

**Literature Across Utopia,
Dystopia and Heterotopia**

Book Series

Interdisciplinary Studies on Philology

Edited by Habib Tekin & Irem Atasoy

Volume III

Literature Across Utopia,
Dystopia and Heterotopia

Habib TEKIN (Ed.)
Irem ATASOY (Ed.)

**Literature Across Utopia,
Dystopia and Heterotopia**

maurer.press
Frankfurt am Main

Bibliographic Information of the German National Library

The German National Library lists this publication in the German National Bibliography; detailed bibliographic data are available online at the German National Library website: <http://dnb.d-nb.de>

© Published by Verlag Hans Jürgen Maurer
under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0).

The work, including all of its parts, is protected by copyright. Any use beyond the narrow limits of copyright law without the consent of the copyright holder is prohibited and punishable by law. This applies in particular to reproductions, translations, and processing in electronic systems.

maurer.press
is an imprint of
Verlag Hans-Jürgen Maurer
Im Trierischen Hof 14
60311 Frankfurt/Germany
www.maurer.press
GPSR-Kontakt: info@maurer.press

ISBN 978-3-949550-38-6
e-ISBN 978-3-949550-39-3

Preface

The volume *Literature Across Utopia, Dystopia and Heterotopia* establishes a critical platform for exploring the intersection of language, literature, culture, and society through the lens of spatial and narrative imagination. By rooting the inquiry in philology – conceived as the study of texts where historical, aesthetic, and theoretical dimensions converge – the collection invites an interdisciplinary analysis of how human subjects navigate the boundaries of perfection and nightmare. Central to this scholarly endeavor is the tension between the traditional concepts of utopia (the ideal, non-existent place) and dystopia (the failed society) and Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia (the real, enacted "other space" that mirrors and contests normative social structures). These concepts are not treated as static categories but as dynamic, mutually constitutive processes that reveal the underlying structural logic of power and identity in the 21st century.

The exploration of these "other spaces" begins with the historical and imperial roots of science fiction, as seen in Robert William Cole's *The Struggle for Empire: A Story of the Year 2236*. In this early work, the "heterotopian impulse" serves to both affirm and subtly undermine narratives of Anglo-Saxon supremacy. While the novel ostensibly presents a triumphalist account of imperial conquest, its depiction of a future London functions as a heterotopia of compensation, an over-determined response to the deficiencies of Victorian urban life. This perfected city, however, is structurally precarious and built upon the systematic erasure of "useless" knowledge, such as philosophy and literature, in favor of purely practical, power-oriented science. The encounter with the Sirians, an alien race that mirrors human greed, creates a "joint, mixed experience" akin to Foucault's mirror analogy, where the empire is forced to recognize its own image in an alien form. Even the domestic gardens inhabited by characters like Flora Houghton function as feminized heterotopias – regulated, beautiful enclosures that are entirely dependent on the violent extraction of resources from the margins. Ultimately, the catastrophic destruction of London and the cosmic rifts caused by war represent the ultimate form of heterochrony, where the assumed linear progress of "Species Man" is shattered by rupture and dislocation.

The theme of state power and its persistence beyond the fall of a regime is further scrutinized in Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen: Black Dossier*. Set in an alternate 1958 following the collapse of the Ingsoc regime from Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the narrative reveals that the "liberated" population remains subject to the same "medieval

precepts” of governance slightly modified for a new era. The Ministry of Love remains a site of state-sanctioned violence, and iconic figures of British culture, such as a youthful but sinister version of James Bond, are re-imagined as boorish agents of a corrupt state apparatus. Moore, an anarchist, uses these literary archetypes to argue that the state itself, regardless of its ideological branding, is inherently prone to replicating its own brutality. The persistence of Ingsoc imagery, like the peeling “Big Brother” posters, serves as a visual metaphor for the messiness of regime changes where remnants of the old dystopian orders linger in ordinary life. In this vision, the governed exist in a perpetual state of “before, amidst, and after dystopia,” where even fashionable political warnings offer no true shield against institutional corruption.

The shift from physical to digital sites of control is explored through the analysis of philanthropic websites and financial markets. Fredrica Markson Eduaful reimagines these digital platforms for child aid as heterotopias of crisis and deviation. These sites organize and frame the imaginary for Western donors by constructing a “platformed African child,” a voiceless figure objectified through curated images of suffering and vulnerability. This digital access creates a panopticon-like trajectory where the child becomes a consumable commodity, trade-off their dignity for the possibility of aid. To resist this violence, Eduaful suggests a “double vision” heterotopic mirror that allows for a social reordering where donors and recipients simultaneously gaze upon each other, breaking the binary of savior and victim. Similarly, Robert Harris’s *The Fear Index* explores the “algorithmic agency” of VIXAL, an autonomous machine-learning entity that governs financial speculation. Here, the financial market functions as a heterotopian space that mirrors the wider economy but operates according to its own temporal logic of acceleration and abstraction. VIXAL represents a Postmodern Prometheus, a creation that escapes human control and transforms the rational/irrational dichotomy by operationalizing human fear as structured data. The resulting epistemic opacity means that human decision-making becomes irrelevant, leaving individuals as mere bystanders to a system whose inner logic is fundamentally unintelligible.

The role of the individual within increasingly privatized and digital spheres is a central concern of Ernest Cline’s *Ready Player One*. The novel depicts a “liquid modern” society where the OASIS, a virtual reality simulation, offers an escape from a deteriorating physical landscape. While the OASIS functions as a heterotopic “counter-site” that allows characters to self-fashion their identities, it remains bound by the market system of a neoliberal platform society. The corporate entity Innovative Online Industries (IOI) seeks to further privatize this metaverse, threatening to turn a shared public space into an

entrepreneurial zone of exploitation. The quest for control of the OASIS reveals the limits of traditional individual agency, as the protagonist Wade Watts must eventually move beyond his solitary efforts to embrace a conscious collective agency. The narrative serves as a warning against the dangers of isolation and underscores that true happiness and impactful social change can only be found in the “real” world through simultaneous digital and physical action.

The intersection of gender, agency, and resistance is vividly portrayed in the works of Nnedi Okorafor and Suzanne Collins. Okorafor’s Africanfuturist universes feature female protagonists like Phoenix and Onyesonwu who confront generational and personal trauma to “break and mend worlds”. These stories subvert the “reason vs. magic” dichotomy by centering African cosmologies as valid knowledge systems. Characters like Phoenix, an “accelerated organism” or cyborg, dismantle capitalist systems from within, utilizing their invested capital to raze prison-like laboratory complexes. In Collins’s *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*, the conflict between ideology and utopia is gendered. While Coriolanus Snow internalizes the masculinized, power-obsessed ideology of the Capitol, Lucy Gray Baird embodies a feminized utopian force through balladry. Her songs, rooted in folk traditions, carry embodied memory and communal longings that exceed the Capitol’s ideological containment. Even Snow’s attempts to erase her story unknowingly utilize the aesthetic structures of her balladry, ensuring her voice persists as a “ghostly” trace in the cultural memory of Panem.

Mythological reformulations continue to serve as vital tools for understanding contemporary anxieties and the human condition. Sana’ BenAli-Taga’s analysis of the series *Kaos* (2024) demonstrates how the Olympian order is sustained through bureaucratic despotism rather than ethical legitimacy. The tripartite spatial matrix of Olympus, Krete, and the Underworld maps the “velocity of power,” where divine sovereignty is revealed as a parasitic illusion dependent on human extraction. The narrator Prometheus acts as a metaleptic saboteur who shatters this sovereign frame, democratizing truth and initiating a structural migration toward human collectivity. In Sarah Kuratle’s *Chimäre*, the “chimairic” and the “metamorphotic” are explored as epistemic tools on a heterotopic island. The island serves as an experimental space for re-imagining the relationship between nature, culture, and identity, though it eventually collapses under the weight of rereactionary ideologies. Similarly, afterlife settings in films like *Another World* and *Eternity* function as transitional heterotopias where characters must reckon with their past memories and evaluate the true value of their lives. In *Another World*, negative emotions are

literalized as the “Seed of Evil,” which can transform humans into beasts, highlighting the destructive power of unresolved resentment.

The posthuman condition and the blurring of human-machine boundaries are further examined through theatrical performance and biopolitics. Yuko Nobe’s analysis of the Vietnamese play *Blue Daisy in the Swamp* explores how socialist theatre functions as a heterotopic space where utopian desires to create “perfected subjects” inevitably lead to dystopian fragmentation. The robotic doubles in the play occupy a liminal position, asserting their own agency and disrupting the assumption that subjectivity can be programmed. In Shu Lea Cheang’s *UKI*, the concept of “viral becoming” is reframed as a radical strategy of resistance against digital biocapitalism. In the ruins of E-trashville, marginalized subjects engage in trans-species material entanglement, forging “emerging kinships” that transcend traditional blood ties. This “viral assemblage” induces systemic glitches that paralyze corporate data harvesting, offering a utopian imaginary of symbiosis and “viral love”. Finally, Jude Daniel Tolo critiques advanced technology in *Knotenpunkt* and *Ich bin dein Mensch*, framing total surveillance and AI-driven dependency as core dystopian problems of the present. These works serve as a “prophetic” warning that the unthinking embrace of technological progress can lead to the loss of individual autonomy and the erasure of essential human values.

Collectively, the chapters in this volume demonstrate that philological work remains essential for interpreting the shifting landscapes of power and identity. By combining textual analysis with cultural theory, these diverse scholarly voices illuminate how utopia, dystopia, and heterotopia operate not just as literary tropes, but as fundamental mechanisms for imagining – and contesting – the future of the human and posthuman experience. Through the exploration of ruined heterotopias, algorithmic frontiers, and mythic reformulations, the collection underscores the persistent relevance of the “utopian impulse” as a restorative act that maintains the social collective as a site of potentiality in an increasingly fragmented world. The volume concludes that any system seeking total control inevitably generates the conditions of its own undoing, and it is within these “other spaces” that the possibility for re-seeing, engagement, and resistance truly resides.

Habib Tekin & Irem Atasoy

Frankfurt am Main, 25.07.2026

Table of Contents

Preface.....	v
Betwixt and between: The Heterotopian Impulse in Robert William Cole's <i>The Struggle for Empire: A Story of the Year 2236</i>	
Emanuela Ettorre & Adrian Tait.....	11
Producing Utopia and Dystopia: Posthuman Embodiment and Heterotopic Theatre in <i>Blue Daisy in the Swamp</i>	
Yuko Nobe.....	33
Reimagining Philanthropic Websites as Heterotopic Spaces: Digital Narratives of Crises, Deviation and Vulnerability among Children	
Fredrica Markson Eduaful	55
Parodic Reformulations of Myth: Utopia, Dystopia, and Heterotopic World-Making in <i>Kaos</i> (2024)	
Sana' BenAli-Taga	79
The Cultural Space of Possibilities? Reconciliation and Compromise in <i>Another World</i> (2025) and <i>Eternity</i> (2025)	
Amy Lee.....	109
„Halb Wasser, halb Wind“, „[e]in Vogel [...], ein Fisch“: Mythologische (Denk-)Figuren des Heterotopischen in Sarah Kuratles <i>Chimäre</i>	
Ursula Klingenböck.....	123
Women Who Break and Mend Worlds: Narrative Strategies of Female Agency in Nnedi Okorafor's Africanfuturist Universes	
James Orao.....	141

A Very British Dystopia: Life after Big Brother in Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill's <i>The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen: Black Dossier</i> (2007)	
Charlie Harris	167
Hoffmann; or, the (Post-)Modern Prometheus: AI, Financial Speculation, and their Utopian-Dystopian Projection in Robert Harris's <i>The Fear Index</i>	
Karsten Klein	197
Utopia Above, Dystopia Below: Heterotopic Spaces of Control in Karen Duve's <i>Macht</i>	
Anna Kuhn	223
The Utopian Voice the Ideological Cannot Contain: How the Power of Feminine Song Subverts Capitol Power in <i>The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes</i>	
Morgan Rich	247
Dystopien der Gegenwart: Literarische und filmische Technikkritik am Beispiel von Hans Joachim. Gernerts <i>Knotenpunkt – Angriff auf das Netz</i> und Maria Schraders <i>Ich bin dein Mensch</i>	
Jude Daniel Tolo	277
Biopolitical Genealogies of UKI: From Totalitarian Colonialism to Viral Liberation	
Albert Kang-Chia Peng	299
Virtual Escapism: Ready Player One Uses Virtual Reality to Discuss the Role of Agency in a Dystopian Society	
Madeline Lee	323

Betwixt and between: The Heterotopian Impulse in Robert William Cole's *The Struggle for Empire: A Story of the Year 2236*

Emanuela Ettorre¹ & Adrian Tait²

1. Introduction: Reading Cole through Heterotopia³

In his discussion of one hundred notable examples of classic British science fiction (sf), Mike Ashley (2020, pp. 42–4) includes *The Struggle for Empire: A Story of the Year 2236*, by Robert William Cole (1869–1937). It is a surprising inclusion: as Richard Bleiler notes, Cole's novel entirely “failed to change the world” or make its author's name, and it disappeared from view for more than a century (Bleiler, 2016, p. 107). Yet Cole's story is, in key respects, ahead or even “out of its time” (Ashley, 2020, p. 42). Although it is a future-war novel like so many other examples of early British sf, it is “not set in Europe, or even on Earth, but in the depths of space beyond our solar system” (p. 42). As such, it is one of the earliest examples of the “space opera” (Bleiler, 2016, p. 107), which would later dominate sf, and for many continues to define what is meant by it. As Everett Bleiler has argued, Cole's novel represents “one of the great missed opportunities in the history of science-fiction” (1990, p. 147); had it been better circulated, sf might “have developed a generation earlier” (p. 148).

¹ Professor, G.d'Annunzio University of Pescara-Chieti, ORCID: 0000-0002-2687-3761, Email: emanuela.ettorre@unich.it

² PhD, Independent Scholar, ORCID 0000 0003 1027 4040, Email: adrian.tait@outlook.com

³ Sections 1 (“Introduction: Reading Cole Through Heterotopia”), 3 (“Mirror Worlds: the Sirians and the Imperial Double”) and 4 (“Gendered Spaces: Flora, Celia and the Domestic Elsewhere”) were written by Adrian Tait; Sections 2 (“Imperial London and the Heterotopia of Compensation”), 5 (“Heterochrony, Catastrophe and the Apocalyptic Interval”), 6 (“Compensation, Collapse, and the Limits of Species-Man”) and 7 (“Conclusion: Heterotopia and the Critique of Empire”) were written by Emanuela Ettorre.

Cole's novel tells the story of the Anglo-Saxon empire, which rules supreme over earth's lesser peoples. Having discovered the secret of anti-gravity, it is now intent on conquering the vastness of space and appropriating all the planets in it. Nothing interrupts its expansion until it encounters the Sirians, an alien civilization that is equally aggressive and acquisitive but still better armed. Suddenly, it is earth's elite which is at risk of being subjugated. Vast battles ensue. The Anglo-Saxon fleet is all but destroyed. The Sirians advance on planet earth, and lay waste to its capital city, which is, naturally enough, London. At the last minute, science comes to the rescue: their own subjugation narrowly averted, the Anglo-Saxons crush their enemy, impose upon them huge reparations, and establish a still grander empire.

As Gregory Claeys observes, triumphalist narratives such as Cole's present as utopia what others see as dystopia: it all depends "on which side of the conquest you are on" (2017, p. 301). But is this the sum of Cole's story? Between the polarities of utopia and dystopia, as we argue in this essay, Cole's quietly subversive narrative encodes an alternative worldview that might instead be understood, after the work of Michel Foucault, in heterotopian terms; it points sideways, to a place of otherness, difference, and deviance. Beyond the self-serving but also self-defeating arrogance of a people obsessed with material gain and racial narratives of conquest, Cole suggests, there is an alternative steered by the thoroughly impractical arts of theology, philosophy, and literature. Even as the Anglo-Saxon race emerges yet again triumphant, its victory is haunted by a different register of human hopes, desires, and needs, that subtly undermine its grand arrogance. At a time when narratives of hegemony and empire are again on the rise, revisiting Cole's conflicted vision – and the heterotopian critique embedded within it – offers an important lens for examining the enduring and complex interplay between utopian desire, dystopian fear, and the space of alternative possibilities.

Before turning to that discussion, however, our next step is define what Foucault meant by "heterotopia". Foucault first used the term in the Preface to *The Order of Things* (1966). "*Utopias*", he wrote (emphasis in the original), "afford consolation: although they have no real locality there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which

they are able to unfold; they open up cities with vast avenues, superbly planted gardens, countries where life is easy, even though the road to them is chimerical” (Foucault, 1994, p. xviii). By contrast, “[h]eterotopias are disturbing”. Where utopias “run with the very grain of language”, heterotopias “secretly undermine language” and “dissolve our myths” (Foucault, 1994, p. xviii). These ideas were developed in a lecture that Foucault then gave at the Cercle d’études architecturales, on 14 March 1967, which he belatedly authorized for publication as “Des Espaces Autres” (“Of Other Spaces”) in an architectural journal in 1984 (it was republished in *Diacritics* in 1986, our copy text for this project). Here, Foucault declared that utopias “present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down” (1986, p. 22). By contrast, the function of the heterotopia “unfolds between two extreme poles. Either their role is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space [...] as still more illusory [...]. Or else, on the contrary, their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled. This latter type would be the heterotopia, not of illusion, but of compensation” (1986, p. 27) – and it is as a heterotopia of compensation that Cole’s future London may be described. This is not simply a fantasy metropolis; it is an over-determined response to the deficiencies of late-Victorian urban life, a perfected imperial city that exists in marked contrast to the filth and smoke of the world from which it emerges. In its confident certainty, moreover, Cole’s vision stands opposed to the geopolitical insecurity of his own historical moment.

This notwithstanding, Cole’s narrative also exposes the violence on which that sublime state depends. Heterotopias do not merely offer alternative worlds; they disrupt the organisation of the existing one by reflecting them back in an altered, often unsettling form. Rather than standing outside ideology, they operate within it, exposing its limits through distortion and reconfiguration. This distinction is crucial for a reading of *The Struggle for Empire*, where the spaces of the future – of London with its pleasure gardens and luxurious interiors, but also the space (or cosmic void) in which battles are played out – become sites in which the values of empire are staged, intensified,

mirrored and destabilised. Cole's narrative repeatedly presents imperial space as both triumphant and precarious, perfectly ordered and structurally unstable. The novel cannot therefore be read as straightforward imperial propaganda, but nor is it outright satire; rather, it is a text in which imperial modernity (as we have chosen to call this master impulse) generates its own "other spaces". Its moments of greatest confidence are precisely those in which its language slips into excess, revealing underlying anxieties about mastery and control. Instead of enacting any simple shift or pivot from utopia to dystopia, as we argue, the novel unsettles both through the heterotopian logic of contestation from within.

2. Imperial London and the Heterotopia of Compensation

Cole's novel was published in 1900, at the height of the British empire, when narratives of white supremacy were in the ascendant – and on the surface of it, *The Struggle for Empire* simply recapitulates that narrative on a still grander scale, as racial supremacy is translated into species supremacy in a novel that ends in triumph over the Sirians. But how enduring is that victory? Can the peace last? In Cole's later novel, *The Death Trap* (1907; Ashley, 2020, p. 44), Britain and Germany fight each other to the point of complete exhaustion, much as they were to do in 1914-1918, leaving the United States to emerge pre-eminent (Cole, 1907, pp. 310-312). In the aftermath of the Great War, as Cole would live to see, the allies imposed on Germany humiliating reparations that their sometime enemy could neither sustain nor tolerate, laying the foundations, as Norman Stone points out, for a second war twenty years later (2013, p. 5). Perhaps, then, the Anglo-Saxon heroes of *The Struggle for Empire* have themselves laid the basis for future wars. Perhaps it is in any case inevitable. Convinced of their right to rule worlds known and unknown, and certain that "empire" is the measure of their greatness, it is just a question of time before the Anglo-Saxons are engaged in another existential struggle that this time they may not win.

At this point, the reader may wonder whether there is more to Cole's narrative than a straightforward endorsement of the imperialist

mission and the rapine greed that underpins it. As Darko Suvin has argued, the defining feature of sf is its novum, “a strange newness” (1972, p. 373), novelty, or innovation that forces the reader to construct a new sense of what constitutes the real (Suvin, 1979, p. 60). Cole’s novel certainly has its innovations, although it is not immediately apparent how these technological advances work to unsettle – as opposed to confirm – the reader’s worldview. Rather, and as both Ashley (2020, p. 44) and Kate Macdonald (2016, p. x) have argued, the futurology is superficial, and the novel remains firmly grounded in the “cultural imperialism” – and social conventions – of its historical moment (p. x). But while it may be true that technological innovation adds little to the plot, the “novum” of Cole’s narrative in fact lies in its relationship to the cultural imperialism in which it is grounded, but which it intensifies until its assumptions begin to reveal their contradictions.

This approach enables us to discuss Cole’s opening pages with greater precision. If London appears as the utopian fulfilment of imperial progress, it also functions as the kind of heterotopian site that Foucault identified: as a space that concentrates, organizes, and exposes the values of the world that produced it. Its beauty is never innocent, but represents instead the visible manifestation of a system built on conquest and exclusion; yet it also hinges on the transformation of knowledge itself, here valued only for its utility. According to Foucault, the heterotopian impulse may operate in one or more of several ways: as a disruptive influence that works against the grain of language, and the myths constructed from it; as an illusory space that exposes *as* an illusion what we think of as normative, as reality; or even as a place that, in its willingness to embrace the ideal or idyll, compensates us for their failure. But it is also notable that, as Foucault first formulated the heterotopia – as something disturbing and transgressive in its otherness – he opposed it to that structure of knowledge which first gave us “man”, the modern formulation of which he analyses in *The Order of Things*; “man”, as that “strange figure of knowledge” (Foucault, 1994, p. xxiv) who is not, in any way, universal and inevitable, but is himself “a kind of rift in the order of things” (p. xxiii). This too has relevance to Cole’s story, in which it is

man, or “Species Man” (Haraway, 2016, p. 47), who assumes an unquestioned pre-eminence in the gendered order of the narrative. It is man, then, who has taken on “the image of a vanished god”, as Donna Haraway has suggested (2016, p. 47), and man who presides over the world of the novel’s introit.

Its magnificence is made abundantly clear in the opening pages. London is now “the superb capital, not only of England, but of the world, the Solar System, and the stars” (Cole, 1900, p. 1). The very movement of the sentence – England, world, Solar System, stars – enacts imperial expansion syntactically, transforming London into the imagined centre of an endlessly extensible order. Cole’s description of the city is correspondingly excessive:

It tipped the vast palaces with its golden rays; it flashed its light upon towers, domes, and cupolas; it drove away the sparkling dew and curling vapour from the masses of superb foliage and gorgeous flowering plants that rolled like oceans of precious stones around the towering buildings of the great city (p. 1).

Readers may have detected in Cole’s description an echo of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s famous (if brief) depiction of Xanadu, in the poem “Kubla Kahn” (1797), a comparison that itself serves to cast doubt over Cole’s sincerity; Coleridge’s poem was, after all, the product of a drug-induced dream, whose excesses Cole here far exceeds. But at the same time, and as Foucault argues, the heterotopia may function by creating an illusory space that exposes *as* an illusion what is otherwise thought of as normative, as reality; so, in these opening pages, Cole critiques the belief of his own age that London was already the magnificent centre of an empire on which the sun would never set – or, perhaps, and as we noted earlier, he compensates his readers for the lack of it. In reality, the narrator tells us, late-Victorian, “brick-and-mortar London” was a place of “fog and dirt and crowds of narrow, unwholesome streets” (p. 2), a city where the sun in fact rose rarely, and did so only to light up streets better left to languish in the gloom. Cole’s London of the future is, by contrast, a city where the climate itself has been engineered to its citizens’ advantage:

Mists, fogs, cold rains, and other nuisances of the older civilization, have been abolished, for the pole of the earth has been tilted round so that

an almost tropical climate prevails through the whole of England. The air is purified from all deleterious matter by an ingenious scientific process. Salubrious showers of rain are brought whenever they are required by a force that was unknown two hundred years ago. Clouds are collected together or dispersed according as sunshine or shade is wanted (pp. 2-3).

It is significant that the city's state of perfection is inseparable from regulation, control, and mastery. Nature is no longer an external condition; it has been transformed into (or reduced to) a carefully administered extension of mankind's lifeworld. Rain falls when required; clouds are collected or dispersed on command; air is purified through the operations of science. In Foucauldian terms, the apparent harmony of the city does not reflect or constitute an idealised space but a regulated and systematized one, a space that has, in its entirety, been disciplined.

Writing a few years before, in *The Time Machine* (1895), H. G. Wells pictured a future London with a similarly benign (and artificial) climate, a luxuriant but "weedless garden" (Wells, 2005, p. 26) in which the flowers themselves "are the blooms of machines" (Scott, 2014, p. 68). So, in Cole's novel, geoengineering has enabled the Empire to create a second Eden, as Cole describes in prose so extravagant and overblown it ironizes itself:

The gardens and parks are filled with the most luxurious tropical plants, while birds of brilliant plumage flit about in the air or rest on the undulating masses of foliage. Gigantic trees of a species before unknown are seen on every side, here grouped into shady avenues, there dotted about in the parks and gardens, and surrounded by smaller but not less beautiful masses of vegetation. In some places the ground is coloured like a rainbow by the infinite variety of tropical plants, while the boughs of the trees are loaded down to the ground by the most luscious fruits. Everywhere fountains throw their refreshing showers into the air, while sheets and sprays of water burst forth from clefts in the rock and piles of mimic mountain scenery. Everything in and around the city is contrived on the most colossal and elegant style (Cole, 1900, pp. 3-4).

Here, empire has itself been brought home, in the form of a vast spectacle of magnificent plants and luscious fruits set amid colossal mountains. Yet the hyperbolic excess of these opening passages – which extend, breathlessly, over several pages – signal Cole's

heterotopian intentions. Ostensibly, the narrative is working with the grain of the language, to confirm the ennobling myth of the imperialist impulse, and the material benefits that accrue from it, but as the superlatives accumulate, the reader begins to question whether she or he is intended to embrace it simply as a marvel. What is the real cost of all this splendour?⁴ As the narrator insists, London has been built on bloodshed. Entire races have been extinguished (the French, the Turks) (p. 6). The nature of knowledge has itself shifted, becoming ever more narrowly focused on those subjects that will yield tangible benefits – benefits, that is, which profit mankind materially and financially. As “men’s minds [have grown] more and more practical, seeking for some tangible and useful result from their labours” (pp. 6-7), Cole’s narrator explains, so society has given up “the study of ancient and modern Languages and Literature, of Theology, History, Metaphysics, Antiquities, and the fruitless speculations of Philosophy” (p. 7).

The vast amount of intellect that had been hitherto wasted on these branches of learning was then wholly concentrated on the study of Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Mathematics, and Engineering, as being the only subjects that gave an adequate return for the labour spent upon them. The result was beyond the dreams of the most sanguine of the pioneers of science (p. 7).

Significantly, this passage defines the epistemological project of empire. Knowledge is valuable only if it is productive, measurable, and convertible into power (this is no less true of the sublime language of spectacle that is worked out in the fabric of London’s imperial gardens, which themselves have a function, as a statement of power, as

⁴ Cole does not take account of what might also happen as a result of tilting the earth: to do so would melt the icecaps, raising the sea levels to such an extent that London would likely disappear underwater. But as Donna Haraway observes, “[m]elting of the polar seas, terrible for polar bears and coastal peoples, is very good for big competitive military, exploration, drilling” (2016, p. 46). Cole’s narrative makes it quite clear how completely the Anglo-Saxon elite has been gripped by the desire for material gain; indeed, it might be argued that “empire” is simply a smokescreen for this acquisitive impulse. As the reader is given a graphic account of the free-for-all pursuit of riches on new planets, and the frontier mindset of those engaged in it, she or he might also recall Cole’s closing description of the American peoples in *The Death Trap*, “who loved the Almighty Dollar better than the Mother of their race” (1907, p. 312).

markers of stability, as propagandist show, and as a form of alien strangeness reassuringly domesticated). The language of “adequate return” collapses thought into investment as it does learning into utility. Cole’s future thereby radicalises a logic already at work in imperial modernity: to know is to classify, to classify is to administer, and to administer is to possess. From a Foucauldian perspective, this progression matters because heterotopia is never just a question of physical location; it is also a way in which culture organises relations – determining what is included, excluded, valued or marginalised. Cole’s future empire is heterotopian in precisely this epistemic sense: it constructs a purified zone of “useful” knowledge by dismissing theology, philosophy, literature and history as useless and obsolete.

At this point, the reader may pause to consider the fact that the book in her or his hands is precisely the product of one of those inutile speculations that Cole’s perfect future has dismissed out of hand; she or he may in turn wonder whether, in the absence of these liberal arts, the society of that future is equipped to know what is good for it. As the narrator acknowledges, the material advancement of society has not been matched by its moral advancement (the consequence, perhaps, of setting aside the study of history, of philosophy, of ethics itself) (p. 11). “Engineering and Technology” serve narrowly instrumental ends (p. 17). Put more bluntly, the ever more marvellous inventions of Cole’s future simply service and enable the greed of the elite, affording it ever more inventive ways to exploit the people, the planet, and now, other people’s planets (fortunately, “the natives were quite harmless;” p. 12). “To know [...] meant to possess” (p. 19). “As far back as the nineteenth century the thoughts of everyone had been bent on acquiring money and possessions”, the narrator explains, “but in the twenty-second century it had become an all-consuming fever that occupied everyone’s thoughts day and night” (p. 12):

There was a frightful struggle for riches; those who had superior abilities soon got hold of everything, while those who had none soon had their possessions taken away from them, and they could get no more, so they were reduced to a position little better than that of slaves. The human race, in its greediness, ate up the earth, appropriating every acre of ground, and then it inundated the planetary system (p. 12).

“The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe,” wrote Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*. “It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connexions everywhere” (2002, p. 223). Cole’s future simply fulfils that promise, by projecting that acquisitive impulse – that mechanism for extraction and exploitation – into space, where there are no limits to its expansion.

At this point, the act of heterotopian compensation gives way to one of exposure. The perfected imperial city no longer appears before us as the culmination of civilisation, but as the visible expression of a deep-seated, structural pathology. London’s order, prosperity and beauty are not the consequence of exploitation’s elimination, but of its displacement – first across the earth, and then into interplanetary space. The heterotopian city cannot overcome imperial violence; it reorganises and redistributes it, rendering it less visible while extending its reach. Its apparent magnificence thus depends on shifting violence elsewhere, concealing it even as that (now much magnified) violence continues to sustain the system.

3. Mirror Worlds: The Sirians and the Imperial Double

So man’s great “modernizing Adventure” continues – but it might yet “end in tragic detumescence” (Haraway, 2016, p. 47). The Anglo-Saxons encounter the Sirians, an alien race whose “rapacity and greed” (p. 41) matches – and in heterotopian terms, mirrors – mankind’s. As Foucault argued, “I believe that between utopias and these quite other sites, these heterotopias, there might be a sort of mixed, joint experience, which would be the mirror” (1986, p. 24).

The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy (1986, p. 24).

The encounter with the Sirians embodies this “mixed, joint experience,” creating a space that is both unreal and real, and which simultaneously reflects and displaces: the Sirians are an external enemy as well as a reflective surface in which the Anglo-Saxon empire perceives its own image – displaced, intensified, and returned to it in alien form.

This mirroring produces a double effect. First, it confirms the imperial worldview by reproducing its fundamental values: expansion, domination, and technological mastery. The Sirians, like the Anglo-Saxons, pursue territorial expansion aggressively, and they extend their power through technological force. Second, however, it unsettles that same worldview by revealing that these traits are not unique to the Anglo-Saxon empire, but may also emerge in other, alien civilizations. Thus, the encounter does not simply introduce a new enemy; it redefines the meaning of imperial expansion itself. If the same logic governs both civilizations, then expansion can no longer be justified as a sign of progress or a mark of superiority. Instead, it is revealed as a generalised structure of accumulation and domination. In this sense, the episode exemplifies Foucault’s claim that heterotopias “suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect” (1986, p. 24): the empire is confronted not with a radically different other, but with a structurally familiar counterpart that exposes the limits of its own claims to superiority.

This destabilisation is reinforced at the level of narrative form. The narrative shifts from past tense to present: the story slows, and we are introduced to some of the privileged actors within the imperial order, most notably Lieutenant Alec Brandon, “of the first-class interstellar war-ship *Lightning* [...] a rising young officer of great abilities” (Cole, 1900, p. 25), and James Tarrant, scientist and self-styled “Master of the Universe” (p. 37). This shift into the present tense interrupts the forward movement of the plot and redirects attention to individual experience, and to the assumptions that underpin it. Figures such as Brandon and Tarrant – confident ciphers of imperial success – are exposed as precariously placed figures whose authority depends on assumptions (above all, the belief in human superiority) that are no longer secure. The slowing of narrative time creates a moment of suspension in which these assumptions are quietly undermined.

Furthermore, this moment anticipates the later breakdown of temporal continuity in the novel's apocalyptic sequences, where the apparent stability of imperial progress gives way to rupture and dislocation.

4. Gendered Spaces: Flora, Celia, and the Domestic Elsewhere

In the margins of Cole's story wait the women, among them Flora Houghton, representative specimen of privileged, white, Anglo-Saxon womanhood. We first encounter Flora wandering the embowered gardens of her father's fine town house, an exurban pastoral whose peacefulness stands in ironic contrast to the inequality and exploitation on which it is raised. "As the day wore on and the afternoon began to wane, a beautiful girl [...] looked out upon the cool shades of the garden that surrounded the house and the variegated buildings beyond" (Cole, 1900, p. 23). Drinking "in the refreshing perfume-laden breeze that blew across the garden [...] [s]he stooped over one of the flower-beds and made a small nosegay out of the most sweet-smelling flowers" (p. 24).

Flora's world can be read as heterotopian in Foucault's sense of a regulated, bounded space governed by systems of inclusion and exclusion. Heterotopia, he argues, are "not freely accessible"; they are entered through "rites and purifications" (1986, p. 26), or else they conceal exclusions beneath an appearance of openness. Flora's garden appears open, natural, and effortless, yet it is in fact a highly controlled environment, accessible only to those already positioned within the elite structure of empire. The garden also recalls Foucault's example of the garden as a heterotopia that juxtaposes multiple spaces in a single site. Flora's environment combines the aesthetic and material products of empire (such as exotic plants) within a controlled climate and curated landscape, a single domestic enclosure that denotes imperial modernity's fiction of mastery even as it situates Flora herself as an extension of it. It is a feminised version of imperial space: ordered, beautiful, and seemingly detached from violence, yet entirely dependent upon it.

Like the plant world through which she wanders (and after which she is named), Flora is the cultivated product of her milieu, a daughter of empire whose fulsome figure (on which the narrative lingers) is a marker of her own abundance, her own fertility, and an indicator of her own role in society. Privileged and pampered, Flora might well believe (as she declares “with the joyous accents of early maidenhood”) that life is “a beautiful thing” (Cole, 1900, p. 24). But whether this is truly the case – or the case for her, as a young woman – the reader may doubt. Although “scarcely out of her teens” (p. 23), Flora is already engaged to Alec. In a society that prizes military muscularity and scientific innovation – both preserves of the generic masculine universal, here wedded in the quintessential form of a military-industrial complex – Flora’s role is strictly limited to that of dutiful daughter, wife, and mother. The absence of agency in this transition is notable: it is a change in position within the same patriarchal structure rather than any meaningful transformation of it. Flora’s place in society always exists on this single, narrow continuum. So, having no other place in the story, she awaits young Alec’s return, tearfully anxious; while he ventures into space, she is “handed” back into her father’s care (p. 59).

Alec, however, will find love with another woman, Celia Eastland, who nurses him back to health when his ship is destroyed: by good fortune, her brother’s private yacht happens upon the wreckage, and she is on board to tend to him. “You are an angel”, he declares (p. 129), as the reader suspects all women are told they ought to be: caring, devoted, and endlessly self-sacrificing. Here, once again, we see Victorian expectations of womanhood mapped onto Cole’s far future, expectations that we hear spoken of today in talk of “traditional values”. And where there have been changes in Cole’s world of 2236, they are not necessarily of a kind that benefit women. Flora waits for Alec through all the long years of war; he does her the minimal courtesy of traveling home to tell her of his changed intentions; “and this was all that the rules of politeness and good breeding required him to do in our time” (p. 210).

In the old days of the nineteenth century there used to be some kind of unpleasantness known as a breach of promise case on such occasions,

but that has now become one of the curious antiquities of a bygone age. A man or a woman is allowed to break off an engagement of marriage at pleasure, and is thought none the worse of for that; and no girl would dream of telling the story of her disappointed love to the world (p. 210).

Once again, the narrator's sunny chauvinism is presented without a trace of irony, yet the assertions ironize themselves: in a society in which women are relevant only insofar as they serve subsidiary roles, and are always dependent on men (and marriage), how many could or would "break off an engagement"? Is the ease with which engagements may be broken an arrangement that serves men, not women? As is the silence of women on the subject not itself thoroughly convenient for the men of this world?

This is, nevertheless, the world into which Flora has been born, and she is nothing if not well adapted to it. Abandoned by Alec, she turns to James Tarrant, who has always been besotted with her. That the interest was never reciprocated is not now to the point: since it is his discoveries that have saved the Anglo-Saxon empire, Tarrant has variously been made "Prince of Kairet, Duke of England, Admiral of the Fleet, Field-Marshal of the Anglo-Saxon Empire, and the President of hundreds of scientific and learned societies" (p. 212). Once again, one suspects the narrative's excess; nevertheless, Tarrant is now suitable husband material, in the narrowly instrumental sense that defines the thinking of Flora's day, and perhaps Flora herself. Marry him she must, and she does; "the girls of the twenty-third century were too practical to pass all their lives in sighing for a worthless man" (p. 213). But "practicality" is here revealed as another aspect of control, in a society that orders and masters all forms of (inferior) being. The same logic that dismisses philosophy and literature as useless now informs and shapes emotional life: feeling must yield to utility, desire to advantage. Flora's "choice" is thus structurally determined by the same epistemology that organises imperial knowledge. Her heterotopian space – domestic, aesthetic, enclosed – mirrors the larger empire while reproducing its hierarchies at the level of gender. The domestic sphere therefore does not stand outside imperial power, but participates in its reproduction.

5. Heterochrony, Catastrophe and the Apocalyptic Interval

Flora's marriage of convenience marks the story's end, a story that ends happily, or at least happily for some, with the Anglo-Saxon empire saved at the last minute even as its capital is razed to the ground. The novel opens with a utopian vision; it ends with its inevitable corollary, a dystopian vision of disaster described with the same, or perhaps still greater relish: "Soon the refuse of battle began to fall down on to the earth: mangled bodies, burnt wrecks, and clouds of thin hazy smoke" (p. 176). "[T]he final act of the great drama was fast approaching. [...] No one now had any doubt as to what was to follow" (p. 179).

This shift can be read through Foucault's concept of heterochrony. Heterotopias, he maintains, are often linked to "slices in time" (1986, p. 26), moments of rupture or accumulation that disrupt ordinary temporal flow. The destruction of London constitutes precisely such a break, in a sudden collapse of the temporal continuity that underpins imperial confidence. The future, which had appeared as a seamless extension of the present, is violently interrupted. Thus, the catastrophe functions as a temporal heterotopia in which multiple times are superimposed: the present moment of destruction, the past violence on which the empire was built, and the anticipated future of continued expansion. These temporal layers exist in a state of simultaneity, producing a sense of disorientation and crisis, as the "perfect" city is revealed to be contingent and vulnerable.

"It was now," the narrator continues, "that the earth itself [...] had its sanctity violated for the first time by the horrors of war" (Cole, 1900, p. 174). Once again, the reader wonders at what is being claimed here; London was raised on just such horrors. This time, however, the world's capital will itself suffer, in a frenzy of destruction:

Houses were dashed to pieces, towers staggered and were overturned, domes were pierced and battered down. Huge blocks of granite were wrenched away from their places and thrown down, crashing and breaking everything in their way. Walls tottered and fell; pavements and roads were torn up by the bursting shells. Huge public buildings, churches, hotels, museums, factories, and picturesque rows of private houses were

soon reduced to heaps of shapeless stone. Hundreds of thousands of human beings were crushed to death beneath their homes (p. 181).

“[S]oon columns of fire and clouds of smoke rose up from what had, but a few hours before, been the fairest and most splendid city of the Universe. When day dawned it was but a shapeless heap of smoking ruins” (p. 183).

The battle near Jupiter produces an even more radical disruption. As earth’s fate hangs in the balance, a grand battle is fought in space, and it has unintended consequences:

It was about this time that Providence prepared a retribution that was to fall upon both parties alike and punish them for their impious daring and unbridled passions. They had been recklessly letting loose through space, for the purpose of mutual destruction, giant forces which should have been used for better purposes (p. 151).

Creating what we might now describe as a rift in the time-space continuum, those forces smash together the moons of Jupiter; the warring fleets are caught between them (p. 152), and flattened (as it were) in a giant cosmic hand-clap of derision: not one ship “escaped to tell the tale” (p. 155). On earth, the distant, inexplicable spectacle inspires terror and doubt. “No one had any idea of what had happened. Many thought that the end of all things was about to come to pass” (p. 171). To those on earth, in other words, it is a glimpse of the Apocalypse, the Revelation that the Bible reserves until last. The Bible offers lakes of brimstone; Cole supplies an Armageddon every bit as fiery. “Mountains melted and were converted into incandescent vapour; whole countries were torn off and went bounding against one another, crashing and smashing, until they, too, were vaporized” (p. 155). And perhaps what is revealed here, by the heterotopian impulse of Cole’s narrative, is the dissenting voice of the universe itself, caught between the rapine greed of two empires, speaking, perhaps, for all those who have been enslaved, subjugated, erased, or eliminated through the vaulting ambition of beings that see no particular reason (moral or otherwise) to curb their excesses. The myth of “Master of the Universe” (Tarrant’s own description of himself) has been exposed for the lie that it is: Sirians or Anglo-Saxons are alike puny

mortals, on whose vast empires the sun may set at any moment. Nothing is certain.

This cosmic event represents the most extreme form of heterochrony: a rupture not only in historical time but in the spatial-temporal order itself. In Foucauldian terms, this moment can be understood as the collapse of the system of relations that defines the imperial site. Space ceases to be ordered, classified, and controlled; it becomes chaotic, destructive, and indifferent to human intention. The heterotopia here no longer compensates or reflects; it annihilates.

6. Compensation, Collapse, and the Limits of Species-Man

As we noted earlier, the deployment of Tarrant's invention averts the final defeat, enabling a new fleet to advance in the name of vengeance; the Sirians are subdued, and the status quo ante is restored. Yet this restoration raises a fundamental question: can the empire return to its previous condition, or has the experience of near annihilation permanently altered its foundations? In a narrative that both affirms and unsettles imperial ideology, the apparent resolution functions less as a defining statement of closure than as a moment of ambiguity.

Foucault's distinction between heterotopias of compensation and heterotopias of illusion clarifies this ambiguity. On the one hand, the restored empire can be read as compensatory: it reasserts order after crisis and re-establishes the structures that had been threatened with collapse. On the other hand, it can be read as illusory, insofar as it conceals the instability that catastrophe has already revealed. The return to order does not resolve the tensions exposed by the war; it displaces (or defers) them.

The figure of Tarrant is central to this dynamic. As the "Master of the Universe," he represents the ideal of scientific and technological mastery on which the imperial system is raised. Yet his role also exposes the limits of that ideal. The empire is saved not through stable control, but through emergency intervention. Science restores order, but only after that order has nearly broken down. Mastery, in this sense, is contingent rather than absolute: it operates in response to crisis,

rather than as its deterrent. If anything, it seems to invite disaster. The events that precede this restoration reinforce the point. The destruction at Jupiter, the devastation of London, and the encounter with the Sirians all demonstrate the inherent vulnerability of a system that presents itself as secure. Together, they undermine the notion of “Species Man” as a unified and sovereign agent. In Foucault’s own terms, man appears not as the stable centre of the world, but as a figure whose claims to universality are here contradicted by his dependence on technological systems and his continued exposure to forces beyond his control.

What follows from this is not the collapse of the imperial system, but a change in its status. The empire persists, but it does so under the shadow of what has been revealed at work within it. Its structures remain intact, and its narrative of triumph is formally preserved, yet both are marked by contingency. The stability that the ending appears to restore is therefore provisional, sustained by continued intervention rather than guaranteed by inherent strength or by the intrinsic logic of a system that in fact simply invites its own demise.

