels potentially intersect with real-world utopian communities in various ways.

Some thinkers however have defined utopia through negation rather than description, suggesting that a better society can be conceived of, not by establishing what is wanted, but by removing that which is unwanted. In one sense, More's original term operates in this manner: already meaning 'no place', or one that does not exist in spatial or temporal reality. Furthermore, Jameson has argued that Theodor Adorno defines utopia as a world without violence, summarising Adorno's view as follows: "the mark of violence, whose absence, if that were possible or even conceivable, would at once constitute Utopia."[225] The most significant of these negative descriptions for the purposes of this thesis chapter relates to a reading of More's *Utopia* by Jameson where he identifies "the absence of money" as both the "fundamental principle" and "the precondition for this enclave utopia".[226] "More's initial utopian gesture – the abolition of money and poverty," Jameson explains, "runs through the Utopian tradition like a red thread", here referring to other key writers of utopia, such as Edward Bellamy and William Morris, whose works utilise similar ideas. In Bellamy's *Looking Backward 2000-1887* (1888), where money and private enterprise does not exist, property is equally distributed and people work motivated by pride; whereas in Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890) money has been abolished, and 'wage slavery' been replaced by craftwork.

2.2 The Culture as Postscarcity Society

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[223] Jameson, Archaeologies of the Future, 72.

[224] Lyman Tower Sargent, 'Theorizing Utopia / Utopianism in the Twenty-First Century', in Artur Blaum, Ludmila Gruszewska, eds., *Spectres of Utopia*, (Lublin: Peter Lang GmbH, 2012). 13.

[225] Frederic Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or the Persistance of the Dialetic* (London: Verso, 1990), 102, in, Adam Roberts, *Frederic Jameson* (Oxon: Routledge, 2000) 109.

[226] Jameson, Archaeologies of the Future, 18.

This 'red thread' identified by Jameson continues in utopian thought to the present day, with Banks's Culture as a notable example: on many occasions within his fictional series and without, Banks described the Culture as a 'postscarcity' society. While contemporary futurologists have defined the term postscarcity as referring to a period of economic stability and material abundance – a period that is likely to remain temporary, always capable of returning to deficiency – immediately following an era of scarcity[227] (such as that which seemed briefly plausible during the era of the Soviet Union in the 1950s),[228] Banks uses the term in his novels to refer to a society "where material scarcity is unknown",[229] suggesting a more permanent basis.[230] This latter situation, the World Futurist Society argues, may have the possibility of achievement in reality, towards the middle of the Twenty First century.[231]

The Culture has access to effectively limitless resources due to its ability to draw from the 'Energy Grid' – a highly fecund source of pure energy, located between universes in Banks's fictional cosmology – and to convert this energy into matter.[232] This Energy Grid, then, can be understood as an example of Csicsery-Ronay's 'Fertile Corpse', which, "in the classic techno-adventure", is the "exploitable body, material to the degree that it is productive and without consciousness"[233] – usually taking the form of the natural resources provided by the Earth, or another planet. In this manner, Banks's Fertile Corpse is particularly notable for the fact that its fecundity is endless, a detail that not only ensures – in theory – that the Culture can also continue in its current state indefinitely, but also one that ensures that the Culture does not break its central axiom: "nothing and nobody in the Culture is exploited".[234] The Culture refuses to use natural resources, or at least keeps their use to an absolute minimum, in the development of its Second Nature, seeing processes such as 'terraforming' – the familiar SF trope of artificially altering the terrain and

[227] Stephen Aguillar-Millan, Ann Feeney, Elizabeth Rudd, 'The Post-scarcity World of 2050-2075.' *The Futurist*. Jan-Feb. 2010. www.wfs.org.
[228] G.I Khanin, 'The 1950s – the Triumph of the Soviet Economy', *Europe-Asia Studies,* Vol. 55, No. 8 (Dec., 2003) 1187-1211.
[229] See: Iain Banks, 'A Few Notes on the Culture'; and David Smith, 'A Conversation with Iain Banks'.
[230] See the following interview for one of the many occasions when Banks uses the term to describe the Culture; in this case as "the most apt way": Marc Aplin, 'Fantasy Fiction; Iain M. Banks Interview – Part One', October 26 2012. fantasy-faction.com/2012/iain-m-banks-interview-part-one (Accessed 20 April, 2016) .
[231] Stephen Aguillar-Millan, Ann Feeney, Elizabeth Rudd, 'The Post-scarcity World of 2050-2075', *The Futurist*, Jan-Feb. 2010. www.wfs.org. (Accessed 7 October, 2015).
[232] Banks, 'A Few Notes'.
[233] Csicsery-Ronay, *Seven Beauties*, 249-250
[234] Banks, 'A Few Notes'.

atmosphere of a planet so that it is habitable for humans – as fundamentally exploitative: terraforming is "ecologically unsound", Banks explains: "the wilderness should be left as it is, when it is so easy to build paradise in space from so little".[235] Instead, the Culture builds entirely artificial habitats – separate from those that exist in 'First Nature' – for its inhabitants: grand feats of mechanical and social engineering that do not rely upon the finite resources of the natural world, but instead draw only from the Grid's infinite energy. In this way, Banks's series provides an example of a "major turn" in the Fertile Corpse archetype, as identified by Csicsery-Ronay, where the Handy Man (or his home culture) refuses "to exploit the source, or bring it to consciousness"[236]; instead Banks posits the Energy Grid as a second kind of source, the unlimited fruitfulness of which renders it beyond exploitation.

Due to the absence of scarcity in the Culture, therefore, there is no need for controlling measures to be placed upon its production or distribution of goods, no need to withhold certain resources from certain groups of people, at certain times, whatever the motivations. Consequently, in theory, everyone in the Culture has access to everything that they could possibly want or need at any time; all material human needs and wants are fulfilled. This fundamental abundance is arguably at the heart of Banks's utopia. Before examining the extent to which this previous statement is true and the various implications such abundance has for the Culture, it is necessary to explain briefly how Banks suggests this society moved beyond a condition of scarcity in the first place.

Following many utopian texts produced by politically Left-wing authors that have preceded him, Banks indicates that the Culture does not rely upon a financial unit of exchange in any form, whether it is physical or virtual. The existence of a postscarcity utopia such as the Culture, he argues, is only possible once money has been abolished, due to the inherent unfairness implied by its very nature:

> It's a post-scarcity society […] They've got enough of everything. There's a phrase in the Culture, a saying that goes 'money is a sign of poverty'. The idea being that if you've got enough of everything to go round, there's no need to ration it. That's all that money really is. Your cheque book is actually a ration book.[237]

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[235] Banks, 'A Few Notes'.
[236] Csicsery-Ronay, *Seven Beauties*, 250.
[237] David Smith, 'A Conversation with Iain Banks'.

By viewing money in all its forms as like rationing, Banks draws attention to the fact that, in this situation, of course, there must be an authority responsible for dividing the money, which, under Capitalism, equates to a powerful elite. As explored below, while in many ways this lack of the capitalist class in the Culture makes it a strong example of a classless society in a Marxist sense, the nature of Contact and SC within it, as well as the presence of the Minds complicates such a description. The Culture's ability to function as a civilisation without the need for money, therefore, hinges upon the fact that it has overcome the problem of finite natural resources: if in the Culture "they've got everything", then there would no longer be any need for a way of restricting access to resources, no need to protect one's assets as others could easily acquire or reacquire similar assets of their own, and the powerful elite would quickly lose their influence and status.

2.3 Information as a Commodity

In a society like the Culture, then, which is not ordered and arranged according to the exchange of money or any other physical unit, meaning and value is free to be attributed more fairly to other commodities, according to its 'real', innate usefulness, rather than arbitrarily as an unfair system of rationing. As far as the Culture has any medium of exchange whatsoever, "information or data", as Farah Mendlesohn has argued, is "the only kind of 'currency' the Culture values."[238] In *Use of Weapons*, Banks dramatically illustrates this point through a kind of fairy-tale. The novel's protagonist Zakalwe – an important example of Csicsery-Ronay's 'Handy Man' – is a former SC operative who has turned renegade, supposedly continuing their good deeds, but really carrying out acts of vigilante justice. Zakalwe holds a corrupt politician at gunpoint, and torments him with an ominous story – which works as a Culture fable like Vossil's story in *Inversions* – before shooting him. Referring to an unnamed society, which Banks's readers recognise as the Culture itself, Zakalwe details the history and nature of this society, noting that "they always tried to bring with them the thing they saw as the most precious gift of all; knowledge; information; and as wide a spread of that information as possible" (29). Here, Zakalwe highlights the role that information plays in Banks's *technologiade* metanarrative, with SC

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[238] Farah Mendlesohn, 'Iain M. Banks: *Excession*', in *A Companion to Science Fiction*, David Seed, ed., (Blackwell Publishing, 2005) Blackwell Reference Online. 599; 562, www.blackwellreference.com/subscriber/tocnode.html?id=g9781405112185_chunk_g978140511218543 (Accessed 28 October, 2015)

providing less developed societies with, amongst other things, the knowledge of scientific and technological development.

It is not the case, though, that the Culture has simply replaced the exchange of money for goods and services with the exchange of information for the same purpose. It is clear, though, that knowledge of various kinds is crucial to the existence of the Culture, and its relations with other civilisations; also, the narrative thrust of many texts in the series relies upon the (re-) acquisition by the Culture of crucial information, often in the form of digital data. In *Consider Phlebas*, for example, SC hunts for an estranged and endangered Mind with first-hand experience of an important event relating to the Idiran-Culture conflict. In *The Player of Games*, SC hides the existence of the Empire of Azad from the majority of Culture citizens, and details are strategically drip-fed to Gurgeh in order to convince him to accept their mission. Upon discovering the Earth in 'The State of the Art', Contact acquires huge volumes of information about our societies and cultures in order to make an educated decision about establishing contact. The titular entity of *Excession*, a trans-dimensional being of great power, represents the potential existence of new knowledge so unprecedented in the Culture's history it would constitute apocalyptic proportions. In *Surface Detail*, SC seeks the physical substrate containing the digital source of a system of virtual 'hells', in order to shut down what it sees as a barbaric practice. Finally, one sub-narrative of *The Hydrogen Sonata* concerns the hunt for the Culture's oldest citizen who has adapted his body to store vast reams of digital information within it, including historical data that eventually undermines an entire religious system.

The Culture's near-fetishisation of information in this manner has important overlaps with a current real-world trend towards free access to on-line information and services, including the development of Open-Source software and Open Access publishing. Advocates of postscarcity argue that "the evolution toward free goods and a lack of scarcity is, in fact, already under way, thanks primarily to technologies (such as computers and the Internet) that have enabled and driven the growth of digitization over the last 20 years."[239] Here, advocates argue, the current availability of some information, products, services and communications channels freely and easily online – news, books, open-source software, social media, etc. – could theoretically result in

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[239] Stephen Aguillar-Millan, *et al.*, 'The Post-scarcity World of 2050-2075', 36.

a completely open and free world-wide network, undermining the need for monetary exchange of any kind. Similarly, the Culture features a vast arrangement of information banks, potentially accessible to everyone at any time:

> This contained as a matter of course almost every even moderately important or significant or useful piece of information the Culture had ever accumulated; a near infinite ocean of fact and sensation and theory and artwork which the Culture's information net was adding to at a torrential rate every second of the day. You could find out most things, if you knew the right questions to ask. Even if you didn't, you could still find out a lot. The Culture had theoretical total freedom of information; the catch was that consciousness was private, and information held in a Mind – as opposed to an unconscious system, like the Hub's memory-banks – was regarded a part of the Mind's being, and as sacrosanct as the contents of the human brain (*TPoG*, 65).

AIs are able to access this network automatically as a 'natural' part of their existence as digital, computer-based entities. Non-AI Culture citizens, however, are provided with access through devices known as Terminals, similar to a highly-advanced smartphone, and sometimes Neural Lace devices that enable human thought and consciousness to be converted into digital information (as detailed in Chapter Five of this thesis). As well as allowing the transfer of knowledge for its own sake, this network also allows communications – often near instantaneous – with other areas of the Culture; as exemplified by 'The State of the Art' where the Culture character Diziet Sma tries to save her friend Linter from violent murder on Earth by using her Terminal to call nearby Minds, this network provides a kind of safety net for Culture citizens, in the unlikely event that they find themselves in a situation of genuine peril.

As is clear from the series, the Culture is dispersed widely across the galaxy, a process that Banks indicates can only have occurred after achieving the state of abundance outlined above, and after it has moved beyond the need for money.[240] Banks implies, however, that there is another obstacle that the Culture must overcome before it can achieve these goals: Capitalism. While scholars advocating reform over revolution have argued that a postscarcity society could arise through capitalism,[241] they fail to address the fundamentally unequal nature of such a system – which constructs and maintains class difference, working to ensure that goods are not fairly distributed – pushing responsibility for poverty and inequality onto humankind's

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[240] David Smith, 'A Conversation with Iain Banks'. Addition my own.
[241] See: Stephen Aguillar-Millan, Ann Feeney, Elizabeth Rudd. 'The Post-scarcity World of 2050-2075.' *The Futurist*. Jan-Feb. 2010. www.wfs.org.

propensity for "warlike behavior", rather than onto the nature of the economic system itself. [242]

2.4 The Culture as Postcapitalist Society

Banks did not state explicitly that the Culture's habitats are an example of a society that developed after capitalism, or that arose following a revolution, although he strongly implied as much. For example, in 'A Few Notes on the Culture', the closest Banks ever came to writing a history of the Culture, he briefly discusses events that occurred prior to its existence in the form described in the series:

> The Culture is a group-civilisation formed from seven or eight humanoid species, space-living elements of which established a loose federation approximately nine thousand years ago. The ships and habitats which formed the original alliance required each others' support to pursue and maintain their independence from the political power structures - principally those of mature nation-states and autonomous commercial concerns - they had evolved from.[243]

These societies, then, from which the "loose federation" was formed, necessarily broke away from their original cultures, in order to form something new. Banks goes on to suggest the federation's split from these "superior forces of a state or corporation" was made considerably easier once they had escaped from their planetary habitats and into outer space, because

> in space, a break-away movement will be far more difficult to control, especially if significant parts of it are based on ships or mobile habitats. [...] Rebellion, then (once space-going and space-living become commonplace), becomes easier than it might be on the surface of a planet.[244]

Oppressive hegemonic forces, Banks argues, cannot maintain control and domination over their subjects if these subjects can easily and widely disperse themselves across the vast space of an entire galaxy. By forming a federation, these dispersed species achieved stability and strength through interconnection and intercommunication – or 'strength in depth', a motto of the Culture's 'Contact' division – establishing in microcosm the basis of the Culture's final configuration as a galactic network. In 'A Few Notes', Banks doesn't explicitly state that the initial rebellions and federations

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[242] Ibid.
[243] Iain Banks, 'A Few Notes'.
[244] Ibid.

may have directly led to the formation of Contact, which is sometimes considered the Culture's equivalent of an international relations organisation, such as the United Nations, and its sub-division, SC, a covert ('black') operations unit, like the Central Intelligence Agency's Special Activities Division. The reader is given the impression, however, that, without these initial rebellions, Contact and SC – indeed the whole "loose federation" of seven or eight species itself – would not have been able to exist. It is precisely their shared rebellious tendencies that seem to have drawn them together in the first place, and this solidarity in persecution that enabled them to remain independent. From this initial federation, the fully-fledged "meta-civilisation" which the Culture eventually becomes in Banks's series, can develop. By focusing on the original alliance maintaining its independence from "autonomous commercial concerns", suggesting business and a free market, it seems reasonable to suggest that this break away from the "nation-states and autonomous commercial concerns" took the form of a traditional Marxist workers' uprising, or at least a revolution of some kind, given that the eventual result was the formation of a truly classless, egalitarian society. While the Culture ultimately found a "relatively quiet galaxy in which to settle", Banks notes, its "formation was not without vicissitudes", further suggesting that this peaceful end-state was not achieved without conflict of some kind, possibly featuring violence and war.[245]

This process of starting to piece together a history of the Culture from the scattered clues that Banks provides in 'A Few Notes' and in the series itself can only produce an incomplete, hazy narrative at best, with many questions left unanswered and qualification of important details impossible to provide. We will probably never know for certain whether Banks envisioned the Culture as the direct result of a revolution that toppled capitalism, for example, or exactly what relationship the original pre-Culture federation he describes in 'A Few Notes' held with the other hegemonic forces in the galaxy. Rather than constituting a flaw in Banks's work, however, it is exactly this lack of concern with describing the Culture's genesis that makes it so successful, if one understands his series as a demonstration of Jameson's notion of the 'future as disruption', as introduced and expounded in *Archaeologies of the Future*. Here Jameson responds indirectly to ideas developed in 'What is Proletarian Culture, and is it possible?' (1923) by Leon Trotsky. In this essay, Trotsky

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[245] Ibid.

famously outlined his argument that it is impossible to imagine and map the classless society that follows a successful revolution with any real sense of authenticity until such a society actually exists. As the development of a society's culture is so intrinsically meshed with its economic foundations, and the relationship between art and the society in which it was produced is so organic, any such visions made pre-Socialism would inevitably reflect little more than the bourgeois, capitalist reality in which they were produced. The new social conditions sought through Marxism, his argument goes, are simply too radically different to the present to be conceived of until they become reality.[246]

While this argument clearly seems to leave the work of utopian writers such as Banks somewhat redundant, Jameson seeks to reclaim their value, yet he does so without rejecting Trostky's rationale. That writers inevitably can provide only incomplete and fragmentary visions of a post-revolutionary society, necessarily leaving areas indistinct and vague, Jameson accepts, but he argues that, in fact, "this increasing inability to imagine a different future *enhances* rather than diminishes the appeal and also the function of Utopia."[247] Visions of the future, he argues, act as disruption: "the name for a new discursive strategy, and Utopia is the form such disruption necessarily takes."[248] While Jameson does not mention Banks's work, it is clear through his reasoning that the value in texts such as the Culture series lies less in the details that they provide for explaining the details of *how* the transition to a radically new future society might be achieved, or the question of to what extent such a society would resemble the Culture, and more in the ability such visions provide to *challenge a conservative narrative of history*. Frances Fukuyama's famous declaration that liberal democracy is the natural "end of history", for example, sought to cut off entirely any potential space for imagining beyond our current social makeup to conceive of radical alternatives. The notion encourages us simply to accept the present as fundamentally unchanging and unchangeable, to the extent that it becomes less and less acceptable or even possible to consider an alternative in the first place. Therefore, "the Utopian form itself", Jameson argues, "is the answer to the universal ideological conviction that no alternative is possible, that there is no alternative to the

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[246] Leon Trotsly, 'What is Proletariat Culture, and Is It Possible?', 1923. www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1923/art/tia23c.htm (Accessed 20 April, 2016)
[247] Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 232. Emphasis added.
[248] Ibid., 231.

system."[249] Through this *disruptive* potential, utopia forces us to "think the break *itself*, and not by offering a more traditional picture of what things would look like *after* the break."[250]

It is not especially important, therefore, exactly how the Culture came into being, nor that it was never intended to offer a vision of *our* future on Earth, nor that parts of Banks's narrative timeline for the series technically exist in our relative past or run concurrently with our own time; it is enough simply that its existence helps to keep the flow of radical thought in motion. With the Culture, of course, Banks clearly does more than offer glimpses of a society that follows a revolution, providing a highly complex utopian system with its own social and political framework.

2.5 The Political Structure of the Culture

"Socialism within; anarchism without" – Iain M. Banks, 'A Few Notes'

"Strength in depth" – Iain M. Banks (*TPoG*, 239)

As the personal utopia of a politically Left-oriented author, who self-identified as socialist, it should be of no surprise that the Culture was initially conceived of as an entirely egalitarian, classless society. "Succinctly", Banks states, the Culture reflects "socialism within, anarchy without".[251] George Woodcock states the following about anarchy:

> What we are concerned with, in terms of a definition, is a cluster of words which in turn represents a cluster of doctrines and attitudes whose principal uniting feature is the belief that government is harmful and unnecessary […] *anarchy* means the state of being without a ruler.[252]

Banks indicates that the Culture can be viewed in spatial terms as a collection of environments – GSVs, ships, Orbitals, etc., which are "deliberately and self-consciously very widely distributed through the galaxy, with no centre, no nexus, no home planet" (*SD*, 198). They would chose to be dispersed "very widely", Banks argues,

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[249] Ibid., 232.
[250] 232. Emphasis added.
[251] Banks, 'A Few Notes'.
[252] George Woodcock, ed., *The Anarchist Reader*, (Fontana: Glasgow, 1980) 11.

> as the nature of life in space […] would mean that while ships and habitats might more easily become independent from each other and from their legally progenitative hegemonies, their crew - or inhabitants - would always be aware of their reliance on each other, and on the technology which allowed them to live in space.[253]

Life in outer space, then, gives them freedom to exist without a centralised authority, a government-like entity, to arrange and oversee them *en masse*; by the same token, their highly sophisticated technological capability allows them to operate according to "a closely-knit fabric of voluntary relationships",[254] rather than a national/federal legal system. The Culture, then, perhaps conforms to certain philosophies of Confucius, which Woodcock describes as proto-anarchist for the former's belief that such systems "impoverished" countries – instead, according to Confucius, "the wise man says: 'I will design nothing, and the people will shape themselves.'"[255])

In accord with this de-centralised nature, Banks notes that the Culture has no "emblem or logo", as it

> refused to place its trust in symbols. It maintained that it was what it was and had no need for such outward representation. Just as it could no imprison itself with laws, impoverish itself with money or misguide itself with leaders, so it would not misrepresent itself with signs (*CP*, 14).

As well as avoiding such signification, the character General Huyler from *Look to Windward* also notes, distastefully given his martial background, that the Culture do not wear uniforms of any kind.[256] By refusing any kind of 'branding', in this sense – by choosing 'no logo' like some off-shoots of the justice globalism movement – the Culture distances itself from the centralised, corporate ethos of the businesses, empires, hegemonies, and other entities, from which it revolted against initially. Yet the Culture's refusal to label or brand itself has another purpose: an attempt to avoid the 'Crisis of Representation'. In *Mythologies* (1957), Roland Barthes challenges the notion that artistic modes such as Realism are able to describe the world with a level of objectivity and accuracy as they conceal a semiotic level, one of many *representations* of reality, and portray this as something natural.[257] By attempting to avoid any layer of signification, the Culture attempts to avoid the need to represent

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[253] Banks, 'A Few Notes'.
[254] Ibid., 12.
[255] Woodcock, The Anarchist Reader, 17.
[256] "They still don't have uniforms? This is a whole society run by fucking dissidents." Banks, *LtW*, 74.
[257] See: Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Random House, 2000).

itself: it wishes to be its own embodiment, to exist as *the thing itself* and be viewed and understood upon that basis alone – a response to the postmodern world in which, as Jameson has expounded, signs have lost their power to meaningfully signify.[258] Whereas words and images frequently have different meanings, and can even lose meaning altogether, by focusing attention upon its practices, its actions, the Culture ensures that its true nature can be made transparent without becoming clouded by symbolic layers.

Not only is the Culture's practice made transparent by its rejection of representation, but this fact actually invites definition of the Culture itself *as* a kind of practice. Importantly, this practice is voluntary, as those other civilisations in relations with Contact or those who are directly changed by SC are merely given the means to become Culture, rather than having it forced upon them: they are perhaps encouraged but never coerced. While this practice is potentially endless and has been compared with imperialism, Banks made it clear that the Culturisation of the universe is neither likely nor indeed desirable, and – however it is viewed morally – the spread of its utopian means of production throughout the galaxy is unlikely to ever be fully completed.[259] In this respect, it has similarities with the theory of Permanent Revolution, closely associated with Leon Trotsky, which argues that revolution could never successfully establish socialism within one country alone, but would necessarily need to spread Globally.[260]

As well as the uniquely-expansive nature of the outer space environment in which it inhabits, at the heart of the Culture's ability to remain dispersed yet connected are its most powerful and most quintessential environments, the General Systems Vehicles. Existing as completely autonomous entities, GSVs – moving habitats on an immense scale – are "individually quite capable of rebuilding the entire Culture from scratch", a function that operates as both "security mechanism" and preferred way of living (*SD*, 198). Culture people can travel between these and other environments completely freely and relatively easily, arranged through their established communications networks. Inside these environments, however, there is at least a little more order, which Banks describes as socialist. "The most fundamental

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[258] See: Frederic Jameson, Postmodernism; or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (London: Verso, 1991).
[259] See: Chapter One of the present thesis.
[260] See: Leon Trotsky, *Permanent Revolution; or Results and Prospects* (New York: Merit Publishers, 1969).

characteristic of socialism," argues Michael Newman, "is its commitment to the creation of an egalitarian society",[261] which is clearly one aim of the Culture. As a postscarcity society, in which everyone is entitled to the same near limitless amount of material goods and resources as everyone else, in theory there cannot exist a class structure based upon relative wealth or poverty, and created by the ownership of private property, as everyone has equal access to the same publically-owned resources in equal measure. With no centralised form of authority – State, monarchy, military etc. – such a hierarchy cannot exist according to power, be it established by divine right, democratic decision-making, familial legacy, or sheer brute force.

Newman states that: "The most obvious common feature in the utopian socialists' transformative projects was the belief that a society based on harmony, association, and cooperation could be established through communal living and working."[262] Here Newman discusses figures such as Plato, Etienne Cabet and Henri Saint-Simon as early socialists, noting that Marx and Engels described these figures as 'utopian' but in a pejorative sense, and he challenges this view by emphasising the impulse toward utopianism necessary for and integral to socialism. While the Culture has alleviated the need for mandatory employment, its environments clearly display similar values of social co-operation and collective responsibility. For example, in *Look to Windward*, the Culture citizen Kabe explains to an outsider Ziller a complex political dispute that once arose on the Masaq' Orbital over the presence of a cable car system and its pylons: following an initial attempt to settle the matter through a 'local' vote, i.e. restricted to the area in which the pylons were located, the vote was finally broadened to potentially include anyone on the entire Orbital (198).

Despite the ability for individuals in the Culture to participate in democracy in this manner, Gurgeh (the protagonist of *The Player of Games*) questions the ability for individuals to have impact within the Culture in any significant way, whether this impact is social, political, artistic, etc. Banks's narrative is concerned with Culture citizen Gurgeh, who – disillusioned with his life as an academic in the field of game-playing – becomes embroiled in a mission for Special Circumstances. Before he leaves for his mission, Gurgeh questions life in the Culture, bemoaning the fact that "this is not a heroic age," to his friend, drone Chamlis Amalk-ney, and that "the individual is obsolete. That's why life is so comfortable for us all. We don't matter, so

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[261] Michael Newman, *Socialism: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford University Press: Gosfort, 005) 2.
[262] Ibid., 7.

we're safe. No one person can have a real effect anymore" (22). Yet it is exactly the loss of individuality, in this specific sense, which defines Banks's utopia: "The Culture was every single individual human and machine in it, not one thing" (*CP*, 149). It is not, in fact, the case that individuals "don't matter" in the Culture, and that a person cannot "have a real effect" any longer: the Culture has removed the contexts – capitalism – which unbalance the relationship between individual rights and social responsibility; due to its unique nature, individuals are in fact free to do almost anything, apart from commit murder.[263] While some citizens, such as Diziet Sma from *Use of Weapons* and 'The State of the Art' or Doctor Vossil from *Inversions* (1998), seem conscientious of the rights of their fellow citizens,[264] regarded as a whole, most people in the Culture seem largely unconcerned, preferring to live their lives as they choose, but safe in the knowledge that various unique aspects of the Culture's societies combine to ensure that individuals' life choices do not seriously impede upon those of others. Also, as explored in Chapter Three of this thesis, Culture citizens have been genetically altered in certain ways to eradicate anti-social, prejudiced and otherwise negative characteristics, and Banks argued that a postscarcity society on its own would not be enough to allow ourselves to develop into something like the Culture – we would need to adjust something fundamental about ourselves.[265]

2.5.1 Liberalism, Libertarianism, Minarchism

Despite the fact that in one sense the "individual is obsolete" in the Culture, as explored above, critics such as Vint, Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, James Heilman, Alan

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[263] In 'A Few Notes', Banks argues that A: the chances of this happening are almost impossible due to the combination of an abundant society removing many criminal motives, and the Culture's genetic manipulation to improve human nature; and B: that, even if a murder was attempted – which could really only really be a 'crime' of passion – the murderer would be 'slap droned', to ensure that they would behave.

[264] Sma regularly expresses concern about the personal and political lives of her fellow Culture citizens, while Vossil's role as doctor – which is clearly core to her being – clearly expresses a high level of social responsibility.

[265] See: 'Iain Banks Email Q and A April 2008'. Mark Wilson, Q: "What do you think is the one, single, most vital collective development that humanity needs to take before it has any hope whatsoever of evolving into a Culture-like society?"; Iain Banks, A: "Genetically modifying ourselves, I expect […] The one thing that won't be enough is getting to a post-scarcity society; a statistically valid number of us have lived in something very like that for the past decade and a bit and we still collectively behaved like slavering morons, so it'll take more than just having more toys than we know what to do with to make us truly civilised." www.iain-banks.net/2008/07/21/iain-banks-email-qa-july-2008/ (Accessed 28 September, 2015).

Jacobs[266] and Chris Brown have associated the Culture with political philosophies such as Liberalism and Libertarianism that are founded upon core beliefs in individual autonomy taking a degree of precedence over State control. Characterising the Culture in this manner seems to clash with others who have emphasised its socialist and communitarian values, thereby intensifying the problems and contradictions that have characterised critical understandings of the Culture from the outset. Yet, as with empire and imperialism, terms such as liberalism and libertarianism are loaded with baggage, accruing different meanings in different contexts; therefore, a nuanced understanding of their application in specific contexts works to reconcile seemingly contradictory concepts. Banks often described himself as "a liberal, on the Left, a socialist",[267] for example – a combination of terms that, in some contexts, would be contradictory. As explored in the previous chapter of this thesis, Vint identifies the Culture as reflecting contemporary neo-liberalism, which underpins the global spread of *laissez-fair*, market-driven globalisation, known as Empire, which directly contrasts with Banks's intentions. Furthermore, used in the European political context, for example, Liberalism refers to either Classical or Neo-liberal philosophies that favour "individual liberty, free trade, and moderate political and social reform".[268] Yet it is more likely that Banks uses the word 'liberal', here, in a general context to convey his fundamental beliefs in tolerance, compassion and a "willingness to respect or accept behaviour or opinions different from one's own".[269] Banks's position is also perhaps closer to being liberal in the understanding of the term in American politics, where Liberals are commonly associated with the Democratic Party and Conservatives with Republicanism.

Yet Jackson and Heilman have read the Culture as an "ideal-typical liberal society" and "perfect liberal utopia" in the more Classical, nineteenth century understanding of liberalism, because Banks's society adheres to "the three central

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[266] "The philosophy of Banks's Culture is that of Liberalism" – Alan Jacobs, 'The Ambiguous Utopia of Iain M. Banks', *The New Atlantis*, Summer 2009, 45-58. 47.
[267] Scott Beauchamp, 'The Future Might Be a Hoot: How Iain M. Banks Imagines Utopia', The Atlantic, 15 January 2013. www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/01/the-future-might-be-a-hoot-how-iain-m-banks-imagines-utopia/267211/ (Accessed 3 October, 2015).
[268] Ibid.
[269] 'Liberal', Oxford Dictionaries. Oxford University Press, 14 March 2016. www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/liberal (Accessed 24 April, 2016).

tenets" of "individual liberty, equality, and reason."[270] Jackson and Heilman, as well as Brown, all agree that the Culture has, at least to some extent, achieved the three fundamental tenants of liberalism identified above, yet they clearly disagree on the exact manner in which the Culture has achieved them. While Jackson and Heilman do acknowledge the importance of the Culture's postscarcity environment to its freedom and egalitarianism – acknowledging that its "distribution of productive capabilities" means that "everyone has the same claim on basically every object produced"[271] – they do not acknowledge the problems that identifying such a society as liberal present. As Vint argues, capitalism is "the economic form of liberal humanist democracies", [272] and she quotes Katherine Hayles's assertion that "the liberal self is produced by market relations and does not predate them." [273] Capitalism creates and maintains a system of stark class inequality, and – in its neo-liberal form – is characterised by economics underpinned by unregulated, *lassez fair* market forces, which means that such a system can never truly achieve the equality and freedom it claims to represent. So clearly, then, it is highly problematic to identify a society such as the Culture – which has dispensed entirely with any form of market economy – as an example of a liberal society, even if it has the same fundamental aims, as Banks's society is underpinned by a radically different economic system. By viewing the Culture as Empire, then, Vint rectifies this problem in one sense by presenting a much more negative reading of the Culture as proponent of "cultural imperialism" motivated by a desire for establishing galactic domination. [274] Yet the Culture bears only superficial similarities to Empire, as explored in the previous chapter.

Pushing the philosophy of individualism further, Kerslake has argued for the Culture's advocation of an "extreme form of libertarianism",[275] while Jude Roberts notes, more specifically, that "many critics and reviewers have claimed that the

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[270]Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, James Heilman, eds., 'Outside Context Problems: Liberalism and the Other in the Work of Iain M. Banks'*, New Boundaries in Political Science Fiction*, Hassler and Wilcox; 235-258; 2008, University of South Carolina. 239; 242.

[271] Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, James Heilman, eds., 'Outside Context Problems: Liberalism and the Other in the Work of Iain M. Banks'*, New Boundaries in Political Science Fiction*, Hassler and Wilcox; 235-258; 2008, University of South Carolina. 239; 242.

[272] Vint, 'Cultural Imperialism and the Ends of Empire'. (N.P.)

[273] Katherine N. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies* in *Cybernetics, Literature and Information* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999), in, Vint, 'Cultural Imperialism and the Ends of Empire'. (N.P.)

[274] Vint, 'Cultural Imperialism and the Ends of Empire'.

[275] Kerslake, Science Fiction and Empire, 175.

Culture represents the American Libertarian ideal."[276] Again, describing the Culture

as such is potentially problematic given its postscarcity nature: Banks stated clearly

that "I pretty much despise American Libertarianism", going on to reassert the

Culture's "deep distrust of both Marketolatry and Greedism".[277] While Vint's reading

of the Culture as Empire aligns Banks's civilisation with American Libertarian ideals

of individual over government responsibility, private charity and support for a free

market, for example,[278] the term "Libertarian" has not always been understood in this

manner. As Colin Ward explains:

> For a century, anarchists have used the word 'libertarian' as a synonym for 'anarchist,
> both as a noun and an adjective. The celebrated anarchist journal Le Libertaire was
> founded in 1896. However, much more recently the word has been appropriated by
> various American free-market philosophers.[279]

Therefore, the Culture can be also be read as an example of a Left-Libertarian society,

in a manner that resolves it individualism with its anarchism: as Mendlesohn has

argued, "the Culture, although Utopian, is not a planned society but a neo-anarchist

collection of individuals".[280] The extent of the personal freedom from State

intervention experienced by the Culture's citizens is indeed great, perhaps "extreme"

as Kerslake suggests. As Banks outlines in 'A Few Notes', in fact technically murder

– "the very worst crime (to use our terminology)" – is the only action that would

cause the Minds to intervene in the actions of a citizen operating outside of Contact or

SC:

> the result – punishment, if you will – is the offer of treatment, and what is known as a
> slap-drone. All a slap-drone does is follow the murderer around for the rest of their
> life to make sure they never murder again. There are less severe variations on this
> theme to deal with people who are simply violent.[281]

For others whose actions or desires fall outside the acceptable conventions of its

society – Banks gives the example of megalomaniacs – the Culture sometimes creates

virtual reality environments into which they can be "diverted successfully", or even

[276] Jude Roberts, 'A Few Questions About the Culture: An Interview with Iain Banks', *Strange Horizons*, 3/11/2014, strangehorizons.com/2014/20141103/1banks-a.shtml (Accessed 14 March, 2015)
[277] Ibid.
[278] 'Libertarian Party 2010 Platform', The Libertarian Party, May 2010, 1(Accessed 15 March, 2015).
[279] Colin Ward, *Anarchism: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 62.
[280] Mendlesohn, 'Iain M. Banks: *Excession*', 557.
[281] Banks, 'A Few Notes'.

allows them to pursue their interests on a non-virtual, "backwood planet" so long as they cause no harm. The postscarcity nature of the Culture, as discussed above, combined with certain physiological and psychological adjustments often adopted by Culture citizens, as discussed in Chapter Three of this thesis, greatly reduces the necessity for slap-drones or these other forms of punishment, diversion or therapy.

Echoing this, Brown has asserted that the Culture is a "liberal anarchic utopia."[282] The Culture is liberal, Brown states, "in so far as it is individualist and committed to the autonomy of all sentient beings", yet this is "not inconsistent with its anarchism" because, "as Marxists used to say, anarchism is liberalism without a police force".[283] Brown emphasises how the Culture's Post-Scarcity nature makes the need for law and law enforcement all but redundant, and therefore identifying this as the enabler for a form of anarchism.

Yet the Culture is not an entirely Libertarian society in this manner, as the Minds do in fact perform the functions of a State to some extent, even if – in certain texts – they seem very minimal. *Look to Windward* provides an example of how the Mind's bureaucratic role in the Culture seems to operate in practice, on a minimalistic, *ad hoc* basis. An avatar takes a newcomer to the Culture, Ziller, on a tour of the Masaaq' Orbital, and explains how a local dispute over use of land was resolved. One Culture citizen, Bregan Latrey, decided that a system of cable cars should be built over an area of wilderness to help people cross the land (*LtW*, 196). In an illustration of the extent of the Culture's freedom and its postscarcity economy, the only formal procedure Latrey need to go through in order to begin is to speak to the Orbital's hub Mind. While the hub refuses to build them itself because "this place was designed as a wilderness" – suggesting that the hub does at least have an opinion on the matter, even if it cannot or will not interfere in an official capacity – it merely tells Latrey to "do it himself", still providing Latrey with the required "manufacturing capacity and design time", and does not restrict him amassing some volunteers to help with the project (197). With no formal system of laws or regulations in place to mediate this project, the hub is involved only as is required in its role as facilitator of the means of production. It plays no other part in the process until other Culture citizens who are opposed to the project form a protest group, The Preservationeers, who begin to undo Latrey's work, and it became clear that it is necessary for the hub

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[282] Chris Brown, 'Special Circumstances: Intervention by a Liberal Utopia', 628.
[283] Ibid.

to arbitrate the dispute. Further demonstrating the *ad hoc* nature of the system, and the infrequency of such situations, the avatar explains that "they had lots of votes", in "one of those rolling campaigns where they had to vote on who would be allowed to vote" (198). In the end, after several stages of voting, confined to those living on Masaaq', Latrey was allowed to complete his project, building miles of pylons across the area, but upon the condition that he agree not to repeat the process elsewhere (199).

This example works to lightly satirise the mechanisms of a democratic state, recalling the sometimes long-winded bureaucratic processes of real-world local governments; as the avatar states, "'Believe me; democracy in action can be an unpretty sight'" (198). Yet it also provides an insight into the ways in which a system like the Culture might settle disputes if they do arise. The Mind in question does fulfil something like several different State functions – arbitrator of disputes, law-enforcement officer, etc. – but in specific response to the individual situation, as proved necessary given that a dispute arose, rather than in a general manner as a matter of course. If no one had objected to Latrey's project then the hub would have allowed him to continue without interfering, even though it personally considered the project to be problematic.

The Culture, then, considering the huge degree of personal freedom afforded to its citizens, and the seemingly minimalistic role of the Minds as a State-like function – could perhaps most effectively be characterised as a form of minarchy – defined as "Minimal government; specifically a (hypothetical) form of government that does not interfere with individual rights and civil liberties"[284] – as David Farnell has argued.[285] This definition, therefore, allows for a degree of anarchy, but underpinned by a fundamentally socialist economic philosophy. Yet it still does not fully encompass the true extent of the Culture's complexity.

2.5.2 The Minds as State

The Culture's State system is actually a lot more comprehensive than it may first appear. For example, along with the political and democratic functions discussed

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[284] 'minarchy', *Oxford Dictionaries*, Oxford University Press, www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/minarchy (Accessed 14 March, 2016).
[285] "'The Culture' is a post-scarcity spacefaring socialist minarchy" – David Farnell, 'Preemeptive Regime Change in Iain M. Banks's *The Player of Games*', 2.

above, the Culture has: a higher education system, evidenced by the university in which part of *The Player of Games* is set, as discussed below; an agricultural system – the Minds have artificially created the Culture's habitats, including 'natural' features, such as mountains, rocks and grass, which it is their responsibility to maintain (*CP*, 85); internal security, in the form of the slap drones who monitor violent individuals (*SD*, 154); military defence, as provided by SC in the absolute direst of circumstances (*THS*, 137); and an extremely effective health care system, as explored in Chapter Three of this thesis. Furthermore, the Culture even features a system of total surveillance covering all of its habitats, for the purposes of safety and security: the Minds are able to view all Culture areas at all times, and they can communicate with citizens extremely effectively through their terminal devices (*CP*, 87; *SD*, 164-167), or even more directly through neural lace devices (*SD*, 447-448). Monitored by the largely benign and neutral Minds, this system further heightens the safety of the Culture's habitats, providing almost instantaneous rescue from danger should it be necessary; yet, following the warnings of anti-utopian and dystopian fiction, this surveillance system could potentially enable a more repressive, totalitarian regime, if used with such intent.[286]

The reason that this State structure may be easily overlooked is to do with the extent of the Culture's technoscientific mastery. The system of Second Nature that constitutes the Culture is underpinned by technoscience that is so complex and so ubiquitous that it renders this State apparatus almost invisible. As Csicsery-Ronay explains, in space opera the Tool Text becomes so advanced that it is able to

> saturate the ground of reality itself, creating barriers between human beings and first nature […] With technoscience and sf, tool and text cease to be merely occasional objects, dormant or ready for use; they become the dominant means of reality production.[287]

Every part of life in the Culture is enabled by the combination of the Tools that form the physical environment and the virtual Text of computer code that enables them to function. The Minds perform their various State functions, then, but these functions are seamlessly integrated into the Culture's all-encompassing Second Nature, forming the fabric of life for its people. The State may seem minimal, yet only because its

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[286] See: Tom Moylan, Raffaella Baccolini, eds., *Dark Horizons*: *Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (London: Routledge Publishing, 2003).
[287] Csicsery-Ronay, *Seven Beauties*, 259.

functions have become so 'naturalised' that they are easily overlooked.

Furthermore, in this postscarcity environment, no citizen has any need or responsibility to give anything in return for these services – in the form of tax, for example – as all can be provided endlessly and effortlessly. This fact, therefore, means that the Culture still conveys the impression of being a liberal/libertarian society in that individuals may live seemingly without being encumbered – as libertarian thought sees it – by State interference; yet they still automatically receive the benefit from State functions, with no obligation to do anything in return.

2.6 A Hierarchical Culture?

"Utility is seven-eighths proximity" – Contact motto (*SD*, 214).

Egalitarianism is at the core of any socialist project, even in certain understandings of Classical Liberalism, as it is core to the Culture, so it is necessary to ask whether it has in fact been achieved. The Culture does not have classes in a Marxist understanding of the term as private ownership of capital does not exist, meaning in turn that a capitalist class does not exist, and therefore neither does an exploited, alienated proletariat. Yet, despite such concerted attempts to eradicate inequality and hierarchy, the question of the extent to which the Culture is truly egalitarian is still complex. Two issues that must be addressed in this regard relate to the nature of Contact and SC – members of which appear to have a certain level of power over other citizens of the Culture in a way that most do not – and the existence and nature of universities in the Culture, which potentially demonstrate the presence of hierarchical arrangements, as discussed below.

In some ways, the organisations Contact and SC seem intrinsically hierarchical, and perhaps could be considered elitist. These organisations – responsible respectively for establishing and maintaining communication with other societies, and for, when deemed absolutely necessary, enforcing change upon Contacted societies – require highly trained and disciplined individuals in order to ensure that their protocols are maintained and their mission accomplished effectively. When SC is first described in the series, the reader is introduced to it through the perspective of *Consider Phlebas* protagonist, Bora Horza Gobuchul:

> Special Circumstances had always been the Contact section's moral espionage weapon, the very cutting edge of the Culture's interfering diplomatic policy, the élite of the élite, in a society which abhorred elitism. Even before the war, its standing and its image within the Culture had been roguish sexiness – there was no other word for it – which implied predation, seduction, even violation (30).

This description tends towards the pejorative, of course, as Horza is known to hate the Culture; yet SC does seem elitist to a certain extent, and its reputation for excellence and intrigue is spoken about with a certain seductive quality – a 'sexiness' – as exemplified by Banks's novels.

