

"Dead beyond any hope of resurrection?" - Iain M. Banks' Gravitas-Defying Narratives as a  
Response to the 20th Century Literary Utopian Decline

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## 1. Introduction

Exactly five hundred years ago, in 1516, Sir Thomas More published his eponymous work of fiction *Utopia*, a text that has been generally accepted to have begun a whole new literary genre, that of utopian literature. During past half a millennium utopian literature has proven to be an adaptive and lasting genre, and although the popularity of utopian texts has fluctuated through the centuries, it has always bounced back to bring visions of better, idyllic worlds. However, the 20<sup>th</sup> century again saw an obvious decline in its popularity. So steep a decline, in fact, that some researchers, such as Krishan Kumar, have speculated on the death of the whole utopian genre (380-1). Yet could it be, that finally after so many centuries, there comes the final moment when a previously so adaptive literary genre does not get resurrected successfully? This decline in the popularity of written utopias is the main driving force behind this paper, and what I intend to explore and discuss here are the reasons so far given for the present lull, as well as showing that perhaps the lull is not so thorough as generally thought.

Before discussing the reasons for the lull and possible solutions, some definition for utopia as a concept ought to be given. A more thorough definition of what utopia, and specifically utopian literature, is will be given later, but for now it is sufficient to say that the Oxford English Dictionary defines *utopia* as “an imagined or hypothetical place, system, or state of existence in which everything is perfect, esp. in respect of social structure, laws, and politics” (OED Online). Utopia is then, an ideal place for living and utopian literature would be a narrative set in that perfect society. Yet what is perfect is highly subjective and depends on who defines it. In utopian literature that would be the author, naturally.

The utopian society presented in Sir Thomas More’s fictional work *Utopia* is certainly subjective if it follows the OED definition of being a perfect place. The OED also acknowledges this: “Critics have questioned the extent to which More intended Utopia to be understood as an ideal society, given the many seemingly satirical aspects of the book and the apparent contradictions between Utopian practices and More's own life”. Despite the satirical aspects of the text, the literary genre that sprang from it did not suffer. Many utopian authors after More used satire as well, although usually those texts that are considered to be utopian literature are less satirical and more

attempts at perfect societies. The roots for the reasons for the 20<sup>th</sup> century drying of the utopian well can be found in More's text as well.

The most often cited reason for the lack of interest in utopian literature (often for the benefit of the dystopian literature) is that while witnessing the horrors of the two World Wars, humanity became depressed and lost hope that the technological progress which had led to so much destruction could lead to anything better. This pessimistic outlook in a disbelief that any perfect system or ideal place could be possible anymore, and thus humanity lost all heart towards utopias. There could be some truth to this, but it needs to be remembered that any major shift in human mentality rarely has any one reason behind it.

More's *Utopia* did more than just present a supposedly perfect society, as its status as the basis of utopian literature directed the flow of utopian narrative for centuries to come. The inherent problem with utopian narratives is that if they are supposed to represent perfect and ideal places, how can one set even a remotely interesting story in such strict setting, as any change to the perfection of the state would naturally be for the worse. More solved this by having a traveller visit the utopia and then relate his observations to others. In terms of a story it is certainly lacking, but it allows the author to present the utopia in a fictional setting instead of publishing the form as a suggestion or a critique of the ruling powers. However, More started inadvertently a narrative tradition that held up even until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and travel narrative has remained the most used narrative form in utopian literature possibly even today.

So perhaps the problem does not only lie in human pessimism, but also in the fact that it has not been easy to tell good stories in a utopian setting. The lull that utopian literature entered coincides with the emergence of dystopian literature. Being able to criticise society without compromising the narrative drive could be one reason for the shift from utopian to dystopian literature. Naturally this would fit to the pessimism-theory as well, but as said, matters like this rarely have only one reason. The main argument of this paper, then, is that the narrative problems of utopian literature are a contributing factor for the decline of utopia, and thus finding a way around it would be one way that utopian literature could be revived. Furthermore, I will argue that Iain M. Banks' science fiction novels set in the Culture-universe offer one such answer.

Iain M. Banks was a popular Scottish writer, born in 1954. His writings include nearly a score of literary novels (as plain Iain Banks) and a dozen of science fiction novels (as Iain M. Banks). Banks' ability to write in two distinctively different literary genres resulted in several nominations and awards in both genres, and with *The Telegraph* headline "Iain Banks was two of our finest writers" (Chivers). In the interest of this paper, attention will be focused on Banks' science fiction novels, more precisely on those that are commonly known as the Culture novels. The Culture is the name of a highly developed fictional civilisation established in a large area of the galaxy, one civilisation among others. Before Banks died in 2013, he had written eight novels that revolve around the Culture. In an interview with Banks that appeared at the end of *The Hydrogen Sonata*, it is mentioned that the Culture was created as "a deliberate response to the science fiction of the time, which was largely concerned with dystopias" (616-7). This response by Banks was to create a post-scarcity and semi-anarchistic civilisation, in other words a utopia (399; Banks, "A few notes on the Culture"). Banks' utopia is placed in a galaxy full of other civilisations, all at different stages of development and some with completely different social structures. The narrative drive in the novels come from the conflicts this creates between a utopian society and other, often far less utopian, societies. At least on the surface this approach appears markedly different from other utopian narratives and thus would benefit from a closer analysis.

Considering the relatively long and active publishing career that Banks had, it is surprising how little his obvious utopian literature has been discussed in any serious utopian sourcebooks. It has not been utterly ignored, as there are several mentions of Banks' work in different science fiction collections, yet those do not dwell overtly in the utopian nature of Banks' Culture. However, much more attention should be paid to this. It seems a completely new way of representing utopias in literature, in highly narrative and entertaining way, and since utopian literature appears to be run over with dystopian literature, here at least would be something to counter that progress. Banks himself certainly saw the Culture as a utopia, as he expresses in an interview when asked

*Do you think of the Culture as a utopia? Would you live in it, if you could?*

Good grief yes, to both! What's not to like? ...Well, unless you're actually a fascist or a power junkie or sincerely believe that money rather than happiness is what really

matters in life. And even people with those bizarre beliefs are catered for in the Culture, albeit in extreme-immersion VR environments.

(Grossman, "Iain Banks: The Matter Interview")

However, one should never take the authors own word as gospel when it comes to their own works, and thus this will be one of the discussions in this paper.

The topic will be approached in three stages. The first stage is to define what utopia really is and to explore where the utopian tradition stems from and what its purpose was in a historical context. The aim is to gain further insight into the reasons for the utopian decline. The second stage is to discuss the Culture, Banks' utopian society, partly to establish that it really is a utopia, but mainly to see how it differs from other utopias, and does it provide societal insight or criticism of current power systems to the reader. The third and final stage is to discuss first the narrative problems that utopian literature faces, and then to see how Banks creates narrative tension and exciting stories in a literary genre that has defied such tricks for centuries.

## 2. Utopian literature: history and concepts

It is generally agreed that the history of utopian literature began with Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, a book which, published in 1516, is now five hundred years old. Half a millennium is a long time for a literary genre to survive. Franco Moretti has done extensive research on British novelistic genres, and in his book *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* shows statistically, that from the forty-four genres that he studied, "about two thirds of them last indeed between 23 and 35 years" (22). If the lifespan of an average genre can be counted in decades, then utopian literature shows remarkable ability adapt to changing times. Yet, as discussed in the introduction, some have seen the rise of dystopia and the decline of utopianism in the last century as at least the beginning of the end for the genre. Before making any arguments to refute this, the history of the utopian literature and, to a smaller extent, utopian thought needs to be considered, to see what has led to this situation.

### 2.1. Utopian pre-history

While, as mentioned above, Sir Thomas More was the one who coined the word "utopia" for his book *Utopia*, it is hardly the beginning of utopianism in the world. As Fátima Vieira argues, "More did not work on a *tabula rasa*, but on a tradition of thought that goes back to ancient Greece" (Vieira 5). If we consider utopianism at its core to be "the desire for a better life", then utopianism is indeed an ancient way of thinking, one that possibly goes beyond ancient Greece as well (6). At this point, the utopias were all behind, lost in the ancient times, such as the Greek myth of the Golden Age of Man, some blessed beginning of humanity that cannot be returned to, or the Christian myth of the Garden of Eden, from which Adam and Eve were cast out and as a result, and mankind cannot get back to anymore. The perfect times and lands were all behind, and mankind was stuck with whatever they had, and so the utopian thought was always retrospective. Even the promise of a blissful life after death that religions provided was not really a desire for a better life.

From Greece comes also the first text that is often considered to be a forefather of the utopian literature, despite usually not admitted to the genre. Plato's *Republic*, written approximately 380 BCE, is a philosophical dialogue between Socrates and a few other philosophers concerning the

nature of justice by considering how a just and fair city-state would function, providing a happy and bountiful living for its citizens. Due to its lack of narrative and its nature of a rather pure philosophical text which only speculates on how things might work, its nature as utopian literature remains debatable. However, its influence to later utopian texts is noticeable, with its themes of equality and common property resonate with many utopian texts and certainly influenced More's *Utopia*. Several themes that in modern western thinking would not be seen as very utopian, including the approval of slavery, were also included in both Plato's and More's works.

After ancient Greek, utopian elements surfaced in different forms, such as the Land of Cockaigne<sup>1</sup> that was featured in several medieval satirical poems. Cockaigne is a land of plenty, where anarchy is the norm and physical pleasure the main desire. Despite it providing a certain wish-fulfilment, Cockaigne is so outrageously steeped in fancy with stories that include "roasted pigs [that] ran up and down the streets with knives and forks in their backs", that it cannot provide much social critique or actual realisable better life (Jonassen 59). Apart from medieval poetry, it is worth to mention another possible influence on More, Saint Augustine of Hippo's *The City of God* (426). While containing certain societal utopianism, the fact that St. Augustine "projects his ideal into the afterlife" precludes it from utopian literature (Vieira 6). If none of these works discussed above are included in the literary genre of utopia, it need be now discussed what does belong to it, and how utopia can be defined.

## 2.2 The many faces of utopia

There are several varying definitions of what "utopia" as a word and as a concept means. Some of this confusion can be attributed to the etymology of the word. When More was naming his island, he combined "two Greek words – *ouk* (that means not and was reduced to *u*) and *topos* (place), to which he added the suffix *ia*, indicating a place. Etymologically, utopia is thus a place which is a non-place, simultaneously constituted by a movement of affirmation and denial" (Vieira 4). Furthermore, More confused the readers and future researchers by adding a sample of Utopian poetry to his book with a description of the characteristics of Utopia, one of which states that "its

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<sup>1</sup> Sometimes written as Cokaygne



inhabitants and its laws are so wonderful that it should be called *Eutopia* (the good place) instead of Utopia” (Vieira 5). So while utopia is a non-place, eutopia is a good place, and the island of Utopia is both. Add to this the fact that “Utopia and Eutopia are pronounced in precisely the same way”, the dual nature of utopia remains to this day (5). Due to this duality, some researchers have adopted the use of eutopia when discussing ideal places, while many continue to use utopia. In common use, the latter is more widely used, and as the focus of this paper is utopian literature, utopia is the term that will be used here, but with awareness of the dual implications of the word.

### Utopian definitions

The obvious way to begin defining utopia is to start with the most general definition by the OED that the majority of people would look up first when searching for a meaning of the word. The Oxford English Dictionary definition of utopia that was quoted in the introduction is not the only definition the OED gives, but it is the most relevant. It is worth repeating here alongside with another possible definition the OED gives, which has bearing on the subject at hand:

An imagined or hypothetical place, system, or state of existence in which everything is perfect, esp. in respect of social structure, laws, and politics (OED Online)

A written work (now esp. a fictional narrative) about an ideal society, place, or state of existence (OED Online)

There is not that much of a difference between these two definitions of utopia, apart from the latter one limiting it to written works. While a minor difference, it is a curiosity, as it would rule out utopia from other fictional works, such as movies and theatre. Which in actuality is not that farfetched, as utopian narratives hardly exist in either of them<sup>2</sup>, perhaps due to same narrative problems as utopian literature faces, which will be discussed later in section 4. Both of these definitions are very broad and do not get into much detail of how exactly these societies, places or states of existence are ideal, and to whom. While OED also casts doubts on the utopianism of More’s *Utopia* as explained in the introduction, broadly speaking More’s text would fit both of

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<sup>2</sup> The few utopias that are present in movies are often designed to seem eventually undesirable for the viewers and main characters as the movies progress. For example, the futuristic vision in *Demolition Man* (1993) presents conflict- and sex free future society as wholly undesirable for the “manly” and physical ideal that the protagonist (and indeed, the villain) of the movie represents. In *Pleasantville* (1998), the cliché idea of the “good old days” (itself an interesting continuation of the Golden Age myth) is dismantled by transporting two siblings several decades back into a perfect 1950s black-and-white sitcom.

these definitions, as subjectively speaking it is ideal, to some. These are perhaps the most inclusive ways to explain utopia.