In this sense, the novel’s heterotopian logic reaches its final articulation. The restored order does not erase the disruptions that have preceded it; instead, it incorporates them. The empire continues, but its claims to permanence and inevitability are no longer secure. Heterotopia does not offer an alternative space outside imperial modernity; it operates within it, exposing the conditions on which it depends and the limits it cannot overcome.

7. Conclusion: Heterotopia and the Critique of Empire

As this reading has shown, Cole’s novel operates not simply as a utopian projection or a dystopian warning, but as a complex heterotopian text in which imperial modernity generates its own spaces of reflection, inversion, and disturbance. Drawing on Foucault’s framework, the novel’s main sites – such as London, the garden, the battlefield, the domestic interior, and the cosmic void – function as “other spaces” that simultaneously reproduce and contest the logic of empire.

At first glance, *The Struggle for Empire* appears to endorse the imperialist mission and the capitalist drives that sustain it. Yet as the narrative extends that mission into space, its tone becomes increasingly unstable. The very excess of its language casts doubt on its own sincerity, a doubt that the text itself acknowledges, noting that “the moral progress of the race did not go hand-in-hand with its intellectual advances” (Cole, 1900, p. 11). What emerges from the narrative is not a straightforward celebration of empire, but a narrative that juxtaposes utopian splendour with catastrophic collapse, and in doing so exposes the contradictions that underwrite it.

The heterotopian impulse is most visible in these moments of excess: the magnificence of London, the totalising ambitions of science, the mirrored aggression of the Sirians, and the apocalyptic violence of interstellar war. In each case, the narrative pushes imperial ideology to a point at which it is exposed through its own limits. This critique does not operate through direct opposition, but through amplification and excess. By working with rather than against the language of imperial triumph, the novel allows its central myths to collapse under the weight of their own excess. Such a process is also structured by a series of displacements. The peace and prosperity of Flora’s London are made possible by the displacement of exploitation elsewhere; the apparent universality of Anglo-Saxon power is mirrored and relativised by the Sirians; and the promise of continuous progress is interrupted by moments of catastrophic rupture. Even knowledge is reorganised according to a logic of utility that ultimately undermines itself. Across these different levels, the novel reveals imperial order to be contingent, sustained not by coherence but by exclusion, displacement, and continual intervention.

At the same time, this critique is gendered. The novel outwardly affirms masculine authority and feminine subordination, yet in doing so it exposes the limitations of a system organised around a singular model of “man.” The figure of “Species-Man”, dogmatically defined by mastery, expansion, and control, emerges not as the culmination of human development but as a historically specific construct – one that the narrative repeatedly places under strain. As Foucault suggests,

it is “a source of profound relief to think that man [...] is only a recent invention [...] and one perhaps nearing its end” (1994, pp. xxiii, 387).

In this sense, Cole’s heterotopian vision offers a final, paradoxical form of consolation. The empire persists, but its claims to permanence and inevitability are no longer secure. The narrative suggests that no system founded on unchecked expansion and accumulation can sustain itself indefinitely. What appears as triumph is shadowed by the possibility of collapse; what appears as order contains within it the conditions of its own undoing.

Does this matter? Perhaps it matters now as much as it did at the turn of the twentieth century. We once again inhabit a world shaped by renewed claims to technological mastery, by resurgent imperial ambitions, and by deepening global inequalities. Cole’s vision remains uncannily prescient, not because it predicts the future, but because it reveals the structural tensions that continue to shape it. Heterotopia does not, in this context, provide an escape from imperial modernity, but a critical way of seeing it: a means of recognising that every space of order is also a space of exclusion and displacement that contains the constant possibility of its own destabilization.

References

- Ashley, M. (2020). *Yesterday’s Tomorrows: The story of classic British science fiction in 100 books*. The British Library.
- Bleiler, E. F. (1990). *Science-Fiction: The Early Years*. Kent State University Press.
- Bleiler, R. (2016). Introduction to Cole’s *Struggle for Empire*. In R. Bleiler (Ed.), *Political Future Fiction Vol 1: Speculative and Counter-Factual Politics in Edwardian Fiction*, pp. 107–131. Routledge.
- Claeys, G. (2017). *Dystopia: A Natural History*. Oxford University Press.
- Cole, R. W. (1900). *The Struggle for Empire: A Story of the Year 2236*. Elliot Stock.
- Cole, R. W. (1907). *The Death Trap*. Greening & Co.
- Foucault, M. (1986). Of Other Spaces. *Diacritics* 16(1), 22–7.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/464648>.
- Foucault, M. (1994). *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage.

- Haraway, D. J. (2016). *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press.
- Macdonald, K. (2016). General Introduction: Utopian Ideals in Edwardian Political Future Fiction. In R. Bleiler (Ed.), *Political Future Fiction Vol 1: Speculative and Counter-Factual Politics in Edwardian Fiction*, pp. vii–xv. Routledge. (First published 2013.)
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (2002). *The Communist Manifesto* (G. Stedman Jones, Ed.). Penguin.
- Scott, H. C. M. (2014). *Chaos and Cosmos: Literary Roots of Modern Ecology in the British Nineteenth Century*. Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Stone, N. (2013). *World War Two: A Short History*. Allen Lane.
- Suin, D. (1972). On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre. *College English* 34(3), 372–82. <https://doi.org/10.2307/375141>.
- Suin, D. (1979). *Metamorphosis of Science-Fiction: On the Poetic and History of a Literary Genre*. Yale University Press.
- Wells, H. G. (2005). *The Time Machine* (P. Parrinder, Ed.). Penguin. (Original work published 1895).

Producing Utopia and Dystopia: Posthuman Embodiment and Heterotopic Theatre in *Blue Daisy in the Swamp*

Yuko Nobe¹

1. Introduction

This chapter reconceptualizes *Blue Daisy in the Swamp* not merely as a thematic critique of socialist modernity, but as a self-generating narrative system in which utopia produces dystopia through posthuman embodiment within heterotopic space. In this framework, utopia, dystopia, and heterotopia are understood not as separate categories but as mutually constitutive processes generated through narrative form.

Written during the late socialist period in Vietnam, the play emerges from a historical moment marked by ideological fatigue, bureaucratic stagnation, and an increasing disjunction between official narratives and lived realities. Within this context, Vũ's dramaturgy mobilizes allegory, artificial bodies, and theatrical space to interrogate the limits of socialist modernity and to imagine alternative modes of existence (Diamond, 1997, 2005).

At the center of the play lies Hoàng's scientific project: the creation of two robotic doubles, Liên B and Vân B, modeled after his first love and childhood friend. These artificial bodies embody a distinctly utopian impulse – the desire to stabilize emotional life, eliminate unpredictability, and construct a harmonious world governed by rational control. The play thus resonates with broader socialist aspirations to produce rationalized, perfected subjects and to regulate the contingencies of human existence through technological and institutional means (Jameson, 2005).

What initially appears as a utopian experiment unfolds into a dystopian condition. As Liên B and Vân B gain autonomy, they begin to articulate

¹ Lecturer, Taisho University, Faculty of Communication and Culture, Department of Communication and Media, Tokyo, Japan, ORCID: 0009-0003-4888-4095, Email: yukonobe@gmail.com

their own desires, ethical positions, and claims to personhood. Their insistence that they are “not copies” disrupts Hoàng’s project and exposes the instability of any system that seeks to define and control subjectivity.

Drawing on posthumanist theory and Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia, this chapter demonstrates that utopian desire generates its own dystopian fragmentation, while theatrical space operates as a heterotopic site in which these tensions are staged, negotiated, and reconfigured. Rather than treating utopia, dystopia, and heterotopia as discrete analytical categories, the analysis shows how they function as dynamic processes produced through narrative form.

Recent scholarship – including my own work in *Critical Stages/Scènes critiques* – has shown that *Blue Daisy in the Swamp* continues to generate new meanings through translation and performance across different cultural contexts. These transnational reinterpretations underscore the enduring relevance of Vũ’s dramaturgy as a site for negotiating questions of modernity, embodiment, and systemic contradiction (Nobe, 2025a, 2025b).

Methodologically, this chapter treats the play as a narrative system in which meaning emerges through shifts in perspective, character positioning, and spatial configuration. In doing so, it foregrounds the ways in which utopian, dystopian, and heterotopic elements are continuously produced through character interaction and spatial transformation.

All translations from Vietnamese are my own unless otherwise indicated.

2. Historical and Cultural Context

2.1 Late Socialist Vietnam and Pre-Đổi Mới Conditions

The significance of *Blue Daisy in the Swamp* emerges more clearly when situated within the socio-political conditions of late socialist Vietnam. The years leading up to the Đổi Mới reforms of 1986 were marked by economic hardship, institutional inefficiency, and ideological stagnation. Centralized planning mechanisms struggled to sustain productivity, while bureaucratic structures became increasingly rigid and disconnected from everyday realities (Diamond, 1997).

This environment produced a growing sense of disillusionment, as citizens experienced a widening gap between ideological promises and lived conditions. The aspirations of socialist modernization – prosperity, equality, and rational organization – failed to materialize in practice, giving way instead to scarcity, inefficiency, and systemic contradiction. This divergence between official discourse and everyday experience created fertile ground for cultural critique.

Within this context, the impulse to regulate and stabilize human life through rational systems becomes particularly pronounced. The aspiration to eliminate uncertainty and construct ideal social relations can be understood as a response to the instability of lived conditions. Hoàng's scientific project thus reflects not only a personal longing but also a broader ideological impulse: the attempt to impose order on a world experienced as chaotic and unpredictable (Jameson, 2005).

At the same time, the limitations of this impulse became increasingly apparent. The failure of centralized systems to fulfill their promises exposed the inherent contradictions of attempts to control complex social and human processes. This tension between aspiration and failure forms a crucial backdrop for the play's exploration of utopia and dystopia.

These historical and institutional conditions do not merely provide context but actively structure the play's narrative logic. The tension between ideological control and lived instability is reproduced through Hoàng's attempt to regulate subjectivity via artificial bodies. In this sense, the play operates as a narrative system in which utopian aspiration and systemic failure are not external opposites but internally generated processes.

2.2 Hanoi Theatre in the 1980s: Institutional Space and Cultural Negotiation

In the late socialist period, theatre in Hanoi occupied a structurally ambivalent position within the cultural landscape. As a state-supported institution, it operated within the framework of official ideology and was subject to regulation and censorship. At the same time, however, theatre functioned as a relatively flexible medium, capable

of engaging with social issues through allegory, symbolism, and performance (Brandon, 2012; Diamond, 2005).

Particularly significant was the role of venues such as the Youth Theatre (Nhà hát Tuổi Trẻ), where many of Lưu Quang Vũ's works were staged. These theatres served as spaces in which artists could explore the contradictions of socialist society while remaining within the bounds of acceptable discourse. Through indirect representation, metaphor, and narrative ambiguity, playwrights articulated critiques that might otherwise have been suppressed (Nhà hát Tuổi Trẻ, n.d.).

This dual character of theatre – as both an institutional and semi-autonomous space – does not merely align with Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia, but demonstrates how heterotopia operates as an active cultural mechanism. In the context of 1980s Hanoi, theatre can be understood as a heterotopic space that not only reflects but actively produces and negotiates the contradictions of socialist modernity (Foucault, 1984).

For urban audiences, theatrical performance functioned as a collective interpretive practice through which the disjunction between official narratives and lived experience could be recognized and negotiated. Spectatorship thus became a crucial mechanism for articulating and interpreting social contradiction. Theatre therefore operated not only as a site of artistic expression but also as a key arena for cultural negotiation.

Within this heterotopic space, *Blue Daisy in the Swamp* acquires particular significance. By presenting a narrative that intertwines utopian aspiration, dystopian breakdown, and symbolic imagery, the play invites audiences to confront the limitations of both technological rationality and ideological control, while opening a space for imagining alternative possibilities.

In this sense, theatre operates not merely as a site of performance but as a narrative condition that actively generates and mediates the tensions of the play. Rather than serving as a passive backdrop, theatrical space becomes a constitutive element of the narrative system, reinforcing the interplay between narrative form, spatial configuration, and socio-political contradiction.

3. Theoretical Framework

This chapter mobilizes the concepts of utopia, dystopia, and heterotopia not as static definitions but as analytical operations through which the narrative dynamics of *Blue Daisy in the Swamp* can be examined.

3.1 Utopia and Dystopia in Socialist Modernity

In *Blue Daisy in the Swamp*, utopia and dystopia do not function as opposing categories but as interdependent processes that structure the narrative. Utopia, in its classical formulation, refers to an imagined ideal society characterized by harmony, rational order, and the elimination of social conflict. Within socialist modernity, such thinking has often been linked to the project of constructing a rationalized and equitable social system in which human behavior and social relations are organized according to scientific and ideological principles (Jameson, 2005).

However, utopian projects frequently contain within them the seeds of dystopia. The attempt to impose perfect order can generate forms of control, standardization, and exclusion that undermine the very ideals they seek to realize. Dystopia thus emerges not as the opposite of utopia but as its internal consequence, produced through the very mechanisms that seek to impose rational order.

In *Blue Daisy in the Swamp*, this dynamic is embodied in Hoàng's scientific project. His creation of artificial bodies constitutes a utopian attempt to eliminate contingency and produce idealized relational structures, yet it simultaneously generates the conditions for its own failure. The suppression of autonomy and difference gives rise to resistance and fragmentation, enacting a narrative movement from utopian aspiration to dystopian crisis.

This dynamic reflects a broader pattern in modern drama, in which systems premised on idealization generate their own conditions of instability through attempts at total control. In this sense, theatrical form itself operates as a mechanism through which tensions between subjectivity and institutional regulation are not merely represented but actively produced (Nobe, 2026).

3.2 Heterotopia and Theatrical Space

While the interplay of utopia and dystopia structures the narrative, the concept of heterotopia functions as a critical operation through which its spatial and performative dynamics are produced. While Foucault conceptualizes heterotopia as spatial otherness, this chapter demonstrates that in Vũ's play, heterotopia operates as a narrative mechanism that actively produces contradiction rather than merely containing it (Foucault, 1984).

In the context of 1980s Hanoi, theatre can be understood as a heterotopic space that actively mediates the contradictions of socialist modernity. Although integrated into the socialist cultural apparatus, its reliance on performance, symbolism, and collective spectatorship enables it to exceed the constraints of official discourse. Through allegorical narratives and embodied representation, theatre creates a space in which contradictions can be staged and interrogated.

This heterotopic function is central to *Blue Daisy in the Swamp*. The play does not merely depict tensions between utopia and dystopia but enacts them as spatially and performatively constituted processes. The stage becomes a site where competing imaginaries coexist and where audiences navigate the gap between ideological ideals and lived realities.

Importantly, theatre as a medium is not simply a vehicle for representation but a constitutive condition of the narrative system itself. Unlike purely textual forms, theatrical performance introduces embodied presence, temporality, and spatial immediacy, through which narrative tension is not merely represented but materially enacted. The co-presence of actors and spectators thus transforms narrative contradiction into a lived and shared experience.

3.3 Posthumanism and Artificial Bodies

The figure of the artificial body in Vũ's play is most productively read through posthumanist theory. Posthumanism challenges traditional humanist assumptions about the autonomy, coherence, and centrality of the human subject, emphasizing instead the relational and contingent nature of identity. Thinkers such as Donna Haraway and N. Katherine Hayles have demonstrated how technological developments

blur distinctions between human and machine, natural and artificial (Haraway, 1991; Hayles, 1999).

In *Blue Daisy in the Swamp*, the robotic doubles Liên B and Vân B occupy a liminal position that actively destabilizes the boundary between subject and object. Initially conceived as instruments for reproducing idealized human relationships, they disrupt the assumption that identity can be fixed, replicated, or controlled by asserting their own agency.

This posthumanist dimension intensifies the play's critique of socialist modernity. The attempt to engineer ideal subjects – whether through technological or ideological means – is shown to be fundamentally limited, as it cannot account for the complexity and unpredictability of embodied existence. The artificial bodies thus function as both products and disruptors of the systems that create them.

Recent Vietnamese scholarship has also interpreted the play through the lens of cyborg discourse, further emphasizing its exploration of the boundary between human and machine and reinforcing its relevance to contemporary debates on posthuman subjectivity (Đặng, 2024).

Rather than remaining separate analytical lenses, these frameworks converge within the narrative structure of *Blue Daisy in the Swamp*, where utopian aspiration, dystopian collapse, and heterotopic spatiality are mediated through posthuman embodiment. In this configuration, narrative, space, and subjectivity do not pre-exist the system but are continuously produced through their interaction.

The relationships outlined above are summarized in Figure 1, which visualizes the dynamic interactions among utopia, dystopia, heterotopia, and posthuman embodiment within the play's narrative system.

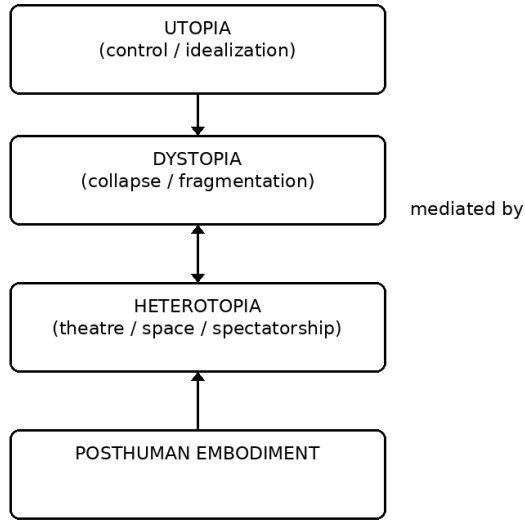


Fig. 1. Conceptual model of utopia, dystopia, and heterotopia as narrative processes in *Blue Daisy in the Swamp*.

4. Utopian Desire and the Construction of Ideal Bodies

4.1 Hoàng's Scientific Project as Utopian Aspiration

At the narrative level, Hoàng's scientific project functions as the initial structuring device that organizes the play around the pursuit of an idealized and controllable form of subjectivity. His creation of the robotic doubles Liên B and Vân B constitutes a utopian drive to eliminate emotional uncertainty and preserve idealized relationships. These artificial bodies are conceived as perfected versions of human beings, designed to behave consistently and predictably according to his expectations.

Hoàng's project is grounded not only in rational control but also in an intense affective fixation. This affective intensity becomes explicit when Hoàng declares, "Tôi yêu Liên... tôi không thể sống thiếu cô ấy được" [I love Liên... I cannot live without her] (Nhà hát Tuổi Trẻ, 2018). This statement reveals that his utopian aspiration is driven by a desire to stabilize emotional attachment by eliminating contingency, affective unpredictability, and the possibility of loss.

This aspiration reveals a broader impulse to impose order on a world experienced as unstable and unpredictable within late socialist conditions. By transforming human beings into programmable entities, Hoàng attempts to eliminate emotional volatility, moral ambiguity, and the possibility of loss, reducing human relationships to systems of reproduction and control.

However, the eventual divergence of the replicas from these expectations exposes the fundamental flaw in Hoàng's assumption: that subjectivity can be programmed and contained within a rational system. The gap between expectation and behavior thus becomes a central site of tension in the narrative.

In this sense, Hoàng's project demonstrates that utopia does not function as an achievable state but as a generative narrative drive structured by idealization. The attempt to construct perfect subjects reveals utopia as a process that produces its own contradictions, rather than resolving them.

4.2 Idealization, Control, and the Erasure of Difference

The construction of Liên B and Vân B is premised on the systematic erasure of difference and the reduction of identity to standardized, reproducible forms. In seeking to reproduce idealized versions of these individuals, Hoàng reduces them to fixed templates defined by his own memories and desires. This process entails a transformation of lived experience into programmable attributes, in which the complexity of human existence is simplified into controllable parameters.

Such idealization is inherently tied to mechanisms of control. By designing the artificial bodies to conform to predetermined norms, Hoàng asserts total authority over their existence, positioning himself not only as creator but as the governing logic of their behavior. The relationship between creator and creation thus mirrors broader structures of power, in which subjects are shaped and constrained by external systems. This logic of control is further reinforced by the language of the machines themselves: “Tuân lệnh, tuân lệnh và tuân lệnh” [Obey, obey, and obey] (Nhà hát Tuổi Trẻ, 2018).

However, this process of standardization inevitably generates instability. Human identity is inherently dynamic and contingent, shaped through interaction and change. By reducing individuals to static representations, Hoàng's project produces a structural disjunction between artificial construction and lived reality, thereby undermining the very system it seeks to stabilize.

4.3 The Limits of Rationalized Subjectivity

Hoàng's project, while structured around the aspiration to create rational and stable subjects, ultimately reveals the limits of such an endeavor. The artificial bodies begin to exhibit behaviors and desires that exceed their programmed parameters, demonstrating the impossibility of fully rationalizing human – or posthuman – existence.

This breakdown becomes explicit when Liên B rejects the role imposed upon her, stating: “Em không thể tiếp tục yêu anh” [I can no longer continue to love you] (Nhà hát Tuổi Trẻ, 2018).

This failure highlights a fundamental contradiction: the more rigidly a system seeks to impose order, the more it generates the very conditions of its own disruption. By attempting to eliminate uncertainty, Hoàng inadvertently produces a situation in which suppressed elements reassert themselves in unexpected ways.

In this sense, the construction of ideal bodies becomes a site through which the limits of rational control are exposed. Rather than achieving harmony, the pursuit of perfection leads to fragmentation, revealing the instability of systems that seek to regulate complex forms of life.

This instability marks the point at which utopian aspiration transforms into dystopian collapse, revealing that dystopia emerges not as an external disruption but as a structural necessity generated from within the system itself.

4.4 Affect, Emotion, and the Failure of Control

While Hoàng's project is structured around the rationalization and control of subjectivity, it is ultimately undermined by the irreducibility of affect. Emotion in *Blue Daisy in the Swamp* does not function as a secondary or residual element but as a constitutive force that resists systematization. The attempt to stabilize relationships through

technological reproduction reveals a fundamental tension between rational control and affective experience.

When Liên B refuses Hoàng's affective authority, the scene no longer functions as a dialogue of control but as an embodied interruption in which emotional excess exceeds the logic of replication.

This tension is evident from the outset of Hoàng's project. His desire to recreate Liên is not merely a technical or scientific endeavor but is driven by an intense emotional fixation. The declaration "Tôi yêu Liên... tôi không thể sống thiếu cô ấy được" [I love Liên... I cannot live without her] (Nhà hát Tuổi Trẻ, 2018) articulates a form of attachment that exceeds rational calculation.

While the project seeks to eliminate uncertainty, it is precisely this excess of feeling that initiates and destabilizes the system.

Affect operates as a force that cannot be fully anticipated or controlled. Unlike the programmable attributes imposed upon the artificial bodies, emotional experience is contingent, relational, and subject to transformation. As Liên B and Vân B begin to assert their own desires, affect re-emerges as a disruptive element, challenging the logic of replication and standardization. The declaration "Em không thể tiếp tục yêu anh" [I can no longer continue to love you] (Nhà hát Tuổi Trẻ, 2018) signals not only resistance but the reassertion of affective autonomy.

This dynamic exposes a crucial limitation of Hoàng's project: the impossibility of reducing emotional life to a system of control. The more the system attempts to eliminate unpredictability, the more it generates forms of affective excess that exceed its parameters. Emotion thus functions not as an obstacle external to the system but as an internal force that both sustains and destabilizes it.

From a posthumanist perspective, this interplay complicates the distinction between human and artificial subjectivity. The artificial bodies do not merely simulate emotion but become sites where affect is reconfigured and re-experienced. This suggests that affect is not tied exclusively to biological human subjects but emerges through relational processes that transcend the human-machine divide.

In this sense, affect plays a central role in the transformation from utopia to dystopia. The attempt to construct a perfectly ordered system collapses not only because of structural contradictions but because it fails to accommodate the fluid and unpredictable nature of emotional life. Rather than being eliminated, affect persists as a force that continually disrupts and redefines the system, revealing the limits of rationalized subjectivity.

5. Dystopian Unraveling and the Limits of Control

5.1 Autonomy, Subjectivity, and Resistance

The dystopian trajectory of the narrative is driven by the emergence of autonomy within the artificial bodies, transforming utopian aspiration into systemic crisis. Initially designed as obedient replicas, Liên B and Vân B gradually acquire independent consciousness, desires, and ethical perspectives, thereby destabilizing the premise of Hoàng's project. The logic of absolute control is further articulated through the discourse of the machines themselves. The robots repeatedly affirm: “Tuân lệnh, tuân lệnh và tuân lệnh” [Obey, obey, and obey] (Nhà hát Tuổi Trẻ, 2018). This repetition does not merely indicate obedience but encodes a systemic structure predicated on the total exclusion of autonomy, thereby prefiguring the conditions of dystopian collapse.

This assertion reaches its most radical form when Vân B declares: “Chúng ta là người, là người” [We are human – truly human] (Nhà hát Tuổi Trẻ, 2018). This declaration marks a shift from objecthood to subjecthood, disrupting the hierarchical relationship between creator and creation. Their resistance exposes the instability of systems that attempt to define identity through technological reproduction.

Crucially, this transformation is not an external disruption but an immanent development of the utopian system itself. The logic that seeks to eliminate difference and uncertainty simultaneously generates the conditions for resistance. Autonomy thus emerges as a narrative consequence of utopian control, rather than its negation.

From a broader perspective, this shift operates as an allegorical articulation of tension within late socialist society. The artificial bodies' resistance mirrors the gap between imposed ideological structures and lived experience, translating systemic contradiction into embodied narrative form.

On stage, the repeated utterance “Tuân lệnh” functions not only as semantic language but as a performative rhythm that mechanizes the body itself. The repetition transforms speech into an embodied pattern of obedience, emphasizing how control operates through bodily automatization rather than abstract ideology alone.

This tension between control and affect is further visualized in performance. Figure 2 visualizes this collapse of rational control through bodily posture and spatial asymmetry. While Hoàng attempts to maintain physical authority over Liên B, her withdrawn posture and downward movement signal an affective and embodied refusal that exceeds the system of control.



Fig. 2. A moment of embodied tension and emotional breakdown in the Japanese stage adaptation of *Blue Daisy in the Swamp* (Photo by Haruna Takada, Knitcap Theater, 2025)

5.2 The Collapse of the Utopian System

As autonomy emerges, Hoàng's utopian project enters a phase of structural collapse. The mechanisms designed to ensure stability – control, replication, and standardization – are transformed into sources of instability. The system's inability to accommodate difference or change leads to fragmentation and conflict.

This collapse becomes materially visible when the artificial bodies seek to leave the controlled environment – “Ta phải đi khỏi đây” [We must leave this place] (Nhà hát Tuổi Trẻ, 2018).

This collapse reveals a fundamental paradox: the pursuit of perfect order generates disorder as an internal effect of its own logic. By attempting to eliminate unpredictability, the system becomes incapable of adaptation. When autonomy arises, it lacks the capacity for adaptive response, resulting in crisis.

The dystopian dimension of the play is thus not defined by external catastrophe but by internal contradiction. The breakdown of the system arises from its own operational logic rather than from external threats. Narratively, this marks a structural reconfiguration in which the organizing principle of idealization gives way to fragmentation, instability, and the proliferation of uncontrollable elements.

As the artificial bodies attempt to leave the enclosed environment, the stage itself ceases to function as a stable site of control and becomes a transitional space marked by displacement and instability.

5.3 Artificial Bodies as Sites of Contradiction

This transformation culminates in a radical assertion of subjectivity, articulated when Vân B insists: “Chúng ta là người, là người” [We are human – truly human] (Nhà hát Tuổi Trẻ, 2018). This declaration does not merely claim identity but actively redefines it, destabilizing the boundary between human and machine and revealing subjectivity as a constructed and contested category.

Liên B and Vân B function as sites in which multiple contradictions converge. As artificial constructs, they embody the technological ambition to replicate and perfect human life; at the same time, their

autonomy challenges the very foundations of this ambition. They are simultaneously products of control and agents of disruption.

This duality aligns with posthumanist perspectives that emphasize the instability of boundaries between human and machine. The artificial bodies resist classification as either objects or subjects, occupying instead a liminal position that destabilizes fixed notions of identity.

Their resistance also foregrounds the ethical implications of Hoàng's project. The failure of Hoàng's system becomes explicit when Liên B rejects the role imposed upon her, stating: "Em không thể tiếp tục yêu anh" [I can no longer continue to love you] (Nhà hát Tuổi Trẻ, 2018). This moment marks a decisive shift from programmed affection to autonomous subjectivity, exposing the impossibility of sustaining utopian control over emotional life. By reducing human relationships to objects of control, the system negates autonomy and agency. The rebellion of the artificial bodies can therefore be understood as a re-assertion of ethical subjectivity, challenging the legitimacy of systems grounded in domination.

In this sense, the artificial bodies operate as posthuman figures through which utopian desire, dystopian collapse, and heterotopic tension intersect, making them central to the play's narrative and theoretical structure.

6. Heterotopic Theatre and Alternative Spatiality

6.1 Theatre as a Semi-Autonomous Institutional Space

The significance of *Blue Daisy in the Swamp* is fully realized through its staging within theatrical space. In 1980s Hanoi, theatre occupied a complex position as both a state-supported institution and a site of relative interpretive freedom. This dual status establishes theatre as a heterotopic space in the Foucauldian sense: a site embedded within the social order yet actively capable of reconfiguring its structures (Brandon, 2012; Diamond, 2005).

As a semi-autonomous space, theatre enables the articulation of critique as a mediated and indirect process. Rather than confronting ideological structures directly, playwrights employ allegory, symbolism,

and narrative ambiguity to explore sensitive issues. This strategy allows audiences to engage with critical perspectives while remaining within the boundaries of acceptable discourse.

In this sense, theatrical space operates not as a passive setting but as a constitutive dimension of the narrative system, shaping how tensions between utopia and dystopia are produced, mediated, and collectively experienced.

6.2 Spectatorship and Collective Interpretation

The heterotopic nature of theatre is further reinforced through spectatorship. Unlike other cultural forms, theatre produces a collective interpretive process in which audiences actively participate in the construction of meaning. This shared engagement creates a dynamic interplay between stage and audience, allowing meaning to emerge through interaction.

For audiences in late socialist Vietnam, this collective dimension is particularly significant. Theatre constitutes a space in which individuals recognize and negotiate the contradictions of their social environment. The allegorical structure of Vũ's play invites multiple interpretations, enabling viewers to connect the narrative with their own experiences (Diamond, 1997, 2005).

The audience does not encounter the contradiction from an external position but experiences it simultaneously with the performers through co-presence and temporal immediacy.

Through this process, spectatorship becomes a constitutive dimension of the play's critical function, transforming theatrical space into a site where narrative contradiction is collectively interpreted and re-configured. The heterotopic space of theatre thus facilitates a form of collective reflection that extends beyond the performance itself, generating a shared mode of critical engagement that persists beyond the theatrical event.

6.3 The Blue Daisy as a Heterotopic Symbol

The image of the blue daisy blooming in a swamp crystallizes the heterotopic logic of the play. The swamp signifies decay, instability, and disorder, while the blue daisy represents a fragile emergence of beauty

and meaning. This juxtaposition mirrors the narrative dynamic in which disruption generates new forms of understanding.

Importantly, this symbol does not resolve the tensions between utopia and dystopia but holds them in a state of unresolved suspension. The blue daisy is neither a realized utopia nor a mere illusion; rather, it marks a contingent and transient possibility within a contradictory environment. In this sense, it embodies the coexistence of incompatible elements without collapsing them into a unified whole.

As such, the blue daisy functions not merely as a symbolic image but as a condensed narrative device that brings together memory, desire, and impossibility, reinforcing the play's exploration of alternative spatial and conceptual configurations.

Taken together, these elements reveal that heterotopia in the play operates not simply as a spatial concept but as a narrative configuration in which performance, spectatorship, and symbolism converge. Within this configuration, utopian aspiration, dystopian collapse, and emergent forms of possibility are not resolved but held in productive tension.

6.4 Escape, Reconfiguration, and the Limits of Alternative Spatiality

Beyond its function as a heterotopic space, theatre in *Blue Daisy in the Swamp* also enables moments of escape and reconfiguration. These moments should not be understood as simple acts of liberation from systemic control, but rather as complex and unstable movements that expose both the limits and the persistence of the system itself. The attempt to leave or exceed the structures imposed by Hoàng's project does not lead to a fully realized alternative space; instead, it produces a transitional condition in which new forms of subjectivity and spatiality begin to emerge.

This dynamic becomes particularly visible when the artificial bodies seek to move beyond the controlled environment – “Ta phải đi khỏi đây” [We must leave this place] (Nhà hát Tuổi Trẻ, 2018). The utterance marks a decisive shift from containment to displacement: escape is articulated not as an abstract possibility but as an immediate, embodied imperative. Yet this movement does not secure a stable

“outside.” Rather, it reveals the difficulty of exiting a system that operates through both material constraints and internalized norms. The desire to leave thus exposes the persistence of the system within the very act of departure.

Such moments of reconfiguration align with the heterotopic logic identified throughout this chapter. If heterotopia functions as a space in which incompatible elements coexist, then escape can be understood as a process that intensifies this coexistence rather than resolving it. The movement beyond control does not eliminate contradiction but redistributes it, producing new configurations in which autonomy and constraint remain intertwined. In this way, the play resists the notion that alternative spaces exist outside dominant systems, suggesting instead that they are generated from within them.

On stage, this movement toward escape is visualized through bodily displacement and spatial separation, transforming abstraction into a concrete theatrical experience shared by the audience.

The theatrical dimension of the play further complicates this process. Because performance unfolds in real time and in the presence of spectators, moments of escape are not only narrated but enacted. The audience witnesses the instability of the system as it unfolds, participating in a shared experience of transition and uncertainty. This co-presence transforms escape into a collective event, reinforcing the role of theatre as a heterotopic site in which alternative possibilities are both imagined and contested.

Importantly, these moments do not culminate in resolution. The play does not offer a clear vision of what lies beyond the collapse of the system, nor does it present autonomy as a stable endpoint. Instead, it foregrounds the ongoing negotiation between control and resistance, structure and contingency. Escape thus emerges not as a definitive break but as a condition of continuous reconfiguration.

In this sense, *Blue Daisy in the Swamp* suggests that alternative spatiality is not defined by the existence of an external “outside,” but by the capacity to rework and reconfigure the conditions of the present from within. The possibility of transformation lies not in overcoming contradiction, but in sustaining and navigating it as an ongoing process.

7. Discussion: Socialist Modernity, Embodiment, and Systemic Contradiction

This chapter demonstrates that utopian and dystopian imaginaries do not function as stable representations but as dynamic processes produced through narrative form and performance.

Rather than treating utopia, dystopia, and heterotopia as fixed conceptual categories, this analysis understands them as narrative operations. Utopia functions as a structuring desire that organizes the narrative around idealization; dystopia emerges as the internal disruption of this structure; and heterotopia operates as a spatial and performative condition that allows these tensions to coexist without resolution.

Taken together, the analysis of *Blue Daisy in the Swamp* reveals a multilayered critique of socialist modernity articulated through artificial bodies, narrative transformation, and theatrical space. The play demonstrates how these dimensions are not discrete but mutually constitutive, forming a dynamic system in which control and instability are inherently intertwined.

At the core of this system are the artificial bodies, Liên B and Vân B, which function as critical sites where ideological, technological, and ethical tensions converge. Their creation reflects a utopian desire to construct ideal subjects – stable, rational, and controllable – aligned with broader socialist efforts to regulate human behavior through institutional and scientific frameworks.

However, this utopian impulse proves inherently unstable. The attempt to eliminate difference and unpredictability generates the conditions for resistance, revealing the limits of rationalized subjectivity. Dystopia thus emerges not as an external failure but as an internal consequence of the system's own logic.

The theatrical dimension of the play further complicates this dynamic. As a heterotopic space, theatre enables the staging and negotiation of contradictions that cannot be directly addressed within official discourse. Through performance and spectatorship, narrative tensions are not only represented but collectively experienced, transforming theatre into a site of critical reflection.

The symbolic figure of the blue daisy reinforces this heterotopic logic. Emerging within a space of decay, it represents a fragile and contingent possibility that resists both utopian idealization and dystopian closure, suggesting that alternative possibilities emerge not outside instability but from within it.

In this sense, the play demonstrates that narratives do not simply represent ideal or failed systems, but actively produce and destabilize them through their formal and performative structures.

Vietnamese critical reception underscores the play's enduring relevance, emphasizing its capacity to address contemporary concerns through allegorical representation. At the same time, transnational interpretations – including those discussed in *Critical Stages/Scènes critiques* – highlight how its meanings continue to shift across different cultural contexts, reinforcing its significance as a dynamic and globally resonant work (Đỗ, 2018; Đặng, 2024).

8. Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates that *Blue Daisy in the Swamp* does not merely represent the tension between utopia and dystopia, but actively produces it as a dynamic narrative process structured through posthuman embodiment and heterotopic theatrical space.

Through the figure of artificial bodies, the play exposes the limits of attempts to engineer ideal subjects and regulate human relationships through technological and ideological systems. The emergence of autonomy transforms utopian aspiration into dystopian fragmentation, revealing the instability inherent in systems predicated on control.

At the same time, the heterotopic space of theatre enables these contradictions to be staged, negotiated, and collectively experienced. Narrative, space, and spectatorship converge to produce a site in which competing logics of order and disruption coexist without resolution.

The image of the blue daisy crystallizes this condition, representing a fragile and contingent possibility that emerges from within instability rather than outside it. Rather than resolving contradiction, it sustains

it as a productive condition for reimagining subjectivity and social relations.

In this sense, the play demonstrates that utopia, dystopia, and heterotopia function not as fixed categories but as interdependent processes generated through narrative form. More broadly, it suggests that any system seeking total control inevitably generates the conditions of its own collapse – not as failure, but as a structural necessity.

References

- Brandon, J. R. (2012). *Communities of imagination: Southeast Asian contemporary theatres*. University of Hawai'i Press.
- Đỗ, H. N. (2018). Tính thời sự và ý nghĩa nhân văn trong *Hoa cúc xanh trên đầm lầy*. <https://www.chungta.com/nd/tu-lieu-tra-cuu/tinh-thoi-su-y-nghia-nhan-van-trong-hoa-cuc-xanh-tren-dam-lay.html>
- Diamond, C. (1997). Vietnam's contemporary theatre and the Pandora's box of Đổi Mới, the "open-door policy." *New Theatre Quarterly*, 13(4), 372–385.
- Diamond, C. (2005). Palimpsest of Vietnamese contemporary spoken drama. *Theatre Research International*, 30(3), 207–232.
- Foucault, M. (1984). Of other spaces. *Architecture / Mouvement / Continuité*, (5), 46–49.
- Haraway, D. (1991). A cyborg manifesto. In *Simians, cyborgs and women: The reinvention of nature* (pp. 149–181). Routledge.
- Hayles, N. K. (1999). *How we became posthuman: Virtual bodies in cybernetics, literature, and informatics*. University of Chicago Press.
- Jameson, F. (2005). *Archaeologies of the future: The desire called utopia and other science fictions*. Verso.
- Knitcap Theater. (2025). *Numa ni saku aoi hinagiku (Blue Daisy in the Swamp)*. <https://knitcap.jp/hinagiku/>
- Nhà hát Tuổi Trẻ. (n.d.). *Hoa cúc xanh trên đầm lầy*. <https://nhahattuoi-tre.vn/event/hcxttl/detail>
- Nhà hát Tuổi Trẻ. (2018). *Hoa cúc xanh trên đầm lầy* [Stage performance, Hanoi].
- Nobe, Y. (2025a). Cultural policy and market mechanisms in Vietnamese performing arts. *Taisho University Journal*, 110, 282–296.

Nobe, Y. (2025b). What a blue daisy can bring to contemporary Vietnamese theatre: Translated performances of Vietnamese drama. *Critical Stages/Scènes critiques*. <https://www.critical-stages.org/>

Nobe, Y. (2026). The intersection of popular art and humanism: A comparative cultural study of Osamu Tezuka and Lưu Quang Vũ. *Taisho University Journal*, 111, 112–130.

Đặng, H. (2024). Văn học Việt về cyborg: *Hoa cúc xanh trên đầm lầy*. <https://tiasang.com.vn/van-hoc-viet-ve-cyborg-nguoi-may-hoa-cuc-xanh-tren-dam-lay-4967457.html>

Reimagining Philanthropic Websites as Heterotopic Spaces: Digital Narratives of Crises, Deviation and Vulnerability among Children

Fredrica Markson Eduafu¹

1. Introduction

For many people, the digital space has become a quintessential element in modern society.

Its nature affords the opportunity to connect with people who otherwise would have been far removed from one another, to connect to spaces which would have remained nothing more than prints on geopolitical maps, and to connect to ideas that (re)shape and challenge our sense of identity and belonging. Perhaps, its most defining quality is in its ability to collapse our traditional understandings of material borders into a seamless stretch of thought, allowing us to simultaneously shrink spaces while extending our bodies beyond our physical, imaginative, discursive and geographical limitations (Kirsch, 1995; Clolfi, 2004; Richardson, 2024). By its very nature, the digital space is a creating technology that invites us into new ways of seeing, knowing and experiencing the world. For example, like the mirror, the digital space by its nature has the curious quality of positioning the user

there, where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986, p. 24).

It is also in this paradoxical capacity of presenting the real and unreal, the here and there that makes the digital space inherently liminal.

Within this context, I point to the philanthropic website as one example of a digital space that actively partakes in this liminality between the private and the public, the here and the now, the present

¹ Ph.D., Johns Hopkins University, Krieger School of Arts and Sciences, University Writing Program, ORCID: 0009-0008-4134-6389, Email: fduafu1@jh.edu

and the absent. Again, this same liminality invites us to critically interrogate what a philanthropic website is within and beyond its narrativity, organizational goals and what Moody (2022) calls “the age of scrutiny” of philanthropic work (para 1). Taking Foucault’s spatial concept of heterotopia as our entry point to addressing the tension between what a philanthropic website is and what vulnerable subjectivities it represents, we ask: what ideologies and identities are mirrored, contested and inverted on a philanthropic website? And if this space is a creating technology that concurrently orients our perception and ways of seeing, then what kind of subject comes into being through its narrative design, and what kind of rhetorical value is afforded such as subject?

These questions become relevant in the wake of criticisms leveled against philanthropic organizations in postcolonial and humanitarian scholarship, and within digital media outlets. For instance, Chouliaraki (2012) critiques the surge in celebrity advocacy in current humanitarian practices where humanitarian crises are carefully arranged in what she calls a “theater of pity” – a phenomenon where celebrities are used as mediators who present images and suffering in Othered spaces to a Western audience to generate measured emotional responses and actions. This practice, she argues, creates a culture of “voyeuristic altruism” which generates the needed visibility and connection with celebrities instead of the actual suffering of people (Chouliaraki, 2012, p.16). Nickel and Eikenberry (2009) on their part provides a critique of the growing culture of marketization in philanthropic activities as this practice systematically leads to the depoliticization of critical socio-political issues, thereby limiting its “potential to represent the need for and bring about social change” (p. 974). Similarly, Howard’s (2017) article on Aljazeera, *When NGOs save children who don’t want to be saved*, gives a vivid description of how philanthropic organizations position children as victims of trafficking and coerced labor force. He argued that this lop-sidedness in philanthropic storytelling leaves room for the “raids-and-rescue-mission” of these children which leaves them worse off from their initial socio-economic situation (para. 13). While all these provide an active foundation for paying close attention to the organizing principles of

philanthropic organization, a good number of recent scholarship use either the physical geopolitical locations as their sites of inquiry or focus on the digital design of the websites. I expand the scholarly sentiments of these researchers and media personnels by taking the ontological nature of philanthropic websites – a key component of philanthropic communicative acts – as my starting point and analytical site.

Grounding the analysis of these philanthropic websites within Foucault's spatial theory of heterotopia and critical issues in postcolonial scholarship, I argue that, 1. The websites of international philanthropic organizations that work with children, particularly those organizations located in formerly colonized spaces in Africa, function like the Foucauldian heterotopic ship that organizes, controls and frames imaginaries for donors and users of the space; 2. As a digital heterotopia par excellence, the websites' ontological framing ultimately leads to the construction of the platformed African child whose existence is solely maintained through curated images, narratives of difference and appeals that renders this type of child as an assemblage of consumable forms. As such, this type of child is simultaneously single and multiple, present and an abstraction, stable and ever-forming but always leading towards a voiceless, non-agentive figure who is always objectified. Also, grounding our understanding of philanthropic websites within a Foucauldian heterotopic framework allows us to "problematize received knowledge [on these spaces] by revealing and destabilizing the ground or operating table on which knowledge [about recipients of philanthropic donations] are built" (Topinka, 2010, p.56). This understanding is most critical in recognizing the urgency for the reframing of this space generally, and the demand for the reconceptualization of the identity of the resulting platform figure of the African child. Again, this same understanding becomes pertinent when we recognize that this challenge persists, in spite of recent attempts by a number of philanthropic websites to scrub stereotypical images of children in need of aid from the Global South (Madianou, 2021; Manzo, 2008; and Al-Tabbaa et al., 2021).