The narrative of *The Player of Games*, for example, provides particularly relevant and interesting examples of such. At the start of the novel, protagonist Gurgeh is blackmailed into joining SC by the drone Mawhrin-Skel; this blackmail is motivated by the fact that the drone was rejected by SC shortly after joining, and intends to exploit Gurgeh to assure its reinstallment. Initially created especially to work in SC, Mawhrin-Skel was designed as a superior drone: "effectively a military machine with a variety of sophisticated, hardened sensory and weapons systems which would have been quite unnecessary on the majority of drones" (14). The drone's character was left to develop of its own accord, it was deemed "rogue" and therefore unsuitable for SC (14); these details, suggesting a highly demanding and competitive recruitment process, seem to highlight the division's superior attitude towards the rest of the Culture. At the end of *The Player of Games*, however, much of the narrative's accuracy is implicitly called into question once the identity of the narrator is revealed in the final chapter to be the drone Flere-Imsaho, making it difficult to verify several aspects of the novel, including those relating to the nature of SC. Flere-Imsaho explains that he was in fact posing as Mawhrin-Skel all along, creating and adopting this false identity and back-story in order to aid SC's manipulation of Gurgeh into overthrowing Azad. When Flere-Imsaho asks at the novel's conclusion "would I lie to you?" (309) the reader is made to reconsider many aspects of the proceeding narrative and the drone's identity. Who was the original drone and which identity was invented? Perhaps rogue SC agent Mawhrin-Skel was the original drone, all along, and it was in fact Flere-Imsaho – supposedly the more respectable drone – that was invented, achieving a double bluff; following this reading, Mawhrin-Skel exploited SC's interest in Gurgeh to allow the drone's own clandestine return to SC, and not vice versa. The narrative's unreliable narrator leaves

the exact extent of SC's hierarchies ambiguous, although serves to exemplify its secretive, seductive nature, regardless of which version of events is believed.

It is not just SC drones that are customised to be superior or especially shaped in this manner; and examples of the extent to which SC's human operatives are similarly privileged, can be found in almost every text in the series. While the majority of Culture people choose to have their bodies and minds enhanced to a certain extent – granted longer, healthier life; cranially-implanted 'drug glands' free from side-effects etc. – SC operatives have access to potentially more powerful and more dangerous tools, such as Knife Missiles, poisoned fingers tips, and other weapons. Given that knowledge is treated as a commodity within the Culture, as explained above, it is important to note that Contact is described as having "the best Minds, the most information" (22), which could potentially be used to acquire leverage and power.

In this manner, then, it could be argued that the Culture does in fact maintain hierarchy, shaped according to its utopian impulse to allow others the freedoms its people enjoy, or its imperialistic drive for expansion and power, depending upon how the ideological nature of Contact and SC are viewed. The issue is not so simple, however, and this question leads us back to Banks's conception of the Culture as "Socialism within; anarchism without". Clearly, the internal nature of the Culture, life *within* its habitats, and its external nature, life *between* these habitats, is different; and the question of the extent of its egalitarian nature adds layers of complexity to any attempt at defining the Culture.

At this stage it is important to delineate SC from Contact, as – while the former is undeniably a part of the latter – they differ fundamentally in purpose and action. As Byr explains to a family member in *Excession*, "This isn't Contact, Uncle, this is Special Circumstances […] They tend to play by slightly different rules" (64). In some respects, Banks describes SC and Contact in similar ways, emphasising the manner in which they both differ from the main body of the Culture, and the paradoxes that result from this situation. Speaking about SC in *Consider Phlebas*, Banks states that: "No other part of the Culture more exactly represented what the society as a whole really stood for, or was more militant in the application of the Culture's fundamental beliefs, yet no other part embodied less of the society's day-to-day character" (30). Similarly, in *A Few Notes*, he states that:

> Contact is the most coherent and consistent part of the Culture – certainly when considered on a galactic scale – yet it is only a very small part of it, is almost a civilisation within a civilisation, and no more typifies its host than an armed service does a peaceful state.

In other words, the Culture's 'day-to-day' character – which lies within the Orbitals and GSVs and is exemplified by Gurgeh's pre-SC life on Chairk and other Culture people from the series who are free to live how they want, in peace, and free from restrictions of almost any kind – seems very different to the character of SC with its missions, orders, secrets and schemes for sociopolitical purpose, which perhaps seem akin to military intervention or government espionage. In turn, Contact might be the Culture's "most coherent and consistent part", yet voyages around the galaxy to meet newly discovered groups and societies also seems at odds with the lives of the majority of Culture citizens. At the heart of these paradoxes is the paradox central to the Culture itself. SC's role, then, effectively to expand the Culture, can be seen as reflecting its utopian essence, while the extent to which it strives to do this as effectively as possible, seems to undermine this very essence.

In one sense, the Culture and Contact have no choice but to contact other civilisations: it is surely an inevitable aspect of life in a galaxy that contains many advanced societies, capable of interstellar travel. If this is true, and given that Contact's role is fundamentally one of diplomacy – establishing safe contact that ensures minimal shock or misunderstanding, and maintaining a peaceful and hopefully mutually beneficial relationship – then Contact should be understood as removed from any direct process of imperialism. Instead it establishes and maintains a peaceful network of relationships between the Culture and other civilisations, which is essentially motivated by benevolence and altruism, as well as necessity. Also, crucially, Banks's novels do not indicate that Contact requires any sort of special criteria in order to become a member: in theory it seems that anyone can join and become an ambassador, as exemplified by Shohobohaum Za from *The Player of Games*. SC's missions, on the other hand, such as their involvement in the regime change in the Empire of Azad, require an elite of sorts, but formed from those Culture citizens who are most suited to the required roles, in order to maintain their internal egalitarianism.[288]

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[288] See: Farnell, 'Preemptive Regime Change in Iain M. Banks' *The Player of Games*'.

The fact that Gurgeh is an academic, who teaches at the University of Chairk, also has interesting implications for the egalitarian nature of the Culture. Universities are often conceived of as an intrinsically meritocratic concept – at least traditionally – as progress within them is judged upon the acquisition of knowledge and intellectual achievement, rather than upon class privilege or wealth. At the time of writing, increased tuition fees and other higher education reforms are topical subjects, with many arguing that entry into some of the more esteemed universities – Russell group institutions such as University of Cambridge, Oxford and London or 'Ivy League' universities such as Brown or Yale, for example – is biased towards those from privileged backgrounds, and threatens the traditional meritocracy of university education. Arguing that the post-war Robbins report is being implicitly challenged by the current Conservative government, Peter Scott states that "the increasing weight placed on attending 'good universities', which just happen to be those with the most privileged student intakes, shows what is really happening. Social connections now trump academic aspirations and achievements."[289] This situation is clearly impossible in the Culture universities, however, as class privilege does not and cannot exist – yet that does not mean that they operate according to a completely different system with no aspect of hierarchy whatsoever. Judging by Gurgeh's title ("itinerant guest lecturer" [11]) and those of his colleagues (*Professor* Boruelal for example) the University of Chairk is structured according to a familiar hierarchy of academic attainment – Reader, Lecturer, Professor, etc. – which in turn suggests that it also follows something akin to the traditional quasi-regal university managerial structure – Dean, Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, etc. Banks's texts offer no further detail on such structures, yet their use of academic positions does demonstrate that the Culture's higher education system cannot be said to be *completely* flat and free from hierarchy, perhaps demonstrating a difference between hierarchy, suggesting inequality and autocracy, and organisation, suggesting meritocracy and egalitarianism.

The key point here is that this potentially unequal aspect scarcely seems to matter, in such an advanced society: the fact that citizens can live for essentially as long as they wish means that, in theory, anyone could achieve such positions within

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[289] Peter Scott, 'Meritocracy is in retreat in twenty first century higher education', the *Guardian*, 1 September 2015. www.theguardian.com/education/2015/sep/01/higher-education-class-degree-university-inequality (Accessed 29 September, 2015).

academia through applying themselves for as long as was necessary, with no economic, geographic or social barriers withholding them. Titles such as 'Doctor' or 'Professor' would exist purely as markers of intellectual achievement and profession, attracting a kind of prestige, perhaps, but not allowing the bearer any serious privileges that would lead to fundamental social inequality. In this respect, universities represent the core values of the Culture: the spirit of discovery and open-minded inquiry; quest for mutual understanding and mutual tolerance between peoples and races across the galaxy; and a desire to encourage the best qualities of human beings.[290]

2.7 Postscarcity and Human Behaviour

One of the most significant benefits that Banks postulates to have arisen from the Culture's move beyond scarcity is the way in which this shift affects human behavior, maybe even human nature itself, and encourages our more positive instincts. By removing inequality and the class-system entirely from a society, the argument goes, the individuals within that society will also be radically reshaped, with negative attributes such as jealousy, snobbery, greed and aggression becoming less and less necessary, and therefore less and less prevalent. Right-wing and/or anti-utopian critics have stressed the fundamental selfishness, greed or war-like tendencies of *homo sapiens*, and the inescapable and insidious nature of Darwin's notion of the 'survival of the fittest' which supposedly ensure that we will never achieve or maintain such an end,[291] whereas more progressive schools of thoughts have of course challenged the basis of this notion, arguing for a fundamental re-conception of human evolution, and our understanding of humanity. Woodcock discusses Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin argument that even humankind's

> intellectual faculty is 'eminently social', since it is nurtured by communication – mainly in the form of language, by imitation, and by the accumulated experience of the race. He [Kropotkin] admitted that the struggle of existence, of which evolutionists such as Thomas Huxley made a great deal, was indeed important, but he saw it as a struggle against adverse circumstances, rather than between individuals of the same species.[292]

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[290] See Chapter Three of this thesis for further discussion of Humanist values in the Culture.
[291] See Francis Fukuyama, Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002) or John Grey, Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia (St Ives: Penguin Books, 2007) and Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals (London: Granta Books, 2002).
[292] Woodcock, Anarchism: A Historical Introduction, 19.

Human beings, Kropotkin's argument goes, evolve according to the ways in which they respond to their surroundings, as much as they react to each other; and will naturally group together for shared protection and support – a concept he called 'mutual aid'. The central logic of the Culture series does seem to support this idea, even though in interview Banks often stated his significantly more pessimistic view of humanity writ large.[293] So effective is Banks's conception of the Culture, however, that, regardless of whether one views humankind as fundamentally selfish and violent, or social and caring, the eradication of our worse tendencies can be explained by a social response to the changes incurred in a postscarcity society, to genetic manipulation of human beings, or a complex mixture of both.

One fundamental change undergone by the Culture is directly related to the postscarcity nature of their society: they have no sense of personal ownership or private property, no sense of possession. When Gurgeh is guided around Azad by the drone Flere-Imsaho, it is necessary to explain such concepts at a basic level, in order for Gurgeh to understand fundamental aspects of the society into which he has been introduced:

> The thing to remember, Gurgeh […] is that their society is based on ownership. Everything that you see and touch, everything you come into contact with, will belong to somebody or to an institution; it will be theirs, they will own it. In the same way, everyone you meet will be conscious of both their position in society and their relationship to others around them (114).

This description, given from the perspective of a Culture drone who has never experienced scarcity, serves to estrange the basic nature of capitalism, and reveals the fundamental economic inequality present on Earth. With ownership and social position absent in the Culture, due to the fact that acquisition of anything at all is an entirely easy, fluid and frequently instantaneous process, the argument goes, any instinct to hang-on to material items in order to ensure that an individual retains ownership has dimmed or vanished, as the item could be replaced perfectly and instantly. The consequences for society would be considerable, especially relating to criminal or anti-social behaviour; as Banks notes: "In a society where material

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[293] At the event 'Iain Banks and Kim Stanley Robinson in Conversation', held at the British Library, London, on 9 June 2012, Banks aired his opinion that humankind is prone to being violent, as well as towards various 'isms' – racism, sexism, etc.

scarcity is unknown and the only real value is sentimental value, there is little motive or opportunity for the sort of action we would class as a crime against property."[294]

2.8.1 *The Player of Games*: Private Property, Sentimentality, Possession

While money does not exist in the Culture, nor the concept of private property in a Marxist sense, and its citizens have to have the concept of ownership explained to them as in the preceding quotation, some of its citizens still display an understanding of ownership and possession even if it is in a general, more abstract sense, in relation to personal possessions. Again in *The Player of Games*, throughout Gurgeh's narrative there are instances when this character displays a sense of attachment to personal effects for sentimental or symbolic reasons. Banks's second published Culture text is perhaps uniquely suited to revealing such details as it is only text in the series that portrays the life of Culture citizen (the male protagonist Jernau Morat Gurgeh) living in their home environment (the Orbital Chiark) for a substantial portion of the text. In this respect, Gurgeh acts as a kind of bridge character which allows a contemporary audience to understand the nature of the Culture by experiencing it through a character to whom they are more likely to be able to relate, given his somewhat ambiguous positioning in relation to his home. The other Culture texts detail the exploits of individuals who exist in a complex and ambiguous relationship with the Culture, and live on its fringes. The plot of *The Player of* Games follows Gurgeh, the Culture's best gameplayer, who is blackmailed by an ex-SC drone into accepting a mission to visit the Empire of Azad, in order to literally beat them at their own game, instigate an intervention, and overturn the regime.

At the beginning, the reader experiences Gurgeh's worklife as an academic in the field of game-playing, as well as snippets from his personal relationships, before he is unwillingly drafted into SC, leaving Chiark to begin his mission to the Empire of Azad. It is during the transitionary period, before Gurgeh boards a ship to leave Chiark, when notions of ownership are acknowledged. Wondering what Gurgeh will need to pack for his journey, the drone Chamlis asks:

> What about personal possessions? It could be awkward if you want to take anything larger than a small module, say, or livestock larger than human size." Gurgeh shook his head. "Nothing remotely that large. A few cases of clothes…perhaps one or two ornaments…nothing more (90).

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[294] Banks, 'A Few Notes'.

Gurgeh's somewhat sparse travelling habits could suggest the somewhat stereotypical image of an academic who lives an ascetic lifestyle, more concerned with intellectual pursuits than material possessions. It is Gurgeh's inclusion of "perhaps one or two ornaments", however, which is of more interest in this context. On two occasions in *The Player of Games*, physical objects presented to an individual explicitly as a gift are mentioned in relation to Gurgeh; in both instances they reveal the residual presence of the feeling of sentimentality. Slightly after Chamlis asks after Gurgeh's possessions, for example, while Gurgeh sorts through his quarters, and selecting items to bring with him on his mission, Gurgeh's friend Yay interrupts this process, communicating with him remotely through a screen. Viewing Gurgeh sat in his home, Yay notices one such object: "a rusting piece of ironware beside the bench; a present from an old lover he'd almost forgotten about" (90). "'What is that you're sitting beside?'" asks Yay. "Gurgeh looked at the piece of ironware by the side of the bench. 'That's a cannon,' he told her. 'That's what I thought.' 'It was a present from a lady friend,' Gurgeh explained. […] "I see'" (85). In this verbal exchange, the cannon may operate at least partly as a joke drawing upon the gun's clear phallic symbolism, yet it plays a more important function later on in the text. Similarly, before Gurgeh departs for Azad, apparently without Chamlis, the drone hands Gurgeh a "'small parcel; paper tied up with ribbon.'" "'Just an old tradition,' Chamlis explained" (93). Preoccupied with his study of Azad onboard the ship, Gurgeh forgets to open this gift until much later on. When he does unwrap it, Gurgeh pulls out what appears to be "'a thin bracelet'" (116-117), the significance of which he does not understand at the time. (Yet Banks's more informed readers at this point would probably pick up the hint offered here to its real nature – a model of Gurgeh's home Orbital – through the description using the word 'bracelet', which Banks often uses to describe Orbitals.)

Gurgeh's decision to bring the bracelet and a photo of the cannon with him on his journey (only his second away from Chairk), suggests his sentimental attachment to the objects, just as Chamlis offering Gurgeh a gift places a special kind of value upon the mysterious object. While Gurgeh could clearly ask a drone or Mind to produce a replica of the cannon, which would be technically perfect in every way, this would not be enough for him. Implicitly, there is a special significance, a special value, in bringing *that particular* object along with him, which could not be acquired by bringing even a perfect replica. Perhaps the fact that Gurgeh's former lover

fashioned the object herself, crafted it through human endeavor, and presumably would have touched the final object with her hands, gives the gift a meaning that cannot – for Gurgeh – be achieved in any other way. Similarly, at first, the gift Chamlis offers Gurgeh seems like a personal gesture – a personal token of friendship, which – as an object crafted from metal – has a similarly tactile and physical presence, even if Gurgeh views the purpose for which he assumes it to be used – a bracelet – as trivial.

Eventually, Gurgeh realises Chamlis's gift is not a bracelet as such, but in fact represents a Culture Orbital, such as that on which he was born. Described as "bright in the darkness, lighting up his fingers and the covers of the bed", and with "microscopic whorls of weather systems over blue sea and dun-coloured land" (145), the model is clearly a highly detailed object of great beauty and aesthetic value. As with Gurgeh's model cannon, however, the Orbital is allowed to develop a somewhat grander meaning in the novel. Necessarily immersed in the alien world of Azad, Gurgeh faces the threat of assimilation, potentially abandoning the values of the Culture (of which he is openly skeptical) where life is but a game, and succumbing to the lure of Azad, which, with its cruelty and violence, represents the dangerous thrills of gambling that he desires. The bracelet, then, far from a mere decoration, represents Gurgeh's home literally, but also signifies the Culture's values symbolically.

The gift given to Gurgeh by his former lover performs a similar function. Gurgeh explains that the metal item is shaped like a cannon because his friend "was very keen on forging and casting. She graduated from pokers and fire grates to cannons. She thought it might be amusing to fire large metal spheres at the fjord" (85). Despite the military connotations of the item, the gift still represents a link between Gurgeh and the fjords of his home Chairk, as well as between to a significant past relationship. Even the drone Chamlis displays a similar inclination towards sentimentality at the very end of the novel, by mounting on the wall the physical shell of drone whose identity it assumes during Gurgeh's journey – that of Mawhrin-Skel (306) – behind glass, and admitting that "this means a great deal to me" (306).

Alongside this literal discussion of sentimentality for personal artifacts, Banks's discussion of the theme of possession within a postscarcity society is allowed to achieve a more metaphorical significance within *The Player of Games*: Gurgeh's gameplaying is symbolic of his general outlook, which marks him as unusual within the Culture, especially regarding his relationships with women. At the start of the text,

Gurgeh has become disillusioned with his game-playing career essentially due to the postscarcity nature of the Culture itself. To Gurgeh, playing games in this environment eventually loses its enjoyment and meaning: "With no money, no possessions, a large part of the enjoyment the people who invented this game experienced when they played it just…disappears" (21). In a society where no-one actually owns anything for themselves (at least in theory), it is impossible to gamble anything, to maintain an element of genuine risk, as it is impossible to lose something that cannot be easily and quickly re-obtained. In retort to this, Chamlis defends the Culture's stance:

> You call it enjoyment to lose your house, your titles, your estates; your children maybe; to be expected to walk out onto the balcony and blow your brains out? That's enjoyment? We're free of that. You want something you can't have, Gurgeh. You enjoy your life in the Culture, but it can't provide you with sufficient threats; the true gambler needs the excitement of potential loss, even ruin, to feel wholly Alive (21).

Arguing that such logic is absurd, Chamlis challenges the notion that one must face experience risk or threat of danger in order to experience joy and pleasure. He states that "you called yourself "Morat" when you completed your name, but perhaps you aren't the perfect game-player after all; perhaps you should have called yourself "Shequi"; gambler'" (21). The Culture's outlook, implies Chamlis, is that of a game-player, a professional playing for the intellectual pleasure of the game itself, and not the glory of winning or losing, the latter of which should be accepted in a sportsman-like manner of mutual respect and appreciation. The attitude of a gambler, by contrast, belongs to the older, backwards society through which the Culture has passed, where pleasure derives from self-interest, insecurity and even a form of sadism: "'To glory in the defeat of another," states Chamlis, "'to need that purchased pride, is to show that you are incomplete and inadequate to start with'"(21).

So Gurgeh's dissatisfaction with his life in utopia shows that his general values and worldview clash with those of the Culture; yet his attitude toward gameplaying also demonstrates an uncomfortable view in relation to sexual relationships. The novel's early scenes in which Gurgeh and Yay discuss the model cannon develop the pair's relationship, characterised by tension caused by opposing worldviews and unresolved sexual attraction; and, reading between the lines of this conversation, Yay's affection for Gurgeh is clear. Before leaving for Azad, Gurgeh "took a few photographs" of the cannon present, to which he is clearly sentimentally

attached (84). Yay's brief yet loaded response to Gurgeh's continued interest in the gift – "I see" (85) – speaks volumes, suggesting perhaps jealousy on her part at his continued interest in the former relationship from which the gift originated. In fact, it Gurgeh has been making sexual advances toward Yay for some time, with Yay politely turning him down. While Yay is attracted to Gurgeh, and has strongly considered acquiescing to his advances, she is concerned about several of his attitudes towards sexuality and sexual relationships, which reveal a great deal about Gurgeh's general character, as well as the subtle devices Banks uses to develop the reader's understanding of the Culture. Yay's ambivalence about Gurgeh arguably stems from the fact that Banks's portrays him as a person who, despite being born in the Culture and only leaving it on one occasion, displays views and adheres to values that more typical Culture individuals deem to be old-fashioned – indeed he is referred to at one stage as "primitive", and at another as a "throwback" (29).

Yay identifies concepts derived from Gurgeh's game-playing in his treatment of women: "'I feel you want to…take me,' Yay said, 'like a piece, like an area. To be had; to be…possessed'" (24). Here, Gurgeh implicitly reflects views from an archaic patriarchal order, which sees woman as an inferior sex, and therefore as the 'property' of men. Here Banks cleverly has Yay draw upon Gurgeh's game-playing terminology to subtly indicate the fact that she seems unfamiliar with the concept of possession from anywhere other than games that Gurgeh has explained to her. (At one stage Gurgeh plays a game entitled Possession, which requires pieces to be taken, implying an ownership that can change hands [24].) These notions are also reflected by Gurgeh's reactions when pitted against a very young but talented female game-player, who attempts an especially audacious move known as a "Full Web": "simultaneous capture of every remaining point in the game-space" (48). The age and gender of his opponent cause Gurgeh anger and upset, yet it is seemingly the nature of the Full Web itself that irks him most. Is possession of gamepieces stands metaphorically for patriarchal male 'possession' of a female, then his opponent is not only using such tactics against him, but attempting total 'patriarchal' domination in this manner.

This fact, that Gurgeh is developed initially as an old-fashioned man from the perspective of the Culture – displaying gendered-male traits that it has supposedly left behind – has several important implications for this text. Firstly, Gurgeh's mission to the dystopian Azad is portrayed as a kind of katabatic descent, with his subsequent return to Chiark indicating that he has been significantly changed by his experience.

In one of the text's deliberate ironies, Gurgeh's mission to Azad succeeds, resulting in this society becoming 'Culture-ised', implicitly because Gurgeh – as a Culture "relic" – is more accepted by the relatively primitive people of Azad; in turn, by experiencing the extreme contrasts between these two societies, Gurgeh finally grows to fully understand and appreciate the nature of his home. Secondly, it lies at the heart of Yay's reluctance taking him as a lover, and reveals important details about attitudes towards gender roles in the Culture (which are discussed in Chapter Four of this thesis).

2.8.1 *The Player of Games*: the Empire of Azad as Capitalist Dystopia

Race Matthews has argued that: "The major preoccupation of his [Banks's] science fiction is with whether – and, if so, on what terms – societies characterized respectively by abundance and scarcity can coexist."[295] While *The Player of Games* does contrast the Culture's abundance with Azad's scarcity, as occurs in a similar manner in other Culture texts, Banks's preoccupations are much more radical than merely negotiating a mutually beneficial compromise between these two modes of society: Banks's series depicts nothing short of attempts to fundamentally transform less-advanced societies, such as the unambiguously cruel and sadistic Empire of Azad, into postscarcity environments, which are therefore capable of becoming something more like the Culture. In *The Player of Games*, Banks first establishes the abundance of the Culture, with the novel's first sections providing a 'tour' of utopia and insight into the daily lives of Culture citizens, and then provides a contrasting view of the Empire of Azad as a society mired by scarcity. In this fashion, Banks establishes a dialectic between utopia and dystopia – a device used in earlier examples of classic utopian SF such as Ursula le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974) or Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), which it is very likely that Banks read.

The Empire of Azad is an imperial bureaucracy, ruled by a single Emperor Nicosar, notable for the extreme inequality and sadism of its laws; and also for the unusual manner in which all of its decisions are made, its socio-political and economic systems arranged, and its hierarchies established. In the text's major innovation, Azad is also the name of a hugely-complicated, large-scale game, the playing of which determines everything in the Empire: Azad the Empire and Azad the

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[295] Race Matthews, 'Iain M. Banks: The 'Culture' Science-Fiction Novels and the Economics and politics of Scarcity and Abundance', *The Metaphysical Review*, No. 28/29; August 1998. 9.

game are literally one and the same: "Whoever succeeds at the game succeeds in life; the same qualities are required in each to ensure dominance" (76-77). The reader gleans the majority of detail regarding the Empire through several paragraphs of exposition in discussions between Gurgeh and the various Culture drones who brief him on his mission. The startling cruelty and oppression of the Empire – brutal deaths and torture as standard legal punishment; a semi-fascist eugenics programme; reported genocide, sterilisation and mass deportation (79-80) – which is detailed at length, suggest that through it Banks is overtly targeting the various authoritarian, imperial empires on Earth, which developed from antiquity and peaked at the end of the modern era.

Following Frederic Jameson's insight that SF, and by extension utopian fiction, whilst often appearing to deal with the future, also sends back "reliable information about the contemporary world",[296] Banks uses the Culture's rival societies, not just to establish the utopian nature of the Culture by contrast, but also to satirise and critique elements of the Capitalist, post-globalisation context in which the series was written, using techniques of defamiliarisation and estrangement. Originally drafted in 1979, and re-drafted in the years preceding its publication in 1988, the period in which *The Player of Games* was written almost wholly aligns with Margaret Thatcher's term as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom (from 4 May 1979 until 28 November 1990). Throughout his career, Banks was a writer who regularly and vociferously positioned himself as politically opposed to the UK Conservative Party, and especially against Thatcher's government.[297] Written within this context then, as Thatcher's programmes begun to be enforced, it is possible to draw parallels between the ideologies underpinning her policies and those of Azad, especially considering the much documented relationship between Thatcher and the Chilean dictator General Augusto Pinochet, who implemented a free-market, neoliberal economic system in

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[296] "In any case, the representational apparatus of Science Fiction, having gone through innumerable generations of technological development and well-nigh viral mutation since the onset of that movement, is sending back more reliable information about the contemporary world than an exhausted realism (or an exhausted modernism either)", in Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 384.

[297] See: Maev Kennedy, Stuart Kelly, 'Iain Banks: squeeze a Tory, Blairite or Lib Dem and Thatcherite pus oozes out', The *Guardian*; Friday, 14 July. www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jun/14/iain-banks-tory-thatcher-blair 2013. (Accessed 26 January, 2015.)

Chile, inspired by Thatcher as well as economists such as Milton Friedman.[298]

2.8.2 *The Player of Games*: Class Inequality in Azad

The Empire of Azad, located on the "home planet" entitled "Ëa",[299] resembles a capitalist system characterised by rigid class boundaries and divisions. As the Contact drone Worthil explains, the Empire features "hierarchical power structures", with influence "restricted to an economically privileged class" (74-75). Whilst reading about its history and politics, Gurgeh notes that Azad is both "fabulously rich and grindingly poor" (106). The drone continues:

> It looks perverse and wasteful to us, but then one thing that empires are not about is the efficient use of resources and the spread of happiness; both are typically accomplished despite the economic short-circuiting – corruption and favouritism, mostly – endemic to the system (75).

Azad, therefore, is characterised by its inequality, its power structures, and scarcity, in the same way that the Culture is by its classlessness and its abundance; also Azad relies upon money in order to 'ration' its resources, as did the civilisations from which the Culture was formed hundreds of thousands of years ago. Exploring Azad on foot, Mawhrin-Skel describes the area through which they walk:

> that's called a shantytown, and it's where the city draws its surplus unskilled labor from. […] That is where people who have left the countryside for the bright lights of the big city often end up. Unfortunately many of them are just loafers [driven off the land by an ingeniously unfair property-tax system and the opportunistic top-down reorganization of the agricultural production apparatus] (122).

Here the drone defamiliarises the fringes of cities in the capitalist West, drawing attention to the crumbling, derelict zones about which conservatives would wish to forget. In this damning critique, we see the result of the concept of a "property owning democracy", developed by Anthony Eden following the Second World War,

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[298] See full text of Margaret Thatcher's speech to the Blackpool fringe in 1999: www.theguardian.com/world/1999/oct/06/pinochet.chile; also Sunday Times economics editor David Smith's article on this relationship: www.economicsuk.com/blog/000406.html

[299] This is probably a reference to the word for 'universe' in the fictional cosmology created by J.R.R. Tolkien for his Middle-Earth legendarium (also 'Ëa'). The fact that Tolkien insisted that Middle-Earth was conceived as existing in fact on the Earth that we know, in the distant past, would seem to strengthen connections between Azad and Earth society.

and adopted by Margaret Thatcher in her first speech as party leader in 1975.[300] Through this lens, the society of Azad, which places importance upon the values associated with the ownership of personal property – the prestige of owning one's own house and associated consumer items, and the glamour of rich celebrities – begins to seem uncomfortably like our own, despite its more glaringly-fascist elements. Drawing its "surplus unskilled labour" from such areas, Azadian society echoes the exploitation perpetrated by many Western countries in the current era of globalisation, which rely upon the desperation of workers from overseas, and their subsequent willingness to work for low pay and with few rights, in order to produce cheap products and services.[301]

2.8.3 Azad as Game

As outlined above, the Empire of Azad and the game of Azad are in fact synonymous – therefore an analysis of one would not be complete without analysis of the other. As Mawhrin-Skel explains to Gurgeh, the results of the game's various stages equate to social and political changes in the larger society, including economics: "The game of Azad is used not so much to determine which person will rule, but which tendency within the empire's ruling class will have the upper hand, which branch of economic theory will be followed" (76). In this manner, therefore, the tactics and strategy used by the game's winner reflect the fundamental ideologies of the final socio-economic conditions that they enforce. By having the Azadian economic system also determined by the outcome of a game, Banks invites the reader to compare this notion with that of the free-market, Neo-liberal economic system which Margaret Thatcher helped to usher in, through her deregulation of financial markets – known as 'Big Bang' – in 1986. Banks once described 'the market' as

> a good example of evolution in action; the try-everything-and-see-what-works approach. This might provide a perfectly morally satisfactory resource-management system so long as there was absolutely no question of any sentient creature ever being treated purely as one of those resources. The market, for all its (profoundly inelegant) complexities, remains a crude and essentially blind system.[302]

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[300] "In the footsteps of Anthony Eden, who set us the goal of a property-owning democracy - a goal we still pursue today; of Harold Macmillan whose leadership brought so many ambitions within the grasp of every citizen" – full speech at: www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=121 (Accessed 26 January, 2015.)

[301] See: Felicity Lawrence, 'Sweatshop campaigners demand Gap boycott', The *Guardian*; Friday, 2 November, 2002. next.theguardian.com/. (Accessed 26 January, 2015.)

[302] Banks, 'A Few Notes'.

Instead of a deregulated market, then, Banks advocated a planned economy, by way of contrast, as "more productive" and "more morally desirable",[303] as there was much less chance of people being treated as mere "resources", a form of exploitation detailed in classic Marxist theory as reification. The "try-everything-and-see-what-works approach" of Neo-liberal economics – in which as little control as possible is exerted over the financial systems, instead leaving the balance of wealth up the whims of the market system – can be regarded similar to game-playing or, more accurately, gambling as real losses are at stake.

Whilst undertaking one of several 'tours' of Azad, the drone Flere-Imsaho, explains to Gurgeh the nature of private property ownership, as well as the related notion of possession, which it implies are deep-rooted in a capitalist society, affecting more than just finance:

> It is especially important to remember that the ownership of humans is possible too; not only in terms of actual slavery, which they are proud to have abolished, but in the sense that, according to which sex and class one belongs to, one may be partially owned by another or others by having to sell one's labor or talents to somebody with the means to buy them. In the case of males, they give themselves most totally when they become soldiers; the personnel in their armed forces are like slaves, with little personal freedom, and under threat of death if they disobey. Females sell their bodies, usually, entering them into the legal contract of "marriage" (114).

Gurgeh is a relatively naive protagonist who has lived his whole life within the safe and abundant realms of the Culture, and for whom "the longest he'd spent away from Chiark had been when he'd gone on a cruise once, thirty years earlier" (32). Without visiting other societies, Gurgeh would not have encountered the various forms of exploitation outlined here; and, by having the drone explain such fundamental social concepts to the reader, Banks achieves estrangement of a patriarchal, Capitalist society with a State-run military. This passage, therefore, shows how Banks uses the game of Azad to develop his metaphorical use of possession in game-playing to refer to various kinds of possession and ownership in a capitalist society – ownership of private property; patriarchal 'ownership' of women; the financial exploitation of human beings as 'wage slaves' and their 'ownership' by private companies, institutions and corporations; the military 'ownership' of soldiers; and in fact any

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[303] Ibid.

facet of society that requires a relationship of the master and subjugated.

As outlined above, the Culture has no need to play the 'game' of free market economics as it operates within a kind of controlled economy where goods and services are fairly distributed within the various habitats that make up the Culture network. In order for this limitless abundance of resources to exist, the pure output of the Energy Grid must be converted into matter before it can be utilised and organised – a process that can only be conducted by the Minds. Moving beyond a money-based economic system such as Capitalism, then, is not the only shift through which the Culture must pass in order to establish an egalitarian system: the existence of highly advanced AI is also crucial to postscarcity society of the Culture.

2.9 PostSingularity: The Minds of 'The Minds'

"The Singularity might be the quintessential myth of contemporary techno-culture" – Csicsery-Ronay, The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction.[304]

Like Banks, the World Futurist Association (WFA) has asserted that technology will play a crucial role in the establishment and maintenance of a postscarcity system: "the evolution toward free goods and a lack of scarcity is, in fact, already under way, thanks primarily to technologies (such as computers and the Internet) that have enabled and driven the growth of digitization over the last 20 years."[305] These advances, the WFA notes, will also contribute towards the abolition of money within a post-scarcity society, albeit in a less politically-radical fashion than is suggested occurred in Banks's fiction – through financial evolution, rather than political revolution:

> In the post-scarcity world, technological advances will facilitate decreasing costs until conceivably almost everything is free to the consumer […] Scarcity will no longer exist in this world, and, without scarcity, the concept of charging a price to consumers as a means of generating revenue will be unworkable.[306]

However this society beyond economics is established, commentators on both sides of the political spectrum have highlighted the crucial role of technology in its establishment and maintenance.

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[304] Csicsery-Ronay, The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction, 262.
[305] Stephen Aguillar-Millan, *et al.*, 'The Post-scarcity World of 2050-2075', 36.
[306] Ibid.

The Minds, however, represent something more complex than a straightforward extrapolation of the AI systems that currently enable our banks to manage their complex day-to-day operations, invest in stock, and manage properties: they are entirely autonomous individuals with unique personalities and lives, whose intelligence far eclipses that of the human beings whom they live alongside, and with whom they are considered equal (*CP*, 171-181). As mentioned above, the Minds are also the means through which the Culture is able to access limitless resources by converting the pure energy from the Grid into raw matter, which they can, in turn, fashion into any material object they require – like a kind of cosmic alchemy or an extrapolated version of material state changes, such as water boiling into steam.[307] This aspect of the series' complex and elegant framework is perhaps one of the most crucial elements, but is also – despite the fact that it cannot be proven, once and for all, as untrue and impossible – one of the least convincing in real-world scientific terms. Banks himself emphasises twice in 'A Few Notes' that it is "entirely fake",[308] leading us to focus on the effects achieved in the series – a continued validation of the need, and desire, for a postscarcity society that is, if not absolutely permanent, at least sustainable on a long-term basis.

Futurists, scientists, economists and SF authors alike have discussed the possibility of AIs such as the Minds – advanced enough to outsmart humanity – occurring in our lifetimes, in the extremely radical technological development known as the 'Singularity'. While Banks does not use the term explicitly in his series, there is plenty of evidence provided, supporting the notion that the Culture has achieved the Singularity, which in turn accounts for the existence of the Minds; and the concept is a useful one through which it is possible to provide further analysis of the importance of the Minds to Banks's utopia.

The technological Singularity – which should not to be confused with the different but related notion of a gravitational singularity – was first pioneered by futurists such as Ray Kurzweil in the mid-1960s. In his work, such as *The Singularity is Near* (2005), Kurzweil defines the Singularity as a threshold moment in the rate of a society's technological progress.[309] Henceforth, Kurtzweil argues, progress will occur at a vastly accelerated and unpredictable rate, until the capabilities of

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[307] Banks, 'A Few Notes'.
[308] Ibid.
[309] See: Ray Kurtzeil, *The Singularity is Near* (New York: Viking, 2005) and also: http://www.singularity.com/ (Accessed 20 April, 2016).

technology are staggering and almost unimaginable; the nature of the world, and indeed of humankind itself, will be irreversibly changed by the emergence of an artificial intelligence that is vastly greater than ourselves.

The concept of the Singularity has met with a great deal of skepticism and derision, including from SF authors such as Charles Stross, Ken MacLeod and Alastair Reynolds, who feature it significantly in their fiction. MacLeod, for example, depicts the emergence of the Singularity in his space opera novel, *The Cassini Division* (1998), yet mocks its pseudo-religious connotations, through one of his characters, as "the rapture for nerds".[310] With this sarcastic quip, MacLeod equates the Christian idea that on a specific date the dead will be resurrected and returned to life in heaven, with the secular notion of mankind's transformation by technological means. Banks himself, when questioned about AIs and the notion of a technological Singularity in an interview, expresses his optimistic 'pro-AI' stance, referring to the importance of the benevolent AIs, the 'Minds', in his Culture novels, before concluding skeptically: "As of the Singularity, I'll believe it when I see it."[311] It is clearly due to opinions such as these that Csicsery-Ronay describes the Singularity as possibly "the quintessential myth of contemporary techno-culture".[312]

Despite Banks's skepticism about the likelihood of the Singularity occurring in reality, there are undeniable links between key aspects of the fictional universe of the Culture and the notion of the Singularity in this sense. In a paper based on his speech at the 2010 'singularity summit', David Chalmers, an AI researcher at the Singularity Institute, San Francisco (of which Kurzweil is CEO), offers this more specific definition of the singularity, focused upon the creation of machine intelligence:

> What happens when machines become more intelligent than humans? One view is that this event will be followed by an explosion to ever-greater levels of intelligence, as each generation of machines creates more intelligent machines in turn. This intelligence explosion is now often known as the "singularity".[313]

To Chalmers, therefore, an integral aspect of the Singularity is the idea of a self-

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[310] Ken MacLeod, *The Cassini Division* (Orbit: London, 1999) 139.

[311] 'Live webchat: Iain Banks', The *Guardian*, 06 July 2011 www.guardian.co.uk/books/booksblog/2011/jul/06/live-webchat-iain-banks. (Accessed 26 October, 2015).

[312] Csicsery-Ronay, *Seven Beauties*, 262.

[313] David Chalmers, 'The Singularity: a philosophical analysis', Singularity Institute. Based on Chalmers' Singularity Summit talk, 2010. 1. http://consc.net/papers/singularity.pdf (Accessed on 22 October, 2015).

developing computer – a generation of machines focused upon developing superior versions of themselves:

> The key idea is that a machine that is more intelligent than humans will be better than humans at designing machines. So it will be capable of designing a machine more intelligent than the most intelligent machine that humans can design. So if it is itself designed by humans, it will be capable of designing a machine more intelligent than itself. By similar reasoning, this next machine will also be capable of designing a machine more intelligent than itself. If every machine in turn does what it is capable of, we should expect a sequence of ever more intelligent machines.[314]

To Chalmers, these intelligent machines would inevitably leave mankind intellectually "far behind."[315] Here, the theoretical sequence of self-creating machines that Chalmers describes operates as an exact practical description of the creation of the Minds, as envisioned by Banks, who states in *Look to Windward* that AIs such as the Minds "underwent their own form of evolution and began to design their own successors – with or without the help, and sometimes the knowledge, of their creators", adding that "it turned out that creating such intelligences was not particularly challenging once you could build AIs in the first place" (126). Early AIs, developed by humans in the Culture, operate as proto-Minds, continuing the development of successively more intelligent versions of themselves, until this development peaks and the mind of the first Mind blinks into existence. It is clear from interviews that Banks explicitly extrapolated from ideas such as these when he first developed the Culture and the nature of the Minds.[316]

Whatever Banks's personal views about the possibility of such a monumental occurrence happening in reality, the Minds are clearly computers with a phenomenally higher level of intelligence than ourselves, and who are potentially able to wield great power. The accomplishments of the Minds are far from purely mental, however, as they are capable of accessing and manipulating the field of pure energy that Banks describes as surrounding the Culture's (and, therefore, technically also our own) universe, the Minds can shape base matter seemingly into any form that they wish. The cumulative power of the Minds' abilities is so great that they have frequently been described as 'godlike' by Banks's characters (CP, 87) and critics

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[314] Ibid.
[315] Ibid.
[316] David Smith, 'A Conversation with Iain Banks'.

alike[317] – despite the fact that the narrative of *Consider Phlebas* focuses on a mission to retrieve a Mind which narrowly survives destruction by the Idirans, therefore portraying them as potentially imperfect and vulnerable from the outset – and this issue is further explored in Chapter Five of this thesis.

2.9.1 AI as Willing Slaves

As Simon Guerrier notes, "what the Minds essentially seem to operate is the bureaucracy of the Culture […] handling the administration of the utopia [while] all the humans have to do is get on with enjoying themselves."[318] Frequently providing the role of central, mainframe computer (known as 'Hubs') for the Culture's Orbitals and ships, for example, the Minds are responsible for fulfilling the needs of Culture citizens, generally on a long-term basis, as well as maintaining general communications and information networks, and of course underpinning SC and Contact. The drones, also, contribute directly to the freedoms provided for Culture citizens. As demonstrated above through the relationship between Gurgeh and various drones in *The Player of Games*, these less-advanced AIs often provide day-to-day support for individuals, in a role seemingly akin to a kind of servant or butler. As allegedly "nothing and nobody in the Culture is exploited", therefore, the exact status of the Minds and Drones within it must be addressed: how can such entities, ostensibly afforded citizenship alongside all other Culture citizens, also be considered free and equal if the liberty of non-AIs seems to be dependant upon the exploitation of their labour?

In this manner, the Minds and Drones fulfill the "science-fictional archetype of the Willing Slave" as outlined by Csicsery-Ronay, which initially developed in proto-SF such as colonial adventure narratives, propagating the "myth of the colonized subaltern" that was "unreservedly appreciative of its colonization".[319] A slave therefore but, supposedly, a willing one. Once the genre of SF had fully developed, this human slave figure of "proletarian and colonial labor" was eventually replaced by that of a machine.[320] Csicsery-Ronay continues, observing that "one might assume that the transition from adventure to sf would have been unproblematic in terms of the

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[317] See: Timothy C. Baker, 'Scottish Utopian Fiction and the Invocation of God', *Utopian Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2010; and Martingale, *Gothic Dimensions: Iain Banks, Time Lord* (Quetzalcoatl Publishing, 2013).
[318] Simon Guerrier, 'Culture Theory', 31.
[319] Csicsery-Ronay, *Seven Beauties*, 229.
[320] Ibid., 252.

Willing Slave function", as such a figure "should cease to be both willing (a machine is no longer a sentient being), and a slave (a machine has no inherent claims to freedom)." [321] But, as the complexities of Banks's series demonstrate, "things have turned out differently."[322]

Banks formulated the Culture in such a way as to ensure that the relationship between AIs and the humans whom they support does not simply recreate such conditions of colonial subordination or the class-based hierarchy of Capitalism, maintaining that artificial life in the Culture falls within its egalitarian system. Seeming to support the assumption outlined above by Csicsery-Ronay, Banks stated that: "machines have no capacity to suffer – that's what it's all about. If they can't suffer, they can't be exploited. You can't exploit a calculator." [323] Therefore, if the Minds are categorically incapable of experiencing torment of any kind, perhaps they cannot be considered sentient; if they are not sentient, then they have no inherent claim to freedom, and perform their function automatically as they are programmed to do. This line of reasoning is problematic, of course, because it would be extremely difficult to prove definitively that a machine of sufficiently developed intelligence is not sentient, with Csicsery-Ronay citing *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *Aliens* as examples of SF that effectively problemetise this issue.[324]

Despite Banks's comments above, and regardless of the extent to which the Minds and Drones can be considered sentient, their function as Willing Slaves can be justified for other reasons. Firstly, they act out of a *genuine* willingness, different to that of the colonised subaltern because they are free to fulfil an entirely different function, or – more importantly – are free to fulfil no specific Culture function whatsoever, adopting the uninhibited lifestyle enjoyed by non-AI Culture citizens. Some Minds are deemed Eccentric, for example, for their unusual lifestyle choices, such as the Mind that inhabits the GSV *Sense Amid Madness, Wit Amongst Folly*" in *Surface Detail* (65); many choose to operate as part of SC or Contact, whose roles may not necessarily directly benefit other Culture citizens, as may be the case with Mawhrin-Skel/Flere-Imsaho in *The Player of Games*; and the drone Hassipura Plyn-Frie in *The Hydrogen Sonata* chooses to spend centuries in a remote desert, building elaborate sand sculptures. Also, even those AIs who do chose to assist with the

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[321] Ibid.
[322] Ibid.
[323] Banks, 'Iain Banks and Kim Stanley Robinson in Conversation'.
[324] Csicsery-Ronay, *Seven Beauties*, 252.