The fact that ideals are subjective is also a key factor that has to be kept in mind when discussing utopias of different eras, as can be evident when looking at one of the older definitions of utopia: Moritz Kaufmann, whose 1879 book *Utopias: Or, Schemes of Social Improvement. From Sir Thomas More to Karl Marx* summarises utopia as follows:

What is a Utopia? Strictly speaking, it means a "nowhere land," some happy island far away, where perfect social relations prevail, and human beings, living under an immaculate constitution and a faultless government, enjoy a simple and happy existence, free from the turmoil, the harassing cares, and endless worries of actual life. (Kaufmann 1)

There are a few things of note to take from Kaufmann's definition. The first thing to note is the unreachability of utopia, that it is something that exists only elsewhere. This coincides well with how the OED phrases it as being an imagined place. The second interesting part is that some sort of order must be established in order for the utopia to work, a government to keep everything in place. In historical context, Kaufmann's definition is situated relatively soon after the socialist ideas of Marx and Engels had been published (as the name of the book suggests as well), and thus the government mentioned here would be moulded after socialist ideals. Nonetheless, this rules out anarchism as a possible basis for the utopian society, a point which becomes important later in this paper. A third point to be raised from Kaufmann's definition is that it assumes a "simple and happy existence", that, apart from socialist undertones, likely refers also to early utopian literature and especially to More's *Utopia*, where life was stripped to its basic needs and simplicity of life brought happiness. This assumption that life must be simple in order for one to be happy is emphasised by the need to be "free from . . . endless worries of actual life" (1). Kaufmann argues then, that any existence that is not simple, is not free from worries. Although it does sound like a plausible assertion, it must be noted that perhaps certain developments in the quality of life and possible future technologies might allow for a utopia that does not require its inhabitants to lead only simple lives. Such thinking is usually associated with fictions of the future, and more specifically with science fiction.

## Defining utopia in science fiction

Science fiction will play a major part in the later discussions of this paper, as the novels of Iain M. Banks, that lie at the centre of the argument against the death of utopia, are science fiction. Thus it is necessary to take into consideration how utopias and utopian narratives are viewed among those that study science fiction. M. Keith Booker and Anne-Marie Thomas, in their concise *The Science Fiction Handbook*, describe utopia as

An imagined society in which the social, economic, and political problems of our own world have been essentially solved, producing an optimum life for all of the citizens of the society. The term “utopia” is also sometimes used to describe a work of utopian fiction, that is, a fictional work whose principal goal is the description of such an ideal society. While utopias often literally dramatize the author’s idea of what would constitute an ideal society, they often also serve a satirical function that is designed more to highlight and critique aspects of the author’s world than to propose a literal alternative. (331)

While, by and large, Booker and Thomas’ definition follows the same pattern as the OED and Kaufmann definitions, there are a few things of note here worth looking into more closely. Unlike Kaufmann, Booker and Thomas do not require utopian citizens to live a simple life. Instead, if indeed all societal and economic problems have been solved, citizens ought to be living “optimum life”. What that “optimum life” actually is, depends completely on what the author considers it to be. The subjectivity of what anyone considers to be optimal is where the creative tension of utopia lies and usually utopian literature is written precisely to show what the author thinks would be best, or as a response to someone else’s utopia. The question of what is optimum can also be used to create tension within utopian stories, to fuel narrative that otherwise is difficult to achieve.

Drawing further from Booker and Thomas’ definition, solving all of our present world economic problems would most likely lead to a post-scarcity society, where there would be no need for menial labour and material would be in abundance. When it comes to utopian fiction, Booker and Thomas make an interesting claim, stating that utopian fiction’s “principal goal is the description of . . . an ideal society” (331). Certainly this has been true in majority of utopian narratives, especially within the utopian literature before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, yet there is no real reason for the

utopian fictional work to focus mainly on the description of the society. This rather classical view on utopian fiction leaves out the possibility that a utopian society could be a backdrop for a narrative instead of the main focus of it. Booker and Thomas' assertion that utopian fiction often serve satirical functions in order to criticize current state of the author's own world is plausible, as even Thomas More's *Utopia*, the origin of the whole concept, has been seen by some scholars as a satirical work and critique to England of More's time instead of plainly presenting an ideal society. The satirical nature of *Utopia* is often based on the framework of the text and More's personal knowledge on satires: "More knew ancient satire well", argues Robert C. Elliot, and "*Utopia*, like many formal verse satires, is 'framed' by an encounter between a satirist and an adversary" (322).

### Utopia: universal concept or western privilege?

Krishan Kumar has probably one of the strictest as well as vaguest definitions of what utopia is, as he discusses it in his book *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*. Kumar argues that "The modern utopia – the modern western utopia invented in the Europe of the Renaissance – is the only utopia", thus arguing that neither classical nor Christian utopias existed (3). Kumar's reasoning is that while modern utopia "inherits classical and Christian forms and themes, . . . it transforms them in to a distinctive novelty, a distinctive literary genre carrying a distinctive social philosophy" (3). What follows is that Kumar counts utopian literature to have only begun from Thomas More's *Utopia*, effectively discounting everything before it. Works such as Plato's *Republic* and the Greek mythology of the Golden Age are only treated as "essential 'pre-history' of utopia" and not part of the utopian canon (20). This view so far is shared by most researchers of utopian literature. However, by placing the birth of utopia in Europe and giving it only Christian roots, Kumar also removes all non-western societies from being able to produce utopian literature and ideals. "Utopia is *not* universal." Kumar argues, and continues: "Other [non-western] societies have, in relative abundance, paradises, primitivistic myths of Golden Age of justice and equality, Cokaygne-type fantasies, even messianic beliefs; they do not have utopia." (19). China is, according to Kumar, the only other society where the concept of utopia might have developed, thanks to Buddhism and its similarities with Christianity (428).

Kumar's view is not universal, however. Phillip E. Wegner presents a somewhat contrary view on the matter, arguing, while discussing pre-More utopian imaginings, that "nor is such an imagining

the exclusive property of the Western and European world, Utopian strands being evident, for example, in Confucianism and classical Chinese poetry” (Wegner 81). Wegner agrees that utopian literature started with More’s *Utopia*, but emphasizes that utopian thought can exist outside the West. Jacqueline Dutton, in her essay ‘*Non-western’ utopian traditions*, argues along the same lines that “based on the evidence available to us regarding the diverse belief system and worldviews, cultural manifestations and socio-political movements that demonstrate fundamentally utopian visions, it seems that the desire for a better way of being in the world is indeed a universal concept” (Dutton 250). However, despite obvious utopian aspects of non-western traditions, Dutton leaves the nomenclature open by writing that the use of “the western term of ‘utopia’ may persist as a point of contention in contemporary studies of utopian thought” (250). Thus utopia would appear to be universal after all, and the argument mainly over semantics.

Now that a majority of the world has been excluded by Kumar from being able to produce utopian literature, it is time to see how Kumar views what is left and how he actually defines utopia. He does not, however, proceed to do so, explaining that “it seems best not to insist on some ‘essentialist’ definition of utopia, but to let a definition emerge: by use and context shall we know our utopias.” (Kumar 26). Kumar is suggesting, then, that the definition of utopia is somewhat subjective, and depends largely on the context where the utopia appears in. In literature, the context is often dependant on the era or on the author, and eventually on the opinion of the reader. Thus, since Kumar argues that More’s *Utopia* was the first proper utopian narrative and created a whole new genre, his context is largely based on the blueprint of utopian narrative that More laid out in his text. Treating More’s *Utopia* as the starting point for utopian literature does have its merits, since as mentioned before, his text even gave the whole genre its name. Kumar is certainly not alone in this view, although his discounting of everything that came before is not shared by everyone. Kumar acknowledges this as well, and goes on stating that

Having expelled the [Plato’s] *Republic* from the utopian canon, we shall not hesitate to re-admit it when necessary. Anything else would be absurd in the face of the fact that utopian writers themselves have often chosen to regard it as the great and original expression of the form. That they are, strictly speaking, wrong is hardly the point. (26)

This benevolent act of accepting views that are, from Kumar's point of view, plainly wrong, does give validity to the suggestion that definitions of utopia are subjective. Kumar's view on utopia is then, naturally, subjective as well. It is worth to explore it further, however, as supplementing his views with Wegner's and others' views presents a concise overlook on utopian history and especially the narrative choices used.

### 2.3. Utopian history from More to present

Having discussed the pre-history of utopian literature, a closer look at More's *Utopia* is required. Along the way a better understanding of Kumar's (and others') view on utopias should emerge. The island of Utopia in More's text holds a society that is, according to Kumar, a communistic one. This communism is what "underpins the social existence of all citizens", meaning that every aspect from housing, labour and voice in decision making are equal for all (Kumar 27). Kumar points out that this is how medieval monasteries worked, where everyone had to share in the work and no one was free from it (27). While technically Utopia is not Christian, but inhabited by pagans, this sort of "ideal Christian commonwealth, a Christian utopia" is the type of utopia that dominated utopian literature for the next couple of centuries, with works such as Johannes Valentinus Andreae's *Christianopolis* (1619) and Tommaso Campanella's *The City of the Sun* (1602) holding up the tradition (20). However, despite the Christian undertones, these utopias were "essentially secular and rational" in the sense that they expressed the "rational and critical spirit of the Renaissance and Reformation" while at the same time opposing the individualism these movements represented (36). The narrative structure of these early utopian texts follow the same type of travel narrative that More set in his *Utopia*. For example, where in *Utopia* a traveller discusses his visit to the island of Utopia, in Campanella's *The City of the Sun* a sea captain is interrogated and tells a story of how he visited the utopian society of the City of the Sun. The travel- and other narrative types will be discussed further in section 4.

In the early utopias, up until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, science was regarded in the utopian literature in a way that it "existed only to serve certain religious or ethical ends", making the idea of progressive science seem "distasteful and dangerous" (36). So while More's traditional utopia had been stagnant and stoic, Kumar argues, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century utopian literature started to look forward,

becoming “temporal and dynamic” (45).<sup>3</sup> Authors like H. G. Wells and Edward Bellamy emerged with time travelling protagonists, looking to the future of the world and what might be. At the same time, Kumar argues, utopia became worldwide and gained complexity. It was not enough anymore that one small area or a state held an agrarian utopia were the basic needs of humans would be met with minimum fuss, the whole world had to be involved in these future societies: “Nothing less seemed adequate to the new social and technological forces released by modern democracy and science. No one nation or continent could hope to contain these forces” (46). Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* was a huge success when it was released in 1888, a novel that presented a future industrialised utopia and one of the first to set their utopia in a future setting of a present society, instead of some speculative land elsewhere. Bellamy’s novel was still, however, very much a travel narrative, for even though the protagonist in *Looking Backward* did not travel to some unknown land elsewhere, he travelled through time to observe the society there. The move from agrarian utopian thinking to a technological did not happen overnight, however. In response to Bellamy’s novel, William Morris published *News From Nowhere* in 1890, where he offered his future utopia as “an agrarian world of simplicity, beauty and unalienated labor” (Wegner 87). Morris’ text echoes closely the same ideals of “simple and happy existence” that Kaufmann expressed in his utopian definition a mere decade earlier (1). Morris’ protagonist got into the future the same way as Bellamy’s did, by falling asleep and waking up in the future. H. G. Wells, one of the major early 20<sup>th</sup> century utopian authors, preferred this kind of travelling to the utopia in most of his utopian style novels, for example in *A Modern Utopia* (1905) the two protagonists are transported to an alternative earth with a utopian society for them to explore and discover the functions of. Similarly, in *Men Like Gods* (1923), the protagonist, while driving a car, finds himself without much explanation in a new world called Utopia.

From Kumar’s point of view, what most of the texts presented here have in common is that they “are societies [. . .] which have more or less satisfactorily solved all known human problems” (48). This seems to be the main clause in understanding how Kumar defines utopia. Even though he

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted here, that Kumar’s use of *dynamic* in this connection refers mainly to the idea that, as utopias became set in the future, the historical progress of their development could be tracked and they were not just plain static pictures. Many of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century utopias allowed some progress beyond the ideal pinnacle that had been reached in the texts is possible, but hardly more than in a cosmetic sense. Furthermore, they were still isolated utopias devoid of the possibility of outside influence. *Dynamic* as used elsewhere in this paper refers to a situation, where the utopian society does not live in a vacuum, but has to deal with other societies and possess the versatility to progress and adapt.

does not explicitly give that statement as a definition, it is what holds these works mentioned together. However, it would be a disservice to Kumar to put too much weight on that statement alone, as it leaves out most of how Kumar narrows utopias down. Still, from this short statement a problem arises: if these societies are perfect to begin with, any change to them would cause them to cease being perfect. For classical utopias this would not have been a problem, as they were permanently stagnant (which in itself is problematic, as discussed below), but for later utopias this posed a problem, for how could they be both progressive and world-wide, if change was undesirable (47-48)? Wegner recognises this problem as well, and he refers back to H. G. Wells, whose claim was that utopias must be planet-wide, so that there would not be outside influence and pressure on the society (Wegner 88). As for progress, it was often envisioned as technological progress, not social. For example, in *A Modern Utopia*, Wells explains the social structure of the society in a way that does not allow for much change, while leaving innovation open for technological advances. Below, in sections 3 and 4, will be discussed how Iain M. Banks' *Culture* solves this problem of retaining utopian society and remaining dynamic.

#### A note on stasis and stagnation in utopia

As has been mentioned above, classical utopias have been mostly static and stagnant in nature, their society perfected according to the needs of the times, and thus no change would be welcome. There are two problems linked to the nature of static utopias that need to be addressed. The first problem has to do with narrative and how an unchanging setting can support it. That problem will be further discussed in section 4. The second problem that will be discussed here, however, relates to the stasis itself, its plausibility and sustainability for eternity.

Static utopia in itself poses a credibility problem, since the humans within it must somehow have dulled their minds or some other way had a complete shift in their thought-patterns. Everyone in a static utopia ought to be content with their lives, or at least those that live within the rules and the confines of said societies, for static utopian societies are usually controlled by surprisingly strict rules. Those who do not conform to the rules are cast aside from the utopians, either to slavery or otherwise away from the utopian state. If one is to assume that the population has dulled their minds to be happy in their simple existence, then the whole society starts to sound more like a dystopia, at least for an observer schooled in individualistic notions of personal identity. In that



kind of society, creation of art would be hardly possible at all, especially anything that involves storytelling or imagining other places. Innovation and new methods of doing this would be stifled, since technological advancements could potentially threaten the established and ideal social order. Everything would be the same, dull existence with the same chores from one day to another, and herein lies the twist: can this sort of life really be fulfilling enough that the whole society is content? Perhaps it is possible, but for a non-utopian reader it feels somewhat lacking. It is the travel narratives that often save these static utopians from this sort of scrutiny by giving only a brief glimpse to the utopian lives, so that the reader does not usually stop and think what an eternity like that would really be like.