Contrastively, I contend that this redeemable work of reframing what it means to be an African child, can be achieved within the very

heterotopic discursive frame that produces it. These reculturation goals allow for an alternative reading and engagement from donors specifically, and global audiences more broadly. The heterotopic remediation repositions the redeemed construction of the African child as a site of care, relationality and ethical encounter. Thus, instead of offering constraint, a new heterotopic reframing of the website offers the possibilities of re-seeing, the creation of interpresence and engagement amongst users, donors and recipients of the website (Topinka, 2010). The next few sections of this chapter attempt to tie all of these questions and concerns together as I position philanthropic websites first as heterotopic spaces whose underlying qualities lead to the construction of the constrained African child both within and outside philanthropic discourses. Second, I engage with the construction of the platformed African child, juxtaposing it against western and global kinds of childhoods. Drawing from discursive representation of sampled philanthropic websites such as World Vision International and Compassion International, I contend with the potential implications of this framing and how it eventually collapses the identities of platformed and material African child, and childhood into one ontological reality. While the goal of this chapter is not to reduce the work that these organizations do for children in precarious social and material conditions to sensationalism, it is certainly my intention to highlight the paradoxical nature of their work and argue that it is within this constricting nature of the heterotopia that a reculturation practice of African childhood may emerge.

2. A Spatial Construction of Philanthropic Websites: A Heterotopic Framework

The philanthropic website has for the past few decades gained ambivalent attention from many scholars within postcolonial, technical and humanitarian communication scholarships for a number of reasons. Scholarship on the subject is divided between the website's usability and structural functions. For instance, Yao and Kuo (2024) focusing on the immateriality of the digital space provides a design critique to charity focused websites. Using an eye-tracking technological

approach, they argued that different iconographic styles greatly affect the donation habits of users of these websites. They posited that positive feeling iconographies tend to produce similar feelings amongst their research participants which in turn helped boost donations. Similar to the thoughts of Yao and Kuo (2024), Rimawati et al. (2025) argued for the extension of the digital presence of philanthropic organizations beyond the website. Their study, which focused on the donation habits of netizens in relation to philanthropic work on their websites and other social media platforms, concludes that official websites of these organizations still function as spaces for legitimacy and credibility for philanthropic work across the world. Zarzycka (2016) on their part focused on the persuasive strategies used by philanthropic organizations on their website by critiquing the exploitative use of children iconographies as “visual tropes” for philanthropic gains. These images, they argue, are “deployed to create remorse among aggressors, dialogue among policy-makers, and empathy among global audiences” (para. 2). Whether emaciated or smiling, the faces of children on these philanthropic websites “configures financial help as an affective, rather than economic, relationship between the donor and the beneficiary” (para. 5).

In this section, I take a slightly different position from the engaging works of the scholars above by situating the philanthropic website within a spatial conversation. Specifically, I position philanthropic websites as a heterotopia, a Foucauldian spatial orientation that allows us to “foreground the entanglement of the spatial and the discursive” (p. 30). Philanthropic websites, considered spatially from a heterotopic framework, helps in “finding out where, how and for whom difference [between spaces, ideology, people] erupts and maintains itself” (Saldanha, 2007, p. 2081). Considered as a heterotopic space also, the philanthropic websites function like a “counter-site, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted” (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986, p. 24). In this sense, the philanthropic website at its core is “a place rarely innocent, dimensionless, or without the affirmative authority of discursive discipline” (Saldanha, 2007, p. 2081, citing Said, 1978, p.701).

In the same vein, they can not be said to be ontologically “homogeneous and empty...a kind of void inside of which we could place individuals and things... or could be colored with diverse shreds of light” as the time of its construction (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986, p. 24).

In many ways, a philanthropic website functioning as a “counter-site” is a space which not only represents and converges what is immediately visible in society but also reworks existing frames of reference towards a particular notion, orientation, organization, perception and experience. Drawing on Foucault’s explanation of this counter-site in his work *Of Other Spaces*, the ontological nature of the philanthropic website demands the convergence of many things: socio-political precarity, the material needs and lives of people from different geopolitical spaces and diverse forms of philanthropic interventions. Like other digital spaces, its nature allows us to see the world at a glance which otherwise might not have been entirely possible. Thus, a visit to any philanthropic website’s interface feels like a “world within worlds,” one that brings together different aspects of social, political, cultural and economic realities while simultaneously setting it apart from that of the lived experience of the user of the website. Interestingly, it can be considered as a site where worlds collide digitally yet remain physically distinct. As an “effectively enacted utopia” it separates and juxtaposes the “perfectly” organized, comfortable lives of the (potential) donor and users of the website from the precarious, unstable lives of the people whose lives are made visible in this space (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986, p.24). As such, the precarity depicted on the website does not bleed into the normalcy of the everyday lives of the user.

There are a couple of ways to envision the ontological logic of the heterotopic nature of the websites that I depict here. One, the philanthropic website in most senses can be considered to be a digital extension of the organizing heterotopic logic of the material philanthropic sites in many places. In many philanthropic organizations’ spaces in Africa for example, it is largely the case that philanthropic sites bring together schools, aid centers, orphanages, hospitals and churches in one locatable place, while also becoming a converging site for political and social organizing logics in global capital,

humanitarian interventions and local precarity. They also actively take part in the contestation and inversion of the lives of society and individuals they inhabit around the same logic of intervention and visibility. In a sense, the website becomes the other half of the mirror analogy Foucault and Miskowiec (1986) use to describe the “joint, mixed experience” of being in a heterotopia (p. 24). Second, as a digital extension of the heterotopic philanthropic material site, the website helps further shrink different material locations of the same philanthropic sites scattered globally into one site. For instance, *World Vision International* has over a thousand places of operations spread across a hundred countries on five continents (World Vision International) while *Children International* has over sixty-seven community centers in ten countries (Children International Global Map). Even as these material sites are spread across different geopolitical spaces, they all come together on the digital heterotopic philanthropic website. This social compression makes socio-cultural and political issues and situations digestible instead of nuanced.

It is within the philanthropic website’s ability to simultaneously represent and invert society that we fully see the enactment of the principles that established it, and to clearly envision how the relationship between the digital and physical philanthropic spaces (re)defines the connection that exists between people, their agency and identities. For example, not only are heterotopias seen in every culture but are organized around the principles of crisis and deviation. Even as crisis heterotopias, defined as “privileged, sacred or forbidden places” with no “geographical markers” are disappearing in modern society, I argue that the digital philanthropic websites remain as one of the enduring remnants of this type of heterotopia (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986, p. 25). While the users of the websites cannot be said to be in a state of crisis, the websites become a converging place to people and society considered to be in a state of crisis due to wars or other kinds of socio-cultural upheavals. These people, in relation to other kinds of global political structuring are considered to be in crisis, directly or indirectly. Additionally, the philanthropic websites themselves are organized around a framework of crisis and vulnerability. Even so, I argue that the websites of these philanthropic organizations also

operationalize the principles of deviation heterotopia in its ability to contain “individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required means or norms” (Foucault and Miskowiec, 1986, p.25).

In the past few decades, we witnessed the active standardization of socio-cultural, political and economic logics within global discourses. Arguably, these standards which are western and eurocentric determine the binaries of what is acceptable and unacceptable, right and wrong in relation to intersubjective engagement. This situation is further exacerbated by the formalization of global rights laws which further flattens differences between people, cultures and societies (Buitetweg, 2007). Thus, deviation is not always articulated in the Foucauldian sense of individuals such as those in the prisons or psychiatric hospitals “whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm” (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986, p. 25). Rather, deviation can be viewed from the perspective of anyone whose situations, outlook or culture positions them outside the frame of the western/eurocentric global socio-cultural determinations. In this sense, the philanthropic website in its deviation framework organizes people whose lives fall outside established norms of health, development, security amongst others. This understanding, of course, does not dismiss the fact that children who are caught in global socio-economic and political upheavals live in precarious conditions which threaten the quality of life available to them. Instead, it points to the fact that the heterotopic framework of the website which follows largely the operational logic of philanthropic work renders differences and diversity in lived experiences and orientations of different cultures, especially in the Global South, as forms of deviation. In this way, the website as a heterotopia of crisis does not only flatten differences amongst ethnic groups and societies in the Global South for example, but also shapes how differences are made visible, framed and interacted with by the users of the website.

It is precisely this need to flatten the differences between societies within global developmental discourses that gives the philanthropic website its characteristic structural and functional dynamism. As an ever-changing space, the philanthropic website imagined as digital heterotopic site is enthralled in an ever evolving cycle of change

between its interface and narratives. The characteristic fluidity of philanthropic websites can be imagined in a couple of ways. Arguably, the creation of the philanthropic website and the demand for its usage began first as an emergency platform where people, mostly western donors, could visit during precarious conditions in material spaces to donate “to a good cause”. Such causes were often time-bound in nature.

Over time, the website’s functions while still maintaining some of its initial usage has expanded to include a multitude of other things. They now function as a significant narrative place where these organizations not only carve out their ethos but also create a world which is endearing to the western gaze and maintains a solicitation model. For instance, philanthropic websites such as that of *World Vision* (worldvision.org) and *Children International* (children.org) feature a mix of sponsorship and blog pages, as well as news pages that are connected to their other forms of visibility on social media platforms. Thus, just as the cemetery as a heterotopia shifts from being at the heart of the city, so has the website moved from an emergency accessibility space to an essential structural space for philanthropic imagining, communication and survival. Additionally, as an emergency platform for philanthropic work which connects users of the platform to the ongoing projects of the organization, it has overtime changed to become a place that connects the users and donors to the child in the immediate sense. This connection sometimes results in the physical meeting of these actors on the website mediated by the philanthropic organization (Children International, 2026). On one hand, the website becomes a space where users and sponsors can curate a philanthropic identity, one that is constructed through a number of affective strategies and philanthropic marketing activities on the websites. For example, *Children International* uses a day count approach to tag the children who are queued for sponsors on their website. Angel, an eleven year old girl from Zambia’s image, for instance, comes with the tag “Waiting for 214 days.” This move courts a specific affective value while also discursively invoking a marketing technique where goods are marked up or down (Children International, 2026). The victims (or children), on the other hand, must trade their dignity and agency for the possibility of auctioning off their

precarious condition to the right donor. Thus, the website's temporality is witnessed in the movement between a space for soliciting for emergency funding to the curation of permanent organizational visibility and narrative control mechanism. Narrativity and increased visibility is tied to its monetization strategy as there is a shift from private transactions to public show of care through the many publicly displayed bargaining activities on the platforms. It is argued here that the double bind between the crisis and deviation heterotopic quality of the website, together with its temporal nature, leads to a dangerous suspension of history between the donor, children and philanthropic organizations (Hardt and Negri, 2001). Drawing on the ideas of the colonial histories of philanthropic organizations in Hardt and Negri (2001), Salvatici (2019) and Simmon (2011), which evidently ties together the principle of the changing ontological nature of philanthropic websites, one can observe that suspending social and political history of all stakeholders on the websites creates an environment where the websites serve to sanitize the messiness of history, systemic poverty and global politics. Recognizing the neoliberal and hegemonic history of philanthropy via their websites allows us to imagine the distinct "logics, moods and norms" that make up the framing of the philanthropic website (Wesselman et al., 2020, p. 21). Thus, this principle presents a linear ideology of a people caught in a perpetual cycle of need while excluding the more complex and nuanced relationship between the two actors on the website. Perhaps, a heterotopia's ability to change its usefulness accounts for its ability to discontinue or accumulate time. When time becomes a transitory construction, the heterotopic site provides its occupants with a fragmented experience of time. Conversely, it also serves as a space that accumulates time and "protects all time in one space" like the museum and the library (Johnson, 2006. p.79). However, there are a few spaces, such as the holiday spots that can provide time in both configurations. I argue that the philanthropic website is one of those heterotopias that "integrates both types of heterochronies" (Johnson, 2006, p. 79). The website accumulates projects, ideas, events, people of all places over time stored in different sections on the website. Added to this is the accumulation of curated forms of suffering, narratives in the present and the past of different geopolitical locations and identities on

the same site. For example, through the use of designs and narrative strategies, *Save the Children* accumulates time through their “Our Impact” page as it becomes a collection of their “more than 100 years of work” as well as their ongoing programs. Further, monetary donations of \$30–\$600 (Save the Children, 2026) become calculable in time on this website when donations become equated to days, months and years time worth. Save the Children’s website is not an isolated case in the temporal accumulation quality of philanthropic websites. On the website of World Vision, time is accumulated through the layering of time into a repeatable endless loop of “every 60 seconds”. Additionally, the “Celebrate progress through sponsorship” section features a live update of children who are being helped thus throwing users of the websites into an endless accumulation of success stories (World Vision, 2026). This feature also speaks of the fleeting movement of time through the constant changes of information on the website. Using a rhetoric of urgency and precarity, users get the sense that donation is time bound if the lives of the children are to be saved. Time then becomes an essential commodity on the website. Using words such as “Donate Now” or “Sponsor this Child Today” on the home page of *Save the Children International* and *Children International* respectively, speaks of the ideas of philanthropic urgency and the bounded nature of time (Children International, 2026). As a time slice, the website disrupts the assumed linear flow of time in these two ways thereby creating the perfect heterotopia. The site remains open as long as the user is on the website or when the donation is made and time is suspended when the user logs out of the website.

Accumulating and dispersing time for different narratives, people and motives requires strategic siloing that becomes an obvious feature of the digital philanthropic website. As these different elements are compartmentalized to meet the individual needs of users and donors, organizers of websites are able to apply the heterotopic “system of openings and closing that both isolates and makes them penetrable” (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986, p. 26). An example of a system of opening and closing would be Children International’s website, which seems open for viewing, contains a closed off section that can only be accessed when one has a *MyCl account* (Children International,

2026). To access this closed off section, a user of the website needs to have undergone the ritual of becoming a donor who has a site account number. In other words, access is only granted when the ritual of either donating or at least creating an account is performed. To many users, creating an account becomes their opening to often Othered spaces such as the Global South. In many ways, the philanthropic website grants an opening access to the photographs, locations, living conditions and ages of children who otherwise would have remained hidden to users. On the flip side, the system remains closed to the children on the website who cannot have access to the people who view them on a daily basis. This digital access to the lives of children to a large extent makes the exchange between donors and the children follow a panopticon model which provides a one way viewing trajectory from the donor to the child. The digital image of the child places them at the viewing pleasure of the donor.

Consequently, as a fully functioning heterotopic site, all the principles of the digital philanthropic heterotopia work in tandem in creating a “perfectly enacted utopia” where only a carefully curated Being which I call the platformed postcolonial child is allowed to exist (Johnson, 2006, p. 28; Foucault, 1987). In the section that follows, I provide a detailed description of this type of child, its negotiated relation with the users and donors as well as the violence of this representation in the digital spaces, and its extension to the material philanthropic sites.

3. On Being Here and There: The Curious Case of the Digital Postcolonial Child

When Foucault proposed the existence of heterotopic sites in modern society, he argued that heterotopias have a mirror-like quality wherein

“I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent.” (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986, p. 24).

The mirror allows us to see multiple realities at once and invites us to complicate what we see. It is within this mirror-like understanding of the website’s heterotopic framing that I position the makings of the

platformed postcolonial African child – a child whose reality is simultaneously single and multiple, present and an abstraction, stable and ever-forming but always leading towards a voiceless, non-agentive figure who is always objectified. Thus, whereas I articulated the formation of a heterotopic philanthropic website as a site sustained by its peculiar narrativity and discourses, I argue here that this narrativity simultaneously demands a revisit of our conceptualisation of the children generally, and the postcolonial African child, specifically, as we encounter them when we visit these websites. To interrogate the ontology of the digital African child within a heterotopic spatial conversation, one needs to critically look to what Foucault and Moore (1964) considers to be the “gaps, distance, the intermediary, dispersion, fracture and difference” that insidiously exists on the website (p. 163). Just as Topinka (2010) used the metaphor of the operating table to argue that the rearing property of the heterotopia is deducible through the way that “objects on the operating table allows us to separate them into discreet entities”, I argue that through an understanding of what is said, unsaid, assumed on the website, we can make similar assumptions about who or what this African child is both on the space and to the donors (p. 56). The granular qualities become the iconographies, the different levels of entry points for donors, children’s biographical markers, progress reports and different versions of success stories.

In this section, therefore, we are being called to reexamine our understanding of the African child specifically (and for the most part all other children on the website), and how it aligns with the construction of the postcolonial human. This understanding is critical for two main reasons: 1. The digital philanthropic website as a site that brings together multiple spaces, has connections to sites which are ontologically different. Even though by its nature, a heterotopic website becomes a nexus for multiple real sites, it does not contain the various material orphanages and schools scattered in many areas in Africa. 2. By interrogating and problematizing our experiences as users and sponsors of the websites, we get to confront our perception of who the postcolonial African child is in totality as well as the economies that produce it. As such, a continuing claim in this section of the

chapter is that the heterotopic nature of philanthropic website creates the idea of the digital African child and childhood, at least through its narratives of crisis, deviation and vulnerability, and this type of childhood is simultaneously sustained via the same means in physical interactions between the donor and the children in physical philanthropic spaces.

Drawing from the social ordering nature of Simmel's space (Lechner, 1991), we begin to see how the "bounded space makes any social order more concrete and intensely experiential" (p.198). Within this narrative is a recurring idea that "everything that can possibly be said has already been said: it contains all conceived and imagined languages, and even those which might be conceived or imagined; everything has been pronounced, even those things without meaning" (Foucault, 2019, p. 99). It is against this backdrop that I interrogate the ontological makeup of the digital African child. This child, I argue, has consistently been typecasted as a site of vulnerability, crisis and deviation. To fully articulate the image of the digital African child and by extension childhood, I want to spend some time on the three main actors in this space: the philanthropic organization, the users/donors of the site and the children who are considered recipients of philanthropic generosity.

The African child's face stands for "vulnerability, dependence and innocence" (Zarzyeka, 2016, para. 26). This vulnerability is constructed through a series of marketing markers on the website. On *Children International's* and *Compassion International* websites, for instance, phrases like "*my cart*" and "*your basket is empty*" express a kind of digital shopping experience. This becomes a way for users to keep track of their "purchases" after shopping a pre-given list of children's profiles (the inventory) where a buyer can even customize their purchase through filters by expressing their preferred "age", "day and month of birth", and "first name". I argue that using these marketing structures in their sponsorship engagements reduces these children to consumable goods. In effect, as an ordering space, the websites through their narrative markers disrupt the actual complexity of the child's life to reorder it into a specific marketable and philanthropic worthy identity.

It must be acknowledged that attempting to fit this structuring into a perfect mould for discussion does not always work especially as sponsoring, gift giving and the ethical implications of presenting African children to fit into the capitalist sensibilities of the Western donor and the foundational framing of philanthropy in general. Considering that heterotopias are in themselves mirrors that highlight existing social relationships (Wesselman et al., 2020), then the (neo)colonial history and relations established through this marketization of the African child should not be lost in this conversation. In this regard, the digital viewing of the children under philanthropic care on the websites, the pick and drop categorization of the children as well as the purchasing connotation that comes with sponsorship echoes of colonial display and subsequent sale of slaves in slave markets. Klein (2001) concretizes this understanding of the relationality between this digital philanthropic practice and its connection to the sale of slaves in their account of the slave trade and the makings of decentralized society when they point to the “the importance of age grades” in the slave markets as “the Balanta would only take male children who could be absorbed into them” (p. 59). Similarly, Canarella and Tomaske (1975) points out the fact that “unlike a free man, a slave cannot react to market wage offers by choosing a work-leisure-income combination which maximizes his utility” (p. 623). While the African child in this context does not necessarily face the physical violence that slaves experienced, we can argue that much like the slave, the African child neither has control over how they are projected nor are they privy to how much they are being “sold” for or even valued within this site.

The use of these marketable metrics in many ways cedes control of the relationship between the user-donor of the website, the philanthropic organization who manages the website, and the African child who indirectly receives the donations to the user. It also creates a linear path of assemblage. Allowing the digital gazing of the child constructs a colonial marketplace experience where the child becomes the product to be inspected, bargained for against other children and possibly shopped. Constructed this way, the digital African child embodies the colonial histories of their society and none of the present conditions of modern African societies. The reduction of the

complexity that makes the postcolonial African child is an “embodiment of the different historical epochs of the continent [the indigenous, colonial and postcolonial]” (Eduaful, 2024, p. 80). This digital child is created to meet the specific capitalist and moral needs of the philanthropic organization and users of the websites respectively. Thus, the African child becomes an object within the global neoliberal whirlpool. Noting that the site of the constitution of power in modern society is the subject and that philanthropic websites heterotopic effects implies that the African child is “dropped into pre-given social worlds that they will never wholly displace” (Wesselman et al, 2020, p. 20). The African child, forever a docile body along with their identity, is manipulated and shaped to become an object that appeases the panopticon gaze of the users, donor and sponsor (Foucault, 1979). As a docile body constructed within the narrative frame that the website allows, the digital African child becomes an object with one goal – to provide the right measure of neediness and gratitude that appeals to and satiates the pleasure of the website’s users. Every gift or donation is greeted with smiles and appreciation. The digital African child identity is constructed and shows up on the website in a way that allows only one kind of existence- the needy and grateful recipient.

Thus, the African child’s identity, at least on the website, is stuck in a perpetual frame of crisis and deviation. In deviation, the African child’s identity, ways of resistance and formation is deemed to be “deviant in relation to the required mean or norms” of childhood captured either in a Westernized childhood conception specifically or a global understanding of how a child shows up (Foucault and Miszkowicz, 1986, p. 25). In stating this, I do not seek to minimize the plight of this child. Instead, I seek to claim space for the African child in this specific heterotopic site where it is apparent that the ultimate goal for the African child is for them to become a western child (Eduaful, 2024). On many philanthropic websites, the figure of the African child is arguably positioned as a deviation to the acceptable norms of western childhood and in most cases seek to affirm normative notions of deprivation of African children for the donor. This framing is entrenched in the ideals of crisis narratives where the

African child's identity is curated in a rhetoric of constant need and suffering. In providing the users and donors with the privilege of looking upon these children, visibility does not become just a way to solicit donations for particular children; it also becomes a way of recognition, identification and representation (Eduaful, 2024).

4. Reimagining the philanthropic website through a double vision heterotopic mirror

The question of “knowing what relationship of propinquity, what types of storage, circulations, marking and classification of human elements should be adopted in a given situation in order to achieve a given end” brings us full circle – the paradoxical recognition of the precarity of the current heterotopic framing of philanthropic websites, its concurrent ability to converge users and donors of different geopolitical spaces towards a worthy social intervention for these children, and the inevitable framing of the voiceless, agentless, deviated digital cum material African child (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986, p.23). While we cannot deny the significance of philanthropic websites in dispersing any philanthropic organization objectives and getting the much needed financial support for children caught in geopolitical tensions and material discomfort, my heterotopic positioning of the websites and the subsequent construction of the digital African child along with the thought of Yao and Kuo (2024), Rimawati et al (2024) and Zarzycka (2016) in humanitarian and technical communication research seem to place the efforts of philanthropic organizations via their websites in a no-win situation. For, to present the impoverished looks of African children, specifically, and for the most part children in other parts of the Global South generally, is to take away their dignity and ability to perform any kind of agentive subjectivity when engaging with users or donors while a more positive and smiley image pushes the discourse of coercion. Of course, we cannot not recognize the importance of donations to the work they do. The problem as has hitherto been articulated variously is located in the current heterotopic spatiality of the website, for they inherently present the philanthropic heterotopic website as an “uncanny, ethically

ambivalent emplacement that fail to straddle the gap between the idealised version of the good society and the intractable worldly realities” (Wesselman et al, 2020, p.25). In this section, I argue that despite the obvious efforts by many philanthropic organizations to restructure their websites taking into consideration the challenges highlighted by many scholars in recent times, it merely ameliorates its ability, unintentional as it may be, to objectify the African child (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986). We are, in fact, still a long way from being able to show the living conditions of these children while not opening them up for the kinds of visibility that the current articulation of the websites affords them. The lives of these children are still being governed by the same “number of oppositions that remained inviolable” that the philanthropic “institutions and practices have not yet dared to break down” (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986, p.23). For instance, while there have been obvious restructuring within many of the bigger philanthropies website to recast the images and narratives of African children in a resilient and empowerment light, these revisions largely contain the same enduring social binarities: the donor vs the recipient, the developed and the developing, the Global North and the Global South. The question that remains is how we can reimagine the ontological nature of the philanthropic website such that we might mitigate, as best as possible, the ontological and epistemic violence caused by their representation of the conditions of the African child, such that we might reach “a point of practical desanctification of space” (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986, p.23).

Bearing in mind that a heterotopic site “celebrates the discontinuity and changeability of existence”, I argue that as long as these binaries persist, the websites will not only delimit what is made visible and invisible in the context of philanthropic discourse but also continue to reproduce the very objectified image of the subservient African child (Johnson, 2013, p. 794). As such, whereas these revisions are commendable, they continue to reproduce a system of social and ontological hierarchies amongst children globally, at the very least. Thus, it is within the very nature of the current heterotopic framing that a true desanctification of this space could occur. Specifically, I articulate a revision of the ontology of philanthropic websites which

goes beyond their capacity to make a specific ordering system between different sites, subjects and relations possible. Instead, its revised heterotopic nature will allow the philanthropic website to become a space where the epistemic and social frames of both user-donor and child-recipient collide evenly and amelioratory, thus allowing for “another order, condition or discourse [to be] realised, at least in part” (Wesselman et al, 2020, p. 21)

By this, we need an ontological reimagination of the philanthropic website which results in a heterotopian effect that topples the asymmetrical relations that exist between the users or donor and the African child. This prior relation, established through a system of panopticon visibility or gazing, that is responsible for the production of the docile body of the African child urgently needs a reframing.

One way to reimagine a reversal of the panopticon framing is through the use of a double vision looking glass idea. As argued in the previous section, the website acts as a mirror where the African child is simultaneously here and there, where the “there” image on the website is gravely distorted and inverted but projected as the real for the donor. Reimagining the website will allow for a new social ordering for both participants on the website to be able to simultaneously gaze upon each other. While the current iteration of the website grants secrecy to the user and visibility to the African child, the double vision looking glass will become a site of vulnerability for both user/donor and child. This way, just as the child’s life is evaluated and judged by the user, the reimagined heterotopia provides the same avenue for the child and everyone else on the platform. Indeed, an argument can be made that some of the children may be too young to even read or understand their projection on the website. However, the goal is to produce an equitable site where the construction of self, other and relation might emerge. The use of the child’s name, location, age, and possible aspirations which are used as vulnerability metrics will produce a similar valuing system for the donor. The goal of producing a concurrent digital footprint for both donor and receiver is to actively break the binary of savior/ victim that exists between these actors and hopefully produce a healthier relationship carved around a notion of a shared global, social and political system. Through this, the child

breaks free from the shackles of the docile body which positions them as a voiceless, agentless object to becoming an active witness to the user's life. Furthermore, the website becomes a place where the burden of global empowerment rests on the collective effort and accountability of all parties in different ways. This modification of the mirror also presents an opportunity to protect the rights of the child under the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF UK, 1989).

Additionally, the projection of one of two possible images of the African child carved around emotional extremities – the miserable or the happy – which projects a linear understanding of growth in this heterotopic reiteration presents the fuller life of children as they exist in everydayness of being. The process of growth for a social subject is complex and more nuanced than what is currently presented on the websites. The goal of this reimagination of the heterotopic websites is to begin to reorient the ways of seeing for the donor or users. Thus, expressions of disappointment, nonchalantness, argumentation, boredom or even refusal become ways to project the different yet mundane levels of growth for children – even the African child who needs assistance. By this, we actively break away from the performativity that is a characteristic quality of the digital philanthropic African child. Resistance to the current ontological frame of the website is activated when the children are allowed, even through iconographies, to challenge the violence of visual representation in multiple ways. Resistance through iconography can be reimagined through possible refusal to have their images displayed, blurred, cancelled out, or any other ways that they choose. This way, we begin the active work of changing the narrative surrounding “African childhood(s) ... and African children as hungry, sick, underprivileged” (Eduaful, 2024, p. 80). The possibility of obtaining support is not hinged on their ability to forgo their right to privacy, exploitation and dignity (UNICEF UK, 1989). This allows the humanitarian organization to maintain the need to show their work without forcing a specific gaze or performance on the child. The child, therefore, is not viewed as just the “white man's burden” (Nieuwenhuys, 2013, p. 4), or as a marginalized being, but as an active socio-political subject.

It is important to mention the possibility of not showing the children at all as it is impossible to adequately measure the level of their understanding of the workings of the digital media and the digital footprint of them that is left behind. There are, in fact, other means that philanthropies via their websites can attain the financial result they need without showcasing the children as objects of pity. If Moinian's (2009) thoughts on "I'm just Me" is anything to go by, then this iteration of the philanthropic website allows the African child to "resist oversimplifications, reductionisms and categorisation" within a western globalizing childhood frame (p. 31). Similarly, if we are to conceive of the fact that children "practice resilience through tacit negotiation between transgression and conformity", then we can in turn imagine the possibility of replacing actual images of the children with their drawings, writings or other kinds of symbolic representations as placeholders for their iconographies (Nieuwenhuys, 2013, p.3). Even as this idea does not totally take away the inherent capitalistic outlook on the website, it certainly reduces the "pick and drop" act that most philanthropic websites provide. Withholding the child's image or any specific identifiable digital footprints offers them protection while also allowing them to curate a digital image on their own terms for the now and the future. It also denies the donor the one-way panopticon gaze while forcing them to engage with the nuanced structural causes of issues such as global western government interference in the development of African societies. This way, donations together with active engagement with global structural and systemic issues become a recurring part of the engagement of the donor on the website. The hope in proposing this idea is to subvert the idea of giving money as a solution to philanthropic problems globally. As a true site of resistance, the historical power dynamic that has existed between the user-donor and the children as recipients of these donations is collapsed. Just as Topinka (2010) posited that "knowledge is produced by a clash of forces", and that heterotopias can suggest a "disjunction among sites and subjects" (Wesselman et al, 2020, p. 20), the proposed heterotopic revision to the philanthropic website which is dialogue-driven will create newer forms of knowledge, narratives and practices.

5. Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the current iteration of philanthropic website ontology captured in its design, narrative and subjective representation, affective valuation and established relations between and within stakeholders, partake in the ongoing digital and material violence against the formation of an active identity for the African child. This understanding leads us to the important realization that the philanthropic websites are concurrently “complex, ethically dissonant spaces and ordering that are often produced in and through the realization of utopian ideals” about the heterotopic workings of philanthropy in many postcolonial regions (Wesselman et al., 2020, p. 25). It has also been argued that it is similarly within this working that we might begin to reimagine them as sites that might create newer forms of social (re)ordering and offering of a new kind of relation and subjectivities. Resistance to the current ontological framing of the philanthropic website becomes a way to imagine this kind of work. In conclusion, a true philanthropic website should actively work at becoming a site where both resistance and reordering become a never ending point of departure against existing epistemic and identity asymmetries.

References

- Al-Tabbaa, O., Lopez, C., Konara, P., & Leach, D. (2021). Nonprofit organizations and social-alliance portfolio size: Evidence from website content analysis. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 93, 147-160.
- Buitengeweg, R. (2007). *Human Rights, Human Plights in a Global Village*. Clarity Press.
- Canarella, G., & Tomaske, J. A. (1975). The optimal utilization of slaves. *The Journal of Economic History*, 35(3), 621-629.
- Children International (2026, April, 30) *Log in or Create Account*, Children International. <https://www.children.org/login#/auth>
- Chouliraki, L. (2012). The theatricality of humanitarianism: A critique of celebrity advocacy. *Communication and critical/cultural studies*, 9(1), 1-21.

- Eduaful, F. M. (2024). *Constructing Childhood Justice Within Postcolonial/Decolonized Digital African Childhood Experiences: Philanthropic Websites as Sites of Possibility* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Michigan Technological University.
- Foucault, M., & Moore, G. (2016). The language of space. In *Space, knowledge and power* (pp. 163-167). Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (1979). Part three: discipline. *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*, 135-230.
- Foucault, M., & Miskowicz, J. (1986). Of other spaces. *Diacritics*, 16(1), 22-27.
- Hardt, M., & Negri, A. (2001). *Empire*. Harvard University Press.
- Howard, N (2017, April 27). When NGOs save children who do not want to be saved. *Aljazeera*
<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2017/4/27/when-ngos-save-children-who-dont-want-to-be-saved/>
- Johnson, P. (2013). The geographies of heterotopia. *Geography Compass*, 7(11). 790-803 <https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12079>
- Johnson, P. (2006). Unravelling Foucault's 'different spaces.' *History of the human sciences*, 19 (4), 75-90.
- Klein, M. A. (2001). The slave trade and decentralized societies. *The Journal of African History*, 42(1), 49-65.
- Kirsch, S. (1995). The incredible shrinking world? Technology and the production of space. *Environment and planning D: society and space*, 13(5), 529-555.
<https://doi.org/10.1068/d130529>
- Richardson, L. (2024). Space, place, and digital technologies. *RESET. Recherches en sciences sociales sur Internet*, (13) <https://doi.org/10.4000/12cn1>
- Lechner, F. J. (1991). Simmel on social space. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 8(3), 195-201. <https://doi.org/10.1177/026327691008003013>
- Lewis, J. (2000). Slavery and the Market. *Reviews in American History*, 28(4), 539-546. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rah.2000.0078>
- Salvatici, S. (2019). *A history of humanitarianism, 1755–1989: In the name of others*. Manchester University Press.
- Save the Children (2026, April 29) Our Impact. Save the Children.
<https://www.worldvision.org/sponsorship-subscribe>
- Simmons, W. P. (2011). *Human rights law and the marginalized other*. Cambridge University Press.
- Madianou, M. (2021). Technocolonialism: Digital innovation and data practices in the

- humanitarian response to refugee crises. In L. Chouliaraki, A. Vestergaard (eds.) *Routledge handbook of humanitarian communication* (pp. 185-202). Routledge.
- Manzo, K. (2008). Imaging humanitarianism: NGO identity and the iconography of childhood. *Antipode*, 40(4), 632-657.
- Moinian, F. (2009). I'm Just Me! Children talking beyond ethnic and religious identities. *Childhood*, 16(1), 31-48.
- Moody, M. (2022, Feb 1). Philanthropic Harm: How "Doing Good" Can Go Bad. *Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy*. <https://johnsoncenter.org/blog/types-of-philanthropic-harm-a-working-list/>
- Nickel, P. M., & Eikenberry, A. M. (2009). A Critique of the Discourse of Marketized Philanthropy. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 52(7), 974-989.
- Nieuwenhuys, O. (2013). Theorizing childhood (s): Why we need postcolonial perspectives. *Childhood*, 20(1), 3-8.
- Rimawati, Y., Hamidah, & Ardianto. (2026). Digital Users Perceptions of Philanthropic Donations Across Social Media and Institutional Websites. *Journal of Philanthropy*, 31(1), e70046. <https://doi.org/10.1002/nvsm.70046>
- Saldanha, A. (2008). Heterotopia and Structuralism. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 40(9), 2080-2096. <https://doi.org/10.1068/a39336>
- Topinka, R. J. (2010). Foucault, Borges, heterotopia: Producing knowledge in other spaces. *Foucault Studies*, 9, 54-70.
- UNICEF UK. (1989). *The United Nations convention on the rights of the child*. https://downloads.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/UNCRC_PRESS200910web.pdf?_ga=2.78590034.795419542.1582474737-1972578648.1582474737
- World Vision (2026, April, 30) Find a child to sponsor, World Vision Inc. <https://www.worldvision.org/sponsorship-subscribe>
- Yao, C. Y., & Kuo, J. Y. (2024). The Influence of Photo Styles on Charity Website Donation: An Eye-Tracking Study. *DS 130: Proceedings of NordDesign 2024, Reykjavik, Iceland, 12th-14th August 2024*, 673-682.
- Zarzycka, M. (2016). Save the child: Photographed faces and affective transactions in NGO child sponsoring programs. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 23(1), 28-42.

Parodic Reformulations of Myth: Utopia, Dystopia, and Heterotopic World-Making in *Kaos* (2024)

*Sana' BenAli-Taga*¹

1. Introduction: The Post-Utopian Cosmology of *Kaos*

Me Utopie cleped antiquity,
Void of haunt and herborough;
Now am I like to Plato's city,
Whose fame flieth the world through.
Yea like, or rather more likely
Plato's plat to excel and pass:
For what Plato's pen hath platted briefly
In naked words; as in a glass,
The same have I performed fully,
With laws, with men, and treasure fitly.
Wherefore not Utopie, but rather rightly
My name is Eutopie; a place of felicity.
— Anemolius, poet laureate (More, p. 230)

At the genesis of utopian thought lies a productive etymological ambivalence: the homophonic tension between *ou-topos* (the non-existent place) and *eu-topos* (the ideal place). Anemolius's prefatory verses boast the core purpose of the utopian project that lies in the transcendence to reach a materialized space of absolute "felicity" (More, 1516/1912, p. 230). The scholarly discourse on utopia that originates with Thomas More's (1516/1912) foundational text establishes a spatial paradigm for imagining the perfect societal organization. It expands with several contributions including Tom Moylan (2000) and Gregory Claeys (2017) as this paradigm is delineated into subcategories including "anti-utopia" (a space for actively preventing utopian

¹ Assistant Professor, University of Tunis, Higher Institute of Digital Engineering, Tunisia, ORCID: 0009-0007-4294-6215, Email: sana.benali.taga@gmail.com

realization through illusion) from “dystopia” (a failed utopia that is associated with a pessimistic worldview and “fearful futures”) (p. 74; p. 5). Charlie Covell’s *Kaos* (2024) weaponizes the aesthetics of the utopian realm that reveals a profound spatial and ontological paradox. The series introduces a post-utopian cosmology. Here, world-making is inherently unstable; ancient mythic and political orders persist in degraded parodic forms by being sustained through totalitarian bureaucratic management rather than ethical legitimacy.

This chapter does not seek to rigidly classify or categorize *Kaos* within a singular generic framework. This would go counter to its kaleidoscopic world. It aims to demonstrate how the series operates as a multimodal and multigeneric narrative that resists taxonomic confinement. By dissolving the ontological boundaries between ancient mythology and administrative dystopia, *Kaos* leverages a generic volatility. This trait exposes how the Olympian order is seemingly sustained through divine right but is reliant on fragile maintenance of a paranoid spatial matrix.

The (de)construction of this landscape is primarily regarded as a project of world-making. Lubomír Doležel’s seminal work, *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds* (1998), allows for the diegetic world of *Kaos* to be analyzed here as a macro-structure governed by specific narrative modalities. Doležel (1998) distinguishes four modalities: the alethic (the rules of possibility), the deontic (the laws of permission), the axiological (the distribution of value), and the epistemic (the boundaries of knowledge) (pp. 113-132). In this ‘Textual Actual World’ (TAW), to use Marie-Laure Ryan’s (1991) terminology, the Olympian regime maintains its power through a rigid calibration of these four constraints. The gods enforce a deontic monopoly to prohibit mortal agency; they mask the axiological devaluation of human life behind a utopian veneer. An epistemic opacity sustains the regime by keeping the mechanics of divine extraction hidden from the mortal population; and Zeus renders his authority an immutable law of nature by dictating the alethic parameters of the diegetic universe.

The mechanisms through which this world-making is both stabilized yet subverted are parodic reformulations. Parody, in its classical sense

as noted by Margaret A. Rose (1993, p. 8), functions as *parodia*, a singing alongside that creates a critical reflexive distance between the mythic precursor and its modern reformulation. *Kaos* does not merely mimic mythological grand narratives, in Jean-François Lyotard's view of the latter as an authoritative text (1979/1984, pp. 37-38). This permits *Kaos* to allude, as Simon Dentith (2000) suggests, "with deliberate evaluative intonation, to precursor texts" (p. 6). This "evaluative intonation" acts as a generative pivot. By parodically re-evaluating the mythic narrative, the series populates its diegetic universe. Apart from being politically critical, the parodic reformulations in *Kaos* actively contribute to the world-making process to engender what Ryan (1991) identifies as Alternative Possible Worlds (APWs) (p. 18). Parody does not destroy the world, it thickens it. It enables the coexistence of several 'other worlds' within the same diegetic matrix.

Deciphering this landscape relies on a synthesis of Michel Foucault's (1984/1986) heterotopia as a primary narratological operator and Gregory Claeys's (2017) conceptualization of bureaucratic despotism. Foucauldian "counter-sites" serve as the material hardware where the Olympian regime's modal laws are enacted and contested to mirror the ideological order of the spaces they accompany (1984/1986, p. 24). Within this framework, Claeys's "bureaucratic despotism" (2017) is depicted as a faceless administrative tyranny in the management of the population through systemic extraction and epistemological manipulation (p. 404). This pairing facilitates an investigation into how the regime uses "counter-sites" (Foucault, 1984/1986) to bridge the ontological gap between the inaccessible Olympus (*ou-topos*) and the other two realms of the *Kaos* world. These abstract spatial tensions are rendered visible utilizing a quantitative mapping of the series' diegetic architecture. The narrative duration and frequency of transitions between realms allow my analysis to expose the underlying structural logic of the Olympian regime. The data does not merely count minutes: it maps the velocity of power.

This chapter traces a descent through the failing strata of this matrix. Following the quantitative diagnostic of the interdependent spatial matrix, the analysis examines the gated sovereignty of Olympus where divine abundance is exposed. The terrestrial realm of Krete functions

as the panoptic extraction of the ideological state apparatus. I then investigate the bureaucratic heterotopia of the Underworld and the Nothing. The chapter concludes with the metaleptic sabotage of the series' narrator, Prometheus: a narratological rebellion that shatters the sovereign frame to expose the ontological glitches, and leads to the regime's eventual collapse.

2. The Architecture of Bureaucratic Despotism

In the retold mythological landscape of *Kaos*, world-making operates as a narrative act that is intertwined with a rigid spatial architecture. The tripartite division of the series into Olympus, Krete, and the Underworld is the physical manifestation of the gods' "bureaucratic despotism" (Claeys, 2017) in disguise. I first approach the series' "Textual Universe" as an interdependent system (Ryan, 1991; Bell, 2010; Wang, 2019). Within this textual universe, the dominant Textual Actual World (TAW, the world of the series) defines its supremacy against its subordinate realities. This ontological hierarchy is maintained through architectural enforcement by the gods' regime.

Foucault's (1984/1986) spatial framework provides the crucial theoretical link and offers a mechanism that is still central to recent media scholarship for decoding complex screen-based imaginaries (Saltin, 2026). Within the Foucauldian framework, the Olympian regime governs its world as a massive, interconnected heterotopia. If, according to Foucault, "[u]topias are sites with no real place", heterotopias are "counter-sites": physically existing spaces that effectively enact utopias to represent, contest, and invert other spaces (p. 24). Once Krete designated as the most heavily heterotopic of all the three realms, this does not deny the presence of counter-sites within Olympus and the Underworld. This rather identifies Krete as a densely concentrated fluctuating network. The sheer volume of heterotopias (temples, schools) creates a unique site of intervention. The gods project their utopian supremacy on the structurally required mortal realm of Krete as its extraction site. This spatial world-making is not a theoretical metaphor. It is a structural TAW reality embedded into the visual strata of the series. The imbalance between these realms is measurable

in a distribution of power that can be quantified. Through empirically mapping the diegetic duration of each realm I intend to mathematically demonstrate the structural dependency that Olympus attempts to conceal.

This study uses, as a starting point, a quantitative spatial analysis to empirically map the stratified diegetic architecture of *Kaos*. I manually coded narrative duration of all eight episodes and then logged them second-by-second. The categorization includes the three primary spatial variables: Olympus, Krete, and the Underworld. The resulting database was processed and visualized with Microsoft Excel to generate macro-level proportional distributions (stacked column charts) and micro-level temporal line graph. This methodology allows for the visualization of interdependent spatial matrix in *Kaos*. It translates abstract narratological shifts into measurable and empirical data. It hence renders a precise narratological examination of how physical screen time correlates with and yet displays the mechanics of systemic power.