Culture's bureaucratic functions need only give up a very small amount of its processing power for such tasks. In *Look to Windward*, for example, referring to the Mind at the centre of the Chairk Orbital, Banks explains that:

> The Hub has millions of human-form representative entities called avatars with which it deals on a one-to-one basis with its inhabitants. It is theoretically capable of running each of those and every other system on the Orbital directly while communicating individually with every human and drone present on the world, plus a number of other ships and Minds (275).

The Minds are so intelligent, their capacity so broad, that they can potentially live rich, personal lives that are entirely separate from their function as Willing Slave; such voluntary duties simply do not impact their lives to any real degree. The Drones, also, are never likely to suffer or become dissatisfied with their function, even if they were not free to desist at any time. As explained by Tersono in *Look to Windward*:

> We drones are perfectly used to being patient while human thoughts and meaningful actions take place. We possess an entire suite of procedures specifically evolved over the millennia to cope with such moments. We are actually considerably less boreable, if I may create a neologism, than the average human (337).

Because human beings think and act so sluggishly slowly in relation to AIs, Tersono explains, drones have become used to passing the time in the spaces between human beings starting to form thoughts and consider actions, and the moment when they finally speak or act; the implication being that there is a private world of thought and communication occurring behind the interactions between Willing Slave and Handy Man 'master'.

2.10 Conclusion

As explored above, many of the problems that must be overcome in order to achieve a utopia stem from economic, social and political issues. As Banks explores with his Culture series, moving beyond an economic system based on monetary exchange would constitute nothing less than a radical change in the fabric of a society and its citizens. As an example of Jameson's 'future as disruption', Banks's Culture appears already fully developed with scant attention paid to its history: a powerful means by which we can once again begin to consider how life might appear beyond inequality, exploitation, violence and greed. There are other potential barriers to Utopia,

however, which the removal of scarcity cannot address, as they exist within human beings ourselves. Culture people are still affected by universal aspects of the human condition, such as declining health and limited lifespan, which seem to be unavoidable; yet the Culture uses its advanced technology to allow its human citizens to shape themselves, perhaps even altering fundamental aspects of their very nature. The following chapter addresses issues relating to human beings and human nature within the Culture.

Chapter 3: Human, Human Basic, Posthuman

This chapter is concerned with the system of physical and psychological enhancements that human (and humanoid) citizens of the Culture utilise in order to improve their lives. I focus on four of the most profound possibilities to result from these changes – control of senescence, management of mortality, rejuvenescence, and immortality – and provide analyses of key characters from *Use of Weapons*, 'The State of the Art' and *Surface Detail*. I consider how these developments affect Banks's conception of human beings within the series, especially in relation to humanism, posthumanism and the categories posthuman/transhuman, which further contributes toward a (re)definition of the Culture.

3.1 The Culture and its Humans

As Ken MacLeod observes,[325] a core premise of the Culture novels draws upon a prominent trope of Golden Age SF: the assumption that the galaxy in which the stories are set (*our* galaxy) is populated by a vast diaspora of human – or at least *humanoid* – beings,[326] and, according to figures stated in *Consider Phlebas*, the Culture's population numbers "in excess of eighteen trillion people" (87). As with many aspects of the Culture's origins, Banks is not especially concerned with explaining this assumption: in 'A Few Notes', he asks "why were there all those so-similar humanoid species scattered around the galaxy in the first place?" before deciding that the answer is "too complicated to relate here."[327] While the galaxy is teeming with life – machine and alien, as well as human – and many of Banks's narratives do depict sentient aliens, they are rarely Culture citizens. The Culture, therefore, seems to be predominantly constituted by humans and AIs. When exceptions to this tendency do appear, such as the Culture character Kabe from *Look to Windward* who is a member of the Homomdan race, reviewers criticised Banks's portrayal of the Homomdans and other aliens in this text as merely "humans in fancy

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[325] Ken MacLeod, 'Phlebas Reconsidered', in *The True Knowledge of Ken MacLeod*, 1.
[326] See: Banks, 'A Few Notes'.
[327] Ibid.

dress."[328] However well Banks conveys non-human life in the series, his portrayal of Kabe suggests that this character stands out due to his physical form. Even though he is a Culture citizen, Kabe's presence elicits a mild sense of unease amongst Culture humans: at one stage, a messenger "appears surprised" upon catching sight of Kabe. "This happened fairly often," Kabe explains; "a function of scale and stillness, basically. It was one hazard of being a glisteningly black three-and-a-bit-metre-tall pyramidal triped in a society of slim, matte skinned two-metre-tall bipeds" (*LtW*, 16).

As explained above, the extent of humanity's diaspora and the vast nature of outer space have proven key to the Culture's ability to exist as a utopia; yet the fact that its population is constituted largely by humans raises other problems for the effectiveness as such. Alongside the 'problem of boredom', as discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis, anti-utopians frequently cite the so-called 'problem of human nature' as an irreconcilable hurdle in the practical establishment of a society characterised by universal peace and egalitarianism: human beings have a natural predisposition towards greed, selfishness, tribalism, intolerance and aggression, the argument goes, which combine to ensure that inequality and conflict will always eventually and inevitably reassert themselves. Francis Fukuyama, for example, in *Our Posthuman Future*, argues that almost all of the various revolutions, utopian social experiments and movements of the twentieth century have failed based upon a false belief that human behaviour is infinitely malleable, when in reality "at a certain point deeply rooted natural instincts and patterns of behaviour reassert themselves to undermine the social engineer's best-laid plans."[329] While such comments often disguise a dogmatic and self-serving fatalism as straightforward realism, such issues must of course be addressed in the context of a study concerned with utopianism. Banks did accept a degree of truth to such views, acknowledging that human nature provides obstacles along the path to achieving the Culture or something like it: "We as a species are too prone to 'isms'," Banks stated, "racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, xenophobia. It would be impossible to have a utopia with people like this."[330] Banks's outlook radically deviates from that of writers like Fukuyama,

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[328] Phil Daoust, 'Brushes with Doom', the *Guardian*, 2 September 2000. www.theguardian.com/books/2000/sep/02/sciencefictionfantasyandhorror.iainbanks (Accessed 8 October, 2015).

[329] Francis Fukuyama, Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution, (New York: FSG books, 2003). 13-14.

[330] Banks's comments at: 'Iain M. Banks and Kim Stanley Robinson in Conversation'; British Library, London; 9/7/2012.

however, through his belief that these obstacles – these problems of human nature – *can* be overcome, and, through his continued desire for an egalitarian society, that they *should* be overcome.

The next question to be considered, as Tower Sargent explains, is "whether a better social order allows people to become better or better people create a better social order."[331] As explored in the previous chapter, the Culture has in one sense adopted the former approach and achieved a shift that significantly changed the nature of its social order, becoming postscarcity, and removing the motivations for greed, jealousy and theft. While this does constitute a significant change in the nature of Culture humans, this change alone still leaves people with other undesirable aspects of the human condition, which might threaten the existence of a stable and long-lasting utopia as well as the happiness of those who live within it. Senescence or biological ageing, for example, seems to be an inevitable feature of the human condition, bringing with it deterioration in mental and physical faculties, disease, and building towards equally inevitable mortality. Having achieved a significant utopian milestone by creating a better social order, the Culture goes a step further, adopting *both* aspects of Tower Sargent's question, as it also strives to make people better people in various ways.

3.2 Genetic Tinkering and Posthumanism

As well as allowing them to build entirely artificial environments in which to live – a Second Nature – the Culture's technoscientific mastery has allowed its humans to alter crucial aspects of their own bodies and minds, taking control of their own ageing process, the quality and length of both their lives and their deaths. The Culture, then, perhaps creates a Second Human Nature.

The methods adopted by the Culture to achieve this improvement of human beings are essentially two-fold. Firstly, as Banks explains, "virtually everyone in the Culture carries the results of genetic manipulation in every cell of their bodies; it is arguably the most reliable signifier of Culture status."[332] Banks imagines that, in the future, it will be possible and desirable to remove specific unwanted, negative character traits – the racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, etc., as previously mentioned – by targeting specific genes and simply switching them off. In this

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[331] Tower Sargent, Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction, 111.
[332] Banks, 'A Few Notes'.

manner, Banks ignores the skepticism of commentators like Fukuyama who maintain that the ability to control behaviour through genetics in such a specific manner is very unlikely,[333] as well as completely eschewing the arguments against human genetic engineering that abound in dystopian fiction and media scare tactics.[334] Secondly, Culture people have mastered the science of neuropharmacology, with most citizens choosing to adopt special drug glands that secrete a variety of side-effect-free drugs, ranging from the pharmaceutical to the psychedelic, at will, in order to regulate their emotions according to their situation. For example, at one tense stage in *The Player of Games*, Gurgeh glands *Sharp Blue*, "an abstraction-modifier", to aid his game-playing (8-9), while Djan Seriy Anaplian glands *quickcalm* during an especially traumatic event in *Matter*, in order to postpone her emotional response until she is clear from danger (75).

Overall, the assumption in the Culture novels is that, given the choice, humans would overwhelmingly choose to intervene into the human condition and improve themselves using whatever means are available. While this possibility might potentially facilitate a fair amount of selfish behavior – individuals adapting their bodies, experiences, emotional responses etc. with no consideration of other people – the nature of selfishness itself would operate differently within a utopia such as the Culture, where problems such as greed and conflict have been removed. As Gurgeh tells a Chamlis in *The Player of Games*: "'this is not a heroic age,' […] 'the individual is obsolete. That's why life is so comfortable for us all. We don't matter, so we're safe. No one person can have a real effect any more" (22). Therefore, the manner in which individuals live their lives – in a self-indulgent manner or socially conscious – as their society will continue to function regardless of their actions, and the selfishness of individuals will not be able to inhibit the freedom of their fellow citizens.

3.3 A Posthuman Culture?

The ways in which the Culture uses its technoscientific mastery to adapt the human body make it necessary to consider Banks's series within the context of scholarly debates on the category of the posthuman and the related field of posthumanism.

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[333] Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future*, 77.
[334] For example, see the following article: www.genengnews.com/gen-articles/designing-improved-humans/2402/ (Accessed 11 February, 2015).

Nick Bostrum uses the term posthuman to refer to "possible future beings whose basic capacities so radically exceed those of present humans as to be no longer unambiguously human by our current standards", through "cumulatively profound augmentations to a biological human".[335] Bostrum explains that these augmentations could perhaps be achieved through a combination of "genetic engineering, psychopharmacology, anti-aging therapies, neural interfaces, advanced information management tools, memory enhancing drugs, wearable computers, and cognitive techniques."[336] This list of augmentations – covering the physical, psychological, neurological and technological – could easily describe the comprehensive array of modifications available to Culture citizens, demonstrating the scientific developments and theories from which Banks extrapolated some of his ideas for the series.

Criticism on the Culture, when it intersects with notions of humanism and the posthuman, has focused on Banks's conception of the category of the human and of the nature of subjectivity. The term posthuman has been understood by others in slightly differently terms. Rather than using it to refer to beings that emerge after humans, Rosi Braidotti uses it to indicate a fresh understanding and reinterpretation of what it means to be human. In *Posthuman*, Braidotti argues for scientific advances (which would include the possibility of the augmentations listed above) as one major factor in contemporary society – alongside market globalisation – that necessitates her major deconstruction of humanism that she calls posthuman.[337] She argues that the Renaissance conception of humanism "historically developed into a civilisational model, which shaped the idea of Europe as coinciding with the universalizing powers of human reason", was used to justify for European forms of imperialisms and the branding of various "others" as inferior – due to humanism's problematically restricted definition of humanity.[338]

Sherryl Vint has discussed the Culture specifically in the context of post-humanism, following an understanding of the term similar to Braidotti's. Discussing the Culture's customisation of its citizens' bodies, Vint argues that the Culture's attitude in this regard amounts to a form of imperialism of the body – an effacement of all difference; a homogenisation – in a subtler internal form, no less problematic

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[335] Nick Bostrum, 'The Transhumanist FAQ', in, David Caplan, ed., *Readings in the Pholosophy of Technology* (Maryland: Rowman and Littleford Publishers, inc., 2009) 346.
[336] Ibid.
[337] Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).
[338] Ibid, 13-16.

than other external forms.[339] Vint argues for this as a demonstration of one of humanism's worst flaws: a dangerous universal understanding of an essential humanness that erases difference. She gives considerable space to critiquing Bank's supposedly-Cartesian conception of subjectivity, using examples from *Consider Phlebas*, *Look to Windward* and *Use of Weapons* to argue that "the body is a risk" for subjectivity understood in this way.[340] Ultimately, Vint sees the Culture expanding the conceptual horizon of posthumanism by redefining it, from a supersession of humanness, to meaning "something beyond or after," and "new categories of identity rather than new appendages".[341]

Jude Roberts's PhD thesis, 'Culture-al Subjectivities: the Constitution of the Self in Iain M. Banks's Culture Texts', also touches upon issues related to this thesis chapter, due to her concern with the constitution of the self and the nature of the human subject. Roberts challenges Vint's essay, arguing that, in the Culture series, Banks conceptualises the subject as fundamentally and foundationally vulnerable, according to theories developed by Donna Harroway and Judith Butler – notions that undermine the centralised, rational subject assumed in the tradition of secular humanism following the Enlightenment.[342]

This chapter acknowledges and engages with these issues and arguments as part of its focus on the ways in which the Culture's biological augmentations reflect upon the lives lived by its citizens, and the kind of society maintained within.

3.4 Senescence and Rejuvenescence in SF

Banks's series is part of a long history of literary works concerned with the quest for eternal youth; an artistic preoccuption as old, in fact, as narrative itself, reoccurring with regularity throughout the centuries, especially in works concerned with the fantastic, gothic or the speculative. It is integral to the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (circa. 18bc), for example, the oldest known work of literature, as it is in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) or *Dracula* (1897). As well as the notion that human beings could populate the universe, the Culture series engages with another trope from the Golden Age of SF. Writers of space opera from this era frequently relied upon the some kind of faster-than-light-travel and/or hyperspace novum as the answer to the

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[339] Vint, 'The Culture-al Body'. [N.P.]
[340] Ibid., 95.
[341] Ibid., 101
[342] Jude Roberts, Culture-al Subjectivities: Iain M. Banks's Culture and the Self.

problem of humans crossing interstellar distances. Other writers, however, developed the moderately more plausible notion of extending the length of average human lifespans for this purpose. For his *Cities in Flight* series (1950-1962), James Blish imagines anti-agathic drugs, which stop the ageing process. Philip K Dick's *Ubik* (1969) describes the physiological and psychological effects of ageing as a result of the universe's tendency toward entropy. Brian Aldiss's *Greybeard* (1964) and Thomas Disch's *334* (1972) both explore dystopian societies struggling to cope with a rapidly-increasing ageing population. Following the "dystopian turn" in SF during the 1980s and '90s,[343] Cyberpunk writers such as William Gibson, Charles Stross, and Pat Cadigan have 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 change, or gain a deeper understanding of, the workings of our minds. Finally, amongst writers of New Space Opera, the ability to prolong or at least halt ageing through technoscience has become a standard trope. Banks, alongside MacLeod, Reynolds, Neil Asher, Robinson and Peter F. Hamilton, wrote fiction that assumes human beings will eventually be able to live for hundreds of years, effectively controlling the ageing process. One of the most significant series in regards to ageing is Robinson's 'Mars' trilogy (*Red Mars* [1992], *Green Mars* [1994], *Blue Mars* [1999]): here, 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 colonise the red planet.

3.4.1 Senescence in the Culture

Following centuries of human speculation, research at the time of writing indicates that scientists have reached the stage where they may be able to "solve" what has been described as the "great mystery" of human ageing,[344] and actually "confront the question of whether it is possible to postpone, or even reverse, the process of biological aging."[345] Banks extrapolates from this with the Culture, imagining this mystery to have been firmly solved, and its citizens to be able to both postpone and

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[343] Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, (Oxford, Westview Press, 2000) 147.
[344] In *Aging: Concepts and Controversies* (Los Angeles: Pine Forge Press, 2010), 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 (19).
[345] Ibid. 16.

reverse this process through genetic engineering. Members of the Culture choose to adapt themselves in many different ways,[346] most of which are focused upon 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"[347]; 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.[348]

The cumulative effect of these modifications on the human body results in the extension of the average lifespan way beyond the maximum 122-year limit currently verified in 2016:[349] as Banks states, "humans in the Culture normally live about three-and-a-half to four centuries."[350] 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 consists 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.[351]

So 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. Recent research into the human biological ageing process may offer reasons for why Banks imagines that Culture people choose to genofix at this age: 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:

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[346] Banks, *A Few Notes* [N.P.] "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."
[347] Ibid.
[348] 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."
[349] 'Oldest Person Ever', *Guiness World Records*, www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/oldest-person (Accessed 27 March, 2016).
[350] Banks, 'A Few Notes'.
[351] Ibid.

> 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.[352]

An individual in their mid-twenties has reached full physical maturity, then, and is capable of a sophisticated level of emotional and social development. It is fair to assume that, by beginning this "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 is careful to ensure, however, that this mass genofixing at a young age does not constitute a monotonous 'cult of youth' society featuring only people who appear outwardly young. While it is true that the vast majority of Culture citizens are said to have undergone the treatment, choosing to keep a body that is biologically young, they adopt a multitude of different appearances, some of which might be suggestive of older age. For example, in *The Player of Games*, 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" (11), and in *Surface Detail* Hvel Costrile is described as "an elderly looking gent with dark skin, long blonde hair, and a bare chest" (37). When SC agent Tefwe is required to locate the whereabouts of the Culture's oldest person, Ngaroe QiRia, he retains visible indications of his age: "he appeared smaller, reduced; like something boiled down to its essence. His skin, visible on his face and hands and feet, had gone a dark red-brown, again like something undergoing a reduction in the bottom of a pan" (*THS*, 331). While Banks's simile here, comparing QiRia's appearance with that of food as it is cooked on a stove, is unflattering, his earlier similar description, "something boiled down to its essence", has more positive connotations, suggesting a removal of anything extraneous, a concentration of vital matter, an affirmation of purpose.

Furthermore, the existence of such individuals who chose to retain features representing biological old age challenges Vint's assertion that the Culture's practices

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[352] Moody, *Aging*, 17.

lead to the effacement of individual physical difference, leading to a society of strikingly-similar citizens, equal yet bland and homogenous, as discussed above.[353]

3.4.2 *Use of Weapons:* **Senescence, Extended Life, Gene-fixing**

Use of Weapons, the third in Banks's 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 – Diziet Sma and Skaffen-Amitskaw – are trying to track him down and coerce him into returning to work for SC for one final mission. Zakalwe has, without their knowledge, gone renegade, and exploited his SC background to gain personal revenge. 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 carrying out their missions. 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" (114). 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.

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[353] See: Vint, 'The Culture-al Body'.

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 by offering rewards 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 (30).

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" (30). Operating outside the remit of Contact and the Culture, though, Zakalwe is indulging in a spree of vigilante justice, inflicting 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 (83).

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 an ambiguous sense of morality, even if it is decidedly misplaced; but in carrying out this revenge, he contradicts and undoes much 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" (129); in return, the Ethnarch describes Zakalwe as a "young man" (26-29). 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 seem to be the case. 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 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" (26-27). 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" (26). The implication is 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" (26). 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 metaphorical 'spectre' of his murdered brother – not to mention various other acts of murder and barbarism that he is revealed to have committed – 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 chaos. 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 SC, a woman named Diziet Sma and a drone 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" (21). Banks's 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 (216).

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 recognisable 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" (217). Beychae's concern with his own posture seems suggestive of more than mere vanity, however, 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 Ubrel Shiol, is employed as a spy and assassin, feigning friendship with him in order to collect information about his research, before murdering him. When Zakalwe reveals this deceit to him, Beychae indicates that he hopes the friendship he maintained with Ms Shoil was – despite her occupation – not entirely false. Through his dejected comment, "I hope […] that is not the only way the old can be made happy…through deceit" (248), Beychae suggests that, had he been younger, he would have considered it more likely that Ms Shoil would have genuinely enjoyed his company at points, despite her mission. As he considers himself old, though, it is more likely to him that she would have needed to fake their friendship. 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*" (248) 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 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. Not only is a person such as Elethiomel Zakalwe repressing his most harrowing memories, something that has damaging repercussions for anyone, but he is doing so for potentially much longer, with effects potentially exacerbated by being repressed for such an unprecedented period of time.

3.4.3 The Problem of Boredom

Writing in *Childhood's End* (1953), Arthur C. Clarke referred to boredom as "the supreme enemy of all Utopias",[354] identifying a now-familiar criticism. As Jameson explains,

> the reproach of boredom so often addressed to Utopias envelops both form and content: the former on the grounds that by definition nothing but the guided tour can really happen in these books, the latter owing precisely to our own existential reluctance imaginatively to embrace such a life.[355]

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

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[354] Arthur C. Clarke. *Childhood's End* (London: Pan Books Ltd, 1954; 1956) 64.
[355] Jameson, Archaeologies of the Future, 190.

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.

It is an issue that Banks too addressed both in his conception of the Culture itself as well as regularly throughout the series. As has been established above, Banks overcame the potential problem of utopian form – restricting narratives to the "boring" form of guided tours – by focusing upon the Culture's relations with other cultures, and by exploring individuals in a liminal relationship with his utopia. The latter notion – that life would be boring in a utopia – is a potential problem that Zakalwe and the Culture inhabitants face, especially given the large amount of 'extra' time generated by life-extension. With fear of illness and disease removed, fear of death greatly reduced, and employment rendered entirely optional, it might seem that Culture citizens are left with no general direction or purpose, leading to a frivolous or futile lifestyle. How then should one occupy a life that continues for three entire centuries or more? How does extending life affect the *quality* of life?

Banks, alongside fellow utopian author Kim Stanley Robinson, has recently spoken out against the so-called problem of boredom, with both authors agreeing that it is often used as an anti-utopian attack from the political Right.[356] 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 SC and gain fulfillment knowing that you have contributed to the continuation of the Culture's (allegedly) benign imperialism/*technologiade*; 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

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[356] 'Iain M. Banks and Kim Stanley Robinson in conversation'; Saturday 9th July 2012, British Library event.

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."[357] 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.

In 'The State of the Art', Banks playfully satirises the so-called problem of boredom in utopia, having the character Li start a 'Boredom Society' in the Culture, before changing its title to the 'Ennui League' (145-146). As with those Culture citizens in *Use of Weapons* who chose to catch a common cold in order to see what the experience is like (53-54), Li is fascinated by the idea of boredom, calling it "an underrated facet of existence in our pseudo-civilisation", because it is something he and others in the Culture are suggested never to have experienced. The point is that, in the Culture, virtually any lifestyle choice is possible: one would actually *struggle* to be bored in such a limitless environment, having to in fact artificially engineer a state of boredom in order to experience it. Here, with heavy irony, Banks reverses the problem of boredom as leveled at utopia, instead turning it around onto Earth society: "'Earth is a deeply boring planet,'" argues Li; "What is the *point* of a planet where you can hardly set foot without tripping over somebody killing somebody else, or painting something or making music or pushing back the frontier of science" (146-147). Here Banks's satire is a little heavier, challenging those who see utopia as boring to confront the violent reality of life in the alternative system of Earth: aren't you fed up of struggle, implies Li's argument, and wouldn't you chose to end it if you could?

Even so, despite providing near-limitless possibilities for the lives of its citizens, the Culture does acknowledge that boredom may become a problem for some. As Banks explains in *Excession*, Storage is a kind of hibernation in cyberspace "where people went when they had reached a certain age, or if they had just grown tired of living […] with whatever revival criterion they desired" (81). People often chose to go into Storage out of boredom, with their revival criterion revolving around the desire to witness the changes that society has undergone, desiring "to come back when something especially interesting was happening", or to be awoken after "one

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[357]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. 116-124. 116.

hundred years", to live "for a single day before returning to their undreaming, unageing slumbers" (83). Again, the sheer scale of the possibilities offered by the Culture seems to provide an option for every life-style choice, even if they contradict the values generally favoured.

For people living somewhere like the Culture, Banks suggests, boredom seems very unlikely, but if it does occur, and that is the utopia's biggest problem, then surely it is indicative of its success.

3.5 Mortality

Ultimately, Banks does acknowledge that boredom may become a problem eventually. Despite the life-options available to them, 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 ultimately "get bored with it. People will want to have an end."[358] As well as boredom, centuries of memory may weigh heavily on a person – as is the case with Zakalwe – and contribute to their final decision to pass on. Despite its manifold commitments to extending and improving life, then, the Culture is not against death *per se*, and death is not absent from the Culture. In effect, most Culture citizens still chose to die, eventually – a fact that may seem surprising for people living in utopia. In 'A Few Notes', 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."[359] Expressed in this manner, it would seem that the Culture's attitude towards death is sensible, rational and pragmatic. There are probably few people who would wish to live literally for ever – existing for all remaining time – Banks implies, but most would opt for a longer lifespan in good health if the possibility existed. 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, or

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[358] Iain M. Banks, Q&A session, The Roundhouse, London, 06/10/12.
[359] Banks, 'A Few Notes'.

to eschew the ageing process altogether and simply choose the appropriate time and circumstances for their life to end. For this eventuality, Banks imagined a suitably beautiful and poetic return to the stars: as indicated in 'A Few Notes', while forms of body disposal such as burial, cremation are sometimes requested, most commonly the corpse is deposited it in the "core of the relevant system's sun, from where the component particles of the cadaver start a million-year migration to the star's surface, to shine – possibly – long after the Culture itself is history."[360]

A Culture inhabitant could, of course, still technically die from a violent incident, by unfortunate accident, or murder. Their heightened immune systems, drug-induced resistance to 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, though, 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' novella, '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, Dervley Linter, who is part of a team that clandestinely landed on Earth, in order to perform research. The results of this research are to determine if Earth should be 'Contacted' 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 – 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

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[360] Banks, 'A Few Notes'.

outside stumbles upon a utopia, and is shown around by one of its inhabitants – the guide – who reveals the details of their peaceful realm; then the visitor returns to their homeland, to share the virtues of the utopia with their people. Instead, Sma, an altered human citizen of 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 the Culture's 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 months, 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' ('TSotA', 129).

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.

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" (196). 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.

Using Sma and Linter's opposite positions, then, Banks establishes a dialectic between an 'artificial' death (and life) in the Culture and a 'natural' death as human basic. 'The State of the Art' is narrated by Sma herself in first-person, allowing for an extended mediation on the significance of the episodes documented in the novella, especially surrounding Linter's death. She discusses her guilt about the incident, which she decides stems not from her "complicity in what Linter was trying to do" but in what she calls "the generality of transferred myth" that Earth people "accepted as reality" (201). Sma denounces the notion that a life lived with suffering and pain provides a more authentic experience than one lived in Utopia, because when Culture people worry about their lives, and "carp on about Having To Suffer […] we are indulging in our usual trick of synthesizing something to worry about" but "we should really be thanking ourselves that we live the life that we do" (201). Worrying that one doesn't suffer, her logic goes, is a self-defeating attempt to bring that suffering about. Anyone who claims that pleasure can only be understood through pain, or peace through conflict, then, is merely regurgitating a "set of rules largely culled from the most hoary fictional clichés, the most familiar and received nonsense" (201). Here Sma renders such notions as kinds of fairy tales, mythologies as coping mechanisms invented by those forced to suffer, which become meaningless as soon as the possibility of cruelty, torment and unplanned death has been ended. In the Culture, it is the *absence* rather than the presence of suffering that provides for an authentic, meaningful existence, a life emancipated.

3.6 Immortality

While the Culture may believe ultimately in the importance of death, there are nevertheless several ways in which an individual may live a kind of life that is potentially immortal, both within Banks's fictional universe and even within the Culture itself. As John M. Fischer and Ruth Curl explain, conceptions of immortality can be divided into two main categories: nonserial immortality, where "the individual simply leads an indefinitely long single life," and serial immortality, where "the individual in question in some ways lives a series of lives".[361] There are potentially two options for both serial and nonserial immortality in Banks's series.

In terms of the nonserial category, firstly, in the Culture and other equally-advanced societies, one may chose 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. This is an option technically open to any Culture citizen, although only two prominent individuals in the series – Zakalwe and QiRia – seem intent upon living longer than the average Culture lifespan, perhaps indefinitely. Secondly, one may chose to perform the act of Subliming, as explored in Chapter Five of this thesis. This process – becoming a powerful, energy-based being in a different dimension – would very probably allow one to live indefinitely, although it is impossible to qualitatively determine the nature of life in the Sublime due to the fundamental mystery associated with this aspect of Banks's series.

There are two options for serial immortality also: repeated rebirth into a physical body, or repeated rebirth into virtual space. As explored in detail in Chapter Five of this thesis, mind-computer interfacing has been mastered by the Culture to the extent that an individual can have their entire consciousness – personality, memories, etc. – perfectly captured and saved as digital information in an automatic process.[362] If a person dies, then their consciousness can simply and efficiently be revived, ready for reinsertion wherever and whenever they choose. In both *Use of Weapons* and *Surface Detail* the protagonists – Zakalwe and Lededje respectively – are killed, only for their saved consciousness to be reinserted into a fresh physical body. This digital consciousness can also be inserted into one of the virtual reality (VR) environments

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[361] John Martin Fischer, Ruth Curl, 'Philosophical Models of Immortality in Science Fiction', in, George Slusser, Gary Westfahl, Eric S. Rabkin, eds., *Immortal Engines: Life Extension and Immortality in Science Fiction* (London: University of Georgia Press, 1996) 6.
[362] See: Banks, *Look to Windward*, 166.

that various civilisations, including the Culture, have developed to perfectly mimic consensus physical reality (*LtW*, 351). Another character from *Surface Detail*, Vatueil – a soldier fighting in a virtual war, continually killed in action only to be resurrected for another mission – is the most prominent example from the series of someone whose life comes close to serial immortality.

The question of in what *manner* one might live an immortal life, however, is not as important as establishing the *quality* of such a life. To this end, Fischer and Curl outline an analytical framework for establishing the quality of an immortal life, as first developed by Bernard Williams.[363] According to this framework, the life in question would need to meet both of the following criteria in order to be considered appealing: the "identity condition" stipulates that "there must be a future in which an individual can recognize himself or herself – someone genuinely *identical* to the individual, not just qualitatively similar or with identical properties", while the "attractiveness condition" stipulates that "the future life of the individual must be *appealing* (in some way) to that individual; it cannot involve constant torture, hard labor, tedium, or the like."[364]

Zakalwe's extended, nonserial existence does not seem to meet either criterion. As established above, his life has caused him psychological and existential trauma: being continually reborn, both literally in a new body following physical death and symbolically following the assumption of his murdered brother's identity, causes disruption of his personality and seems to render his existence torturous to some extent. In turn, reading Zakalwe through the lens of material developed by Judith Butler, Jude Roberts has argued that Zakalwe's revenge missions constitute an "excessive performance of traditional masculinity", which is "shown to be founded on a fundamental vulnerability."[365] Therefore, as with each increasingly-violent mission, so with each of his serial lives, "each repetition brings the protagonist closer to the realization that beneath his performance of Zakalwe, invincible action hero, lies Elethiomel: a vulnerable human being."[366]

QiRia – the Culture's oldest known citizen, who has dedicated his long life to music – on the other hand, seems best placed to continue his life in an indefinite

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[363] John Martin Fischer, Ruth Curl, 'Philosophical Models of Immortality in Science Fiction', in, George Slusser, Gary Westfahl, Eric S. Rabkin, eds., *Immortal Engines: Life Extension and Immortality in Science Fiction*. 3.
[364] Ibid.
[365] Roberts, 'Iain M. Banks' Culture of Vulnerable Masculinities', 53.
[366] Ibid.

manner as he appears to meet both criteria in Williams's framework. SC agent Tefwe, an old acquaintance of QiRia's, meets up with the old man again after many years. Despite the fact that he has lived a period of time equivalent to Tefwe's lifetime several times over, there is no reason to doubt that QiRia's identity remains consistent, judging by Tefwe's reactions to meeting with her friend after such a long time: she never has cause to question his identity. QiRia also meets the attractiveness condition for his vocation as a musician provides him with a purpose: this artistic passion has fueled his long existence so far, and shows every sign of continuing to do indefinitely. Rather than his greatly extended life becoming an ordeal, leading to boredom and despair, in fact it enables QiRia to continue his life's purpose in a more successful manner – it is suggested that it has uniquely enriched his knowledge of sound and music, enabling his to gain a deeper understanding of the subject in a manner that would not have been possible in just one lifetime of a more average length. For QiRia, nonserial immortality may prove to be a very attractive option.

Vatueil's potentially serially immortal existence does not seem to meet either criterion. It is clear that Vatueil's life does not meet the attractiveness condition. One of his lives involves long grueling shifts of hard labour, digging tunnels underground (*SD*, 17-29) and resulting in capture and torture (*SD*, 144). At other times, as a soldier, he fights to the death in a disastrous laser battle (*SD*, 142-143) or barely survives the inhospitable conditions of a volatile water planet (*SD,* 246-252). There is evidence in *Surface Detail* to suggest that Vatueil's life also does not fit the identity condition. His successions of lives – starting a mission, repeatedly dying and being reborn for a new goal in the war-effort – clearly make for a deeply confusing and unsettling experience: dying in pain and shock, only to re-emerge in an unfamiliar yet equally dangerous location. Sometimes, Vatueil's virtual rebirth goes wrong: during one mission, "he had not even been his complete self" due to an "all-too-believable glitch within the re-created scenario meaning that his download into the combat unit had been only partial" (144). It seems clear, therefore, that this version of Vatueil cannot be considered truly whole – the equivalent of a corrupted computer file. Throughout these continual lives, Vatueil recognizes places and faces from his past, though struggles to retain a complete image of his personal history; he is frequently bewildered about the purpose of his mission and for whom he is fighting. As Banks makes explicit about Vatueil, "it had been so long since he was really alive" that he can no longer tell virtual from material reality (*SD*, 145). Making the unpleasantness

of his situation clear, a young doctor – presumably from SC – asks Vatueil, "'do you feel you're being punished?' 'Borderline,' he told her. "It depends how long this goes on for" (*SD*, 315). His reply, then, makes it apparent that the quality of his life in this form is a feat of endurance, which he does not wish to continue indefinitely. Once his serial ordeal is over and all his missions completed, Vatueil is rewarded by Revention, rebirth into a new body back in the physical world, and his sense of relief is clear (*SD*, 625-627).

The nature of Vatueil's life is made even more complex, however, when – through the very last word of *Surface Detail* – Banks reveals that Vatueil is actually a pseudonym for Zakalwe himself, once again working for SC. While Banks's readers are left to speculate about which version of Zakalwe this may be, *Surface Detail* is set in 2970 AD,[367] much later than *Use of Weapons*, the present time narrative of which is set in 2092 AD; this makes it clear, then, that the Zakalwe formerly known as Vatueil must very likely be the Zakalwe from the present time of *Use of Weapons*.[368] In this manner, Banks brings back the character around which the whole series grew, casting him as a kind of eternal mercenary, who has experienced both serial and nonserial models of immortality. Given that both his long single life as Zakalwe in physical space and his succession of virtual lives as Vatueil seem to have provided him with more punishment than pleasure, immortality perhaps functions as a kind of penance or atonement for this character's immoral behaviour rather some kind of utopian reward.

Ultimately, Banks's (and therefore the Culture's) stance seems to be anti-immortality, arguing that, "In the Culture you can live forever, if you want to, but do you really want to? Living forever you take up a lot of real estate – people end for ecological reasons."[369]

3.7 Conclusion

The Culture series is posthuman in that human beings are not the most advanced beings in this fictional universe – the Minds, the powerful extradimensional

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[367] Michael Parsons, 'Interview: Iain M Banks talks 'Surface Detail' with Wired', 14 October, 2010, www.wired.co.uk/news/archive/2010-10/14/iain-m-banks-interview (Accessed 28 March, 2016).
[368] In the final scene of the novel, Zakalwe is awaiting the arrival of a poet friend; whilst waiting, he ponders the poetic qualities of some of his own thoughts. This may seem to imply that he is therefore Cheradenine and not Elethiomel, although it is suggested in *Use of Weapons* that Cheradenine was killed long before his contact with the Culture, and therefore he would probably not have the possibility of Revention. See: Banks, *Surface Detail*, 626-627.
[369] Banks, Q&A, The Roundhouse, 06/10/12.

Excession itself from Banks's 1996 novel, and the Sublimed clearly supersede our intelligence – and perhaps never were: Banks's work imagines a time *after* humanity, in that sense. With the Culture itself, Banks created an environment designed to bring out the very best attributes in human beings, based on the principle that people would want to use all the tools available to adapt and improve themselves. Yet, despite the possibilities for radical self-transformation in such an environment, the Culture's citizens overwhelmingly chose to remain recognisably human; they are therefore not posthuman in the sense that they have transcended this fundamental category, moving *beyond* humanity to become another kind of being altogether.

In the Culture, the wish to become *more* than human is seen as a kind of hubris, an insult to those who have fought hard for a utopia that brings out the best in humanity. Biological ageing is controlled because it limits life's utopian possibilities, whilst retaining physical signs of ageing can display positive difference and diversity. Immortality is discouraged as a life that eventually decreases in quality as it increases in quantity, while death on one's own terms is the final necessity of a life lived in freedom. Perhaps the Culture's citizens, therefore, should be considered more as transhuman: individuals whose capabilities have been extended, expanded and improved, but still remaining identifiably human.[370]

As Vint has argued, Banks's thinking in this regard is essentially rooted in a Renaissance model of humanism, which emphasizes the problematic notion of a common 'essence' to humankind. While an in-depth discussion of what it means to be human is beyond the scope of this thesis, I think it is clear that Banks's conception of the human does not result in the complete effacement of physical and cultural differences within the Culture, as argued at various points in this thesis.[371]

Through Zakalwe's greatly extended life, *Use of Weapons* forms an extended mediation on the subjectivity of the ageing process, demonstrating the various understandings of ageing itself as psychological and social as well as biological. Linter is clearly a plot function for 'The State of the Art', illustrating the differences between the Earth and the Culture, as well as a means by which Banks could expound philosophical arguments key to the series. The dialogue between Sma and Linter forms a dialectic between two different approaches to life: respectively the belief in a

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[370] See: 'What is Transhumanism?', whatistranshumanism.org/ and humanityplus.org/philosophy/transhumanist-faq/ (Accessed 26 March, 2016)
[371] Vint, 'The Culture-al Body'.

body produced by Culture, and by nature. Linter's desire to return to human basic is motivated by a yearning for his life to have meaning, in a tragic, poetic sense, which he feels is not possible in an environment where all conflict has been ended. Fundamentally, it is this yearning for deeper meaning that is problematic as it is antithetical to all that for which the Culture stands: Sma's view is that life lived under the threat of conflict and tragedy is demeaning to the lives of all; a life emancipated from pain becomes meaning in itself. It's no surprise, then, that when Banks was asked by *New Humanist* magazine "isn't it the messy struggle, in which scarcity, crime and bad things are inevitable, that makes life worthwhile?", he replied – with amusing and confident brevity – simply "No."[372]

As has been demonstrated, the Culture strives to achieve equality in its relations with other civilisations, and has created an egalitarian society within its own environments by eradicating class differences; it must too, therefore, ensure that its habitats are equal in terms of gender. The next chapter of this thesis expands upon the ways that Culture citizens adapt themselves as discussed above, analysing the ways in which Banks imagined that the Culture's physical and psychological changes its humans would help it to achieve and maintain its goal of gender equality.

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[372] 'Iain Banks: Q&A', *New Humanist*, July/August 2012, Vol: 127; No.4; 36-37. 36.

Chapter 4: Postgender, Postpatriarchy, Postbinary

This chapter is concerned generally with the ways in which Banks's stance as a feminist affected his development of the Culture series and how this affects our understanding of the Culture itself within it. Through close analyses covering *The Player of Games*, *Matter*, *Excession* and *Surface Detail*, this chapter explores the strategies that Banks develops for attempting to achieve a gender-equal utopia, how gender and gender roles operate within the Culture, how the possibilities for transformation of the human body in the Culture affects its attitude towards gender, sexuality, family, reproduction and romantic relationships, and how Banks uses this to further subvert the tropes of traditional space opera. Continuing my examination of the Culture's shifts, I investigate the extent to which the Culture has moved beyond: a patriarchal system, a binary understanding of gender, and essentialist thinking in this regard. I conclude that the Culture has largely achieved a gender-equal system beyond patriarchy, and it acknowledges that biological sex and gender exist on a fluid spectrum; it is, however, clearly still coming to terms with the consequences of these developments, and has yet to fully move beyond a binary understanding of gender or elements of essentialist thinking. Banks's representations of women characters in the series have moved a long way beyond the often problematic depictions of traditional space opera, especially his successful subversion of the Handy Man and Wife at Home archetypes.

4.1 The Culture and Feminist SF

The initial conception and subsequent development of Banks's "personal utopia" was heavily informed by his feminist worldview. Banks was "very concerned" with the ways he represents women characters in his writing, in an "attempt to redress the (im)balance" he found "in so much other fiction or other fictive media."[373] Furthermore, Banks intended the Culture itself to be a futuristic vision of a society that, alongside the additional shifts described in this thesis, has eradicated gender inequality.[374] The Culture was therefore conceived of as postpatriarchy, in the

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[373] Jude Roberts, 'A Few Questions About the Culture: An Interview with Iain Banks'.
[374] *The English Programme: Scottish Writers*, 'Iain Banks', 2-5; Warwick: Channel 4, 1996; 5.

understanding of the term patriarchy as "the rule of the father",[375] or in Sarah

Gambles's more specific feminist definition as "a system ruled over by men, whose

authority is enforced through social, political, economic and religious institutions."[376]

     These intentions, therefore, place Banks's series within a vital and firmly-

established current in SF writing, as Pat Wheeler outlines:

> the major project of feminist science fiction is to call attention to the
> 'constructedness' of gender and to question those patriarchal ideologies that posit the
> pervasive belief in 'essential' differences which permanently distinguish men from
> women and which invariably render women as passive and inferior.[377]

The SF megatext is replete, then, with examples of works that engage with the

feminist project in unique and imaginative ways; and, in particular, Banks expressed

admiration for classic writers within this field, such as le Guin, Octavia Butler, James

Tiptree Jr., Gwyneth Jones, and Joanna Russ,[378] all of whom adopt different fictive

approaches towards achieving such a broad shared goal. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of

Darkness*, for example, disrupts essentialist notions through the humanoid Gethenians

who have no fixed biological sex, temporarily developing the requisite genitalia for

specific reproductive periods, while Russ's *The Female Man* (1975) "is well known

for its queering of the gendered body". [379] Marge Piercy's utopia Mattapoisett, as

famously depicted in *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), reveals the frequent sexism

inherent in gendered language through its removal of gendered pronouns altogether, a

similar strategy to that adopted more recently by Anne Leckie in the space opera

Ancillary Justice (2013), where a protagonist unfamiliar with gender differences has

little choice but to constantly guess the gender of the person to whom they are

referring, with amusing and startling consequences. Russ and Charlotte Perkins

Gilman, amongst others, have envisioned separatist utopias – 'When It Changed'

(1972) and *Herland* (1915) respectively – where the population is constituted entirely

by women, dramatically demonstrating the inequality of a mixed sex, patriarchal

present, and, through their utopians' reliance upon parthenogenesis, also foreground

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[375] Kathy E. Ferguson, 'Patriarchy', in, Helen Tierney, ed., *Women's Studies Encyclopedia*, Vol. 2. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing, 2009). 1048

[376] 'Patriarchy', *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, Sarah Gamble (New York: Routledge, 1999; 2006) 271.

[377] Pat Wheeler, 'Issues of Gender, Sexuality and Ethnicity', in, *The Science Fiction Handbook*, eds. Nick Hubble and Aris Mousoutzanis (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013) 213.

[378] Jude Roberts, 'A Few Questions About the Culture: An Interview with Iain Banks'.