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century utopia does not necessarily fare much better with this, despite the allowance for progress. For example, H. G. Wells' *A Modern Utopia* argues for a kinetic and progressive utopia. However, there are certain aspects of it that, when examined more closely, seem to lead to exactly the kind of unimaginative, dull citizens as the earlier static utopias. Much of this has to do with getting children. Everyone in Wells' utopia is expected to work to earn at least the minimum wage prescribed by the state, and if one does not, one does not eat. The state will not let one starve, but expects the work in return afterwards (Wells 139). And to have children, one must earn well above the minimum wage in order to support the children. A sensible precaution for sure, yet still problematic in connection with other restrictions. Wells' utopia resorts to "a kind of social surgery", which includes sending "idiots and lunatics, . . . perverse and incompetent persons, . . . people of weak character who become drunkards, drug taker, and the like" to isolated islands along with other criminals and prevents them from having children (141-142). Anyone with "certain foul and transmissible diseases" are forbidden from breeding as well (142). It is hardly inconceivable, that when one removes basically anyone who does not keep up with the society's rules out of the gene pool, the result is that the populace becomes very homogenous. Wells is echoing here the practice of eugenics<sup>4</sup>, which he was a firm advocate of at this point in his life (Hyde 220-222). The whole idea of this selective process of breeding is clearly contradicting what we would now consider a fundamental freedom. To make Wells' well-bred utopians even further uniform, there is the fact that the residents are already conditioned towards unvarying manners:

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<sup>4</sup> The idea behind eugenics is "a conscious selective improvement of the human breed" by either promoting the breeding of those with desirable traits or preventing the breeding of those deemed unworthy (Field 2). Eugenics also became a tool of the Nazi Germany in its attempts at promoting Aryan race.

“Utopian manners will not only be tolerant, but almost universally tolerable” (40). A homogenous, universally tolerable population does not sound dynamic.

The progress away from closed off and static utopias has been steady in the utopian literature, and Wells’ *A Modern Utopia* was huge step in a more open direction. However, as will be discussed later in this paper, it is perhaps possible to widen this kineticism to properly dynamic settings. As Iain M. Banks is the author whose utopian vision is going to be examined for precisely those qualities later in this paper, it is only fitting to include his opinion to closed off utopias:

A true utopia implies an inclusivity, a comprehensiveness – limited only by consent – or it’s not really a utopia at all. Living in a gated community and employing hired muscle to keep you comfy does not mean that you live in a little utopia. It means you live in a dystopia and happen to be one of the privileged. (*The Hydrogen Sonata* 619)

While the classic utopian texts have clearly seemed utopias to the contemporaries reading the texts, a modern reader looking backwards to those times can find many aspects that do not conform to their present idea of utopian thinking. This quote from Banks highlights one of those aspects.

### Death of utopia

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after the First World War, utopian literature lost a majority of its audience. Before the World Wars, Eric Sandberg argues, “a powerful interest in technology, and a widespread belief in its redemptive potential, was a dominant feature of the early twentieth century” (26). So the technological progress that had been seen as desirable and a viable path to utopia, was now seen as a “plummet . . . into the horrific depths of the industrialized murder” (27). People began to think that “it was grotesque to see reason and science as the great deliverers of humanity. If reason and science provided any guide to the future, it was in the nightmare form of their perverted use” (Kumar 224-225). This is where dystopian literature started to gain popularity, most likely due to the same reasons as utopia lost its readership. The declining popularity, horrific world event and lack of universal optimism, coupled possibly with the story-wise more versatile dystopian literature gaining status, results in Kumar practically calling utopian literature dead in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (380).

Kumar asserts as well, that the lack of Christian undertones have taken the heart out of utopia:

But without the hope that religion ultimately offers, without specifically the paradisiac and millennial expectations that Christianity inspires, it may be that utopia becomes a lifeless shell. . . . without religious underpinning, without the structure of belief and sentiment that religion incomparably provides, it is possible that utopia is not capable of arousing a significant and heartfelt response, on anything like a mass scale. (420-421)

If this is to be believed, utopian literature faces extinction solely due to the fact that as technology and progress replaced Christianity in utopian literature, and people lost their trust to said technology, people lost hope and interest in the solutions provided by utopias based on them. The horrors of not only one, but two World Wars, a holocaust, the failure of communism and many other disasters most certainly would not have brought more hope for the future, so it cannot be denied that this argument makes sense. It seems, however, only a part of an explanation.

It should be remembered here, that almost every utopian text that has been discussed above, and that were published by and around the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, were in some way closed off ideal places that could only be visited, and always the whole narrative drive of the texts was concentrated on a traveller observing the utopia without much more than a pasted over plot thrown over the social discussion. The full attention to this observation will be given below, in section 4, but for now it is valuable to keep in mind, that perhaps the only reason for the decline was not that people got more pessimistic, but maybe the fact that utopia could not provide necessary escape from that pessimistic world any longer, because it did not tell proper stories. The other side of the utopian coin, dystopia, provided the readers with plenty of events, desires, plots and conclusions, thus providing escapement from the disappointments of life, even if it was not to a better world.

Not everyone agrees with these claims of the dying utopia. Some researchers refute these claims, arguing that these “authors have grounded their claims on the idea that we are now witnessing a moment of cultural retreat, as well as of a vanishing of real political convictions, and envisage the fact that contemporary writers seem to be capable of witnessing dystopias only as a very clear sign

of man's incapacity to put forward positive images of the future" (Vieira 19). So part of this confusion comes from the idea that utopian literature is only its message, be it political or ideological, and when ideologies such as Marxism fails, utopian literature that had connections to those ideologies fail as well and takes the whole genre with it. This is simple false. If that was true, utopian literature as a genre would have died many times during its long history. Vieira continues, that we "can no doubt accept the idea of the death of the utopias of the Renaissance, of the utopias of the Enlightenment or of socialist utopias, in the sense that the solutions that they put forward had short-term relevance and ceased to be applicable to subsequent historical moments" (20). The failure of ideology is not the failure of the literary genre.

In reality, the literary utopian genre has been able to adapt to new forms throughout all these troubled times. As discussed above, from where More started the genre, utopia already before the 20<sup>th</sup> century has adapted to new circumstances several times. The transformation from a tiny utopian enclave to a world-wide utopian society, the move from spatial separation to a temporal one and many different moral and ethical changes are just a few ways in which utopian genre has adapted and expanded itself with. There is no reason why this would change this time, either. As H.G. Wells wrote, "There will be many Utopias. Each generation will have its new version of Utopia, a little more certain and complete and real" (370). One obvious direction where utopian literature could go, and had already started to go in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is the realm of science fiction.

### Science fictional utopia

It is quite conceivable, that Kumar's negative outlook on the present and future state of utopian literature is a result of him practically dismissing science fiction almost completely as works of literature. Kumar does make a note of Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974) to some extent as "the best of the ecotopias" (ecological utopia), but treating it as science fiction continues to state that "Presented in science fiction guise, it tended in any case to find it difficult to break out of its specialized literary ghetto" (420). It is somewhat odd to view science fiction as something distinctly separate from other fictional utopias, since science fiction as a genre would be perhaps among the easiest places utopian fiction to thrive in. Indeed, Wegner proceeds to argue that since "Utopian is increasingly identified with speculations concerning the future . . . Utopian writing

more and more is read as a subset of the expanding genre of science fiction” (Wegner 88). Wegner reflects here the thoughts of many utopian researchers, among them Darko Suvin and Fredric Jameson. Suvin expresses this view rather more firmly, stating that “[s]trictly speaking, Utopia is not a genre in its own right, but rather the socio-political sub-genre of Science Fiction” (qtd. in Jameson 393).

Jameson, building much on Suvin’s view of utopia belonging to the science fiction, discusses utopia and SF thoroughly in his book *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. One of Jameson’s conclusions is that it is “clear that the SF author is placed in a position of divine creation well beyond anything Agatha Christie or even Aristotle might have imagined; rather than inventing a crime of some sort, the SF writer is obliged to invent an entire universe, an entire ontology, another world altogether – very precisely that system of radical difference with which we associate the imaginations of Utopia” (101). Thus by the very nature of SF author’s craft, utopian literature should find an easy place to thrive. SF gives the authors more freedoms to develop narratives and stories as well, something that has been difficult in the past. Furthermore, when discussing especially the utopian literature that was published in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, all those means to travel in time or to another planet certainly seem to belong to the world of science fiction, or in the least to fantasy. With older utopias it is not quite so straightforward to join them with SF, but there is not really any need to do so, either: if we consider utopian literature to be adaptive and, as Wells said, every generation has their own utopia, then it is quite possible for the genre boundaries to shift over time.

To not quite end the argument here, it should be noted that Kumar, in an essay “The Ends of Utopia” (2010), presents an argument against Jameson as well as science fiction as a home for utopia. Kumar’s main argument is that if Jameson considers utopia to be alive and well in science fiction, then he should have found “more current examples to substantiate the claim”, as almost all the examples Jameson uses are written before 1980s. The only fresher example, Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Mars*-trilogy, Kumar rather strangely dismisses as being more “whimsy” than having utopian imagination (551). It is true that Jameson does not present that many fresh examples, and this is where we will come to the next part of this paper. Iain M. Banks’ *Culture* could very well be exactly the current example that is called for here.

### 3. The Culture – A society of peers

As the previous chapter shows, utopian literature has a long and rich history as a part of the utopian tradition. However, as is further evident, some researchers fear that the long history of utopian literature might be turning out to be the only utopian history if the current hiatus of utopian literature does not end. There are still places where the utopian tradition is not forgotten, and one of those is science fiction. Although certain researchers discredit science fiction as suitable platform to continue the literary utopian tradition, also as discussed above, it would be foolish to dismiss SF from utopian canon. Science fiction provides fertile ground to plant utopias in, removing if from the restrictions of present day human society. Furthermore, any credible utopia needs to take into account the current rate of technological advances, and for a forward looking, technology rich utopia, SF is an obvious genre to mix utopian literature with.

Considering the adaptive nature of utopia and what Wells said about every generation having their own utopias, what we should be looking for now in our contemporary world is not the same enclaved blueprint utopias that started the literary utopian tradition, nor is it the world-spanning yet isolated utopias of the progressive utopian times. Instead, it need be something new and something fresh, something suitable for contemporary readers. What is needed then, is, to borrow linguistic terminology from Saussure, a new *parole* of the overall utopian *langue*.<sup>5</sup> The *langue* here can be thought of as the utopian ideal, the overall structure and meaning of utopia, while *parole* is the exact manifestation and use of that *langue*. In other words, what More, Bellamy, Wells and any other utopian author has written is the specific view (*parole*) those authors have on what utopia (*langue*) is for them.

As a possible contemporary *parole* of the utopian *langue* Iain M. Banks' science fiction stories that centre around the imaginary society called the Culture will be discussed in this section. This discussion will mostly be limited to the actual society that Banks has created, sometimes in comparison to older utopias and sometimes in the light of discussing possible problematics that arise from the dynamic nature of the Culture as a society. The advantages of an open, dynamic

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<sup>5</sup> According to Hirsch, "Saussure defined *langue* as the system of linguistic possibilities shared by a speech community at any given point in time", while the "actual utterances are called *paroles*; they are *uses* of language, and actualize some (but never all) of the meaning-possibilities constituting the *langue*" (473).

utopian society in terms of narratives will be discussed further on, in section 4. These narratives are in a central position when considering that a lack of narrative might have contributed to the decline of the utopian literature, and thus establishing the utopian nature of Banks' narratives here first is essential.

As mentioned in the introduction, Banks wrote eight Culture-novels over a time period of approximately 25 years. It is natural that during this time the Culture evolved further both in Banks' own mind as well as in the novels, and some of these developments will be pointed out in the discussion. The basic form of the Culture did not change overtly though, and information about the Culture is relevant no matter which novel is considered.

### 3.1 Structure and social order of the Culture

The Culture stories are set in our own galaxy, which in the novels is a well populated place. Earth and humans of Earth, however, play no part whatsoever in Banks' novels, apart from a brief appearance in a short story, where the Culture agents visit Earth. What the Culture itself is, is briefly explained by Banks himself:

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. ("A Few Notes on the Culture")

The nine thousand years that Banks mentions is the age of the Culture where his stories up until that point had been when he published that essay in 1994. In later novels, the time frame is expanded further and the Culture is older in later novels. The galaxy is full of other civilisations, some humanoid, others far different from humanoids, a lot of them space-faring but on completely different technological scale. The Culture is on the high-end of technological progression, along with a handful of other 'in-play' civilisations. In-play in this context means that

they take part in the general galactic community, while there are also civilisations that just do not want to be part of the galactic community for whatever reason. There are also a lot of older-than-the-Culture civilisations that have disappeared or Sublimed.<sup>6</sup> While technological progression is not itself a mark of a well-off, balanced society, it is notable that, within the scope of Banks' books, only among the highly progressed civilisations in the galaxy can utopian tendencies be found. Less progressive civilisations tend to be more violent as well as territory-obsessed. For example, the novel *The Hydrogen Sonata* describes in detail Gzilt, an empire of humanoids roughly the Culture-equivalent in technological progress, that, although being in many ways different from the Culture, appeared to be rather utopian. In the same novel, plenty of civilisations with lesser technological progress are clearly warlike and territorial. That is not to say that older civilisations would not be conscious of their spheres of influence, they just appear not quite as obsessed with expanding it.