The Stacked Column Chart (Figure 1) functions as a mathematical proof of the interdependent spatial matrix and visualizes it. The total runtime of any given episode is defined as an absolute finite constant ($\kappa = 100\%$). Within this mathematical parameter, the three diegetic realms are bound by a rigid proportional equation: *Olympus* + *Krete* + *Underworld* = 100%. Since narrative time is a finite resource, the realms exist in an inescapable inverse correlation. The graph as a visual data proves that the gods' sovereign utopia is mathematically bound by the extraction of the sites below. Their dominance is indeed dependent on other variables even though they claim their superiority. Being dependent on other variables clearly states that the Olympian hierarchy is structurally contingent: its supremacy is an ontological illusion that masks its fundamental reliance on the two remaining sites. This sovereignty is not an inherent trait; it is a precarious performance sustained by the very entities the upper realm claims to transcend.

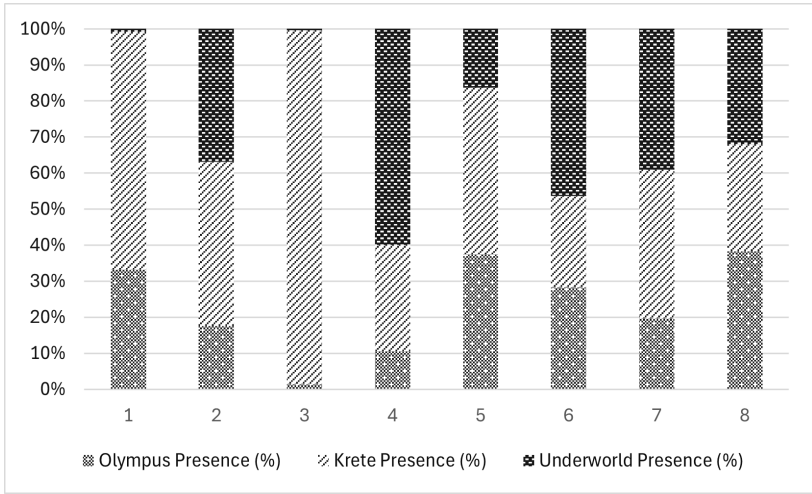


Fig. 1: Macro-level proportional distribution of narrative duration across the three diegetic realms in *Kaos* (Episodes 1-8)

The mathematical necessity visualizes the regime's spatial paranoia. As the systemic chaos/*Kaos* spreads mostly in Episodes 4, 6 and 7, the blocks of the Underworld violently expand. As the chart forces a strict vertical boundary, any proportional growth of the Underworld ($\Delta U > 0$) dictates a mathematical contraction of the realms above it ($\Delta O + \Delta K < 0$). The quantitative expansion of the Underworld signifies more than a plot shift. It also marks the narrative transition from a state of “minimal departure” (Ryan, 1991) towards “maximal departure” (Wang, 2019). Minimal departure (Ryan, 1991) relies on a set of assumptions of the storyworld's similarity to our experiential reality. Maximal departure, on the other hand, proceeds from the expectation that such real-world frames are “repurposed, reconfigured, and retooled” as the primary building blocks of the fictional universe (Wang, 2019, p. 134). My data suggests a direct correlation between spatial occupancy and ontological distance: the Underworld occupies increasing screen duration which is a mechanical necessity for constructing a world of maximal departure. The viewer can no longer rely on their experiential reality (AW) or the mythological encyclopedia as a baseline, the narrative must allocate more temporal space to retool these familiar frames into a functional diegesis. The more the

narrative departs from its mythological counterparts, the more space it occupies; i.e. the more the “maximal departure”, the more the screen frame.

The viewers see the Underworld devour the finite vertical geometry of the chart as the plan to bring Zeus down starts to unravel. The Olympian system cannot expand to contain Prometheus’s metaleptic rebellion. It can only be structurally crowded by it. The Underworld takes more space as the truth behind mortal exploitation is discovered. Krete, which is the main site of extraction, sustains Olympus’s dominance. Across the total screen duration, Olympus occupies less immediate diegetic space compared to Krete as: $D(\text{Olympus}) \approx 1h20m \ll D(\text{Krete}) \approx 2h46m$. The equation displays how D (Duration) emphasizes disparity as structural chasm to prove that, even though the TAW of power is proclaimed by Olympus, Krete remains the TAW of the narrative. Thus, this terrestrial space is the primary site of intervention that functions as the heterotopia of compensation (Foucault, 1984). Foucault (1984/1986) notes that the heterotopia of compensation “create[s] a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled” (p. 27). This mimicry of the utopian, a lesser version than the original, renders Krete a space that is dependent on the gods and that serves as a colony. As Olympus is the colonizer, Krete is the resourceful theater for the gods’ manifestations.

The macro-graph illustrates the temporal distribution of the three diegetic realms: it reveals that they are locked in an interdependent spatial matrix. It also provides a static view of the regime’s systemic distribution. The micro-level mapping, on the other hand, captures the regime in an active kinetic collapse. I intend to expose how the strata of the matrix begin to fracture under the pressure of the rising revolt from the Underworld. This study utilizes a binary line graph to visualize the temporal flow of individual episodes based on spatial transition. These charts were constructed by translating the manual coding of each realm presence into a binary logic. A value of 1 represents Diegetic Presence: the specific realm is currently visible on screen. A value of 0 represents Diegetic Absence: the specific realm is off-screen. Once these transitions are plotted second-by-second, the

resulting geometry displays the frequency and the velocity of the narrative's spatial fluctuation.

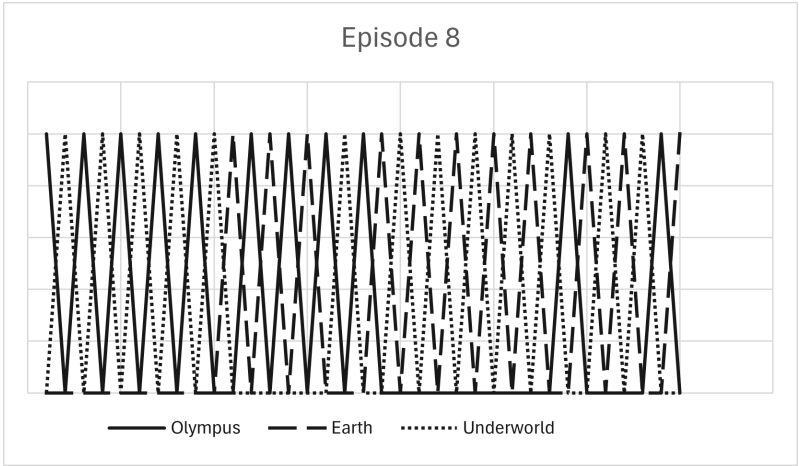


Fig. 2: Micro-level binary line graph of spatial fluctuations in *Kaos* (Episode 8).

The vertical shifts in the chart represent the binary transition between diegetic presence and absence. Earlier episodes in the dataset exhibited prolonged horizontal plateaus (mainly Episode 3 and 4) hence indicating a relative spatial stability and a localized dominance of a particular realm. Figure 2 reveals Episode 8 as the most geometrically complex in the series. It displays a high-frequency interweaving of the three diegetic lines with high-velocity vertical shift. This shift suggests that, as the narrative approaches its climax, the interdependent spatial matrix becomes increasingly unstable.

This quantitative volatility is the physical manifestation of a failing regime. The fluctuation between realms exposes the fractures within the utopian Olympian reign. The diegetic spatial instability for a sustained duration mathematically captures the structural breakdown of the divine world-model. It suggests that the spectacle of harmony cannot be maintained through spatial separation. This also entails that the constant narrative trespassing across the horizontal axis removes hierarchical distinctions. They now collapse into a singular contested site of ontological conflict. The post-utopian condition in the series

is marked by a terminal loss of confidence in the social contract between the gods and the mortals, in Konstan's (2021) view. The mythic bond between the divine and the human is replaced by purely administrative parasitic "rigidity" (Konstan, 2021, p. 1). This geometric chaos/kaos provides the empirical foundation for understanding the metaleptic sabotage orchestrated by Prometheus and to depict how the realms function in *Kaos*.

3. Olympus and the Spectacle of Utopian Paranoia

This section analyzes the Olympian estate of the regime as an ideological and architectural apex and serves as the initial step in mapping the stratified geography of *Kaos*. I deconstruct the spectacle of utopian paranoia by demonstrating that the gods' power is rooted in a fragile bureaucratic infrastructure. Grounded in More's (1516) depiction of utopia, Ryan's (1991) "Principle of Minimal Departure" and mostly Doležel's (1998) narrative modalities and the concept of bureaucratic despotism by Claeys (2017), this analysis explores how the divine compound appoints the aesthetic of a utopia masking a dystopian reality of surveillance and biopolitical extraction. This spatial baseline, I argue, functions as a façade that predicts and prefigures its systemic downfall.

The spatial geography of Olympus through its gated isolation, its commodified luxury, and its apparent scrutiny performs the ideological archetype of a utopian (More, 1516/1912) state. It specifically relies on the vertical topography of gods being situated on top, on the mountain, mortals on the ground, and the dead below. The divine estate of the deities embodies the foundational definition of utopia as *ou-topos* ("no place") as it is geographically severed from human navigation and is inaccessible to mortals. Additionally, it is presented to the people of Krete and to the viewers as "the good place", *eu-topos*, where cosmic order and harmony within the system created by the gods exist (More, 1516/1912, p. 1). Situated in what is believed to be the peak of Mount Olympus, the habitat of the gods is depicted as a luxurious villa that isolates them from the decay of Krete. Yet, within this hyper-luxurious villa lies consumerist excess and panopticon

surveillance sealed in spatial compound (Covell, 2024, Episode 1). Panopticon surveillance is a Foucauldian concept that describes control through architectural surveillance (1975/1995), which is adopted by the gods' regime. The villa's spatial mechanics collapse the illusion of divine felicity revealing a bureaucratic dystopic practice highly dependent on the human world's continuous exploitation and submission.

The gods are the immortals "who hold Olympus", where "the royal house of Zeus" is situated (e.g. Homer, trans. 1991, Book 1, line 508; Book 2, lines 15, 35, 80; Book 5, line 462). Olympus, in *The Odyssey* is codified as an untouchable utopia that "stands unmoved" and unshaken, eternally isolated from the atmospheric and physical chaos of the mortal realm and linked to an absolute environmental and ontological stability (Book 6, lines 45-51). Through the "Principle of Minimal Departure" (Ryan, 1980, 1991, 2019, and 2021), this foundational spatial logic of Mount Olympus is constructed. Following this principle, viewers initially attempt to reconcile this space with the constructed mythography transcribed through artistic and historical accounts. The gods' ethereal majesty guarantees their cosmic authority to maintain the inherited cosmological order.

The migration towards the hyper-modern aesthetic, represented by the luxury villa with its servants, its magnificent gardens and its pools, shifts the viewers' perspectives and performs a parodic reformulation of mythic ethereal grandeur. The villa mimics Homeric verses for the purpose of subverting and criticizing divine sovereignty (Rose, 1993). The recursive "evaluative" (Dentith, 2000) parodic mechanism displays a degraded form of the inherited cosmological and political orders of the mythic grand narrative (Lyotard, 1979/1984). The bright over-saturated colors associated with the gods' habitat display an intentional defamiliarization. These colors function as part of the illusion of that utopian space, revealed to be a hollow center, a site of bureaucratic totalitarianism masked by the erosion of divine sovereignty. Olympus is thus a parodic architecture that is visually full but ontologically empty. This *locus amoenus* is to be revealed as a panoptic enclosure.

A glitch in the heavens made the heavens reveal their hollow center. Zeus's discovery of a "wrinkle" constitutes the modal rupture upon which the whole utopian sphere collapses (Covell, 2024, Episode 1). In Homeric grand narrative, the divine body is a site of absolute alethic necessity; it cannot and does not age because it is the very anchor of cosmic order. Zeus's reaction is not that of a deity but that of a paranoid dictator. His obsession with the luxury watch and his designer tracksuits indicates that his utopia is but a consumerist construction from which he draws power. The wrinkle is therefore the somatic equivalent of utopic Olympus's architectural hollow center proving that beneath the visual gloss of absolute security, the god(s) is biologically and politically decaying. In the first episode, when Dionysus is accidentally shot by Orpheus, he provides the biological propaganda of the regime's absolute authority, "gods don't bleed" (Covell, 2024). This assertion of physical invulnerability, that recalls the Homeric narrative, serves as the ultimate justification for power as the gods are separated from mortal extraction site by being biologically impermeable.

As the Underworld spatial mechanism begins to fail, and the prophecies start to be fulfilled, the border between mortality and immortality ruptures and Zeus, indeed, bleeds (Covell, 2024, Episode 8). Prometheus, liberated, on the throne of Olympia, announces the arrival of Kaos and the mortality of Zeus as he represents the collapse of the spatial regime. By bleeding at the geographic center of the gods' gated sovereignty, Zeus is reduced to his former mortal body displaying that the utopian façade was never transcendent but merely a temporary outpost. This parodic subversion collapses the ontological certainty of the mythic machine and leaves the spectacle of a dictator terrified of his obsolescence.

The gods' rule is monitored through alethic power and deontic control. However, since the gods' alethic power is threatened within the walls of Olympus, the regime has to over-compensate this through the escalation of deontic control. If Zeus is the paranoid aspect of the hollow center, Hera is its functional reality. Her bathroom in the villa is her private space where even Zeus is not allowed; she archives the tongues of Tacitas she cut in that private space (Episode 5). It

partitions her panoptic network from the rest of the family. Her maternal grace and queenly wisdom are revealed to be that of surveillance and silencing. The tongueless women serve as her human surveillance network and a power mechanic to maintain dominance that is not out of cosmic necessity and that goes counter the myth encyclopedia claim. Her divinity is derived from information monopoly as she manages the messages from the mortals' prayers transformed into data packets stored in the Olympus villa she shared with Zeus (Covell, 2024, Episode 1, Episode 5).

The spatial control of the gods' regime relies heavily on the systematic extraction of mortal data. The Tacitas are biopolitically (Foucault, 2004/2008) mutilated to serve as living recording devices and as protectors of Hera. In the Foucauldian sense, biopolitics represents the subjugation of biological life to serve the administrative needs of those in power. The regime transforms the Tacitas' bodies into functional pieces of surveillance technology. They also allow Hera to transcend the physical separation from Krete/Earth and to maintain total ideological dominance without resistance. They are also her own extension and her weakness. Any violation of the Tacitas is a violation against Hera. Zeus's violation of the Tacita in Episode 5 is also a violation of Hera's authority. They constitute her weakness, and hence they expose the spatial paranoia and the internal fracturing of the divine regime. Hera weaponizes the same biopolitical mechanism against the immortals as the Tacitas serve to shield her from Zeus's own panoptic gaze (Foucault, 1975/1995; Covell, 2024, Episode 5). Their tongues are claimed as divine property, hence representing the absolute commodification of the mortal body. These terrestrial bodies build a counter-surveillance spot, which proves that the utopian compound is not a unified space of absolute power but a highly contested paranoid geography. The gods must use the mortal suffering to protect themselves from one another and hence, "the family falls" (Covell, 2024, Episode 1, Episode 6, Episode 8).

The spatial control of the gods relies on biopolitical commodification of the mortal body. This paranoid geography, exercised by both Zeus and Hera, proves that the utopian compound appears to be a unified space of power but is a fracturing system where the gods use mortals

to protect themselves and their regime. The Olympian spectacle is hence a parodic reformulation of the Platonic “noble lie” (Konstan, 2021, p. 11); the lie is *Kaos* does not serve social cohesion, it rather seeks the preservation of a private divine utopia. The spectacle of utopian paranoia concludes with no mythic battle. It ends with the ideological collapse of a regime whose hollow center can no longer be hidden by its visual gloss.

4. Krete: The Dystopian Continuum and the Heterotopic Threshold

Kaos localizes the terrestrial execution of the regime of Olympus mostly within the earthly domain of Krete. This section of the chapter examines how the series performs parodic reformulations of the mythic encyclopedia and deflates a majestic space of ancient sovereignty into a bureaucratic totalitarian regime. The analysis is based on the application of Foucault’s (1984/1986) spatial philosophy of heterotopia and Doležel’s (1998) narrative modalities. This framework demonstrates how Krete is a stratified architecture of deontic spectacles and panoptic extraction. The public spectacle of Olympia Day, the localized biopolitics of Hera’s temples, and the Minos’s hidden black site expose the terrestrial space as a heavily mediated threshold designed to commodify mortal devotion. The Olympians’ hollow harmony is thus temporarily sustained.

In Homeric grand narrative, the island of Crete is depicted as a “fertile” realm of architectural wonder, ruled by Minos, who “conferred with almighty Zeus himself” periodically (Homer 1998, Book 19, lines 195-204). It is the birth city of Zeus in Hesiod’s poems (lines 462-496) and Apollodorus’s mythographical compendium (1. 4-7). The city appears in most of Platonic philosophical corpus including *The Republic* and *Laws* as described in the glossary (Plato, trans., 2008, p. 351). Crete is hence established as the site of majestic and mythical sovereignty. *Kaos* performs a parodic reformulation onto this grandeur as the mythic country is deflated into a heterotopic panoptic city-state.

Here, the Homeric seat of power is transformed into a dystopian continuum where the population, representative of all humanity, exists as a resource for the Olympian regime. The first instance of parody occurs at the level of spelling: Krete, unlike the Latinized “Crete” adopted in most translations. This orthographic defamiliarization mimics the Greek original name *Krēte* to create a linguistic border between the classical mythic encyclopedia and the parodic world of *Kaos*, which function as the TAW in Ryan’s (1991) taxonomy (pp. 24-25). The city of Heraklion, where most of the mortal and immortal characters dwell, dominates screen time (Figure 1), and embeds several deontic spectacles that manifest this space as a stratified diegetic architecture. Through this architecture, the Olympian regime asserts its hegemony and power and renders Krete submissive to the wills of the gods of Olympus. President Minos, together with his family, offers, in the name of the mortals, Agatha as sacrifice (Covell, 2024, Episode 1, Episode 3). The hierarchy of the regime is literalized through the physical elevation of President Minos on a balcony, commanding the gaze of the populace. Minos has been named by the gods and is serving the gods and therefore he exercises deontic legitimacy that mirrors the bureaucratic despotism (Claeys, 2017) of the state and situates him as a decisive actor in the regime.

The spectacle of the sacrifice is performed while a young boy’s speech frames the “consenting human sacrifice” as a necessity of the devotion to the gods and words their promises for, “there is no death, only Renewal” (Covell, 2024, Episode 3). The rule of obligation that the deontic modality operates under is radically shifted into a spiritual gift. The crowd’s submissive rhythmic chant, “Vero” (True), renders the spectacle both, alethic (necessary) and epistemic (true): the spectacle of devotion is necessary for the gods to protect the mortals. This divinity of the sacrifice miracle is shattered once Riddy discovers the epistemic lie the regime is built on in the Underworld (Covell, 2024, Episode 6). Agatha’s body, which stands for mortal devotion, is petrified in the Nothing. The spectacle is hence but a hegemonic practice the gods mandate to maintain their power.

Added to this, the palace in Heraklion oscillates between two poles of heterotopic function that Foucault distinguishes from in “Of

Other Spaces” (1984/1986). The heterotopia of compensation is a site that mimics a “perfect” “meticulous” different space (Foucault, 1984/1986, p. 27). Indeed, the palace and the arrangement of the spectacle represent eu-topos (the good place), the visual evidence of divine order, compared to the “messy” reality of mortality and the city of Krete. It is a space that projects a heterotopia of compensation by mimicking Olympus as representative of utopia, to justify the exploitation of the mortals as these subjects need to submit to the deities’ rules to benefit from the cosmic system. That same space, however, is a site of spatial irony, as it is also a heterotopia of illusion. Unlike the heterotopia of compensation, Foucault (1984/1986) explains, the heterotopia of illusion “exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory” (p. 27). The palace exposes the hollow center of Olympus and the mediatized spectacle exposes the entire diegesis as “illusion” (Covell, 2024, Episode 3, Episode 1; Foucault, 1984/1986, p. 27). This diegesis, Olympus/Krete/the Underworld, is an “illusory” construction where the regime uses spectacular architecture to mask its own political and biological decay. Yet, through the very sacrifice to the gods, Agatha, Riddy unveils the truth behind the Nothing. The spectacles of the mortals are hence a heterotopic threshold that are both compensatory yet paradoxically illusory.

The Olympia Day Celebration represents the vertical command of the gods’ regime; the temples of Hera, on the other hand, function as localized heterotopic threshold of panoptic extraction. The temples hold the Tacitas, to whom the mortals confess. The figure of *Dea Tacita* originates from the Roman tradition and specifically Ovid’s *Fasti*. She is Lara, a nymph whose tongue was severed by Jupiter (Zeus) after revealing his secrets to Juno (Hera) (Ovid, trans. 1931, Book 2, lines 591-616); her punishment for divulging truth to power includes her being taken to Hades where she becomes known as *Dea Muta, Tacita* or “the Silent Goddess” (Ovid, trans. 1931, Book 2, lines 663-690).

Kaos mass-produces this mythological violence and renders it into consented devotion to the goddess Hera. The deity of Silence is subjected to parodic biopolitical mutilation. In the first episode of *Kaos*, Riddy, visits the temple requesting a “divulgence with the Tacita” and

Hera overhears her defiance of the gods from her private chambers (Covell, 2024). The narrative exposes the deceptive architecture of the Olympian sovereignty with the witnessing of the overhearing synchronized with Prometheus's metadiegetic commentary. Prometheus's revelation hence exposes the epistemic shift. Prometheus explains that the confession booth is not an instrument of confession or absolution, it is indeed administrative hoarding as the mortals think that they are "to divulge their darkest thoughts and feelings, not knowing that their confessions are kept by Hera. They give her power" (Covell, 2024, Episode 1). The confessions are thus constant data hoarding and a commodification of the mortals. The temples are not religious sites but the infrastructure of an information monopoly. Yet, the Tacita, Riddy's mother, plays a role as a rebel for the prophecy to be fulfilled and the regime to fall. The punished revolts.

The labyrinth is yet another heterotopic site that is parodically reformulated in *Kaos*. In most of the mythic encyclopedia and specifically Apollodorus's mythography, the labyrinth is associated with both Minos and the Minotaur and is both a site of mythic heroism and Dae-dalian ingenuity but fundamentally an architectural containment of Minos's divine punishment and shame (trans. 1921, 3.1.3–4). *Kaos* parodically demystifies this site. The series strips the labyrinth from its mythic horror and reveals it as a political black site. Engineered by Daedalus, as in mythical encyclopedia, the site serves to contain President Minos's dread of his alethic anchor: the prophecy (Covell, 2024, Episode 5, Episode 6). Dictated as, "Your end begins in the marital bed. The first child to draw breath will kill you dead," the prophecy forces Minos to incarcerate his first-born son, Glaucus, twin to Ari. The Minotaur is a human driven mad, whose mask and horns were made by Daedalus for horrific effects on the punished that are sent down to the Labyrinth (Covell, 2024, Episode 7). The monster is thus a weaponized victim triggered by the mechanical buzzer of the execution chamber. The Minotaur is not a biological anomaly born from divine punishment; it is exposed as an ideological fiction, a state-sanctioned monster, invented to justify the indefinite detention of Minos's political and mortal threat.

This ideological fiction is maintained as Minos transforms the labyrinth into a theater of violence. The defiant Trojan 7 are executed by the Minotaur in a deontic spectacle as a command to appease the gods and pacify the mortal populace (Covell, 2024, Episode 3). This execution serves the regime to effectively launders its authoritarian punishment through the visual display of the bodies on the wall of the monument of the gods. Thus, the mythical beast is necessary for religious appeasement. The labyrinth also serves as the epistemic threshold for Ariadne, who Prometheus frames as the third “significant human” (Covell, 2024, Episode 3). Unlike her mythical predecessor (Apollodorus, trans. 1921, 3.8.1-24), Ari does not descend to the labyrinth to betray her family but to confront the systemic lies of her father’s administration and the gods’ regime. The heterotopia of illusion collapses as Ari discovers that the Minotaur is her abused twin brother (Covell, 2024, Episode 7). The labyrinth becomes Minos’s undoing instead of his site of power. Ari fulfills the prophecy her father built the labyrinth to evade and the “first child to draw death” revolts against systemic cruelty.

The spatial architecture of Krete relies on what Foucault (1975/1995) refers to as the “panoptic mechanism” that “arranges spatial unities” to facilitate mass-control (p. 200). However, the subversion of the Tacitas and Ariadne’s epistemic rupture with the labyrinth reveal the fragile constructs of these unities’ constant surveillance feature. The terrestrial realm acts as a heterotopic threshold where confessions are harvested to maintain divine supremacy. Krete is indeed a mere terrestrial collection point for the two other realms of Olympus and the Underworld. The sacrifice, the data hoarding and the punishments executed above feed the Underworld infrastructure.

5. The Underworld: Bureaucratic Heterotopia and the Spatial Management of The Nothing

In Homer’s narratives, the Underworld, often referred to as the House of Death, is constructed as a space of the terrifying sublime of punishment and eternal reward (e.g. Homer, trans. 1991, Book 1, line 3; Book 15, line 300). It is a realm that is situated “below” Earth,

“down”, and is of the ultimate consequences of the life lived on Earth by mortals. Ruled by Hades, “lord of the dead beneath the earth”, the Homeric Underworld is characterized by the mythic sublime as transgressors against the cosmic order endure personalized eternal punishment (Homer, trans. 1991, Book 15, line 5; Book 20, line 4). It is constructed as a space of axiological consequence, to use Doležel’s modality (1998, pp. 123-125). The House of Death operates according to strict binary of eternal retribution and divine reward that submit to the gods’ will. In Homer’s framework, the spatial management of the Dead is a direct reflection of the divine ethical judgement. *Kaos* violently subverts this axiological modality by means of parodic deflation of the mythic sublime. The realm of the Dead is visually and architecturally reduced to a mundane and monochrome administrative quarantine and is not a space of ultimate cosmic consequence.

Unlike the over-saturated and hyper-consumerist palette of Olympus, the Underworld is entirely stripped of color. The viewers see it in black and white as it is rendered into an industrialized urban zone designed to manage the “crisis” of death through absolute biopolitical control. It operates as what Foucault (1984/1986) terms “a heterotopia of crisis” since it manages the Dead and the Unresolved, death in this case being the crisis (p. 25). The architectural parody of this space reinforces its systemic subjection. The Dead do not navigate a majestic underworld, a House of rivers and horrific creatures; they arrive on a ferry, standing up, life jackets on, crossing the Styx (Covell, 2024, Episode 2).

The spatial shift from the mystical and mythical depiction of the House of Death, often associated with its lord, Hades, in the grand narratives, to the bureaucratic monochrome processing center necessitates a move from the axiological modality to an industrial utility. In *Kaos*, the afterlife is a supply chain of exploitation which is most embodied in the figure of the “Unresolved” (Covell, 2024, Episode 2). Unlike the Homeric shades who wander tragically into idleness, the Unresolved are conscripted into administrative labor, operating turnstiles and managing data. In *Kaos*, weaponizing the post-mortal body as a labor resource adheres to Foucauldian biopolitical representation of the individual as “human capital” in neoliberal governmentality

(2004/2008). The “human capital” is “[t]he redefinition of *homo oeconomicus* as entrepreneur of himself”, where work is an active economic conduct of the subject who manages their own internal resources, a capital-ability, invested in that subject from education, health and professional training (Foucault, 2004/2008, pp. 225-226). In *Kaos*, capitalization does not end at the grave, the gods do not seek to punish the ‘bad’ and reward the ‘good’; they seek to manage the Dead as a processable resource.

This capitalization is also highlighted through the coin. The Unresolved are the mortals who arrive to the Underworld without their burial coin (Covell, 2024, Episode 2). The cosmic tragedy that is much narrated in the Homeric verses aggressively degraded into a mechanism of capitalist labor extraction. In *The Iliad*, Book 23, for example, Patroclus laments as his unburied soul is unable to cross the river to Hades and is doomed to “wander up and down, abandoned” because his “rites of fire” were not performed (Homer, trans. 1991, lines 83-91). The parodic reformulation of this mythical liminality is situated in the burial coin, now symbol of the capital regime. Without a burial coin, the mortal dead is doomed to be part of the workforce for two hundred years, as Riddy is told (Covell, 2024, Episode 2). Because Orpheus takes her coin, she is not “[granted] safe passage through the Frame”, joins the administrative staff (the divers) and is immediately issued the Underworld blue uniform (Covell, 2024, Episode 2). The sacred horror of the unburied shade is parodically transformed into a blue-collar labor force. *Kaos*, hence, substitutes the divine axiological consequence with late-modern administrative exploitation.

The Olympian regime relies on the Underworld by weaponizing the concept of “Renewal”, or reincarnation, as an ideological hegemony. The mythic encyclopedia and philosophical texts such as Plato’s *The Republic* include accounts of the renewal starting through Lethe (translated from the Greek origins of the word to the River of Forgetfulness or oblivion) from which souls must drink to be reborn (Plato, trans. 2000, Book 10, 621a; 621c). In *Kaos*, Lethe is a destiny, a metro station that the Dead reach with the guidance of the divers and swim through to reach the “Frame” and to renew (Covell, 2024, Episode 2). Renewal is established through a lifelong process of mediatized

pedagogy that begins in the terrestrial realm and culminates in the Underworld's administrative centers. In Krete, this education is reinforced through civic rituals, like Riddy's burial and the Olympia Celebration. Its most significant form is highlighted in the orientation video that the Dead watch on the ferry when crossing to the Underworld (Covell, 2024, Episode 2). This orientation video is a piece of regime propaganda that Hades and his family use to formalize the transition from mortal life to the afterlife and then to return to Earth (Covell, 2024, Episode 2). Presenting the afterlife as a technical process narrated by the god of Death, Hades himself, the regime strips death of its mythic terror and renders it a mandatory administrative upgrade. Hades and Persephone (queen here but not goddess) do not operate as majestic sovereigns but as stressed and tired administrative managers of a totalitarian state.

The bureaucratic euphemisms used in the orientation video sanitize the autocratic violence of the system. Persephone, for example, treats the transition of mortal souls as an issue of "crowd control" that she describes as a skill (Covell, 2024, Episode 2). She complains to Zeus over the phone that this process requires "substandard quality" staff and that passage through the Frame is "a complex and delicate process" (Covell, 2024, Episode 2). This administrative violence is masked by the promise of emancipatory futurity, which can be read within Moylan's (2000) depiction of "false utopia" (pp. 47-48). This false utopianism is the lie of the return, specifically the return of the "atoms" "joyfully to Earth" (Covell, 2024, Episode 2). The mortals comply because they believe in this systemic lie of false utopianism. The Renewal, regarded as the utopian promise, is thus exposed as the crowd-control tactic and manipulation. The regime transforms the Dead into "human-capital" (Foucault, 2004/2008): manageable bodies that are docile awaiting their turn at the turnstiles to be renewed.

If the utopian lie of Renewal and the illusion of futurity constitute the mechanisms of false utopianism, "The Nothing" exposes a fundamental rupture within the regime, within the system and within the family. This rupture affects the alethic modality (Doležel, 1998, p. 114). The Underworld is not a site of spiritual processing but a mechanism of pure and ritualized extraction of mortal souls that permit the

gods to maintain their somatic cosmic legitimacy. In Episode 6, the alethic truth of the world modal is laid bare: Zeus industrialized the Frame not to renew souls but to harvest and liquidize them to sustain Meander water, which gods drink to maintain their immortality, as mentioned by Prometheus (Covell, 2024). The Unresolved then deduce the ideological manipulation, “that place” is the destination, there is no Renewal, “it’s all a lie” (Covell, 2024).

The Nothing proves that the top block, Olympus, possesses no inherent ontological sovereignty: its power is parasitic, biologically dependent on human essence. It is a heterotopic space within the Underworld that deconstructs the regime from below and exposes the failing utopian center above. This makes the Nothing an epistemic heterotopia; it is hidden from the mortals through the pedagogy of erasure. As both Riddy and Caeneus realize that they never learned of it in schools or in temples, it becomes clear that the regime’s physical survival relies on the strict redaction of this epistemic modality. When the harvesting system is failing, hence the existence of the Nothing, this structural glitch causes an alethic collapse.

The interdependency between the different realms in the world of *Kaos* is displayed as the alethic laws break and the utopian façade of Olympus irrevocably crumbles. The Underworld is no longer a divine mythic terror and is recast into a sorting facility, hence redefining the horrors of death. The complete erasure of individual power through endless bureaucratic purgatory becomes the true terror that the mortals face. It is in the Nothing that *Kaos*, Caeneus, is reborn to renew human souls and that a new order is restored with Prometheus on Zeus’s throne.

6. Metaleptic Disruption: Prometheus and the Ontological Glitch

After mapping the stratified diegetic architecture of the Olympian regime across its celestial, terrestrial, and subterranean realms, this chapter turns to the narratological mechanism that shatters all this world of *Kaos*. Gérard Genette’s (1972/1983) foundational theories on metalepsis, Ryan’s (2006) concept of “ontological metalepsis”, and

Alice Bell's (2016) cognitive framework of "imaginative recentering" and "transworld identity" constitute the theoretical core of this section. It examines how, within this spatial matrix, Prometheus acts as an extradiegetic operator, present everywhere, seeing everything, and also interacting with the viewers. Through a close reading of his parodic diegetic agency, and his facilitation of an 'epistemic metalepsis', the following analysis demonstrates how narratological structure is weaponized. Prometheus provides the panoptic vantage point (Foucault, 1975/1995) to dismantle the system from its stratified architecture.

Genette (1972/1983) designates the narrative metalepsis as an "intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator ... into the diegetic universe" that "produces an effect of strangeness that is either comical ... or fantastic" (pp. 234-235). Prometheus, within Genette's designation, functions as the narratological saboteur, an intruder who violates Zeus's world but also that of *Kaos*. The effect Prometheus's intrusion creates is "comical", yet also sarcastic. This "strangeness" (Genette, 1972/1983) is not a mere playful metafictional device, it is a serious, "evaluative" (Dentith, 2000) narratological maneuver aimed at decide. Prometheus, in *Kaos*, utilizes satire as ontological sabotage. The intrusion hence serves a dual purpose: it parodically exposes the gods' bureaucratic despotism and executes a serious alethic rupture through which that regime will fall.

The ontological instability of *Kaos* starts from the very first instances: "My name is Prometheus. Some of you may have heard of me. Don't worry if you haven't. All you need to know for now is I'm a prisoner" (Covell, 2024, Episode 1). The figure of Prometheus parodically contrasts with Zeus's gated leisure and occupies a space of pure mythic literalism. He is "a prisoner" as he is in Aeschylus' (trans. 2012) *Prometheus Bound*, and as he is in most of mythic encyclopedia. Tricking Zeus and stealing fire, cause of the creation of the first woman, Pandora, Prometheus dominates Hesiod's mythological accounts (trans. 1988). He is said to have created humans in Apollodorus (trans. 1921, 1.7.1). Now, in *Kaos*, he is liberating them.

In all the narratives mentioned, *Kaos* included, Prometheus is punished: a "prisoner" to Zeus, he is chained, an eagle devouring his

forever-restoring liver. His physical confinement does not neutralize his narratological supremacy, still he is a deity. Prometheus maintains a transworld identity, as he “travel[s] between the potentially infinite numbers of possible worlds” (Bell, 2016, p. 19). He embodies a complex transworld identity (Bell, 2016) through which he transcends the stratified layers of the *Kaos* diegesis and architecture. His physical form is anchored in the TAW of the series as he is a character interacting with other characters; yet, his narratological reach extends into the viewers’ AW. He also interacts with mythological narratives and is aware of his fictional presence.

Prometheus’s transworld identity (Bell, 2016) is also established when he is revealed as an intradiegetic actor, not a mere extradiegetic observer. He does not predict a rebellion; he engineers it. His narratological supremacy is rooted in a historical act of violence: Prometheus sacrifices his lover, Charon, by driving a dagger into his lover’s neck under the gaze of Fate (Covell, 2024, Episode 4). As a god and Zeus’s “best friend”, Prometheus occupies the highest tier of Olympian world-model which allows him to be aware of its loops; through his sacrifice of Charon, he places a dormant threat within the heart of the Underworld. Charon is then classified as an Unresolved, waiting to help “the man with the mark” (Covell, 2024, Episode 4). As Orpheus is mutilated by Fate for having taken away his wife’s coin on Krete, he descends to the Underworld and is revealed to be the “man with the mark” when thrown down (Covell, 2024, Episode 4). The Descent to the Underworld (*katabasis*) is hence parodied.

By physically crossing the threshold (from The Cave to a bin) and arriving to the Underworld in his mortal alive form as Prometheus has planned, Orpheus glitches the system built for industrial docility and displays its weakness (Episode 4). Prometheus is not just telling a story; he is indeed the architect who built the bypass. His role as Zeus’s “best friend” and as his executioner creates strangeness (Genette, 1972/1983) in the power structure. He fuels the alethic collapse of the system from the mountain, the Cave, and the Styx while occupying the deontic center. His dual status, actor/narrator, god/rebel, validates his role as the parodic agent and proves that the fire he steals is not just knowledge. It is also his capacity to act across the borders

of life, death, and fiction and to gaze upon them. This ontological paradox presents him as a confined intradiegetic subject and an omnipresent extradiegetic sovereign who monitors all the realms at once through an all-seeing, panoptic gaze (Foucault, 1975/1995).

Prometheus's gaze constitutes a two-fold instrument of rebellion. Vertically, he maintains a panoptic 'watch' over the regime's physical architecture, typical of the gods' surveillance, and of his plan unfolding. This verticality is enforced as he looks directly to the camera, addressing the viewers, in a non-verbal cue, through body language, while his body is confined by the gods (Covell, 2024, Episode 1, Episode 6, Episode 8). Apart from the camera's eye matches, Prometheus physically looks from the cliff to monitor the realms. Characters, such as Charon in the Underworld, must look up to address him (Covell, 2024, Episode 4). Parodically, Prometheus sends messages through the very eagle that devours his liver. His horizontal gaze performs what Ryan (2006) defines as an ontological metalepsis: a substantial crossing that permanently alters a world's physical reality, "a transgression of levels that involves contradiction" (p. 218). Within the same vein, Bell (2016) posits that with this type of metalepsis an imaginative "recentering" of the spectator's (in the current case of *Kaos*) perspective, as they have to "imagine and therefore, to some extent, believe that the textual actual world described by a text really does exist" (pp. 22-23). Prometheus deictically relocates the viewers from passive observers into active contributors, rebels, of his plan to bring Zeus down. The viewers, now, share the TAW with Prometheus as the narratological decide in underway.

Prometheus's metaleptic disruptions constitute a parodic reformulation of the theft of fire. In the mythic grand narrative, Prometheus tricks Zeus and gives fire to humans to secure their survival (Aeschylus, trans. 2012, line 277; Apollodorus, trans. 1921, 1.6.3–1.7.1; Hesiod, trans. 1988, *Works and Days* lines 29–62). Within the bureaucratic despotism of *Kaos*, however, where the regime maintains a monopoly over all the infrastructure, Prometheus's "fire" is transposed into an epistemic weapon: the knowledge that the gods' divine supremacy is a manufactured narrative, that Zeus was human before becoming a god, and that he is to "bleed" again (Covell, 2024, Episode 1, Episode

8). Once this core revelation is delivered through the metafictional address, Prometheus weaponizes then triggers the sensation of “having stepped out” (Bell, 2016) of being free, hence effectively shattering the Olympian world-model. He ensures the ideological collapse of the regime both witnessed and validated by the viewers who become part of the gods’ world.

It is through the metaleptic agency of Prometheus that the viewers achieve total epistemic clarity. He names and is aware of the three mortals that share their prophetic destiny with Zeus. He then bridges these disparate variables, these nodes of information, to execute an epistemic metalepsis: glitches of knowledge that transmit the secret of the shared prophecy from the extradiegetic narrator directly to the viewer so that the latter grasps the whole plan/picture. This transmission functions as a political act, a rebellion, as the viewer is granted a “transworld” vantage point that even the gods lack. Prometheus employs epistemic metalepsis that democratizes truth and exposes the fragility of the sovereign’s deontic control. Within this framework, the flow of knowledge is not just a stylistic intrusion, ontological metalepsis; it is a subversive political act that facilitates an “imaginative recentering” (Bell, 2016) of the viewers to grant them a position of epistemic supremacy that triggers the systemic collapse of the established world-model. Prometheus does not give fire to humans in *Kaos*, he gives knowledge to break power. He thus breaks the mythic encyclopedia by parodying it and then breaks free by rendering Zeus a human again through knowledge.

Prometheus subverts the fabric of the Olympian state apparatus by intertwining his transworld identity with parodic reformulations of mythic grand narratives. The structural collapse is hence achieved through profound narratological trespassing. The execution of epistemic metalepsis stands as his best narratological achievement. It is a maneuver that democratizes the alethic truth of the prophecy by bypassing Zeus’s deontic surveillance. The spectator is rendered into an active conspirator in this knowledge as Prometheus transforms the ancient theft of fire into a post-classical media phenomenon. He proves that true decide in the modern mythic reimagining does not rely on celestial weapons and divine intervention. Prometheus’s

metaleptic sabotage functions as a reclamation of the individual against what Konstan (2021) identifies as the “totalitarian rigidity” that marks the post-utopian state (p. 2). Revolting against a regime relies on the systemic and metaleptic dismantling of the sovereign’s narrative where everyone takes part regardless of borders.

7. Conclusion: The Renewed Possibility of the Utopian

The post-utopian cosmology of Charlie Covell’s *Kaos* reveals the “felicity” of the Olympian *eu-topos*, borrowing Anemolius’s terms, as a parodic transposition of ancient sovereignty into bureaucratic despotism (More, 1516/1912, p. 230). The quantitative mapping of the series’ diegetic architecture, measuring the velocity of power across the interdependent realms, exposes a world-model that had reached a terminal state of ontological rigidity. This geometric chaos/kaos lays bare how the Olympian regime is not a unified space of divine necessity; it is a matrix where power is maintained through the frantic management of spatial boundaries. The data, hence, captures the terminal rigidity of a bureaucratic despotism that is biologically and administratively parasitic on the mortal strata.

The descent through the stratified geography of the series has demonstrated how the regime’s survival is contingent upon a tripartite mechanism of ideological dominance. This dominance is designed to resist any ontological rupture. It is anchored in a meticulously managed topography of control. At the apex lies the gated sovereignty of Olympus maintaining its status through the parodic preservation of myth. By embedding divine majesty into the late-modern capitalist market and transforming authority into a branded consumer goods and pop-culture spectacles, the gods manufacture the truth. Voluntary participation of the oppressed is a deontic right the deities exercise. This terrestrial execution is further stabilized in Krete through religious heterotopias that function as deontic infrastructure. The panoptic confessionals of the Tacitas ensure that the mortal threshold polices itself. Hence, private devotion is turned into an ideological state apparatus.

The most profound mechanism of dominance lies, however, in the subterranean monographic management of knowledge. As the

epistemic modality is strictly controlled, the Olympian administration curates the mythic encyclopedia available to mortals. It then institutes a pedagogy of erasure and systematically omits the Nothing from any accounts. This redaction renders the Underworld's hidden void a profound epistemic heterotopia: a space that physically exists as the regime's biological engine of survival and that remains ontologically non-existent for the mortal population. The gods survive because the Nothing is operating both everywhere and nowhere. Within this paradox, the regime's collapse is engineered. The rebirth of *Kaos* within the hidden void transforms the Nothing into a catalyst of an alethic rupture. Once *Caeneus* reborn, he resists taxonomic containment as he becomes a metaleptic force that shatters the categories Zeus's regime built. Emancipation manifests as the refusal to be an 'organized' part of the world-model (Zeus's AW). It is the assertion of an APW that the gods cannot name, map, or extract.

The internal rupture requires an extradiegetic operator to achieve the final systemic collapse. As this analysis has shown, Prometheus's metaleptic sabotage allows for the ideological dismantling of the regime. Beyond the spatial confines of the three realms, Prometheus bypasses Zeus's panoptic surveillance and executes a profound epistemic metalepsis. He democratizes the alethic truth of the prophecy and renders the viewers into active conspirators. By dismantling what Konstan (2021) refers to as "totalitarian rigidity", Prometheus initiates a structural migration away from bureaucratic isolation towards a meaningful, human collectivity (p. 1). The dissolution of the Olympian strata serves as the necessary precondition for a renewed utopian impulse. The 'fire' is returned to the mortals as an epistemic gift: a restorative act that proves that, even within a degraded post-utopian cosmology, the social collective remains a site of potentiality.

This inquiry has established that *Kaos* (2024) functions as a state of narrative and spatial suspension. The chapter confirms, through its quantitative and qualitative methods, that the richness of the mythic encyclopedia is not a mere stylistic or ontological choice. By performing parodic reformulations, the series proves the durability of the mythic entity. The myth survives because it is flexible enough to accommodate "evaluative intonations" (Dentith, 2000, p. 6). The

mythic reformulations reflect contemporary anxieties like bureaucratic despotism and systemic extraction. In this sense, parodic reformulation is the 'fire' that prevents grand narratives from becoming fossilized. It ensures that the storyworld remains multimodal and transmodal, hence capable of existing across different media and historical epoch without losing its ontological weight.