[379] Pat Wheeler, 'Issues of Gender, Sexuality and Ethnicity'.

such disparity in processes of child-rearing. Referring to Russ, Piercy, le Guin and others, Henry Jenkins III explains that:

> These writers' entry to the genre in the late 1960s and early 1970s helped to redefine reader expectations about what constituted science fiction, pushing the genre toward greater and greater interest in soft science and sociological concerns and increased attention to interpersonal relationships and gender roles.[380]

Banks's challenge was to continue this push by integrating such concerns into space opera, which – at least before the mid-1980s and '90s – was seen as a "traditionally masculine"[381] genre: aspiring to hard science, featuring unreconstructed male heroes, concerned with military and economic values, and promoting conservative gender roles and sexual attitudes.

4.2 Critics on Banks's Portrayal of Gender

Throughout his career, Banks's work has been both praised and condemned for its depictions of gender identity and women characters. With his debut non-SF novel *The Wasp Factory*, Banks used a protagonist who was born biologically female but raised to believe she was a boy to shatter the notion of a gender identity naturally linked to biological sex, as Berthold Scoene-Harwood explains:

> The ending of *The Wasp Factory* hints at a remedial reassemblage of human subjectivity. Injurious distinctions between femininity and masculinity, madness and sanity, have collapsed into a vision of restorative unity beyond the systemic inscription of woman's congenital lack in opposition to man's phallic plenitude.[382]

This ending, when the hypermasculine boy Frank discovers the truth about his/her identity, narrates this "collapse" of Frank's own prior self-conception, and suggests *Frances*'s seeming acceptance of his/herself for what s/he is. The text can be read, therefore, as an extended and subtle exploration of gender identity as fluid and socially constructed, vehemently challenging arguments for essentialism. In a similar manner, Janice M. Bogstad has identified Banks's SF as part of a shift away from more conservative works produced during the Golden Age, in line with Banks's

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[380] Henry Jenkins III, '*Star Trek* Rerun, Reread, Rewritten: Fan Writing as Textual Poaching', in, Sean Redmond, ed., *Liquid Metal: The Science Fiction Film Reader*, (West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2007), 272.
[381] Ibid.
[382] Berthold Schoene-Harwood, 'Dams Burst: Devolving Gender in Iain Banks's *The Wasp Factory*', *Ariel*, 30, 1. 131-48. 146.

intentions: "This shift comes from the understanding that gender is socially constructed rather than historically fixed or biologically grounded in the individual."[383] Focussing on Banks's depictions of female characters, Moira Martingale argues that Banks "creates strong female protagonists, and even secondary female characters are, in the main, assertive, smart, sexually uninhibited and in control of their lives – frequently more in control than their male counterparts."[384] Discussing his mainstream fiction, Sarah Falcus notes that, while Banks's work may feature un-reconstructed male characters, it highlights the "repression and dangers of patriarchal masculinity" and "exposes female sublimation" into a patriarchal system.[385] Shifting focus onto Banks's male characters, Jude Roberts implicitly affirms both Martingale's point about women in control and Falcus's notion that Banks's work challenges essentialist, patriarchal masculinity by arguing that, in Banks's fiction, "the foundation of the masculine subject" is "the vulnerability of the masculine body."[386]

On the other hand, Sheryl Vint has argued that – despite Banks's achievement in *The Wasp Factory* – a strong essentialist tendency underpins his conception of the Culture. Vint draws particular attention to the sex-changing procedure that Banks outlines in 'A Few Notes' – as is explored below – which, in her view, displays a continued attachment to "the notion of the body as natural, rather than as cultural."[387] As one of the few critics to engage with issues relating to gender specifically within the Culture series, Vint's arguments feature prominently in the analysis below. Sarah Falcus, too, despite largely praising Banks's portrayals, does offer caveats about his writing of female characters, worrying that – while seeming to challenge patriarchy – they also seem to run "perilously close at times to the traditional portrayal of women as little more than sexual objects"[388] – a view also supported by Gwyneth Jones, as

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[383] Janice M. Bogstad, 'Men Writing Women, in *Women in Science Fiction and Fantasy 1* (2009): 170-78.171.
[384] Moira Martingale, Gothic Dimensions: Iain Banks, Time Lord, 330-331.
[385] Sarah Falcus, 'Gender in *The Wasp Factory*, *Whit* and *The Business*', in, Martyn Colebrook, Katherine Cox, eds. *The Transgressive Iain Banks*. 124.
[386] Jude Roberts, 'Iain M. Banks's Culture of Vulnerable Masculinity', in, *Foundation*, vol. 43, no. 117, Spring 2014. 46.
[387] Sheryl Vint, 'Iain M. Banks: The Culture-al Body', 89.
[388] Sarah Falcus, 'Gender in *The Wasp Factory*, *Whit* and *The Business*', in, Martyn Colebrook, Katherine Cox, eds. *The Transgressive Iain Banks* (McFarland: North Carolina, 2013) 124.

explored below.[389] Overall, however, Falcus offers a balanced and practical assessment of Banks's work in this regard:

> various ways of approaching gender in Bank' work are held in tension in *The Wasp Factory*, *Whit* and *The Business*. These novels do not offer easy or unproblematic narratives of women in men's worlds, but explore what happens and what is sacrificed when women try to take up positions of power in patriarchal social systems. In these texts, gender, like identity, is not stable, and the conclusions of the novels present both concepts as a process of negation.[390]

As explored below, the position of women within the Culture is clearly different compared with real-world contexts, and is perhaps more difficult to effectively ascertain. The tensions in Banks's writing identified above – between essentialism and gender fluidity, objectifying women characters and giving them agency, etc. – run through the forthcoming analysis, further highlighting the complexity and contradictions of the Culture series.

4.3 Space Opera: Feminist and Feminine

One strategy that Banks utilised as part of his intention to subvert traditional space opera involved characterising the Culture as a whole society, or as a group of people *en masse*, in gendered terms. "The kind of future the Culture represents," Banks stated, "is more female than male in its demeanor."[391] Unpacking this comment, it is fair to assume that Banks uses the terms "female" and "male" interchangeably with the terms "feminine" and "masculine". In referring to this society's *demeanor* as female, it seems much more likely that Banks refers to *femininity* and *masculinity*, understood as "the distinct sets of characteristics culturally ascribed to maleness and femaleness",[392] rather than simply to sex or biological differences. Writing in *Sex and Gender* (1968), for example, Robert Stoller made an important, early acknowledgement of the difference between biological sex and cultural gender, explaining that "one can speak of the male sex or female sex, but one can also talk

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[389] Gwyneth Jones, ''Review of *Matter*', for *Strange Horizons*; 14, April 2008. www.strangehorizons.com/reviews/2008/04/matter_by_iain_-comments.shtml#foot1 (Accessed 28 January, 2015).

[390] Sarah Falcus, 'Gender in *The Wasp Factory*, *Whit* and *The Business*', 124.

[391] 'Inversions: An Interview', *Dillons* Review.

[392] Anna Tripp, 'Introduction' to *Gender,* ed. Anna Tripp. (London: Palgrave, 2007). 3.

about masculinity and femininity and not necessarily be implying anything about anatomy or physiology."[393]

Banks, then, saw the Culture not merely as femin*ist* but also as fundamentally femin*ine*, in a further attempt to create politically radical space opera. By this logic, if traditional space opera world systems like Smith's Galactic Patrol embody "conventionally masculine qualities (such as vigour, courage, rationality, authority, mastery, independence)"[394] then the Culture would predominantly represent opposing, conventionally feminine values, such as emotion, empathy, tolerance, self-reflection and communality. As Holly Devor explains, a "description of the social qualities subsumed by femininity and masculinity might be to label masculinity as generally concerned with egoistic dominance and femininity as striving for cooperation or communion."[395] Banks conceived of the Culture, then, as a utopian system of interlinked habitats, which was feminine for its reliance upon collaboration and support rather than masculine for its reliance upon opposition and competition.

Non-Culture characters in the series certainly view Culture citizens as non-normative in relation to gender. In *Surface Detail*, Lededje visits the Culture for the first time: "one of the few things that she could recall having heard about the Culture back in Sichult: its people were hopelessly effeminate, or unnaturally aggressive females" (157). Lededje, then, views Culture people in fairly pejorative and essentialist terms and clearly does not understand the distinction between biological sex and gender. This is not surprising given that Lededje grew up outside of the Culture in the Sichultian Enablement, a series of planets which – heavily market-driven, patriarchal and still practicing slavery – are ideologically opposite to the Culture in almost every way. As patriarchies, societies such as the Sichultian Enablement in the series are thrown into sharp relief by the Culture. As Anna Tripp explains, quoting Devor,

> in patriarchally organised societies, masculine values become the ideological
> structure of the society as a whole. Masculinity thus becomes 'innately' valuable and
> feminity serves as a contrapuntal function to delineate and magnify the hierarchical
> dominance of the masculine.[396]

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[393] Robert Stollers, *Sex and Gender* (1968), in Anna Tripp, *Gender*, 4.
[394] Anna Tripp, 'Introduction' to *Gender*, 11.
[395] Holly Devor, 'Gender Role Behaviors and Attitudes', in Abelove, H., Barale, M.A., and Halperin, D., eds., *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1993). 484-488. 484-485.
[396] Ibid., 11.

In Banks's series, this logic is inverted. The Culture, as the focus of the series, where feminine values become the ideological structure of the society as a whole, serves to highlight the "egoistic dominance" of more masculine, traditional space opera world systems – often the Culture's antagonists in the series – and magnify their frequently oppressive, authoritarian nature.

4.4 Sex-swapping or Ambisexuality

While Banks used gender as metaphor for the Culture's outlook in the manner described above, it was also clearly necessary that his utopia would represent a progressive attitude toward gender and sexuality in a more literal manner; and Banks stated that he intended the Culture to be a "post-sexist society".[397] The key to the success of this fundamental shift in his utopia, Banks argues, lies in the ability of any Culture citizen to change from one biological sex to another, perfectly and easily. In 'A Few Notes', Banks explains this process: all Culture inhabitants, as part of their altered human condition, through a complex mixture of genetic engineering and hormonal secretions by drug gland, can make a complete and effective sex change, as frequently as they wish given that the process takes roughly a year. This process is instigated by "an elaborate thought-code, self-administered in a trance-like state (or simply a consistent desire, even if not conscious) [that] will lead, over the course of about a year, to what amounts to a viral change from one sex into the other."[398] Culture society, as a rule, encourages each individual to perform this change at least once during their lifetimes. Banks goes on to argue that this ease of sex-swapping has allowed the Culture to achieve a system of gender-equality:

> A society in which it is so easy to change sex will rapidly find out if it is treating one gender better than the other; within the population, over time, there will gradually be greater and greater numbers of the sex it is more rewarding to be, and so pressure for change – within society rather than the individuals – will presumably build up until some form of sexual equality and hence numerical parity is established.[399]

The wording of this description is problematic for its conflation of the sex/gender distinction, with the two terms being used interchangeably. Banks's argument here is most logical if it is assumed that he refers to biological sex throughout, even when

[397] The English Programme: Scottish Writers, 5.
[398] Banks, 'A Few Notes'.
[399] Ibid.

using the term gender. According to this rationale, in such a society, the quantity of members of one sex is directly related to the quality of life experienced by individuals of that sex: significantly larger numbers of Culture citizens choosing to live as a man for long periods of time would seem to indicate a patriarchal order or at least an androcentric system; an abundance of women perhaps indicating a more gynocentric arrangement.

The logic behind this rationale is convincing in a general sense, as it suggests that prejudice and inequality could be minimised or removed altogether if all could directly experience life from the perspective of individuals in different circumstances. Banks's logic here is clearly problematic in relation to establishing gender-equality, however, because it fails to take into account the personal and social significance of gender identity, and seems to adopt the logic of essentialism by assuming that gender will shift automatically alongside a change in biological sex. In reality, when a Culture citizen changes sex their gender identity may change very little, aside from a few potential and nominal alterations as the result of hormonal adjustment. Banks's system of sex-swapping, therefore, may work to ensure that prejudice against those of a different biological sex does not exist in the Culture, but does not significantly affect prejudice against gender because there is no suggestion that Culture citizens are also encouraged to move between different gender identities in the same manner.

The details and significance of this process are not described in detail until *Matter*, the eighth text in the series, when SC agent Djan Seriy Anaplain becomes a man for a year and documents the experience.

4.4.1 *Matter*: Djan Becomes a Man for a Year

Originating in the highly conservative and patriarchal society of Sursamen, Djan was exiled from her home at a young age, which enabled her to achieve her secret dream of joining the Culture and becoming an operative for SC. Djan's transition from biologically female to biologically male is detailed amongst several chapters of *Matter* concerned with Djan's adjustment to life in the Culture, which is radically different in many ways to the militaristic and monarchical society of her home.

As Banks explains, Djan "had been a man for a year. That had been different. Everything had been different. She had learned so much: about herself, about people, about civilizations" (163). Whilst explaining this "difference", Djan groups her change alongside others such as: temporal and gravitational adjustment to her new

physical environment; social adjustment to a postscarcity society; and a kind of aesthetic adjustment regarding the appearance of her fellow Culture citizens, who appear as almost unanimously perfect in their beauty and health (*M*, 164). In other words, Banks seems here to suggest that the process of changing from one sex to another would be equivalent in scale to that of encountering an effectively alien world. When Djan focuses on the experience of becoming biologically male, the transition causes her both amazement and shock:

> Over most of the year, she grew slightly, bulked out further, grew hair in strange places, and watched, fascinated, as her genitals went from fissure to spire. She did wake up a couple of nights covered in sweat, appalled at what was happening to her, feeling herself, wondering if this was all some enormously laboured joke and she was being made a freak of deliberately, for sport, but there were always people to talk to who had been through the same experience – both in person and via screens and sims – and no shortage of archived material to explain and reassure (170).

On one level, this description works to suggest the biological simplicity with which one sex may become as another, emphasising the relative lack of significant physical difference between male and female bodies: the changes amount to slight adjustments in size and weight, the placement and amount of hair growth, and differences in genetalia. Djan's transition, therefore, suggests the fundamental fluidity of the human form and emphasises the similar aspects of human bodies regardless of biological sex.

Alongside these progressive notions, however, this description also portrays Djan's physical transition as a traumatic and frightening ordeal to be endured, rather than a positive cultural development, almost certainly due to her status as a relative newcomer to the Culture. By viewing the process as a "joke" and her altering physical form as a "freak", Djan emphasises the radical nature of such a change – especially considering its relative ease and complete effectiveness – from the perspective of a patriarchal society. Djan's physical body, at this stage situated somewhere between biologically male and female, can also be read as highlighting the trauma and prejudice endured by intersex individuals in contemporary society, whose naturally "queered" bodies disrupt the values of binary, essentialist culture. Even so, the process that Djan undergoes seems designed purely to allow binary adjustment from one rigid, normative conception of biological sex to another, with Djan's liminal, intersex state rendered as a purely temporary stage in this process rather than suggesting a potential variety of different sexes across a spectrum.

As with Banks's outline of the Culture's sex-swapping in 'A Few Notes', this description in *Matter* focuses entirely on biological sex and does not mention gender identity in relation to Djan's, who – given the nature of her background – would presumably also need to have this distinction explained to her. This may perhaps indicate, however, that if Djan retained her feminine gender identity at the same time as becoming biologically male, her resulting queer identity – as we understand it – was accepted without question or comment, suggesting that gender discrimination *has* been ended within the Culture with understanding and acceptance of the sex/gender distinction being widespread.

As well as detailing Djan's transition, Banks discusses the sexual encounters that she undertakes around this time, which provide further insight into how gender and sexuality are represented in the Culture. As Banks states, Djan "took a couple of intermittent, unbothered lovers even as she changed, then, as a man, took many more, mostly female" (170). These comments, then, leave the identity of her pre- and mid-change lovers unspecified, although Banks does explicitly note that, after completing the transition to a biologically male body, Djan takes significantly more female lovers, and more in general. The suggestion here, that in male form, Djan's interest in sexual relations increases and that he is more interested in those who are biologically female, implicitly perpetuates the stereotype that men are more promiscuous than women and more inclined to heterosexuality, or at least that men are less open-minded regarding homosexuality than women. Furthermore, the passing comment that Djan's experimentation includes sexual encounters "even as she changed", confirms that Djan was sexually active during the intersexual, liminal stage of her biological transition from one sex to another, yet Banks does not provide any further detail.[400]

At one stage Djan contemplates returning to "Sursamen as a man, [to] see what they made of him then" (170). While jesting about returning in *his* new male physique and claiming the throne, as he would now technically be entitled to do, Djan also mentions that "apart from anything else, there had been a couple of ladies at the court he had always been fond of, and *now* felt something for" (170; emphasis added). This statement is a little ambiguous. On the one hand, Banks could be saying that, whilst living in a society in which homosexuality was viewed as a crime and with

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[400] "Work by John Money, Joan Hampson, and John Hampson on intersexuality (the state of having both female and male biological characteristics) led to the introduction of the technical term gender (1955)." Talia Bettcher, 'Feminist Perspectives on Trans Issues'.

abhorrence – at one stage, Sursamen Prince Oramen uses the homophobic insult "man-fucker" (245) – Djan would not and could not accept that the feelings she harbored for other women were anything other than platonic. Therefore, if she were to return to such a society having lived in an inclusive and diverse Culture habitat where homosexuality is accepted and celebrated, Djan would understand the true nature of her feelings. On the other hand, the statement could also be read as suggesting that, now *she* has become physically *he*, Djan's prior affections will inevitably adjust along with these bodily changes: whereas her prior feelings towards other women *were* only platonic, a "fondness", they will inevitably become a more physical, sexual attraction now that Djan inhabits a man's body. Seemingly, then, one's sexual orientation is directly related to one's biology, in an affirmation of heteronormative values, which seems problematic for Banks's representation of the Culture's attitudes, perhaps confirming Vint's assertion that an essentialist tendency runs through his work.

During other scenes in *Matter*, Banks parodies the tropes of romance fiction to demonstrate Djan's conflicted views regarding her sexuality, resulting from her combined Sursamen/Culture background. As in *The Player of Games* regarding Gurgeh and Yay, Banks depicts a woman from the Culture being sexually propositioned by a man, only to turn him down. In this instance, Djan is propositioned by a Culture avatoid – "a ship's avatar of such exquisite bio-mimicry it could pass for fully human" (*M*, 377) – Quike, originally part of the Culture, but who has 'Absconded', in a manner that is compared with the GSV *Sleeper Service* from *Excession* (see Chapter Six of this thesis). Quike sends Djan a long transmission, written in an elaborately polite and suggestive manner, the underlying sexual proposal of which is quickly interpreted and rejected by Djan, to amusing effect. "'I think your trick does not work on me, sir,'" replies Djan. "Quike smiled. "Well, it doesn't work with everybody […] Perhaps I might be permitted to try again some other time?'" (*M*, 379). Djan does further consider Quike's proposal, however, and almost succumbs to his seduction routine:

> She looked into his languidly beautiful eyes and saw in them – well, being cold about it, more precisely in the exact set of his facial features and muscle state – hint of real need, even genuine hunger […] she was only experiencing what untold generations of females had experienced throughout the ages (383).

In many ways, these scenes are allowed to develop into parodies of depictions of seduction from stereotypical romantic fiction, which reproduce heteronormative values of active male and passive female, of which both reader and fictional couple are aware. When Djan is described as "experiencing what untold generations of females had experienced throughout the ages", Banks knowingly reproduces the romance trope of a woman protagonist falling for a man who appears initially to be 'strong' and assertive, but who eventually reveals an underlying sensitivity that belies his true nature. The parodic effect is enhanced by the fact that the relationship crosses boundaries of 'species', as Djan is being wooed by a person who is not human: "She was thinking, Dear shafted Worldgod, all my potential bedfellows are machines. How depressing" (379).

This exchange shows further comparison between the sexual standards represented by the Culture and Sarsuman. Djan ultimately does reject Quike, in a manner not dissimilar to Yay's initial rebuff of Gurgeh: "She thought, a real Culture girl would definitely say yes at this point. She sighed regretfully. However, I am still – deep down, and for my sins – both my father's daughter and a Sarl" (383). A "real Culture girl", as Djan describes herself, who lives in a society with no sociopolitical, familial, patriarchal or religious influences affecting her personal freedom, would be entirely free to make this decision according to her own desires at the moment in time. Yet, no matter how hard she tries – in a similar manner to Gurgeh who is a somewhat un-reconstructed man at the start of *The Player of Games* – Djan cannot fully shake off the trappings of the conservative and patriarchal society in which she was raised. (In turn, her background on Sarl, a deeply religious community, is perhaps further exemplified by her continued reference to the "Worldgod" in the previous quotation.) Acquiescing to a sexual encounter so soon upon meeting her partner, while socially acceptable in the Culture, would bring shame upon her and her Sarl family. Here, Banks illustrates how deep the influence of such a repressive, orthodox society such as the Sarl runs, given that Djan has lived in the Culture for most of her life; she is in the process of 'Culturing out' the negative, unwanted elements of her heritage.

4.5 SC Agents as Handy Men

As well as enabling Banks to demonstrate the Culture's attitude toward sexuality and gender roles, Djan – as an SC operative and active woman protagonist – is a

prominent example of his subversion of a space opera archetype, the Handy Man, as identified by Csicsery-Ronay. Writing in *Seven Beauties*, Csicsery-Ronay identifies utopia, "the city of handiness",[401] as an essential part of the *technologiade*, his conception of SF's unique narrative. The Handy Man is the archetypal protagonist in such a narrative, derived from early modes of SF such as colonial adventure stories, and is therefore an archetype that is almost always automatically gendered. Csicsery-Ronay describes the Handy Man as follows:

> a figure, usually male, who possesses skill in the handling of tools […] his many ideas and plans are almost exclusively devoted to technical problem-solving. The Handy Man is able to manipulate tools, to fashion new ones […] and, most important, to extend his power over the environment through technological control.[402]

The origins of this archetype can be traced back to characters such as Homer's Odysseus, Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe and Jules Verne's adventurer heroes, then later protagonists such as Clarke's Dr. Carlisle Perera or H.G. Wells' Dr. Moreau.[403] In the Culture novels, it seems relatively straightforward to identify the agents of Contact and SC as the figures that most closely conform to the Handy Man archetype: posthuman, tech-savvy agents of the Culture's expansion. Banks's Handy Men are adventurers "induced or forced out of a culturally comfortable, predictable home environment, to exotic and undeveloped regions".[404] They either "solve a fundamental problem", allowing them to function as an "entrepreneurial hero" for their original c/Culture, or they "establish a base" for a 'Cultural' transformation, or frequently both.[405] As is the case with Gurgeh, the Handy Man is an "an adventurer though not always a willing one." [406]

In his Culture series, Banks is arguably concerned with subverting the inherent gender stereotype associated with the protagonist featured in early, traditional varieties of such a narrative, as will be discussed shortly. Despite this, Banks does provide one example of someone akin to a traditional Handy Man: Gurgeh from *The Player of Games*, whose begrudging role in the political machinations of SC clearly marks him as such a figure. This notable scholar and practitioner of game-playing

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[401] Csicsery-Ronay, *Seven* Beauties, 249.
[402] Ibid., 227.
[403] Homer, *The Odyssey* (8 BC); Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719); Arthur C. Clarke, *Rendezvous with Rama* (1973); and Dr Moreau from H.G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1986).
[404] Csicsery-Ronay, *Seven Beauties*, 221.
[405] Ibid., 221.
[406] Ibid., 227.

grows bored of his peaceful, academic life on his home Orbital Chiark, and becomes embroiled in an SC mission to "solve the problem" of the "volatile and unstable" Empire of Azad (77). He helps the Culture defeat Azad at the eponymous game that forms the centre of their culture, resulting in the implosion of Azad's infrastructure (305), and helping to establish it as a base for a 'Cultural' transformation. Gurgeh is a typical Handy Man because "he has an ambivalent relationship with his home"[407]: he leaves the safe, sanitised Culture to play dangerous games elsewhere for 'real' stakes. The Culture is ambivalent to Gurgeh as it is simultaneously the site of a stultifying *ennui*, but also of everything and everyone for which and whom he cares. At the novel's conclusion, Gurgeh returns to Chiark, and is reunited with his friends and colleagues, and his relationship with his home culture is rectified.

Gurgeh is also a fairly traditional Handy Man, however, not just because of his SC role, but because of his gender role. As mentioned previously, Gurgeh is described initially as "primitive" and as a "throwback" (29) combined with his growing skepticism regarding the nature of the Culture, Gurgeh is marked as a man who – despite living on a Culture Orbital his entire life – has yet to fully embrace the ways of the Culture, and does not easily fit in. This is clearly revealed in the following conversation between Gurgeh and his friend and potential lover Yay, in which they discuss Gurgeh's sexual proclivities:

> There's something very… I don't know; primitive, perhaps, about you, Gurgeh. You've never changed sex have you?' He shook his head. 'Or slept with a man?' Another shake. 'I thought so,' Yay said. 'You're strange, Gurgeh.' She drained her glass. 'Because I don't find men attractive.' 'Yes; *you're* a man!' She laughed. 'Should I be attracted to myself, then?' (24).

Yay's comments here suggest that the Culture encourages its citizens to practice not only sex-swapping but also bisexuality. Yay finds it genuinely odd – even disturbing – that Gurgeh is not attracted to men as well as women; and, by associating the fact that Gurgeh has never slept with a member of the same sex with primitivism, Yay associates heterosexuality with a bygone era, emphasising further that bisexuality is the Culture's norm. In fact, her question 'Or slept with a man?' suggests that that she is surprised, and could potentially be lightly accusing her friend of homophobia. Also, Yay's comment 'you're a man' could be read as having a double meaning: on the one hand, wittily pointing out the perceived strangeness of heterosexuality, which,

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[407] Ibid., 227.

according to an individual from a postpatriarchal society, implicitly casts one's own self as unattractive; one the other hand, by 'man', Yay may refer to a traditional or 'unreconstructed' man, and therefore further confirming his identity as an oddity, a patriarchal man living in a postpatriarchal society.

Gurgeh's comments suggest that he has missed the wider, social role of sex-swapping in the Culture, reducing this practice to mere pandering to sexual preferences; while the fact that he is free *not* to do so, reinforces the Culture's lack of a legal structure, operating according to a much looser *de facto* system of codes, manners and practices. The sexual chemistry and desire between the pair is clear from the outset, yet, at the start of the novel, Yay gently and consistently rejects Gurgeh's advances:

> 'You're going to ask me to stay again, aren't you?' […] 'Oh,' Gurgeh said, shaking his head and looking up at the ceiling, 'I doubt it. I get bored going through the same old moves and responses.' Yay smiled. 'You never know,' she said. 'One day I might change my mind. You shouldn't let it bother you, Gurgeh' (24).

Judging from his responses here, while Gurgeh may be something of a throwback in Culture terms, he clearly does not respond to sexual rejection with anger or violence, and handles the situation by speaking with Yay and understanding her motivations. His response is more one of genuine bemusement, rather than frustration, and he is not portrayed as pressing Yay to the extent that she feels obliged or forced to acquiesce. Her last comment, "One day I might change my mind", clearly indicates the fact that, in the Culture, Yay is entirely free to chose whom she takes as a lover, with none of the patriarchal pressure that maintains, at its most extreme, that women somehow have a responsibility – are obliged even – to please the men who are attracted to them, regardless of their own wishes. Yay continues:

> 'It's almost an honour.' 'You mean to be an exception? 'Mmm.' She drank. 'I don't understand you,' he told her. 'Because I turn you down?' 'Because you don't turn anybody else down.' 'Not so consistently.' […] 'So; why not?' There he'd finally said it. Yay pursed her lips. 'Because,' she said, looking up at him, 'it matters to you' (24).

Here, Yay's semi-sarcastic quip that Gurgeh is an "exception", indicates that it is rare for her to turn down sleeping with someone to whom she is genuinely attracted. Perhaps, too, Yay's comments show that her behaviour is exemplary of Culture

relationships: it seems that she only engages in sexual relations that are not meaningful on a long-term basis, merely enjoyable in the short-term; as Banks notes in *Excession*, in the Culture, "life-long monogamy was not utterly unknown, but it was exceptionally unusual" (321). By patriarchal standards she would seem promiscuous, yet – in the Culture – individuals are encouraged to be free with their sexuality, as it is regarded as an integral part of their personal identity and humanity; also, in many ways, Culture citizens might perhaps feel it natural to do so, as arguably the whole point of the Culture is to fight for the existence and maintenance of such freedoms.

Yay gives her reason for turning Gurgeh down as the fact that their relationship clearly "matters" to Gurgeh: it seems that he feels very strongly about her, and wants their relationship to be more than a series of casual sexual encounters, as seems to be more common practice for both of them. Yet Yay has further concerns about Gurgeh's slightly hidebound nature: her turning down of Gurgeh may also matter to him for more unsettling reasons. As previously explained in Chapter Two of this thesis in relation to the Culture's postscarcity nature, Yay believes that Gurgeh sees the act of becoming her lover merely as a form of conquest – the essence of his world-view as a professional game-player: "'I feel you want to…take me,' Yay said, 'like a piece, like an area. To be had; to be…possessed'" (24). Here Yay identifies in Gurgeh residual views from an archaic patriarchal order, which sees women as an inferior sex, and therefore as the 'property' of men. These patriarchal views are, in turn, directly reflected in the Empire of Azad, to which Gurgeh is sent on his SC mission.

Using Gurgeh initially as an example of a traditional Handy Man, then, enables Banks to retain elements of traditional space opera within his Culture narratives, offering readers of the sub-genre the tropes they have come to expect and enjoy. Through Gurgeh's character in the novel, however, Banks achieves the ideological subversion of the form that he intended: Gurgeh is only able to defeat Azad when he acknowledges its inherent cruelty, and Yay will only accept him as her lover – which she eventually does at the text's conclusion – when Gurgeh returns home to Chiark changed by his experiences, with a fuller understanding of the Culture's society and his own nature.

Banks's Culture novella 'The State of the Art' provides another complex example of a man, Dervley Linter, who, like Gurgeh, does not sit comfortably within

the Culture. Before the events of the text, Linter worked in SC for many years, and is suggested to have fitted comfortably within Culture society: he can be regarded, then, as a Handy Man – technically a *former* Handy Man – but representing a version of the trope politically reimagined according to the Culture's utopian values. Yet, in the novella, Linter is undergoing the process of becoming human basic: removing the physical and social characteristics of a Culture citizen in order to live in a different society on Earth. While Linter does, like Gurgeh, also undergo a fundamental change in 'The State of the Art', the logic of this change is in fact inverted – becoming *less* like the Culture than more so.

While the reasons for Gurgeh's dissatisfaction with life in the Culture are fairly explicit – relating to his nature as a patriarchal "throwback" whose views on gender-relations and sexuality are somewhat narrow-minded and reactionary, as explored above – Linter's reasons for leaving the Culture are less obvious, relating to a deep sense of boredom, as explored in Chapter Three of this thesis. While these reasons do not seem explicitly related to biological or gender identity, Linter does make one comment that could be interpreted as indicating such. Whilst explaining to Sma the extent of his physical alteration to human basic, Linter states that: "Well…no, I guess you could say I've changed." He smiled uncertainly. "I'm not the *man* I was" (153, emphasis added). There are at least three possible interpretations of this comment, which hinge on Linter's meaning of the term 'man'. Firstly, he may use it as a metonym for *hu*manity more generally, indicating that he is now no longer generally enhanced as a result of the Culture's genetic amendments. Secondly, the comment could be intended as a sexual innuendo, meaning that his genetalia in particular is now unenhanced, suggesting that he is a less enticing prospect for a sexual partner. A third interpretation, however, reads the comment as suggesting that Linter sees himself as emasculated by the society of the Culture, and that he wishes to become 'a real man' in patriarchal terms, perhaps desiring to exhibit an unreconstructed mode of masculinity.

Linter, then, to some extent exemplifies the more progressive Handy Man achieved by the Culture, yet clearly the fact that he has left SC, as well as his desire to revert to human basic, make his status as such more ambiguous. As with Gurgeh, Linter provides a prominent example of a Handy Man in the series, yet both are located on the Culture's margins in order to achieve a subversion of the archetype. If Gurgeh ultimately performs something of a heroic role in *The Player of Games*,

overturning the Culture's enemy, his liminality in relation to the Culture ensures that the problems of such individualist heroism can be challenged and deconstructed. If Linter once represented a defining example of the ideologically reconstructed Handy Man, he comes to demonstrate Csicsery-Ronay's assertion that the Handy Man "may also have more complex, self-contradictory motivations complicating their heroism"[408] – in this case a flawed desire for tragic, poetic meaning.

In *Excession*, Banks provides a third example of a Handy Man, Byr Genar-Hofoen, who does not sit comfortably within the Culture, yet is employed by Contact. Contact seems aware that Genar-Hofoen is something of an un-reconstructed man, and chooses him for certain missions where his nature as such will help him to maintain diplomatic relations with more troublesome civilisations that are more able to relate to such a person. Yet, carrying out his missions, Genar-Hofoen encounters other civilisations that have very different cultures to that of his home, and, as with Linter and Gurgeh, this causes Genar-Hofoen to reject the Culture.

This seems scarcely surprising, given that, upon joining Contact, Genar-Hofoen acts as a stereotypical male lothario, setting out "to bed as many women as possible" (*E*, 323). Even living in the Culture with its liberal sexual mores, where sexual openness is accepted and encouraged, Genar-Hofoen objectifies women and views them as conquests; he approaches the task of bedding as many women as possible "with a single-minded determination and dedication" (*E*, 323). At the start of *Excession*, Genar-Hofoen attends a formal dinner with a civilisation/alien race known as the Affront and he quickly identifies with them. Mendlesohn describes the Affront as "reminiscent of satirical descriptions of the British gentry of the huntin', shootin' and fishin' sort",[409] and Banks clearly satirises their highly patriarchal, hypermasculine and militaristic culture, through elaborate displays of competition, strength and machismo. As Genar-Hofoen displays a number of these traits himself, he soon bonds with the Affront officers, acting comfortably at "an all-male gathering […] therefore likely to be fairly boisterous even by Affronter standards" (33). Genar-Hofoen, then, seems like a more traditional example of the Handy Man archetype, which the Culture exploits to its own advantage.

Yet Genar-Hofoen's ability to bond with the Affront has more serious consequences, and soon after the dinner he states that: "all I want is an Affronter

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[408] Csicsery-Ronay, *Seven Beauties*, 247.
[409] Mendlesohn, 'Iain M. Banks: *Excession*', 561.

body, one that I can just zap into and…well, just *be* an Affronter" (63). Genar-Hofoen indicates that this change would aid relations between the Culture and the Affront, therefore serving a professional purpose, seeing the ability to become like those with whom the Culture has alliance, as key to understanding their society. It becomes clear, however, that Genar-Hofoen wishes to become like the Affront because he relates more to their culture than he does his own. While Linter relates to Earth society and reverts to a human basic body, casting aside his augmented body ("arguably the most reliable signifier of Culture status"[410]) as a symbolic rejection of the Culture, Genar-Hofoen's denunciation of the Culture in favour of the Affront is more severe. In a similar manner to Azad, Affronter society represents the extreme result of patriarchy, relying upon a "sub-class of oppressed females" and others deemed inferior, that are subjected regularly to rape and other practices of sexual torture (168) – all of which Genar-Hofoen is said to be aware, yet able to write off as an unfortunate "degree of exploitation" deemed "necessary in a developing culture" (170). Yet, upon being shown the heads of three Affront adversaries mounted as trophies upon the wall, Genar-Hofoen "found himself laughing wryly" even though he is aware that this was "just the kind of attribute the Culture in general […] found to be such a source of despair" (28), suggesting that a degree of complicity with their cruelty, despite his prior justifications.

As with Gurgeh in *The Player of Games*, *Excession* traces Genar-Hofoen's conflicted relationship with the Culture in a narrative of dissatisfaction, rejection, conflict and a form of resolution; yet it is a romantic relationship that ultimately helps to mediate Genar-Hofoen's masculinity. Against the background of political turmoil and galactic intrigue that occupy the major plot-threads of the novel, Banks tells the story of the relations between Genar-Hofoen and his lover, former Contact agent Dajeil Gelian, who – at the start of *Excession* – have been estranged for many years, due to a violent, near-fatal incident between the pair. In this manner, as Mendlesohn observes: "*Excession* is a novel of romance, of the day to day lives lived through great events," in which "Ruritanian romance gives way to the affectionate satire Jane Austen brought to military balls."[411] Dajeil and Genar-Hofoen's relationship is similar

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[410] Banks, 'A Few Notes'.
[411] Farah Mendlesohn, 'Iain M. Banks: Excession', in *A Companion to Science Fiction*, David Seed, ed., (Blackwell Publishing, 2005) Blackwell Reference Online. 599; 562, www.blackwellreference.com/subscriber/tocnode.html?id=g9781405112185_chunk_g9781405112185 43 (Accessed 28 October, 2015)

to that between Gurgeh and Yay in *The Player of Games*, with the woman attempting to change the man to a more progressive way of thinking and acting. Just as Yay was concerned that Gurgeh merely wished to 'possess' her like a game piece, and Gurgeh initially exhibited such a tendency, Genar-Hofoen reacts to Dajeil's initial reluctance to sleep with him by deciding "he would *win* her" (323, emphasis added). While Dajeil does not object to her future partner's promiscuity in principle, she associates it with a fundamental childishness: "He could never grow and develop as a human being until he went beyond this infantile obsession with penetration and possession" (324).

Eager to please Dajeil, Genar-Hofoen tries to overcome these problematic aspects of his identity, stating that "she was the still point in his life he needed […] she was his lesson" (324). In this manner, Dajeil's attitude represents the influence of the Culture more generally, as does this process of bringing Genar-Hofoen around to being considerate and equal in his treatment of his partner. Yet Genar-Hofoen has not changed: even though the pair decide to have children together, with both becoming simultaneously pregnant (as is possible through the process of Mutualling described below), Genar-Hofoen cheats on Dajeil leading to a violent incident, and the couple split up for many years. While the pair reconcile their differences at the end of the novel, Genar-Hofoen's mode of masculinity cannot be fully reconstructed through his relationship with Dajeil, as occurs with Gurgeh and Yay, and, like Linter, Genar-Hofoen is resolute about his decision to leave the Culture: at the end of *Excession*, Genar-Hofoen leaves the Culture for the Affront, and – adopting an Affronter body – finds love amongst this new community. When the Culture forces the Affront to surrender, Genar-Hofoen's assimilation is suggested to represent the beginning of a new era of peace between the two civilisations, as well as for Genar-Hofoen himself. Using three examples of male characters that struggle to adapt to the Culture's society, Banks provide examples of the Handy Man archetype, roughly commensurate with those from traditional space opera. These characters can then be deconstructed and remodelled in accordance with Banks's progressive agenda, as with Gurgeh, remodeled in a reverse process that demonstrates the Culture's reconstructed mode of masculinity, as with Linter, or – in the case of Genar-Hofoen – demonstrate that the Culture's utopian process may not work for all.

4.6 The Handy Woman

Gurgeh, Linter and Genar-Hofoen, then, fulfil the Handy Man role, existing in an ambiguous relationship with the Culture, and are identified as 'men'. Yet it is more common for those fulfilling the role of Handy Men in the series with a less problematic relationship with the Culture – SC agents, for example – to actually be indentified as 'women', as in the following six cases: Perosteck Balveda from *Consider Phlebas*; Diziet Sma from *Use of Weapons*, 'The State of the Art', and briefly *Surface Detail*; Doctor Vosill from *Inversions*; Djan Seriy Anaplain in *Matter*; Yime Nsokyi in *Surface Detail*; and Tefwe in *The Hydrogen Sonata*.[412] In 'The State of the Art', for example, Sma functions as a kind of ethnographic variant of the Handy Woman, who uses her research knowledge base, attuned observational skills, and social intuition, as 'Tools' with which she can help achieve her Contact mission. In this novella, Banks gives her a somewhat more personal and less dangerous role than in the earlier novel *Use of Weapons*, in which Sma is required to perform a more traditional variant of the Handy Woman, achieving missions of political intervention relying largely on technological Tools.

Csicsery-Ronay discusses the emergence of Handy Women as

> a variant that can bring with it enormous alterations in ideological import, supplanting a colonialist-patriarchal myth with a critical feminist one; or, alternatively, merely replacing an explicit male agent with a one-of-the-boys figure identified with phallocratic values.[413]

This issue of critical/conservative variation is especially relevant to Banks's depictions of female SC operatives and characters, as critics have identified elements of both in his portrayals. On the one hand, Janice M. Bogstad has asserted that "A younger generation of Anglo-American and European writers, including Iain Banks […] has done much to challenge the stereotypical constructions of Golden Age and cyberpunk texts," isolating the character Sharrow from Banks's non-Culture SF novel *Against a Dark Background* (1993) as a prime example.[414] On the other hand, in a review of the later novel *Matter*, Gwyneth Jones challenges Banks's portrayal of SC agent Djan Seriy Anaplian, and by implication those of other SC agents in the series,

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[412] Tefwe perhaps stands out from the others in this list as she occupies a very minor role in the novel – depicted across only a few pages – compared with other Handy Women in the series, who, even as minor characters, play a fairly significant role.

[413] Csicsery-Ronay, *Seven Beauties*, 248-249.

[414] Bogstad, 'Men Writing Women', 176.

as "one of Iain M. Banks's trademark "perfect girlfriend" tough females"[415]; while Jones does not develop this comment, she seems to suggest that Banks's characters offer mere male wish fulfillment, and his depictions of people in a postsexist society merely revert to clichéd tropes, rather than imagining the fresh gender identities made possible under such circumstances. Bogstad praises the way Banks "uses female-viewpoint characters" and gives them "lives outside their sexuality", as well as the way "Banks is able to turn the classic space opera SF theme into a true future vision of societies where all humans – male, female, and even robotic sentients as large as entire spaceships – enjoy positions of agency".[416] Jones, by implication, suggests that Djan and other SC agents merely represent the trend identified by Csicsery-Ronay where Handy Men are replaced with ostensibly progressive, female operatives, who really represent "a one-of-the-boys figure identified with phallocratic values".

Challenging Jones's reading, however, Banks develops Djan Seriy Anaplain – one of several view-point characters in *Matter* – as a three-dimensional character throughout the narrative, providing her with narrative agency and an integral role in the political outcome of the novel, as well as a Handy Woman with a fluid gender identity that subverts the archetype with feminist values.

4.6.1 *Matter*: Djan Seriy Anaplain

Djan's back-story in *Matter* is of crucial narrative significance as she provides a link between the Culture and the Shellworld of Sursamen, with which the book is primarily concerned. Furthermore, she is portrayed as a victim of her home society, Sursamen – a feudal, pre-industrial habitat, organised according to a divinely-appointed monarchy – which is as patriarchal as it is militaristic. Djan's father is King Hausk, and her mother a woman named Anaplia; she has two brothers – Ferbin and Oramen – from different mothers. Djan's birth was marred by tragedy: Anaplia collapsed whilst pregnant and King Hausk had to choose between saving his wife and their child. As they were unsure of the baby's sex, King Hausk chose to save the baby over its mother, hoping it would be a male, and therefore a suitable heir in this system of patrilinial descent (*M*, 124). Disappointed that the child was a girl, and irrationally blaming Djan for her mother's death, King Hausk banishes his daughter while she is

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[415] Gwyneth Jones, ''Review of *Matter*', for *Strange Horizons*; 14, April 2008. www.strangehorizons.com/reviews/2008/04/matter_by_iain_-comments.shtml#foot1 (Accessed 28 January, 2015).
[416] Janice M. Bogstad, 'Men Writing Women', 176.

still a child: Djan, however, who had secretly hoped to escape the cruel, prejudiced society of Sursamen anyway, longing to join the Culture, eventually does so, achieving her dream of becoming an SC operative. Prince Ferbin, who has been wrongfully accused of treason and requires her help, eventually calls Djan back to Sursamen.

In this manner, the narrative of *Matter* reverses the gender expectations inherent in the archetypes of both Handy Man and Wife at Home: Djan plays the role of Handy Woman, returning to her 'home' – at least in an ancestral sense – in order to save her brother Ferbin. Yet, at one stage, Djan states that often she awakens "with a pang of homesickness, sometimes in tears" knowing that she has dreamed of the Culture: "The details of the dream itself were not important; what exercised her on waking was that it was the kind of dream she had always associated with *home*" (289). What Djan considers her home, then, is not where she was born but where she feels most free and most comfortable: Sursamen is now no longer her home but the site of her adventure as Handy Woman. At the novel's conclusion, also, rather than a conventional reunion of adventurer and partner, achieving the conventional *technologiade* closure, the narrative becomes similar to that of a classical tragedy, with Djan and Ferbin both performing acts of self-sacrifice, and all but one other character being killed. *Matter* is therefore also notable for being the only text in the series in which an SC operative – or at least a main character – actually dies, seemingly without the possibility of resurrection: at the end of text, when Sursamen faces destruction from a monstrous machine created by a rival civilisation, the only way that Djan can save her home world is to sacrifice her own life by detonating a bomb that is part of her neural lace, and leaving her with no possibility that her soul can be retrieved.