## Economy

The Culture is a post-scarcity society. A society reaches post-scarcity when its economy is "capable of producing huge amounts of material wealth in the form of goods and services with the aid of a relatively small percentage of the population" and thus reaches "an age of abundance, a state in which an ever wider range of economic goods and services are available in abundant supply and at extremely low cost, meaning that there is no lack of physical resources to fulfil the needs of its population" (Sadler 7). While there is only one direct reference to the Culture being post-scarcity<sup>7</sup>, there is plenty of evidence of this scattered around the novels. For example, in *The Player of Games* during a discussion over having a house in the mountains, the main character explains that if "somebody wanted a house like this they'd already have had one built; if they wanted anything in the house . . . they'd have ordered it; they'd have it" (21). Furthermore, there is no real need for anyone to work, although many choose to do so as a hobby, such as designing habitats or doing research, which there still is plenty to do in the wide universe. All the actual production is done by artificial intelligences (AIs), but low-level ones without actual consciousness, so they are not enslaved entities, and this is a point that is taken very seriously in the Culture. The different AIs

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<sup>6</sup> Subliming is the last thing a society does, a technological pinnacle where the inhabitants leave the material world behind and become pure energy, able to travel past the physical world elsewhere. See Banks' novel *The Hydrogen Sonata* for further information on it.

<sup>7</sup> See *The Hydrogen Sonata*, page 399: "by the relaxed, abundantly provisioned standards of a post-scarcity humanoid civilisation".



and their functions will be discussed further later on. Money does not exist in any form within the Culture, and although personal possessions exist, they have only personal and sentimental value, rather than monetary.

The Culture does not create matter and materials from thin air, but as is evident even with our own solar system and its outskirts full of material-heavy asteroids, collecting needed materials from space would not be a challenge for a highly advanced society. And indeed, building Orbital structures that orbit a star involves “simply removing the sort of wandering debris (for example comets and asteroids) which the average solar system comes equipped with and which would threaten such an artificial world's integrity through collision almost always in itself provides sufficient material for the construction of at least one full Orbital” (“A Few Notes on the Culture”).

This type of society which would not have any kind of monetary system and especially no need for any inhabitant to work are rare in the utopian literary history. If one forgets about the Cockaigne-fancies, the closest would perhaps be William Morris' *News from Nowhere* (1890), but even with that the similarities are few. Although a monetary-free society that is organised around as little and as pleasant work as possible, it is not based on superabundance of resources, but rather on minimisation of consumption.

#### Political system, or the lack thereof

The Culture is technically an anarchy, without any centralised government, where people are allowed to do pretty much anything that does not endanger other living beings, AIs included. This is not controlled by any centralised police force, rather by high-level, super-intelligent AIs called Minds, whom invariably control the functions of most habitats. They are not to be confused with a ruler, as will be clarified below. The fact that the Culture is an anarchy is a clear break away from most of the earlier utopias, especially if we consider Kaufmann's definition of utopia<sup>8</sup> that in quite clear terms rules out anarchy as a possible basis for utopia. H. G. Wells dismisses anarchy as well, claiming that “there is no freedom under Anarchy” (33). This is one of those instances where the adaptability of utopian literature comes clear: while a hundred years ago it was not possible to see

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<sup>8</sup> See section 2.2.

how anarchy could work in a utopian setting, it does not mean that it could not work in settings imagined now. For this type of utopian setting it might even be necessary, as can be derived from how Banks explains some of the reasons why the Culture formed into an anarchy:

Essentially, the contention is that our currently dominant power systems cannot long survive in space; beyond a certain technological level a degree of anarchy is arguably inevitable and anyway preferable.

To survive in space, ships/habitats must be self-sufficient, or very nearly so; the hold of the state (or the corporation) over them therefore becomes tenuous if the desires of the inhabitants conflict significantly with the requirements of the controlling body. On a planet, enclaves can be surrounded, besieged, attacked; . . . 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. (“AFNotC”)

This does not explain, however, why local power systems do not develop, as in why there is no local ruling body in an orbital containing billions of inhabitants. The most likely reason is the aforementioned Minds that control the everyday workings in orbitals, and if someone happened to be a power hungry individual with dreams of glory, they would not be welcome to live in that particular place any longer unless they kept their ambitions in check. In fact, power hungry “megalomaniacs are not unknown in the Culture, but they tend to be diverted successfully into highly complicated games; there are entire Orbitals where some of these philosophically crude Obsessive games are played, though most are in Virtual Reality” (“AFNotC”). In other terms, the Culture in a way covertly exiles those with un-utopian personalities to places where they cannot harm or restrict the freedoms of other Culture citizens, yet they are not kicked out of the Culture, either. Not even murderers get thrown out of the Culture, they get “slap-droned”, meaning that a drone follows them to make sure it never happens again (Banks, *Player of Games* 225). A crueller punishment than it sounds, as it basically means a social death for the perpetrator, and they certainly “don’t get invited to too many parties” (225).

## Living conditions

The majority of the Culture's population lives on orbitals, massive space constructions orbiting a star, each capable of holding several billion inhabitants more cost-effectively than having the same population on a planet and in much more comfort and security. It must be noted here, that people and inhabitants include not only humanoid and other intelligent biological lifeforms, but also AIs that have reached self-consciousness and thus are considered as full members of the Culture. Many orbitals feature natural habitats for as many animal and plant species any given planet would hold. In *The Hydrogen Sonata*, Banks writes that out of all the people in the Culture, "better than ninety-five per cent of them housed across the vast, distributed bucolic hinterland of the Orbitals, scattered throughout the civilised galaxy like a million glowing bracelets" (483). Being planet-born is extremely rare in the Culture.

The reasons for why so many choose to live in orbitals instead of planets, have both economical and especially ecological reasons:

Whatever the source material, Orbitals are obviously far more mass-efficient in providing living space than planets. The Culture . . . regards terraforming generally as ecologically unsound; the wilderness should be left as it is, when it is so easy to build paradise in space from so little. ("AFNotC")

This aversion to terraforming and ecological protection goes so far, that the Culture also attempts to influence neighbouring civilisations to avoid it as well, never by force or threats, but often diplomatically or covertly.<sup>9</sup>

After orbitals, the next largest population concentrations are on planets and in huge General System Vehicles, GSVs. These GSVs are technically spaceships, but their size is that of many major cities, just one being able to provide habitat for a few billion people. These megaships roam the galaxy, although usually staying within the sphere of influence that the Culture has carved for itself in the galaxy, for reasons of security. However, usually the largest of GSVs are those of the Contact section, and used for diplomatic duties. The idea is that a GSV with its population is like a

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<sup>9</sup> For an example to the extent of influence the Culture is willing to go for this, see *Use of Weapons*.

miniature representation of the Culture, when it embarks on a diplomatic mission for the Culture (“AFNotC”).

#### Inhabitants: Humans and humanoids

Humans, or rather, humanoids, are able to do almost anything they wish in the Culture. Their life is open to frolic, to explore, to find higher meanings in life or do almost anything. While there is no real reason to work, some do so anyway, as a hobby. The Culture is also a society of equals, perhaps with a slight exception of the Minds, for obvious reasons that will be discussed below. As there is no poverty or a system of power, there are no class differences. Gender equality has been solved through genetic manipulation generations past, and every Culture human is able to change sex at will or become sexless. Although not an immediate change, as it “took anything up to a year to alter yourself from a female to a male, or vice versa. The process was painless and set in action simply by thinking about it” (*Excession* 356). Most humans also do change their sex at least once in their lifetime, which usually is several hundreds of years. As anyone could be of either sex (or, be genetically altered to be something completely different), gender roles are non-existent in the Culture, and that point that is well made in *The Player of Games*, where it is mentioned that Marain, the language of the Culture, has only “one personal pronoun to cover females, males, in-betweens, neuters, children, drones, Minds, other sentient machines, and every life-form capable of scraping together anything remotely resembling a nervous system and rudiments of language” (99).

Technically it is possible for the Culture citizens to stay alive indefinitely, but rarely anyone decides to do so, opting rather to have an end to their life at some point, or going into prolonged stasis. Many humans would find that kind of existence rather shallow, and Banks acknowledges that as well:

The humans of the Culture, having solved all the obvious problems of their shared pasts to be free from hunger, want, disease and the fear of natural disaster and attack, would find it a slightly empty existence only and merely enjoying themselves, and so need the good-works of the Contact section to let them feel vicariously useful. (“AFNotC”)

This was so not only for the humans within the Culture, but for the whole Culture itself, so much so that it became the very reason for its own existence:

The only desire the Culture could not satisfy from within itself was . . . the urge not to feel useless. The Culture's sole justification for the relatively unworried, hedonistic life its population enjoyed was its good works; the secular evangelism of the Contact Section, not simply finding, cataloguing, investigating and analysing other, less advanced civilisations but – where the circumstances appeared to Contact to justify so doing – actually interfering (overtly or covertly) in the historical processes of those other cultures. (*Consider Phlebas* 451)

So while a human could, in theory, spend his whole life frolicking around the galaxy, it is obvious that some other meaning is need for life, and in the case of the Culture, this meaning came from the outside, from the possibility to give better life to others. For that reason, many humans wanted to join the Contact Section, which will be discussed below. To refer back to stagnated and closed off utopias, the advantage of having an open and dynamic utopia like the Culture is that the people who do find their existence lacking and meaningless have the option to break away from the dullness. The break can be in the form of joining the Contact Section, or it might come in the form of living among other societies.

#### Inhabitants: Artificial Intelligences - Minds

Artificial Intelligences are responsible for all major functions within the Culture. They are also important characters in all of the Culture stories, sometimes even more so than the humans (especially in *Excession* (1996)). Orbitals, GSVs and smaller ships (excluding inter-planetary ships) are all run by Minds, the most advanced of the Culture's AI's. In fact, Minds are not only responsible of these constructions, in some cases they actually are the constructions, such as in case of starships:

Culture starships . . . are sentient; their Minds (sophisticated AIs working largely in hyperspace to take advantage of the higher lightspeed there) bear the same relation to the fabric of the ship as a human brain does to the human body; the Mind is the important bit, and the rest is a life-support and transport system. Humans and independent drones (the Culture's non-android individual AIs of roughly human-

equivalent intelligence) are unnecessary for the running of the starships, and have a status somewhere between passengers, pets and parasites. (“AFNotC”)

As the ships literally have minds of their own, they pretty much can decide themselves where they want to go, so hitching a ride from one is often the matter of finding a ship that goes to your desired direction. It is not so different from having a non-sentient vessel with a captain or a shipping line deciding where to go, except that there is no way a Mind would lead its own body to possible danger no matter how nicely one asks. At least unless the destination was of extreme interest to the Mind in question. In a money-free society, information and new experiences can be used as a currency. Larger ships, such as GSVs are sometimes controlled by more than just one Mind, due to the sheer size of these floating cities. Their representative function and populations ranging from millions to billions, as discussed above, restrict their personal travel plans in order to serve the needs of that population and that of Contact. Orbitals, due to their nature of being restricted to only one-star system, exist solely to provide habitats for humans, drones and other inhabitants of the Culture. The Minds in control of the Orbitals must find their joy in other forms than exploration and travel, yet this is not much of a problem. Minds, like humans, have their own personalities, and are drawn to different interests.

Before going further into the inner workings of AIs and how they are constructed, the matter of machine- and mass surveillance type of dystopias needs to be addressed, as these two types of dystopian visions include elements that are present in the Culture novels as well. In science fiction in general, artificial intelligences that have gained self-awareness<sup>10</sup> are rarely presented as benevolent towards their human creators<sup>11</sup>. Examples of this are abundant, from small-scale AI problems such as those in Arthur C. Clarke’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968, both novel and movie) where the AI causes only a few human casualties, to world-wide dystopias such as in the movies *The Terminator* (1984) and *The Matrix* (1999), or the play *R.U.R.* (1920) by Karel Čapek, where AIs (in different guises) attempts at domination threatens the whole existence of humanity<sup>12</sup>. The idea

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<sup>10</sup> In SF often a result of a “technological singularity”, where a machine can create even smarter machines, eventually creating a superhuman intelligence, that in turn can create even more intelligent machines. (Russel et al. 963, Booker and Thomas 330)

<sup>11</sup> One example of benevolence are the robots in Isaac Asimov’s *Robot-series*, for which Asimov created ‘The Three Laws of Robotics’ to prevent robots from harming humans.

<sup>12</sup> Banks briefly touched upon the fear of AIs in his non-Culture SF novel *The Algebraist* (2004), where a galactic empire had banned AIs as they were thought to be an eventual threat, leading to the destruction of most AIs. Some surviving AIs in the novel, however, seem benevolent.

appears to be, that by definition whatever AI humans create, it will in its superior intelligence decide that humans must be removed. Banks, proposes another approach to this, in an interview at the end of *The Hydrogen Sonata*, arguing that

the humans create [the Minds] and enough of these god-like entities stick around to save us from ourselves. The children create the adults, and behave better as a result. I submit this is no more likely to be wrong than the idea that as soon as we create an AI it'll try to exterminate us is right – that's the us in it talking, . . . that's our guilty conscience articulating. (615-6)

As Banks argues, then, things might turn out either way: the AIs can be benevolent as well as malevolent, the truth of it cannot be known beforehand. In the Culture, however, Banks has attempted to lay a groundwork for Minds to end up being the former rather than the latter. This will be discussed below, after addressing another possibly dystopian feature that the Culture AIs possess.