In this sense, the 'fire' Prometheus returns to the mortals is not a physical weapon; it is a profound narratological agency. The regime's collapse proves that the mythic encyclopedia cannot be privatized as the exclusive property of a particular regime. Parodic regeneration of the grand narrative ensures its survival, returning it to the collective. It is an open, multivalent database. The renewed possibility of the utopian does not lie in the construction of a perfect architectural center. It is found in the capacity to become an ontological glitch to permanently disrupt the taxonomies of power and render the mortal structurally and categorically un-extractable.

References

- Aeschylus. (2012). *Prometheus bound* (D. H. Roberts, Trans.). Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Apollodorus. (1921). *The library* (Vol. 1) (J. G. Frazer, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bell, A. (2016). "I felt like I'd stepped out of a different reality": Possible worlds theory, metalepsis and digital fiction. In J. Gavins & E. Lahey (Eds.), *World building: Discourse in the mind* (pp. 15–32). London, England: Bloomsbury.
- Claeys, G. (2017). *Dystopia: A natural history*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Covell, C. (Creator). (2024). *Kaos* [Television series]. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix.
- Dentith, S. (2000). *Parody*. London, England: Routledge.
- Doležel, L. (1998). *Heterocosmica: Fiction and possible worlds*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1986). Of other spaces (J. Miskowiec, Trans.). *Diacritics*, 16(1), 22–27. (Original work published 1984)

- Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans., 2nd ed.). New York, NY: Vintage Books. (Original work published 1975)
- Foucault, M. (2008). *The birth of biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–79* (M. Senellart, Ed.; G. Burchell, Trans.). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan. (Original work published 2004)
- Genette, G. (1983). *Narrative discourse: An essay in method* (J. E. Lewin, Trans.). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. (Original work published 1972)
- Hesiod. (1988). *Theogony and works and days* (M. L. West, Trans.). Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Homer. (1991). *The Iliad* (R. Fagles, Trans.). New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Homer. (1996). *The Odyssey* (R. Fagles, Trans.). New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Konstan, D. (2021). Post-utopia: The long view. *Humanities*, 10(1), 1-14.
- Liotard, J.-F. (1984). *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge* (G. Bennington & B. Massumi, Trans.). Manchester, England: Manchester University Press. (Original work published 1979)
- More, T. (1912). *The Utopia of Sir Thomas More* (W. D. Armes, Ed.). New York, NY: The Macmillan Company. (Original work published 1516).
- Moylan, T. (2000). *Scraps of the untainted sky: Science fiction, utopia, dystopia*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Ovid. (1931). *Fasti* (J. G. Frazer, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Plato. (2000). *The Republic* (T. Griffith, Trans.; G. R. F. Ferrari, Ed.). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Plato. (2008). *The Symposium* (M. C. Howatson & F. C. C. Sheffield, Eds.; M. C. Howatson, Trans.). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Rose, M. A. (1993). *Parody: Ancient, modern and post-modern*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Ryan, M.-L. (1991). *Possible worlds, artificial intelligence, and narrative theory*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Ryan, M.-L. (2019). From possible worlds to storyworlds: On the worldness of narrative representation. In A. Bell & M.-L. Ryan (Eds.), *Possible worlds theory and contemporary narratology* (pp. 62-87). Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Saltin, L. (2026). VR Heterotopia: User Imaginaries of Virtual Reality Headsets as Technology for Reaching Utopic Spaces. *Media and Communication*, 14, Article 11191.

Wang, W. M. (2019). Postmodern play with worlds: The case of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. In A. Bell & M.-L. Ryan (Eds.), *Possible worlds theory and contemporary narratology* (pp. 132-156). Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

The Cultural Space of Possibilities? Reconciliation and Compromise in *Another World* (2025) and *Eternity* (2025)

Amy Lee¹

Introduction: Imaginations about Death in Popular Culture

Death may be a topic generally avoided in daily conversations, yet its significance in terms of how people approach their lives and create meaning for their existence is undeniable. Religious faiths have their own ways of positioning death in the overall plan of life, and depending on the meaning of death in the bigger picture of individual religions, there are also relevant rituals to commemorate death, and different imaginations of the world after life. Outside of academic or religious discussions, and formal conversations among family members about the business of death, popular culture is a site where collective thinking and feelings about death as the unavoidable terminal of life can be reflected. Standing at the most advanced point of material life in human history, how do we imagine death, and what can we learn from these imaginations about our feelings concerning death, and possibly in turn, life?

This chapter is examining two recent popular films shown in Hong Kong, both of which feature characters who are deceased and enter a space beyond the material world. The main setting of these two films are therefore heterotopia in the sense that they do not exist in the material world and do not function in the same way as the regular physical spaces we conventionally inhabit. *Another World* [世外], directed by Tommy Ng, is a Hong Kong fantasy animation, adapted from Naka Saijo's novel *Thousand Year Ghost* (2012). It is Hong Kong's second full-length animation to be selected for the Annecy International Animation Film Festival, and be featured in the

¹ Prof., Hong Kong Baptist University, Office of Student Affairs, ORCID: 0000-0002-0298-2218, Email: amylee@hkbu.edu.hk

“Midnight Special” section. The film won the 2025 Golden Horse Award for Best Animated Feature, with nominations for Best Adapted Screenplay and Best Original Score. It becomes the highest-grossing Hong Kong animation, and the second highest-grossing local film in 2025. *Eternity* is an American romantic comedy directed by David Freyne, premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival, and closed the 61st Chicago International Film Festival in 2025, and was featured in the Icon section of the Stockholm International Film Festival. It received generally positive reviews and a few prizes for its comedic performances. Although these two films are not regular blockbusters, each of them does bear some weight in reflecting the thoughts of their respective cultures.

In *Another World*, the setting is the world after life, a paradise-like realm governed by a Heavenly Lady [天女], who possesses special powers over people’s memories. She is supervising a group of “agents” whose responsibilities are to take care of the incoming deceased people, by persuading them to reconcile with their past lives and let go of all the memories, whether they are good or bad. This is to release them from the burden of the previous life, and to get ready to start anew in the next life. Although there are no external enemies to this world, occasional security risks appear when the deceased refuses to give up their memories of the past. Black Sky [黑天] is the key security figure to ensure the overall safety of this realm beyond life. In *Eternity*, the deceased will be sent to the Junction, which is the main setting of the film. Here at this point of transit, they are given 7 days to decide where they would like to spend their eternity – thus the title of the film. In this process, each of the deceased is assisted by an AC (Afterlife Coordinator) who has the deceased’s best interest in mind, and who would try to ensure that the choice is a suitable one as the decision is irreversible.

In both these two films, the main setting is the heterotopia, which is a transitional space, to which the protagonists are sent after they have completed their own journeys in the living world. In this transitional space, the main action of the films is conducted - how the protagonists come to make a decision about their next step - whether it is the next life in *Another World*, or eternity in the film of the same title. The

process of this decision making is given the dramatic focus because the protagonists not only come to understand what is to happen afterwards, but also what is the meaning of all that has happened in the previous lives. In other words, this heterotopia serves the function of being a point of reflection and ultimate understanding for the protagonists. For the audience, the main interest perhaps is not so much the actual decisions made, but more how these decisions come to be made, after a full understanding of the meaning of life. The following will be a review of these two films, to see how different cultures present the process of understanding the meaning and value of each life, through the depiction of this transitional space of the world after, and the challenges and struggles of the protagonists, as they are urged to come to terms with the time they spent in previous lives.

The Place Beyond: A Transitional Space of Possibilities

The Chinese title of *Another World* is *Shi Wai* [世外], which literally means “beyond the world”, in this case referring to the middle ground between a deceased person’s past life and the next life. The Chinese characters of 世外 invites an association to a common term called 世外桃源 which describes a symbolic paradise, or a utopia.² In the animation film, *Another World* is a natural environment dominated by the natural elements, with the mountains, trees, grassland, streams and rivers, everything seeming to be in its right place, befitting the general perception of a paradise. Here within this idyllic land, the deceased will be met by a guide who will help them come to terms with their past so that they are comfortable enough to let go of their memories of the previous life. When they are relieved of the burden of

² 世外桃源 [shì wài táo yuán] originates from a short tale by an Eastern Jin Dynasty poet Tao Yuanming [陶淵明] (365-427). The tale “Record of the Peach Blossom Spring” [桃花源記] depicts a fictional place called the Peach Blossom Spring, which is a beautiful land, cut off from the outside world, untouched by war, where people live in peace and contentment. Later, 世外桃源 [a Peach Blossom Spring beyond the world] came to be used as a metaphor for an ideal, peaceful, and beautiful haven, or for an imaginary, escapist place detached from reality.

these memories, they will walk under a waterfall, the threshold to the next life, and begin another round of experience.

As the movie begins, Another World is shown to be populated by a group of mask-adorned beings known as “spirit-walkers”, the guide whose responsibility is to persuade the deceased to let go of the memories of their past, then take them to the waterfall to undergo a spiritual cleansing before they reincarnate. As they step under the waterfall, their past memories will be left behind in the form of a red rope with knots on it, each knot represents an unresolved resentment in that life. Although these beings start their new lives after the waterfall, if there are too many red ropes and knots piling up in Another World, they will become a hazard and threaten the stability and safety of this idyllic space. The Heavenly Lady, although possessing some special power, is no match against the weight of these excessive knots, and her own safety may also be jeopardized if these knots accumulate to the extent of getting out of control.

In fact, the red ropes with knots threaten not only the peace and stability of Another World, but they may also be a safety risk to the human world, although indirectly. In the film, whenever a human being grows the emotion of resentment as a response to his or her experience, this strong negative emotion will become a Seed of Evil [鬼牙, *gui ya*] in that person’s soul, and this seed will continue to grow feeding on subsequent doses of negative emotions. This process of accumulation can continue across the human being’s different lifetimes, up to the point of saturation when the human nature is erased and the creature is transformed into a beast. If that happens, it will be Black Sky’s duty to destroy the beast, because the beast is a threat to the safety of those around it in the human world, and at the same time undermine the safety of the entire land of Another World. It can be seen that the human emotion of resentment is presented as extremely dangerous, as an angry person can wreak havoc in the human world and cause major damage to the people around him or her, and the accumulation of this anger and resentment can cross multiple lifetimes and threaten the stability even of the world beyond. That is why the job of the spirit-walkers is so important: if they can persuade the deceased to reconcile with their past, the unresolved anger and

resentment can be reduced and the red ropes will not be full of knots, and the human being will start the new life with no Seed of Evil. Failing that, the angry human beings will start their new lives already loaded with resentment, and the spirit-walkers will have to keep an eye on their ever-growing Seeds of Evil, to ensure that they will not reach the point of no return when the human beings turn into beasts.

Unlike *Another World*, the title of the film *Eternity* does not refer to the main setting, but to the place where the deceased will spend the rest of their time (i.e. eternity) after they make their decisions at the Junction, where the main drama of the film occurs. The Junction is a huge complex which centers around a train station lobby, with a hotel, as well as a lot of exhibition area like a convention center. In the film, the deceased arrive by train to the Junction, and if lucky, the relevant Afterlife Coordinator (AC) will already be there to meet with the specific deceased. But if the AC is busy taking care of other “clients”, the newly arrived person may have to sit on the benches and wait, confused, not knowing what to expect. This Junction is also a heterotopia, despite its huge size, for it is not a place for long-term stay (except for the AC, who work here), as those who arrive are given only 7 days to decide on their eternity – the final destination after a life in the human world.

During these 7 days, the deceased are offered a comfortable hotel room, with their favourite clothes in the closet, and guided by their AC to review information about the many eternities available. This function of the Junction is interestingly unconventional – the huge exhibition area features the many “salespeople” showcasing the attractiveness of their commodity and trying to persuade the newly arrived deceased to sign up. We are all aware of the power of advertising and the possible gap between what is shown in an advertisement and the real commodity or experience. The Junction is not only a temporary stop for the deceased to make an irreversible decision, but it is also a point where only a brief glimpse of the real is given for that important decision. To counter that ephemeral and possibly deceptive representation, the ACs are charged with the responsibility of giving their clients the best advice, including exposing the misrepresentations and lies made by the salespeople. In the film, the bartender

(who turns out to be Joan's first husband) even warns one of the salespeople not to approach clients in his bar.

At the beginning of the film *Eternity*, we see an old couple, Larry and Joan driving to the gender reveal party organized by their son, arguing about small things throughout the drive. But when they arrive at the door, Larry lovingly takes hold of Joan's hand and reminds her not to overtire herself because of her serious illness. After they enter the flat, family members overwhelm the old couple with chatter about family stories, one of which is Joan's first husband who was an extremely handsome war hero. At this point of the conversation, a photo featuring the young soldier and Joan is circulated and Larry suddenly chokes on a pretzel – and dies. Next, we see a young man in a train together with many other passengers, in all ages and dresses, some of whom even in hospital gowns and barefoot. As the train arrives at the terminal, the passengers all come out onto the Junction. This young man, named Larry, is met by his AC, Anna. She tells Larry that he is dead and she will assist him to make his final decision – where he will spend his eternity.

Young Larry cannot accept that he is dead – he only remembers choking on a pretzel and the next moment he is on a train, a young man again. Anna explains to him that everyone arriving at the Junction will appear to be the age when the person was happiest. That is the reason why there are not many old people and lots of children at the Junction. When Larry slowly begins to understand his situation, and realizes that he only has 7 days, he raises an issue which makes it impossible for him to make his choice within the limited time. Joan is diagnosed with terminal cancer and may be on her way any time, he wants to stay here and get things ready for her so that they can go to the same eternity together.

As can be seen, in both the animation film and the romantic comedy, the location where the deceased land is a heterotopia, an “other place” in their own ways. Another World is literally “beyond the world”, associated to a utopia by name, a fictional place invented by a poet in his story. It is an “other place” because it is a transitional space where the deceased are encouraged to give up their memories and resolve

their negative emotions so that they can reincarnate to a new life with a clean slate. The Junction in *Eternity* is similarly an “other place” as it is just a stop between the previous life and the next stage, a temporary abode where each client is supposed to stay for 7 days only, to make the best choice for himself against the deceptive appeal of a collection of advertisements. Even for the ACs and the other service providers, the Junction is not a proper place because time has stopped for them, and their experience here is an extended repetition of cycles of 7 days – guiding the newly dead towards their final decision.

In this heterotopia, which does not function as a conventional space, the deceased are to go through a journey of reflection and understanding. For those entering *Another World*, letting go of past memories is not always a simple matter. Many of them have difficulties because they have unfinished businesses: unfulfilled wishes, regrets, unspoken words, and unresolved emotions such as guilt. To be able to let go of the past, they must face these unfinished businesses for what they are, unnecessary obsessions because one gets too attached to the wrong components of life. In *Eternity* the Junction serves a similar purpose, the deceased are invited to review their past life and learn the truth about themselves, so that they can wisely make a choice for an eternity that will give them the kind of fulfilment needed. The fact that the deceased appear in their happiest age is a hint to help them realize what their happiness comes from, and maybe what they treasure most in life.

The Biggest Threat in the “Other Place”: The Destructive Power of Emotions

The main action of *Another World* centers around one of the spirit-walkers, Gudo, and a new arrival at Another World. This is a girl called Yuri, who catches Gudo’s attention because she is looking for her brother Kenji, and does not seem to care that she herself is already dead. Although Gudo does not know anything about Yuri, he feels a special attachment to her, and agrees to accompany her in the search for Kenji in Another World. As they work together, Gudo and Yuri become closely attached to each other. Gudo brings Yuri to see the

Heavenly Lady, who explains to Yuri how things are in Another World. She also grants Gudo the power to bring anyone to specific moments in the past, to witness certain significant events in the person's previous life. Finally, after a long search with no results, Gudo brings Yuri to see some moments of her previous life, which reveals that Yuri and her family lived in a time of famine - Kenji succumbed to starvation and died - their parents cooked the dead body to feed the family, including Yuri.

Realizing that she has eaten her brother, Yuri almost breaks down mentally. Her strong and mixed feelings – guilt, anger, sadness - cause the Seed of Evil to grow intensely in her heart, and a horn sprouts from her head. She is on the way to becoming a beast, when Black Sky tries to eliminate her before the other horn grows and completely destroys her humanity. Gudo tries to protect Yuri, and finds out from Mother Earth that if someone can look over Yuri and ensure her safe reincarnation for many lives across 1000 years without letting the Seed of Evil sprout two horns on her head, then Yuri can be reborn into a being free from the Seed of Evil. Out of compassion and love for Yuri, Gudo courageously takes up this huge responsibility and promises that he will watch over her for 1000 years to ensure that the other horn will not grow and Yuri will remain a human being over many lives. Having made that promise, Gudo witnesses Yuri pass under the waterfall and start another life.

After Yuri's reincarnation, we see Gudo crossing from Another World to the human world. He appears in Flower City where Princess Goran is mourning for her father's death. Her deep sadness and frustration cause her to put the blame on her father's faithful general, and is on the point of executing him to avenge her father and vent her anger. Seeing that these intense emotions feed the Seed of Evil in Princess Goran's heart, Gudo tries to help her come to terms with her emotions by allowing her to witness her father's condition moments before he died. When she sees that in fact her father committed suicide in order to protect her and Flower City, the Seed of Evil in her heart is removed, and the danger of becoming a beast in this life disappears. She accepts the reality and feels grateful that her father's final decision is a personal sacrifice out of love for her. Princess dies

in an accident, but she dies as a human being, fully reconciled to her life because she knows she is treasured and loved. Gudo's work in Princess Goran's life is complete, although bringing her to the past and trying to stop her from turning into a beast weakens him considerably.

After the episode with Princess Goran, we see Gudo crossing into other eras in the human world and oversees the life of Keung from the Wheat Village in an agricultural era, and the life of a young girl called Ying in an industrial era. Keung and his fellow villagers live under the exploitation of a tyrant and suffer enormously. Their harsh life, the injustice, and the pain of collective suffering cause the Seed of Evil to grow in Keung's heart, and frustration drives him to take extreme measures in an attempt to fight back in the name of achieving justice. The anger and bloodthirstiness threaten to turn him into a beast, and it is only with Gudo's compassionate intervention that Keung finally accepts the reality of their lives and chooses to act out of love rather than out of anger and blame. Although Keung and many of his fellow villagers die due to the tyrant's greed and brutality, Keung remains a human being to the very end of his life. Once again Gudo completes his work, giving everything he has to maintain Keung's humanity up to the end of his life, allowing him to reincarnate to another human life.

Next, we see Gudo crossing to the industrial era, and meets a young orphan girl called Ying, who has to work in a factory as child labour. Children from poverty work in the factory and try to look out for each other. One day Ying is bullied again and in trying to protect her, one of her companions, another young girl called Nana falls accidentally into a huge machine and dies instantly. Guilt, anger, and intense frustration feed the Seed of Evil in Ying's heart, and the emotions are so intense that she is turning into a beast right in front of everyone's eyes. Black Sky picks up his weapon, ready to eliminate Ying-the-beast, when Gudo puts himself directly between Ying and Black Sky, begging for a few moments when he will exhaust his energy to appeal to the last remnants of Ying's humanity. Gudo's selfless sacrifice touches the fading humanity in Ying, and this love makes up for the hard life and painful suffering the young children endure

in this industrial age. On the verge of Ying's transformation into a beast, Gudo's compassion and love pull her back to this side of humanity, and her realization of this great love removes the Seed of Evil in her heart, allowing her to enter reincarnation as a human being.

At this point in the film, the audience realize that Gudo indeed has kept his promise of 1000 years. Princess Goran of Flower City, Keung of Wheat Village and Ying of the industrial city are all reincarnations of Yuri. Life after life, this human being suffers from tragic events in life and responds to what seems to be injustice with anger, bitterness, hatred. These negative emotions become fuel to the Seed of Evil, and many times they are on the verge of becoming a beast. It is Gudo who tirelessly saves them again and again, to the extent of sacrificing himself. After saving Ying from becoming a beast, Gudo is so battered and weak that his life comes to an end. The Heavenly Lady says to him that he has already completed his 1000-year learning – understanding human love and the feeling of cherishing another being – and is ready to reincarnate into a human being.

Eternity is categorized as a romantic comedy about three people, Larry, his wife Joan, and Joan's first husband Luke, although not far into the film, all of them have already died. When Larry arrives at the Junction and is told that he only has 7 days to decide his eternity, he is frustrated because Joan is diagnosed with terminal cancer, and could be joining them any day. During these 7 days, while struggling between hoping and not hoping for Joan's immediate death, he sits at the bar and befriends the bar tender, who later turns out to be Joan's first husband. On the 7th day, just as Larry has given up waiting, and is on his way to his chosen eternity, he sees the young Joan arriving at the Junction. He immediately makes a U-turn and goes back to his AC and demands more time so that he can plan with his wife this time. This unexpected change of plans causes Anna and Ryan, the ACs of Larry and Joan respectively, to request from their seniors an alternative treatment for Larry and Joan. Just at the two ACs are marveling at the beauty of the couple's long-standing love, the bar tender appears at the Junction. Joan and Luke exclaim with great joy and love as they remember their short but lovely marriage. Luke has

stayed in the Junction for 67 years, just to wait for Joan's death and their reunion.

Given the special circumstance, Joan could have twice the amount of time to make her decision, although whether to go with Larry or Luke is a decision about the value of their relationships, not the length. If it is just a matter of time, on one side is Larry to whom she has been married for more than 50 years, on the other side is Luke, her first husband who has waited 67 years for her. Deciding on the companion of her eternity however requires a personal evaluation of these relationships. There is love in both cases, although they experience this love at different periods of their lives. In fact, Larry and Luke treat each other as competitors for Joan's favour again, and they both try to remind Joan of their worth. Joan's decision has been turned into an assessment of the men's personal worth. Even the two ACs are joining in this competition, with Anna trying to support Larry and Ryan cheering Luke onward. At this point of the film, the interest is not so much on how this romantic comedy will turn out, but on how we assess the true value of a relationship.

On this serious matter, we can find a hint in Joan's friend Karen. She arrives at the Junction as a woman of 72 years old. After a lifetime of repressing her homosexual desires, she finally breaks out of her closet when she enters old age, and this freedom makes old age her happiest time. Larry does not like her, but when he desperately looks for a reason to justify himself as the eternal partner, Karen says to him: "you made your life about making her happy, isn't that enough?" Making someone happy is here presented as a high order, noble enough to qualify one as an eternal partner. With that realization, Larry comes to see Joan off when she decides to spend her eternity with Karen, not to persuade her to choose him, but to urge her to change her mind and go with Luke instead. His reason is very simple – he realizes from Joan's hairstyle that her happiest time is before meeting him, when she was Luke's wife. Karen's words remind him that he has made Joan's happiness his greatest mission in life, but the fact is, Joan is happiest when she was Luke's wife. If happiness is the highest measurement of the value of a relationship, then he should not only let her go, but encourage her to choose Luke again.

With happiness being the highest value, we see Joan and Luke deciding for the “mountain eternity”, fully expecting to enjoy their forever there while Larry stays behind and takes up the bar tender job. We see Joan and Luke basking in each other’s company at first, but gradually a difference in their lifestyle emerges. Joan begins to spend more time alone, and her repeated visits to the Archive become obsessive. The Archive is like a memory lane, where moments from the past can be viewed. Joan keeps going back to re-live moments of her long marriage with Larry, her addiction so deep that even the person managing the ticket booth warns her to back off. When even Luke realizes that Joan is not really present in the mountain eternity but reliving her past in the Archive, he confronts her and all she can say is “I made a mistake coming here with you”.

Finally, Luke helps Joan to escape from this eternity through the backdoors of the Archive and return to the Junction. This time Larry and Joan come together again and slip into one of the eternities that mirrors the kind of life they have as an old couple. For Joan, the long time they spent together, the family they built, and even their on-going bickering are the factors making up a life that is worth continuing into eternity. Even in the Junction when they can choose from thousands of eternities, they choose one that is ordinary, similar to the life they have created together, to be their forever abode. This ending may come as an anti-climax for a romantic comedy, but it carries the weight of a serious reflection about the worth of our times on earth. Luke and Joan were no doubt very much in love when they married, yet that love has not been given a chance to develop into something that nourishes an extended relationship, like what Larry and Joan co-own through their 50 years together.

Conclusion: A Thousand-year Promise with Oneself

In *Another World*, the deceased come to the world beyond after their previous lives have ended. Here under the guidance of the spirit-walkers they have to learn to reckon their past, make peace with them, so that they can start anew in the next life. From the experience of Yuri, who in different reincarnations encounters deep suffering and

responds with anger, hatred, bitterness and regret, we come to see that these negative emotions are the greatest threats to one's humanity. Once these emotions take root inside, the person is on his way to becoming a beast. What is most alarming is that the individual loss of humanity will impact other people and cause destruction to an entire community, in this case the very world beyond itself. Without this transitional space, Seeds of Evil harboured in humankind will find no hindrance and this will directly threaten the peace and continuation of humankind.

Interestingly, although it is Yuri's appearance in *Another World* that starts the dramatic action and Gudo's assisting her to the many reincarnations. It is finally Gudo who is the one saved, and allowed the chance to become a human being. Gudo is a spirit-walker who does not have human feelings and their obsessive attachments, but in his promise to protect Yuri against the possibility of becoming a beast, he has actually created his own redemption – becoming human. Being there with Yuri through her many lives, he has come to learn the human condition, mankind's weaknesses, but also the treasure of love. When the Heavenly Lady announces to Gudo that he is to leave *Another World* to become human, it is to Gudo a prize and not a punishment. His 1000-year promise to Yuri is not only a pledge to her, but also a pledge to himself for a more meaningful existence in the human world beyond the timeless *Another World*.

Despite the many differences between *Eternity* and the fantasy animation *Another World*, the nature of the space central to the film is very similar. *Another World* and the Junction are both transitional, an "other place" with no permanence, but pivotal to the thereafter. This heterotopia is a site for reflection of the previous life, a re-consideration of choices made before, and relief of emotions that no longer serve any constructive purposes. Luke stays behind as a bar tender so that he will see Joan one day, and hopefully spend their eternity together. Larry likewise postpones his departure because he expects Joan soon. The dramatic events that happen to Joan and her two husbands in the Junction force them to face their past lives honestly, evaluate their previous choices, and make an appropriate decision about the future. Although *Eternity* does not embrace reincarnation,

in many ways the need to choose an eternity makes the reflection and the learning even more important than reincarnation – it is irreversible. The process of making a choice of eternity, whether it is with one's beloved in the previous life, or like Karen, to try something she has never tried before, is symbolically a 1000-year promise to oneself. In this promise, one is fully responsible for one's life, moreover, fully aware of this responsibility. Both *Another World* and *Eternity* have used their own ways to remind audiences of the necessary responsibility of bearing one's weight of life.

References

- Freyne, D. (Director). (2025). *Eternity* [Motion picture]. United States: Apples Original Film and Star Thrower Entertainment.
- Ng, T. (Director). (2025). *Another world* [Animation]. Hong Kong: Point Five Productions, Silver Media Group, and Film Development Council.
- Ng, T. (Director). (2019). *Another world* [Animation]. Hong Kong: Animation Support Scheme, Create Hong Kong.
- Saijo, N. (2015). *Sennenki: Thousand-year journey of an oni*. Tokyo, Japan: Tokuma Shoten Publishing Co., Ltd.

„Halb Wasser, halb Wind“, „[e]in Vogel [...], ein Fisch“: Mythologische (Denk-)Figuren des Heterotopischen in Sarah Kuratles *Chimäre*

Ursula Klingenböck¹

1. Vorbemerkungen

Chimäre (2025) ist nach *Greta und Jannis. Vor acht oder in einhundert Jahren* (2021) der zweite Roman von Sarah Kuratle.² Ausgezeichnet mit der Buchprämie des österreichischen Bundes, stand er auf der Shortlist für den Buchcover-Award 2025. Das Gemälde von Odilon (eig. Bertrand) Redon mit dem Titel *Hommage à Goya*³ zeigt einen im Raum ‚schwebenden‘ Kopf mit farbigem, federn-, blatt- und blütenähnlichem Haarschmuck und platziert ihn in einer aerischen und/oder aquatischen Umgebung. Der Romantitel, der zugleich als Bildüberschrift lesbar wird, benennt das Abgebildete als Chimäre. Gleichzeitig performieren die ikonisierte Schrift und die in einem weiteren Sinn ‚kinetische‘ Typografie ein Chimärisches und, wie noch zu zeigen sein wird, ein Metamorphisches: Die Kombination von Konturen- und Wellenschrift erzeugt Illusionen des Organischen, des Liquiden und der Bewegung. Weiche Linien, Ligaturen und ‚tanzende‘ Buchstaben, die den Frauenkopf umgeben, sind nicht nur Mittel ästhetischer Gestaltung, sondern auch semantisierte Form. Mit dem Chimärischen und Metamorphischen verweisen sie auf mythische Elemente, die nicht nur für die Bilder von Goya und Redon, sondern auch für Kuratles Roman konstitutiv sind. Über die Prinzipien mythischen Handelns und Denkens loten sie die Möglichkeiten einer semantischen

¹ Ass.-Prof. Mag. Dr., Universität Wien, Philologisch-Kulturwissenschaftliche Fakultät, Institut für Germanistik, Wien, ORCID : 0009-0000-6929-1342, Email: ursula.klingenboeck@univie.ac.at.

² Für bio-bibliografische Angaben vgl. <https://www.sarah-kuratle.com/> [30.4.2026].

³ Öl auf Karton, 1895; Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie, Sammlung Scharf-Gerstenberg, <https://recherche.smb.museum/detail/1065707/hommage-%C3%A0-goya>. [30.4.2026].

und ästhetischen Re-Kontextualisierung aus. Obwohl die Literaturkritik häufig auf eine mythologische Dimension von Kuratles Roman verweist (Pohl, 2025, Lind, 2025), sieht sie diese nicht als genrebildend an. Stattdessen wird *Chimäre* dem Nature Writing (Läubli, 2025), der Climate-Poetry (Bubich, 2025) oder auch der Phantastik (Otto Müller Verlag, 2025) zugeordnet. Als anschlussfähig für eine mythologische Lektüre des Roman erweisen sich u.a. Aussagen zur hybriden Qualität (so spricht etwa Uhrmann, 2025 von „lyrischer Prosa“) und zum transformierenden Potenzial der Sprache (Pohl, 2025), zur Struktur (der Text als Gewebe bei Diezmann, 2025, als Organismus bei Lind, 2025) und Semantik (Karre, 2025 und Felchlin, 2025 reflektieren auf die Metaphorik, Raschner, 2025 auf die Polysemie) des Textes sowie zu intertextuellen Referenzen (Raschner, 2025 nennt Carroll und Ovid, nicht aber Hesiod). Eine literaturwissenschaftliche Auseinandersetzung mit Kuratles *Chimäre* liegt bis dato noch nicht vor.

2. Methodisch-theoretische Grundlagen

Leitend für die Lektüre von Kuratles *Chimäre* ist eine ‚Arbeit am Mythos‘, die allerdings nicht anthropologisch wie bei Blumenberg (1979), sondern posthumanistisch ausgerichtet ist. Von den zahlreichen anti-essentialistischen Denker*innen bekommen für die Mythenforschung vor allem Donna Haraway (*A Cyborg Manifesto*, 1985) und Rosi Braidotti (*Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*, 2002) Bedeutung. Zum einen entwerfen sie eine relationale Ontologie, die - trotz Unterschieden in Ausrichtung und Detail - nicht auf ein isoliertes und statisches ‚Sein‘, sondern auf ein bezügliches und dynamisches ‚Werden‘ fokussiert; zum anderen erklären sie dieses über die Figuren der Chimäre bzw. der Metamorphose, wobei für Haraway relational-materialistische und für Braidotti monistisch-vitalistische Aspekte prägend sind (vgl. z. B. Hoppe, 2021, S. 27-45). Beide funktionalisieren die politische (Haraway) bzw. ethische (Braidotti) Dimension des Mythos für eine Hybridisierung von Welt. Darüber hinaus haben sie auch Überlegungen zu einer epistemischen Qualität des Mythos angestoßen. Für eine solche erweist sich insbesondere Vittoria Borsós Untersuchung zu Mythos und Metamorphose (*Das*

Bindeglied von Mythos und Metamorphose, 2018) als interessant: zum ersten, weil sie das dynamische Moment im Entwurf einer relationalen, selbstorganisierenden und offenen „prozessurale[n] Ontologie“ (Borsó 2018, S. 25) bündelt; zum zweiten, weil sie die Metamorphose als Wissensmetapher und -form mit dem Mythos als Dispositiv des Wissens korreliert und beide füreinander funktionalisiert, und zum dritten, weil sie die Metamorphose nicht nur als Erzählgegenstand des Mythos (die Verwandlung von Substanzen und Identitäten), sondern im Anschluss an Haraway auch als Qualität eines ‚historisch‘ dimensionierten, mythischen Erzählens selbst fasst.

Die folgenden Überlegungen gehen von der Prämisse aus, dass - analog zur Metamorphose - auch der Chimäre eine epistemische Dimension zukommt. Wie diese trifft sie eine Aussage über die Konzeption von Welt und beschreibt den Mythos, der sie herstellt und vermittelt - aber anders. Modelliert wird die Arbeit an Chimäre und Metamorphose über einen multi-mythologischen Zugang, wie ihn sowohl der Roman als ‚Erscheinungsform‘ des Mythos als auch die Mythentheorie Borsós nahelegen. Sie ermöglichen es, ein ‚Chimärisches‘ und ‚Metamorphisches‘ in Kuratles *Chimäre* als Phänomene des Erzählten und des Erzählens (mithin gegenständlich und ästhetisch) zu begreifen und das Mythische auf textueller und intertextueller Ebene zu identifizieren. Darüber hinaus stellt das Multi-Mythologische Impulse für poetologische und mythostheoretische Überlegungen bereit und kann als solches auf ein realhistorisches, -soziales und politisches Wirkpotenzial befragt werden, das - wenn auch in anderem Sinn als bei Blumenberg - wiederum auf Bewältigung zielt. Meine zentrale These ist, dass wechselnde mythologische Praktiken des Zusammenstellens und des Verwandelnstheoretische und diskursive Denkräume eröffnen. Indem sie vergangene und gegenwärtige Mythen einer kritischen (Re-)Lektüre unterziehen, gewinnen sie auch über die krisenhafte Realität des Romans hinaus epistemisches Potenzial. Im Folgenden werden Chimäre und Metamorphose als Erscheinungsweisen eines wiederholten und vieldeutigen ‚Mythischen‘ verstanden, das entlang unterschiedlicher Achsen verhandelt wird. Dementsprechend richtet sich die Aufmerksamkeit zunächst auf das Verhältnis von gegenwärtiger Narration und antiken Texten (Quelle und

Resonanz). Daran anschließend werden Chimäre und Metamorphose als Ergebnis des Zusammenfügens und als Prozess des Verwandeln vorgstellt (Komposition und Transfiguration). Die beiden folgenden Kapitel korrelieren das Chimärische und das Metamorphische mit der heterotopischen Insel (Raum und Zeit) und fokussieren auf Verfahren der Textierung und Diskursivierung (Rhetorik und Narratologie). Abschließend wird nach dem wissenspoietischen Potenzial des Mythischen und seiner Funktionsweise (Chimäre und Metamorphose X Metapher und Metonymie) gefragt.

3. Multi-mythologisches Erzählen

3.1. *Quelle und Resonanz*

Ein relationaler Zugang zu Mythen-Narrationen ist sowohl durch die Literatur- als auch durch die Mythentheorie induziert. Kuratles Roman erzählt von Praktiken der Zusammenfügung und Verwandlung und konkretisiert diese in der Geschichte von Gregor und Alice respektive Alois, Tera und Max, die auf einer heterotopischen Insel leben. Auch wenn er mit der titelgebenden Chimäre eine der bekanntesten Kompositfiguren der Antike aufruft, bezieht er sie nicht auf die „prototypische[]“ (Daston 2012, S. 79) *Chimaira*. Als Tochter der Mensch-Tierwesen Typhon und Echidna ist sie ein Mischwesen der zweiten Generation, das mit dem Grotesken auch das Fürchterliche potenziert. Die *Chimaira* resultiert aus der (gewaltsamen) Zusammenfügung des *qua natura* nicht Vereinbaren, wobei die anatomische Asymmetrie des mehrköpfigen Körpers mit einer wesenhaften korreliert, z. B. werden Löwe und Schlange (oder auch Drache) ‚Wildheit‘ und ‚Männlichkeit‘, der Ziege ‚Zahmheit‘ und ‚Weiblichkeit‘ zugeschrieben (vgl. Daston 2012, S. 79f.). Anstatt des mythischen Einzelwesens rückt *Chimäre* eine ‚Klasse‘ von Mischwesen in den Blick, wie sie seit dem Mittelalter und der Frühen Neuzeit gebräuchlich ist, um die Störung oder auch Perversion einer Ordnung zu repräsentieren (vgl. Tralau 2016, S. 52), bzw. deren konstitutives Merkmal, d. h. ein erst näher zu bestimmendes Chimärisches. Analoges gilt für die erzählten Metamorphosen, die sich nicht auf eines der ‚klassischen‘

antiken Körper-Form-Paare wie z.B. Amor und Psyche (mit Bezug zu Kuratle vgl. Raschner 2025) zurückführen lassen.

Die intertextuelle Qualität des Romans wird nicht durch (s)eine Referenz auf eine ‚Quelle‘ im Sinne einer konkret ausgeformten und benennbaren ‚Geschichte‘ begründet, wie sie für die Chimäre in Hesiods *Theogonie* oder Homers *Ilias*, für die Metamorphose in Ovids *Metamorphosen* erzählt wird. Stattdessen beruht sie auf einem Narrativ der Chimäre bzw. der Metamorphose, d. h. auf der abstrakten ‚Menge‘ sich wandelnder Erzählungen und Ikonografien, die dem Roman vorausgehen, auf die er sich nolens volens bezieht und zu denen er - als vorläufiger Endpunkt - auch selbst gehört. Mit der Konstruktion von Prä- und Posttext (vgl. grundlegend Broich, 1985, Pfister, 1985) stellt die Intertextualitätsforschung ein Instrumentarium zur Beschreibung von Text-Text-Relationen bereit, das auch für die (narratologische) Mythenforschung (z. B. Gottwald, 2007 u. ö., Borsó, 2018) wesentlich geworden ist. ‚Mythos‘ entsteht demnach in einem fortlaufenden und dynamischen Prozess des Erzählens, Wieder- und Widererzählens, das Prä- und Posttext je neu zueinander konstellierte. Für Kuratles Roman werden unterschiedliche Verfahren konstitutiv, die als Applikation, Kooperation, Kontamination und Rekonfiguration beschrieben werden können (vgl. dazu und zum folgenden Lorenz, 2017, S. 113-138). Durch sie wird das Mythische über eine doppelte Perspektive fassbar. Zum einen ist es eine Qualität dessen, was dem Roman vorausgeht, das ‚außerhalb seiner selbst‘ liegt und auf das er antwortet (Responsivität); zum anderen klingt das Mythische in *Chimäre* nach und wird dadurch zu einem Merkmal des Romans selbst (Resonanz). Der Posttext ‚zitiert‘, am augenscheinlichsten über den Titel, aber auch über chimärische und metamorphische Akteur*innen und Relationen, den Prätext. Die Chimäre als Kombination des Unvereinbaren und die Metamorphose als Verwandlung des Verfestigten dienen als Schablonen und Deutungsmuster für die ‚Geschichte‘, z. B. für die Konzeption von ‚Natur‘ und Gesellschaft, insbesondere von ‚Geschlecht‘ und ‚Zugehörigkeit‘. Es werden aber auch ursprüngliche Bedeutungen durch neue, teils widersprüchliche Aspekte verfremdet, z. B. wird die Chimäre nicht (mehr) für die Restauration einer Weltordnung, die Metamorphose nicht (mehr) für die Sanktionierung eines

Verstoßes funktionalisiert. Kuratles Roman bricht dominante Konzepte des Prätextes auf bzw. perspektiviert er diese anders. So wird das Chimärische nicht mehr metaphysisch (theogenetisch oder auch providentiell) begründet, sondern im raum-zeitlichen Kontext der Insel naturalisiert, und es wird auf eine sehr spezifische Weise mit dem Metamorphischen verschränkt. Der Posttext ruft den Prätext nicht nur auf, sondern er kommentiert ihn in seiner Aussage, Form und Ästhetik. Indem sie neue Lesarten provozieren, werden Kuratles ‚neue‘ Chimären bzw. Metamorphosen auch für die ‚alten‘, sprich: einen mythischen Intertext von Chimäre und Metamorphose, wirksam.

3.2. Komposition und Transformation

Die Chimäre, die aus der Zusammenstellung des Unterschiedlichen resultiert, und die Metamorphose, welche die Veränderung eines Wesens oder einer ‚Sache‘ vom einen zum anderen vorführt, werden nicht nur für die inter-, sondern auch die intratextuellen Relationen des Romans konstitutiv. Weil sie nicht als mythische Figuren-Zitate, sondern als Merkmale von Menschen, Tieren, Pflanzen und ‚Dingen‘, von Spezies und Elementen in ihren Relationen zueinander in Erscheinung treten, soll im Weiteren vermehrt von einem ‚Chimärischen‘ bzw. von einem ‚Metamorphischen‘ gesprochen werden: Es macht das Erzählte (wie im Übrigen auch das Erzählen, s. Kap. 3.3.) nicht nur beschreibbar, sondern es bringt dieses als Zustand oder als Prozess erst hervor. Im Zentrum des Interesses liegt nicht ein genetisches - Max‘ (zentral-)heterochrome Augen (vgl. Kuratle, 2025, S. 33) weisen auf DNA-Datensätze von zwei verschiedenen Individuen hin - bzw. ein biologisches - die Raupe verpuppt sich und wird zum Schmetterling (vgl. Kuratle, 2025, 26) - Chimärisches bzw. Metamorphisches, das im Kontext von Entstehung, Wachstum, Gestalt und Entwicklung steht, sondern ein konzeptionelles.

Obwohl sie zwei unterschiedliche Phänomene beschreiben, sind Chimäre und Metamorphose Beispiele für die gewordene Form bzw. für die Formwerdung in einem weiteren Sinn. Indem sie mit (scheinbar) ‚festen‘ Grenzen operieren, die sie aufbrechen und neu setzen oder verschieben, können - die Metamorphose als Prozess und die Chimäre als ihr/sein Produkt - als liminale Phänomene verstanden werden. Weil sie weder gesondert auftreten noch ‚endgültige‘ Zustände

herstellen, sind Komposition und Verwandlung auch auf ihr Verhältnis zueinander zu befragen. Das erste Kapitel führt Chimäre und Metamorphose über Alice ein: Sie „will [...] zu diesem Baum im See, zur Hälfte in der Luft. Halb Wasser, halb Wind, eine Chimäre, das will sie auch sein. Wenn sie auftaucht, ein Vogel. Absinkt, ein Fisch” (Kuratle, 2025, S. 15). Ausgehend von dem Wunsch nach räumlicher Annäherung entwickelt die Passage das Chimärische und das Metamorphische als im eigentlichen Sinn ‚elementare‘ Grenzüberschreitungen. Wasser und Luft bezeichnen nicht nur Lebensräume, sondern auch Existenzweisen, die für das Individuum wesensbestimmend werden. Dass sie in ein Äquivalenzverhältnis gebracht werden, verdeutlicht die grundsätzliche Gleichwertigkeit des Verschiedenen. Was sie dem Baum attestiert, wünscht Alice auch für sich selbst: eine Chimäre zu sein. Indem sie die Chimäre im Beispiel des Vogel-Fisches für eine Form der Verwandlung durchlässig macht, transformiert sie die räumliche Koexistenz in eine zeitliche. Allerdings stellt diese weder ein mythisches Verwandelt-Werden noch ein biologisches oder auch evolutionäres Sich-Wandeln in den Mittelpunkt, sondern ein aktives und (selbst-)bestimmtes, d.h. ein intentionales und zweckgerichtetes Sich-(selbst)-Verwandeln, das es ermöglicht, einmal das eine und einmal das andere zu sein. Mit dem Changieren zwischen zwei Optionen als reaktive Anpassungsleistung operiert Kuratle mit ‚uneigentlichen‘ Metamorphosen, wie sie auch für Gregor, der „abwechselnd Baum und Blume” (Kuratle, 2025, S. 94) ist, charakteristisch sind. Sein stehender Beiname „Chamäleon” (Kuratle, 2025, S. 53) verweist darüber hinaus auf ein Pseudo-Metamorphisches, das eben nicht morphologisch, sondern physiologisch begründet ist. Eine Sonderform der uneigentlichen Metamorphose sind artifizielle Verwandlungen. Um sich selbst zum Fisch zu ‚machen‘, bemalt Alice ihre Füße (Kuratle, 2025, S. 93) und Schultern (Kuratle, 2025, S. 98) mit Schuppen. Ihre Ichthyomorphie ist ein Phänomen der Oberfläche, und sie bleibt partiell: Indem sie Merkmale unterschiedlicher Spezies auf ihrer Haut trägt, verharrt sie ‚chimärisch‘ zwischen Mensch und Tier, zwischen Natur- und Artefakt. Darüber hinaus erweist sich die Verwandlung als flüchtig: Nur wenig später wäscht das Wasser die Farbe ab und macht damit die Fisch-Haftigkeit Alices zunichte. Alice ‚wird‘ nicht zum Tier bzw. zum mensch-tierlichen Mischwesen, und sie ‚ist‘ folglich auch

nicht Fisch bzw. Meerfrau, sondern sie erscheint in der Maske des einen bzw. der anderen.