Djan, then, provides a crucial example of a female character in the Culture series who is given narrative prominence and agency, and whom Banks develops as a Handy Woman who truly subverts the phallocratic expectations inherent in the original Handy Man archetype.

4.7 The Wife at Home

Another innately gendered trope of *technologiade* fiction is that of the Wife at Home. As Csicsery-Ronay explains, in more conservative adventure narratives, even the most dedicated Handy Man often returns home eventually, however reluctantly, and

they are almost always met there by their patient wife or female partner, in an affirmation of the norms of patriarchal society.[417] While largely absent from such narratives, it is the function of the Wife at Home to "secure the stability of domestic relations", representing "rooted tradition, the foot of the compass that does not move."[418] Regardless of the exotic people and locales that the Handy Man encounters on his journeys, the narrative logic of such stories almost always suggests a final return to 'normality', and a reassertion of traditional values.

Banks's prominent inclusion of this trope is unusual, given Csicsery-Ronay's observation that – unlike other *technologiade* tropes – "the function of the Wife at Home becomes strikingly muted in sf, for clear-cut reasons. There is not much home is sf."[419] In a galaxy where interstellar travel and intergalactic communication are easy and commonplace, the notions of domestic stability and a nuclear family frequently become non-existent. Even though this is the case with the Culture's galaxy, Yay's function in *The Player of Games*, for example, is close to the traditional 'Wife at Home' archetype: after Handy Man Gurgeh completes his mission, he returns to Yay, who finally acquiesces to sleeping with him, and gives the novel something of a conventional ending. The final image, before the Coda, is of Gurgeh observing the beautiful snow-covered fjords of Chiark, and finally allowing himself to cry (307) – these tears implicitly caused by his happiness at returning safely to a beautiful home, rather than in frustration at his adventures coming to an end. Here, Gurgeh's outpouring of emotion reveals characteristics strongly associated with femininity, an indication that his journey may have helped balance his otherwise prominently masculine traits of stoicism and egotistical dominance. Gurgeh's implicit final acceptance of the Culture gives the novel a conservative ending in strictly narrative terms, and perhaps in relation to Yay's role, although a more progressive one in terms of this particular Handy Man's overall ideological trajectory.

While Yay conforms to the Wife at Home in many ways, she is at least not portrayed as a passive figure, as exemplified by her freedom to turn down Gurgeh's advances in the first place – which he discusses with her but without appearing to pressurise her – and by the fact that Yay sets off travelling as Gurgeh does, and

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[417] For example, the final paragraph of Jules Verne's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* reads as follows: "From that day onwards, my uncle was the happiest of scientists. I was the happiest of men, for my pretty Virland girl, giving up her position as ward, took on responsibilities in the house in Königstrasse as both wife and niece." (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) 185.

[418] Csicsery-Ronay, *Seven Beauties*, 255.

[419] Ibid., 255; 234.

implicitly takes on other lovers as she chooses, in the meantime.[420] Even though Yay is not a viewpoint character in the novel, Banks does portrays her as having a separate life, living entirely independently from Gurgeh, disrupting the passive, obedient guardian of domestic stability inherent in the original trope. In this manner, Banks plays with the Wife at Home trope, as Yay both is and is not the Wife at Home, and thus creates a novel that is both recognisable as space opera yet also achieves a radical inversion of the form, as was his intention.

4.8 Reproduction and Child-rearing

While the texts in the series are primarily concerned with characters on its fringes, readers do acquire some details regarding the everyday lives of more typical Culture citizens. In 'A Few Notes', Banks details various elements of the Culture's social and familial living arrangements, including discussion of its common practices in relation to the birth and nurturing of children:

> In terms of personal relations and family groupings, the Culture is, predictably, full of every possible permutation and possibility, but the most common life-style consists of groups of people of mixed generations linked by loose family ties living in a semi-communal dwelling or group of dwellings; to be a child in the Culture is to have a mother, perhaps a father, probably not a brother or sister, but large numbers of aunts and uncles, and various cousins. Usually, a mother will avoid changing sex during the first few years of a child's life. (Though, of course, if you want to confuse your child...) In the rare event of a parent maltreating a child (a definition which includes depriving the child of the opportunity for education) it is considered acceptable for people close to them – usually with the help of the relevant Mind, ship or Hub AI, and subject to the sort of small-scale democratic process outlined above – to supervise the child's subsequent development.[421]

So the average Culture child grows up as part of a loose group (never depicted in detail in the series), living with a parent or parents and what we understand as their "extended family", probably in a very close-knit environment with a high level of participatory and shared experience, as suggested by the phrase "communal dwelling". Banks's reference to a "small-scale democratic process" that helps "supervise the child's subsequent development" in the "rare event of a parent maltreating a child" further substantiates the Mind's State role, as argued in Chapter

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[420] See: Banks, *TPoG*, 85, when Gurgeh asks Chay: "'How long are you going for?' 'A month or two.' Yay's bright, smiling face crinkled. 'We'll see. Shuro might get tried of me before then. Kid's mostly into other men, but I'm trying to persuade him otherwise.'"
[421] Banks, 'A Few Notes'.

One of this thesis, suggesting a social services function.

Children feature seldom in the series, specifically Culture children even less, and when they are depicted it is generally brief and circumstantial. As Banks explains through narration in *Look to Windward*:

> It was one of the effects of living in a society where people commonly lived for four centuries and on average bore just over one child each that there were very few of their young around, and – as these children tended to stick together in their own society – there seemed to be even fewer than there really were (140).

Linter affirms this point in 'The State of the Art', when he compares the Culture to Earth, stating of the latter: "you see a lot more children on a planet like this" (194). Chomba from *Look to Windward* is one notable example of a Culture child depicted in the sequence, offering some insight into their life. Chomba explains some of the Culture's ways to the alien visitor Kabe, outlining the fitting of a neural implant, a device that acts as a mind-computer interface, "was about as close as some bits of the Culture got to a formal adult initiation rite" (*LtW*, 141) – a detail revealing that the Culture practices a curious mixture of the traditional and the technoscientific in elements of family life.

There is another aspect of this familial framework that Banks establishes, however, which has greater significance for his portrayal of gender and biological sex in an ostensibly postpatriarchal society. Considering the above long quotation from 'A Few Notes', Sherryl Vint draws attention to Banks's use of the term 'mother', arguing that it provides a further example of essentialism in his work:

> This notion that the female sex is somehow essentially appropriate to motherhood – even within a social context of continually changing morphologies – again suggests an unacknowledged attachment to understanding our contemporary constructions of the body as 'natural'.[422]

The term 'mother', then, defined as "a female parent"[423] or "a woman in relation to a child or children to whom she has given birth"[424], is similar to that of 'woman' itself, which is often used in a problematic manner, conflating biological sex with gender

[422] Vint, 'Iain M. Banks: The Culture-al Body', 89.
[423] 'Mother', *Merriam-Webster* dictionary, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mother (Accessed 13 June, 2016).
[424] 'Mother', *Oxford Dictionaries*. Oxford University Press. www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/mother (Accessed June 13, 2016).

identity. Given that the Culture's technoscience makes it possible for the human body to be adapted into virtually any form, Vint asks implicitly, why would they still retain such a rigidly binary understanding of biological sex in relation to reproduction? Why must a body that is capable of giving birth still be regarded as innately female and/or feminine, when other physical options could be adopted that would make biology more fluid? Why could Banks not have used a more neutral term such as 'parent' instead?

Perhaps Banks uses the term here as shorthand to refer to anyone currently bearing the appropriate form for the *role* of birth-giver, regardless of their sex or gender, even though the term has such connotations. If a key guiding principle of the Culture is a lack of exploitation then its system for reproduction can be seen as justified: no-one is ever forced to have children or not, or stigmatised for their decision, and all combinations of biological makeup, sexual orientation, and gender identity are available freely to all, which makes the fact that only people who have chosen to bear a woman's body at that moment in time can give birth significantly less important. If Banks then does portray the *biology* of reproduction in essentialist terms, the *role* of mother can be freely chosen or rejected, which still seemingly enables the Culture to achieve a postpatriarchal and gender-equal society.

Banks published 'A Few Notes' in 1994, based upon ideas that he began developing in the 1970s – a time when it seemed a biological and medical impossibility, even in theory, for cis men and transwomen to bring a child to term within their own bodies. His thinking is this regard, then, reflects the time in which he was writing, for it was not until much more recently in 2015 that successful uterus transplant surgery for cis women, and possibly for cis men and transwomen, has been deemed theoretically possible, estimated to occur within the next decade.[425] Perhaps Banks's adherence to the notion of gender essentialism that retains links between women's bodies and giving birth, then, reflects the facts of the context in which he wrote, regardless of the broader intentions underpinning his writing. While society at present has clearly not achieved the "social context of continually changing morphologies" of the Culture, there are many scientific advances that allow physical sex to become fluid to an extent, although not yet with complete freedom. The

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[425] See: Leah Samuel, 'With Womb Transplants a Reality, Transgender Women Dare to Dream of Pregnancy', *StatNews*, 7 March, 2016; and Melissa Bailey, 'First Uterus Transplant in the US Gives 26-Year-Old Woman Chance at Pregnancy', *StatNews*, 25/02/2016 www.statnews.com/2016/02/25/uterus-transplant/ (Accessed 1 February 2016).

continued adherence to the notion of women's essential motherhood in Banks's writing therefore also displays a further example of the ways in which his Culture novels fluctuate between depicting an imagined utopian society, and between commenting upon the societies of his own lived experience.

However his use of the term is interpreted, Banks does at least affirm the Culture's general total openness to almost all eventualities, specifically in this regard, stating that "the Culture is, predictably, full of every possible permutation and possibility"[426]: this could easily include the possibility of pregnant 'fathers', or other child-bearing non-mothers, suggesting the only deciding factor is personal choice. Another possible method of reproducing in the Culture, known as Mutualling, is introduced in *Excession*.

4.8.1 *Excession*: Reproduction through Mutualling

The two lovers Genar-Hofoen (who begins the narrative as biologically male) and Dajeil (who begins the narrative biologically female) chose to reproduce by Mutualling, a method that is complex and unusual, even by Culture standards. Mutualling is enabled directly by the Culture's practice of sex-swapping, as Banks summarises, "a couple would have a child, then the man would become female and the woman would become male, and they would have another child" (*E*, 321-322). Explaining the process of Mutualling in more detail, Banks states that:

> It was possible for a Culture female to become pregnant, but then, before the fertilized egg had transferred from her ovary to the womb, begin the slow change to become a man. The fertilized egg did not develop any further, but neither was it necessarily flushed away or reabsorbed. It could be held, contained, put into a kind of suspended animation so that it did not divide any further, but waited, still inside the ovary. That ovary, of course, became a testicle, but – with a bit of cellular finessing and some intricate plumbing – the fertilized egg could remain safe, viable and unchanging in the testicle while that organ did its bit in fertilizing the woman who had been a man and whose sperm had done the original fertilizing. The man who had been a women then changed back again. If the woman who had been a man also delayed the development of her fertilised egg, then it was possible to synchronize the growth of the two fetuses and the birth of the babies (*E,* 321; 322).

So, through Mutualling, the biologically male Genar-Hofoen impregnates a biologically female Dajeil. Then, in the middle of that process, both Dajeil and Genar-Hofoen change sex. Dajeil, now biologically male, also impregnates Genar-Hofoen,

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[426] Banks, 'A Few Notes'.

who is now biologically female. If the process were to go according to plan, then both individuals would be would eventually give birth in synchronicity, and then change back to their original sex. Before they can both give birth, however, their relationship deteriorates into bitter argument and eventually violence, with Dajeil attacking Genar-Hofoen and perhaps intentionally killing the foetus with which they are pregnant, after which the couple became estranged for a long time. At the start of the novel, Dajeil – still carrying the foetus created with her former lover – lives in isolation onboard the *Sleeper Service* whilst her personal circumstances can be resolved, pondering her fate and that of her child, about whom she feels deeply ambivalent.

The process of Mutualling is clearly intended to have a romantic purpose: "To some people in the Culture," Banks notes, this "process was quite simply the most beautiful and perfect way for two people to express their love for one another" (322). By synchronising pregnancies and births, this logic suggests, a couple develops a deeper empathy with each other, having undergone the same experience, and, as Dajeil states, "it seemed…I don't know; more romantic, I suppose, more symmetrical" (320). Yet, while Banks's descriptions of sex-swapping seems intended to highlight the fact that loving relationships do still occur in the Culture, and it demonstrates further layers of nuance and complexity to his vision of utopia, the process of Mutualling is not without problems. As Vint has noted, Banks retains the notion of two distinct biological sexes in human beings, even within a society that can easily adapt a citizen's biology in any manner they desire: in the Culture, all manner of other reproductive options would be possible, including for example parthenogenesis or another system relying upon a less rigidly-binary understanding of biological sex. Again, as with earlier descriptions of sex-swapping, Banks uses the word mother, relating gender identity to biological process and parental roles: "Within a year a woman who had been capable of carrying a child – who, indeed, might have been a mother – would be a man fully capable of fathering a child" (*E*, 322). While these descriptions are still clearly problematic, they again suggest Banks's need for convenient, shorthand, familiar terms in order to make his meaning clear for his readers, indicating the inadequacy of our already-gendered language.

Here, it seems clear that the Culture's system seems to support a binary understanding of sex, or at least that the majority of people who live as part of the Culture choose to live this way. While Banks substantiates this to an extent, stating that "generally people eventually changed back to their congenital sex," he does

acknowledge the existence of individuals whose sex exists somewhere in between, placing them on a spectrum none the less: "some people cycled back and forth between male and female all their lives, while some settled for an androgynous in-between state, finding there a comfortable equanimity" (321-322).

4.9 *Surface Detail*: Yime as 'Neuter'

The most prominent example of such an individual is Yime Nsokyi from *Surface Detail* – an SC agent working for the secretive sub-division known as 'Quietus' that concerns itself with the Sublimed (see Chapter Five of this thesis). Yime was born biologically female, but has decided to have her body altered to become effectively "neuter", which Banks – conflating the sex/gender distinction – describes as "exactly poised between the two standard genders" (210). When Yime considers her alterations, she also touches herself, putting

> one hand down between her legs, to feel the tiny slotted bud – like a third, bizarrely placed nipple – which was all that was left of her genitals. […] She touched the little bud at her groin again. Just as much like a tiny penis as it was a relocated nipple, she supposed (210-211).

It seems odd, in this context, for Yime's genitalia to be compared with a male sexual organ when her condition is apparently intended for the express purpose of removing her capacity for sexual pleasure. In this manner, while Banks uses the term neuter to describe Yime's body, his physical descriptions seem more akin to an intersexed body – which, as defined by the Intersex Society of North America, includes those: "born with genitals that seem to be in-between the usual male and female types."[427] The Society also specifically notes that "for example, a girl may be born with a noticeably large clitoris",[428] which may in fact be to what Yime refers as her "tiny penis". It is technically only because Yime is left feeling no sexual desire that links the change she has undergone to the word neuter, when the term is used as verb for the castration of animals.[429] Here, while the Culture often seems quite rigid in its binary

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[427] 'What is Intersex?', *Intersex Society of North America,* 1993-2008. http://www.isna.org/faq/what_is_intersex (Accessed 12 June, 2016).
[428] Ibid.
[429] 'Neuter', *Dictionary.com*. Random House, Inc. www.dictionary.com/browse/neuter (Accessed June 14, 2016).

understanding of sex, Banks's descriptions suggests that biological sex be considered as a fluid spectrum, with Yime's clitoris seeming so much like a penis.

Yime's decision to alter her biological sex to become neuter in this manner is explicitly linked to her career in Quietus, and seems entirely unrelated to her sense of personal identity. Some trans people, for example, choose to alter their sex in order to address "a lack of fit between felt sense of body and external appearance of the body".[430] This is not the case with Yime, however, who sees the alteration as way of dedicating herself to her role: "it had been her choice. A way of making real to herself her dedication to Quietus" (209). More than a merely aesthetic change, Yime's neuterism leaves her no longer feeling sexual desire: "she rubbed the little bud absently, remembering. There was no hint of pleasure in touching herself there any more; she might as well have caressed a knuckle or an ear lobe" (210). Neuterism, therefore, is portrayed as the result of a conscious decision on Yime's part, rather then something more innate like a sexual orientation, or a general inclination such as asexuality.[431] Describing neuterism like taking a vow of "Nun-like" celibacy (209), Yime portrays it without enthusiasm, as something practical and working to a greater good, remaining skeptical about more extreme actions as taken by other members of Quietus – presumably adopting neuterism on a more permanent basis – referring to their "spirit of denial and asceticism" as "taking matters too far" (209). While Yime's neuterism could possibly be classified as a third-gender, or exemplifying merely one of many potential genders, Yime suggests that it is only temporary: she "still thought of herself as female, always had," and "of course the decision was entirely reversible. She had wondered about changing back, becoming properly female again" (210). Again, with Yime, Banks further indicates the Culture's fundamental need to reassert binary gender roles; and the possibility of Yime remaining in her neuter or intersex condition on a more long-term or permanent basis does not seem to be considered.

Later on in the narrative of *Surface Detail,* Yime experiences a kind of lucid dream that features gendered imagery, implicitly relating to her neuterism. Acting in her Quietus capacity, Yime visits some creatures known as the Bulbitians, who are

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[430] Talia Bettcher, 'Feminist Perspectives on Trans Issues', The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-trans/#PhenTransEmb (Accessed 09 February, 2015).

[431] Recent studies have categorised asexuality as a sexual identity alongside hetero- and homo-sexuality, emphasising the qualitative differences between identity and disorder. www.psychologytoday.com/blog/living-single/200912/asexuals-who-are-they-and-why-are-they-important (Accessed 8 February, 2016).

held in high esteem due to their alleged communication with the Sublimed, themselves even more mysterious and elusive. Supporting the notion that the Sublimed and those with whom they have contact exist in another dimension, which necessarily appears strange and almost incomprehensible to human beings, this meeting between Yime and the inter-dimensional being appears to occur in a sub-conscious space, only understandable to humans in comparison with a particularly vivid lucid dream. For this section, Banks adopts a wonderfully surreal register, with prose that is rippling with resonant images. In this quasi-dream sequence, two images are prominent, both highly symbolic in nature. Firstly upon awakening, Yime sees herself as part of an elaborate "marionette" with strings stretching to her from above and from below: appearing towards the bottom of a great chain of the Culture's key elements, Yime sees drones, Minds, and GSVs above her, all linked in this giant web of puppets, with no strings visible in the highest position of control. The vision, however, soon changes, with the figures above and below her in the web becoming versions of herself:

> The person below was looking up at her. She waved down. The person below waved back. She looked a bit like her, but not entirely. Below the person below, there were more people. Human – maybe just pan-human further down, it was hard to tell – vaguely female, all looking a bit like her (306).

If the previous version of the marionette web image was focused on the Culture's hierarchy of intelligence and control, then this next version seems to suggest a shift in imagery to her own personal identity. While the reader is invited to assume that the fact that the humans are 'vaguely female' is because these figures are representations of Yime's image of herself and her own gender identity, it is also possible to read this image as in fact extending the previous representation of the Culture itself, with the people who wave back to Yime as the mass of Culture citizens, appearing female because they are a "feminised" society, at least to some extent, in the manner depicted above.

This imagery demonstrates Yime's subconscious response to her role in Contact and the Culture more generally – caught in a web of power, manipulated by dimly-seen forces which extend beyond her, seemingly forever. Confronted with near-infinite versions of herself, all implicitly different, suggests a quest for stable personal identity. This notion is supported by the form in which the Bulbition finally

appears, which directly reflects her own ambiguous and complex gender identity in an ironic manner:

> It was a cock; an erect phallus that any pan-human adult would have recognized, but with a vagina splitting it not quite from top to bottom, frilled with vertical double lips. Looking at it, it did quite a good job of looking exactly like both sets of genitals at once, with neither predominating (*SD*, 322).

This image, of course, of an elusive variety of alien/AI, revered for its supposed deep insight into the universe, which appears as a set of intersex genitalia, somewhat bluntly described, is partly intended for comic effect — at one point, she even bows to it (323). The comic tone of this sequence is further heightened by the fact that this image may well have been intended by Banks as a clear parody of Freudian dream imagery and psychoanalysis, for Yime – as intersex/neuter – lacks both a fully developed penis and a vagina. Still self-aware despite her liminal experience, Yime wonders "if her subconscious designed this for her", making Banks's Freudian suggestions explicit, and she too treats the vision as comic: "She laughed when she saw how the singularity was choosing to portray itself to her" (323).

Yime's vision, however, does have serious implications for her characterisation, as well as for the novel's overarching narrative. By choosing to become neuter, Banks seems to suggest, by removing the sexual urge and nullifying her sexual organs, Yime is repressing key aspects of her personal identity as well as her humanity. According to a Freudian system, these aspects must of course return through the subconscious, and perhaps signal that Yime's choice to live as neuter has negative consequences for her psychological make-up; this in turn has wider implications for the practices of the Culture itself, as this trauma – if it can in fact be called that – is the result of Yime's ability to exert almost full control over her body according to personal choice, enabled by the Culture's technoscience. The implication is that perhaps other fundamental aspects of the Culture's citizens, merely repressed rather than removed by modification, may return to traumatise them, in the manner that Zakalwe is metaphorically haunted by the ghosts of traumatic memories gathered over a radically extended life, as explored in Chapter Three of this thesis.

Reading Yime as intersex, then, does on some level challenge a binary understanding of sex by placing biology on a fluid spectrum, although the novel's

logic ultimately portrays Yime's condition as something temporary and strange, which can be overcome by a return to her 'natural' biological state as female.

4.10 Gender identities of AIs

If Banks's portrayal of the Culture often omits discussion of gender as separate from biological sex in human beings, there are varieties of AI in the series that are discussed in gendered terms – as has been commonplace in SF since Fritz Lang's depicted Maria, a female *Maschinenmensch* or 'Machine-Human', in his highly influential work of expressionist SF film *Metropolis* (1927). Instances are varied and numerous, with key examples including the titular "perfect woman robot" from Lester del Ray's 'Helen O'Loy' (1938),[432] Pris, a "basic pleasure model" of replicant from Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) or Ava from Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2015). The particular prevalence of feminine and/or female robots in SF has led to the widespread use of the portmanteau "fembot" (female robot) or "gynoid", the latter taken from a novel by Gwyneth Jones.[433] An important early example of a male robot in SF is the eponymous protagonist 'Robbie', from Isaac Asimov's classic short story collection *I, Robot*. Robbie befriends a girl, and seeks to dispel fears that an AI would turn against its creators, by eventually saving the life of the girl. Douglas Adam's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979) features two contrasting examples of male AI: the ship computer Eddie, whose constant cheery demeanor even in the face of mortal danger is a source of comic irony; and Marvin the Paranoid Android, a perennially depressed and pessimistic robot. The comic television series *Red Dwarf* (1988-present) provides a notable example of an SF narrative that used gendered AIs to successfully subvert gender expectations, as well as to parody the genre's less credible tropes. For example: the computer on board the ship Red Dwarf, known as Holly – appearing simply as a disembodied head on a black background – was played by both male and female actors at various points in the series (Norman Lovett and Hattie Hayridge respectively), following a 'head sex change', with no alteration in his/her fundamental nature, suggesting the superficiality of many of our notions about gender.

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[432] Robert Scholes, Eric S. Rabkin, eds., *Science Fiction: History, Science, Vision* (Oxford University Press, New York Inc: 1977) 169.
[433] Gwyneth Jones, *Divine Endurance*, 1985.

4.10.1 *Excession*: Amorphia as Androgynous

While the various artificial intelligences that appear throughout the Culture series – drones, Minds, avatoids, etc. – are often given a gendered identity of some kind, many are not, and are referred to as a non-gendered 'it'. Avatars or Avatoids – humanoid representatives of the hub Mind that forms the core of an Orbital – are the variety of AI in the series that is most frequently gendered, perhaps due to their deliberately anthropomorphic characteristics. In the Culture, every ship's Mind is capable of allowing its consciousness to be embodied as an avatoid – a kind of humanoid entity – giving it the freedoms a physical form allows, such as the ability to move, speak and touch. Frequently in the series, these avatoids are used by their host ships to perform informative, protective or guidance-related roles – somewhere between host, ambassador and medical advisor. As mentioned above in *Excession*, Banks depicts an AI, Amorphia who – like the human character Yime in *Surface Detail* – is positioned somewhere between male and female. Amorphia is the avatar of the GSV *Sleeper Service*, which Dajeil "thought of as her host and protector" (*E*, 4). Amorphia regularly visits Dajeil, ensuring that she is safe and comfortable, and perhaps also to subtly examine Dajeil's inclinations towards violence and/or revenge resulting from her traumatic experiences. Later in the novel, when Amorphia reveals that Dajeil may have to leave the *Sleeper Service*, and therefore also leave her AI companion, Dajeil sincerely expresses her gratitude to Amorphia as it has "looked after", "indulged" and "humored" her; Dajeil tries to cover her emotions by "smiling insincerely", but breaks down into tears and sends Amorphia away (*E*, 9-10).

In the same way that Yime is "exactly poised between the two standard genders," Amorphia is described as "deliberately formed to look not simply neither male nor female but as perfectly, artificially posited between maleness and femaleness as it was possible to be" (*E*, 6). Amorphia, however, is referred to explicitly using the term "androgynous," defined as "partly male and partly female in appearance" or "of indeterminate sex",[434] while Yime is described with the term 'neuter', which plays on this latter term's dual meaning: in linguistics "denoting a gender of nouns in some languages, typically contrasting with masculine and feminine or common"; and, in relation to animals, meaning "lacking developed sexual

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[434] 'androgynous', *Oxford Dictionaries*. Oxford University Press, www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/androgynous (Accessed October 28, 2015).

organs, or having had them removed."[435] The implication, then, is that Amorphia is 'both' while Yime is 'neither'.

As explained above, Yime has deliberately changed her body to look this way, although not motivated by aesthetics, and with the resulting androgyny (or at least near-androgyny) only the by-product of her wish to stop experiencing sexual desire in order to improve her career. While the reasoning for Amorphia's appearance is not made explicit, and nowhere is it suggested that the avatoid's androgyny is anything other than its 'natural' state of being, it seems reasonable to speculate that – given that other avatoids are gendered, as explored below – Amorphia may have adopted an androgynous appearance for its role as companion for Dajeil, associating gender-neutrality with a neutral stance in relation to Dajeil's history of violent behaviour.

As well as maintaining a gender-neutral image, Banks's descriptions of Amorphia's avatoid body evoke the gothic, casting it as almost Wight- or spectre-like: "a gaunt, pale […] creature, almost skeletally thin and a full head taller than Dajeil, who was herself both slender and tall" (*E*, 5). In turn, the avatoid chooses to complement its physique by wearing suitably somber attire: "Over the last dozen or so years, the avatar had taken to dressing in all black, and it was in black leggings, black tunic and a short black jerkin that it appeared now, its cropped blonde hair covered by a similarly dark skull cap" (5). At points, Banks relates these two facets of the avatoid's appearance, rendering Amorphia as a "cadaverously sexless creature" (6).

Amorphia's demeanor might perhaps, in a more stereotypical novel, prefigure portends of distrust; yet, as explored above, Dajeil and Amorphia have a friendly if somewhat stilted relationship. Despite their friendship, however, and perhaps at least partly due to the long period she has spent in relative isolation, Dajeil cannot resist the temptation to conduct experiments upon Amorphia: playing "small, private games" (6) even during serious conversation, which explore the extent to which Amorphia is not human, and merely a kind of artificial performance like gender itself. One of these games involves examining Amorphia's gestures, movements and responses. Sometimes Banks has the avatoid effectively reproduce human gestures, which seem designed to help put Dajeil and other humans at ease around the avatar, such as nervously "playing with its fingernails" or shrugging, "the most human gesture she had ever seen the avatar make" (9). On other occasions, however, as the result of

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[435] 'neuter', *Oxford Dictionaries*. Oxford University Press.
www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/neuter (Accessed October 28, 2015).

Dajeil's games, Amorphia's performs actions, such as maintaining totally unblinking eyes or an impossibly steady hand, that could never be achieved by a human being, and achieve an affect of uncanniness.

Many of Amorphia's more human gestures – hands clasped behind the back, hand on chest, a smile – reflect intrinsically human traits and emotions, and seem carefully chosen by Banks to further emphasize the avatar's gender-neutrality by avoiding stereotypically masculine or feminine gestures. One result is that Dajeil's gestures, by contrast are thrown into sharp relief as highly feminine, at least in a stereotypical sense, especially in her pregnant condition: Dajeil appears "straightening and holding the small of her back", "absently stroking her swollen abdomen through the rich fabric of the heavy dress she wore"; she "carefully" tucks her "long, night-black hair back beneath her plain hairband" (4), or tears the hair-band off, and shakes her head, "setting free her long dark hair so that it half covered her face" (9).

4.10.2 *Surface Detail*: Sensia as Female

Elsewhere in the series, Banks depicts Culture avatoids whose gender identities fall further towards the ends of the spectrum, with Sensia, representative of the *Sense Amid Madness, Wit Amidst Folly*, from *Surface Detail* depicted as female (*SD*, 62) and Klatsli Quike from *Matter* as male, as analysed above.

In a similar manner to that of Amorphia, Sensia's role in *Surface Detail* is part-nurse, part-counselor – carefully rehabilitating Lededje, another victim of extreme trauma, back to a stable understanding of her current situation. Both Dajeil and Lededje have been closely affected by murder: while Dajeil was responsible for the death of one fetus born to herself and Genar-Hofoen, Lededje meets Sensia in fact following her own resurrection, having been 'murdered' by her long-term captor Joile Veppers. Again, as with the scenes featuring Amorphia and Dajeil, Banks draws attention to small, usually inconsequential details, in order to emphasise that Sensia is not human. At one stage Lededje notices the unusual degree of control exerted by the avatoid over her own eyes, "*her eyes stay too wide*, she [Lededje] found herself thinking. *She's facing into the sunlight; a real person would be squinting by now, wouldn't they?*" (*SD*, 63). Later in the novel, Sensia turns to face Lededje "swiveling, not just her head but her shoulders and upper body, so that the younger woman could not pretend not to have noticed" (153-153) – this final clause suggesting that, like Dajeil, the avatar, fully aware of the effect that this gesture would have on the human,

was playing subtle games with her companion.

Yet Sensia is identified as unambiguously female. When she first appears, Lededje sees a "rather plain but very amiable-looking lady of late middle age standing outside," with "bunned white hair, sparkling green eyes and was dressed in a plain dark suit, unadorned" (63). When Sensia speaks, she uses "a pleasant-sounding female voice," which Lededje would "have guessed belonged to a relatively elderly woman, and one who was smiling as she spoke. She'd had a favourite aunt who'd sounded like this person, though perhaps not quite as well-spoken" (62). In this way, Sensia's gender identity seems more explicitly linked to her role as a kind of counselor and rehabilitator to Lededje. As the first person Lededje meets after awakening from her 'death', Sensia has many potentially traumatic facts which she needs to gently reveal to Lededje, following her temporary amnesia: the full extent of her traumatic past; the fact that she has been murdered; the fact that she is currently part of a hyper-real computer simulation; the fact that she is in a somewhat-alien Culture environment; and that she will soon be physically resurrected. Described as "plain" and "amiable", with "sparkling" eyes and a "pleasant-sounding" and "well-spoken" voice, Sensia seems specifically engineered to aid this process, appearing as unintimidating and calming as possible. Even Sensia's laugh – described as "surprisingly deep", presumably because she is female, and "almost raucous" to the extent that Lededje inadvertently smiles too "despite the apparent gravity of the subject" (66) – works upon Lededje to ease her worry. Given that Lededje's rapist, captor and murderer, Veppers, was a man, perhaps the *Sense Amid Madness, Wit Amidst Folly* chose to appear to Lededje as an aunt-like woman in late middle age, to create significant symbolic distance between victim and perpetrator. In this manner, Sensia also provides another example of a Culture character who chooses an appearance that clearly denotes older age, even in a society when most people choose to have their physical age fixed in their mid-twenties.

As in the scenes depicting Amorphia and Dajeil, the interaction between AI Sensia and human Lededje works to draw attention to the physical differences between the two characters, Following Lededje's revention, the pair discuss what it means to have a physical existence, with Sensia arguing for the importance of the corporeal: "Embodiment was all, Sensia had told her, ironically while they were talking in the Virtual […] the precise form that your physicality took had a profound, in some ways defining influence on your personality" (152). Following this, the

details of Sensia's artificial body – despite generally passing for human – are revealed: the "avatar's brazen skin" appears "false, as though she was made of metal, not genuine flesh and bone" (152). As with descriptions of Dajeil's pregnant body, in contrast with the machine-like exterior of Sensia's body, the femininity of Lededje's dress and body (at least by the stereotypical standards of Western cultures) becomes accentuated: whilst becoming accustomed to her to her new body, Lededje observes her "pale purple blouson pants" and "filmy but opaque long-sleeved top" (151).

4.11 Conclusion

Through his Culture series, Banks clearly demonstrates a deep and pervasive concern with issues surrounding gender, especially concerning its fundamental nature, the formation of gender identity, associated social roles, and the feminist struggle for social equality. By developing the Culture itself as a place of almost infinitely varied and unconstrained morphology, Banks potentially places gender on a fluid spectrum, using his series to construct and examine the plethora of situations, bodies, identities and relationships that may arise, yet his thinking in this regard is limited.

As with other themes vital to his work, an examination of gender in the Culture series further reveals the extent to which Banks's conception and development of the Culture and its universe – despite also demonstrating a huge capacity for imaginative extrapolation – cannot fully escape the trappings of the real-word environment in which he wrote. If, as Jameson has maintained, this is indeed an inevitable aspect of utopian fiction, and SF more generally, then it serves to allow Banks's series to comment further upon topical issues and debates; and this dual quality is at the heart of many of the critical issues and problems discussed above. Male figures such as Gurgeh, Genar-Hofoen, and to some extent Linter, exist in the Culture environments exhibiting a mode of masculinity that belongs to patriarchy, if the latter is defined as "inherently hierarchical and aggressive".[436] Used deliberately as recognisable examples of more traditional Handy Men, clearly a minority in the Culture, Banks uses them to offer contrast with other Culture characters who have moved beyond such attitudes. Banks's texts, therefore, become an engagement with ongoing debates about the extent to which these characteristics are the result of nature or nurture, and how a politically progressive society such as the Culture could

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[436] 'Patriarchy', *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, by, Sarah Gamble (New York: Routledge, 1999; 2006) 271.

instigate the process of such a reconstruction. Also, through the ways in which Banks's depictions of AI characters are sometimes gendered, the extent to which gender forms an integral part of our thinking about the nature of personal identity is revealed.

The ways in which Banks reconstructs the space opera archetype of the Handy Man, offering – despite assertions to the contrary – largely positive active, empowered and technologically savvy women protagonists in typically male roles, are crucial to supporting his status as a writer seriously engaged in the feminist project, as well as one engaged in reconstructing and updating a stale and reactionary sub-genre.

Just as his deeply held beliefs in gender equality and sexual openness informed his writing and the conception of his utopia in the manner outlined above, Banks's equally firm views on matters pertaining to organised religion, faith-based worldviews and superstition have underpinned the series from the outset. The next chapter is therefore concerned with Banks's portrayal of religion and spiritual, faith-based worldviews within the Culture series. It addresses the question of whether a place exists within the Culture for such views, whether religion is necessary to Banks's vision of utopia, and whether in fact the seeming absence of religion in the Culture constitutes a total shift to secularity, moving beyond religious systems altogether.

Chapter 5: Postreligion

"Reason shapes the future, but superstition infects the present" — 'Piece', *The State of the Art*, Iain M Banks (97)

This chapter is concerned with the question of whether or not the Culture has moved beyond reliance upon organised religion and faith-based worldviews, as Banks considered to be the case. It examines various core elements of the Culture that seem to reproduce concepts from major world religions – souls, gods, afterlives, transcendence – and are sometimes allowed to acquire a quasi-religious significance, using close-readings of *Look to Windward*, *Surface Detail* and *The Hydrogen Sonata*. I argue that, despite the lingering presence of certain concepts linked to religious ideas on a metaphorical level, the Culture is most accurately and most beneficially understood as a materialist, non-spiritual and non-religious system, achieved using advanced technoscience; and when other, faith-based societies appear in the series, Banks frequently allows the Culture's viewpoint to critique such philosophies.

5.1 Banks and Religion

As was the case with most subjects upon which Banks held strong views, the role of religion in society affected both the way that he lived his life and the nature of his fiction. Describing himself as a "militant" and "evangelical" atheist for "over twenty years", Banks was an Honorary Associate of the National Secular Society,[437] and a distinguished supporter of the Humanist Society of Scotland.[438] He wrote for publications from the Rationalist Association, such as *New Humanist* magazine, frequently throughout his career.[439] Banks married his second wife Adele in 2013 at a Humanist wedding at Inverlochy Castle Hotel, Scotland, and – when Banks unfortunately passed away shortly afterwards – his family and friends attended a Memorial Ceremony in Sterling led by a Humanist Celebrant.[440] Banks frequently spoke out publically against what he regarded as religious privilege in society, most notably when in 2009 he published letters in national newspapers, such as The *Times*,

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[437] See author profiles at: www.secularism.org.uk/iainbanks.html and www.humanism-scotland.org.uk/about-us/the-hss-today.html (Accessed 28 February, 2011)

[438] See: www.humanism-scotland.org.uk/news/in_the_news/tributes-pour-in-for-our-distinguished-supporter-iain-banks/ (Accessed 28 October, 2015).

[439] For example, see: 'Q&A: Iain Banks', Editorial staff, *New Humanist*, 5/07/2012. rationalist.org.uk/articles/2832/qa-iain-banks (Accessed 28 October, 2015).

[440] See: 'Iain Banks marries in his favourite place', Stephan McGinty, *The Scotsman*, 08/08/2013 www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/books/iain-banks-marries-in-his-favourite-place-1-2882190 (Accessed 28 October, 2015).

arguing that state funding to faith schools should be stopped as they "foster sectarianism".[441]

Banks's passionate views in this regard permeate all of his fiction in a similar manner to his love of SF. The realism of Banks's mainstream fiction often allows for this message to be conveyed most directly. This is most notable in *The Wasp Factory* with its scathing satire of religious indoctrination and ritual, *The Crow Road* (1992) which uses the *bildungsroman* form to playfully and ironically explore the relationships between agnosticism, atheism and more idiosyncratic personal belief systems,[442] and *Whit* (1995) in which Banks returned to the satirical mode, deconstructing the arcane rituals and illogical beliefs of a fictitious Scottish cult through a sympathetic portrayal of one of their naive members, and exposing the cult's leader as a charlatan.[443] Similarly, Banks used the Culture series to critique and deconstruct religious worldviews, frequently drawing upon the techniques of defamiliarisation and estrangement that are core to the SF genre. The texts in the series most notable for their engagement with such themes are as follows. In *Consider Phlebas*, the uncompromising religious fundamentalism of the Idiran Empire is at the heart of a hugely destructive war between this civilisation and the atheistic Culture, which Rob Duggan reads as a mirroring the "Clash of Civilisations" in the first Gulf War.[444] *Look to Windward* explores the results of a failed attempt by the Culture to reform the highly-religious Chelgrian society, built upon a draconian caste system and a Viking-esque belief that those who died in battle will earn their place in the afterlife. In both *Matter* and *The Hydrogen Sonata*, Banks establishes the elaborate cosmological and spiritual beliefs of a religious society, only to gradually undermine the tenants upon which this belief is built, in a similar manner to *The Wasp Factory* and *Whit*. In *Surface Detail*, Banks pits the Culture against various societies who use sadistic afterlives as both deterrent from and punishment for transgression in life.

5.2 A Total Lack of Respect for all Things Majestic

From the outset, it is clear that Banks intended the Culture, as his "personal utopia", to be a vessel through which he could expound philosophies and ideologies close to

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[441]'Iain Banks: Stop Funding for Faith Schools', The *Times*, 16 August 2009 www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/news/uk_news/article182309.ece (Accessed 12 October 2015). Behind The *Times* paywall)
[442] Iain Banks, *The Crow Road*, (London: Abacus, 1992).
[443] Iain Banks, *Whit.* (London: Abacus, 1995) 10.
[444] Rob Duggan, 'Iain M. Banks, Postmodernism and the Gulf War'.

his heart; and, as his "secular heaven", he intended to construct the Culture as a Humanist, secularist and atheistic alternative to the more religious-inclined societies he developed in the series. Therefore, Banks conceived of every element that makes up the Culture, from Terminal to Orbital, in a rationalistic and materialist manner, predicated on the power of technoscience.

By imagining the Culture as "secularist" Banks suggests that, in this society, the "state takes a neutral position with respect to religion", as is the meaning of the word according to Stephen Law.[445] If the Minds are understood as a minarchy, then their role as state function is so minimal and *ad hoc* that it would scarcely seem to problematise their relationship with religion as this understanding characterises them as largely neutral towards almost all actions of Culture citizens anyway – regardless of their personal views. If the Culture is understood as fully anarchic, and the Minds do not perform the role of state, then the question of the relationship between "Church and state", as it were, becomes moot. The Culture, however, clearly does fulfill State functions, as argued in Chapter One of this thesis, so would necessarily need to provide any citizen with the freedom "to follow and espouse, or reject and criticize, both religious and atheist beliefs."[446]

Yet, any trace of religion or spirituality – even in a personal manner, outside of formalised systems – appears to be entirely absent from the Culture: as Zakalwe observes, "There are no Gods, we are told, so I must make my own salvation" (*UoW*, 233) and he proposes a toast to the Culture's "total lack of respect for all things majestic" (*UoW*, 259). This strongly implies that Banks conceived of the Culture in accordance with his desire for religion to die out, and be replaced by scientific rationalism and Humanism. Speaking in 2012, Banks commented that, while at one stage he had considered this process to be in progress, he no longer believed it likely: "I think a lot of us [atheists] were naïve and thought that religion would quietly slip away […] Religion should have sloped off embarrassed by now."[447] In the post-9/11 climate, however, Banks conceded that the reverse had in fact occurred, with conflict due to religious fundamentalism clearly on the rise; by continuing to value religion,

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[445] Stephen Law, *A Very Short Introduction to Humanism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 3.
[446] Ibid.
[447] Michael Parsons, 'Interview: Iain Banks talks 'Surface Detail' with Wired', *Wired* Magazine. 14 August, 2010.
www.wired.co.uk/news/archive/2010-10/14/iain-m-banks-interview (Accessed 28 November, 2010).

Banks argued, humanity is rendered "embarrassing" and "gullible".[448] Within the Culture's artificial utopian habitats, then, religion does seem to have "sloped off", as Banks desired.

Yet this raises the question: given its fundamental belief in freedom, couldn't a citizen of the Culture be religious in some manner if they wished? While Banks depicts various different religious societies and cultures within the Culture series, people with such beliefs appear never to identify as citizens of the Culture itself. One exception is Linter from 'The State of the Art' who, having "found Jesus", is "going to enter the Roman Catholic Church" at the end of the novella (*TSotA*, 191). Yet, as explored in Chapter Three of this thesis, Linter is in the process of reverting to the human basic form in order to live on Earth, and is therefore joining a society outside the Culture that continues to practice religion. While Linter has several reasons for wishing to leave the Culture, and he does not indicate that he has been persecuted for religious beliefs in any way whilst living there, the desire to live in a society which understands this way of thinking is one such reason for his desire to return to a human basic form – further indication that the practicing of religion in the Culture is, at the very least uncommon, if not actually completely absent.

The protagonist of *Consider Phlebas*, Horza, explains how the Culture views monotheists and others with similar views:

> the Culture's attitude to somebody who believed in an omnipotent God was to pity them, and to take no more notice of the substance of their faith then one would take of the ramblings of somebody claiming to be Emperor of the Universe. The nature of belief wasn't totally irrelevant – along with the person's background and upbringing, it might tell you something about what had gone wrong with them – but you didn't take their views *seriously* (*CP*, 157).