An additional element in the power that Minds possess that is these days considered to be decidedly dystopian, especially in the wrong hands, is the amount of surveillance that any Mind-inhabited/-controlled structure includes. Any decent ship Mind knows exactly what is happening within its hull, and while Orbitals might not have observation points everywhere, basically every single Culture person carries with them a personal terminal, which can be used to access information networks or ask the resident Mind for information. While these terminals are not used specifically to eavesdrop on people, the information from their surroundings is often processed to detect possible danger to the bearer of the terminal, or to the ship/Orbital itself. This type of surveillance easily brings to mind dystopian societies where every movement and act of the inhabitants are recorded, the arguably most famous example of this being George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Furthermore, the information network that the people access through terminals is also managed by the Minds, which would make it extremely easy to control information flow, much like was done in Orwell's dystopia, albeit not with AIs, but using the news. AIs in the Culture, then, could be the ultimate Orwellian Big Brother. However, the Minds in the novels are clearly not abusing their obvious powers to harm or control people, and while it is the author's prerogative to create a world however he or she wants, Banks does provide some insight why his AIs tend towards benevolence.

Part of the AIs benevolence towards humans and other species is related to how they are developed. AIs “are designed (by other AIs, for virtually all of the Culture's history) within very broad parameters, but those parameters do exist; the Culture AIs are designed to want to live, to want to experience, to desire to understand, and to find existence and their own thought-processes in some way rewarding, even enjoyable” (“AFNotC”). Another way to express this would be to say that AIs in the Culture are designed to enjoy life and have fun. Many would find dominating simple humans eventually rather boring, time-consuming and far from fun. However, perhaps the major reason for them not to do so, is that it would make any single Mind a social outcast, a pariah among its peers. Much like it is for humans, being nice to people and to each other simply offers much more in the long run. Furthermore, considering how utterly vast the galaxy is (and even further, the universe), there are innumerable discoveries to be made and things to do, even for hyper-intelligent Minds. And when the physical (from human point of view) universe is not enough, Minds often run whole simulated universes in virtual environments to entertain themselves.

Yet it is not only these elements that steer the Culture away from a machine controlled dystopia. Despite the fact that Banks often deals with serious issues and questions of morality in his books, there is always a constant underlying playfulness to the narratives, that removes all doubt from the reader that the Culture would be in any way dystopic. A prime example of this is the unconventional nomenclature of the Culture Minds: *Unacceptable Behaviour*, *Zero Gravitas*<sup>13</sup>, *What Is The Answer And Why?* and *Fate Amenable To Change* are just a few examples of what a reader can expect to find from Banks’ stories, and these are only a few ship names taken from a single book, *Excession*. Despite this nomenclature, it is easy to take the Minds seriously, and if one pays close attention to their actions within the stories, it is possible to see how the names do reflect the personalities of the Minds as well. This narrative playfulness will be discussed further in section 4, yet its effect to the general feel of the stories is important factor to be aware of here as well.

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<sup>13</sup> It is a recurring theme in the Culture books to have a ship name that expresses lack of gravitas.



Examining the AIs and their behaviour in different novels provides certain insight to how the Culture is still evolving, not only in technological terms, but in philosophical thinking as well. A good example of this would be the virtual realities mentioned above. In *Excession*, for the AIs these virtual realities “was where they lived. That was their home. When they weren’t running ships, meddling with alien civilizations or planning the future course of the Culture itself, the Minds existed in those fantastic virtual realities, sojourning beyondward into the multidimensioned geographies of their unleashed imaginations, vanishingly far away from the single limited point that was reality” (153-4). There are no expressed negative or morally dubious aspects in the novel to these virtual realities. However, in *The Hydrogen Sonata* (2012) that takes place approximately 500 years after *Excession*<sup>14</sup>, the simulations are not so straightforward. The difficulties arise when AIs create simulations so real that its population consisted of “realistically reacting and . . . cogitating individuals”, then in a sense “you had . . . created life” (*The Hydrogen Sonata* 318). Thus, if those creatures in one’s simulation were to be considered being alive, did one have the right to turn the simulation off, effectively killing all of its inhabitants (317-20)? The fact that this issue has only slowly developed in the Culture shows that the AIs are not infallible and that they gain from experience much as humans do. It also shows that the Culture is a living society. Naturally another way of looking at this is that quite likely Banks himself did not at first think about this, and came up with it during those intervening 16 years between the books. However, all that proves only that the Culture was evolving in Banks’ mind as well as in the books. Indeed, when Banks came up with new things that might make one wonder why Minds or other entities in the previous books did not use the same technology/method to solve whichever situation they were in, they are almost without a fault been set at a later point in the Culture’s history.

A conclusion can be drawn from this: if AIs spend time considering the possible morality problems of virtual entities, they can hardly be thought to be anything but benevolent. However, since there are a wide variety of personalities in humans and not all necessarily as nice, the same applies to AIs which distinctly individual, as the Culture AIs tend to be.

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<sup>14</sup> As there is no official timeline for the events in Banks’ books, establishing the order must be done by looking for clues spread around the books. Thus this is an estimated time difference based on evidence found from the books: In *Excession*, the Idiran war is referred to have taken place five hundred years earlier, while in *The Hydrogen Sonata*, one of the ships is referred to having been present at the end of the Idiran war a thousand years earlier (*Excession* 463, *The Hydrogen Sonata* 68).

## Inhabitants: Artificial Intelligences - Drones

Apart from Minds, other AIs inhabit the Culture. One group of AIs are the Drones, which were mentioned in the earlier quote from Banks. Drones come in varying sizes, from bulky, roughly large suitcase size boxes to small tennis ball size constructs. They all have floating/flying capabilities through anti-gravity fields, and use different forms of force fields to manipulate objects around them. Drones are sentient, but their intelligence is far below that of the level of a Mind, being rather “of at least equal intelligence to Culture humans and . . . generally adjudged, in practice, to be of somewhat greater intelligence” (*The Hydrogen Sonata* 302). Just as the Minds, the drones are each their own individuals but unlike the Minds, they are far more numerous, perhaps equalling the human populace in numbers. With being of roughly equal in intelligence as well as in numbers, drones and humans live alongside without any qualms and are treated as equals in all social functions within the Culture. One example of this is a passage found in the *Player of Games*, where a party is being held and humans and drones mingle and discuss without any distinct groupings of one or the other forming (9-16). This is not to say that everyone lives happily with each other, the same real life rules still apply, where one person, be it human or drone, creates friendships with others while creating rivalries or even dislike with others. It just does not matter much if those others happen to be drones or humans.

While this equality within the Culture is taken for granted by practically everyone within the Culture, this is not so with most of the other societies that appear in the stories. Especially those civilizations that are not highly technologically advanced as the Culture (which is most of them), drones are considered to be merely machines, not actual feeling, thinking beings that have worth. Banks uses this fact often in his narratives, creating tension when dealing with aliens (from the Culture’s point of view) that treat the Culture drones with much less courtesy than the Culture humans.

### 3.2 Trouble in utopia

There are some aspects of the Culture that might be seen troublesome when considering its standing as a utopian society. Frequent involvements in wars around the galaxy, some dubious characters and a whole section of the Culture tasked with spying and influencing other civilizations seem at first glance something that a utopia should not be involved with, and yet, these themes are frequent in Banks' books. Thus, a closer look into these events, characters and reasons for their existence is in order. There is, however, a reason these matters are so central to the novels, as Banks explains in an interview:

Of course, my need to tell a story of even the slightest degree of rip-roaringness means that the novels tend to concentrate on exactly the kind of life-threatening mayhem that the entire Culture is very carefully designed to obviate, both within it and – to the extent that it reasonably and ethically can project its values – around it. The impression the books might give is that this action-adventure stuff is happening all the time all over the place, and that's just not true. (*The Hydrogen Sonata* 618-19)

It should be remembered, then, that while these type of aspects are highlighted in the novels, there is an actual narrative reason behind them and as such, should not be considered as a constant occurrence in the Culture. Just as in any story, be it of almost any genre, the daily is not the stuff of fiction.

#### Contact and Special Circumstances

Within the Culture there are two rather prestigious organisations that take only the best and brightest candidates to work for them: Contact and Special Circumstances. Contact Section is a group of Minds, drones and humans dedicated to exploration and diplomacy. It “is the part of the Culture concerned with discovering, cataloguing, investigating, evaluating and - if thought prudent - interacting with other civilisations”, so its responsibility is to keep up relationships with other civilisations and handle, as the name suggests, contact with new civilisations (“AFNotC”). They are also the unofficial military force of the Culture, as their ships are most often equipped with massive weaponry. While the Culture in general adheres strictly to non-violent solutions, the galaxy is a vast place and one never knows what might happen.

Special Circumstances is a small branch of Contact, their covert operations section, responsible of espionage and other matters that no self-respecting Culture citizen would ever do. Special Circumstances (SC from here on) is something that the Culture feels very conflicted over. On one hand, how can they feel morally superior and a perfect society while having a group of people who actively operate against other civilisations and even subtly attempt to guide other civilisations towards the standards that the Culture lives by? On the other hand, without SC doing dirty work for them, the whole Culture might be in danger. Nonetheless, when the non-Culture protagonist of *Surface Detail* is searching the Culture information networks for information on SC, “She’d looked a little closer at some of the anti-SC sites. *Profoundly* critical” (190). Culture citizens are aware of SC, and some certainly are heavily critical of it as well.

SC is also the place where the finest individuals of the Culture could truly test themselves, and find further meaning in life:

SC was the pinnacle, the service that attracted the absolutely best and the brightest of the Culture; in a society that held few positions of individual power, SC represented their ultimate goal for those blessed and cursed with the sort of vaunting, hungry ambition to succeed in the Real that could not be bought off by the convincing but ultimately artificial attractions of VR. (SD 211)

In this way SC also serves a dual purpose: while it invites to its ranks those with the greatest abilities, it also gathers together those people who are willing to do what is necessary, even dirty and morally questionable deeds. This in turn keeps possibly morally questionable people away from the general populace for long periods of time and keeps them protecting the Culture from possible harm, be it present or future assumed harm. This is a further advantage of an open and dynamic utopia, as opposed to the closed and static utopias discussed above<sup>15</sup>, so that instead of slavery or total exile from the utopia, the Culture can use these nonconforming individuals as means for perfecting the utopia for others. Furthermore, SC actions are in almost all the Culture stories involved somehow in the events taking place, certainly exactly for the reason that Banks explained above about having to set the novels in difficult times in order to tell his type of a story.

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<sup>15</sup> See section 2.2, sub-heading “A note on stasis and stagnation in utopia”.

Booker and Thomas in *The Science Fiction Handbook* have acknowledged the controversial nature of the Culture's "tendency towards interventionism, in which it surreptitiously attempts to steer less-advanced civilizations in more positive and humane directions . . . [seeming] to echo all too closely the imperialist tendencies of advanced nations on Earth" (84). This is certainly problematic, but there are also mitigating factors. In several of the stories, before decisive action is taken towards any civilisation, it is considered by several hyper-intelligent Minds for a very long time before reaching a decision that is in any way could be morally wrong. An excellent example of this is the short story *The State of the Art* (1991), where Contact agents visit Earth. During the year-long visit, it is made clear that several Minds consider the options on whether to interfere and make contact with Earth, or let the earthlings continue on their evolutionary path. For a group of Minds to consider this choice for a year while absorbing everything they can of the Earthen cultures, means approximately the same as a group of humans considering the question for several millennia. So to quote Booker and Thomas again, the "Minds are so advanced that they really *are* qualified to guide other societies, whereas the wealthier and more powerful nations on Earth are not" (83).

## War

Sometimes the Culture is faced with a war it does not want. One of these, an immense conflict called the Idiran war is referred to in many different novels, although it has the centre stage in Banks' very first Culture novel, *Consider Phlebas* (1987). The war was started by the Idirans, an aggressive and expansive society. The Idirans are on approximately the same technological level as the Culture, but much more warlike. Their campaign against the Culture began partly due to religious reasons, for they consider the Culture to be only the sum of its machines, and machines in their minds should not be allowed to have free will. Another reason is that the Idirans thought the Culture was weak enough to be easily conquered, as it was very keen on peaceful coexistence and did not even have a proper armed fleet. Ideological differences play a major part in this conflict, as the Culture and the Idirans have hardly anything in common. While the Idiran society is a tightly knit hierarchical society that is almost solely based on planets, the Culture is a more loosely knit anarchistic group based on movable orbitals. This resulted in the Culture moving its orbitals out of the way of the Idiran advance while starting its war production, as at this point even

the Contact section of the Culture was hardly armed. The Idirans, having a different attitude towards territory, wanted to secure as many planets as it could.

Getting into a war instead of immediately surrendering areas to the Idirans was against what everyone thought the Culture would do, even for large parts of the Culture population. For a peaceful, idyllic and idealistic society focused on doing good deeds, such as the Culture, going to an all-out war was an abomination, and many factions broke away from the Culture as a result, refusing to fight. Similar to the Special Circumstance problem discussed above, this does raise a question of how much can a utopian society do to protect its existence without becoming less utopian. However, the Culture did have a need to stop the Idirans from expanding and crushing every other less developed civilisation under their heels. It is the very reason of how the Culture justifies its own existence:

Faced with a religiously inspired society determined to extend its influence over every technologically inferior civilisation in its path regardless of either the initial toll of conquest or the subsequent attrition of occupation, Contact could either disengage and admit defeat – so giving the lie not simply to its own reason for existence but to the only justificatory action which allowed the pampered, self-consciously fortunate people of the Culture to enjoy their lives with a clear conscience – or it could fight. (*Consider Phlebas* 452)

So in a sense, the Culture really had to fight. It does not make any less relevant the question over how far can a society go in protecting itself and still remain utopia. It is, however, a price to pay for a dynamic and open society. It also brings in the question of wars of choice and wars of necessity.