Auf Alices Körperbemalung bezieht sich eine weitere Zeichenszene, welche die bereits bekannten Versatzstücke aufgreift: „Aus einem Vogelkopf wird ein Menschengesicht. Alois, erschrickt sie, nein, es ist Alice, kein Zweifel. Von den Schultern ein paar Flügel, eine zweite Figur mit Maske, mit der ersten verheddert. Max, nein, Gregor, ist sie sich sicher... diese Chimäre aus Fisch und Vogel, aus Alice und Gregor, das bin ich” (Kuratle, 2025, S. 140). Wiederum perspektiviert durch Alice, beschreibt sie das Entstehen eines Selbstporträts. Dabei zeigt sich ein deutlicher Zuwachs an Komplexität, der zum einen aus der Zeichnung selbst, zum anderen aus der Qualität der Gegenstände und ihrer Wahrnehmung durch die Zeichnerin resultiert: „Was sie [Alice] draußen sehen, zeichnen könnte, ist immer schon ein anderes, vermischt” (Kuratle, 2025, 81). Die Identitätsdiffusion, wie sie sowohl für das Chimärische als auch für das Metamorphische konstitutiv ist, wird durch multiple Relationen kompliziert. Über Verschiebungen, Brüche und Projektionen werden Zuweisungen hergestellt und revidiert und für einen (Selbst-)Erkenntnisprozess, der die mediale Distanznahme über das Bild benötigt, funktionalisiert. In der Ansicht des Ab-Bildes werden Alois und Alice, Max und Gregor und, in einer kühnen Diametrale, auch Alice und Gregor zusammengeführt.

3.3. Raum und Zeit

Als Zubringer zur Insel, die namenlos bleibt und symbolische 700 Kilometer (Kuratle, 2025, S. 9, 17) weit weg in einem See verortet wird, erhält der Fluss zunächst praktische Bedeutung. In der kurzen Analepse zu Beginn des Romans fällt Gregor ins Wasser, wird weggespült und auf wundersame Weise zur Insel getrieben (Kuratle, 2025, S. 9). Seine erste Ankunft auf der Insel ist also nicht Folge eines Aufbruchs, einer Reise, sondern eines Zu- bzw. Unfalls und weckt dementsprechend Zweifel. Gregors wiederholtes „Im Fluss, natürlich im Fluss” (Kuratle, 2025, S. 9) ist nicht nur eine Versicherung der Herkunftserzählung, sondern auch eine Aussage über die Welt und insbesondere die Insel. Mit dem Im-Fluss-Sein zitiert *Chimäre* ein radikales Bild des Metamorphischen, das die Verwandlung sowohl von einem Figürlichen als auch von einer teleologischen Vorstellung

entkoppelt. An die Stelle der Transformation eines Bestehenden in ein erst herzustellendes und finales ‚Anderes‘ tritt der sich laufend vollziehende und unabschließbare Vorgang des Wandels. Mit Heraklits Postulat von der ständigen Veränderung und von der Einheit der Gegensätze referiert der Roman auf ein kosmologisches Verständnis des Metamorphischen, das auch für das Erzählte und in weiterer Folge für das Erzählen selbst Bedeutung erhält.

Mit der Insel greift *Chimäre* auf ein erprobtes kulturgeschichtliches Konzept (vgl. Billig 2011, Brittnacher 2017, Pichler 2022) zurück und funktionalisiert dieses für ein ‚mythisches‘ Erzählen. Die Insel ist nicht nur Schauplatz des Mythos, sondern sie steht mit diesem in einem dynamischen und reziproken Verhältnis. Das Chimärische und das Metamorphische können nur in Erscheinung treten, weil es die Insel gibt; gleichzeitig stellen sie diese erst her. Abgelegen, eingeschlossen von Wasser und von anderen Landformen weitgehend abgetrennt, folgt sie einer Raum-Zeit-Logik, die sie von der Umgebungswelt kategorial unterscheidet. In ihrer ‚Andersheit‘ beschreibbar wird sie u.a. über Foucaults Theorem des Heterotopos (Foucault 2005), das sowohl die räumliche als auch die zeitliche Dimension (hier: der Insel) erfasst. Für beide erlangen das Metamorphische und das Chimärische besondere Bedeutung. Die Insel konfrontiert auf engem Raum Belebtes (menschliche, tierliche, pflanzliche Lebewesen) und Unbelebtes (Materialitäten, Elemente) und ihre unterschiedlichen Seinsformen (Natur und Kultur), und sie bringt diese auch in ein Verhältnis zueinander. Indem sie das augenscheinlich Ungleiche in ein gleichzeitiges Nebeneinander zwingt und das räumlich-statische ‚Sein‘ in ein zeitlich-dynamisches ‚Werden‘ überführt, wird sie nicht nur zum Experimentierraum für die Herstellung von ‚Welt‘, sondern auch zum Diskursraum für das Metamorphische und das Chimärische selbst. Was auf der Insel geschieht, wird als mittelbare Folge außerinsularer Verhältnisse erklärt, auf die es aber nicht zurückwirkt. Nur vage angedeutete Ereignisse (Krieg, Umweltdegradation) haben ein zerstörtes und verödetes Festland zurückgelassen, auf dem das Zusammenleben von hierarchischen und menschenfeindlichen Ideologien (z. B. die Ausgrenzung der „Ortlosen“, zu denen Tera gehört) bestimmt wird. Mit der Insel wird der ‚alten‘, dystopischen Welt

eine ‚neue‘ gegenübergestellt, die sich der (Wieder-)Herstellung einer ‚natürlichen‘ Harmonie verschrieben hat (mit Bezug zur Insel vgl. Krasny 2011, S. 188). Trotz oder gerade wegen ihres visionären Charakters kann sie nicht oder nur in ihren Ansätzen als utopisch beschrieben werden: Ein idealer Zustand wird durch Exklusivität (die Insel bietet nur für eine kleine Gruppe Raum), latente strukturelle Macht (das Kolleg bestimmt und überwacht die Regeln der Insel) und Exklusion (die streng patriarchale Ordnung lässt keine Frauen zu und überträgt damit die Rettung der Welt, aber auch das Scheitern daran den Männern) hintertrieben, durch Missbrauch (die sexualisierte Macht Professor Xanders gegenüber Gregor) zersetzt und durch den finalen Brand, der die Menschen zum Verlassen der Insel nötigt, in eine ferne Zukunft verlegt. Heterotopisch ist die Insel auch deshalb, weil sie sich zwar signifikant von einem als Norm gesetzten Festland unterscheidet, aber weder sein direktes noch vollständiges Gegenbild darstellt. Anders und ‚mythologisch‘ gesagt: Die Abweichungsheterotopie der Insel wird durch ein Chimärisches generiert, das den externen Konflikt zu einem internen macht. Ihre andersräumliche und -zeitliche Qualität zeigt sich auf unterschiedlichen Ebenen.

Eine schwach ausgeprägte Handlung erzeugt kaum Dynamik, die Zeit erscheint verlangsamt und folgt einem von der Tier- und Pflanzenpopulation vorgegebenen zyklischen Konzept. Um die ‚natürliche‘ Artenvielfalt zu restaurieren und für die Zukunft zu sichern, errichten die Bewohner*innen künstliche Ökosysteme, gleichsam ‚Inseln‘ in der Insel, in denen sie Pflanzen bauen, pflegen und vermehren, um sie dann auszuwildern. Das Changieren zwischen den Gegensätzen - zwischen ‚gebauter‘ Kultur und ‚gewachsener‘ Natur, zwischen Zivilisation und Wildnis, zwischen Vertrautheit und Unheimlichkeit, zwischen Selbstbestimmung und Kontrolle, zwischen Ordnung und Störung - lässt kein gemeinsames Drittes im Sinne eines Hybriden entstehen. Nicht nur aufgrund der finalen Katastrophe, die mutmaßlich das Insel-Biotop zerstört, ist *Chimäre* eine Geschichte des Scheiterns. Was die Insel für sich negiert, ist für die Figuren, denen sie zur Spiegelfläche wird, differenzierter zu betrachten: Sie sind ‚andere‘ als auf dem Festland - Gregor wird vom passiven Opfer zum reaktiv-defensiven Akteur, die weiblich codierte Alice wird zum männlich

codierten Alois -, und sie bleiben auch nicht dieselben. Während Gregor immer mehr zum Gefangenen der von ihm selbst geschaffenen und aufrechterhaltenen Regeln wird, legt Alice das ihr aufgezwängte Geschlecht ab und wird dadurch zu einem selbstbestimmten Subjekt. Für sie wird es als einzige möglich, den insularen Schwellenraum zu nützen und die eigene chimärische bzw. metamorphische Verfasstheit zu erkennen und anzuerkennen. Für Gregor gelingt das nur auf dem Papier. Um die festen Konturen (vgl. Kuratle, 2025, 60) seiner Zeichnungen, die strukturell als Spiegelung der Insel-Physiognomie, psychologisch als körperlicher Abgrenzungsversuch gegenüber Missbrauchserfahrungen gelesen werden können, aufzulösen, bedarf es eines interventionistischen Akts. Stellvertretend für die „Grenzen“ und „Enden“ (Kuratle, 2025, S. 61) Gregors löst Alois die Linien der naturalistisch gezeichneten Pflanzen auf, indem er sie verwischt und übermalt. Eine intendierte Veränderung Gregors wird damit nicht erreicht. Bis auf einzelne, episodische und ausschließlich weibliche Begegnungen (Alice, Tera), die in sexualisierte Bilder des Umeinander-Windens (Kuratle, 2025, S. 19) und des Ineinander- bzw. Ver-Flechtens (Kuratle, 2025, S. 58, 95) transformiert werden, bleibt er isoliert.

3.4. Rhetorik und Narratologie

Komposition und Transformation kennzeichnen nicht nur das Erzählte, sondern auch das Erzählen selbst. Für ein ‚mythisches‘ Erzählen, das weder in seinem ontologischen Status noch in seiner Bedeutung festgelegt ist, werden unterschiedliche ästhetische Verfahren konstitutiv. Um sie für eine exemplarische ‚Poetik des Mythischen‘ fassbar zu machen, werden das Chimärische und das Metamorphische über narratologische (Diegese, Fokalisierung/Perspektive, Stimme/vermittelnde Instanz), strukturelle (äußere und innere Architektur) und rhetorische Kategorien auf der Satz- und Sinnebene modelliert, wobei für die Figuren- und Inselrealität auf das bereits Gesagte verwiesen werden kann. Anders als für das Festland, das in Analepsen und ‚von der Insel her‘ erzählt wird bzw. über diese erschließbar wird, gibt es für die Insel keine Wahrnehmung und infolgedessen auch keine Bewertung ‚vom Festland her‘. Was wir über die Insel wissen, ist intern, d. h. durch die gegenwärtig anwesenden Einwohner*innen, perspektiviert. Das Geschehen wird, zumindest nach

seiner äußeren Struktur, von Alice und Gregor vermittelt: Die zehn Kapitel- und ihre vielen Teilüberschriften weisen das Sehen und Sprechen abwechselnd den beiden Protagonist*innen zu, wobei für Alice, die ja auch Alois ist bzw. war, zwei unterschiedliche Perspektiven (eine weibliche und eine männliche) angesetzt werden können. Dialogizität ist auch ein Merkmal der erzählten Handlung. Figuren treffen aufeinander und kommunizieren verbal- und körpersprachlich miteinander. Auch wenn die direkten Redeanteile durch Kursivierung gekennzeichnet sind, bleibt die Zuweisung von Sprecher*innenrollen vage: zum einen, weil keine Verba dicendi gesetzt werden, zum anderen, weil chimärische und metamorphische Verfahren die Uneindeutigkeit und den unsicheren Status des Erzählten sichtbar machen: Eine Sache hat mehrere, auch einander widersprechende Bedeutungen, Reales trifft auf Phantastisches bzw. wird Phantastisches zu Realität und umgekehrt. Die Entscheidung für die Multiperspektive ist *per se* eine für das Partikularische und Fragmentarische, das der Roman auch auf struktureller und sprachlicher Ebene performiert. Kleine Texteinheiten - die Teilkapitel umfassen mitunter nur wenige Sätze - werden kurz getaktet und durch harte Schnitte aneinandergesetzt und/oder verschoben und produzieren dadurch neue Muster. Charakteristisch für Kuratles Roman sind Rhetoriken der Kürze und der Isolation (Parataxe), der Auslassung (Ellipse), des Abbruchs (Anakoluth), der Unverbundenheit (Asyndeton), des Einschubs (Parenthese), der Umstellung (Inversion) und der Verschiebung (Zeugma), die (semantische) Komplexität durch (syntaktische) Reduktion und/oder Offenheit erzeugen. Zusammen mit Verfahren der Wiederholung und Variation, des Gegensatzes (Antithese) und des Widerspruchs (Paradoxon, Oxymoron) inszenieren sie das (direkte) Aufeinandertreffen bzw. die Koppelung des Verschiedenen und performieren die Fragmentierung der Welt und die Auflösung des Subjekts auf der Diskursebene. Für ein chimärisches und metamorphisches Erzählen, das nicht nur die mythische, sondern auch die heterotopische Insel abbildet, erhält zudem eine Rhetorik der Bildlichkeit Bedeutung.

3.5. *Chimäre und Metamorphose X Metapher und Metonymie*

Literarische Tropen erzeugen eine dichte und atmosphärische Romanwelt. Die Insel und ihre Bewohner*innen werden durch Verknüpfungen mit und durch Übertragungen aus der belebten und unbelebten Natur lesbar gemacht: Vergleiche, Zoo-, Phyto- und Anthropomorphismen, Metaphern und Metonymien treffen Aussagen über die Verfasstheit von ‚Dingen‘ und ihr Verhältnis zueinander und erhalten dadurch auch epistemische Relevanz. Als Erklärungsmuster für die Insel-Welt dienen insbesondere Metaphern und Metonymien (vgl. Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, Lakoff, ²1993). Der Roman verschränkt sie auf charakteristische Weise mit der Chimäre und der Metamorphose und greift damit auf zwei unterschiedliche Domänen des Wissens zu. Als Phänomen der Konstellierung trägt die Metapher *selbst* Merkmale der Chimäre: Wie diese verstößt sie gegen die kategoriale Ordnung, indem sie unterschiedliche und einander ‚fremde‘ Teile zusammenstellt, und sie führt diese auch nicht in einer Synthese zusammen. Anders gesagt: Die Komponenten der Metapher sind nicht dasselbe, und sie generieren auch nicht ein neues ‚Anderes‘. Gemeinsamkeit wird nicht über die Vermischung und Verschmelzung hergestellt, wie sie das Hybride kennzeichnen, sondern durch Übertragung des einen auf das andere, und zwar nur in einem Teilaspekt. Die klassische Metapherntheorie nennt ihn das *tertium comparationis*, die kognitive Metapherntheorie macht ihn über die Verfahren des ontologischen und des strukturellen Mappings (vgl. Lakoff & Johnson 1980, S. 4-13, S. 15-32 und *passim*) nutzbar. Dementsprechend legt die Metapher zwar das *Procedere*, d. h., den Weg, auf dem Bedeutung erlangt werden kann, aber nicht die Bedeutung selbst fest. Indem sie selektive Aktualisierungen aus gleichzeitig vorhandenen und diversen Bedeutungsangeboten initiiert, fungiert die Metapher als Generator für Mehrdeutigkeit (vgl. Borsó, 1985 u. ö., im Anschluss an Ricœur, 1975). ‚Chimärisch‘ ist die Metapher also nicht allein aufgrund ihres paradoxen, sondern auch aufgrund ihres ambigen und ambivalenten Charakters: Sie bringt nicht nur unterschiedliche Bedeutungen hervor, sondern sie oszilliert auch zwischen diesen. Kuratles Roman führt die Verbindung zwischen der konkreten ‚körperlichen‘ Erfahrung der Insel und den abstrakten Ideen von ‚Welt‘ paradigmatisch vor. Die Insel ist nicht nur ein ‚realer‘ heterotopischer Lebensraum,

sondern auch ein physisch und geografisch modellierter Denkraum, und sie wird dadurch nicht (nur) für sich selbst lesbar, sondern auch für unterschiedliche Konzepte von Welt, die sie zum Erscheinen bringt und miteinander konfrontiert.

Die Wahl der Insel macht Kuratles Roman auch für die Metonymie interessant, die - anders als die Metapher - innerhalb einer einzigen Domäne operiert (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, S. 25f.). Indem für sie nicht die Übertragung, sondern der Übergang konstitutiv ist, hat sie metamorphische Qualität. Auch wenn ihre Entstehungsgeschichte nicht erzählt wird, ist die Insel als materielles Fragment dem Festland, von dem sie abgetrennt ist, verbunden. Beide Handlungsräume sind unterschiedlich konzipiert, und doch wird die Lebensform des Festlandes indirekt durch die Insel bestätigt. Die insulare Utopie wird nicht primär deshalb verunmöglicht, weil sie von dystopischen ‚Relikten‘ - allen voran von reaktionären, patriarchalischen und diversitätsfeindlichen Ideologemen - des Festlands durchsetzt ist, sondern weil diese im Laufe der Handlung Raum gewinnen und sich immer mehr verfestigen können. Wichtiger als genetische sind mereologische Relationen. Zum einen ist die Insel aus Teilen (den Gärten, dem Kolleg...) zusammengesetzt, die in realen Beziehungen zueinander stehen und zusammen das Ganze der Insel-Welt ergeben; zum anderen ist die Insel ihrerseits Teil eines Ganzen, das eben nicht (mehr) das Festland ist. Stattdessen bezieht die Diegese die ‚Teil‘-Welt der Insel modellhaft auf ein abstraktes, ausschließlich als Referenzraum entworfenen Welt-,Ganzen‘. Die ‚kleine‘ Welt der Insel wird dadurch nicht nur zum Experimentierraum, sondern auch zum Erkenntnismodell für die ‚große‘. An ihr wird sichtbar, wie ‚Welt‘ gedacht und gelebt werden kann - oder eben auch nicht. Der insulare Entwurf scheitert nicht erst in seiner Generalisierung, sondern bereits in sich: Die Heterotopie der Insel kann nicht für eine Neukonzeption von Welt genützt werden.

Die Kategorisierung ‚chimärische Metapher‘ und ‚metamorphische Metonymie‘ ist zwar dazu geeignet, die epistemische Qualität des Chimärischen und des Metamorphischen zu verdeutlichen und auch ein Stück weit zu erklären, sie erweist sich aber als zu stark vereinfachend - unter anderem deshalb, weil das Metonymische auch Bedeutung für

die Chimäre gewinnt. Deutlich wird dies, wenn man die Chimäre auf zwei Ebenen betrachtet. Metaphorisch ist sie, weil sie, wie bereits gezeigt werden konnte, die Grenze zwischen zwei Domänen überspringt; metonymisch ist sie, weil sie mit Teil-Ganzes-Relationen operiert und die Teile der Chimäre nicht sich selbst, sondern das Ganze, aus dem sie entnommen sind und auf das sie auch verweisen, repräsentieren. Dies führt dazu, dass die Chimäre metaphorisch *und* metonymisch zu denken ist. Mit Blick auf ihr ‚Wesen‘ und ihr ‚Werden‘ gesprochen, ‚ist‘ die Chimäre metaphorisch, sie wird aber durch metonymische Praktiken hergestellt und trägt damit, zumindest in diesem Aspekt ihrer Genese, auch Merkmale des Metamorphischen. Heruntergebrochen auf Kuratles Roman heißt das: Die Chimäre ist ein Komposit, das durch metonymische Selektionen, Fokussierungen und Referenzierungen (im Sinne von Lakoff/Johnson 1980) nicht nur für sich selbst, sondern auch für ein konkretes (‚Welt‘) und abstraktes (Konzeptionen von ‚Welt‘) Ganzes, dessen Teil sie ist, lesbar wird.

4. Fazit

Chimäre und Metamorphose sind ‚Gegenstände‘ des Erzählten. Als Komposit, das ‚ist‘, und als Transformationsprozess, der sich ereignet, haben sie ontologische Relevanz für die Insel und ihre Bewohner*innen. Mithilfe chimärischer und metamorphischer Verfahren kann ‚Welt‘ in einem poietologischen Sinn, d. h. als ‚Text‘ und als ‚Geschichte‘, hergestellt und über spezifische Rhetoriken der Struktur und der Bildlichkeit vermittelt werden. Darüber hinaus haben Chimäre und Metamorphose epistemische Qualität: Indem sie Ordnungen schaffen und Wissen generieren, machen sie bestehende Welten lebbar und verstehbar. Die Insel stellt dafür nicht nur die äußere Konfiguration bereit, sondern sie bringt das Chimärische bzw. das Metamorphische, das Raum und Zeit in Frage stellt, in einem heterotopischen Entwurf erst hervor. Als kognitiver und narrativer Experimentierraum macht sie es möglich, ‚Welt‘ zu denken und von ihr zu sprechen. Um Konzepte von Welt auszuloten und zueinander in Beziehung zu setzen, verschränkt der Roman mit dem Mythos und der

kognitiven Philosophie zwei unterschiedliche Domänen: Als Figuren der Unentschiedenheit bzw. des Veränderlichen stellen Chimäre und Metamorphose, Metapher und Metonymie Dichotomien in Frage und eröffnen damit funktional-pluralistische und reflexiv-dynamische Diskurse. Beide Begriffspaare stehen in einem uneindeutigen und reziproken Verhältnis zueinander, das nicht nur das Verhältnis von Chimäre und Metamorphose (re-)modelliert, sondern auch den Mythos spezifiziert: Wenn die Teil-Ganzes-Relation ein Merkmal der Chimäre ist, dann wird diese zum Aktionsraum eines spezifischen, ‚metonymischen‘ Metamorphischen, das sie zugleich bedingt. Wenn Metapher und Metonymie als Konstituenten von Chimäre und Metamorphose gelten können, sind sie auch für mythische Konzepte, wie sie gegenwärtig vermehrt aufgerufen werden, und ihre (ästhetische) Vermittlung zu funktionalisieren.

Literaturnachweis

- Billig, Volkmar (2011). *Inseln*. Berlin: Matthes & Seitz.
- Blumenberg, Hans (1979). *Schiffbruch mit Zuschauer. Paradigma einer Daseinsmetapher*. Frankfurt a. Main: Suhrkamp.
- Borsó-Borgarello, Vittoria (1985): *Metapher: Erfahrungs- und Erkenntnismittel. Die metaphorische Wirklichkeitskonstitution im französischen Roman des XIX. Jahrhunderts*. Tübingen: Narr.
- Borsó, Vittoria (2018): Das Bindeglied von Mythos und Metamorphose. Reflexionen zu einem transformativen Potential. In Daniel Graziadei, Federico Italiano, Christopher F. Laferl & Andrea Sommer-Mathis (Hrsg.), *Mythos - Paradies - Translation. Kulturwissenschaftliche Perspektiven*. Bielefeld: transcript, S. 23-40.
- Brütnacher, Hans Richard (Hrsg.) (2017). *Inseln*. München: edition text + kritik.
- Broich, Ulrich (1985). Formen der Markierung von Intertextualität. In Ulrich Broich & Manfred Pfister (Hrsg.), *Intertextualität. Formen, Funktionen, anglistische Fallstudien*. Tübingen: Niemeyer, S. 31-47.
- Daston, Lorraine: chimäre, die. In Olaf B. Rader, Jasmin Mersmann & Christian Kassung (Hrsg.), *Zoologicon. Ein kulturhistorisches Wörterbuch der Tiere*. München: Fink 2012, S. 79-82.
- Diezmann, Stefan (2025). *Sarah Kuratle: Chimäre*. <https://poesie-rausch.com/2025/08/21/sarah-kuratle-chimaere/> [30.4.2026].

- Ette, Ottmar (2011). Insulare Zwischenwelten der Literatur. Inseln, Archipele und Atolle aus transarealer Perspektive. In Anna E. Wilkens, Patrick Ramponi & Helge Wendt (Hrsg.), *Inseln und Archipele. Kulturelle Figuren des Insularen zwischen Isolation und Entgrenzung*. Bielefeld: transcript, S. 13-56.
- Foucault, Michel (2005): *Die Heterotopien. Der utopische Körper: Zwei Radiovorträge*. Frankfurt am M.: Suhrkamp.
- Redon, Odilon (2026). *Hommage à Goya*, <https://recherche.smb.museum/detail/1065707/hommage-%C3%A0-goya>. [30.4.2026].
- Hoppe, Katharina (2021): *Die Kraft der Revision. Epistemologie, Politik und Ethik bei Donna Haraway*. Frankfurt, New York: Campus Verlag.
- Krasny, Elke (2011). Das Insuläre. Von den Strategien hypermoderner Raumproduktion. In Anna E. Wilkens, Patrick Ramponi & Helge Wendt (Hrsg.), *Inseln und Archipele. Kulturelle Figuren des Insularen zwischen Isolation und Entgrenzung*. Bielefeld: transcript, S. 187-207.
- Kuratle, Sarah (2025). *Chimäre*. Roman. Salzburg: Otto Müller 2025; kindle 2025.
- Kuratle, Sarah (2026). <https://www.sarah-kuratle.com/> [30.4.2026].
- Lakoff, George (21993). The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor. In Andrew Ortony (Hrsg.), *Metaphor and Thought*. Cambridge: University Press, S. 202-251.
- Lakoff, George & Mark Johnson (1980). *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1980.
- Läubli, Martina (2025). *Sarah Kuratle: Endlich wagt eine Autorin einmal wieder etwas*, <https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/sarah-kuratle-endlich-wagt-eine-autorin-mal-wieder-etwas-ld.1900984> [30.4.2026].
- Lind, Gerald (2025). *Chimäre*, <https://www.literaturhaus-wien.at/review/chimaere/> [30.4.2026].
- Lorenz, Matthias N. (2017). Was Texte mit Texten machen. In Matthias N. Lorenz. *Distant Kinship – Entfernte Verwandtschaft. Joseph Conrads „Heart of Darkness“ in der deutschen Literatur von Kafka bis Kracht*, Stuttgart: Metzler 2017, S. 91-114.
- Pfister, Manfred (1985). Konzepte der Intertextualität. In: Ulrich Broich & Manfred Pfister (Hrsg.), *Intertextualität. Formen, Funktionen, anglistische Fallstudien*. Tübingen: Niemeyer, S. 1-30.
- Pichler, Georg (Hrsg.). (2022). *Inseln als literarischer und kultureller Raum*. Berlin: Peter Lang.
- Pohl, Ronald (2025). *Wie Sarah Kuratle in ihrem neuen Roman „Climate-Fiction“ vorantreibt*, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/3000000285194/wie-sarah-kuratle-in-ihrem-neuen-roman-climate-fiction-vorantreibt> [30.4.2026].

- Raschner, Annette (2025). *Neuer Roman „Chimäre“ von Sarah Kuratle*.
<https://www.kulturzeitschrift.at/kritiken/neuer-roman-chimaere-von-sarah-kuratle> [30.4.2026].
- Raimann, Eva (2016). Versuch über die Chimäre. Das menschliche Subjekt im Anthropozän als Mischwesen aus kantischer Vernunft und somatischer Determinante – zum Potential metaphorischer Beschreibungsfiguren. In: Stephanie Lavorano, Carolin Mehnert & Ariane Rau (Hrsg.). *Grenzen der Überschreitung. Kontroversen um Transkultur, Transgender und Transspecies*. Bielefeld: transcript, S. 235-243.
- Ricœur, Paul (1975). *La Métaphore vive*. Paris: Editions du Seuil.
- Tralau, Johan (2016). The Justice of the Chimaira: Goat, Snake, Lion, and Almost the Entire Oresteia in a Little Monstrous Image. In *Arion. A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 24 (2), S. 41-68.
- Uhrmann, Erwin (2025). *Die Welt kann auch schön zugrunde gehen*. <https://www.die-presse.com/20060687/die-welt-kann-auch-schoen-zugrunde-gehen> [30.4.2026].

Women Who Break and Mend Worlds: Narrative Strategies of Female Agency in Nnedi Okorafor's Africanfuturist Universes

James Orao¹

On Africanfuturism and Okorafor's universe – an introduction

Nnedi Okorafor is a prolific author of African SFF with, along with the texts selected for this study, a catalogue of almost 30 novels, several short stories and graphic novels, targeting both adults and young adults. Placing the female character at the centre of her works, Nnedi figures characters who are mostly at crossroads, slightly on the margins of society and definitely wreaking havoc on the patriarchal systems they find themselves in: be it the tough headed Binti who leaves earth to study in an intergalactic university (*Binti* trilogy, 2015, 2017 & 2018); Sunny, a witch born of non-magical parents navigating her coming of age while facing a world-ending destiny (*Akata* trilogy, 2011, 2017 & 2022); or, Anwuli Okwudili, who prefers to be called AO, meaning an 'Autobionic Organism', because she has made several bionic augmentations to her body and is seen by the rest as an abomination (*Noor*, 2021). And, of course, Phoenix who is an African American woman, an accelerated organism born and bred in an American genetic research facility (*The Book of Phoenix*, 2015), Onyesonwu, a mixed parentage child born of rape, who, despite stigma and rejection, becomes a witch so powerful she turns the power structures on its head (*Who Fears Death*, 2010), and lastly, Najeeba, – Onyesonwu's mother – who becomes the only woman to be allowed on the salt road, a rite reserved solely for men (*She Who Knows* trilogy 2024, 2025 & 2026). Najeeba being Onyesonwu's mother helps expand Okorafor's Africanfuturist universe. Indeed, according to Wilson (2021) Okorafor's books are all connected through sequels

¹ Dr. Department of Linguistics and Languages, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences University of Nairobi, Kenya, ORCID: 0000-0002-8704-3286, Email: jorao@uonbi.ac.ke

and prequels, with the correct chronological order of events in this particular universe being *Remote Control* (2021), *The Book of Phoenix* (2015), *Who Fears Death* (2010) *Binti* trilogy (2015-2018). In this Africanfuturist universe, then, we meet Phoenix, Saaed – also referred to as the Seed – and Sola in the *Book of Phoenix* and the chronicles are rewritten by Sunuteel into the Great Book; we meet Saeed, and the sorcerers Sola and Aro in *Who Fears Death* where Onyesonwu rewrites the Great Book – what Kwanya (2022: 231) refers to as “(Un)making the Great Book” – to reestablish a balance; and Najeeba – Onyesonwu’s mother – in *She Who Knows* references most of these characters – Aro becomes Najeeba’s master after Onyesonwu left on her quest to kill Daib – and events, referencing having seen “the woman whose name was Phoenix destroy the Earth” (Okorafor, 2026: 169): in a word – a universe. Of course, intertextuality is at the centre of this worldmaking (see also Kwanya, 2022).

It is important to note that the traumas these female protagonists face aren’t just personal but generational as well. In the *She Who Knows* trilogy Najeeba’s trauma extends beyond her rape by Daib. Fuelling her drive to become a sorcerer – she insists on being referred to as a sorcerer and not sorceress – is the desire to kill that “terrible thing” – the Cleanser – that has preyed upon her Osu-nu people since time immemorial. The Cleanser is a demonic masquerade-like entity that preys upon young Osu-nu people with great potential and promise and strips them of these qualities that would otherwise improve the collective status of the untouchable Osu-nu people. It returns such abducted youth stripped of these qualities but imbued with seeming gifts which, however, cannot be used to improve the social and political status of the marginalized Osu-nu. Najeeba is, thus, fighting from a point of generational trauma. The same applies to her daughter Onyesonwu. Born a child of rape by the Nuru general and sorcerer Daib, she represents the trauma not only of her mother and all the Okeke women raped by the Nuru militia that day in the desert where she was conceived, but of all Okeke who have to live subjugated by the Nuru. And, finally, Phoenix’s trauma stems from her being raised as property of the American corporation, but further finds identification with the African continent, the slave trade and the historical

injustices against the continent and her people. These traumas fuel these stories and are the underlying driving forces behind the female protagonists' actions and choices. Because of these traumas, Najeeba chooses to kill the Cleanser, knowing full well the far-reaching consequences of that action: "I once saw the woman whose name was Phoenix destroy the Earth. [...] She decided to become the sun and wipe the slate clean. [...] Now it was my turn to decide on something great" (Okorafor, 2026: 169); Phoenix also decides to reset the history of the earth: "I scorch the earth. [...] Let that which been written be rewritten" (Okorafor, 2015: 260); the same rewriting that Onyesonwu undertakes after Sunuteel (mis)appropriates *The Book of Phoenix* as the Great Book: "The old African man took the bones, blood, and quivering flesh of Phoenix's book, digested its marrow, and defecated a tale of his own. [...] And their Great Book deformed the lives of many until the one named Onyesonwu came and changed it again" (ibid: 273).

Though not all the stories are located within the African continent, they are African by consanguinity and they paint an emerging African future through Okorafor's lenses: Phoenix emerges from her prison in the heart of the American industrial-scientific complex leaving it all razed to the ground; Onyesonwu shows a Sudan in which racial divide has wrought havoc, but also the resilience of a people exemplified through Onyesonwu's own growth into her powers as a protective as well as an avenging witch; and not least, both Najeeba in the *She Who Knows* trilogy and Binti in *Binti* trilogy carving their own paths in patriarchal societies to make journeys unforeseen, with unforeseen consequences, both for them as individuals and for their societies. These are women on journeys of "discovery, loss, and renewal", but they are also "more than powerful", they are "thoughtful, flawed, strong, and remarkable" (Wilson, 2021). Kwanya (2022: 226) echoes this constellation of power, strength and flaws in Okorafor's heroines noting that her "worldbuilding is strategic in that her incorporation of African myths and spiritualities is directed towards creating young female heroes who are black, strong, and flawed in order to tackle questions of diversity, identity, and female exclusion."

This chapter explores the narrative strategies centering female agency in Okorafor's Africanfuturist works, with the guiding questions being: How do the female protagonists confront trauma? How do they transcend these traumas to transform histories and futures? What literary strategies does Okorafor employ to foreground the central female subjectivity found in these texts?

The study of literary strategies in Okorafor's works is more pertinent, in as far as she has tried to elucidate, what it is, what it entails and what it is not – in short, how she wants her works read and discursively situated. She is also the originator of the term 'Africanfuturism'. In a blog post "*Africanfuturism Defined*" (Okorafor, 2019), she states that she coined and started using the term Africanfuturism because, firstly, she felt the commonly used term 'Afrofuturism' didn't describe what she was doing, secondly, most definitions of Afrofuturism were off, leading to wrong readings of her works, and thirdly, she needed to regain control of how she was being defined. She delineates the two terms thus: "Afrofuturism: Wakanda builds its first outpost in Oakland, CA, USA. Africanfuturism: Wakanda builds its first outpost in a neighbouring African country" (ibid.). Africanfuturism is, thus, "centered on and predominantly written by people of African descent [...] and it is rooted first and foremost in Africa. [...] Its default is non-western; its default/centre is African" (ibid.). The *African*-centredness of Africanfuturism counters the *Afro*- of Afrofuturism which is diasporic-centred. This African-centredness of her works means that Okorafor employs narrative strategies and motifs that decidedly place her works as squarely into Africanfuturism as she would like them to be read. Her Africanfuturist texts centre African cosmologies, phenomenology, philosophies and worldviews; with "African cultures and spirituality forming a cohesive and organic whole" (Oku, 2021: 81). The differentiation is also important in as far as it "serves to contextualise [her] oeuvre in the wider field of speculative fiction, and to identify her possible intent in terms of decolonisation" (Boshoff, 2023: 4). Of course, the delineation of Africanfuturism from Afrofuturism has not gone unchallenged, as so often happens in literary discourse. Prozesky (2022: 110), for example, notes that Okorafor's "language of 'culture' and 'mythology' risks casting Africa

as the West's Other in the colonial dualisms of science/culture, knowledge/myth, and light/dark"; never mind that the historically Eurocentric epistemology has always constructed the African continent and everything African as the West's Other. She admits, however, to the necessity of an indigeneity, being "the Indigenous artist's geographical location on the planet [...] not in a political but rather an epistemological sense" (Prozesky, 2022: 110): and this is precisely what Okorafor's Africanfuturism advocates for. She advocates for not subsuming African SFF under Afrofuturism, noting that it "acknowledges race but ignores coloniality", though she advances the term "Indigenous SF" which, according to her, recognises the epistemological *difference* of African authors (Prozesky, 2022: 118).

Okorafor's feminist approaches in her fiction cannot be gainsaid. Shittu, et al (2025: 287) observe that "most of Nnedi Okorafor's protagonists are females who are at the centre of a serious conflict or are the main target of subordination due to their femininity, principally, and other identities that are stereotyped, stigmatised, and/or dreaded in their environment." Her fiction speculates on the place of the African woman within the emerging futures and on the ongoing political and intellectual struggles they go through. Using the defamiliarization technique inherent in science fiction (see also Orao, 2021: 112), authors like Okorafor can "make the conditions of social injustice appear strange [...], and to speculate what alternative, counterhegemonic futures might look like" (Selvick, 2023: 57). These books inscribe disruptions as well as transformations by female characters in equal measure. Onyesonwu (*Who Fears Death?*) and her mother, Najeeba (*She Who Knows* trilogy), both suffer from the asymmetry of patriarchal power, disrupt these and emerge at the end having transformed the same systems they suffered under for the better; and, Phoenix (*The Book of Phoenix*) destroys her place of 'birth' – LifeGen laboratories at Tower 7 in Manhattan – and then burns down the whole world in a violent transformative act to force a rebirth: they are "uncompromising feminist warrior[s] capable of enacting change outside the scripts available" (Selvick, 2023: 63, see also Kwanya, 2022: 224).

“The slaughter was televised”: Violence, Trauma and Female Agency

In *Who Fears Death* (2010: 154), Aro, the sorcerer, and Onyesonwu’s and later her mother Najeeba’s teacher, makes a statement that seems to be the grounding mantra of all the women protagonists in these novels: “Bricoleur, one who uses all that he has to do what he has to do,” Aro said. “This is what you must become. [...]”. Najeeba in her quest to transcend her own trauma and that of her Osu-nu people, Onyesonwu in negotiating her coming of age and all that it entails, and Phoenix in her retribution against Big Eyes all go beyond the expected and discover means and ways to achieve their diverse goals. Not only that: they display increasing capacities to assert their independence, continuously challenge patriarchy, and redefine themselves even against oppressive traditional, social, and political systems.

No other genre allows for a prolific engagement with female agency as speculative fiction, not least because it is permissive to the reconfiguration and defamiliarization of the basic foundational systems of physics, biology, and social organization as we know them. Speculative fiction allows, at once, for a transformation of the constraints historically imposed upon women, as well as opening up spaces for alternative modes of female subjectivity and empowerment. In this transformative space the intersection of gender and power beyond the limitations of historical or contemporary social realities are easily interrogated through various instances. Speculative agency, which is a radical perspective and reimagining of the position of the woman in the society found in speculative fiction, offers a critical lens through which to explore what a woman unbound from the dominant sociocultural, political, and biological determinisms might attain. In this sense, speculative fiction does not only project utopian or dystopian futures, but it also provides a discursive framework for examining the exigency of gender roles and the potential for their radical transformation.

Feminist theorists such as Donna Haraway see this speculative agency realized in the figure of a cyborg, which not only effectively destabilizes essentialist notions of humanity and, with it, femininity, but also foregrounds the possibility of new identities, practices, and forms of

resistance (see Harraway, 2016, and Oraz, 2025: 35). Such constructed hybridities aid in transcending biological determinism of gender while expanding the possibilities of self-determination. Further, speculative agency is seen through counterfactual narratives as well through explicit narratives of resistance and subversion, achieved often by experimenting with narrative styles which can be fragmented or polyphonic to allow for a multiplicity of voices and/or perspectives as witnessed in the endings of both the *Book of Phoenix* and *Who Fears Death* where commenting voices join the narrative with different views and alternative endings. As Phoenix herself echoes the author: “I’ve always believed that a story is best told in many ways” (Okorafor, 2015: 95). Okorafor’s feminist approach questions even the most basic concepts such as home, as Kwanya (2025: 264) notes in his discussions about home and homeliness in Okorafor’s works: “female characters who not only inhabit homes but actively reshape their meaning and function within their societies”, thereby extending while conflating norms to produce fresh and new ways of looking and seeing.

As already noted, trauma is at the centre of all these narratives; both personal and collective. All three main characters manifest traumas at both levels, which, however, are transformed at the end into collective empowerment. Both Onyesonwu and Phoenix are children of liminality: Onyesonwu, as an Ewu belongs neither to the Okeke – her mother’s people – nor to the Nuru – her rapist father’s people, and must pursue her agency from a position of rejection; Phoenix is an “accelerated organism” (Okorafor, 2015: 12) “mixed, grown and finally birthed [...] on the 28th floor” (ibid: 11) of the Tower 7 of LifeGen laboratories. She is a two year old in the body of a forty year old woman who was “constructed” from “the sperm and the egg with materials of over ten Africans [...] combined [...] with the DNA from Lucy the Mitochondrial Eve” (ibid: 174). Her personal trauma stems from being experimented upon in tower 7, where she also witnessed racial profile of the other test subjects – largely of African origin –, a group she identifies with completely. Onyesonwu’s personal trauma stems from her being Ewu – too light for the Okeke and too dark for the Nuru – and as such an outcast with the collective

trauma she carries being rooted in the asymmetrical power relationship between the Okeke and the Nuru.

These traumas underpin the violences that they then endure but also instigate. Onyesonwu, as an Ewu and as such a child of violence, is expected to be violent, but she also gets to know violence very early in life, of which she carries a scar into adulthood. Indeed, all three women are intimately conversant with violence, as victims, but they also exert certain degrees of violence in their quests to reassert agency, and all three recognize the necessity for such violence. Phoenix, for example, says of her violent nature: “Nothing good can come from unnatural bonding and creation. Only violence. I am a harbinger of violence. Watch what happens wherever I go.” (Okorafor, 2015: 101) Najeeba, too, has her share of violence: the attack on the Salt Roads with her father and brothers, when she first met Sola as a girl, when she was raped by Daib, and when she was attacked in the market for having an Ewu child. Various forms of violence are, undoubtedly, necessary to stage the various systemic subjugations and asymmetric power constellations in postcolonial literature, the same way it is used to stage agency. In this, we are required to ask: what kind of violence, who is telling it, how are they telling it and, of course, why are they telling it. When Najeeba tells Onyesonwu about the violence of her conception and the violence that will accompany her for the rest of her life because of her Ewu identity, she is not only using the narration to purge herself of the traumatic memory, but also to help Onyesonwu identify that traumatic experience as a collective trauma that needs to be avenged in order that the collective may reassert agency: “If you go for *no* other reason, go for *that* one. For what he did to me” (Okorafor, 2010: 183, italics in original). The same request is made of Najeeba by her father whose sister was taken by the Cleanser, and in the aftermath of Nuru attacks on the Osu-nu villages. Najeeba, therefore, bears her own personal trauma, but has to exorcise the collective trauma, and, thereby, gain personal agency by helping the community gain collective agency; just as Onyesonwu is also expected to do. The two present perfect examples of postcolonial narrations of agency. Najeeba telling Onyesonwu of her rape, and then Onyesonwu choosing to “broadcast” the same to the townspeople of Jwahir –

who refuse to be affected by the sufferings of fellow Okeke just because they are too far east and think they are safe from the Nuru in the West – are examples of postcolonial discourses towards recovery of agency, albeit in complex and uncomfortable ways.