While Horza's views must be treated with caution due to his vocal hatred of the Culture, these comments do chime with some of Banks's own comments. In an interview for BBC Radio 4 about *The Wasp Factory*, Banks was asked if he considers religion "a waste of time", to which he tactfully responded: "nothing that people believe in to that degree is entirely wrong or wasted". While religion is "technically wrong" he argued, "it tells us about ourselves, about what we want to believe, about what we wish to be the case. I don't want to denigrate anyone's belief in any

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[448] Ibid.

particular religion because it means something to them."[449] To Banks, then, religion remains relevant to a certain extent – for an understanding of psychology and as a coping mechanism for individuals, but he clearly does not regard it is a worthwhile social function. Perhaps, then, the Culture's attitude towards faith could be similarly characterised as politely tolerant and respectful, but with the sense that they are humouring such views, and – as Horza notes – not taking them too seriously. For ultimately, the Culture itself is presented as the natural result of the increased rationalisation of humankind, directly commensurate with the decline of religious belief. The more we learn about the world through science and reason, Banks implies, the more we will become embarrassed by our supernatural interpretations and narrow understandings, until eventually we no longer see the need for such a way of thinking at all. This suggests that, despite their tolerance of believers, becoming a Culture citizen is a kind of process that ultimately entails coming to view the universe in a more rational manner. Religion then is being, or may already have been, "Cultured out" of Banks's secular heaven: to be a religious Culture citizen, therefore, seems something of an oxymoron.

5.3. The Culture as Humanist Utopia

It has long been argued that the withdrawal of religion from society is essential for a form of utopia to exist, as A C. Grayling explains, arguing for humanism as the natural replacement:

> Because humanism draws on 2,500 years of non-religious ethical thinking since Socrates, it is a deep, rich tradition of insight, wisdom and inspiration, and it is this without any supernaturalistic beliefs involved. That means that it offers the possibility of truly global ethics that everyone could live by. Consider a utopia in which people, having been liberated from religion at last, can agree to base their ethics on a generous view of human nature and needs.[450]

Here Grayling implies that humankind cannot live together in harmony and prosperity without a purely rational manner of thinking that unites us all through a shared sense of identity, drawn from our common heritage as the same species. Both Banks and

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[449] BBC Radio 4 – Bookclub, 'Iain Banks: The Wasp Factory', 10 November, 2011. Quote, circa 15:00 in clip. www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b016w0nf (Accessed 27 April, 2016).
[450] A.C. Grayling, 'Humanism's faith in reason represents out best hope', 03/03/2013, the *Guardian*. www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/mar/03/humanism-religion-reason-our-best-hope (Accessed 26 October, 2015).

Grayling adhere to the variant of Humanism propounded by organisations such as the British Humanist Association (BHA), which promotes a stridently anti-religious message, as opposed to other variants that allow for elements of secularism and rationality to be amalgamated with religious ideas.[451] As Banks explained to Jude Roberts,

> I think I fit the dictionary definition of a Humanist pretty well: non-religious, non-superstitious, basing morality on shared human values of decency, tolerance, reason, justice, the search for truth, and so on. My personal take on this goes a little further – as any serious SF writer's would kind of have to unless they reject the very idea of both AI and aliens – to encompass the rights both of these (as it were, still potential) categories, but other than that I'm probably fairly typical.[452]

This understanding of humanism, however, has been implicitly challenged by Law, who emphasises that "non-religious" humanism is merely one way of being a humanist. As he states, "clearly, many humanists consider religion, not just false, but dangerous. Some even view religion as a great evil. But not all", and Law emphasises the fact that religious people may too identify as humanist, or collaborate with humanist projects. [453] Furthermore, Law argues that "a humanist need not be a utopian, convinced that the application of science and reason will inevitably usher in a Brave New World of peace and contentment."[454] Following this view, Grayling's comments above need not be taken as broadly representative of the views and outlooks of all humanists, although Banks made his non-religious stance very clear.

In many ways, therefore, it seems straightforward to identify the Culture as a kind of non-religious, humanist society, in accordance with Banks's own views. Corliss Lamont identifies a humanist civilisation as "one in which the principles of the Humanist philosophy are dominant and find practical embodiment in laws, institutions, economics, culture, and indeed all the most significant aspects of individual and social life"[455] – a description that, based upon previous analysis above, seems very apt. The Culture's fundamentally socialist economic system, for example,

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[451] The correct understanding of what it means to be both a "secular humanist" and a religious humanist has been hotly debated. For an overview of this debate, and one opinion on the matter, see: Tom Flynn, 'What is Religious Humanism – really?, *Center for Inquiry*, 23 August, 2012. www.centerforinquiry.net/blogs/entry/what_is_religious_humanism_--_really/ (Accessed 27 April, 2016.)

[452] Jude Roberts, 'A Few Questions about the Culture'.

[453] Stephen Law, A Very Short Introduction to Humanism, 6-7.

[454] Ibid. 4.

[455] Corliss Lamont, *The Philosophy of Humanism*, (London: Pemberton Publishing Co Ltd, 1949; 1965) 273.

geared towards equal treatment of human beings, is as rational and logical as it is profoundly moral; using extremely advanced computers to fulfill State functions seems to epitimise a rational approach; enabling citizens full control of their own bodies and life-spans demonstrates the "practical embodiment" of humanism in the most literal way; and SC's missions form a humanistic version of the *technologiade* metanarrative.

Yet the issue is more complex and warrants closer inspection. Sherryl Vint has clearly identified humanism as an integral aspect of Banks's conception of the Culture as well as identifying important problems relating to this conception. Vint challenges Banks's humanist thinking for its essentialism, and argues that it amounts to a homogenisation of our varied human experiences, but does not challenge the Culture's fundamental rationality and secularity. Understanding the Culture as humanist in a non-religious sense becomes more complicated when a certain quasi-religious thread seems to weave its way through the complex framework of technoscientific systems that Banks relies upon as the basis for his utopia, which are not as obviously secular and atheistic as he perhaps intended.

5.4 The Culture's Quasi-religious Framework

While religion may not be recognised within Banks's utopia, there are several crucial aspects that fundamentally underpin the Culture, allowing it to exist in the form that it does, which appear to reproduce concepts derived from religion, or may be read as problematic in regards to a fully materialistic, rational conception of the universe. Critical engagement on religion in the Culture series is in its relative infancy compared with other aspects. Victor Sage in 'The Politics of Petrifaction: Culture, Religion, History in the Fiction of Iain Banks and John Banville' mentions the politics of the Culture, but only deals with religious themes in Banks's mainstream fiction.[456] Timothy C. Baker and Moira Martingale both argue for the persistence of religious ideas in Banks's work, with particular emphasis on the "God-like" role that they see the Minds playing in the series, touching upon aspects of this quasi-religious framework.[457] Jackson and Heilman have argued for Banks's concept of the Sublime

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[456] Victor Sage, 'The Politics of Petrification: Culture, Religion, History in the Fiction of Iain Banks and John Banville,' in *Modern Gothic: A Reader*, eds. Victor Sage and Allan Lloyd (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996).

[457] Timothy C. Baker, 'Scottish Utopian Fiction and the Invocation of God', *Utopian Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2010; and Moira Martingale, *Gothic Dimensions – Ian Banks: Time Lord*.

– a form of retirement from normal galactic life – as a spiritual practice,[458] while Jim Clarke explores the Sublime in fully materialistic terms.[459] By reading the roles of the Minds within the Culture as akin to the roles of gods in religious understandings of the universe, Baker and Martingale implicitly draw attention to other aspects of the Culture – digital capturing of personality and consciousness, and virtual afterlives, for example – which may suggest that elements of Banks's utopia reproduce religious concepts and philosophies.

5.4.1 Evangelical Atheism and Utopian Crusades

Public thinkers who propound strong atheistic views criticising religion, such as Christopher Hitchens, Grayling and Richard Dawkins – sometimes referred to as the "New Atheists"[460] – with whom Banks could be compared, frequently face the accusation that the vehemence of their opinions merely reproduces that of the institutions they oppose. Challenging the theological scholarship of the New Atheists, Brad Gregory argues that "Hitchens and Harris, Dawkins and Onfray proceed like fundamentalist doppelgangers of the untutored biblical literalists whom they deplore", while he critises Dawkins's "fundamentalist atheism" for the unyielding certainty of his views, which Gregory suggests amounts to bigotry.[461] Writing in *The God Delusion* (2006), Dawkins expressed incredulity at such arguments, explaining that he is "often described as a deeply religious man", and, perhaps because he is a highly prominent spokesman for atheism, many feel that has his work has turned into a crusade for a kind of atheist conversion.[462]

Following a similar logic, commentators have argued that the vehemence of the Culture's atheism, coupled with the practices of Contact and SC, also amount to anti-religious crusades, attempting to impose their views and way of life upon others. Vint calls the "seductive danger" of utopia that desires to "convert others" an "evangelical impulse", and therefore potentially coding the Contact and SC's actions in quasi-religious terms.[463] Balveda, for example, who leaves the Culture in 'A Gift

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[458] Jackson and Heilman, 'Outside Context Problems: Liberalism and the Other in the Work of Iain M. Banks', 253-256.

[459] Jim Clarke, 'The Sublime in Iain M. Banks's 'Culture' novels', *Vector*, #281, Winter 2015. 7-11.

[460] Brad S. Gregory, 'The Insights and Oversights of the "New Atheists"', *Logos*, 12:4, Fall 2009. 17-55.

[461] Ibid. 27; 37.

[462] Richard Dawkins. *The God Delusion*. (London: Transworld Publishers, 2006). 33.

[463] Vint, 'Iain M. Banks: The Culture-al Body', 86.

from the Culture', does so in part due to the "evangelical" nature of SC (*TSotA*, 17). Duggan compares the Culture with Jean Baudrillard's conception of the real-world West, for the way in which its expansion mimics that of "late capitalism's global 'progress'",[464] observing that the Culture replicates "Baudrillard's presentation of the West as a monolithic threat to diverse social formations, and especially Islam,"[465] so effectively characterising the Culture as an anti-religious crusade. Furthermore, even Banks described himself frequently using the tongue-in-cheek phrase "evangelical atheist".[466]

Following this logic, then, the Culture's utopianism is understood using religious concepts as metaphor, using the same logic underpinning Murray N. Rothbard's article 'Karl Marx: Communist as Religious Eschatologist', which argues that Marx's vision of Communism is underpinned by the same logic as core elements of Christian theology:

> In the same way as the return of the Messiah, in Christian theology, will put an end to history and establish a new heaven and a new earth, so the establishment of communism would put an end to human history. […] for Marx and other schools of communists, mankind, led by a vanguard of secular saints, will establish a secularized Kingdom of Heaven on Earth.[467]

Applied to the Culture, this would place the Handy (Wo)Men of SC as this "vanguard of secular saints" and the Culture itself as "a secularized Kingdom of Heaven on earth" – both of which are inherently problematic assertions, as is argued below. In turn the radical shifts through which the Culture may have passed, forming the basis of each chapter of this thesis, may be understood as apocalypses, as explained in the Introduction – a further example of this logic that applies religious concepts to secular ideas through metaphor.

Baker too introduces the notion that Banks relies upon "quasi-religious terminology" in the Culture series by drawing attention to the religious metaphors Banks uses to describe the Idiran-Culture war in *Consider Phlebas*: "the Culture *was* threatened, not with conquest, or loss of life, craft, resource of territory, but with

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[464] Duggan, 'Iain M. Banks, Postmodernism and the Gulf War', 7.
[465] Ibid.
[466] Barry Duke, '"Faith is basically bananas", says dying "Evangelical Atheist" Iain Banks', The *Freethinker*, 4 April, 2013. freethinker.co.uk/2013/04/04/faith-is-basically-bananas-says-dying-evangelical-atheist-iain-banks/ (Accessed 16 March, 2013).
[467] Murray N. Rothbard, 'Karl Marx: Communist as Religious Eschatologist', *The Review of Austrian Economics*, December 1990, Volume 4, Issue 1, pp 123-179. 1.

something more important: the loss of its purpose and that clarity of conscience; the destruction of its spirit; the surrender of its soul."[468] Here Baker draws attention to the fact that the Culture places higher regard upon philosophical notions such as "purpose", "conscience", "spirit" and "soul" than upon material concerns like "craft", "resources" or "territory", even over ethical concerns like "loss of life". The words "spirit" and "soul" undeniably have religious connotations – suggesting an immaterial, transcendent essence – yet it seem very unlikely that Banks is suggesting that the Culture features these aspects in such a literal manner, as Baker's use of the prefix "quasi-" suggests he is aware. It is much more likely that Banks used these terms metaphorically, drawing upon the gravitas granted to them through their religious connotations, but ultimately to convey an entirely secular concept: the Culture's essence, the core of its identity, purpose and meaning.

Baker confirms that the Culture is "a completely irreligious society" in one sense;[469] yet he also argues that the Culture is in fact "presented as a society in which freedom from religion is itself a religion."[470] While he does not qualify this statement at length, Baker seems to suggests that the Culture practices a kind of fervent Scientism that is merely another form of religion; through this logic, placing one's trust in evidence gained through the empirical method is the same as having faith in divine revelation and spiritual insight, which is clearly problematic. Banks was very clear in his view that "the world works in a certain way, and the way you find out about it is you do science, you do experiments, and you use reason", whereas "religion just doesn't do that […] it doesn't describe reality".[471] The extent to which such views have actively become a crusade on the part of the New Atheists is debatable, but it seems clear that there is an important, fundamental difference between worldviews based on evidence obtained through scientific practice and those based on revelation. Furthermore, Banks argued that "the main reason that so many people are self-reportedly religious is because that's just the way they've been brought up".[472] If the Culture offers an environment where citizens are not assigned to a religious belief system at birth, and – once they are old enough to comprehend such

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[468] Banks, *Consider Phlebas*, 482, in, Baker, 'Scottish Utopian Fiction and the Invocation of God', 106.
[469] Ibid.
[470] Baker, 'Scottish Utopian Fiction and the Invocation of God', 106.
[471] Parsons, 'Interview: Iain Banks talks 'Surface Detail' with Wired'.
[472] Ibid.

issues – they can adopt or reject any kind of worldview as they see fit, then freedom from religion has not become a religion in itself, it is just freedom.

In other respects, however, the notion of a quasi-religious element to the Culture is more convincing. Baker's analysis of the Culture draws exclusively on *Consider Phlebas* rather than the whole series, and therefore reflects the differences in interpretation that are possible dependent upon which text(s) are selected. It is in a later book, *Surface Detail*, where Banks developed the notion that a Culture citizen, despite their lack of religious belief, may still have a kind of 'soul'.

5.4.2 Secular Souls

Out of the quasi-religious elements mentioned, 'soul' is perhaps the most important, as it is not only linked with some of the other elements, but it makes them possible. In the Culture universe, all forms of sentient life, including AIs, have what Banks calls a soul. The term 'soul' is somewhat slippery, creating a variety of different understandings and definitions in the fields of both theology and philosophy. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, the soul is "the immaterial 'I' that possesses conscious experience, controls passion, desire, and action, and maintains a perfect identity from birth (or before) to death (or after)".[473] The *Encyclopedia Britannica* adds that, "in theology, the soul is further defined as that part of the individual which partakes of divinity and often is considered to survive the death of the body".[474]

Yet, despite the connotations of the term, souls in the Culture novels are quite different. As described in *Surface Detail*, souls are "mind-states […] dynamic full-brain inventories" (66); the focus, therefore, is placed upon the contents of the mind, or the combination of personality and memories that Banks understands as consciousness. As discussed in Chapter Three of this thesis, perhaps the most important aspect of these fictional souls is the fact that they can be converted into or captured as *digital* information, effectively saved onto a computer in a similar manner to saving a file onto a USB stick or other data-storage device. This saving can occur at any point in the soul-bearer's life without causing harm to the bearer, or to the soul-information itself; for most Culture citizens, the act of 'backing up' one's soul is a

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[473] 'Soul', *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 346.
[474] 'Soul', *Encyclopædia Britannica* Online Library Edition. (Accessed 20 March, 2011).

routine part of daily life, and there are varieties of technology available with which to perform this action. Some Culture citizens, particularly those who work in SC, are fitted with a device called a neural lace – usually though not necessarily at a young age – that is similar to a soulkeeper, which merely stores a soul indefinitely, although much more sophisticated. The neural lace, a hybrid of organic and technological parts, "grows with the brain it's part of, it beds in over the years, gets very adept at mirroring every detail of the mind it interpenetrates and co-exists with" (78); this makes the process of 'soul-saving' automatic. Once they have been digitalised, after the original body has died, these converted souls can even be transferred – revented – back into another physical body, or into a computer-generated virtual environment. This procedure means that one is potentially protected from the consequences of the effects of fatal or life-altering violence, and even, effectively, from death itself: once revented, all that they would lose would be memory of all that had happened between the time they last backed-up their soul, and the time of their revention.

The importance of souls in the Culture novels, including their resurrection potential – as discussed in Chapter Three of this thesis – is perhaps best illustrated by *Surface Detail,* where the existence of souls allows various elements of the novel's complex narrative to converge. The novel's protagonist Lededje Y'breq tries and fails to escape her captor Joile Veppers, which results in her violent murder at his hands. Fortunately for Lededje, due to a favour that she granted an eccentric Culture Mind many years in the past, a neural lace has been planted in her brain, as its gift to her in return; Lededje, however, was unaware of this fact, and, when asked about compensation for her trouble, she flippantly replies, 'Whatever you think fit. Surprise me" (89). Lededje is subsequently resurrected by the Culture, and her soul revented, "brought back to life in a physical body in the Real" (91). Lededje's 'new' life in the Real (used in Banks' novel to describe a real-life physical environment as opposed to a virtual one), motivated by gaining revenge on Veppers, forms the main narrative thrust of the novel.

Banks's dualistic conception of the relationship between the body and personality can be traced back to René Descartes's famous assertion that the soul exists in an entirely immaterial, non-physical state, fundamentally distinct from the material physical state of the body.[475] Writing in *The Philosophy of Humanism*,

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[475] Rene Descartes, "Letter to Princess Elizabeth (28 June 1643); selections from *Principles of*

Lamont associates monistic theory, where "the relationship between body and personality [is] so close and fundamental that they constitute an indissoluble unity",[476] with Humanism, whereas dualistic theory, such as that which underpins Cartesian thought as well as Banks's, is associated with "the traditional religions of the world" because it leaves "a future life probable or at least possible."[477] If the idea of revention represents a logical and somewhat extreme extrapolation from the theory of dualism, then Banks's thinking in this regard does chime with religious ideas to a certain extent, but is made impossible through technoscience.

Yet, to return to a topic addressed in Chapter Three of this thesis, Lamont explains that "the issue of mortality versus immortality is crucial in the argument of Humanism against supernaturalism."[478] In religious understandings, it is important that the soul is entirely separate from the body so that it may continue after physical death and enable the individual to achieve immortal life in spiritual form. The Culture, however – while it's fundamental belief in individual freedom means that it would not actually stop citizens from living endlessly – is generally opposed to immortal existence, as has been established previously. So, while Banks's dualistic conception of the mind-body *relationship itself* is perhaps more in line with traditional religious rather than humanist thought, the actual philosophy underpinning the purpose of this relationship affirms its humanistic understanding within the Culture. Also, the fact that – in the Culture's system – the soul can only live on after death through technoscientific means, makes it clear that this system is nothing more than the *material imitation* of a spiritual hypothesis, rather than any indication that the hypothesis is actually true.

5.4.3 Virtual Afterlives: Limbo/Purgatory

Another aspect of Banks's quasi-religious system explored in *Surface Detail* occurs in the state that exists between Lededje's violent 'death', and her subsequent revention. The clandestine nature of the neural lace that captured Lededje's soul, and the eccentric, ostracised nature of the Mind who implanted it in her, meant that her automatic revention had not been scheduled. For people who are *meant* to have

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Philosophy and *The Passions of the Soul*. N. Scott Arnold, Theodore M. Benditt, and George Graham. Ed. *Philosophy Then and Now* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1998) 58.
[476] Lamont, The Philosophy of Humanism, 81.
[477] Ibid., 81.
[478] Ibid., 82.

neural-laces, the device is registered, and therefore if anything happens to the person, the Minds will be notified and will begin the process of revention. As Lededje's is 'unofficial', this has not occurred; she therefore awakens into what could be considered a kind of virtual limbo.   Lededje's gradual coming-to and awakening after her 'death' is described in dream-like terms: "From somewhere came the idea that there were many different levels of sleeping, of unconsciousness, and therefore of awakening (58)". These thoughts emerge from "in the midst of [a…] pleasant woozy calm – warm, pleasantly swaddled, self-huggingly curled up, a sort of ruddy darkness behind the eyelids" (58). In this way, Lededje currently exists on the peripheries of consciousness, somewhere between the real world and the virtual. Eventually, Lededje awakens properly:

> She opened her eyes. She had the vague impression of a wide bed, pale sheets and a large, high-ceilinged room with tall open windows from which gauzy soft billowing white curtains waved out. […] She noticed that there was some sort of fuzzy glow at the foot of the bed. It swam into focus and spelled out the word SIMULATION (59).

The room in which she awakens, then, is comfortable and homely suggesting a space for rest and relaxation. Soon a Culture Mind (in the form of a humanoid avatar) appears and speaks with her: Lededje learns that she is "presently, literally […] in a computational substrate node of the General Systems Vehicle *Sense Amid Madness, Wit Amongst Folly*" (65); essentially, her soul-information is resting temporarily inside a spaceship's computer awaiting further instructions.

As Lededje explores her new surroundings, she becomes aware, despite the implications of the message in her vision, that her environment is remarkably detailed on a sensory basis: "What she was looking at here – and feeling, and smelling – was effectively, uncannily flawless" (61). The environment of Lededje's virtual limbo is seemingly designed to be as comforting and reassuring as possible, partly to soften her inevitable initial disorientation, but also to help her deal with the traumatic memories of events leading up to, and including her physical death, which the Mind will slowly allow to re-emerge. As the Mind's avatar states: "I discovered that you've had a traumatic experience […] which I've sort of held back, edited from your transferred memories, just for now, while you settle in" (67). This virtual limbo also serves as a neutral environment in which Lededje can choose what kind of body she is

to be revented into subsequently: "I'll leave you with an image you can manipulate until you're happy with it, take a spec from that" (92).

Clearly, the state into which Lededje is transferred is different, both in form and function, from the limbo of Roman Catholic theology. Instead of a permanent place that grants Lededje freedom from eternal punishment in hell just as it denies her the joy of eternal existence, as in the understanding of the term in Roman Catholic theology,[479] the limbo provided by the Culture is a temporary environment given to recovery, relaxation and contemplation following trauma. Banks's virtual limbo is a kind of post-death 'safe space' for souls who have experienced trauma and who may be further threatened if they were to be revented, rather than the religious model, with its emphasis on judgement and deprivation of pleasure. This space is located liminally, covering the thresholds between consciousness and unconsciousness, material and virtual environments, physical death and a form of rebirth. Here, referring to this phenomenon as limbo – even in a metaphorical sense – stretches the appropriateness of the term.

This space indeed proved to be temporary for Lededje. Due to her ties with the Culture, Lededje was given the choice to once again return to the physical realm of the real, deciding upon revention into another physical body, and effectively continuing to live on again in the same manner as before; she chose this as it was necessary for her to achieve revenge. Yet there are spaces featured in the Culture series the purpose of which is closer to ideas associated with many religions. The souls of individuals from other races and civilisations in Banks's fictional universe, for example, may live on in virtual environments very close to religious notions of heaven.

5.4.4 Virtual Afterlives: Heavens

In describing the Culture as his "secular heaven", Banks conflates the notion of utopia with the idea of heaven in a casual way, in that both ostensibly offer a kind of idealised paradise. Frequently Banks's descriptions of the various Culture habitats often draw attention to its idyllic "natural" beauty, and strange, awe inspiring

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[479] "Limbo, in Roman Catholic theology, the border place between heaven and hell where dwell those souls who, though not condemned to punishment, are deprived of the joy of eternal existence with God in heaven. The word is of Teutonic origin, meaning "border" or "anything joined on." "limbo". *Encyclopædia Britannica* Online. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2016. www.britannica.com/topic/limbo-Roman-Catholic-theology (Accessed 22 March, 2016).

surroundings:

> tumbling waters could be heard and tall, distant trees stood on gentle rolling hills. Dotted amongst the trees, long vertical bands of pale, almost transparent vegetation rose high into the air […] surmounted by a dark ovoid […] Dozens of these strange shapes swayed to and fro in the breeze, oscillating together like some vast seaweed forest" (*SD*, 148).

These aesthetically pleasing surroundings, combined with the Culture's general ethos of peace, freedom and pleasure, form an idealised environment, even if the sense of natural beauty if is in fact created artificially within a system of Second Nature.

Yet Banks's conflation of material paradise with spiritual heaven lacks nuance, and serves to muddy understandings of both terms. The Culture's paradise exists undeniably within material reality, and is therefore not the "abode of the gods", the "reward for a life well lived" or a "transcendent realm beyond" the reality known by humans, as heaven has been widely understood.[480] The Culture offers peaceful places available to all regardless of the manner in which their lives are lead, inhabitated by humans, aliens and AIs, and which exist physically in time and material space. A 'heaven on Earth', therefore, can never be a heaven at all. Furthermore, as Mendlesohn argues, the fact that "the Culture proves that a paradise in the real world is possible," not only undermines its status as a heaven but also any need for belief in a spiritual heaven whatsoever.[481] Affirming Mendlesohn's point, Jim Clark also argues that "the Culture is no afterlife", noting the ways in which it "facilitates and encompasses movement between life, virtual life and post-life states."[482]

Despite its commitment to providing everything that is needed for happiness in material reality, the Culture does offer other ways of existing beyond physical life for those who are interested. While there is the option of Storage – a kind of suspended animation, as mentioned in Chapter Three of this thesis – there are also virtual spaces, explicitly referred to as heavens, available following bodily death, often tailored to that individual's particular pleasure: "Some Afterlives simply offered everlasting fun for the post-dead: infinite holiday resorts featuring boundless sex, adventure, sport, games, study, exploration, shopping, hunting or whatever other

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[480] 'Heaven', *Encyclopædia Britannica* Online. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2016. www.britannica.com/topic/heaven (Accessed 22 March, 2016)

[481] Mendlesohn, 'The Dialetic of Decadence and Utopia in Iain M. Banks's Culture Novels', 117.

[482] Clarke, 'The Sublime in Iain M. Banks's 'Culture' novels', 11.

activities particularly tickled that species' fancy" (*SD*, 127-128). The tone adopted by Banks for this paragraph seems irreverent and satirical. The list of activities he provides – variously hedonistic and materialistic – contrasts sharply with traditional Christian depictions of heaven as a space for purity, modesty and spiritual fulfillment. Banks's phrase "tickled that species' fancy" seems to dismiss the pleasures of heaven as nothing more than whims, distractions and follies, while describing them as "holiday resorts" suggests something short-lived, frivolous and perhaps mundane.

Challenging both the physical possibility of heavens and their role in religion, Johann Hari has argued that such ideas tell us more about the *lives* of believers than their afterlives.[483] "Heaven is constantly shifting shape," he argues, "because it is a history of subconscious human longings. Show me your heaven, and I'll show you what's lacking in your life."[484] To illustrate this thesis Hari mentions the controversial issue of the *houri* (virgins) promised to Islamic men when they reach *Jannah* (paradise) in the Qur'an, or indulgences in Catholicism, sometimes characterised as buying one's way into heaven, as demonstrations of such a lack. Through this interpretation – which chimes with Banks's comments about the ways in which religious belief is useful as it reflects upon the believers themselves, as discussed above – heaven is easily deconstructed as nothing more than a kind of psychological urge, a symptom of a life restricted in certain ways by religion.

Banks's characterisation of the Culture's afterlives, then, should reveal something about its nature. It is interesting to note that Banks mentions shopping and hunting as two possible activities in a Culture afterlife, as the former is impossible and unnecessary in a postscarcity environment that has no form of currency, while the latter is probably frowned upon in a society where "nothing and nobody is exploited" – which presumably includes animal life also – where violence is an absolute last resort, and where highly-realistic meat can be simulated.[485] This perhaps shows that Culture citizens subconsciously perceive such activities – which they may encounter

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[483] It must be acknowledged here that, in 2012, Hari left the *Independent* following accusations of plagiarism. See: Conal Urquhart, 'Johann Hari Quits The Independent', 20 January, 2012. www.theguardian.com/media/2012/jan/20/johann-hari-quits-the-independent (Accessed 12 June, 2016). These allegations relate to a completely different article ("interviews with Gideon Levy, an Israeli journalist, and Hugo Chávez, the president of Venezuelato") than that from which I quote in this thesis ('Heaven: A Fool's Paradise'), and I have no reason to suspect that this latter piece was plagiarised in any way.

[484] Johann Hari, "Heaven: A Fool's Paradise", *The Independent.* 21 April, 2010. www.independent.co.uk/opinion/faith/heaven-a-fools-paradise-1949399.html (Accessed 09 January 2011).

[485] See: Banks, 'The State of the Art', 180-183.

in other societies – as a lack, and may even indicate the start of a desire to live in a non-utopian society as human basic, as Linter experiences in 'The State of the Art'. It also further expands the freedom offered by the Culture: seemingly allowing even those who wish to perform activities deemed old-fashioned, immoral or unnecessary to do so in a fashion, within a kind of restricted environment where they are unable to do real harm to others.

Banks' portrayal of heaven is not all satirical and dismissive, however: other varieties of heaven that he describes are more focused on intellectual rather than just physical gratification, or "were of a more contemplative and philosophic nature" and therefore seem to offer a more genuinely fulfilling afterlife (*SD*, 128). Banks balances his critique of heaven with this elegant and romantic image of the final moments of a soul's existence:

> Some […] featured a sort of gradual fading-away rather than genuine post-death VR immortality, with the personality of the deceased individual slowly […] dissolving into the general mass of information and civilization ethos held within the virtual environment (*SD*, 128).

Ultimately, despite offering Afterlives to its citizens, the Culture still seems to encourage that an individual's consciousness – in whatever state – reach an end point eventually. Reiterating his argument for eventual bodily death, as discussed in Chapter Three of this thesis, Banks states that: "those who had lived for a really long time in Afterlives were prone to becoming profoundly gravely bored, or going […] mad" (*SD*, 82).

As with souls, Banks's incorporation of heavens into his series clearly does not challenge the Culture as a rational, materialistic system. Furthermore, Banks uses the notion of a virtual paradise to satirise religious belief in an afterlife, and to further undermine the notion that we need look beyond this life and the physical world for satisfaction. No discussion of heaven – whether in cyberspace or elsewhere – would be complete without its antithesis, and many of the various narrative threads of *Surface Detail* are also concerned with the existence of virtual hells.

5.4.5. Virtual Afterlives: Hells

In *Hell in Contemporary Culture* (2005), Rachel Falconer argues that religious imagery and ideas, specifically the idea of hell, have survived and proliferated in

contemporary secular culture, in largely metaphoric and symbolic forms: "Many Westerners retain a vestigial or quasi-religious belief in hell: Hell as the absolutely horrific experience from which none escape unchanged".[486] While this symbolic notion of hell as a descent into horror and a return into trauma could undoubtedly be found in the Culture novels, the hells in *Surface Detail* operates a realm of eternal damnation in the classic sense, but again existing in virtual reality. In fact there are several different hells in cyberspace, which – like the circles of hell in Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* – are each allotted to the wrongdoing souls of every civilisation in the galaxy who condones their use, and each zone has been linked to form a vast virtual network of infernal realms.

While these cyber-hells recall the famous visions of Banks' literary and artistic predecessors, such as the vivid and imaginative realms of Milton and the visceral and sadistic paintings of Bosch, they are more than mere revisions. Instead, Banks exploits the freedom that the nature of a virtual environment allows him. His descriptions invoke archetypal infernal images, such as vicious demons, rivers of blood, bleached bones, rotting corpses, and the emaciated, naked bodies of hells denizens: "The wheel was constructed of many, many ancient bones, long bleached white by the action of the acid or alkali rains that fell every few days" (*SD*, 46). These images exist alongside more contemporary images, such as *cheval de frise*, a "giant X of crossed spikes laden with impaled, half-decaying bodies" (48); these were defensive obstacles, made from a wooden frame and topped with broken glass or barbed wire, and used on the battlefields of World War One. When describing a demon, Banks also draws upon the simple technology of the Victorian era:

> The thing had a lantern head, like an enormous version of a four-paned, inward-sloping gas light from ancient history […] At each of the four external corners of the lantern, a giant candle of tallow stood, each containing a hundred shrieking nervous systems intact and in burning agony within (285).

Also, when another character Prin, who has become one of Hell's "dark angels", describes her surroundings, she draws attention to their computer-simulated nature: "Trying to look at it […] it was as though everything about her had become pixelated, smoothed out" (580). The mention of a "pixelated" image is instantly recognisable as contemporary, and contrasts with Banks' more archaic imagery. In this way, the

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[486] Rachel Falconer, *Hell in Contemporary Culture,* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005) 1.

overall effect is of an omni-temporal zone: a kind of morbid pastiche of infernal images.

In this virtual space, the strict laws of physics concerning the body and its surrounding environment need not necessarily apply: in "the Thrice Flayed Footprint district of the Pavulean Hell" (58) the limb of one of hell's sufferers – first flayed, and then amputated – can be enlarged to such a scale that it constitutes part of the physical environment; the limb's amputation from the body, while physically disconnecting the two parts, does not necessarily disconnect nerves from their endings, and the sufferer's pain is eternally amplified whenever someone passes over the ridge that the flayed limb forms in the hell's landscape. Similarly in other scenes, body parts are removed from their owners to constitute elements of the landscape, without freeing their owners from pain: fingernails decorate the roofs of buildings like tiles; bones form the structure of a mill wheel; and stretched skin lines the walls of the mill. Banks takes the dystopian virtual landscapes of cyberpunk works, such as *Neuromancer* and *Ghost in the Shell,* and pushes them to their extreme, creating an eternal network of fractal flesh that easily defies and manipulates the corporeal limits of the Real world.

Banks' descriptions of the hells in *Surface Detail,* while extensive and complex, are not simply included for mere titillation: they form a vital link between many of the novel's narrative threads, and explore an important argument that is central to many atheists', or non-believers' problems with theology. In the novel, only some races advocate the existence and use of Hells, for any purpose. Those in favour, such as the Sichultians, argue that their existence has an important moral purpose similar to the function of hells in Christianity: the souls of sinners will be cast into the virtual abyss to suffer eternally; the threat of unceasing damnation and punishment after death acting as a moral imperative for all to live a just and good life. For those opposed, these cyber-hells are simple sites of unspeakable barbarism: "The Culture took a particularly dim view of torture, either in the Real or in a Virtuality, and was quite prepared to damage its short-, and even – at least seemingly – long-term interests to stop it happening" (*SD*, 133). These two clashing viewpoints have led to a war over the Hells – both in the Real and the Virtual – and the Culture has vowed to end them once and for all by destroying the physical computer components, known as substrates, that enable them to exist. This war allows Banks to explicate and engage with the political, and ethical debates surrounding the nature of hell, in both his fictional universe, and our own.

In their most literal meaning, the virtual hells in *Surface Detail* clearly serve as a bitter attack against religious systems that tryrannise their followers with threats of torture after death for transgression in life, yet they also achieve a grander symbolic meaning in the series. The Culture's fight to destroy the hells and permanently end their use is but one part of their overall utopian goal, their *technologiade*: as Zakalwe explains, "that's the way they prefer to work; offering life, you see, rather than dealing death" (*UoW*, 30).

So, just as the Culture series depicts souls and virtual afterlives as part of a quasi-religious system, it also features entities with power beyond that achieved by its human citizens: as Baker has argued, "even the most atheistic society cannot, finally, shake itself free of, if not gods, unfathomable and omnipotent beings."[487]

5.4.6. The Minds as Gods

The Culture's Minds are one example of such beings, which have been compared to gods by characters within the series, Banks's critics, and even by Banks himself. For example: Fal 'Ngeestra describes their "near god-like power" (*CP*, 87); Moira Martingale argues that "the Culture's AIs compare to mythic entities";[488] and Banks told *Wired* magazine that they "play the part of Greek gods".[489] If these descriptions are accurate, then this is clearly a somewhat odd feature of a fundamentally atheistic society.

In *Gothic Dimensions*, Martingale develops the Minds-as-gods interpretation and challenges the Culture's secularity, arguing that "Banks appears to create his 'gods' in the form of something he trusts: technology".[490] She goes on to emphasise the lack of technical detail that Banks provides in order to rationalise the Minds, arguing that they are in fact more similar to "guardian angels" that are "hiding behind pseudoscience".[491] Banks clearly believed that AI could theoretically advance to something like this level of power and self-awareness – that something like the Minds is *not impossible* – to fulfill the Suvinian paradigm, and he emphasised that they are "constrained by the laws of physics."[492] Yannick Rumpala, too, writing in 'Artificial intelligences and political organization: an exploration based on the science fiction

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[487] Baker, 'Scottish Fiction and the Invocation of God', 106.
[488] Martingale, *Gothic Dimensions*, 471.
[489] Parsons, 'Interview: Iain Banks talks 'Surface Detail' with Wired'.
[490] Martingale, *Gothic Dimensions*, 471.
[491] Ibid.
[492] Parsons, 'Interview: Iain Banks talks 'Surface Detail' with Wired'.

work of Iain M. Banks', has argued for the rationality behind Banks's conception of the Mind, stating that: "The technical progress towards a growing presence of highly-evolved machines, more or less directly derived from computers and microprocessors, can have a certain level of plausibility."[493] Rumpala gives an overview of the wide-spread reliance upon highly-sophisticated use of AI in the military, legal, financial and aviation sectors, as well as the increasing automation of everyday life, to support Banks's extrapolations.[494] Clearly, at this stage in the debate, Arthur C. Clarke's most quoted Law of Predication, that "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic,"[495] could be used to place the Minds on a spectrum between science and the supernatural, potentially supporting either argument.

Perhaps a more productive debate, however, should focus on the *role* of the Minds within the series, rather than just the rationality by which they are imagined. In his article 'Scottish Utopian Fiction and the Invocation of God' Timothy Baker also challenges Banks's vision of a truly secular society (among other secular Scottish authors of utopian fiction), but with a slightly different focus: through his reliance upon the *idea* of god-like beings, regardless of in what form such a being actually comes to exist.[496] "The efficacy, or divinity in any common sense, of these Gods is irrelevant," Baker states, "what matters is that every society finds its own godlike being."[497] The Minds can be regarded as "god-like", Baker's argument goes, because they conform to the superlative powers attributed to the God of the New Testament: omnibenevolence, omniscience and omniprescence. Even if they are entirely devoid of spiritual or supernatural elements, according to Baker, they fulfill a similar role to that of gods in the maintenance of the Culture and therefore – at least symbolically – make it a religious system.

Yet this is not the case. The Minds – with their ability to turn energy into matter, to access instant knowledge about the fringes of the galaxy, and to control huge habitats – clearly wield a high degree of power and knowledge. As they play a fundamental and highly-successful role in the maintenance of a civilisation that seems

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[493] Yannick Rumpala, 'Artificial Intelligences and Political Organization: an Exploration Based on the Science Fiction Work of Iain M. Banks', *Technology in Society*. 34 (2012) 23–32. 11. isiarticles.com/bundles/Article/pre/pdf/20144.pdf (Accessed 23 March, 2016).
[494] Ibid., 11.
[495] Arthur C. Clarke, 'Hazards of Prophecy: The Failure of Imagination', in *Profiles of the Future: An Enquiry into the Limits of the Possible* (London: Harper and Row, 1962; rev. 1973), 14-21, 36.
[496] Timothy C. Baker. *Scottish Utopian Fiction and the Invocation of God.* Utopian Studies, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2010.
[497] Ibid., 106.

utopian, and work to allow others access to utopia, they are clearly benevolent to some degree. Also, their ability to manifest in the humanoid form as avatars – see Chapter Four of this thesis – at any part of the Culture almost instantaneously, even in multiple locations simultaneously is clearly impressive. But there are limits to all aspects of their power, knowledge, goodness and technical ability. Banks explained that the Minds are "not infallible" and "there's lots of problems they can't handle",[498] while he outlined various constraints – both moral and political – which apply.[499] For example, while technically they can easily read the minds of human citizens, it is strictly forbidden for them to do so: "they will not look inside people's heads", Banks explains, "there's only one ship that ever did it."[500] Here, referring to the GSV *Grey Area* as explored in Chapter Six of this thesis, Banks confirms that the humanist moral code maintained in the Culture restricts the Minds' actions in this way, but also makes it clear that the Minds have not achieved a standard of absolute perfection, despite how they may appear, as is necessary for godhead. As Banks explains in *Look to Windward*, the Minds are deliberately created as *im*perfect because the Culture discovered that "perfect AIs always sublime" (126-127), meaning that they leave permanently for another dimension, as explored below. Supporting this idea, Baker's analysis itself in fact relies upon the depiction of a particularly vulnerable Mind at the centre of *Consider Phlebas'* narrative, eventually revealed as the Bora Horza Gobuchul,[501] who – damaged, threatened, near death – is forced into hiding for the dangerous knowledge of which it is in possession. It is clear, therefore, that the Minds are not only fallible but far from immortal.

Furthermore, The Minds' powers rarely seem to stretch beyond the confines of the Culture's environments, otherwise – if their powers were truly god-like, covering the universe itself – there would be no conflict in the series that the Minds could not easily undermine. While their ability to manipulate energy into matter clearly indicates a high level of power, it is presented as a feat of engineering indicative of productive capacity, but not supernatural or even merely natural omnipotence. Their powers in this regard are limited to the building of large-scale projects in space – the GSVs and Orbitals can be see as extrapolations from currently-existing structures

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[498] Parsons, 'Interview: Iain Banks talks 'Surface Detail' with Wired'.
[499] Ibid.
[500] Ibid.
[501] The Mind eventually takes the same name as the novel's (by this point deceased) protagonist out of respect for him. See: 'Epilogue', *CP*, 471.

like, for example, the International Space Station – and do not truly constitute a total god-like influence on the fundamental materials of the universe.

No one in the Culture worships the Minds, and their existence is undeniable: they are manmade, or at least were, initially. As outlined in this thesis, the Culture has developed over many decades as the result of several important shifts – while the Minds may well have helped facilitate this process, and develop it further afterwards, they did not create the Culture, or the entities in it.

As argued in Chapter Two of this thesis, the Minds are best understood as closer to a kind of secular State due to the nature of the various functions they fulfill, rather than as fulfilling a symbolic yearning for the divine or a narrative role more similar to that gods. As the result of the Singularity, the Minds are in fact the highest level of *human* accomplishment possible: a simulated consciousness that replicates the human mind's cognitive abilities to the extent that it can become independent of its human creators, eventually superseding our possible intelligence. From a religious perspective, this would constitute blasphemy: "the sentient machines; the very image and essence of life itself, desecrated idolatry incarnate" (*CP*, 334). To the atheistic Culture, however, this is merely a necessity if one is ever to rely upon a system that features such a being: gods must be created artificially if they are ever to exist. If the Minds do demonstrate "the continuing relevance of God and myth", as Baker argues, then Banks's series constitutes a blasphemous subversion: God did not create man, man created 'God'.

Raising similar issues, there are other types of being in the Culture universe that might be considered god-like, the Sublimed, which Baker's analysis does not touch upon, but has been examined in detail by Clarke, and briefly by Jackson and Heilman.

5.4.7. Transcendence: Sublime, Sublimed, Sublimers

If a being is part of the Sublimed, it has passed into the realm of the Sublime: a dimension of pure energy located within the series' layered system of universes, of which beings become a part as necessitated by entering it; henceforth, as one of the Sublimed, these entities have achieved a kind of heightened existence, granting them a deeper understanding of the universe. Sublimation is often, but not always, achieved by a civilisation *en masse*, as is the case with the Dra'Azon in *Consider Phlebas*, a "Pure-energy superspecies long retired from the normal, matter-based life of the

galaxy" (91), or the Gzilt who achieve this process – known as Subliming – at the climax of *The Hydrogen Sonata*. Seemingly any entity in this universe can become one of the Sublimed, including the Minds, drones, Stored souls, or souls that have been uploaded into virtual space.[502]

The process of Subliming is usually instigated when an entity or entities is regarded to have reached a state of high-achievement in their lives, feeling a sense of completion or often sheer boredom, and is able to transcend their physical bodily form, changing their base matter into pure energy. This, in fact, renders the process of Subliming as something like a larger-scale version of the process by which the Minds enable the Culture's postscarcity environment (see Chapter One of this thesis): using Csicsery-Ronay's terms, Subliming is the process when an individual, perhaps a Handy Man, combines with the Fertile Corpse, creating a new, altogether "Handier", entity.