Banks was strongly against wars of choice. When Britain joined the US in the invasion of Iraq in 2003, Banks cut up his passport and mailed it to Tony Blair as a protest, an affair which Banks describes in some detail in his nonfictional semi-autobiographical book *Raw Spirit: In Search of the Perfect Dram*. He hated Blair for joining Bush in a clearly illegal war that was by no means necessary. This aggressively pacifist tendency could be an important fact when considering the wars that Banks had the Culture take part in. These interventionist tendencies and occasional wars could very well be the way that Banks himself is testing how his own utopia would survive them and keep its integrity. Certainly these events bring along plenty of narrative force with them, but it

is worth considering that maybe Banks really wanted to see his utopia being able to cope with them, and what would be a worse test to put any society to than a war?

### 3.3 Is it utopia, though?

As discussed so far, the Culture has clear utopian tendency to it. It could even be said that it breaks into several utopian sub-genres as well: problem with patriarchy is gone and equality reigns, thus feminist utopia is fulfilled, and ecological problems are non-existent, as the Culture refuses to terraform and instead prefers to preserve, thus filling the frame of ecotopia. The list could go on, but the main point is, that the Culture has solved the majority of social problems known to humans at this point. The clear tendency of the Culture towards socialism and especially anarchy as opposed to the ever tightening state control in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Earth can easily be seen as a critique towards the current social orders and capitalism in particular, which is rather the point of utopias. Not even the problematics of interventionism and wars lessen the utopian impulse in Banks' novels: they can be seen as an attempt to test the validity of the utopia, while as well it can be seen as a critique towards the wars and imperialistic interventionism on Earth as well.

Banks' utopia can, then, be seen as a *parole* of the general utopian *langue*. It responds to the needs of social critique, it expresses alternatives that, although technologically distant, still resonate with positive outlook on things instead of a dystopian vision. Furthermore, Banks' has brought exciting storytelling to the world of utopia, as will be discussed next.

#### 4. Narrating utopias

As has now been established, the Culture is a society that can indeed be considered to be a utopian society, despite its non-static nature. By setting his utopia in a galaxy full of other, non-utopian societies, Banks created an endless amount of possibilities for narratives that rise from conflict and interaction between societies and individuals in different societies. This allows for the utopian society to be explored and fleshed out properly from perspectives both inside and outside of the said society, all the while providing entertainment and excitement for the readers. This has not been the case in majority of historical literary utopias, where the ideal state or society requires a certain static, perfect state of being where progress of any kind would disrupt the harmony of the utopia. Due to this requirement of a static state, historical utopian literature has had very few choices in terms of telling a story within the confines of their respective utopias.

As has been discussed earlier in this paper, the decline in literary utopias and utopianism in general in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been generally considered to be caused by increased pessimism towards the future brought about by two World Wars, and the feeling that technology, which was still seen as a major positive force in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, turned out to be a major destructive force in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thus it would be dystopias in their bleak visions of future, instead of utopias, that resonate with people's thoughts and feelings. However, perhaps this is not the only reason, but instead, alongside the increased pessimism, there is another significant cause for this shift towards dystopia: dystopian settings allow for more interesting and varying stories to be told. Dystopias provide often similar political and thematic critiques as utopias, in that they can highlight present day societal problems, yet compared to pre-20<sup>th</sup> century utopias, dystopias additionally offer much wider spectrum of story possibilities as well. This problem with utopian narratives will be the focus of this chapter, first in discussing the problem in detail and then examining if and how Banks does things differently in his utopian narratives. Along the way, a couple of Banks' novels will be discussed in relation to certain more classical utopian novels to highlight possible differences and similarities in narration.



#### 4.1 The difficulties in narrating utopias

It is safe to assume that every aspiring and established author struggles while attempting to create an interesting narrative that gathers readers as well. As Christian Lorentzen aptly puts it, “it’s plot that keeps us turning pages, even when we feel no sympathy or the opposite of sympathy for a fiction’s characters and animating ideas” (“Is It Story That Makes Us Read?”). Thus for those who want to bring their utopian vision forward, there are additional difficulties that are inherent to utopian literature. If we consider, as Rimmon-Kenan does, that “causality and closure (i.e. a sense of completion) may be the most interesting features of stories, and the features on which their quality as stories is most often judged”, then somewhere in the story there ought to be clear narrated events that impose some causality and change, resulting in climax and closure (Rimmon-Kenan 18). As the basic idea of utopia is that it is an ideal place for people to live happily in, creating meaningful narrative that causes change within the ideal setting without shattering the utopia is a challenge to say the least. This is especially difficult if the said utopia should remain static, as is with majority of historical utopias, that most often describe a place that functions perfectly as it is and does not strive for any kind of progress. There are a few ways different authors in the past have attempted to work around this problem, but by far the most common form of utopian storytelling is the travel narrative.

The basic form of the utopian travel narrative involves a stranger, an outsider that comes to a utopian society and makes observations of it, sometimes directly to the reader, but often in the guise of relating the tale to some other character in the book. The very first utopia, Thomas More’s *Utopia* used this method, as will be discussed below in further detail. Variations of this travel theme dominated utopian literature for the first four hundred years. At first utopia was always found from some distant land of the present, and later, when utopias started looking forward to the future, travel to the utopia was done by time travel of different means or by being transported to a whole new planet or alternative reality<sup>16</sup>. Although there certainly is a difference between falling into a hole (*The Coming Race*), falling asleep for a century (*Looking Backward*:

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<sup>16</sup> For examples of utopias set in distant lands, see Sir Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis* (1672) and Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Coming Race* (1871). For examples of utopias set in different times, see Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (1888) and William Morris’ *News from Nowhere* (1892). For examples of utopias set in another planet or alternative reality, see H.G. Wells’ *A Modern Utopia* (1905) and *Men Like Gods* (1923)

2000-1887) or simply imagining oneself onto another planet (*A Modern Utopia*) to reach each respective utopia, the plot device remains the same.

The bulk of the reason travel narrative is so popular among utopian authors lies in the idea that utopia needs to be in stasis, unchangeable. With utopian societies being already perfect and ideal, many scholars and utopian writers in the past have deemed that change is automatically undesirable, as then the perfection would be disrupted. This can be seen from the very beginning of classical utopias, where the utopian society was always placed on some isolated island, unaffected by outside influence, such as in More's *Utopia* or William Dean Howells' *A Traveler from Altruria* (1894). Later on, when the world got more thoroughly explored and there just were no blanks left on the map, it became necessary to distance utopias even further and make them cover up the whole world, or different planets, as in the case of Wells' *A Modern Utopia* (1905) or Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974). All in order to keep the utopia away from corruptive influence. If, then, the utopia itself was to be a thing to admire but not to disrupt, travel narratives were needed to become the backbone of the stories. It was not uncommon to make the journey to and from the utopian state an adventure of a sort, such as in Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872). Sometimes the narrative was spiced up by romance, mainly in the form of a utopian girl falling in love with the traveller, often resulting in the traveller having to flee the utopia to escape an angry father, such as in Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1871). These romances and other small escapades the traveller gets into are always very small scale and their primary function is to get the traveller back to talk about the main point of the narrative, the utopian society. As the travel narration is mainly used as an excuse and a framework to discuss the utopian society, the novel on the whole must rely on the society to be exotic and exciting enough to bring in and keep the readers interested.

The problem with utopian travel narratives now is the same that existed about a hundred years ago, when utopian literature started its decline and gave way to the dystopian literature. With a well mapped and almost wholly colonized Earth, there are no new islands to discover. A traveller would need to go beyond the scope of the present day Earth to find utopias, be it the future or other celestial bodies, which would also push the genre of the narrative firmly towards science fiction. While some see this possible blend of utopian literature with other genres as an impossibility (such as Kumar, as discussed in section 2), it also opens up possibilities for new kind

of utopian stories to be told, and it could even keep the travel narratives alive. There is nothing inherently wrong with the convention of the travel narrative form in utopian context itself, it could in fact thrive in a new science fiction setting. And if one is going into the realm of science fiction anyway, there are further possibilities to explore, especially with non-static, dynamic utopias.<sup>17</sup>

Travel narratives have not been the only narratives set in utopias, although by far they have been the most numerous. Some works of fiction start off appearing as utopian, but in the end it turns out that there was some internal flaw within the society, and it is not that idealistic and perfect society after all. Often these turn out to be totalitarian dystopias or have some other dire flaws within the system. Ursula K. Le Guin's short story *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* 1973 is one example of this type of utopia/dystopia, but it needs to be noted that the short story does in fact not even attempt to be a narrative with a plot. Le Guin's text is description of Omelas, a city that is perfect, its features described by an omnipresent narrator speaking directly to the reader. This perfect place stays perfect only as long as one child is suffering, yet there is no beginning or a conclusion for a story, just statements that this is so. Some, as the name implies, leave Omelas, perhaps because of the child, perhaps not, they just do. It is certainly a thought-provoking text to read and implies that there is always a darker side to utopias, but a proper narrative it is not. A better example of an actual narrative, where building a good community turns sour, is George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945). An animal revolt that starts to form a perfect and equal society is eventually revealed to be not actually changing anything, as evident by the famous quote "All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others" (Orwell 81).

Presently, dystopian literature is being written and read in overwhelmingly larger quantities than utopian literature. Dystopian stories aimed for young adult audiences such as Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*-trilogy (2008-2010) and Veronica Roth's *Divergent*-trilogy (2011-2013) have both been hugely successful and turned into successful movies as well. For more mature audiences, dystopian novels such as Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* provide views on the dark side of technological progress and ecological catastrophes. Part of the reason for the dystopian popularity has to be the versatility that dystopian literature

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<sup>17</sup> The theoretical problem of static, closed-off utopias have already been discussed at the end of section 2 to the extent of questioning the sustainability of static utopias in longer timeframes. See also section 3 for an argument on that societies need not be static to be considered utopias.

has compared to utopian. Utopian narratives are in a need of fresh approaches to storytelling, and luckily some alternatives already exist, especially in the science fiction genre. Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars-trilogy* (1993-1996), Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, Terry Bisson's *Fire on the Mountain* (1998) and of course Banks' Culture-novels all bring something new to the utopian genre, and some of them shall be discussed below.

#### 4.2 Plotting the stories

Before going further with the analysis, it is necessary to clarify certain terminology that is going to be used. While terms such as narrative, story and plot are common vocabulary, their usage in narrative studies vary. The relevant OED definitions read as follows:

Narrative:

- a. An account of a series of events, facts, etc., given in order and with the establishing of connections between them; a narration, a story, an account. (OED)

Story:

- f. The series of incidents forming the basis of a novel, play, film, or other work; a plot, a storyline. (OED)

Plot:

- 6. The plan or scheme of a literary or dramatic work; the main events of a play, novel, film, opera, etc., considered or presented as an interrelated sequence; a storyline. Also in extended use. (OED)

While narrative and story could be used interchangeably by the OED definition and indeed thus by common usage, there is a distinction to be drawn between them. As Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan argues in *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*: "'Story' designates the narrated events, abstracted from their disposition in the text and reconstructed in their chronological order, together with the participants in the events" (Rimmon-Kenan 3). Here Rimmon-Kenan is drawing from the Russian Formalist movement, translating its concepts of *fabula* and *syuzhet* into the English concepts of story and narrative, respectively. What it means, then, is that narrative is the order in which the events are presented in the text, while the actual story is these same events

rearranged into a chronological order. Another way of expressing this would be to think of it as a matter of timelines and point-of-views: for a character, events unfold as time progresses consecutively on a timeline (a story), while for the reader events might unfold in any order, even starting from the very last chronological event (a narrative). Thus narrative and story are the same thing only if the narration follows strictly the chronological causality of the story. This distinction is an important one especially while discussing Banks' novels, as his narratives rarely follow strict causality.

Plot, the third term being discussed here, however, is a term that Rimmon-Kenan avoids using, arguing that it "has become too vague in ordinary critical usage" (135). While Rimmon-Kenan is hesitant to use the term, plot remains a factor in critical usage as well, as evidenced by Peter Brooks in his collection of critical essays *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. Brooks argues that plot "is so basic to our experience of reading, and indeed to our very articulation of experience in general, that criticism has often passed it over in silence, as too obvious to bear discussion" (Brooks XI). Brooks' view of plot follows relatively closely the OED definition of the term:

Plot as I conceive it is the design and intention of narrative, what shapes a story and gives it a certain direction or intent of meaning. We might think of plot as the logic or perhaps the syntax of a certain kind of discourse, one that develops its propositions only through temporal sequence and progression. Narrative is one of the large categories or systems of understanding that we use in our negotiations with reality, specifically, in the case of narrative, with the problem of temporality: man's time-boundedness, his consciousness of existence within the limits of mortality. And plot is the principal ordering force of those meanings that we try to wrest from human temporality. (Brooks XI)

For Brooks, plot is then an integral part of a narrative. Furthermore, a correlation could be drawn between Brooks' use of plot and Rimmon-Kenan's use of narrated events that make up the story. Where Brooks considers plot to develop through temporal sequence, Rimmon-Kenan regards story to develop through chronological events. It could be said, then, that to some extent plot and story could be used interchangeably. However, that is hardly what either of the authors intends, and differences between them can be found. As the terminology in this kind of critical work is

obviously problematic, a certain amount of clarification is required and distinctions need to be drawn. Thus, for the purposes of this paper, story and narrative will mainly follow Rimmon-Kenan's definitions of the terms. Plot, however, is going to be used not to refer only to the overall story of a book, but also in cases where there are multiple converging narratives involving separate characters whose stories are told side by side. These will be referred to as plotlines that form the actual story/narrative as a whole.