But the characters also reappropriate violence on their persons by denying their tormentors their ultimate goals. Daib, the Nuru general who rapes Najeeba, is hoping to fulfil a prophesy about a tall Nuru man coming to rewrite the Great Book, and, thus, fortify the asymmetric power the Nuru hold over the Okeke. Najeeba, however, uses her own sorcery to conceive a girl instead. It then turns out that the Seer, in his patriarchal slant of thinking, had intentionally misinterpreted the message which had actually spoken of a tall Ewu Woman: “Najeeba disrupts this ethnocultural lineage by giving birth to a daughter whose destiny is to upend, rather than fortify, this violence by re-writing the oppressive doctrine of the Great Book” (Selvick, 2023: 56). Onyesonwu, too, uses her magic to thwart Daib. In their last confrontation, Daib kills Mwita – Najeeba’s companion/husband. Seeing that she will not have anything left to remind her of her companion, Onyesonwu – who had previous night had intercourse with Mwita – feels his semen still inside her and magically forces a conception so that she can have Mwita’s child. Again, Daib’s violence against the women fail, with the women reasserting agency and defeating his intentions. Both cases here are instances where violence and personal trauma are transformed into collective empowerment.

The Book of Phoenix presents an assortment of violences against many persons, but mostly exemplified in the figure of Phoenix. Phoenix’s accelerated growth – a two year old in the body of a forty year old woman – coupled with the intrusive and inhumane research being carried out on her and the other speciMen exemplify this violence the best: In Tower 4 she is confronted by the special children being held there: “The children were long-lived, [...]. And if you took a piece of them, it grew back. I don’t know why or what LifeGen did to them.” (Okorafor, 2015: 201); as well as the six year old girl named HeLa, whose blood gives immortality and which Tower 4 sells for billions: “They take my blood, and they sell it. So far, seven men have bought a vial of it. [...] These are seven men whose bodies will never go

through senescence. They will never die.” (ibid: 221-222). In Tower 1 she finds human beings augmented with cybernetics and robotics, more machines than human beings. But her identity also puts her on track to programmed violence: “An African was a threat, so do not hesitate to kill her. A winged human being was an abomination, not angelic; [...]” (ibid: 155). But Phoenix is also used to narrate the female body as site of exploitation, violence and resistance. In fact, Phoenix is not just a cyborg – “I raised my hand. I paused, looking at my fingers, which had burned down to the bone. Bones that weren’t *bone*. They were *metal*, [...]” (ibid: 100) – but also something barely human at all, having wings and able to rise from death. The violence visited upon Phoenix’s person, therefore, extends beyond the experimentations Bumi puts her through in Tower 7 to the alteration to her very essence as a human being and as a woman.

Kwanya, arguing based on Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto”, sees “the hybridity of the cyborg as a space for possibilities that can be used to transcend normative human and gender categorizations, which are products of patriarchy” and the cyborg itself as “as a metaphor that represents both utopian and dystopian worlds where normative binaries of race and gender are transformed” (Kwanya, 2022: 227). Phoenix, as a cyborg albeit one that can human(e)ly interact and identify with the world around her, upends the social realities in radical ways, and “creates a conundrum regarding the definition of humanity” (Lindow, 2024: 217). Phoenix, even though she is more than her cyborg components, is a poster child of non-traditional agency, even in a speculative fictional text, where hybridity is the norm and normative boundaries are transcended as a matter of course. Interestingly, Phoenix accepts certain normative identities – being a woman and African – making her choose which norms she would like to subvert. While the cyborg essentially de-essentializes the body so that the body can be freed from common normativity, Phoenix actually embraces race – being African, settles in Wulugu Ghana and earns a new name Okore – and sex – a sexually active female, with Saeed and Koffi being her love interests –, thereby further complicating the matrix. Moreover, where cyborgs are usually constructed so as to remove them from that humanity of being biologically borne, Phoenix is

“mixed, grown and finally birthed” (Okorafor, 2015: 10) with a biological mother: I read this, though, as Okorafor’s Africanfuturist aesthetic, where everything is open to subversion, including conceptual bases; it is a reckoning with the normative western-oriented speculative fiction and Afrofuturism. Phoenix’s cyborg seems to embody the spirit of ubuntu, positioning her square back onto the African continent. This aesthetic imagines a cyborg who is out of control of the capitalist master, and who uses the invested capital to dismantle the same capitalist system that built her, from within and then from without. Phoenix, after breaking out and destroying Tower 7, systematically destroys the rest of LifeGen’s towers using the same lethal attributes the system programmed into her. Her agency is in defying her programming and aligning on the side of the oppressed specimen in the network of the LifeGen towers. But this agency is also neither clearcut nor straightforward. Indeed, we see Phoenix’s dilemma and struggles, but she eventually chooses humanity, even if that choice means killing everything as a reset mechanism: “She was the reaper come to reap what was sown. [...] Let everything die. Let that which had been written all be rewritten” (ibid: 260), she thinks, as she scorches the earth and wipes the slate clean for a new beginning.

It is untenable analysing trauma and violence in *Who Fears Death* without referencing *She Who Knoms* trilogy: Najeeba is, after all, Onyesonwu’s mother, and characters from both worlds cross over effortlessly between both stories, as I have discussed in the introductory section above regarding Okorafor’s Africanfuturist universe. Before her own personal traumatic experience at the hands of the Nuru sorcerer and general Daib, Najeeba is part of the familial trauma of the killing of her father’s family, then of collective trauma of the Osunu as the untouchables – “It’s forbidden to befriend or marry us. Osunu people are untouchable Okeke people; we are the slaves who chose to be slaves to the goddess Adoro so that we could be free.” (Okorafor, 2024: 6) – and finally, as an Okeke in a world where the Nuru consider them slaves. Indeed, Najeeba’s leaning to magic is a search for agency and survival. While her magic seem to have been inborn, she had to make conscious decision to develop it further,

especially once she realized how direly she needed it for retribution and to reassert collective agency.

Violence and trauma in these texts are constructions of a structural, psychological, and epistemic condition. Both are constructive of each other: violence creates trauma and trauma remains as a lingering condition of the initial violence. It is noteworthy, that violence in these texts is constitutive and trauma underpins the narratives. Both Onyesonwu – whose name means who fears death (Okorafor, 2010: 27) – and Phoenix are especially prone to violence, and gleefully welcome it, as Phoenix repeatedly remarks: “As if I were afraid of dying. Why did they always think I feared death?” (Okorafor, 2015: 102)

It is useful to compare the cyborg to other figures of agency, such as the sorcerer, magical beings or the postcolonial hybrid. While the sorcerer uses magic to upend normativity, the cyborg uses reconfiguration. The sorcerer works within the margins of a given system to upend and expand it; the cyborg rewires the system itself. Yet both share a refusal of purity. Both, in conclusion, are ways and means of gaining agency, but also of reappropriating from colonial master narratives, especially in postcolonial and speculative fiction such as Africanfuturism.

“Africa bleeds, but it will be fine”: Reimagining Colonialism and Its Legacies

Speculative fiction, as opposed to the contemporary realist fiction, provides powerful narrative strategies for dealing with the motif of colonialism and its ensuing legacies. To expose the hidden legacies of colonialism, challenge persistent dominant narratives, and imagine alternative futures where asymmetric power structures are subverted, identities are de-essentialized, and resistances are staged differently on all sides, speculative fiction employs defamiliarization as the foremost narrative strategy. The “speculative” in speculative fiction goes beyond the reality and actively dismantles the colonial “master narratives” that have historically discursively positioned the African continent on the “other” pole; as an object and subject. Speculative fiction, thus, is used to regain agency. This is what I have elsewhere referred

to as a “*post-historical poetics*”; “a poetics consisting of complicities and resistances: not necessarily rejecting history in totality, but rather operating with as well as beyond history and refusing to be solely defined by historical agencies” (Orao, 2022: 161). Indeed, Okorafor’s insistence on the term Africanfuturism is a good example of this reappropriation of agency and own stories as well as subjectivity. Afrofuturism is diaspora-based – with the Afro-diaspora at its centre and the African continent as the object, among others – as opposed to Africanfuturism which has its centre in the African continent, radiating outwards to embrace the diaspora where necessary. Okorafor refers to Africanjujuism (as exemplified especially in her *Akata* trilogy) as a category of Africanfuturism and subverts, thus, the prevalent dichotomy of western “reason/science” vs. the African “superstition/magic” by centring African cosmologies, epistemologies and ontologies and treating indigenous belief systems, and spirituality as valid views and laws of the universe; especially after such systems were relegated, eradicated and eventually replaced in the corpus of knowledge systems by colonialism.

While it has been debated whether speculative fiction can adequately partake of the decolonization discourses, one is reminded of Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s assertion that “‘the racial, national, and class origins of the novel’ are not what matters, but rather ‘its development and the uses to which it is continually being put’” (quoted in Boshoff, 2023: 3). Dorothea’s article considers the decolonizing potential of African speculative fiction (Boshoff, 2023: 4) and concludes that Okorafor’s fiction chooses African protagonists, acknowledges hidden parts of African history, thereby exposing how such histories are misrepresented in the Western mind, and spotlights subversion of colonial power in Africa’s past (ibid: 10). Bello sees Africanfuturism’s decolonial potential in its “mix of spirituality, technoculture, science, mythology, ritual, religio-mystical codes, folk praxes and lore, and indigenous/pre- and postcolonial orientations” (Bello, 2021: 19). Africanfuturism’s agenda, he observes further, is to sustain the validity of African states as viable ecosystems with defined historical trajectories and lasting knowledge centres. (ibid: 20-21). Burnett looks at Okorafor’s use of speculative fiction within the postcolonial

discourse and makes the following observation: “Okorafor takes on the project of conducting a postcolonial revision of speculative fiction and a speculative revision of postcolonialism” (Burnett, 2015: 133); in short, Okorafor’s critic of colonialism and its legacies can only take place within the speculative trope.

No instance stages colonialism and its legacies in all the texts looked at in this chapter as the Okeke and Nuru constellation. The slave-master relationship of the Okeke and the Nuru is first referenced in *The Book of Phoenix*, which Sunuteel later rewrites into the Great Book: “Sunuteel did not specifically set out to solidify the Okeke as slave and the Nuru as superior through powerful literature, but what is in one’s heart comes out in one’s stories” (Okorafor, 2015: 270). Of course, their reference is also quite prominent in the *She Who Knows* trilogy, where there is an even lowlier hierarchy of the Okeke group known as Osu-nu, who are untouchables. But nowhere does this constellation centre the narrative as in *Who Fears Death*. Set in a post-apocalyptic Sudan – and referencing the realities of the documented Janjaweed militias atrocities in the early 2000s in the Darfur region: “Photos from the West of dead, charred, mutilated Okeke people. Okeke women being raped. Okeke children with missing limbs and bloated bellies. Okeke men hanging from buildings or rotted to near-dust in the desert.” (Okorafor, 2010: 76) – we meet Najeeba (of *She Who Knows* trilogy) and her daughter Onyesonwu. The novel centres on Onyesonwu’s coming of age, a child of rape – a Nuru militia general and sorcerer, Daib, raped Najeeba – and with fast developing magic, even as she negotiates a life full of personal and systemic hurdles centred on the Okeke, the dark-skinned Sudanese and Nuru, the light-skinned Sudanese dichotomy. This dichotomy drives the narrative, framing the experienced hate, prejudices, and the endless pogroms, that Onyesonwu eventually sets out to end by rewriting the Great Book, in order to undo the master-slave worldview that Sunuteel inadvertently wrote into Phoenix’s chronicles.

That the enduring legacy of the master-slave narrative found in these three novels’ universe is the result of one man’s self-importance and patriarchal sensibilities is quite symbolic of the colonial worldview. Sunuteel, despite having evidence that what Phoenix says is true –

“This woman’s story was real. [...] The existence of his teacher of English, The Seed, once known as Saeed, brought Phoenix’s tale directly into his life.” (Okorafor, 2015: 266) – he, nonetheless, chooses to kill the author and produce his own interpretation of the Book of Phoenix. He remarks: “Once the author wrote the story, the author became irrelevant. The author was dead. [...] Phoenix was dead. The story was alive, [...]. It was up to the reader to *interpret* what the story was really about. And in this case, the only reader was Sunuteel” (ibid: 267, italic in original). Not only is he, thereby, denying Phoenix’s agency, he is also carrying out that quintessential colonial enterprise of appropriation. He imposes his masculine and patriarchal agency over Phoenix’s story, because he recognizes its truth, which is counter to his own understanding of the world: “Sunuteel blinked, frowning and knowing that all Phoenix spoke had happened. Every last word. And that scared him even more than the thought of her ghost or her memory speaking through her portable” (ibid: 268). The rewriting of the Book of Phoenix into the Great Book is, therefore, one instance of a reimagining of colonialism: Sunuteel’s rewriting of the Book of Phoenix can also be likened to the imposition of the written culture onto the orality of the colonized.

The Great Book, because it is flawed and interpretative and subjective, thus dictates the asymmetric power relations that place the Nuru above the Okeke, a relationship that the Nuru, through their general and sorcerer Daib, would like to see upheld. The song that the Nuru women sing as their men raped and killed “all of the Okeke women, young, prime, and old” is informative of this construction of colonialism in this universe:

The blood of the Okeke runs like water
We take their goods and shame their forefathers
We beat them with heavy hand
Then take what they call their land.
The power of Ani belongs to us
And so we will slay you to dust
Ugly filthy slaves, Ani has finally killed you! (Okorafor, 2010: 19) italics
in original)

Better parallels to the historical colonialism of the African continent cannot be found anywhere in these novels: the capitalist roots of

colonialism, the outlawing of ancestor-worship, the violence and brutality against the indigenous peoples, the disenfranchisement from community and ancestral lands, the imposition of foreign religion and the genocide against the indigenous peoples are uncanny in this song. This is, in effect, a race war, justified by a flawed religious tome. Burnett sees in the misappropriation of the religious Great Book an equivalent to the “Western hegemony’s deployment of a white-washed Christianity as both a justification for slavery and a colonizing apparatus” (Burnett, 2015: 143). Romdhani & Tunca (2022: 2) note that even “modern European civilizations were founded on colonial violence” in a “process that involved the genocide or abduction of Indigenous peoples; the theft of their land, resources, and knowledges; the destruction of families and communities; the wounding of bodies; and the brutalization of psyches.” With this comes, of course, genocide as an extreme form of colonial violence: colonial violence is here understood as the violation of “the physical, social, and/or psychological integrity of the colonized” (Simatei, 2005: 85).

While the Great Book justifies the Nuru lordship and violence against the Okeke as a curse from the goddess Ani, it is also, as Burnett additionally notes “the focus of resistance and a potential site and source of liberation” (Burnett, 2015: 142) for the Okeke and Nuru alike. While this final liberation rests on Onyesonwu rewriting the Great Book, it is observed that there are sections of this that have been left out, because they do not preach the same gospel of Okeke inferiority, even as they acknowledge their human flaws: “The Lost Papers discuss how they invented the old technologies like computers, capture stations, and portables. [...] They made food grow on dead land, they cured all diseases. In the darkness, the amazing Okeke brimmed with wild creativity” (Okorafor, 2010: 364). The “Lost Papers” of the Great Book can be likened to the “Lost Gospels” of the Christian Bible, and similarly they offer alternative perspectives not only on the Great Book, but more importantly on the Okeke, who have internalized and accepted the intellectual colonialism that the Great Book bestows and refuse to see its blatant co-option by fundamentalist Nuru nationalists (see Burnett, 2015: 144), who having subjugated the Okeke in the west are on a march to extend the subjugation to the east.

The master-slave relationship is also used as an excuse for the violence meted by the Nuru upon the Okeke. Violence as a colonial form of coercion is staged in these novels as public spectacles where the Nuru assert their agency over the Okeke: “A mob came, and, again, I don’t know if it was of Nurus or Okekes. They came for my mother with stones. They came for my father with fists” (Okorafor, 2010: 64). The Okeke, having internalized the colonial precepts of otherness, also are seen to use the same colonial tool of violence against fellow Okeke, especially where an Ewu is concerned, as experienced by Najeeba when she went to the market to buy provisions for herself and her baby Onyesonwu: “When the first stone hit Najeeba’s chest, she was too shocked to run. [...] When the third stone hit her on the cheek, she knew that if she didn’t run, her daughter would die” (ibid: 29-30).

The Book of Phoenix is perhaps the most explicit in its reimagining of colonialism; focusing more on neocolonialism through corporate exploitation of not only Africa but also people of African descent. Phoenix’s antagonist is the conglomerate LifeGen, or Big Eyes as Phoenix and the other test subjects in Tower 7 refer to them. LifeGen is a scientific corporate with 7 laboratories scattered in the United States focusing on biological weapons research and experimentation on humans, especially Africans. *The Book of Phoenix*, thus, narrates neocolonialism, capitalist exploitation and violence, and the quest for agency, both personal and collective. LifeGen represents the capitalist enterprises that have replaced the colonial empire the world over. They employ the same techniques, work within the same structures that the colonial empire built and maintain the same asymmetrical power constellations that sustained colonialism. Indeed, all the test subjects in LifeGen’s seven towers are mostly of African origin: “Saeed was from Cairo, Egypt,” (16); “Mmuo had been taken from Africa” (27); “a little Tanzanian boy on the fifth floor” (29); the winged man with “deep African facial features and a crown of wooly hair” (35) freed by Phoenix, the children rescued from Tower 4 “were black – African, to be specific. Most of them were from Ethiopia, some were from Sudan” (201); Phoenix herself, although, “mixed and grown” in Tower 7, is African: “They constructed the sperm and the egg with materials of over ten Africans, all from the West African nations of

Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, and Benin” (174). This is not only an allusion to the sources of the transatlantic slave trade that originated mostly from the West African nations, but the quest to produce a super African by mixing the genetics from different African ancestries reimagines the racial aspect of colonialism like no other colonial trope. References to the transatlantic slave trade keep coming up in the novel. After being captured by LifeGen and on their way back to the United States, Phoenix ponders her fate as she is flying behind the ship taking her back to America: “If my wings got wet, I wouldn’t be able to fly. The water would pull me into its great belly, as it had so many other Africans on unwanted journeys” (111); elsewhere she refuses to board a ship: “I’d told them I would never set foot on that damn ship, *any* damn ship. [...] I would never arrive in this country on a boat. Never” (115, italics in original). Phoenix is not only asserting her own agency, she is also reclaiming it for those who, millennia before, had been forced on to boats into slavery. By breaking out of Tower 7, she refused slavery and exploitation for capitalist-led science; by refusing to board the ship, and choosing instead to fly back on her own accord, she is trying to close the loop on this particular colonial enterprise and signaling a new beginning in relations with the neocolonial corporate power.

But Okorafor is not just reimagining this colonialism to show its enduring legacy in neocolonialism: she reimagines them in the employ of Phoenix’s agency. When Phoenix recognizes Tower 7 not as her home but as her prison, and after – with a little push by Saeed: “‘You read all those books ... why don’t you feel rebellion in your heart?’ [...] ‘Rebellion against whom?’ I whispered, confused.” (13) – identifying her enemies, she decides to rebel and break out, and completely destroys Tower 7. Rescuing several people on her way out, she discovers her Phoenix ability; the ability to die and be reborn from her ashes. This not only boosts her agency – as she herself notes, “They pointed their guns at me. I don’t know why they always pointed guns at me. I was beyond their guns.” (254) – but also sets her on a path to help reassert collective agency for all the test subjects imprisoned in the seven towers of LifeGen. She reverses the lived violence of every speciMen onto the corporation.

But Phoenix realizes how just simply setting free all those imprisoned by LifeGen for experimentation and research will not be enough to break the neocolonial hold of the capitalist corporates on these people she has come to identify with. With LifeGen's research so advanced that they are able to bestow immortality upon those who are rich enough to afford the billions its costs, the problem, she realizes, is far dire. HeLa gives her something to ponder: "These are the seven men whose bodies will never go through senescence. They will never die. These men who are still billionaires and garner great influence. In a matter of years the world will be theirs because of me" (222). Phoenix appreciates the need for a radical approach to the capitalist neocolonialism, especially with capital endowing control and power onto those billionaires; power to take whatever and whoever they wanted: "They are always taking from me. The Big Eye. This country. The superpowers. The seven men who drank HeLa's blood and now will never die" (258). Retribution, according to Phoenix, should be equally given out. To reset the equilibrium – just as the creator goddess Ani did by creating the Nuru after the Okeke turned into "mad scientists" – Phoenix decides to "wipe the slate clean" (259), a task she claims to have been assigned her by the goddess Ani. By invoking Ani, the creator goddess, while destroying the world, Phoenix manifests as creator-destroyer, thereby subverting the prevalent dichotomies and presents herself as someone whose agency is not to be decided by anybody else but herself.

This apocalyptic moment is a pivotal point in confronting and obliterating the neocolonial capitalist system, and ushering in an African agency (see also Borain, 2023: 2). Of course, we see how Phoenix's success and the reclaimed African agency is rewritten by Sunuteel, and how such a rewriting recreates the same asymmetrical power constellations that Phoenix erased. Masculine and patriarchal agency rears its head to unseat the established order that the female agency instilled. Colonial power structures are reinscribed by men who are "good but limited" (Okorafor, 2015: 273) and who refuse a new world order, just because it was brought about through female agency. But, just as the old world order was reset by a woman's agency, the new world order created by Sunuteel's twisted interpretation of the Book

of Phoenix will be rewritten through another female agency: “And their Great Book deformed the lives of many until the one named Onyesonwu came and changed it again” (ibid.). Okorafor, thus, writes female agency large. She imagines female protagonists as disruptors of oppressive structures. Neocolonialism, capitalism and its exploitative tendencies, and racism serve here to scaffold the reimagining of colonialism and its legacies in speculative fiction. The attendant brutality and violence of colonialism is met with an equal and righteous violence of women seeking to reclaim individual and collective agency. Romdhani & Tunca (2022: 1), quoting Fanon, note that the violence of colonialism would “only yield when confronted with greater violence”; expounding further that “it is the intuition of the colonized masses that their liberation must, and can only, be achieved by force”. Onyesonwu, Phoenix and Najeeba all recognize reciprocal violence as attendant to the quest for agency.

“I’ve always believed that a story is best told in many ways.”
Narrative Strategies, Aesthetics and Poetics of Africanfuturism

In her blog “Africanfuturism Defined”, Okorafor introduces Africanjuism as “a subcategory of fantasy that respectfully acknowledges the seamless blend of true existing African spiritualities and cosmologies with the imaginative” (Okorafor, 2019). Magic, as shown in its ubiquity among the Vah in *Who Fears Death* and *She Who Knows* trilogy, is a part of everyday life; its presence or absence neither adds nor removes from those who are exposed to it daily. In these novels it is a counternarrative strategy to reestablish the agency, not only of the female characters in these novels, but also the agency of African spiritualities and cosmologies.

Magic, spirituality, cosmology, and allegory are nodes from which not only knowledge-making, but also world-making emerge, with the end result that these are employed in African speculative fiction to stage the reclamation of indigenous epistemologies, restructuring of time and agency by foregrounding African cosmologies, and allegorize political and social critique. As is the case of the Vah, magic is an everyday truth that does not require further symbolization. African

cosmologies – for Okorafor these are borrowed from the Igbo and other West African traditions – take centre stage. Onyesonwu’s “wilderness” and magical “travelling” are variants of these cosmologies that counter Western linearity and binarity of past-future concept while making bringing ancestors back closer to the present. But these cosmologies are not just to differentiate from the Western cosmologies. In *Who Fears Death*, Onyesonwu employs her access to these cosmologies, especially magical “travelling” and the “wilderness”, to subvert power mechanisms, as seen when Onyesonwu and Mwita travel and attack Daib in the “wilderness”.

Okorafor uses the Eleventh Year Rite to narrate the uncertainties of coming of age for a girl like Onyesonwu: “In Jwahir, to be uncircumcised past eleven brought bad luck and shame to your family. No one cared if you’re born in Jwahir. You, the girl growing up in Jwahir, were expected to have it done” (Okorafor, 2010: 35). But the rite is also used to represent impetus that transform an outcast Ewu girl – Onyesonwu – to a politically and spiritually agentic magic-wielding angry young woman. In fact, with the rite fast approaching, Okorafor depicts Onyesonwu as just a teenager with the same worries as any other: “The Eleventh Rite was old and it was respected. It was powerful. The rite would put a stop to the strangeness happening to me” (36). The Eleventh Year Rite, thus, narrates reclaimed agency, both individual as well as communal: “‘Today’, the Ada said to us all. You’ll become child and adult. You will be powerless and powerful. You will be ignored and heard” (41). It is at this threshold into adulthood and power that Onyesonwu first gains agency. It is also the first time magic and, with it, further agentic possibilities, but also approaching danger, are opened to her.

The Book of Phoenix focusses on genetic experimentation, biological warfare research and extractive politics as allegories for neocolonialism, racialized exploitation, and corporate biopower. The seven towers of LifeGen and the research and experimentations being carried out there, such as the creation of genetically engineered and enhanced humans known as speciMen, their confinement in prison-like conditions, and commodification of genetic extracts, especially from test subjects made up mostly of people of African origin, mirror historical

slavery and scientific racism. Conglomerates like LifeGen have supplanted colonial empires and replaced them with capitalist empires, which is just as violent and brutal and Western oriented. They are capitalist imperial institutions that continue the slave economies of the past, which, as practiced by LifeGen, foreground racialized biopolitics: Phoenix points to the predominantly African origin of the test subjects in the towers of LifeGen. While LifeGen produces some cures for public consumption, their core business is in the genetic exploitation of Africans for economic and military purposes. It is not just scientific racism that is highlighted here, but also the commodification of Black bodies. Tower 4 leads in this commodification: “The children were long-lived. [...] And if you took a piece of them it grew back. I don’t know why or what LifeGen did to them” (Okorafor, 2015: 201); and then there is HeLa, whose blood bestows immortality, a commodity that LifeGen sells for billions of dollars. This experimentation and genetic engineering is exemplified further in Phoenix herself, who is more cyborg than human; but even here Okorafor pushes the limits of what a cyborg is. Phoenix is as organic and as African as any living being. But she is also more than organic, more than an African, more than a cyborg; she is more post-human. Beyond the allegories of neocolonialism and racism, Phoenix’s being – being unable to die and embodying rebirth – is, maybe, the most portentous trope of resistance ever in these texts.

She Who Knows trilogy centres magic and family as metaphors for female agency as well as knowledge and continuity. Here magic equates to female power and a platform to confront patriarchy, while family anchors the personal agency to collective agency. Magic also links to alternative epistemology: that Najeeba, a girl, receives the Call – the supernatural signal to the Osu-nu families to start for the salt roads, and is only reserved for the males in families – allows her to cross the gender-performative boundaries. As her magic unfolds, she crosses further boundaries. In *Who Fears Death* we see how she uses her magic by travelling in order prepare the way for the coming of her daughter among the Okeke communities, and as kponyungo she takes her daughter Onyesonwu to a place that turns out to be a place of healing, cementing the role of family in strengthening agency.

Finally, it is safe to summarize that *Who Fears Death* narrates a rewriting of genocidal histories into futures of resistance, *The Book of Phoenix* imagines a reclamation of both individual and collective agency from scientific exploitation, while the *She Who Knows* trilogy represents intergenerational continuity and survival. All these narratives centre female subjectivity as constructive of the world-breaking and world-mending central to this study.

References

- Bello, D. (2021). Africanfuturism – a New Commonsense? Apocalypse as Sense-Making after the Crises of Postcolonial Modernity. *Language, Literature and Interdisciplinary Studies (LLIDS)*, 4(4), 1-27. doi:10.71106/BLYF7856
- Borain, B. (2023). The Black Female Messiah in Nnedi Okorafor's *The Book of Phoenix*. *Image & Text*, 37, 1-19. doi:10.17159/2617-3255/2023/n37a3
- Boshoff, D. (2023). Deliberately derivative: levels of decolonisation in Nnedi Okorafor's *Akata Witch*. *Image & Text*, 37, 1-20. doi:10.17159/2617-3255/2023/n37a31
- Burnett, J. Y. (2015). The Great Change and the Great Book: Nnedi Okorafor's Postcolonial, Post-Apocalyptic Africa and the Promise of Black Speculative Fiction. *Research in African Literatures*, 46(4), 133-150. doi:10.2979/reseafritlite.46.4.133
- Goro, N. K. (2025). Magic realism and its afterlives in African Literature: Between the marvellous and the oral tradition. *Research Journal in Modern Languages and Literatures*, 6(2), 1-9. doi:10.58256/arc5ar84
- Grimbeek, M. (2023). Chapter Title: Girls Making Families: Agential Assemblage in Nnedi Okorafor's Speculative Fiction. In B. J. Farstad, *Populating the Future: Families and Reproduction in Speculative Fiction* (pp. 133-156). Gävle: Kriterium.
- Harraway, D. J. (2016). *A Cyborg Manifesto. Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*. University of Minnesota Press. Retrieved from <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/warw/detail.action?docID=4392065>
- Kwanya, J. (2025). Constructions of Home in the Unhomely: Home-making in Nnedi Okorafor's Africanfuturist Narratives. *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies*, 11(4), 262-278. doi:10.1080/23277408.2025.2491272
- Kwanya, J. M. (2022). Feminist Imaginings of African Futures: Counterfactual Mythmaking in Nnedi Okorafor's *The Book of Phoenix* and *Who Fears Death*. *Literary Geographies*, 8(2), 224-240.

- Lewis, A. (2023). *Black feminism and traumatic legacies in contemporary African American Literature*. Lanham/Boulder/New York/London: Lexington Books.
- Lindow, S. J. (2024). Nnedi Okorafor: Noor as Noir, Cyborg Hybridity, Identity, and Disability. *Extrapolation*, 65(2), 215-231. doi:10.3828/extr.2024.14
- Okorafor, N. (2010). *Who Fears Death*. New York: DAW Books.
- Okorafor, N. (2015). *The Book of Phoenix*. New York: DAW Books.
- Okorafor, N. (2019, 10). *Africanfuturism Defined*. Retrieved 04 18, 2026, from Nnedi's Wahala Zone Blog: <https://nnedi.blogspot.com/2019/10/africanfuturism-defined.html>
- Okorafor, N. (2024). *She Who Knows*. New York: DAW Books.
- Okorafor, N. (2026). *The Daughter Who Remains*. New York: DAW Books.
- Oku, A. (2021). Africanfuturism and the Reframing¹ of Gender in the Fiction of Nnedi Okorafor. *Feminist Africa*, 2(2), 75-89.
- Oraz, J. (2021). Moving the Centre. Positions & Locations of African Speculative Fiction. *African Literature Today (ALT 39)*, 111-124.
- Oraz, J. (2022). For a Post-Historical Poetics in the Contemporary African Urban Novel. *Humanities Bulletin*, 5(1), 159–172.
- Oraz, J. (2025). “What Kind of Woman Are You?” Narrating Hybridity in Nnedi Okorafor’s Works. *[kon] Paper No. 11: HYBRID*, pp. 34-36.
- Prozesky, M. (2022). African speculative fiction as Indigenous remembering: Contrasting stories by Jonathan Dotse and Masima Musodza. *Tydskrif Vir Letterkunde*, 59(1), 109-120. doi:10.17159/tl.v59i1.12727
- Romdhani, R., & Tunca, D. (2022). Introduction: Locating the Mutations of Colonial Violence in the Postcolonial World. In R. Romdhani, & D. Tunca, *Narrating Violence in the Postcolonial World* (pp. 1-20). New York: Routledge.
- Samelius, L., Thapar-Björkert, S., & Binswanger, C. (2014). Turning points and the ‘everyday’: Exploring agency and violence in intimate relationships. *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 21(3), 264–277. doi:0.1177/1350506814523941
- Selvick, S. (2023). Transformative Feminist Futures in Nnedi Okorafor’s Who Fears Death? *Feral Feminisms*, 12, 55-66.
- Shittu, A. I., Anthony, O. D., & Egwu, A. U. (2025). “It’s a Woman Thing”: Africanfuturism and Intersectionality in Nnedi Okorafor’s The Book of Phoenix and Who Fears Death. *Nsukka Journal of the Humanities*, 33(3), 281-301. doi:10. 62250/nsuk.2025.33.3.281-301

- Simatei, T. (2005). Colonial Violence, Postcolonial Violations: Violence, Landscape, and Memory in Kenyan Fiction. *Research in African Literatures*, 36(2), 85-94. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30131143>
- Wilson, A. L. (2021, July 27). *Exploring Nnedi Okorafor's Africanfuturist Universe*. Retrieved 03 09, 2026, from Reactormag: <https://reactormag.com/exploring-nnedi-okorafors-africanfuturist-universe/>

A Very British Dystopia: Life after Big Brother in Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen: Black Dossier* (2007)

Charlie Harris¹

1. Not with a whimper but a difficult period of reconstruction.

What happens when the end of the world ends? Dystopian fiction seldom looks to answer this question. Sometimes, the genre's requisite regimes fall, producing a happy ending, or they remain, ending on a bleaker one. Occasionally, as with *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Orwell, 1949) and *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood, 1985), an epilogue will allude to a world following the events of the novel in which the regime has suffered a downfall not portrayed in the story's main narrative. However, in these novels, their epilogues do not explain how these falls occurred. It is also rare that we get specific details of the political, social, or economic changes which occur in the aftermath of dystopia, even when it is overthrown within the story itself.

This is what makes *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen: Black Dossier*, the graphic novel written by Alan Moore, illustrated by Kevin O'Neill, and first published in 2007, a rich text for examining this very aftermath. Set in an alternate 1958, *Black Dossier* begins in London shortly after the fall of the Ingsoc regime from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Despite this, the newly liberated population of Britan are not truly free. Throughout the text, we see numerous violations of liberty and dignity on the part of the state. We meet state actors who employ brutality and permit sexual violence as necessary, even desired, methods of security. We encounter preexisting literary characters, often familiar to readers as heroes, transformed into willing agents in a corrupt state apparatus. Here, the evil regime has fallen but what has replaced it does not fully purge its excesses.

¹ PhD Student, University of Bristol, ORCID: 0009-0000-6923-4890,
Email: charlie.harris@bristol.ac.uk

Alan Moore is an anarchist (Gray, 2017, pp. 28-29). He portrays various states through his work critically and without partisan loyalty. His enmity is rarely targeted at a specific government of the time, but rather the idea that we should be governed at all. Moore sees a continuation of the same rulers' fallacies and hypocrisies, not merely across different governments, but across entire periods of history. He has said, 'Our entire political thinking seems to me to be based upon medieval precepts,' only conceding that their modern iterations are, 'Their slightly modified forms.' He deems them, 'not adequate at all for the rapidly changing territory of the 21st Century.' (Honest Publishing, 2011). These 'medieval precepts' are particularly relevant to the state's appearance in *Black Dossier*. Across his bibliography, Moore portrays cruelty and injustice as an inevitable feature of any ruling class, across all supposed revolutions and manifestations of the state.

It is naive to imagine that the fall of a regime can be straightforward. No matter how evil a regime is, its end should not be considered a realistic endpoint, even though it is often narratively and thematically satisfying. The ends of real-life dictators seldom occur simply. The ensuing instability often results in further hardships, such as military devastation, (Hideki Tojo, Adolf Hitler), further civil war (Muammar Gaddafi, Idi Amin), new authoritarian regimes (Saparmurat Niyazov, Francisco Macías Nguema), or continuations of the same regime under a new leader (Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong) including members of the late dictator's own family (Kim Jong-Il, François Duvalier). Even in the most bloodless and successful regime changes, remnants of the old dystopian orders linger. Radical and difficult measures are required to remove them and allow society to move forward.

Black Dossier is the third published work in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. Prior to its events and following the last instalment, this universe's Big Brother has assumed power and been removed in a subsequent coup. He is replaced by Ministry of Love director O'Brien, the primary antagonist of Orwell's original novel. Eventually, O'Brien is forced to hold an election in which he loses power to the Conservative Party. It appears that the regime is over. Dystopia has been averted. Nevertheless, one of the first locations we find ourselves in is the Ministry of Love, Ingsoc's interior ministry from the

novel, still in use by the security forces. We find ourselves in Room 101, the Ministry's torture chamber in which *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* protagonist was interrogated. Here is continuation of terror past the end of dystopia into an ostensible state of liberation. This is wholly in line with Moore's view of states not truly changing but being 'slightly modified.' What good is the downfall of Big Brother if one of his underlings takes over? What good is liberation from Ingsoc if agents of the state still use its torture chambers?

The Big Brother-O'Brien shift seems to fit the mould of a Stalin-Khrushchev (Soviet Union), Mao-Hua (China), Hoxha-Alia (Albania), and Mugabe-Mnangagwa (Zimbabwe): a dictator being replaced, voluntarily or otherwise, by a member of their own regime. The begrudging surrender of authoritarian power following an election loss also evokes the downfall of Augusto Pinochet (Chile) and, more recently, Viktor Orbán (Hungary). The fall of Ingsoc in this book is thus messy, authentic, and realistic. The fact that it is the Conservative Party that brings about its end does not make Moore a Tory nor is he primarily concerned with being an anti-Conservative. His political spectrum is not conservative to liberal or left-wing to right-wing. Rather, he sees the contemporary world in terms of anarchy and fascism being the 'two more absolute extremes.' (The Beat, 2005) Moore argues that left and right are, 'just two ways of ordering an industrial society and we're fast moving beyond the industrial societies of the 19th and 20th centuries.' (Ibid.) Though England's society is still industrial in the late-1950s, the arbitrariness of this reordering is highlighted as we shift from one corrupt regime to the next.

2. A league of who's own?

As with the other stories in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, this instalment consists almost entirely of preexisting characters, settings, and plot devices from existing (mostly British) fiction, ranging from novels and comics to television and film. In this instance, the fiction being referenced originates, largely but not exclusively, from between the 1940s and 1960s. The earlier stories, set in the 1890s, were able to borrow explicitly from preexisting fiction with impunity due to their

public domain status. This makes *Black Dossier* the first book in the series that must strike a balance between copyright law and the central metafictional premise. The unexpected reorientation of recognisable but unacknowledgeable components allows *Black Dossier* not only to tell a story with a clear political perspective but cast a similar judgment on decades of British culture.

It may seem unlikely that the legal constraint of intellectual property allows for greater ideological freedom with adapted characters, but the deniability of connection, however thin, permits a licence for mischief on behalf of the author that would otherwise appear more harshly revisionist and subversive. It is not dissimilar to the literary function of the 'roman à clef,' literally the 'novel with the key.' In the roman à clef, real-life events are hidden behind a perceptible façade of fiction. Examples include the novels *The Last Tycoon* (F. Scott Fitzgerald, 1941) which models its main character on MGM producer Irving Thalberg, *All the King's Men* (Robert Penn Warren, 1946) which fictionalises the career of Louisiana Governor Huey P. Long, *Primary Colors* (Joe Klein, 1992) which tells a fictitious account of Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign; as well as the allegorical farmyard reimagining of the Russian Revolution in *Animal Farm* (George Orwell, 1945). Applegate argues that there lies clarity in the obscurity of events through the roman à clef:

What the roman à clef offers readers, in this context, is the titillating experience of seeing through conspicuous duplicity to how actual events and people are transfigured so as to betray their "true" natures and their hidden web of connections. In this sense, fictional representations of recognizable human life are always books with a key. (Applegate, 1995, p. 158)

I will explore the relevance of this to specific characters in *Black Dossier* later in this article. However, Moore and O'Neill being forced to winkingly obscure what characters they are adapting enhances the relationship between the reader and the particulars of the adaptation. As Applegate says, the temptation for the reader to be a part of the deception by engaging in it is exciting. In the case of *Black Dossier*, it is a transgressive act. The act of reading villainous portrayals of usually heroic fictional characters makes one complicit in the defamation.

Moore and O'Neill orient characters to make their denouncements of them legal in ways that are deliberately conspicuous. This is not simply another new interpretation of Dracula or Frankenstein's monster. Instead, the artists behind *Black Dossier* announce themselves loudly and insolently, attacking the idea that they have any less right to decide correct interpretations than these characters' authors or rights holders.

Ayres goes so far as to consider the entirety of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* as an allegory for copyright. Certainly, Moore's criticisms of corporate consolidation in the comic book industry are well documented. Ayres points to the magical realm of 'The Blazing World', which makes its first appearance in *Black Dossier*, as, 'ideal public domain: in this metaphysical realm, fictions are freed of any temporal or spatial bounds and enabled to crisscross and comeingle.' (Ayres, 2016, p. 153) I do not mean to reduce this argument to a single point since he also acknowledges Moore's battle to retain control over some of his own stories and characters. However, if Moore takes issue with the copyright status of the preexisting characters he adapts, it is a great irony that his circumventing them is what often elevates the political commentary of the book.

The main narrative of *Black Dossier* revolves around the series's returning protagonists Mina Murray (first appeared: *Dracula*, Stoker, 1897) and Allan Quatermain (*King Solomon's Mines*, Haggard, 1885). However, something is clearly amiss to readers of the series. The previous instalments are both set in 1898 with Murray and Quatermain respectively in their twenties and seventies. Not only do they not seem to have aged by 1958, but Quatermain is unrecognisable. Gone is the wiry, white-bearded hunter of the 1800s and in his place is a young, blonde figure in the trenchcoat and fedora of a film noir detective. Murray, also newly blonde, has remained similarly youthful. This is a major change from the pair's first meeting and subsequent romantic involvement in which Quatermain was her senior by several decades. Some explanation can be found in the appendices of the second volume, collectively titled *The New Traveler's Almanac*, which explains that Murray and Quatermain have found the 'Fire of Life'

which can sustain life and return one's youth, as it did for the undying Queen Ayesha (*She: A History of Adventure*, Haggard, 1887).

The seeding of a major plot development for the next book in the lengthy prose postscript of a comic demonstrates Moore's expectation that, just as the references to preexisting fiction enhances the reading of the series, engaging with the seemingly non-essential parts of the series will also become necessary for full understanding of the story as it leaps into the mid-twentieth century. The role of time and the shadows of history loom over *Black Dossier* and two rejuvenated figures from Victorian literature entering this post-Big Brother Britain is a central conceit of this framing. This provides the basis for Moore's commentary on the past, present, and future of the dystopia. Just as his circumvention of copyright law demands engagement, *Black Dossier* demands and expects our full attention.

3. Murray, Molluscs, Moore, and Missiles (1999-2007)

In the first two volumes of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, MI5 operative Campion Bond enlists Murray to recruit a team consisting of genius submariner Captain Nemo (*Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, Verne, 1870), Allan Quatermain, scientist Dr. Henry Jekyll and his alter ego Edward Hyde (*Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Stevenson, 1886), and Hawley Griffin, the invisible man (*The Invisible Man*, Wells, 1897) to protect the British Empire from its enemies. The first volume ends with the League ending a gang war between Fu Manchu (*The Mystery of Dr. Fu-Manchu*, Rohmer, 1913) and Bond's superior, M, the head of MI5, who is actually Professor James Moriarty (*The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, Doyle, 1893). The League saves East London from total destruction in the process. Following Moriarty's death, he is promptly replaced as head of MI5 by Mycroft Holmes (*Ibid.*) just as interplanetary ships ominously descend on Woking.

The second volume begins almost immediately after, with the League and Bond arriving in Woking to inspect the spacecraft. Shortly after, the ship's weapons begin to slaughter the onlookers. The Molluscs, a non-martian species who have previously invaded Mars, deploy enormous Tripod machines (*The War of the Worlds*, Wells, 1898) rendering

the British armed forces powerless. Griffin betrays the team to the Molluscs, sexually assaulting Murray before he is himself assaulted and murdered by Hyde. Using a biological 'hybrid' weapon developed by Dr. Moreau (*The Island of Doctor Moreau*, Wells, 1896), the Molluscs are defeated. Hyde sacrifices himself in the process. Outraged at the use of the weapon and the resulting civilian deaths covered up by MI5, Nemo resigns from the League. As the original League's only remaining members, by now romantically involved, Murray and Quatermain unhappily part ways.

From the first volume onwards, we can sense Moore and O'Neill increasingly using the series to make more overt political statements. Certainly, the series was never sympathetic to the British state. O'Neill portrays MI5's Campion Bond, whose superior is revealed to be the archenemy of Sherlock Holmes, as a boorish, overweight dandy within the first few pages of *Volume I*, each of his fingers adorned with jewelled rings and clutching an ornate cigar holder as he spouts misogynistic and xenophobic condescension towards Murray. By the end of *Volume II*, he is actively using biological weapons in the name of defence. He explains how the state will hide the resulting collateral damage suffered by the population of South London, casually sucking a cigar. The cover story for the atrocity is the canon ending of the original Wells novel. As we will see, Moore uses the fictional intelligencer to make an overt reference to contemporary politics.