Banks allowed a sense of mystery to develop around the Sublimed, amongst his characters, critics, and fans alike. This mystery and ambiguity was created by the fact that occasional references to the Sublimed are made in the series, since their introduction in *Consider Phlebas*, yet their exact nature and function is left vague until *The Hydrogen Sonata*. Banks even admitted that he decided to return to the subject of the Sublime in the final Culture book partly because "people at signings and in interviews began to ask about it".[503] It was only then that he "started to think about it properly and decided/realised that it was an important part of the whole context of the Culture and the rest of the civilised galactic scene".[504] There is certainly a sense of Banks developing his ideas as the series progresses, as discussed below. Initially, the Sublimed seem to pose a threat: the Dra'Azon guard the Land of the Dead, offering ominous warnings to the protagonists that "DEATH IS NEAR" (294), communicated via text on a monitor, yet they do not manifest. Entities associated with the Sublimed – the Bulbitions – who do manifest in *Surface Detail*, as explored in Chapter Four of this thesis, seem to take the form of an individual's deepest subconscious psychological concerns, and are certainly unsettling if not actually immediately dangerous.

While Baker does not mention the Sublimed as examples of god-like beings

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[502] Jim Clarke, 'The Sublime in Iain M. Banks's 'Culture' Novels', 8.
[503] Iain Banks, Q&A Session, 2012.
[504] Ibid.

in Banks's series, Jackson and Heilman describe the process as "a spiritual form of ascension", also noting the vast yet mysterious power with which it is associated.[505] Jim Clarke, while ultimately arriving at different conclusions, acknowledges that the Sublime features "hints of religious and spiritual influence".[506] The word 'sublime' has been defined as a "state of mind" that "marks the limits of reason and expression altogether with a sense of what might lie beyond these limits".[507] The sublime is also understood as concerned with the "indescribable", and the "void" that remains unknowable to "finite beings".[508] Banks's descriptions of the Sublime often highlight the difficulty of those who have passed beyond its void to describe it in anything other than "vague, dreamy reports": "it is beyond comprehension, literally indescribable" (*THS*, 64). Given the connotations of the term, therefore, it is clear why Jackson and Heilman may characterise Subliming as a spiritual ascension or transcendence, perhaps similar to the state of *moksha* (liberation of the consciousness from the material world) in Hinduism and Hindu philosophy.[509] Similarly, sublime is often used to refer to gods, or other divine beings, which, by their nature, seem to exist beyond words.[510] Cossont, the protagonist of *The Hydrogen Sonata*, considers her understanding of the Sublime, stating that "like some ideas of God or whatever", the Sublime "was all around" (17), here perhaps likening it to the doctrine of Panthiesm, which "identifies God with the universe".[511]

As with the Minds, the character Dorolow in *Consider Phlebas* describes the Sublimed, making the implications of their chosen name explicit: "This creature is virtually a god. I'm sure it can sense our moods and thoughts" (292). Following this, the Sublimed even have a kind of religious cult that worships them, known as the Sublimers, who:

> had turned what was a normal but generally optional part of a species' choice of fate into a religion. Sublimers believed that everybody ought to sublime, that every human, very animal, every machine and Mind ought to head straight for ultimate

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[505] Jackson and Heilman, 'Outside Context Problems: Liberalism and the Other in the Work of Iain M. Banks', 253.
[506] Clarke, 'The Sublime in Iain M. Banks's 'Culture' Novels', 11.
[507] Philip Shaw, *Sublime* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006) 211.
[508] Ibid.
[509] 'moksha', *Oxford Dictionaries*, Oxford University Press. www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/moksha (Accessed April 28, 2016).
[510] Ibid., 2.
[511] 'pantheism', *Oxford Dictionaries*. Oxford University Press. www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/pantheism (Accessed April 28, 2016).

transcendence, leaving the mundane life behind and setting as direct a course a possible for nirvana (*E*, 259).

Here Banks emphasises that, while Subliming is common and widespread, it is not generally deemed essential, yet it is a way of thinking that can very easily fascinate and obsess people to the point of dedicating their "mundane" lives to it, maybe even encouraging others to participate and turning it into a crusade.

Yet, as Clarke concludes, "Banks's Sublime is as firmly atheistic as the rest of his Culture mythos."[512] When he first began developing his notion of the Sublimed in *Consider Phlebas*, Banks's descriptions – for example: "long retired from the matter-based life of the galaxy" (*CP*, 91) – did not render them in as resolutely rational a manner as in later texts. In the *The Hydrogen Sonata*, for example, the Sublime is portrayed as an "almost tangible, entirely believable, mathematically verifiable nirvana" (63), a description that seems designed to bring its connotations of religious transcendence within a rational framework. In the fictional cosmology of Bank's series, the universe as we know it in fact consists of several layered universes, between two of which is located the Sublime (*THS*, 16-17). Existing there, "parched, rolled, compressed and enfolded into the dimensions beyond the dimensions beyond the ones you could see and understand" (*THS*, 17), there seems nothing supernatural or spiritual about the Sublime.

Furthermore, regardless of the extent to which it can be understood in rational terms, the Culture is clearly ideologically and morally opposed to it. The Culture could "in theory" have "sublimed anything up to eight thousand years ago […] but the bulk of the Culture has chosen not to" (*E*, 82). To achieve Elderhood, as Subliming is also described in *Excession*, would not only require the Culture to stop the work of Contact and SC but negate its general existence as material culture, effectively removing its entire sense of purpose: "the very ideas, the actual concepts of good, fairness and of justice just ceased to matter once one had gone for sublimation" (*E*, 82). The Culture's view on Subliming can be seen as a continuation of its stance regarding mortality and immortality, as explored in Chapter Three of this thesis: its whole existence is geared towards providing the best possible life for its citizens in *this* life; the desire to leave its utopia entirely behind is "almost a personal insult" (*LtW*, 110). This view is implicit in the attitude of Culture citizen Byr Genar-Hofoen

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[512] Clarke, 'The Sublime in Iain M. Banks's 'Culture' Novels', 11.

who, upon meeting a Sublimers, asks rhetorically, "You believe everybody should just disappear up their own arses, don't you?" To which the Sublimer, innocently unaware of Genar-Hofoen's cynicism, replies, "'Oh, no!' […], her expression terribly serious, 'What we believe in takes one completely *away* from such bodily concerns…'" (*E*, 260). The Culture, represented by Genar-Hofoen, not only chooses not to Sublime but openly mocks the process and its advocates.

Despite the relative frequency of their appearance, the Sublimed remain one of the most mysterious entities in Bank's fictional universe, second perhaps only to the Excession. While the Minds-as-gods theory has been discussed at some length, the religious connotations of the Sublime have had relatively little attention – a slightly strange fact given that it is are the one aspect of Banks's series which comes closest to challenging the rationality and secularity of the series. Yet, even if the Sublime is read in ultimately supernatural or spiritual terms, the Culture's attitude towards it is entirely commensurate with its rationalist, humanist outlook.

5.4. Conclusion

Iain M. Banks's view of SF, as demonstrated through his approach to the Culture series, can be understood as relatively orthodox in Suvinian terms.[513] Ken MacLeod supports this, stating that he does not think Banks would have published a novel featuring elements of the supernatural or fantastic in an unambiguous manner, and echoing Suvin's notion that SF can be considered more progressive than fantasy fiction as it is guided by reason and rationalism.[514] For its structure the Culture relies upon several ideas that seem to perhaps stem from religious notions. Discussing such elements of the series, Banks commented that "SF is now able to speak with some degree of authority" regarding "matters where only religious writing and faith previously seemed qualified to comment."[515] Calling humankind's religious visions of souls, afterlives, gods and transcendence "dream fulfillment", Banks used his secular versions of such concepts to "propose alternative angles for looking at the

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[513] In *The Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, Darko Suvin famously argued that science fiction is politically progressive because it is concerned with science and rationalism, whereas fantasy is reactionary because it is concerned with superstition and faith-based worldviews. Banks's fiction clearly adheres to this formulation in relation to SF.

[514] Ken MacLeod, 'The Culture & other stories', at 'The Life and Works of Iain (M.) Banks', Huddersfield Literature Festival, 6-7pm, 15 March, 2014.

[515] *Orbit Books* website, 'An Interview with Iain M. Banks on the 25th Anniversary of the Culture', 2012. www.orbitbooks.net/interview/iain-m-banks-on-the-25th-anniversary-of-the-culture/ (Accessed 28 April, 2016).

same dreams."[516] The implication is that, when we come closer to actually achieving such dreams in this world, belief in something immaterial and outside the laws of physics will be understood as unnecessary and eventually die out.

The Culture, too, demonstrates through humanism that religious belief is not necessary to live a moral life, and that, coupled with such a system, technoscience can offer comfort and meaning for its citizens in this life. Having established this key break from religious thinking and organised religion, the final chapter of this thesis is concerned with aesthetic and creative practices in both the Culture itself and the Culture series.

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[516] Ibid.

Chapter 6: Post-Aesthetics

"The imagination is the goal of history. I see culture as an effort to literally realize our collective dreams." — *Terence McKenna*[517]

This chapter focuses on analysis of various cultural artifacts and artworks described by Banks throughout the series, originating both within the Culture and without. Following methodology suggested by Frederic Jameson, analysis of the Culture's own art (where present) is used as a unique means of providing further insight into this society's socio-political nature and to address questions relating to the existence and purpose of art within a utopia. One interesting aspect of this subject is the fact that none of the artworks associated with the Culture in the series are produced by individuals whose relationship with the Culture 'centre' is straightforward: all live on its peripheries and/or voice discontent with its practices. In this respect, the only art from the Culture that Banks depicts is 'Outsider Art', which offers further insight into the Culture by means of comparison, and reveals further progression in Banks's ideas in relation to aesthetics. Another crucial aspect is the fact that the majority of the artworks described are produced by the Culture's Minds or drones: there are relatively few instances of human art, and none whatsoever of art produced by a 'conservative' human Culture citizen. The discussed works of Outsider Art, most of which are produced by AIs, are as follows: the *Sleeper Service*'s tableaux, the *Grey Area*'s torture museum, and the 'baroqued' ships in *Excession;* as well as the digital rendering of Lededje's 'Intagliate' body in *Surface Detail.* The discussed example of human Outsider Art is the musical composition 'Expiring Light' from *Look to Windward*; the musical occurrence 'The Sound' from *The Hydrogen Sonata* is produced by natural phenomena and closely associated with a Culture human. Finally, there are two examples of works clearly produced from outside of the Culture, both by humans or humanoids: 'The Hydrogen Sonata' from the eponymous novel and Lededje's Intagliate markings themselves.

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[517] Rupert Sheldrake, Terence McKenna, Ralph Abraham, eds. *Chaos, Creativity and Cosmic Consciousness* (Vermont: Park Street Press, 1992; 2001) 48.

6.1. Art in Utopia

Alongside the radical social and political changes necessary to establish a utopian society, it is necessary to consider associated effect this would have on the notion of art and creativity as we understand it; and considerations of art in utopia and the nature of utopian art have fascinated thinkers almost as much as utopian changes to economics, human nature, gender roles and religion. Who would produce art and why? What form might it take? Would it in fact exist at all?

Some writers have imagined that art – defined as the product of deliberate creative and imaginative endeavor, often at least partly motivated by the desire for others to experience it and/or for financial gain – and aesthetics would actually cease to exist within a utopia altogether. Frederic Jameson describes this 'death of Art' as the "aesthetization of daily life", as occurs in William Morris's *News From Nowhere*. In a postcapitalist society where labour has become unalienated, Morris suggested that creativity and imagination would become integral to employment, and what we conceive of as art would no longer exist as a separate category as it has blended seamlessly into daily life.[518] Utopia might spell the death of art in another manner: if art, in a Marxist sense – at least the *best* art – fulfills a politically radical function, rendering society's ills visible and forcing it to confront them, then perhaps it serves no purpose in a utopian environment that has overcome its problems. By this understanding, art could lead to the development of utopia in the first instance, and disappear once its purpose had been fulfilled; if this utopia ever developed problems again, perhaps radical art would resurface.

While it seems clear that art is not actually dead in the Culture, and that Banks's utopia has not passed into a postaesthetic state, either due to the aestheticisation of daily life or rendered redundant in a society beyond political strife, the exact role and amount of art in the Culture is ambiguous. Unlike Morris's vision where people are required to work albeit in an unalienated fashion, Banks's vision is more radical, positing a society in which any form of employment is entirely voluntary: in short, Culture citizens have plenty of time on their hands, especially given the artificially extended healthiness and length of their lives. It follows, then, that many may choose to fill their time by utilising their imagination and creativity in whichever manner they see fit, fully supported by the limitless nature of their environment. This does not

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[518] Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 184.

seem to be the case, however, given that – as mentioned above – virtually all of the art described in the series is produced from outside the Culture or by individuals in an ambiguous relationship with it. Discussing the role of art in the Culture, Banks indicates that it is not widely regarded as a positive pursuit: "Being a famous artist in the Culture meant at best it was accepted you must possess a certain gritty determination; at worst it was generally seen as pointing to a pitiably archaic form of insecurity and a rather childish desire to show off" (*E*, 198). His comments indicate that artists definitely exist, and do become well know, but this practice is seen as serving little purpose other than expressing the character of the artist. Even the most talented artists, Banks explains, are "are not regarded in quite the same hallowed light as Contact members" (*E*, 198). Art is made to seem equally as pointless when, as explained in *Look to Windward* and *The Hydrogen Sonata*, the Minds are capable of reproducing even the most complex forms of art produced by people to an incredibly high standard, perhaps even achieving a level of *perfection* that a human could not.[519]

Given this, the role and nature of works of art within the Culture become extremely significant, especially when considering the extent to which it can be considered a utopia, as utopian philosophers such as Frederic Jameson have suggested: paraphrasing R.C. Eliot, Jameson compels us to "judge the quality of a given utopia on the basis of the art his creator attributed to his imaginary scenario."[520] Reasoning that art uniquely lays bare a utopia's shortcomings, Jameson continues, stating that "The work of art within the work of art thus itself becomes the miniature glass in which Utopia's most glaring absences are thus reproduced with minute clarity."[521] Following Jameson's observations, therefore, in the following chapter I read the ways in which the Culture is reflected in the 'miniature glasses' of the fictional artworks produced from within it, such as the tableaux of the GSV *Sleeper Service* or the torture museum created by the GSV *Grey Area*, and also in relation to other artworks described in the series from outside of Banks's civilization.

While William J. Burling agrees with Jameson on the importance of focusing upon a utopia's artworks for similar reasons, they directly clash on the most effective methodology for producing such an analysis. For Jameson, writing in *Archaeologies of the Future*, critics should focus on the *content* of the described artworks, their

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[519] See: *LtW*, 299-300, and *THS*, 187.
[520] Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 124, footnote.
[521] Ibid., 185.

aesthetics, while Burling writing in the essay '"The Basic Technique of Life": Utopian Art and Art in Utopia' from *Red Planets*, challenges Jameson directly, arguing for the importance of artistic *form*. The shortcomings of a utopia are concealed "at an external level of political and social argument [and] of economic production," argues Jameson, but can be, by the "purely aesthetic, suspended."[522] By focusing on the work of art within the utopian work of art, the utopia's shortcomings are revealed because there are no external political or social arguments to hide behind.

Burling, however, points out that Jameson has provided no clear framework or methodology for producing such an analysis,[523] and Burling develops his own version of such a framework, arguing that, in fact, "the mechanism of production is the crucial factor respecting art's form. While variations of content are interesting, they have far lesser ideological significance for art than those of form."[524]

6.2. Music in the Series

Of all the various forms of art depicted throughout Banks's oeuvre, including both mainstream and SF, most attention is arguably paid to music, probably as a reflection of his own long-term hobby of musical composition in the fields of rock and classical music. During his career, Banks published four novels that prominently feature professional musicians/composers as protagonists or key characters (*Canal Dreams*, *Espedair Street*, *Look to Windward* and *The Hydrogen Sonata*), and several others that make numerous incidental references to music and musicians, both real and fictional. Sometimes, while references to music in Banks's texts may be largely insignificant in terms of the overall plot, he still uses them to strengthen the themes with which he is concerned. In Banks's debut *The Wasp Factory*, for example, protagonist Frank/Frances attends a gig by the fictional punk band 'The Vomits', listening to the "howling, crashing music" that "thundered through the sweaty room."[525] By having Frank hear the band's overtly phallic lyrics, full of hypermasculine posturing and insecurity ("Ma gurl-fren's left me un ah feel like a bum,/ ah loss ma job an when ah wan kah can't cum…"), and state that "this sounded like it would be fun," Banks adds further layers of irony to his text, which is of course

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[522] Ibid.

[523] William J. Burling, 'Art as 'The Basic Technique of Life': Utopian Art and Art in Utopia,' in *Red Planets: Marxism and Science Fiction*, ed. China Mieville and Mark Bould. (London: Pluto Press, 2009), 47.

[524] Ibid., 52.

[525] Iain Banks, *The Wasp Factory*, 75.

concerned with misconceived gender identity, and its socio-cultural construction. Elsewhere, Banks allows references to provide subtle characterisation: Prentice in *The Crow Road* and Cameron in *Complicity* both listen to rock/indie acts from the 1990s, such as The Pixies and Faith No More, reflecting their countercultural leanings and left-wing political stances.[526]

Similarly, there are several passing references to music in the Culture series, often forming part of the backdrop to parties, ceremonies and other key events. For example: in *The Player of Games*, string-players perform near Gurgeh as he meets his game-playing match in Professor Boruelal, and a band from the empire of Azad display their cruelty by performing "wailing" music upon instruments formed from human skin and bones (220); in *Excession*, a character Ulver Seich is recruited into SC at a dance, given momentum by music (102-103); and in *Use of Weapons*, music tinkles softly as the true identity of the novel's protagonist is revealed (369).

There are two instances in the Culture series, however, when a musical composition is integral to a text's narrative, forming a nexus point for various plot strands, as well as the sociopolitical themes with which the texts are concerned.

6.2.1 *Look to Windward*: 'Expiring Light'

The sixth text in the Culture series *Look to Windward*, as is typical of Banks's space opera, features a complex multi-stranded narrative with shifting viewpoint characters, all subtly interwoven, building to coalesce as a dramatic climax: two key plot-strands include an attempt at violent retribution against the Culture by military veteran Major Quilan, following the death of his wife during the Chelgrian civil war; and disillusioned celebrity composer Mahria Ziller writing and premiering the grandest piece of his career, 'Expiring Light'. Forming part of the novel's climax, both Ziller and 'Expiring Light' are intrinsically linked to the wider politics of the novel, concerned with the sociopolitical consequences of a hugely-destructive historical battle (the 'Twin Novae Battle') that took place between the Culture and Ziller's people, the Chelgrians. The Chelgrians fought alongside the Idirans and against the Culture in the Idiran-Culture war, which was the biggest war in the history of either people (events from which were depicted by Banks in the first published Culture novel *Consider Phlebas*). The Culture was responsible for inadvertently instigating a

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[526] Iain Banks, *The Crow Road*, 384.

catastrophic civil war on Chelgria after one of its supposedly benign interventions failed. Many decades later, the Culture commissioned Ziller to compose 'Expiring Light' as a commemoration of the 'gigadeaths' that resulted from the destruction of two planets during the Twin Novae Battle, an event significant enough to end the Idiran-Culture war. Premiered thousands of years after the war, 'Expiring Light' is timed to coincide with the appearance of the supernovae that resulted from the Battle.

This fictional symphony has several interesting and revealing parallels with the real-world 'Symphony in Three Movements' by Igor Stravinsky. In my personal correspondence with Banks's friend Gary Lloyd, with whom he composed several pieces of music, Lloyd has confirmed that – as far he is aware – Banks did not have this specific piece in mind, but he was generally aware of Stravinsky's life and work.[527] Composed during the Second World War from 1942-1945, Eric Walter White notes that 'Symphony in Three Movements' was linked in Stravinsky's mind "with a concrete impression, very often cinematographic in origin, of the war"[528] – and Stravinsky sometimes simply called it his "war symphony".[529] Given this knowledge, parallels can be drawn between the Twin Novae Battle – an atrocity of enough magnitude to conclude a bitter war – and the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, which of course effectively ended the Second World War. Furthermore, both Ziller and Stravinsky composed their respective symphonies whilst living as expatriates in exile from their place of origin – a detail from Stravinsky's life of which Lloyd assures me Banks was definitely aware, even if it was not his primary inspiration for the piece.[530] Ziller lives "half outcast, half [in] exile" (*LtW*, 20) on Masaq', ostracised from his home-planet Chelgria after he criticised the draconian caste system enforced there, whilst Russian-born Stravinsky began composing 'Symphony in Three Movements' shortly after moving to the United States, this move

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[527] Gary Lloyd, email to author, 26 April, 2016.
[528] Eric Walter White, *Stravinsky: The Composer and his Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966) 96.
[529] Charles M. Joseph, *Stravinsky Inside Out* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 120.
[530] Lloyd has, however, proudly informed me that Banks was inspired by one of his own compositions: "When Iain was writing about the composition in *Look To Windward* that he was in fact using as his guide, model and inspiration a piece of mine that I wrote for [the] *son et lumiere* shows entitled 'Ignition'. The largest of these shows took place in Llandrindod Wells in 1996 with an audience of 11,000 people. I had a small choir bolstering up the recorded version of the piece which was what usually would be used at the events I was involved in, and I conducted it from a pontoon that was covered in ignition sites. It was deafening, the fireworks, not the music." Gary Lloyd, email to author, 26 April, 2016.

in part motivated by a marked low-point in the popularity of his music,[531] but also, like Ziller, by a desire to compose undisturbed under conditions of both "tranquility," "security," and "an atmosphere of [political] neutrality."[532]

Confirming Simon Guerrier's observation that, rather than focusing upon the Culture's inner spaces, "it is *in* the liminal zones, in the boundaries between the Culture and other races, that […Banks'] stories are all situated,"[533] Ziller does now live on a Culture Orbital, but this fact does not stop him from regularly criticising his new found home and its people, as he does those he left behind. Refusing to assimilate into his society, Ziller appreciates the Culture's liberal environments as they provide him with the space and facilities to compose undisturbed, as well as the venue and audience for his symphony; but, at the same time, he bitterly criticizes Culture people for their supposedly hedonistic, valueless and artificial lives. In fact his impression of the Culture goes beyond mere criticism and dislike to hatred and loathing: it is telling that, at one stage, Ziller remarks that "Happily, that hatred *does* provide vital inspiration for my work" (*LtW*, 65).

'Expiring Light' is performed at the climax of a long concert programme featuring several shorter pieces, the whole of which Banks makes clear has been carefully arranged so that its overall form mirrors its subject matter: the Idiran-Culture war itself:

> The music accumulated. Each piece, he realized, was slowly contributing to the whole. Whether it was Hub's idea or Ziller's, he didn't know, but the whole evening, the entire concert programme had been designed around the final symphony. The earlier, shorter pieces were half by Ziller, half by other composers. They alternated, and it became clear that the styles were quite different too, while the musical philosophies behind the two competing strands were dissimilar to the point of antipathy. […] The evening was the war. The two strands of music represented the protagonists, Culture and Idirans. Each pair of antagonistic pieces stood for one of the many small but increasingly bitter and wide-scale skirmishes which had taken place, usually between proxy forces for both sides, during the decades before the war itself had finally broken out. The works increased in length and in the sensation of mutual hostility (376).

Through this description, it is clear that the programme is intended to represent the chronology of the war, with each of the various musical works commissioned

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[531] White, Stravinsky: The Composer and his Works, 91-92.
[532] Ibid., 93.
[533] Simon Guerrier, 'Culture Theory: Iain M. Banks's 'Culture' as Utopia', *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction.* 1999-06-01; 28. 36.

representing each of its battles. By deliberately placing "antagonistic pieces" (so, pieces with musical aesthetics that are "dissimilar to the point of antipathy") side-by-side, the programme is used to mirror the conflict of a battle between factions with opposing political ideologies: a sonic 'war' to convey a physical war. From his descriptions, Banks does not explicitly state which particular musical style corresponds with which side in the conflict, and it is possible only to glean general impressions of the symphony's overall tonality, from certain passages in the text.

Banks describes the start of Ziller's piece in the following manner:

> The symphony *Expiring Light* began with a susurration that built and engorged until it burst into a single clashingly discordant blast of music; a mixture of chords and sheer noise that was echoed in the sky by a single shockingly bright air burst as a huge meteorite plunged into the atmosphere directly above the Bowl and exploded. Its stunning, frightening, bone-rattlingly loud sound arrived suddenly in a hypnotic lull in the music, making everybody – certainly everybody that Quilan was aware of, including himself – jump (377).

Here Banks suggests the tonality of the piece using adjective-heavy lyrical language. Close analysis reveals a strong impression of the use of musical dissonance, which is also a prominent feature of Stravinsky's 'Symphony in Three Movements'.[534] Dissonance is often understood in relation to its opposite 'consonance', the latter of which is defined as "a harmonious sounding together of two or more notes" […] with an "absence of roughness", and relief of "tonal tension."[535] Dissonance, therefore, can be understood as a combination of notes which create a sensation of aural 'roughness' and disharmony, leading to sensations of discomfort in the listener – arguably an appropriate tonality for depicting war in sonic form. In the above quotation, Banks potentially expresses dissonance using the adjective "clashingly", which suggests notes in conflict like soldiers on a battlefield, before he makes its presence more explicit with the musical term 'discordant', which is itself a synonym for dissonance. These terms are shortly followed by the phrase "sheer noise", again implying note combinations so exceedingly harsh in tone as to be heard as completely un-pitched, non-musical sounds. Elsewhere, the symphony is described in similarly-violent terms:

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[534] A critic of Stravinsy, Herbert Glass, provided oxymoronic description of the final movement of 'Symphony in Three Movements': "hellishly glorious noise." www.laphil.com/philpedia/music/symphony-three-movements-igor-stravinsky (Accessed September 8, 2013).

[535] Claude V. Palisca and Brian C. J. Moore, 'Consonance', *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press. www.oxfordmusiconline.com.v-ezproxy.brunel.ac.uk:2048/subscriber/article/grove/music/06316. (Accessed September 8, 2013).

as "screaming" (*LtW*, 377) and "battering" (378) the concert audience. Interestingly, Banks supports his preceding descriptions of the symphony's beginning, by allowing the music to be 'echoed' by acts of real, physical destruction – the burst and explosion of a meteorite – inviting the reader to interpret these violent acts as visual analogues for the tonal content of the music they accompany.

As well as using harsh tones to convey the mood of war, Banks's descriptions of 'Expiring Light' are further enhanced by a particularly surreal register, which is achieved by the deliberate confusing and overlapping of four different elements. Firstly, commencing just as the light from the first nova (named Portisia) explosion becomes visible, the 'real' destruction of Portisia is visible to the audience in the sky above the Bowl. Secondly, the projections of "visuals of the war and more abstract images" that also fill the sky (377). Thirdly, the metaphoric language that Banks uses to describe the music, which draws upon similar destructive and war-like imagery. Finally, the fact that much of this chapter (16: Expiring Light) is written from the third-person limited perspective of Quilan, whose perception is doubly-impaired by general feelings of guilt, doubt and despair, as well as the presence of another individual's consciousness (that of General Huyler) within his own.[536] This surreal, overlapping effect is arguably used by Banks to echo the state of 'cognitive dissonance'[537] that Quilan is experiencing at this point in the narrative: torn between a committed duty to infiltrating the Culture in order to perform an act of terrorism against them, whilst, in the process, slowly developing a significant degree of respect for them. The following paragraph, in which the symphony is linked by direct simile to ambiguous images of destruction, exemplifies the effect in question:

> Somewhere near the furious centre of the work, while the thunder played bass and the music rolled over it and around the auditorium like something wild and caged and desperate to escape, eight trails in the sky did not end in air bursts and did not fade away but slammed down into the lake all around the Bowl (377).

The fact that the trails "slammed into the lake" would seem to indicate that Banks is

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[536] At this stage in the novel's narrative, Quilan has the consciousness of General Huyler embedded within his own, in order to help him conduct his act of terrorism/revenge against the Culture; this allows Huyler to access some of Quilan's thoughts, but supposedly only those necessary in order to complete their task.

[537] Simon Blackburn, "cognitive dissonance," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2008). www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199541430.001.0001/acref-9780199541430-e-603. (Accessed 13 June, 2016).

here describing the real fall-out of Portisia's nova, although the paragraph follows a passage outlining the accompanying projected visuals, with no clear delineation between topics. In the next paragraph, the concert audience is *literally* shaken by the physical force of the lake-strikes – confirming Banks's previous reference as relating to the real destruction – and *figuratively* shaken by the music's startling effect:

> The entire Bowl, the whole kilometer-diameter of it, shook and quivered as the waves created by the lake-strikes smashed into the giant vessel. The music seemed to take the fear and terror and violence of the moment and run screaming away with it, pulling the audience behind like an unseated rider caught in the stirrup of their panic-stricken mount (377).

In the second sentence, Banks's uses simile to cast the audience as a terrified equestrian, with the music of the symphony itself representing the wild horse they struggle to control. This comparison serves to emphasise how the audience is affected physically and emotionally by Ziller's creation: temporarily trapped in an unpredictable moment, the listeners are seemingly forced into passivity by the sheer vehemence of the music, and unable to break free.

Quilan's state of mind at this stage, described using the near-oxymoron "terrible calmness", seems to mirror in some ways the terrified passivity of the rest of the audience, and – as he is the viewpoint character for this chapter – the reader is privy to the psychological effects he experiences in response to the music:

> It was as though his eyes formed a sort of twin tunnel in his skull and his soul was gradually falling away from that shared window to the universe, falling on his back forever down a deep dark corridor while the world shrank to a little circle of light and dark somewhere in the shadows above. Like falling into a black hole, he thought to himself. Or maybe it was just Huyler (378).

The effects of listening to music will of course vary according to the individual subject, and in this case Quilan's perspective is complicated a great deal, as previously mentioned, by grief, guilt, political ambivalence, and the presence of General Huyler within his consciousness. In paragraphs following the preceding quotation, the symphony seems to enable Quilan to experience a period of reflection and revelation, overwhelming in its intensity. Finally, descending to the nadir of his psychological 'black hole', Quilan discovers that Huyler is no longer within him, and instead the former communicates internally with a Special Circumstances drone who reveals that Quilan's plan to enact revenge upon the Culture by destroying the Masaq'

Orbital had been discovered and rendered impossible. Quilan's experience is written in a manner that heightens the already surreal tone of the section, almost to the extent of a dream-like blurring of reality and vision, or as Quilan makes explicit, as "if he'd been fed a drug" (378). Within this virtual dream- or drug-like space, Quilan alternates between periods of near-solipsistic self-reflection and feelings of unity with all of his surroundings: "he watched from a thousand angles, he was the stadium itself, its lights and sounds and very structure" (380). Upon revealing that the Culture was aware of his revenge almost from the outset, the drone encourages Quilan to "listen to the end of the symphony", which is described using the metaphor of a wave: "The music rose like the bulging bruise of water from an undersea explosion, an instant before the smooth swell raptures and the spout of white spray bursts forth" (380). Here, Banks uses natural imagery in order to convey Quilan's rising realisation and the final effect of this revelation.

Ultimately, through 'Expiring Light', *Look to Windward* forms a mediation of the ways in which artistic practice can clash and collude with the cultures in which it is created, the role of art as memorial of war and conflict, and a fascinating example of the difficulties arising from attempting to effectively describe music in writing.

6.2.2 *The Hydrogen Sonata***: 'The Hydrogen Sonata'**

Published thirteen years after *Look to Windward, The Hydrogen Sonata* - the tenth and final Culture text – features a fictional musical work prominently in its narrative, this time featuring a musician, Vyr Cossont, and not a composer as such, as protagonist. 'The Hydrogen Sonata' itself, fully entitled the "26th String-Specific Sonata For An Instrument Yet To Be Invented", is a highly experimental and avant-garde musical work, which is closely associated with Cossont throughout the novel. The sonata is generally regarded as highly-unpopular due to its extreme complexity and inaccessibility to most listeners, and as such has achieved a notorious and even semi-mythical status throughout the Culture's galaxy, with even its composer Vilabier supposedly treating it as a joke (125). Nevertheless, Cossont has made it her life's task to perform a perfect solo rendition of the piece, spurred on by its reputation as "near impossible to play acceptably, let alone perfectly" (13).

As with 'Expiring Light', parallels can be drawn between Banks's depictions of 'The Hydrogen Sonata' and a real-world counterpart, in this case the piece 'Time and Motion Study II', written by the English composer Brian Ferneyhough between 1973

and 1976. Ferneyhough's Study shares a similar renown to Vilabier's Sonata: once described as "the ultimate in complexity," [538] Ferneyhough's score includes: "labyrinthine"[539] notation on up to five staves simultaneously; "mind-bending rhythmic density;"[540] and extensive annotations indicating the emotional timbre of each passage, which are bizarre, abstract and idiosyncratic.[541] While a perfect rendition of 'Time and Motion Study II' is perhaps not actually impossible, or a task that would literally require an entire life-time to achieve – or, in fact, is perfection an attribute even *expected* for it by its composer at all[542] – an extremely high level of virtuosity *is* required to perform it to a satisfactory degree; and, such is the detailed nature of the score, that any performer must dedicate a huge amount of time to the piece, in order to satisfy the substantial demand placed upon the performer by the composer. At one stage, Cossont sarcastically points out that, referring to the 'The Hydrogen Sonata', the "score *is* beautiful" (124); her description here, then, could easily refer to Ferneyhough's piece also.

The compositional complexity of 'The Hydrogen Sonata' and 'Time and Motion Study II' is also reflected in terms of performance. Vilabier's Sonata is written for a solo performer of the "The Antagonistic Undecagonstring" or elevenstring, which is described in such a way as to suggest a cello and a piano, but also a bicycle, due to the necessity for a performer to sit partly inside the instrument's body (12). Similarly, Ferneyhough's Study, written for solo cello, requires its performer to be both surrounded by, and wired up to, a complex arrangement of footpedals, microphones and speakers – like "strapping the performer into a sort of musical electric chair"[543] – just as Cossont must sit partially inside her elevenstring in order to play it.

When describing the sound of the sonata itself, Banks does occasionally rely upon metaphor, as with his treatment of 'Expiring Light', but he offers much more

[538]Tom Service, 'A Guide to Brian Ferneyhough's Music', *The Guardian*, 10 September, 2012, www.theguardian.com/music/tomserviceblog/2012/sep/10/contemporary-music-guide-brian-ferneyhough. (Accessed January 12, 2015).
[539] Ibid.
[540] Ibid.
[541] Brian Ferneyhough, 'Time and Motion Study II: for solo cello and electronics', (London: Peters, 1978). Annotations include: "violent but reserved, coldly inscrutable"; "with passionate dedication and self-transcendence"; and, famously, "with the utmost imaginable degree of violence".
[542] Service, 'A Guide to Brian Ferneyhough's Music'. "The point is, if Ferneyhough wanted his scores […] to be a sort of straitjacket for the performer, to determine precisely what they should be doing at every micro-second of the piece, he would have become an electronic or electro-acoustic composer."
[543] Service, 'A Guide to Brian Ferneyhough's Music'.

concrete detail of harmony and tonality – possibly a reflection of his own increased interest in composition later in life. 'The Hydrogen Sonata' is characterised as a work with high levels of dissonance, in a much more explicit manner than 'Expiring Light'.[544] In interview Banks suggested that 'The Hydrogen Sonata' was intended as a satire of atonal music, reflecting his own musical preferences: "I'm not a traditionalist in many things, but I am when it comes to music; I like melody. I can't be getting on with atonal music. I keep trying."[545] Even Vilabier himself admits writing the piece to "prove how easy it was to write such … mathematical … programmish … music" (*THS*, 125) – and the Sonata seems notoriously unpopular for its inaccessibility. It is no coincidence that the only people who seem to appreciate 'The Hydrogen Sonata' within Banks's novel are academics, computers, and androids.[546] It is significant that – in brief snippets of a symphony composed by Banks aired during his final BBC interview – Banks consciously used as few chords as possible, and only single melody lines:[547] in other words, the exact opposite of 'The Hydrogen Sonata', which is noted for its almost total lack of melody.[548] It is not unreasonable, then, to suggest that the Culture's music may be composed along these lines, given the highly personal construction of Banks's utopia, although this speculation is unlikely to ever be confirmed.

In a sub-plot of *The Hydrogen Sonata*, Banks describes a parallel musical system – portrayed as both more natural, and overwhelmingly beautiful – that contrasts with the supposedly 'programmish', 'soulless' nature of Villabier's Sonata. Known simply as 'The Sound', this "sky-filling, soul-battering, ear-splitting" (329) noise, created by wind passing through deliberately-created tunnels cut into a planet's mountain range, is powerful enough to cause QiRia, an individual old enough to have known Villabier, to dedicate later stages of his long life to hearing The Sound from its source through an extra set of ears, grafted in place of his eyes (326-337). Compared to "a slow, sonorous hymn in a language you would never understand" (328); "an orchestra of hundreds of gigantic organs all playing […] at the same time (329);" and a "god bellowing in your ear" (331), Banks's descriptions of The Sound, scattered across several pages, rely upon science fictional extrapolations of familiar musical

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[544] See: *THS*, "clashing…atonal music" (127); and: "I do detect a degree of discordant tonality" (128).
[545] 'Interview with Iain M. Banks', *BBC Radio Scotland* - The Book Café, 08 October, 2012. www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00zjf0f (Accessed 6 October, 2015).
[546] See: *THS*, 124 and 286 – 287.
[547] Interview, *BBC Radio Scotland*.
[548] See: *THS*, 127.

practices as well as the scale of the divine in a similar manner to his descriptions of 'Expiring Light' years earlier. These descriptions contrast with those of 'The Hydrogen Sonata', which Banks in fact seldom describes directly; when he does in fact do so, he uses distinctly less enthused language.

While Banks does use the Sonata to satirise atonal music, his touch is playful and light-hearted, and his writing indicates a greater enthusiasm and interest in discussing the complex metaphoric potential of the piece's aesthetics, rather than as a piece of music in its own right. The piece's title 'The Hydrogen Sonata', rather like the term 'science fiction' itself, mixes concepts from art and science, which are seemingly-opposed by their respective contrasting connotations of fictionalisation and objective truth. Following this, Banks develops a complex metaphor interlinking musical concepts and terms, with concepts from particle physics and cosmology, often linked synonimically or homonymically – for example: the word 'string'.

The instrument known as "The Antagonistic Undecagonstring", for example, was deliberately designed by Vilabier with eleven strings, not seemingly for a specific musical reason, but in order to represent the dimension known as 'the Sublime', transcendence into which forms pinnacle of the Gzilt's (the civilisation from which both Vilabier and Cossont originate) civilisational goals. In order to understand this metaphor, it is necessary to understand the fictional cosmology that Banks imagined for his Culture series. Banks developed his own variation of the familiar SF trope the "multiverse", or coexisting, layered universes – he explained, "think of an onion"[549] – and the Sublime is said to be located in layers seven to eleven (*THS*, 17). Therefore, Vilabier wrote the Sonata for an eleven stringed instrument, linking it with the "vast, infinite, better-than-virtual ultra-existence" (63) that is the Sublime. In turn, Vilabier chose a stringed instrument as opposed to, say, an instrument with valves or keys, to allow for a pun on the word 'string' – relating the physical components of the instrument to the one-dimensional objects postulated in the concept of String Theory in particle physics. This metaphor is strengthened by Banks's description of the Sonata's introductory passage: here, a "single high note" signifies "a hydrogen nucleus", followed by a "wavering chord" that represents "the concept of a sole electron's probability cloud." Together, "the first note and the first chord represented the element hydrogen" (286).

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[549] Iain Banks, 'A Few Notes'.

While there is relatively little further in-depth description of the piece in the novel, it is possible and worthwhile to briefly speculate about the broader implications of the above analysis on Banks's intended metaphorical significance for 'The Hydrogen Sonata' as a whole. Given the repeatedly-stated complexity and length of the piece – seemingly the absolute pinnacle of baroque intricacy and grandiosity in the music of the known galaxy – it is reasonable to suggest that the piece represents nothing less than the grandest imaginable story: that of the universe's expansion, and the life of the cosmos itself. Ferneyhough, too, expresses the radical musical philosophy behind his music using metaphors from particle physics:

> We need to speculate about modes of reality and works of art do this for us. The work of art is not there just to entertain but to continually take apart and re-assemble the *molecules of meaning* which for us constitute reality. We must continually deconstruct them and reconstruct them in other formulations to see what their mode of reality, for a moment, might be.[550]

For Ferneyhough, then, art of any kind – but especially music – performs one of science fiction's most basic functions: speculation on the nature of our current reality; but, perhaps more importantly – as with Banks's novels – it allows the artist also to 'reconstruct' that reality, and conceive it in a new manner.

As well as fulfilling this metaphorical role in the story, the Sonata is linked with the novel's social and political themes, largely through the protagonist Vyr Cossont. Cossont is an important performer of the Sonata, and not its composer, Vilabier (about whom little is known except that he was probably an academic).[551] Born into the religious Gzilt civilisation, where all chose a Life Task to pass the time spent in a corporeal body in this universe before they 'Sublime', Cossont chooses for her 'life task' the challenge of performing 'The Hydrogen Sonata' perfectly, a task that almost no others have accomplished.

Like Ziller in *Look to Windward*, Cossont occupies a liminal and ambiguous position relating to her home culture. While at the start of the novel she does lives with the Gzilt, Cossont seems to have chosen her Life Task as much to distance herself from the conservative and militaristic Gzilts, who do not afford musical and martial discipline with the same level of respect, as from a love of creativity and music. Cossont proudly displays both her social and her musical non-conformity by

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[550] "Electric Chair Music", 2007, Youtube video. Posted by Institute of Advanced Study, University of London. www.youtube.com/watch?v=Py5Vk90ZTak (Accessed 6 October, 2015).
[551] The piece was first performed to an audience of academics. See Banks, *The Hydrogen Sonata*, 126.

wearing a jacket emblazoned with the offensive logo of her old music group 'The Lords of Excrement'. In fact, her rebellion and dedication goes deeper: in order for a solo performer to play 'The Hydrogen Sonata', which uses the elevenstring's full harmonic range, they are required to have an extra pair of arms surgically grafted onto their bodies – as Cossont has done. While she views this as an improvement or adaptation, and it can be easily and perfectly be undone, it induces shock and disgust among her family members, many of whom call her a "freak", and threaten her with discrimination and social ostracism (*THS*, 31). Throughout the novel, Cossont is very reluctant to practice the piece, however, and even transporting the "coffin-like" (176) elevenstring seems a chore. Cossont's desire to rebel against the social, political and religious structure of the Gzilt seems to leave her trapped, as, while practicing the unpopular sonata is in itself an act of rebellion, this nevertheless helps her achieve her life task, an act of social conformity. Her dichotomy is somewhat resolved at the novel's conclusion: though she *does* eventually complete her life-task, a symbol of social conformity, she also flings the instrument into space afterwards, listening as it "hummed emptily" (517), a symbolic rejection of the Gzilt. More significantly, Cossont achieves a much more literal rejection of her family and home-culture by choosing not to Sublime alongside them, and to remain on Gzilt. In this respect, Cossont aligns herself more with the Culture, who – as explained above – adamantly refuse to Sublime, and prefer like Cossont to live in the dimension from which they originated.

6.3 Other Arts in the Series

While music is the artform that predominates in the Culture series, and in his oeuvre as a whole, Banks uses the freedoms afforded to him by the SF mode and space opera form to imagine other, stranger forms of art and creative culture – all linked to the Culture in some way but not necessarily originating from within it. In the fourth published Culture text *Excession*, for example, the Mind which inhabits and oversees a General Systems Vehicle (GSV) entitled the *Sleeper Service* is afforded the opportunity to create a unique work of 'living' art.

6.3.1 *Excession*: Gory Living tableaux

With only two sentient, conscious inhabitants – a reclusive ex-Contact officer Dajeil Gelian and a bird Gravious – the huge vessel of the *Sleeper Service* provides space for

a multitude of flora and fauna, gathered from all over the galaxy, as well as maintaining Culture individuals who have agreed to be kept onboard under a form of suspended animation known as 'Storage'. Choosing to go into Storage "when they had reached a certain age, or if they had just grown tired of living" (81), this process allows a person's mind and body to rest safely, and without ageing, ready for awakening at an appropriate time, if desired. By choosing to act as a vessel for Storage, the *Sleeper Service* is deemed to have adopted an unusual lifestyle, and – like Ziller and Cossont from *LtW* and *THS* – it exists on the fringes of the Culture (as do its inhabitants) as an officially 'Eccentric' craft:

> When it Stored people it usually did so in small tableaux after the manner of famous paintings, at first, or humorous poses […] the ship had always asked the permission of the Storees in question before it used their sleeping forms in this way, and respected the wishes of the few people who preferred not to be Stored in a situation where they might be gazed upon as though they were figures in a painting, or sculptures (83).

Based upon this description – which emphasises the consent of the Storees, the Culture's famously ludic attitude, and the ship's interest in classic art – the tableaux seem an innocent way for the Mind to pass time, out alone in deep space, providing the opportunity for Storees to participate in a unique artistic venture. These tableaux, to the Mind of the *Sleeper Service*, are its "master-work, its definitive statement" (205). Yet the *Sleeper Service*'s actions and motivations for the tableaux become more suspect and sinister as its interests develop in a morbid direction, and it begins focusing exclusively upon recreating especially gruesome scenes from historical battles, such as the 'Battle of Boustrago', and "the great sea battle of Octovelein".