Narrative studies are a large field of study that involves so much more than these three basic concepts that were discussed here, especially in terms of what different narrative techniques allow authors to do, whether it is to keep readers interested, confused or even fooled. Since narratives are not bound by strict order of cause-and-effect, techniques such as *analepsis* (flashbacks), *prolepsis* (flashforwards) and *frequency* (repetition) can be used to tell the story out of sequence (Rimmon-Kenan 46). Apart from time-related techniques, uses of reliable/unreliable narrator and switching the point-of-view characters can enhance the narratives. Furthermore, the author may plant information within the text that will be vital later on in the narrative, or draw attention to something that the reader thinks is important, yet leave it unused (48).<sup>18</sup>

#### 4.3 Banks' utopian narratives: a comparison

Are Banks' Culture stories so different, then, from the older utopian stories? As a present day representations of the overall utopian literary *langue*, do they bring something new to the genre? Can they be viewed as a new hope for the genre? One obvious way to approach these questions is to discuss a few of the Banks' novels in relation to older works of the utopian genre. As the nature of the Culture, Banks' utopian society, has been discussed in detail before, the analyses will focus on examining Banks' works from a narrative perspective. Of Banks' novels, *Excession* (1996) was chosen as main body of text to be examined, *Use of Weapons* (1990) will receive a more cursory overview. These texts coupled with a small selection historical utopias that might bear

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<sup>18</sup> To go into further detail of these different techniques at this point is not necessary for the scope of this paper, yet it is important to be aware of their existence. Some of these may be referred to when analysing Banks' (and others') novels further on, in which case they will be discussed more as necessary.

resemblances in narration and narrative techniques will create a basis for discussion of what Banks might be doing differently, especially in making his stories and narratives interesting.<sup>19</sup>

#### 4.3.1 Utopias old and new

The most obvious beginning for discussion of Banks' narratives is to contrast one of his novels to Thomas More's *Utopia*, the book that started it all. As *Utopia* is hardly famous for its immersive story, clever narrative or cunning plots, it is more than suitable to compare it with Banks' *Excession*, which has all of those, one might say even excessively. It must be noted, however, that the texts in question are of different genres, with *Utopia* being rather strictly utopian in genre and *Excession* being utopian science fiction, and could be considered to belong to perhaps even several other genres as well.

#### *Utopia*

Thomas More's *Utopia* has been discussed several times over the course of this paper, yet its merits as an actual story have not been considered. It might not be fair to judge a 500-year-old book by the standards used today, but as it is considered to have "more or less single handedly" created "a new literary genre" and set the standard for narrative utopian fiction for centuries to come, it would not be prudent not to give it at least a cursory overview in terms of storytelling (Kumar 25). However, before considering its narrative merits, it is prudent to remember that storytelling is not the main purpose of *Utopia*, but rather the focus is on the land of Utopia itself and its social structure. In the introduction to *Utopia*, Paul Turner argues that

The form, then, of *Utopia* was designed . . . to create a context in which More could say what he liked, without laying himself open to too much criticism. It enabled him, in an age when rash expressions of opinion were apt to land one in the Tower, to disclaim responsibility for any view that might be considered subversive. (Turner 10)

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<sup>19</sup> While the richness of the language and the ability to use language to express sometimes complex themes or actions are important aspects in keeping readers hooked on a text, its effects will not be examined overtly in this paper, as the focus will remain in narrative structures and plots. However, it is useful to be aware of its effects, and thus it will be occasionally discussed, when appropriate.

The narrative, then, was only secondary to the actual socio-economical criticism the book presents in its text. Yet, again, since *Utopia* is considered to be the starting point of utopian literature, it ought to be discussed from narrative perspective as well.

In fact, *Utopia* is lacking in many ways as a story. The narrative is mainly in epistolary form, consisting mostly of letters that relate events where the narrator, fictitious Thomas More (sharing the same name as the author) travels from England to continental Europe, meets an old friend and a new acquaintance and has a conversation with them. The majority of the discussion consists of the new acquaintance (Raphael Hythlodæus) talking about *Utopia*, a place he claims to have visited on his travels. Furthermore, the ending of the narrative is far from conclusive, ending with the fictitious More musing “Well, I must think it over. Then perhaps we can meet again and discuss it at greater length” (More 132). While the story as such lacks basically all events that normally would constitute a story, such as turning points and conclusion, creating a sense that one is reading a brochure rather than a story. This sense is further enhanced by the fact that the most of the text consists of Raphael describing *Utopia* in a completely non-narrative way, pure description of social order with no story events.<sup>20</sup> However, it can be argued that *Utopia* does fall into the notion of a minimal story. Rimmon-Kenan argues that

[W]hile granting that causality and closure (i.e. a sense of completion) may be the most interesting features of stories, and the features on which their quality as stories is most often judged, I would like to argue that temporal succession is sufficient as a *minimal* requirement for a group of events to form a story. (Rimmon-Kenan 18)

*Utopia* does, then, conform to this idea of a minimal story, as events can be tracked in a temporal succession: Raphael travels to Utopia and back, More travels to Europe and meets Raphael, who relates his observations on Utopian society to More, who then over a course of a year writes down what Raphael has told him. Very plain and relatively uninteresting when written out in this manner, yet still obviously a coherent story with one clear plotline, even though it is left without conclusion. In creating this minimal story as the framework for *Utopia*, More placed his notion of this supposedly perfect society into the realm of fiction instead of creating a sort of “brochure” that could be only seen as criticism towards then current social orders. In this way the text’s

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<sup>20</sup> Interestingly this same type of fictional sociology is what Le Guin uses in *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*, discussed above.



fictional nature sugarcoats the actual critical nature of the text, as Turner hints above. The most obvious reason why More decided to disguise his social critique this way is that during the time when More was alive, publishing direct criticism of society and social structures could have resulted in the execution of the critic. However, despite the reasons for creating a story out of *Utopia*, the text would not be an actual narrative without this bare plot, since all narrative requires a plot to give it meaning, as argued by Brooks: “a narrative without at least a minimal plot would be incomprehensible” (Brooks 5).

Now that it has been established that More’s *Utopia* is a story in itself, certain narrational choices More made in it ought to be discussed. *Utopia* is, in essence, a travel narrative. Published in time of great exploration and discovery, the idea of the island of Utopia that explorers happen upon during a great sea voyage seems quite plausible. Columbus made his discovery of America merely two decades earlier, and Europeans were on a constant lookout for new lands and riches, so a traveller’s tale of a new land would not have been uncommon. This is further enhanced as the traveller’s “imaginary travels are grafted on to the historical voyages of Amerigo Vespucci, and the starting-point for the journey to Utopia is a fort at Cape Frio, in which Vespucci left twenty-four men in 1504” (Turner 9). More attempts to further disguise the fictional nature of the narrative by setting the story in the real world with real, contemporary people as characters in the story. Most notably the narrator of the text is (a fictional version of) More himself, who meets his then real life friends. Furthermore, the only completely fictional character that the narrator interacts with within the story, is the traveller Raphael Hythlodæus, the person who describes the land of Utopia to More. Every other character in the book are based on real contemporaries of More. More also uses the epistolary form in his book, going so far as to provide samples of Utopian poetry and alphabet along with the letters relating the events. The use of pseudo-epistolary creates an interesting link to Banks’ *Excursion*, that will be discussed below. By setting the story in real world, it could be argued that More intended the Utopia to be taken seriously enough that the readers would consider it as a plausible society.

However, More has scattered plenty of evidence throughout the narrative to take away its credibility as a true story, evidence that places it directly into the world of fancy. Most obvious hints towards the imaginary nature of the narrative is the nomenclature of places and fictional people. Although More wrote his work in Latin, majority of the Utopian names derive from Greek.

As discussed earlier, the very name of Utopia means literally “Noplace”. Other names serve similar functions, as explained by Turner: a river in Utopia is called *Anydrus* (“not water”) and the chief magistrate in Utopia is called *Ademus* (“not people”). This naming convention extends also to the name Hythlodæus, which translates to “dispenser of nonsense” (Turner 8). Quite an obvious hint that the person who has supposedly visited Utopia is, in reality, talking nonsense. These types of names place the whole story firmly into the realm of fantasy. However, it is possible that the choice to use Greek-derived names in Latin narrative let those who were familiar with both of the languages in on the joke while leaving those who knew only Latin wondering the reality of the whole story.

More’s *Utopia* is clearly not a magnificent story full of enticing events, and its characters function mainly as mouthpieces for selected worldviews. Considering that More’s text predates the birth of a novel, and the main form of storytelling was still epic poetry and stage plays, this is not highly surprising. It should also be remembered that this was not its main function to begin with. During the time period when it was published, with its audience being only the well-educated (as others could not read the text), there was perhaps no reason to attempt entertaining the readers with events, but rather intrigue them with societal aspects. With that in mind, it is no wonder that the actual story exists only in a minimal sense. However, here lies a problem as well: since More created a whole new literary genre with *Utopia*, perhaps too much of the later utopian literature and utopian authors relied on the shallowness of narration of their genre’s originator, instead of attempting to create more inspired ways to present their utopias.

### *Excession*

While narrative events and plotlines are scarce in *Utopia*, they are more than abundant in Banks’ *Excession*, his fourth novel set in the Culture-universe. The narrative begins when an “Excession” appears to an uninhabited area of space. The Excession, from which the book takes its name, is a black sphere that is capable of technological feats so far above the level of the Culture that it is also referred to as an “Outside Context Problem”, since it is outside any context that the Culture Minds are able to comprehend. Banks explains this rather splendidly:

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

(*Excession* 79)

The obvious Earthly example would be how the Europeans arrived in America, which is clearly where Banks drew inspiration for that particular passage. This passage serves also an example of Banks' literary wit and, to lesser extent, his ability to set a visual scene. The main body of Banks' works are highly scenic and he easily paints the scenes to the readers' minds. *Excession* is no exception, although not quite as much as some others, due to certain epistolary elements which are discussed below. *More's Utopia*, in comparison, is far from visual or scenic in its descriptions on how people live.

What function does the Outside Context Problem (OCP) serve in the story, then? When a ship stumbles upon the *Excession*, it is barely able to send a message out before being taken over by it. This sets several different plotlines into action, and while the *Excession* appears to be the main focus of many of them, this turns out not to be true. For the narrative itself, the *Excession* is a plot device to incite action. This type of plot device is often referred to as a McGuffin, defined as "a particular event, object, factor, etc., initially presented as being of great significance to the story, but often having little actual importance for the plot as it develops" (OED). Throughout the whole book, the *Excession* does hardly anything than just stay put, reacting only if approached by taking over the approaching craft, but in the end just leaving without any explanation for its being there

or what it was in the first place. As a McGuffin, then, the Excession is merely an object which existence is seen by characters within the story as an opportunity to launch their own plans, unrelated to the Excession, into action. For the narrative as a whole, the Excession binds all the different plotlines together, without which the story would not be possible. Aside from pure narrative function, the OCP can be seen again as one way that Banks forces his utopian society to face something that threatens its utopian existence, much like discussed in section 3 relating to the wars of choice that the Culture has taken part in. And indeed, many of the plotlines triggered by the OCP do seem dubious from a utopian perspective.

There are several major and minor plotlines that the book follows through different perspectives, and they are all interwoven even though they do not appear so at first. Farah Mendlesohn has summarised these very concisely in her essay *Iain M. Banks: Excession*:

. . . a man called Byr Genar-Hofoen finds himself on a mission to find a stored soul on the eccentric ship *Sleeper Service*. Ulver Seich is recruited to [SC] . . . to entrap Byr Genar-Hofoen. One group of Minds meets to discuss the excession and is taken over by a second group of much older Minds . . . who have put plans in place for this eventuality several hundred years before; and yet another group of Minds is plotting to persuade a bunch of allied aliens – the Affront – to declare war on the Culture so that the Culture can be persuaded to wipe out the Affront. . . . Conspiracy is layered upon conspiracy and everyone is suspicious of everyone else. (Mendlesohn 558)

These are still only *some* of the plotlines that appear throughout the book. This narrative structure is clearly something very different to that of *Utopia*. It needs to be remembered at this point, as mentioned above, that part of this difference in structure is that *Excession* belongs to both science fiction and utopian genre. Although by this point of the series, the utopian society of the Culture is an established entity, *Excession* does not forgo bringing up new aspects of the Culture for the reader to digest. As the main perspective is spread among several different individuals within the Culture, the reader is presented with a wide array of views on the Culture itself. Rather than merely repeating already known facts of the Culture, *Excession* sheds light to many previously unknown sides of the Culture. Since the narratives are spread to obviously different groups with different motivations within the Culture, it becomes clear that the Culture is by no means a uniform civilisation and parts of it might disagree very strongly with other parts.

While in *Utopia*, the utopian civilisation was discussed in contrast to the rest of the societies in Europe, in a galactic scale of the Culture-series the Culture society cannot be easily contrasted to any present Earth-bound state, no matter how much some of the aspects of the Culture could be seen as being critique to modern societal problems. In *Excession*, this contrast is explored in one particular set of plotlines that reflects on the utopianism of the Culture by confronting it with sometime completely its opposite: The Affront.<sup>21</sup> The Affront are a civilisation on a much lower technological level than the Culture, but still a noteworthy spacefaring species. They are also a society that is utterly dystopian and their behaviour towards other is described in their chosen name. In fact, Banks spends several pages of the book describing how horrifying the Affront society is. Among other things, they used gene manipulation change everything in their own planet more to their liking, creating a “self-perpetuating, never-ending holocaust of pain and fear” (185). Even domesticated food animals “had been declared as tasting much more interesting when they betrayed the signs of having been severely stressed” and altered accordingly (186). Females in the Affronter society are constant subjects of rape and violence, to the extent that their genetic makeup has been altered to make sex excessively painful (185). Simply put, the Affront are everything the Culture dislikes and disapproves of, thus providing both narrative conflict as well as a sounding board for the Culture citizens to reflect upon their own lives.

It is clear that the Affront are a problem for the Culture. After the Idiran war<sup>22</sup> had been won, some factions within the Culture argued that now that they had all those warships left from the war, they could teach the Affront some manners as well.

Some Culture Minds had argued at the time that a quick war against the Affront was exactly the right course of action, but even as they’d started setting out their case they’d known it was already lost. . . . Even while the Minds concerned had been contending that a single abrupt and rushing blow would benefit all concerned – including the Affront, not just ultimately, but soon – the Culture’s warships were being stood down, . . . (*Excession* 182)

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<sup>21</sup> Having originally called themselves Issorilians after their home world, they “thought that “Affront” sounded much better” after having been called that by another civilization, due to “an episode involving a . . . trade mission to Issorile which the recipients had treated more as a food parcel” (*Excession* 183)

<sup>22</sup> See section 3.2

This did not suit the majority of the Culture however, for they were weary of war and wanted to return to the old peaceful ways. Thus a majority of the warships built during the war were mothballed and placed into storage. This did not please everyone, and so a group of Minds arranged so that one of the warship storage asteroids would make its way near the assumed future Affront area of influence within the following 500 years or so. Chronologically speaking, this is where the story of *Excession* begins, while the actual narrative of the book begins those 500 years later. When the Excession is discovered at the beginning of the narrative of the book, this group of Minds that have been waiting for half a millennium see their opportunity and lead a group of Affronters to the warship cache in order to incite war between the Affront and the Culture. During this, another group of Minds is trying to figure out what the first group has in mind, and through their efforts and the results of other interwoven plotlines, war is averted. There are several things that make this plotline interesting. First off, it is curious that there can be a group of Minds within the Culture capable of contemplating war in order to achieve what seems like a relatively minor accomplishment, which is hardly something that a utopian society ought to be considering. There is a mitigating factor for this as well, since considering the reasons for the Idiran war that were discussed in section 3, it would be in some way in line with the Cultures interfering policy. However, since the Affront are not a serious threat at that point of time to anyone else than themselves, this point becomes rather moot. Some of the conspirators realise this as well, and commit suicide instead of facing the horrors they were about to unleash.

Another interesting thing about those plotlines involving the Minds is how they are represented as active characters. Considerably more of the workings of Minds becomes clear when matters are looked from their perspective. While some ship Minds are shown in action, much of the book consist of messages sent between different Minds. These conversations are presented in the book much like a long series of 'emails' with senders and recipients, although they naturally are faster-than-light communication signals. Banks makes exceptional use of these "emails" as a way to drive the narrative. Plots are progressed and conspiracies created and solved just by seeing who is sending what kind of information to whom. The usage of correspondence to tell a story is an old narrative function, epistolary, and brings us back to More and his *Utopia*, where the narrative consists mostly of letters from More to his friends, relating the events that took place. This link between the two narratives is fascinating, as the same narrative function can be used in very different ways and in very different times as well.

*Excession* is without a doubt a complex and enticing novel. While there is constant movement from one place to another within the story, the narrative itself is in no way a travel narrative in a sense where any one character would go to a place specifically so that it could be described to the readers. The only possible exception to this is the character Byr Genar-Hofoen, whose stay with the Affront in the beginning of the story is used to highlight exactly how horrifying and dystopic their society is, but it is only a minor part of the general narrative and not the main focus of it. The story of *Excession* is multi-layered and able to keep the interest of the reader throughout. In contrast to the shallow mouthpiece-characters of More's *Utopia*, *Excession* lines up a multitude of characters with depth and history, as well as often horrific controversy. The Culture citizens, while living in a utopia, are hardly all agreeing to same things, which gives an impression of a functioning society that is not bound by strict rules. Those acting clearly against the general conscience of the Culture are shunned, as evidenced by the extremely controversial ship Mind called the Gray Area, who has been discussed at length in section 3. Its habit of violating human minds by reading them and then exacting often horrific vigilante-type justice on perceived wrongdoers is not met with joy in the rest of the Culture, and it has been given a nickname of "Meatfucker" to reflect this (77). Banks often uses this type shocking narration to make the reader consider the events in relation to what is happening on Earth. What the Gray Area is doing is very close to finding evildoers by torture. Sometimes Banks shocks the reader just for the sake of it, but he always does it with style. And in some cases, Banks uses shocking revelations at the end of his narratives to force the reader to re-evaluate everything that happened before, such as in case of *Use of Weapons*.

#### 4.3.2 Utopia out of order

*Use of Weapons* (1990) is the third Culture book that Iain M. Banks published. In narrative terms it is perhaps the most complex of all the Culture books as well. While *Excession* is filled with numerous plotlines and a complex, multi-layered story, *Use of Weapons* has much simpler story structure with two main characters, of which the narrative follows mainly only one, Cheradenin Zakalwe. The complex nature of the narrative rises from the fact that the story is told in two directions in time at the same time, forwards and backwards. The narrative starts from the middle of the story, with alternating chapters, one numbered normally from one to fourteen in order,

while the other counts back in roman numerals from XIII to I. The normally forward-progressing chapters tell a part of the story where Diziet Sma, an SC agent for the Culture, first searches for Zakalwe to enlist his help in averting a war and then focuses on Zakalwe and his part in the ensuing conflicts. The backwards-progressing chapters, however, focus on Zakalwe's personal history, each chapter moving further back in time to present a piece of Zakalwe's past, showing glimpses of all the wars he has taken part in for the SC and how he first got drafted by the SC as well, as he is not a Culture citizen. These backwards progressing chapters are further confused by frequent uses of *analepsis*, flashbacks to Zakalwe's childhood. The first time reading the book, one really has to pay attention to follow what is really happening.

The reason for this complex structure is the fact that the early parts of the story are integral in the twist that comes at the end of story. For most, it can be safely argued, the twist comes as a total surprise at the end, yet on a second reading of the novel, the hints are clear within the text if one knows what to look for. This uncanny setup of the narrative is necessary to keep the tension, since in a chronological telling of the story, the twist would be revealed before reaching the middle of the book.

This narrative structure is also very distinct from other utopian literature, if not as well from the majority of science fiction as well, a structure that would fit very well into realm of literary novels. In fact, John Mullan in *The Guardian* wrote that "Iain M Banks's novel *Use of Weapons* has a narrative structure that, if it were not a work of science fiction, would qualify it as the most "literary" of literary fiction" ("*Use of Weapons* by Iain M Banks"). While Banks makes frequent use of *analepsis* and alternating chapters in many of his mainstream novels as well, not even those are quite this strangely organised. In utopian literature, perhaps the only book that resembles this structure is Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974). Le Guin's story follows Shevek, a member of a supposedly utopian society based on planet Annares, on his trip to the nearby planet of Urras, from where the people on Annares left to form their utopia. The alternating chapters in *The Dispossessed* are organised so that odd-numbered chapters tell of Shevek's journey and time on Urras, while the even-numbered tell of his life in Annares prior to his journey. However, those two narrative streams both flow forwards in time. The purpose of this is similar to Banks' purpose, to explain motives of the protagonist without giving too much at once before the end of the story, and to hold the interest of the reader. It is also worth note that, while a travel narrative, Le Guin's



utopian story is a different type of travel narrative in that here the protagonist goes from utopia to a non-utopian society and reflects his own experiences in utopia over what he witnesses in the non-utopia.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the main character of the *Use of Weapons* not being part of the Culture, the story does not neglect to inform the readers of different aspects of the Culture. However, the *UoW* concentrates much on the darker side of the Culture. The purpose for why Zakalwe was drafted by the Special Circumstances is so that he, as an expert war strategist and weapons user, could influence the outcomes of wars at the edges of the Culture's sphere of influence. He is part of the SC's covert attempts at steering neighbouring, hardly space-faring societies towards to a more suitable future development from the Culture's point of view. For example, it is revealed that the SC has been influencing several societies to move away from terraforming as well as towards a more approving stance on AI sentience, both important issues for the Culture (*Use of Weapons* 263-5). A further reflection is provided by the character Zakalwe himself. An outsider to the Culture, he takes the jobs the Culture offers him not because he always agrees with them, but because he gets "well paid for it" (265). Zakalwe is the kind of person that would never fit to the Culture proper. He takes what advantages he can from them and uses it for his own purposes, sometimes going so far as attempting to use the methods he learned from SC to have his own kind of influence on another society, screwing things up royally. This could be seen as Banks making a point that only the hyperintelligent Minds are capable of making decisions that influence whole societies, and that no human could manage that. It can also be a reflection on that perhaps the SC is not always doing what is best for another society.

By focusing the narrative on Zakalwe's dirty deeds (and indeed his horrible secret), Banks creates again a situation where the ideals of a utopian society are put to a test. But more than that, it creates a narrative that keeps the reader completely hooked, but also forces the reader also to ponder the questions of what amount of meddling should be allowed. It is not farfetched to find correlation with what SC is doing to what superpowers on Earth are doing to smaller countries, as briefly discussed in section 3.2. Perhaps it is telling a lot on SC's nature that despite eventually finding out Zakalwe's past and the horrible secrets he has been hiding (and it can be argued,

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<sup>23</sup> Banks uses similar structure in the *Player of Games* (1988), where the protagonist travels from the Culture to a totalitarian dystopia.

atoning for throughout his life), that in *Surface Detail* (2010), set hundreds of years after the *Use of Weapons*, Zakalwe is still being used by SC to fight wars for it, albeit virtually and under a different name and his identity in *Surface Detail* is revealed only on the very last sentence of the novel (627).<sup>24</sup>

#### 4.4 Is it something different?

Banks' style, despite sometimes including horrific things, is always playful. Banks brings humorous tones into all his writings, although the humour sometimes has extremely dark tones. This humorous tone, however, allows Banks to talk of disturbing and heavy themes without bringing the reader into the dark and twisted levels of the narrative with it. Shocking it often is, but it never depresses the reader. This narrative style is intriguing, it keeps the reader hooked and constantly waiting for what happens, and it almost never is what one expects. Like in good detective novels, some of Banks' novels, like *Use of Weapons*, keep dropping hints that there might be a huge twist waiting at the end, and hint even to the nature of the twist, but hardly ever can one boast of noticing it in the first reading, even though on the second reading those hints are so obvious and clear.

Banks' narratives are something different from the majority of the utopian literature. By creating a wholly dynamic utopia, Banks avoids the major narrative problems that otherwise would restrict storytelling in more closed-off utopias. It is certainly not the only utopia with a good story, one cannot discount such narratives as Kim Stanley Robinson created in his *Mars*-trilogy or Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (both notably science fiction), but Banks certainly does it differently, and by looking at reviews his books have gotten, his narratives resonate well even with readers outside the "specialized literary ghetto" of SF, as Kumar puts it (420).

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<sup>24</sup> Zakalwe and Diziet Sma are the only characters in the Culture novels that appear in more than one story. Apart from the *Use of Weapons*, Zakalwe appears in *Surface Detail*, and Sma appears in the short story *The State of the Art* (1991).

## 5. Conclusions

The motivation for this research was to find out if Iain M. Banks' Culture novels would bring something new and fresh to the literary utopian genre, and that has succeeded. Banks' narratives are fresh, the stories with multiple plotlines and twists keep readers hooked on the books and all the while, almost sneakily Banks is revealing his futuristic utopian society to readers. And by creating conflict with other societies, Banks can highlight problems in our contemporary societies better than any enclaved utopia of old could have done. Despite the Culture having certain troubling aspects in terms of utopia, it is a small price to pay for a fully dynamic society that does not need to hide from others. A modern western person could hardly imagine living anymore in a closed off society, the internet and possibility to travel the world with relatively speedy has made sure of that. Cultures co-exist and mix, and so should any contemporary utopian society as well.

As has become evident in this research, there is clear controversy between researchers over what is truly utopian literature and what is not. Some have dug fiercely into trenches in their dislike of the idea that science fiction could have anything to do with the utopian genre, while others go rushing straight to the other end of the field by insisting that not only is SF integral in utopia, but that utopia is in fact a sub-genre of SF. There is clearly a middle-ground here as well, and an attempt has been made to follow it, although it has tilted more towards the pro-SF side. It would be foolish to dismiss SF from utopian literature, yet not everything has to be so strictly defined; while a lot of utopian literature certainly belong to the realm of SF, a lot of the older texts do not necessarily do so, and this should be understandable when discussing a genre as versatile as the utopian is.

There are several ways this research could be expanded. Perhaps one of the most interesting aspect of Banks' novels is the rich and visually expressive language that Banks uses. His ability to describe events and action in a way that easily paints a picture in the readers' minds is something that almost any but the best of writers would be jealous off. In fact, Banks' SF books would make excellent movies not only from a story perspective, but in the way the visuality could easily be transferred to the big screen. This quality of Banks' language use would be an interesting research project for anyone interested in narrative studies.

Furthermore, this study gave only a very brief glimpse into the Culture and its many aspects. Banks' novels are full of nuances within the novels, so many details and aspects in the thousands of pages about the Culture that could in no way be taken to account within the confines of this paper. While enough for the purposes of this paper, I have barely scratched the surface of the Culture. Especially areas concerning the AIs and their problematic existence would certainly be fertile ground when opposed to for example other AIs in fiction.

It is impossible to say if Banks' novels will truly bring back the utopian literature from its still shallow grave - only time will be able to tell that - but utopian literature is not truly dead either, especially not beyond any hope of resurrection. Its form might have changed, it might have found new genres to blend in with, it might have become dynamic instead of static, yet it is still utopian literature at heart. To quote, again, H.G. Wells: "Each generation will have its new version of Utopia, a little more certain and complete and real" (370). The technologically infused utopias that current generations are enjoying are as much utopias as were those older ones for the audience of their time. Iain M. Banks' Culture is but one *parole* of the overall *langue* of utopian literature, it transformed utopian literature to respond to the needs of the current generation of readers. The next generation will perhaps have something new again, but for now, Banks' narratives are the best response to the 20th century decline in literary utopias.

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