Concerning the latter, the *Sleeper Service* appears to focus upon conveying the epic scale and dramatic complexity of the battle, which, at points, sounds almost picturesque in its descriptions of natural imagery:

> The air was crisscrossed by the smoky trails of the primitive rockets and the sky seemed supported by the great columns of smoke rising from stricken warships and transports. The water was dark blue, ruffled with waves, spattered with the tall feathery plumes of crashing rockets, creased white at the stem of each ship, and covered in flames where oils had been poured between ships in desperate attempts to prevent boarding […] The incomplete battle scene filled less than half of the bay's sixteen square kilometers (205).

Here, Banks evokes the long-standing tradition of paintings depicting naval battles –
and comparable real-world examples of grand galleons leaking flames and pounding
each with cannons are too numerable to mention.[552] The tone of the preceding
passage, however, when compared with others that detail the ship's tableau of the
'Battle of Boustrago' – a particularly violent conflict from the Culture's distant
history, which, as with the Twin Novae Battle mentioned previously, had been the
"final, decisive battle" in a large-scale war – contrasts sharply (*E*, 79):

> Bodies lay scattered like twisted, shredded leaves amongst the torn-up grassland […]
> they all lay together, some with the collapsed shapelessness of death, some in a pool
> of their own internal organs, some missing limbs, some in a posture appropriate to
> their agony, thrashing or writhing or – in the case of some of the soldiers – supporting
> themselves on one limb and reaching out to plead for help, or water, or a *coup de
> grace* to end their torment. It was all quite still, frozen like a three-dimensional
> photograph, and it all lay, spread out like some military society's model scene made
> real, in General Bay Three Inner of the GSV *Sleeper Service* (79-80).

The ship's focus for this tableau – notably different from the Battle of Octovelein – is
clearly upon the gory aftermath of the battle, emphasising the pain, torment, and
desperation, of the dead, dying and severely wounded, rather than the actions
performed in the midst of the battle itself. As is made explicit, the tableau is very
similar to dioramas created by real-world hobbyists and military enthusiasts, yet
rendered on a 1:1 scale.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect, as Banks notes, is the ship's attention to
detail, carefully recreating the scene – every gout of blood and puff of smoke – with
an accuracy that borders on obsession:

> The details of the scene were as authentic as the ship could make them; it had studied
> every painting, etching and sketch of the battle and read every account, military and
> media report of it, even taking the trouble to track down the records of the diary
> entries of individual soldiers, while at the same time undertaking exhaustive research
> into the whole historical period concerned including the uniforms, weaponry and
> tactics used when the battle had taken place (80).

The *Sleeper Service*, then, treads a fine line between providing a highly accurate
recreation of a crucial historical scene as might be found in a museum, and exploiting
the painful deaths of its subjects and the permission of its Storees, in a kind of House

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[552] Notable examples include: 'The Battle of Trafalgar', by William Clarkson Stanfield, 1805; 'The
Sinopskiy Battle on the 18th November of the 1853 year (Night after Battle)', by Ivan Aivazovsky,
1853; and 'Battle of Gibraltar', by Cornelis Claesz van Wieringen, 1607.

of Horrors. The tableaux, however, prove to be very popular. When the *Sleeper Service* "released holograms of its more and more ambitious tableaux", it attracts significant attention from Culture people: Ulver Seich, one of the novel's viewpoint characters, expresses disappointment that she is unable to visit;[553] others are said to be drawn to it as they "thought it rather amusing"; others because "they might be said to be forming part of a work of art"; and yet others because it is "fashionable" (84-85).

When an avatar of the *Sleeper Service*, known as Amorphia, enters the narrative, traversing the Battle of Boustrago in order to awaken an important Storee, the avatar offers an insight into its motivation for the tableau. Upon recovering, the Storee in question, one of the novel's protagonists Dajeil Gelian, observes the tableaux surrounding her "for some time", and has her observations preempted by Amorphia: "'It is a terrible sight,' it said. 'But it was the last great land battle on Xlephier Prime. To have one's final significant battle at such an early technological stage is actually a great achievement for a humanoid species'" (87). By emphasizing the significance of this battle – marking an end to almost all conflict – Amorphia suggests that it was motivated by a positive, progressive desire to remind the tableaux's viewers (who are implicitly mostly if not all from the Culture) about the unfortunate necessity for war in the past, and the good that has arisen from it, as well as providing a celebration of the fact that it can be removed altogether. Although Dajeil's response – "I was just thinking how impressive all this was. You must be proud" (*E*, 87) – could be read as sarcastic.

The Battle of Boustrago tableau, in particular, can be usefully compared with works by real-world artists such as Spanish romantic painter and printmaker Francisco de Goya, especially 'The Disasters of War' (1810-1820), and contemporary *les enfants terribles,* sibling duo Jake and Dinos Chapman, whose work often engages with that of Goya, particularly their sculpture 'Great Deeds Against the Dead' (2003). In 'The Disasters of War'*,* a series of 82 etchings produced as a protest against various uprisings and wars affecting Spain during the early nineteenth century, Goya depicts various scenes of murder, torture and execution, such as number 37: '*Esto es peor'* ('*This is worse'*), where the mutilated torsos and limbs of civilian victims are mounted on trees, in the aftermath of a war. As with the tableaux of the *Sleeper Service,* the cadaver in the tree within Goya's etching appears artistically arranged

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[553] Ibid., 340: "It looked like she wouldn't get to see even the remnants of the famous craft's tableaux vivants, and would have to make do with the *Grey Area* and its tableaux mortants."

like a figure for a statue, and is depicted in considerable detail. At the time of writing, a new exhibition of Goya's work in London has re-opened critical debate surrounding the violent content of this artist's work, focused on the question of whether it supports freedom from tyranny and repression or glorifies it.[554] Similar debates surround the Chapman Brothers, also, whose portfolio of controversies include the direct alteration of mint condition plates from 'The Disasters of War', printed by Goya himself (a piece the title of which anticipates its own controversy: 'Insult to Injury'), which was described by the Brothers as "rectification" and "improvement", but by critics as "desecration" and "defacement".[555] In direct relevance to the tableaux produced by the *Sleeper Service*, the Brothers produced 'Great Deeds Against the Dead' (2003), a life-sized, mixed-media recreation of '*Esto es peor'*, created from dismembered, fully-castrated mannequins impaled upon a bare tree.

Regardless of the morbid nature of many of its obsessions, the *Sleeper Service* ultimately redeems itself in the narrative of Excession, when it plays a major role in ending the war at the novel's heart. It is revealed that the *Sleeper Service*, far from being a docile eccentric disengaged with the politics of the Culture, has been part of a group of Minds known as the Interesting Times Games, engaged in a conflict between the Culture, an aggressive alien race the Affront, and the mysterious and powerful entity the Excession itself. A sub-section of this Gang, acting against the wishes of the Gang and the Culture at large, wished for the *Sleeper Service* to give over its vast hold space – currently filled with flora, fauna and its elaborate tableaux – to a great fleet of Culture attack vessels, thereby ironically making the ship potentially responsible for such epic scenes of death and slaughter as it chose to represent with its art. In a wonderfully surreal continuation of its artistic inclinations, the *Sleeper Service* does perform this request, causing, "without warning […] Stored bodies and giant animals" to begin "popping into existence" across an Orbital, Teriocre, "inside the sports halls, on beaches, terraces, boardwalks and pavements, in parks, plazas, deserted stadia and every other sort of public space the Orbital had to offer" (E, 240-241) which suggests

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[554] See: James Hall, 'My Highlight: Goya', *The Guardian*, 3 January, 2015. www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/jan/03/my-highlight-goya-courtauld-national-gallery-james-hall (Accessed 12 January, 2015); and, Christopher Turner, ''I'd like to have stepped on Goya's toes, shouted in his ears and punched him in the face': The Chapman Brothers', *Tate Etc*. issue 8: Autumn 2006; 1 September, 2006. www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/id-have-stepped-on-goyas-toes-shouted-his-ears-and-punched-him-face (Accessed 12 January, 2015).
[555] Jonathan Jones, 'Look What We Did', The *Guardian*, 31 March, 2003. www.theguardian.com/culture/2003/mar/31/artsfeatures.turnerprize2003 (Accessed 12 January, 2015).

a more ludic sensibility for the bizarre, perhaps, rather than an unhealthy, obsessive interest in morbidity or actual sadism.

Ultimately, the *Sleeper Service* refuses to cooperate with the Gang, and uses its resources in a different manner in order to bring the war to a more peaceful conclusion. At the novel's finish, the *Sleeper Service* readies itself to perform the ultimate deed of heroism, sacrificing itself for the good of if its people, although eventually the threat such destruction represents seemingly causes the Excession to leave, just in time for the *Sleeper Service* to survive (428). This potential act of self-sacrifice, the *Sleeper Service* concludes, could be seen as "a kind of desperation at work", perhaps "an act of defiance", or maybe "it was even something close to an act of art" (428).

If the artistic tastes of the *Sleeper Service* tend towards the strange, they are eclipsed in this regard by the General Contact Unit (GCU) *Grey Area* – also a key player in *Excession*'s narrative – which, in a similar manner to the *Sleeper Service*, uses itself as a venue for a kind of exhibition, yet one which is much more gruesome:

> The ship was like a museum to torture, death and genocide; it was filled with mementoes and souvenirs from hundreds of different planets, all testifying to the tendency towards institutionalized cruelty exhibited by so many forms of intelligent life. From thumbscrews and pilliwinks to death camps and planet-swallowing black holes, the *Grey Area* had examples of the devices and entities involved, or their effects, or documentary recordings of their use. Most of the ship's corridors were lined with weaponry, the larger pieces standing on the floor, others on tables; bigger items took up whole cabins, lounges or larger public spaces and the very biggest weapons were shown as scale models (339).

Described as "like a museum to torture, death and genocide", Banks invites the reader to draw comparison between the *Grey Area*'s collection and really-existing museums of a similar nature, such as the Torture Museum, and the Museum of Medieval Torture Instruments, both located in Amsterdam, Netherlands, and the Medieval Crime Museum, located in Rothenburg ob der Tauber, Germany.[556] It is an interesting fact, if possibly a coincidence, that the only city in the world to have more than one museum dedicated to such ghoulish subject-matter is Amsterdam, which is known (perhaps stereotypically so) – like the Culture – as cosmopolitan, peaceful and tolerant.

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[556] See the respective museums' websites: www.torturemuseum.com/; www.torturemuseumamsterdam.com/; and www.kriminalmuseum.rothenburg.de/

If the proceeding description of the *Grey Area* serves to indicate the tone and scale of its collection, the following list that Banks provides – featuring some thirty five of the "thousands of instruments of torture" on display – indicates the somewhat obsessional extent of the ship's interests, as well as the huge time periods over which the items have been gathered:

> clubs, spears, knives, swords, strangle cords, catapults, bows, powder guns, shells, mines, gas canisters, bombs, syringes, mortars, howitzers, missiles, atomics, lasers, field arms, plasma guns, microwavers, effectors, thunderbolters, knife missiles, line guns, thudders, gravguns, monofilament warps, pancakes, AM projectors, grid-fire impulsers, ZPE flu-polarisers, trapdoors units, CAM spreaders and a host of other inventions designed for – or capable of being turned to the purpose of – producing death, destruction and agony (339).

Featuring crude medieval weapons, such as clubs and spears, often roughly constructed from simple materials; far-future technology and staples of military SF such as grav- and plasma guns; and the even more complex-sounding ordinance suggested by the nova 'grid-fire impulsers' and 'ZPE flu-polarisers' – the paragraph is a huge list, both exhaustive and exhausting, of every conceivable type of arsenal. The presence of such a collection onboard a vessel from the Culture seems perhaps somewhat incongruous – even for an Eccentric ship – given their supposedly peaceful nature. Given what Banks reveals about the *Grey Area* and its later role in the narrative, however, the content of the ship's collection seems appropriate to its nature, and therefore becomes sinister and concerning. The ship's moniker '*Grey Area*', suggesting connotations of uncertainty, dubiousness and distrust, is significant as it is revealed that this was not the name it selected for itself (its chosen name is not stated), but one in fact chosen for it by the Culture: this rare incidence, of a Culture vessel being denied an official listing under its name of choice, is considered a grave insult, and clearly shows that the *Grey Area* is generally distrusted by the Culture.[557] The *Grey Area*'s bad reputation in the novel in fact extends beyond mere distrust; the ship is despised by its peers for its habit of reading the minds of Culture humans without their consent – perhaps the gravest wrongdoing it is possible for a Mind to commit, second to murder – therefore earning its pejorative nickname, *Meatfucker*, .[558] The ship therefore becomes a perfect exemplar of both names.

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[557] See: *LtW*: "To be denied your self-designated name is a unique insult in the Culture" (249).
[558] See: Ibid., and also: *Excession*, 70-71.

When Ulver Seich visits the *Grey Area*, her observations provide commentary on the nature of the items in the ship's collection, and draw attention to the somewhat detached way in which it is presented to an observer:

> She thought they might be more effective if they had contained the victims or the victims and tormentors, but they didn't. Instead they contained just the rack, the iron maiden, the fires and the irons, the shackles and the beds and chairs, the buckets of water and acid and electric cables and all the serried instruments of torture and death. To see them in action you had to stand before a screen. It was a little shocking, Ulver supposed, but kind of aloof at the same time (*E*, 340).

Ulver observes that the various devices and weapons are presented in isolation from the human "victims" for whose torture they are designed, and thusly avoiding a visceral response to the actions, and also in isolation from the "tormentors", also avoiding an opportunity for the observer to analyse those capable of conducting such actions. While the torture is recreated on a "screen", the resulting effect is only "a little shocking", and her ultimate feeling of semi-aloofness suggests that her feeling of shock will be only temporary, and she will be able to leave the exhibits without being affected on a long-term or permanent basis.

Following this observation, however Ulver goes on to suggest that her response is both cerebral and visceral. Initially she notes that, "It was like you could just inspect this stuff and get some idea of how it worked and what it did […] and you could sort of ride it out […] at the end of it you were still here, it hadn't happened to you" (340-341), which indicates that her experience was almost an impersonal, technical exercise. She follows this, however, by mentioning that, whilst "watching the screens […] for a few seconds", she "nearly lost her breakfast; and it wasn't even humans who were being tortured" (340-341). The fact that the depictions on-screen almost made her physically sick indicate that she endured a deeper level of shock and distress during the exhibit after all; and her comment that "it wasn't even humans who were being tortured" suggests a feeling of pan-species empathy resulting from her experience – a more universal sense of horror at appalling acts of pain deliberately-inflicted upon living creatures.

Ulver's next comments, however, indicate a further, more directly political, aspect of the *Grey Area*'s collection: "stopping this sort of shit was exactly what SC, Contact, the Culture was about, and you were part of that civilisation, part of that civilising…and that sort of made it bearable. Just if you didn't watch the screens" (340). As a Culture citizen, Ulver has adopted the values, messages and ideologies of

her civilisation – that the Culture and its factions are a force of moral progress in the galaxy, who are self-evidently, diametrically opposed to all forms of torture – and viewing the *Grey Area*'s collection, horrific as it may be, is justified as it reaffirms everything she knows about herself and her background. In this regard, the collection operates in a similar manner to the 'Battle of Boustrago', as noted above, which sought to affirm the dominant narrative of the Culture in which it was produced. It is interesting, at this stage, to recall the fact that, amidst the long list of *Grey Area* artifacts Banks provides, appears a knife missile – the Culture's most quintessential weapon. Whatever the real function of the *Grey Area*'s "grisly collection of memorabilia", when Ulver wonders "how many people had looked upon this," the ship's reply is vague: "apparently it regularly offered its services as a sort of travelling museum of pain and ghastliness, but it rarely had any takers" (341).

In contrast to the artworks produced by the *Grey* Area, and the majority of those on the *Sleeper Service*, Banks later describes one of the *Sleeper Service*'s tableau which depicts a completely different scene, seemingly created with alternative motivations:

> the modest tableau on the balcony, which in its previous existence, before the GSV had decided to go Eccentric, had been part of a café with a fine view of the bay. Here were posed seven humans, all with their backs to the view of the empty bay and facing the hologram of a calm, empty swimming pool. The humans wore trunks; they sat in deck chairs around a couple of low tables full of drinks and snacks. They had been caught in the acts of laughing, talking, blinking, scratching their chin, drinking (206-207).

Initially, the tableau may perhaps seem included purely for comic effect achieved by its sharp contrast with the battle-focused tableaux previously described. Immediately following the preceding quotation, however, Banks states that the tableau in fact depicts "some famous painting, apparently. It didn't look very artistic to Gravious. It supposed you had to see it from the right angle" (207).

Here, Banks may be referring to 'People in the Sun', painted by Edward Hopper in 1960, currently owned by the Smithsonian American Art Museum, which depicts three men and two women, dressed formally, seated in deck chairs, and facing out over "mountains, sky, and grass," an "abstracted environment that veers between a real view and a stage set."[559] As noted in the description provided by the Museum, "*People in the Sun* suggests a crowd of tourists who feel obliged to take in a famous

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[559] Edward Hopper, 'People in the Sun', 1960, oil on canvas, 40 3/8 x 60 3/8 in. (102.6 x 153.4 cm.) Smithsonian American Art Museum. Gift of S.C. Johnson & Son, Inc. 1969. americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artwork/?id=10762 (Accessed 12 January, 2015.)

scenic view, but do so with little pleasure."[560] Following this observation, the expressions of Hopper's tourists indicate an arguably neutral response to the scenery that they observe, which can easily be interpreted as boredom. The human figures from Banks's tableau, however, are notable for the distinct range of their expressions and gestures – "laughing, talking, blinking, scratching their chin, drinking" – and, while there is nothing immediately unusual or striking about these commonplace and familiar actions, the fact that they were singled out for depiction, by both Banks and the *Sleeper Service*, draws attention to this very ordinariness. Perhaps this 'modest tableau on the balcony' is included to enliven an otherwise potentially morbid and depressing exhibition, by capturing seven different individuals, each expressing a different aspect of everyday human activity: focusing upon life as it is lived, amongst so much death and suffering.

6.3.2 *Surface Detail:* **Lededje's Intagliation**

Lededje Y'breq, the protagonist of *Surface Detail,* can be understood – like the *Sleeper Service*'s tableaux – as an example of a living work of art. Referred to as an Intagliate, Lededje

> was covered, head to foot, in what was called a congenitally administered tattoo. Lededje had been born tattooed, emerging from the womb with the most fabulously intricate patterns indelibly encoded at a cellular level onto her skin and throughout her body (69).

Lededje is a woman who originates from the pan-human society known as the Sichultian Enablement; while Lededje and her people become involved with the Culture in the novel, the creation of her elaborate 'tattoo' initially has no direct relation to the Culture, yet later in *Surface Detail* the Culture is required to remake Lededje's tattoo, as discussed below, which can be used to provide a degree of insight into its own practices.

It is straightforward to understand the extrapolation that Banks has performed to arrive at the notion of Intagliation. Beginning with the concept of cosmetic tattooing – inserting indelible ink to the dermis layer of the skin in order to change the pigment and decorate a person's body – as is commonly practiced in various cultures worldwide, Banks postulates that a society with a higher level of technological capability would be able to administer such markings throughout the entirety of a

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[560] Ibid.

human body, both inside and out: the markings are noted to appear also on an Intagliate's teeth, the whites of their eyes, the pores of their skin, their organs, and their bones (69). While the use of tattooing for purely aesthetic purposes is mentioned in Banks's Culture novels,[561] Intagliation is not voluntary: her markings identify Lededje as a chattel slave, the property of "Mr Joiler Veppers, President and Prime Executive Officer of the Veprine corporation; the richest man in the world […] in charge of the most powerful and profitable company that had ever existed" (80). Allowing for something of a grim pun on the term 'branding', Lededje's tattoos consist of "fabulous scroll work", the basis of which is the brand logo for Veppers' company: "the letter V standing for Vespers, or the Vesperine corporation that he commanded" (75). Lededje's father Grautze – Veppers' business partner and sworn 'blood brother' – had arranged "a momentous, reputation-securing, history-making, world-changing deal" (73) which they sealed in blood, using a pair of ceremonial daggers, rather than in print. Following the failure of this deal, however, Grautze was forced to comply with the outrageously draconian debt laws enforced by the capitalist Sichultian system:

> if a commercial debt could not be fully settled, or the terms were deemed not entirely sufficient due to shortage of funds or other negotiables by one of the partners, then the defaulting or inadequately provisioned side could compensate by undertaking to have a generation or two of their progeny made Intagliate, signing over care and control, indeed the ownership, of those to whom they were indebted or at a fiscal disadvantage (43).

Having no choice but to hand over his wife and daughter, Grautze commits suicide using the dagger with which he sealed the initial deal, despite Veppers' assurance that Lededje and her mother would be cared for, with his wife eventually throwing herself from a tower, years later (75). In a lifetime of actions marking nothing less than a total betrayal of his friend and partner, Veppers subjects Lededje to exploitation, physical and mental abuse, and rapes her multiple times. Following an unsuccessful escape attempt, Veppers kills Lededje, only for her to be resurrected by the Culture, and one key plot thread of *Surface Detail* follows Lededje's attempts to gain

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[561] In *Excession*, it is noted about the character Genar-Hofoen that he has a bodily adornment removed: "It had been a whim after a drinking session (as had an animated obscene tattoo he'd removed a month later)."[561] The notion of an animated tattoo clearly displays another example of Banks's extrapolation in this regard; the notion of an animated tattoo also features prominently in China Miéville's *Kraken* (2010).

vengeance upon Veppers, working alongside the Culture. This revenge narrative is linked with the novel's other key plot thread, concerning the existence of virtual Hells (see Chapter Five of this thesis) by the fact that the physical location of the computer substrate that enables the Hells to exist is underneath the Veppers' company itself.

As this description makes clear, Lededje's markings, therefore, originate from a society with an entirely different culture to that of *the* Culture. Through the sub-plot concerning Lededje and her revenge over Veppers, Banks enables some of his bitterest, most Juvenalian satire directed at the capitalist economic system, particularly neoliberal ideas surrounding free markets, privatisation and market competition. Lededje is personally owned by Veppers as a human chattel slave, in the same manner as black Africans once were in the Americas and across Europe, who can be bought and sold as a commodity. Yet Lededje is also owned by the Vesperine Corporation: she has become almost literally reified into a unit of capital that can be traded on the stock markets.

As with Banks's depictions of art in *Look to Windward*, *The Hydrogen Sonata* and *Excession*, Lededje is an outsider figure from an early age, easily identifiable as such through her markings: "When she began to mix with them, the other toddlers and younger children from the estate seemed in awe of her […] the other children had no markings, boasted no astounding design upon their skins" (*SD*, 70). The fact that the signifier of difference for Lededje is her skin invites the reader to associate her treatment with discourses of race and ethnicity, and her 'legal' indenture as Intagliate with colonial slavery. While such a reading is viable in the sense that Lededje can be viewed as a symbol of any woman who has been ostracized, exploited and abused by the society from which she originates, her suffering, however, does not result from prejudice against her unusual appearance, but in fact *vice versa*: her markings symbolise cruelty and prejudice, specifically related to class. While Lededje has clearly been abused by her owner, the Sichultian at least have laws that supposedly ensure the protection of the Intagliate, with some slaves considering their positions a privilege, as – inevitably coming from poor backgrounds – their servitude allows them to live alongside rich people, sharing the fruits of their wealth (70-71). When this detail is explained, the tone of Banks's authorial voice – sarcastic and insincere – highlights the preposterous nature of the argument (72).

Lededje's markings afford her the opportunity to meet another outsider figure, who takes a strange and obscure interest in her Intagliate body, ostensibly for

aesthetic reasons. In the fifth chapter, shortly after she is revived by the Culture, Lededje relates a story to the avatar Sensia, about an unusual incident she once experienced whilst attending a reception held by Veppers, several years previously. Lededje was approached by a being identifying itself as Himmerance, who describes himself as follows: "I am a wanderer; an explorer […] a cultural translator […] and a collector of images of whatever I consider to be the most exquisite beings, wherever my travels take me" (88). While he does not reveal it to Lededje at the time, Himmerance is an avatar of a former Culture ship *Me, I'm Counting*, which is considered independent. Later described by a different Mind as "Hooligan-class LOU" (90), and "declared as an Eccentric" (85), Himmerance asks to "take an image" of Lededje for his "private collection" (86). Assuming that the stranger means a nude photograph of her for his own sexual gratification – further exploitation – she initially writes him off as "just an old perv after all" (85). Assuring her that his interests in her body are "purely due to the intagliation you have suffered", Lededje asks "What do you do with these images?" to which he replies, "I contemplate them. They are works of art, to me" (86).

While the content of this artwork – Lededje's uniquely decorated body – seems an understandable choice for aesthetic presentation, the particular form of Himmerance's art is also interesting. The avatar explains that: "It would be an image of your entire body, not just both inside and out, but of its every single cell, indeed its every atom, and taken, in effect, from outside the three dimensions one normally deals with" (85). Lededje confirms that Himmerence here is referring to a position "from hyperspace" (85), effectively meaning that the image would be rendered in four dimensions (4D). Himmerence proceeds to show Lededje some other images from his collection that prove to be rare and beautiful cosmic anomalies – and to explain the science behind them: "This is just the three-dimensional view one would have of a stellar field-liner entity […] A particularly fine specimen […] creatures who live within the magnetic lines of force in, mostly, the photospheres of suns" (86). Despite its initially unsettling nature, Lededje ultimately treats Himmerence's request as a kind of strange compliment, warily securing a surprise gift in return, and agrees for her image to be taken. This encounter also serves as a neat opportunity for Banks to establish a plot device: when the avatar is revealed to have seeded Lededje with a neural lace as her surprise gift, and thusly enabling her to be 'resurrected' by the Culture, as previously discussed in Chapter Three of this thesis.

Following these various interpretations of Lededje's markings – as corporate branding, as marker of difference, as fetishised aesthetic object – Banks gives them a final purpose in the climax of *Surface Detail*'s revenge sub-plot: the personal confrontation between Veppers and Lededje. When finally Veppers is killed, his death is administered with a kind of poetic justice: Lededje's markings – which she has the Culture following her 'death' as she feels incomplete without them – were actually the disguise used by one of the Culture's AI bodyguards, a knife missile, which attaches itself to Veppers, and efficiently crushes him to death (614-616), although Lededje was unaware.

Banks's graphic and unusual descriptions make this scene one of pure gothic extravagance and abject horror: Veppers's head "seemed to crumple and shrink into itself, becoming a far-too-thin tall cylinder that disappeared in a spray of blood" (616). Veppers's death is ironic because he is killed by something resembling an item of his own creation, becoming himself Intagliate if only for a short while and symbolically experiencing the suffering he caused to others; and also because the markings – regarded as a creation of great aesthetic beauty – were co-opted for a particularly gruesome demise. Yet this scene has a deeper significance. While Lededje's tattoo originates from outside the Culture, and therefore the pain and subjugation with which the former is associated is largely unrelated to the latter, the fact that the Culture is prepared to remake the tattoo provides insight into its own ethos. By remaking it the Culture appropriates the tattoo into its own culture, however temporarily, and the purpose for which SC remakes the tattoo – the crushing of a Culture enemy – therefore demonstrates them perpetrating violence. SC would perhaps justify this as an act of corporal punishment, legitimate as it is performed only in extremely rare instances; also, shortly before instigating the *coup de grace*, a Mind asks Lededje if she wishes the death of her oppressor and rapist to be quick or slow, both a demonstration of compassion and symbolic displacement on responsibility for Veppers' death away from itself and the Culture, and onto Lededje and the Sichult (616).

6.4 Conclusion

Walter Benjamin famously concluded 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1970) by arguing that: "the logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life," which means that "Communism

responds by politicizing art."[562] Through examining the preceding examples from the Culture series it becomes clear how art in Banks's series has become politicized to a certain extent. It is much more difficult, however, to draw straightforward conclusions about the Culture itself based upon its art, as we are not provided with an example of a 'pure' work of Culture art, originating from an citizen existing in a straightforward relationship with the Culture 'centre'. The Culture is stated to have no national anthem, for example, as it has no symbol or flag; and it is perhaps significant that, when a Culture ambassador is required to pretend his people do have an anthem and to invent such, the first melody he whistles is taken from a dirty and offensive ballad (*TPoG*, 124). Also, given the limitless nature of the Culture and its abilities, it is surprising that the potential for radically new manifestations of art in various forms does not form a larger part of the series.

Yet the progressive, utopian nature of the art portrayed in the series is arguably emphasised by its frequent connections with violence, death or pain in some manner, and its depictions of war and armed conflict.[563] At the opening ceremony for the installation *Hell* (2000), which featured detailed recreations of Nazi war atrocities using model soldiers, Jake Chapman said that he and his brother intended to create hell on earth because "I couldn't imagine a world without hell".[564] Perhaps this binary logic offers an explanation for the seeming incongruity of a utopian society, necessarily by definition free from pain and conflict, reintroducing through art that which is missing in everyday lived experience. This reflects the notion that Utopia (or heaven) cannot truly escape its antithesis; it must be constantly defined by comparison with dystopia (or hell) in order for its inhabitants to fully appreciate it.

On a symbolic level, then, from the Culture's perspective, 'Expiring Light' seems intended to fulfill something like the function of a traditional war memorial: in this way, rather than simply a piece of music just written *about* a war, the symphony enables the audience – many of whom are Culture citizens – to experience something

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[562] Ibid., 244.

[563] Even 'The Hydrogen Sonata' can be linked to violence, through its connection to 'Time and Motion Study II', for which was proposed the subtitle 'Electric Chair Music'. During interview, prominent performer of the piece, cellist Neil Heyde, states that during the "first performance we quite dramatically put the microphone under a bandage, and bandaged it tightly round my entire neck, so I thought it looked rather unpleasant, and I thought that belonged rather nicely with the aesthetic." 'Electric Chair Music: Brian Ferneyhough', Optic Nerve Music, 2007, Youtube video, 4:27 – 4:43. www.youtube.com/watch?v=sykB4znEk2Q (Accessed 6 October, 2015).

[564] Stephen Adams, 'Chapman Brothers' Hell Back From The Flames', The *Telegraph,* 29 May, 2008. www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/2050329/Chapman-brothers-Hell-back-from-the-flames.html (Accessed 12 January, 2015).

of the reality of armed conflict, in a utopian society which has necessarily eradicated all but the faintest traces of such occurrences. Hearing 'Expiring Light' allows Banks's utopians who, despite their increased longevity, were likely not alive during the war, to *feel* something of its horror, acting as a reminder about that which their ancestors strove so hard to remove from their society, and as a reassurance that it shall not return.

Despite the Culture's ambiguous relationship with art there is one reoccurring aesthetic image in the series that serves to represent Banks's utopia, the image of a fractal: "a curve or geometrical figure, each part of which has the same statistical character as the whole."[565] In *Excession*, the *Sleeper Service* secretly stores a host of ships, which have been patterned in a procedure known as 'Baroquing': "fractally inscribed with partially random, non-predictable designs", "covered with these curious, whorled patterns and motifs" (226-227). As with Banks's Intagliate, the patterns do not stop at the craft's surface, but repeat internally, going "down to the atomic level" (227). These fractal processes of both Intagliation and Baroquing and serve as camouflage for a potentially violent purpose – the ships are warships (227), whilst Lededje's Intagliation were remade by the Culture, disguised as a knife missile, itself a kind of bodyguard and security device.[566]

Such patterns, therefore, perfectly represent the Culture, which can also be understood as fractal: gradually expanding through the galaxy, replicating itself in repeating forms (such as the Orbitals and GSVs), with its central values inscribed at every level; as noted by Ken MacLeod, using fractal language: "there is the sense of a toolkit that *scales up*".[567] Crucially each form, each 'tool in the kit', is represented equally in relational terms at every level, with no one part allowed to dominate. This fractal logic is also present in depictions of music from within the series. While the dissonant *content* of both 'Expiring Light' and 'The Hydrogen Sonata' could confirm Jacques Attali's assertion that music's order "simulates the social order," whereas "its

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[565] 'Fractal', *Oxford Dictionaries*, Oxford University Press. www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/fractal (Accessed November 02, 2015).
[566] This mechanism of attack/defense clearly resembles animal predators, such as the 'Poison Dart Frog', native to Central and South America, or the 'Flamboyant Cuttlefish', native to Northern Australia and Southern New Guinea', which cover their dangerous nature with beautiful patterns to confuse its prey, or lull it into a false sense of security.
[567] MacLeod, 'Phlebas Reconsidered', in Butler, *The True Knowledge of Ken MacLeod*, 1. Emphasis added.

dissonances express marginalities"[568], this dissonance could be seen as a byproduct of the music's *form*. Several critics have identified certain sonic aesthetics as indicating social models of utopia metaphorically,[569] for example, by suggesting that the structuring of atonal, twelve-tone music – which it is suggested that Vilabier relied upon for 'The Hydrogen Sonata' – is more egalitarian and therefore more utopian than tonal music since, by its definition, "all notes must be represented equally," whereas "tonal music selects certain notes according to the key and scale being used."[570] It is therefore for this reason that, in *Matter*, Djan hears "the influence of the Culture" in a piece of music, "signaled by a chord sequence constructed from mathematically pure whole-tone scales reaching forever down and up" (95).

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[568] Michael J. Griffin, 'Utopian Music and the Problem of Luxury', *Utopian studies*, 2005, 16 (2):247-266. 255.
[569] Marshall Brown and Michael Kennedy, 'Origins of modernism: musical structures and narrative forms', in, *Music and Text: Critical Inquiries*, ed. Steven Paul Scherp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Publishing, 2006) 90.
[570] Ibid.

Conclusion

I began this project with the aim of providing a thorough and in-depth critical analysis of the entire Culture series, drawing upon and developing the relatively small existing body of research into Banks's SF, which would ultimately enable me to arrive at a fresh and informed understanding of the Culture itself.

Working to subvert traditional space opera, Banks envisioned a galaxy in which the progressive, utopian Culture is equivalent to a version of Csicsery-Ronay's concept of the *technologiade*, aiming to transform the cosmos into a technological system for the purpose of enabling others to accomplish the freedoms it has achieved for itself. While the Culture does therefore inevitably expand as part of this process, it is too small, too egalitarian, too heterogeneous and too altruistic to be considered a form of empire or a system of imperialism; and peacefully coexists with many other such systems, without vying for power. While the near-total control over the Culture's habitats maintained by the Minds could in theory be transformed into some kind of dystopian, imperial, and/or totalitarian system, it features too many safeguards, and is too self-aware, to allow this to happen. Furthermore, Banks's vision of a galaxy interlinked by communication, interstellar travel, and sociopolitical allegiances – amongst other aspects – reflects an extrapolated image of globalisation; while this vision does provide comment on the current reality of market globalisation to a certain extent, the Culture enabled Banks to demonstrate how such a system could be subverted through utopianism. The Culture itself has, therefore, successfully achieved a shift away from imperial models of sociopolitical organisation and practice, yet is sometimes required to interact with other, more imperialistic societies that still exist within the galaxy.

Inside the Culture's environments, the Minds maintain an effective State system that provides peace and safety for all whilst leaving the freedom of individuals almost entirely unrestricted, and requiring almost no formal system of rules and regulations. The Culture is ultimately socialist for its commitment to egalitarianism and ending exploitation; when it does rely upon organisations with a degree of hierarchy, such as SC and the Culture's universities, positions are attained by merit and/or by suitability for the required task. By constantly contrasting the Culture with other societies in which capitalism and free-market-oriented economics lead to deep inequality, misery and instability, Banks demonstrates that the Culture's complete

break from a system underpinned by material scarcity is integral to its success as a utopia.

As well as controlling almost all aspects of the outer environments in which they live in order to create a functioning utopia, Culture citizens alter their own bodies and minds, taking control of their own ageing and their deaths – even achieving forms of immortality. By contrasting characters who have aged naturally with those who have aged artificially, Banks comments upon attitudes towards senescence at the time of writing, and helps reveal ageing as a cultural as well as a biological process. Banks expands philosophical understandings of humankind's centuries-long fascination with immortality and greatly extended life by contrasting the desirability of both serial and non-serial models, and emphasises the Culture's general belief that ultimately death on one's own terms is desirable. The changes made by Culture citizens, while sometimes radical, are never extreme enough to constitute a complete break from a form that is still recognisably human: the Culture, therefore, should be considered transhuman (*beyond* human) but not posthuman (*after* human).

In accordance with its fundamental belief in egalitarianism, the Culture aims to establish a true system of gender equality, entirely breaking away from systems such as patriarchy where one gender is allowed to dominate over others. My research has demonstrated that the Culture has moved beyond gender inequality to the extent that patriarchy has been overcome, and measures are in place to ensure that one sex does not dominate, but has yet to affect a complete break from its historical precedent. The Culture places both biological sex and gender on a spectrum, along which citizens can potentially move fluidly; while movement between sexes is recognised and encouraged, it seems that the Culture has yet to recognise the significance of gender fluidity, even though the gender of its citizens seems to be already in flux. Despite the progressive standards of its culture, it seems that the Culture has yet to fully move beyond heteronormative standards, maintaining a degree of essentialist thought in its understandings of gender and sexuality. While Banks's series therefore still has issues with its representation in this regard, it has clearly moved the space opera sub-genre on a good deal from more traditional forms, as Banks intended. Through characters such as Sma and Djan, Banks provided strong examples of Handy Women which operate to further subvert the tropes of traditional space opera, providing prominent women characters with narrative agency and significance, complex gender identities, and lives outside of their relationships with men.

Banks's views and beliefs as a humanist significantly impacted his vision of the Culture, ensuring that it remained entirely secular, rejecting all religious and supernatural worldviews. By developing crucial elements of the Culture that correspond to ideas originating in several major world religions but are enabled entirely through technoscience, Banks used his utopia to demonstrate the need for human beings to take charge of our own lives and living environments using every means possible in order to achieve a practical, materialistic salvation, because he believed that otherwise such an eventuality would not occur. The Culture appears to have achieved a complete break from religious and faith-based systems, instead relying upon an entirely empirical, rational and secular values.

The Culture's existence as a postscarcity society has affected it at a fundamental level in many ways, with significant impact upon the way its citizens view art and creativity. While art as we understand it has 'died' in the Culture, with artistic and creative impulses being fulfilled in everyday life, Banks's utopia often features art created by outsiders or marginalised individuals, which often allows the Culture to reflect upon its own history and the practices of other societies. Art, when it is created, has become an esoteric activity, viewed as eccentric, quaint or even a waste of time. When the Minds and Drones choose to express themselves through artistic creation, they too are frequently unconventional and marginalised AIs who produce strange and characteristically-obsessive works. By featuring AIs who share the urge to represent, mimic and interpret through creative practice, Banks encourages his readers to view these advanced entities as more similar to human beings than perhaps otherwise supposed.

The Culture is an image, then, which displays the potential zenith of human achievement, or something close to it. But utopia is not a blueprint for real-world political structure and never has been. In this thesis, I have expanded upon my reading of the Culture as a kind of utopia by examining the extent to which certain fundamental shifts or breaks away from less utopian societies have necessarily been achieved, and the process by which it has effected such changes. Indeed, in many ways, Banks provided us with the name for this process from the outset. When he re-drafted *Use of Weapons* in 1974, re-naming his newly conceived personal utopia 'the Culture' instead of 'the Aliens' – as is was very nearly known – Banks could not have

chosen a more apt term.[571] The word 'culture' was famously described by Raymond Williams as "one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language"[572] – a suitable term, then, for a creation that has attracted such an array of often contradictory understandings and has resisted easy categorisation. Yet the term is accurate for a reason more profound than this shared sense of complexity: the Culture simply *is* culture, in almost all understandings of the word; and it allows for these various definitions and understandings of culture to combine, overlap and become interrelated.

The Culture is a way of thinking: undergoing a certain process of "refinement of mind, taste, and manners," as well as of "intellectual development."[573] The Culture is "the distinctive ideas, customs, social behaviour, products, or way of life of a particular nation, society, people, or period."[574] The Culture is "a way of life", a "social environment", and "a group of people", who subscribe to a particular philosophy, practice, and attitude.[575] The Culture is all of the above and more: a collection of artificial environments, whose inhabitants are linked primarily by shared achievements, practices, customs, world-views, behaviours, etc.; in other words, linked by and representative of a *shared utopian culture*. The Culture is something that you *do*, as well as somewhere you live. The Culture is to be Culture*d*, nurtured, utopianised. The Culture is a fractal culture because its fundamental values and philosophies run through it at every level forming a broader, inter-locking utopian pattern.

As my research demonstrates, the utopian processes through which the Culture is moving or has already moved are embodied in the culture of the Culture itself; and – because of this flux and this constant desire to improve – it seems likely that the Culture will never reach an end state of its own accord. By constantly working to rid itself of negative attributes, the Culture will never be considered a utopian dead end, where all change stops, leading to stagnation and an "end of history".

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[571] Ken MacLeod, 'Iain Banks: A Science Fiction Star First and Foremost', 10 June, 2013. www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jun/10/iain-banks-ken-macleod-science-fiction (Accessed 30 April, 2016).
[572] Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (London: Fourth Estate, 1976; 2014) 90-92.
[573] 'Culture', *OED* Online. Oxford University Press. www.oed.com.v-ezproxy.brunel.ac.uk:2048/view/Entry/45746?result=1&rskey=1Tguyt& (Accessed July 31, 2013).
[574] Ibid.
[575] Ibid.

As discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, Banks makes the question of defining the Culture explicit from the outset through the questions of the character Fal 'Ngeestra in *Consider Phlebas*. Perhaps the occasion where her question "so, who are we?" is answered most explicitly in the series occurs in 'The State of the Art': as one of the Minds explains to Sma:

> what are we supposed to be about, Sma? What is the Culture? What do we believe in, even if it is hardly ever expressed, even if we are embarrassed about talking about it? Surely in freedom, more than everything else. A relativistic, changing sort of freedom, unbounded by laws or laid-down moral codes, but – in the end – just because it is hard to pin down and express, a freedom of a far higher quality than anything to be found on the planet beneath us at the moment (161).

Throughout the series, Sma is the character best representative of the Culture, whose attitude seems the most quintessential, so it is highly significant that she acknowledges the truth in this statement. This freedom to which the Mind refers is the fundamental utopian philosophy that underpins the Culture and provides the driver for the radical shifts it has undergone, or is still undergoing. The planet beneath them, to which the Mind refers, is none other than the planet Earth during the 1970s; the comparison offered here, then, serves to further highlight the difference and distance between Banks's utopia and ourselves. This description, in turn, highlights one of the fundamental achievements of Banks's series: an extended mediation on "thinking the break", as Jameson described it, which asserts the importance of maintaining a belief in change and progress, and constantly affirms the need to look beyond perceived social, political, technological and natural limitations. Banks's series is both a treatise outlining his firm belief that our future is not fixed and an attack on the idea of the end of history.[576] So, just as the Culture looks down literally upon the Earth, so should we metaphorically look up to the Culture as a reminder of the peaks to which we should constantly aspire, regardless of our ability to ever definitively achieve them. Confirming the Culture's fractal logic, Li in 'The State of the Art' states that "any one of us could be picked at random and represent the Culture quite adequately; the choice of who you would pick to represent Earth fairly I leave to your imagination" (176).

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[576] "Nobody who reads science fiction comes out with this crap about the end of history" – Iain Banks, *The Steep Approach to Garbadale*, (London: Abacus, 2013) 170.

Banks always intended the Culture to be a place in which he would like to live, if something like it could ever be realised; in turn, MacLeod has pointed out that it is a rare example of a utopia in which many people would also wish to live;[577] and I for one would agree. I hope that the Culture series will be considered Banks's masterwork, as I feel that these are the works to which he brought many of his most personal and most profound ideas. The texts have an extended utopian value and significance that lies in the nature of the Culture itself, forming a multivalent utopian force in which individuals can participate – a truly utopian culture. Writing in the midst of the on-going Hugo awards scandal – where Right-wing fractions within SF seem intent upon undermining the values of the genre's most prestigious award – Banks's unblinking focus on progressive values is needed now more than ever. By turns exuberant, humorous, sarcastic, satirical and angry, Banks utilised many voices whilst writing this series, all singing the same message: we should never stop fighting for a more peaceful world, we should never lose our hope to pessimism, and regard human culture as the highest of values. Given the originality, complexity and wonderful ambiguities of Banks's work, it is no surprise that the British Library's *Out of this World* exhibition in 2011 described the Culture "one of the most extraordinary settings in modern literature."[578]

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[577] MacLeod, 'Iain Banks: A Science Fiction Star First and Foremost'.
[578] British Library, 'Exhibitions and Events: April – August 2011', 10.

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