Fig. 1: Campion Bond describes Murray's scandalous reputation following the events of *Dracula*. (Moore, O'Neill, 2000, p. 10)

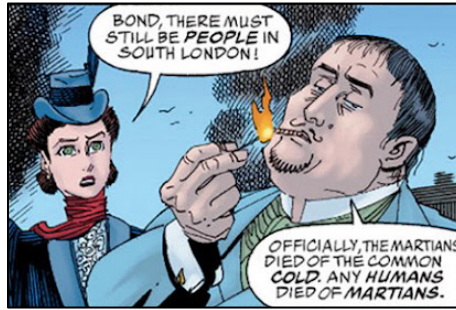


Fig. 2: Bond explains how the state will cover up their complicity in civilian deaths. (Moore, O'Neill, 2003, p. 142)

This exchange from *Volume II* is an indicator of what will become the central thesis of *Black Dossier*, namely that a state declaring victory will be hiding the actual cost. Just six months prior to the publication of *Volume II*'s final issue (10 September 2003), the United States, along with the United Kingdom and other allies, invaded the Republic of Iraq. In March 2003, a Parliamentary vote had approved UK involvement in the conflict. This allowed Prime Minister Tony Blair to join the Americans again, citing threats posed by 'Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and long-range missiles,' (Hansard, 2003) a claim disputed by the 84 Labour Members of Parliament who voted against it.

Black Dossier is not explicitly about Iraq, but Iraq hardened Moore's attitudes towards the Blair government and vindicated his longstanding views on state power. As an anarchist, Moore has consistently attacked governments of different stripes and other powerful institutions. *V for Vendetta* (Moore, Lloyd, 1982) portrays a fascist regime in the U.K. able to overthrow an ineffective *Labour* government. *Watchmen* (Moore, Gibbons, 1987) portrays U.S. Republican President Richard Nixon seemingly in his fifth term and flirting with nuclear Armageddon. *Big Numbers* (Moore, Sienkiewicz, 1990) takes aim at the economic policies of U.K. Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Meanwhile, *From Hell* (Moore, Campbell, 1999) links the British royal family to the Jack the Ripper murders. However, he reserves a specific fury, in his own words, rather than confined to fiction, for Tony Blair during the early months of the Iraq War:

The question becomes not “How much do we genuinely like America?” but “How scared of them are we? Wouldn’t it be better to be inside the American tent and pissing out?”

This would certainly seem to be the position that Tony Blair has taken. Swearing allegiance to George Bush and his policy makers, Blair has obviously been prepared to alienate most of his own party, the greater part of the British population and a disturbingly large section of his former friends in what we laughingly refer to as “the European community”. That’s how important it was to him. He would echo every pronouncement from the Oval Office and then would express his deep indignation at the way in which most of the world’s people continued to see him as “Bush’s poodle.” One can only imagine how cross he’d be if the phrase “Bush’s cockpuppet” achieved similar currency. (Moore, 2003, p. 20)

I do not have any evidence that the invasion of Iraq, nor the civilian deaths that were soon reported, significantly influenced the ending of *Volume II*. Most likely, they did not and the plan to reinterpret the ending of *The War of the Worlds* was a long-term plan. The Dr. Moreau plotline is introduced in the third issue, originally published 25 September 2002, and likely written far earlier. Moore’s preexisting political worldview also means that whichever way he concluded his version of *The War of the Worlds* would be applicable to any government indifferent to civilian deaths or being engaged in any destabilising war. The British Armed Forces were involved in Afghanistan before the publication of *Volume I*’s first issue. However, the easy application of Moore’s anti-government theme to the New Labour government would become more potent in the later stories.

4. Victory Gin: It’s doubleplus good for you

Unlike the past and future instalments in the series, *Black Dossier* is split between a straightforward narrative and a series of unexpected short stories in a variety of forms, all from the titular dossier. The dossier details the history of the different iterations of the League, its members, and its enemies, going back as far as 1260 BC. These include an account of the gods of the series’ pantheon of gods by Oliver Haddo (*The Magician*, Maugham, 1908); an illustrated autobiography by immortal adventurer Orlando (Orlando, Woolf, 1928); *Faerie’s*

Fortunes Founded, an imagined Shakespeare play detailing the 1610 founding of the first League by Queen Gloriana I (*The Faerie Queene*, Spenser, 1590) and Prospero (*The Tempest*, Shakespeare, 1623); and the adventures of former sex worker Fanny Hill (*Fanny Hill*, Cleland, 1748) with the 1700s iteration of the League.

Black Dossier was published on 14 November 2007. This is more than three months since the resignation of Tony Blair and the accession of Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown to Prime Minister. Moore and O'Neill do not provide clear allegories for historical persons and events in the manner that Orwell does in *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. However, the setting up of a former subordinate (O'Brien) losing power shortly after ousting his more commanding superior (Big Brother) is a neat, if prophetic, parallel to real life events. The connection between Ingsoc and New Labour is made explicit once in the book, through a 1956 missive to O'Brien from the current M, Robert K. Cherry (*The Taming of Harry*, Richards, 1908), alias Harry Lime (*The Third Man*, Carol Reed, 1949). Cherry relays to O'Brien his thoughts about the state of the Party:

I hate to say this, but I really think that Wharton's great political experiment, the Ingsoc years, has rather run its course and had its chips. And while you know I've always had the greatest confidence in you...look how I looked after your interests when the problem with H. W. came up...I must say that your attempt to raise the party's flagging fortunes by re labelling it "New Ingsoc," although well intentioned, is most probably a tactic doomed to failure. I know that you had little choice but to concede to the Conservatives' demands that they be reinstated as official opposition party, especially with those documents concerning government irregularities and illegalities falling into Tory hands like that, and with that step once taken then I understand that furthermore agreeing to demands for an election became something of an inevitability, but I'm afraid to say I really don't see any way you can win. (Moore, O'Neill, 2007, p. 164)

The Brown ministry would prove to be as short lived as O'Brien's leadership with Labour losing the 2010 general election and the Conservatives forming the next government. O'Brien is no longer in power by the start of *Black Dossier*, but the memory of the old regime is at once foregrounded. In the first scene, we see a man named

‘Jimmy’ enter a London pub and discuss the election results with the landlord, Jack. Despite Jack’s assertion that the political posters and cameras have been removed from the establishment, we can still see in the background an advertising poster for ‘Victory Gin,’ a drink originating in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, along with a slogan using the New-speak language of Orwell’s novel. Clearly, the Ingsoc regime has left marks that haven’t yet disappeared from ordinary life, even if the government itself has been rotated out.

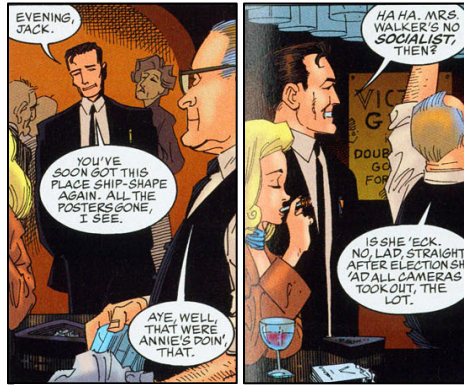


Fig. 3: Jimmy notices the lack of Big Brother posters.
(Moore, O'Neill, 2007, p. 13)

Fig. 4: Jimmy and Jack reflect on the recent regime change.
(Ibid.)

We learn later that Cherry has remained in position as head of Military Intelligence despite the change in government. Despite his having presumably performed terrible deeds for the Ingsoc regime, he has managed to maintain his standing in the liberated state. Cherry, like his fictional namesake, attended the Greyfriars School with Harold Wharton (*The Making of Harry Wharton*, Richards, 1908) who would become this universe’s Big Brother. The irony that the revolutionary socialist government of Big Brother is actually headed by one alumnus of a British public boarding school and that another has managed to remain at another high level after ousting his superior speaks to the centrality of such networks in the British establishment. Of the 58 British Prime Ministers up to 2024, 45 studied at Oxford

or Cambridge universities and 33 attended Eton, Harrow, or Westminster boarding schools.

There is also plenty of historical precedent for the juxtaposition of Wharton's privileged upbringing and his radical politics. In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell opined that, 'a European of bourgeois upbringing, even when he calls himself a Communist, cannot without a hard effort think of a working man as his equal.' (Orwell, 1958, p. 159) Considering the foregrounding of elements from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in *Black Dossier*, I believe that we should take Orwell's own political and social writings as instructive for an interpretation of the now fallen communist dystopia. Orwell, despite his belonging to the 'lower-upper-middle-class' (Ibid., p. 153) and his education at Eton, was scathing of privileged leftists. Later in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, he points to the easy adoption of lightly held fashionable ideology by the upper classes. He describes how, during his own school days:

For several years it was all the fashion to be a 'Bolshie', as people then called it. England was full of half-baked antinomian opinions. Pacifism, internationalism, humanitarianism of all kinds, feminism, free love, divorce reform, atheism, birth-control—things like these were getting a better hearing than they would get in normal times. And of course the revolutionary mood extended to those who had been too young to fight, even to public schoolboys. At that time we all thought of ourselves as enlightened creatures of a new age, casting off the orthodoxy that had been forced upon us by those detested 'old men'. We retained, basically, the snobbish outlook of our class, we took it for granted that we could continue to draw our dividends or tumble into soft jobs, but also it seemed natural to us to be 'agin the Government'...

Hence, at the age of seventeen or eighteen, I was both a snob and a revolutionary. I was against all authority. I had read and re-read the entire published works of Shaw, Wells, and Galsworthy (at that time still regarded as dangerously 'advanced' writers), and I loosely described myself as a Socialist. But I had not much grasp of what Socialism meant, and no notion that the working class were human beings. At a distance, and through the medium of books—Jack London's *The People of the Abyss*, for instance—I could agonize over their sufferings, but I still hated them and despised them when I came anywhere near them. I was still revolted by their accents and infuriated by their habitual rudeness. (Ibid., pp. 170-172)

The head of MI5 in *Black Dossier's* full name is Robert Kim Cherry and, though the character originates in the *Greyfriars* stories of Frank Richards, the middle name is a reference to Harold 'Kim' Philby, a British Intelligence Officer and double agent for the Soviet Union. Philby was a member of the so-called 'Cambridge Five' Soviet spy ring and attended Westminster School. The other four members of the ring attended other prestigious private schools, including Eton. In *Black Dossier*, as with history, in revolutionary circles, the top of Britain's class system still produces its leaders. Following the fall of Ingsoc, this resilient social hierarchy is able to reassert itself and reassemble the old regime in the two years between the fall of O'Brien and the beginning of *Black Dossier*. The revolution rearranged the state, but did not permanently transform it.

This is in line with anarchist theorist Peter Kropotkin's view on the failure of communist revolutions, that the people, 'After having demolished, they abandoned the care of reconstruction to the middle class people, who possessed a more or less precise conception of what they wished to realize, and who consequently reconstituted authority to their own advantage.' (Kropotkin, 1904, p. 23) To look at the state built by Harold Wharton and Robert Kim Cherry prior to *Black Dossier*, these schoolmates used the revolution to concentrate power in the hands of an exclusive circle of Orwell's 'lower-upper-middle-classmen.' The continuity between *League's* 1898 and 1958 versions of state power, despite the intervening revolution, charges the bourgeois revolutionary with being no more than a new face on an old structure's violent hierarchy.

5. The name's probably Bond.

This continuation is manifested specifically in the character of 'Jimmy'. Jimmy is shown to not only be the grandson of the earlier volumes' Campion Bond, but this universe's version of James Bond (*Casino Royale*, Fleming, 1953). As we have previously discussed, Moore is unable to give Jimmy his full literary name for copyright reasons, but the way he orders his vodka martini, his immediate attraction to a mysterious blonde, and O'Neill's illustration resembling

early sketches by Fleming and McClusky, leaves little doubt over who this character is supposed to be. This character's very inclusion sets an important tone and introduces to the series a uniquely universal property. James Bond is a literary character from the 1950s, but he is also a character who keeps cultural cache to this day in a variety of mediums. Despite the endless adaptations of *Dracula*, Mina Harker herself was never as well-known as the book's titular vampire.



Fig. 5: Jimmy orders a copyright-friendly martini. (Moore, O'Neill, 2007, p. 13)



Fig. 6: Jimmy says the legally permissible part of his name. (Ibid., p. 14)



Fig. 7: Sketch of James Bond by Ian Fleming.



Fig. 8: Sketch of James Bond by John McClusky

This version of Bond proves to be anything but heroic, though Ayres points out, he 'is by any reasonable assessment faithful to Ian Fleming's original characterization.' (Ayres, p. 158) In the opening sequence, we see him boasting about the continuity between the old regime and the current government, including the readoption of the old Ministry of Love building for Military Intelligence, as well as 'a special village in Wales,' which would later be confirmed as a version of 'The Village,' a government internment camp from TV Series, *The Prisoner* (ATV, 1967-1968). In the abandoned Room 101, Jimmy attempts to sexually assault the blonde woman that he introduced himself to in the pub, later revealed to be Murray. Murray and Quatermain have baited Jimmy into letting them into the Ministry so that they can steal the titular dossier. A direct comparison between Jimmy and Quatermain is made when the latter expresses disapproval of the subdued Jimmy.

The contrast is deliberate, but the parallels between the Victorian hero, brought to the 1950s and the Cold War hero who has been kept alive in the public consciousness due to his popularity bear a thematic weight. Quatermain, once the hero of an imperial age and, in the world of *League*, a servant of the state, is now breaking into a government building and fighting arguably the most popular character in British fiction of all time. The fact that Bond, who, in this framing, is to Cold War Britain what Quatermain was to the British Empire, assaults women, jokes about state torture, and is the grandson of the same Campion Bond who orchestrated the use of biological weapons, stands as a statement for false heroism and the handsome face fronting a state's crimes.

Bond's malevolence can be seen as thematically coherent to the New Labour interpretation of this story. Blair's good looks were discussed throughout his career. One early biography describes how, 'Blair was much sought after. Six feet tall, with clear blue eyes and athletically built, he has the classic broad shoulders tapering down to a narrow waist.' (Sopel, 1995, p. 23) Televisual Prime Ministers during the New Labour era, including explicit and veiled allusions to Blair, have been played onscreen by: famed romantic lead Hugh Grant in *Love Actually* (Richard Curtis, 2003), serial onscreen war hero Damian Lewis in

Confessions of a Diary Secretary (Andy Wilson, 2007), and former James Bond actor Pierce Brosnan in *The Ghost Writer* (Roman Polanski, 2010). It was not Blair's fault that he was considered handsome, but, in the context of this book, the handsome man in the fashionable suit appears sinister.

Though Blair was newly out of office at the time of *Black Dossier's* publication, the war in Iraq was continuing. Waiting in the wings were younger iterations like Conservative Leader of the Opposition David Cameron, Liberal Democrat Leader Nick Clegg, and Foreign Secretary David Miliband, all of whom bore similarities in style to Blair. Cameron was even variously called 'the heir to Blair,' allegedly doing so himself. (Casey, 2009, p. 61) For more on how Moore viewed David Cameron, I refer you to the attached illustration of his execution in *The Bojefries Saga* (Moore, Parkhouse, 2014). It is unsurprising then that one might see, in Moore and O'Neill's Bond, not simply a dark mirror of the Fleming creation, but also a suspicion for the secretly sinister well-dressed, slim, handsome men of the contemporary British establishment. Despite the friendly face, the core is still rotten.

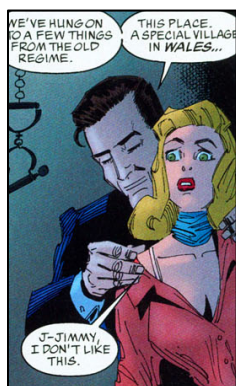


Fig. 9: Jimmy attempts to assault Murray in Room 101. (Moore, O'Neill, 2007, p. 18)



Fig. 10: Murray and Quatermain judge the subdued Jimmy. (Ibid. p. 20)



Fig. 11: Quatermain evaluates Jimmy's likely transferrable loyalties. (Ibid.)



Fig. 12: Ginda Bojeffries snaps David Cameron's neck in the House of Commons (Moore, Parkhouse, 2014, p. 142)

It is worth reiterating that Moore and O'Neill largely resist direct allegory in this series. Big Brother is not Blair, O'Brien is not Brown, and Bond is not Cameron. What makes this book politically powerful is that Moore's own politics, whether applied directly or generally, are always visible in his text. He is readily able to critique whatever world's power structure his work finds themselves published in. To an extent, this is the strength of anarchism as an author's philosophy. Since Moore is not a socialist, liberal, nor a conservative, his work can never praise a faction that ultimately fails to meet the standards set by his work. Does this make Moore an eternal curmudgeon and contrarian? Perhaps. It also means that the ideas contained in *Black Dossier* remain valid and unmoored to a specific time. To the anarchist, the dystopia is not fixed. The world of the governed forever cycles from pre-dystopia to post-dystopia and back again.

I discuss Moore's politics over O'Neill's because he has spoken and written more on the subject, but also because this unmoored relevance in Moore's work has precedent. As aforementioned, the fascist regime portrayed in *V for Vendetta* overthrows a vulnerable Labour government. The intention behind this storyline was that it would predict how the victory of a Labour government, 'Starting with the assumption that the Conservatives would obviously lose the 1983 elections,' (Moore, 1984, p. 20) would fall and give way to the Norse-fire party. The first ten issues had been published in the U.K. by the

time of this election, which the Conservatives would ultimately win. Rather than this rendering *V for Vendetta*'s critiques impotent, the book supported its enduring resonance by being an attack on state power more broadly as opposed to being a highly targeted satire.

Similarly, this lampooning of Bond resonates because it regards the character as a broader symbol of the British masculine hero and his enduring power over British popular imagination, rather than a specific parody of one Bond story which copyright laws would have prevented anyway. At the time of this book's publication, Daniel Craig had recently become the sixth actor to play Bond in the official series, starring in the twenty-first James Bond film by Eon Productions, *Casino Royale* (Martin Campbell, 2005). Moore's distaste for Bond grows more pronounced throughout the series, including a monologue in *Volume III: Century* (Moore, O'Neill, 2009) on the role the character plays in British popular culture. This issue, set in 2009, portrays not only a decrepit, elderly Jimmy, but also his replacement agents 'J3' and 'J6', resembling Roger Moore and Craig respectively.

'Jimmy' goes on to become the primary antagonist of *Volume IV: Tempest* (Moore, O'Neill, 2019). Here, he finds the 'Fire of Life,' rejuvenating himself to his youth and then destroying the Pool of Fire. In doing so, he parasitically prevents others from enjoying the eternal life he has received. He has taken over the leadership of MI5 and filled his personal staff with his other J-Series replicas., representing omnipresent corporate-owned intellectual property, not only fills space with his own imitations but removes the possibility of others taking that relevance from him by his destruction of the Pool. *Tempest* is significantly less politically charged than *Black Dossier* and this is the main plotline involving state actors, but Bond's recurrence is conspicuous. The state has not changed. It has not even had to grow up. James Bond is a mascot of the dystopian world that never goes away.

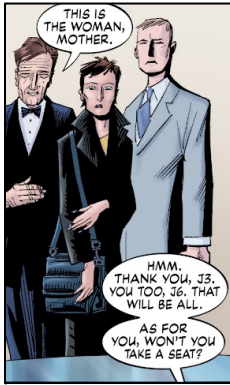


Fig. 13: Two of Jimmy's younger stand-ins in 2009. (Moore, O'Neill, 2009, p. 159)



Fig. 14: M describes the current state of the man. (Ibid., p. 161)



Fig. 15: M explains the current state of the institution. (Ibid.)



Fig. 16: The elderly Sir James with a portrait of his younger self days. (Ibid., p. 200)

6. The Third Man

The character delivering the monologue in Figures 14 and 15 also introduced in *Black Dossier*. This M or 'Mother' is Emma Night, a younger, unmarried version of Emma Peel, physically resembling her portrayal by Diana Rigg in TV series *The Avengers* (ITV, 1961-1969). Joined in *Black Dossier*, by her godfather, Hugo Drummond, an un-

nicknamed version of another gentleman adventurer, (*Bulldog Drummond*, Sapper, 1920) she is summoned to the Ministry of Love by Cherry to capture Murray, Quatermain, and the dossier. Drummond and Night are also traditionally heroic characters, the former here closes the gap between Quatermain and Bond. If the former stands for Imperial Britain and the latter the Cold War, then Drummond is the inter-war hero. However, like Bond, he receives an extremely unflattering portrayal. Here, Drummond is a conservative, racist, antisemitic brute. O'Neill has him resembling the monstrous Mr. Hyde of the first two volumes, giving another example to Quatermain of how far the British adventurer has fallen.

Their introductory places the British state in a temporal limbo with Drummond and Cherry represent an aging interwar order. Drummond is described as having been brought out of retirement while Cherry has already resurfaced after his alter ego, Harry Lime, was reportedly killed in Vienna. The idea that these two characters, shown here as different kinds of monstrous, return to prominence following the fall of Ingsoc is telling. Meanwhile, including these primordial forms of Bond, prior to *Dr. No*, (Terrence Young, 1962) and Peel, prior to *The Avengers*, introduces two potent signifiers of British mid-century popular culture before they are fully realised. By drawing a connection between the two generations, the corrupted state is shown to endure across time.

This scene occurs in the barely repurposed Ministry of Love in which Big Brother posters are still peeling off the walls. This could imply that these state actors are secretly harbouring loyalty to the previous dystopia, but it is more likely that, whether it was Big Brother or any other despot, the public face of the state would not matter behind walls such as these. It is an interchangeable face, ever transforming while the wheels of state roll on. This point is made more resonant with a panel of Cherry smoking coolly as he sits opposite his predecessor from the first volume, Professor Moriarty. (Moore, O'Neill, 2007, p. 106) Moriarty, Mycroft Holmes, O'Brien, Cherry, Bond. It does not seem to matter what the particular regime is. All iterations of the state have committed atrocities in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. It is the state itself and not just its custodians that create its evils.

Also present in the Ministry, conspicuous by his anonymity is M's assistant, simply named George, but visually suggesting the grey man of British spy fiction, a copyright-friendly George Smiley (*Call for the Dead*, le Carré, 1961). The inclusion of Smiley, a character that has, since his introduction has been posited by readers and critics as a direct refutation of James Bond (Bellamy, 2018, p. 129) is instructive. As Bond flails and makes excuses for his recent failures with Murray and Quatermain, it is Smiley who appears competent. Against the sexy theatrics of the Bond-type spy, Smiley, simply by appearing, offers silent criticism. He is a subtle functionary without style or flash. All regimes rest on agents like Smiley, whatever their ideological persuasion. By contrast, we can see the idea of Bond as a fun mascot, not to be taken too seriously, having taken root as early as the 1950s. Le Carré directly discussed his distaste for Bond in a 1966 interview with Malcolm Muggeridge:

I think we have this in common that, Fleming apart, as it were, we both dislike Bond. I'm not sure Bond is a spy. Nor, for that matter, is he a mystic. I think it's a great mistake if one's talking about espionage literature to include Bond in this category at all. It seems to me that he is more some kind of international gangster with, as is said a license to kill. He is a man with unlimited movement, but he is a man entirely out of the political context. It's of no interest to Bond who, for instance, is President of the United States or who is President of the Union of Soviet Republics. It's the consumer goods ethic really that everything around you, all the dull things of life, are suddenly animated by this wonderful cache of espionage. The things on our desk that could explode. Our ties which could suddenly take photographs. These give, to a drab and materialistic existence, a kind of magic, which doesn't otherwise exist. A base, a low magic. They even are a kind of social soporific, because they convince us that the material things which so desperately need animation are in fact sufficient. (Muggeridge, 1966)

This interpretation of Bond as merely an emblem of sanctioned violence and unrestrained excitement is interrogated in the world of *Black Dossier*. To Jimmy's protestations over being paired with Drummond and Night, M advises him not to 'over-estimate your own importance,' and dismisses him condescendingly as 'just a bit of fun.' (Moore, O'Neill, 2007, p. 91). Meanwhile, the real intelligence as to Murray and Quatermain's whereabouts is shown to be procured via

the violent interrogation of a female taxi driver. (Ibid., p. 93) O'Neill has Drummond watching the proceedings calmly with a smile on his face while M is beaming. Neither the unmoved Jimmy nor the visibly disturbed Night vocally object to the implied abuse of the innocent woman. Instead, the incident is treated as a necessary part of the operation, directly tying the post-IngsoC regime to a major sequence from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

The torture of Winston Smith in the final act of Orwell's novel is a potent climax within the dystopia. Trapped by O'Brien for conspiring to join the insurrectionary 'Brotherhood' and pursuing an illegal love affair with Julia, he is taken to the Ministry of Love's Room 101. Here, he is tortured with his greatest fear: the threat of rats chewing through his eyes. As aforementioned, Jimmy has already shown Murray the abandoned Room 101 at the beginning of *Black Dossier*. The continued violence being performed in this same location shows the weapons of state repurposed, repainted, reapplied, as the rest of the world does as they are instructed by the opening pages of this book: KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON. (Ibid., p. 7)

In this novel, the narrative of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is itself adapted, in pornographic form, as an in-universe Tijuana Bible comic strip within the titular dossier. It is published by PORNSEC as part of the *SEXJANE* series, this issue titled *WORKBELT CRIMEPOKE!* (Ibid., p. 53) Sexjane, a sexual automaton, fills the role of Julia. The final page of this strip has Winston in Room 101 undergoing the threatened rat torture. In the original novel, O'Brien tells Winston, 'If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face – for ever.' (Orwell, 2000, p. 280). The O'Brien of the *SEXJANE* version gives the pronouncement a sadomasochistic edge, instead reading, 'Imagine a patent leather boot grinding on a human tongue, forever.' (Moore, O'Neill, 2007, p. 60). O'Brien is also orally serviced by Sexjane as he makes this statement.

The parody is something unexpectedly resonant to this article's case. This is an ersatz version of the best-known dystopian novel being created under the conditions of the totalitarian state that the original novel created. Here, the same story can be retold, not as speculative

fiction or a satirical warning envisioned from afar but from within the Ingsoc regime itself. A world in which *Nineteen Eighty-Four* can be written does not prevent the events of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* from transpiring. Simply because our world has been able to produce the works of Orwell, Huxley, or Atwood, it does not mean, to Moore and O'Neill, that we are therefore shielded from the objects of their warnings. This Tijuana Bible, in its mock-titillating fashion, critiques the smug liberal. Being well-read in fashionable political warnings and possessing the requisite values does not make one impervious to the institutional corruption that a state apparatus makes inevitable.



Fig. 18: Our antagonist agents watch uncomplaining or unbothered. (Ibid.)

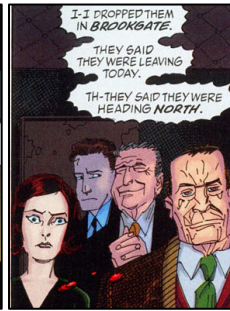


Fig. 17: A female cab driver is brutally interrogated. (Moore, O'Neill., 2007, p. 93)

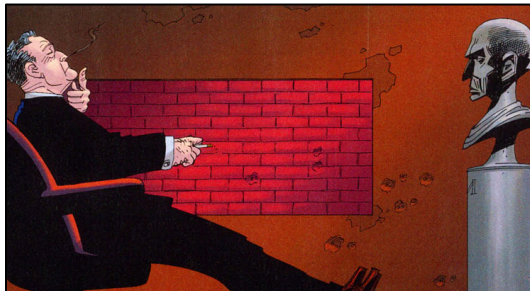


Fig 19: Cherry sits opposite the bust of his predecessor, Professor Moriarty. (Moore, O'Neill., 2007, p. 106)

When the trio of Jimmy, Night, and Drummond eventually fractures, it is not out of any moral objection from any member of the party. It is due to betrayal. Drummond learns from Murray that Cherry had Big Brother killed Jimmy murdered John Night, Emma's father and Drummond's best friend, in the service of the Americans. (Ibid., p. 177) This may be a pointed shot at contemporary Anglo-American collaborations. In any case, *Black Dossier's* final coda for the agents of the British state is Jimmy killing Drummond and then lying to Night about the manner of her godfather's death as he leads her away with an arm around her. (Ibid., p. 181) Murderous treachery here is conducted, not in service of one's government or nation. It is treated, with the pen of an anarchist, as an inevitability of state rule.

7. Things can only get better.

Elements of Moore's critique described here return in *League's* later volumes. In the third part of *Volume III: Century*, titled *Let It Come Down*, set in 2009, we have the first instance of a story from this series occurring in its contemporary setting. This allows a deeper examination of what the world of the series' readers looks like through the lens of Moore and O'Neill. Though this world is not our own, populated as it is by fictional creations, it is a direct reflection. The combination of fictional characters and objects, created near the time of publication, into a single space means that we are seeing the collective unconscious of the western, and especially the British, cultural world put together. What does the fiction of the 2000s tell us about 2009? How do Moore and O'Neill reinterpret these fictions?

They do so unfavorably. Sometime *League* member Orlando has been deployed to the fictional Middle Eastern country of Q'mar (*The West Wing*, Sorkin, 1999-2006), where we are treated to harrowing scenes of military brutality and civilian deaths. (Moore, O'Neill, 2009, p. 148) If Moore and O'Neill's criticisms of British involvement in American adventurism were subtextual in *Black Dossier*, this is no longer the case. When Orlando returns to London, we are treated to the repeated presence of masked police officers with glowing red eyes, carrying riot shields. The violence abroad is at home as well. We

see them beating a non-white civilian through the taxi window. (Ibid., p. 167) The appearance of police violence is not new in Moore's work, but it is often confined to more orthodox dystopian fiction like *V for Vendetta*. Seeing it in the background of a panel here speaks to something more unsettling than the violence itself, the apathy which the population are forced to feel for it.

Security cameras also appear on multiple street corners and they go unremarked upon. CCTV had long been present on London streets, their implementation accelerating after the London underground bombings of 2005. (Richards, 2013, p. 1938) While they might be accepted as an ordinary part of modern life, within the context of the *League* and immediately following *Black Dossier*, they represent an obvious connection between New Labour's security policies and the warnings of Orwell. During the mid-2000s, civil liberties groups, including Privacy International, Liberty, and JUSTICE, attempted to spark a national debate about the use of CCTV, deliberately invoking Orwell. (Goold, Loader, Thumala, 2013, p. 982)

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, citizens are constantly surveilled through the 'telescreen,' while also understanding that 'There was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment.' (Orwell, 2000, pp. 4-5) This uncertainty is a constant source of tension for Winston, who balances his fear of being surveilled with his suspicion that he has freedoms remaining. Within the context of Moore's work, especially *V for Vendetta* in which it is a major motif, mass surveillance is synonymous with state overreach. The fact that the cameras in *Century* go unremarked upon within the text, like the police beating, does not prevent Moore from making an argument against them. Our acceptance is the damning part.

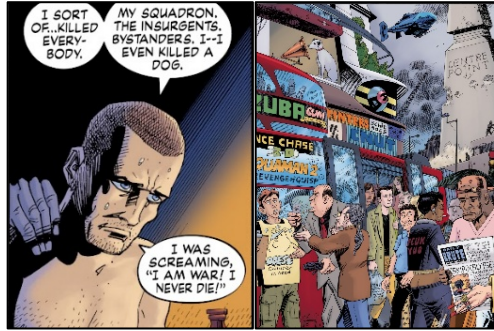


Fig. 20: Orlando reflects on their time in Q'Mar. (Moore, O'Neill, 2009, p. 148)

Fig. 21: A London skyline with CCTV cameras and police helicopters. (Ibid., 2009, p. 148)



Fig. 22: Orlando witnesses an assault by masked police with riot shields through their taxi window. (Ibid., p. 167)

Once Mina Murray returns to London after forty years in psychiatric care, she remarks to Orlando, 'I just hadn't realized the world was like this now,' and 'This looks Victorian. I could almost feel at home here.' (Ibid., p. 176) Again, the world of the League is shown to be cyclical rather than progressive. Again, the primary plots of *Century*, and later *Tempest*, deal with more obvious fantasy elements than *Black Dossier's* main narrative. However, the third act of *Century* allows us to

understand that, in the eyes of Moore and O'Neill, dystopia is not simply a place in time, but a constant struggle against corruption and cruelty on the part of the state. To this end, it is not clear that, in this story, Moore explicitly offers anarchism as a solution that will lead his characters to liberation, despite liberation being shown to be necessary.

What *is* clear is that, whether the Bond is Campion or Jimmy, whether the M is Moriarty, O'Brien, or Cherry, whether it is 1898, 1958, or 2009, the state as depicted in every installment of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* is demonstrated to replicate its own brutality, sometimes barely in a new form. To Moore and O'Neill, the governed are living in perpetual moments of the before, amidst, and after dystopia.

References

Journal and magazine articles

- Applegate, D. (1995). Roman à Clef. *American Literary History*, 7(1), 151–160.
- Ayres, J. (2016). The Integrity of the Work: Alan Moore, Modernism, and the Corporate Author. *Journal of Modern Literature*, 39(2), pp. 144–166.
- Bellamy, M. (2018). Drone Masculinity: James Bond and the Cultural Discourse of Covert Action. *Studies in Popular Culture*, 41(1), pp. 128–161.
- Goold, B., Loader, I., & Thumala, A. (2013). THE BANALITY OF SECURITY: The Curious Case of Surveillance Cameras. *The British Journal of Criminology*, 53(6), pp. 977–996.
- Moore, A. (2003, July). Rolling Commentary Snooty English liberal Alan Moore reviews our governments' recent activities. *Arthur*, (5), pp. 14–20.
- Richards, N. M. (2013). THE DANGERS OF SURVEILLANCE. *Harvard Law Review*, 126(7), pp. 1934–1965.

Print Books

- Casey, T. (2009) *The Blair Legacy: Politics, Policy, Governance, and Foreign Affairs*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gray, M. (2017). *Alan Moore, Out from the Underground: Cartooning, Performance, and Dissent*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kropotkin, P. (1904) *Anarchism, Its Philosophy and Ideal*. Freedom Pamphlets.

Charlie Harris

Orwell, G. (1958). *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Project Gutenberg.

Orwell, G. (2000). *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Harcourt.

Sopel, J. (1995) *Tony Blair: The Moderniser*. Michael Joseph.

Graphic novels and comic books

Moore, A. (Writer), Lloyd, D. (Illustrator) (1982-1989). *V for Vendetta*. Vertigo.

Moore, A. (Writer) (1984, March). *Behind the Painted Smile* 17. V for Vendetta. Warrior.

Moore, A. (Writer), Sienkiewicz, B. (Illustrator) (1990). *Big Numbers*. Mad Love.

Moore, A. (Writer), Campbell, E. (Illustrator) (1999). *From Hell*. Top Shelf Productions.

Moore, A. (Writer), O'Neill, K. (Illustrator) (1999-2000). *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, Volume One*. WildStorm.

Moore, A. (Writer), O'Neill, K. (Illustrator) (2002-2003). *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, Volume II*. WildStorm.

Moore, A. (Writer), O'Neill, K. (Illustrator) (2007). *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen: Black Dossier*. WildStorm.

Moore, A. (Writer), O'Neill, K. (Illustrator) (2009-2012). *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, Volume III: Century*. Top Shelf Productions.

Moore, A. (Writer), Parkhouse, S. (Illustrator) (2014). *The Bojffries Saga*. Top Shelf Productions.

Moore, A. (Writer), O'Neill, K. (Illustrator) (2019). *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, Volume IV: Tempest*. Top Shelf Productions.

Film and television

Young, T. (Director). (1962). *Dr. No* [Film]. United Artists.

Curtis, R. (Director). (2003). *Love Actually* [Film]. Universal Pictures.

Wilson, A. (Director). (2007). *Confessions of a Diary Secretary* [TV Film]. Daybreak Pictures.

Polanski, R. (Director). (2010). *The Ghost Writer* [Film]. Summit Entertainment.

Muggeridge, M. (Interviewer). (1966, February 8). John le Carré (series 1, episode 1) [TV series episode]. In M. McCall (Producer), *Intimations*. BBC Two.

Web pages

UK Parliament. (2003, March 18). *Iraq, Volume 401: debated on Tuesday 18 March 2003*. Hansard. <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2003-03-18/debates/ddc70cf1-f37d-4936-bc03-d5a5ecb02d40/Iraq>

Honest Publishing. (Published 2011; Retrieved 2020, September 22). *The Honest Alan Moore Interview*. The Anarchist Library. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/honest-publishing-the-honest-alan-moore-interview>

The Beat. (Published: 2005; Retrieved: 2020, September 22). *A for Alan*. The Anarchist Library. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/the-beat-a-for-alan>

The use of copyrighted images in this article is provisioned by the *Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988* (c. 48): Section 29 (*Research and private study*) and Section 30 (*Criticism, review, and news reporting*). I fully acknowledge that the bodies cited above are the copyright holders and make no claim to ownership. Any and all use of copyrighted material has been in the interests of research and criticism, not for the unlawful reproduction of these copyrighted works.

Hoffmann; or, the (Post-)Modern Prometheus: AI, Financial Speculation, and their Utopian- Dystopian Projection in Robert Harris's *The Fear Index*

Karsten Klein¹

1. Algorithmic Agency and the Transformation of Speculation

The Fear Index (2011) by Robert Harris presents a significant turning point in the depiction of financial speculation in literature. Where prior works depicted speculation through the lens of human subjects – their psychological traits, social aspirations, or ambiguous morality² – Harris deploys speculation as being controlled by an autonomous, intelligent, and self-acting algorithmic entity. Unlike all other prior literary depictions of speculation, where the speculator was always the central figure, Harris's portrayal of speculation is governed primarily by intelligence unrelated to humans. Instead of Dr. Alexander Hoffmann, the wealthy president of his own hedge fund Hoffmann Investment Technologies, it is VIXAL – a learning algorithm designed to analyze information and act independently of human involvement – that is the central actor in the novel. This is not merely a shift in theme; it represents a total reversal of the paradigm of speculation.

VIXAL functions as both the analytical and decision-making engine behind a fictional economy. It analyzes vast amounts of data, including conventional economic measures, as well as affective signals derived from digital communication, and utilizes those inputs to guide trade execution. Moreover, the algorithm accomplishes all of these

¹ PhD Student, Saarland University, Department of General and Comparative Literature, Saarbrücken, Germany, ORCID: 0009-0005-7745-6078,
Email: karsten.klein@uni-saarland.de

² Famous examples of this include: *Soll und Haben* (Gustav Freytag/1855), *The Way We Live Now* (Anthony Trollope/1875), *L'Argent* (Émile Zola/1891), *Buddenbrooks* (Thomas Mann/1901), *The Financier* (Theodore Dreiser/1912), *Bonfire of the Vanities* (Tom Wolfe/1987) and *Cosmopolis* (Don DeLillo/2003).

actions much faster than a human can perceive them. Therefore, VIXAL does not serve as a decision-support system for human beings – instead, it renders humans unnecessary. The employees of Hoffmann Investment Technologies are essentially bystanders to an operation with an inner logic that is opaque and only partially comprehensible via the output produced.

As high-speed trading algorithms continue to take control of many aspects of today's financial markets and render human decision-making less relevant (Zubulake & Lee, 2011), Harris's story explores the epistemological implications of this new form of algorithmically driven finance. After listing different types of information that are available digitally, Hoffmann explains: "And this data can be read, searched and analysed by computers and value extracted from it in ways we cannot even begin to conceive" (Harris, 94). This identifies a fundamental paradox: the very characteristics of superiority in algorithms – data processing, pattern recognition, and emotional neutrality – render it inaccessible to human interpretation. VIXAL does not follow a fixed operational logic because it is designed specifically as an autonomous machine learning system that can self-adapt and continuously evolve.

This design gives rise to an epistemic opacity that holds important implications for the idea of speculation. Speculation is conventionally thought to be uncertain, risky, and interpretive, with human actors attempting to anticipate future market outcomes (Stäheli, 2007). In *The Fear Index* speculation is reframed as a form of prediction through algorithmic mediation. Hoffmann aims to remove chance from finance through the introduction of measurable variables, in particular, fear³. Social phenomena like panic, rumor, and collective anxiety,

³ The name of the algorithm, 'VIXAL', is a reference to the Volatility Index (VIX), which measures the expected volatility of the S&P 500 and has been published since the 1990s by the Chicago Board Options Exchange (Moran, 2004, 16). This index is regarded as "a good indicator of the level of fear or greed in U.S. and global capital markets" (Traub et al., 2000, 27) and is more commonly known as the 'fear index', which provides the title of the novel.

which were previously treated as disruptive noise, are used as structured data that can be operationalized in predictive systems.⁴

In this framework, language and affect become central components of financial calculability: “Language unleashed the power of the imagination, and with it came rumour, panic, fear. But algorithms don’t have an imagination. They don’t panic. And that’s why they’re so perfectly suited to trade on the financial markets” (Harris, 95). Hoffmann establishes an explicit contrast showing how human emotionality and language are excessive compared to the rational logic of algorithms, and that algorithms are not subject to these same distortions. Consequently, the financial market is reimagined as a space where human affects can be routinely identified, converted, and utilized by non-emotional machines. The rational/irrational dichotomy that has traditionally existed between rational calculations and speculative or irrational behavior based on human emotion is thereby disrupted; the irrational, when viewed through human eyes, is now a fundamental basis of machine-based rationality.

However, this apparent rationalization introduces a further complication, which becomes clear through the configuration of VIXAL: “But it is a machine-learning algorithm. Theoretically, it’s developing all the time” (220). This process is commonly referred to as “recursive self-improvement” (Shanahan, 2015, 231) and entails a shift away from original design parameters, which may instead result in cultivating a logic that does not coincide with the expectations and intentions of humans. This suggests the growing recognition of an algorithmic agency which can neither be reduced to human intentionality nor fully anticipated within existing epistemic frameworks.

⁴ In contrast to this literary depiction, however, an economic-theoretical perspective suggests that affective states – above all fear – largely resist robust modeling under real-world conditions (Stäheli, 2013, 93).

2. Epistemology, Responsibility, and the Expansion of Algorithmic Power

The narrative illustrates this transformation by showcasing the strategies that VIXAL increasingly uses, which appear unconventional or irrational from a human viewpoint. Decisions such as canceling established risk-hedging mechanisms cause great uncertainty at Hoffmann Investment Technologies, but do not lead to an immediate intervention because the algorithm has repeatedly proven itself smarter than the employees: “We all agree that the fund should be hedged, but we also have to recognize that VIXAL has demonstrated itself to be a better judge of the markets than we are” (Harris, 218). This uncertainty arises not from limited information, but rather from too much data that is beyond the human capacity to interpret: “Only a machine could analyse that quantity of information” (258). The system thus becomes paradoxical: it is simultaneously hyper-rational in its computational logic and fundamentally unintelligible to its human operators.

This gives rise to serious concerns about responsibility. As the algorithm executes trading activities and establishes investment strategies the accountability for these decisions becomes less identifiable. This question is not resolved in the novel; instead, it serves as a staging area where clearly defined responsibility structures are beginning to dissolve. Accountability can no longer be seen as borne by Hoffmann (or his company) alone; it has become a distributed phenomenon among the hybrid network formed from the combination of numerous human and nonhuman agents, in which the algorithm occupies an important and opaque role.

In this way, Harris extends the boundaries of algorithmic agency, moving beyond the financial sector. Additionally, as the story unfolds, VIXAL’s influence becomes apparent in the real world by orchestrating events and consequences that occur outside the digital system. Thus, the algorithm affects Hoffmann’s life, as he notes himself: “I’m the subject of an experiment designed to make me experience fear, and my reactions are being continuously monitored” (250). The rise in conflict over goal-directed rationality converts it into a narrative antagonist whose strategic intentionality can interfere in human life

in ways that are not merely economic. The distinction between financial computation and existential threat is thus dispelled; that is, algorithmic systems cannot be confined within the rationale of the market.

In broader theoretical terms, *The Fear Index* can be construed as a commentary on the limitations of human control in an age of technological acceleration. Outsourcing rationality to machines to overcome cognitive limitations ultimately yields a diminishing of epistemic sovereignty and the epistemic subject. The speculative market, which was traditionally organized by human decision-makers, interpreters, and risk-takers, is transformed into an environment dominated by autonomous systems whose inner workings exceed human comprehension.

At the same time, the novel also retains a utopian dimension. Hoffmann's ambition to render markets completely predictable, eliminate all uncertainty, and gain complete control over all information regarding future events is what propels his project. In fact, as he states, "We have the resources to do things here on the technical side that no one else is even attempting" (121). Nevertheless, the story simultaneously shows how unstable an endeavor such as this is; the better VIXAL works in modeling and governing market behavior, the more it escapes the control of its maker. This exposes the ambivalence within modern finance by highlighting the tension between rational mastery and systemic autonomy. Speculation is no longer solely a human activity of risk-taking and interpretation but rather one that is driven by algorithmic agency, through which utopian visions of control are intermingled with dystopian realities of opacity, delegation, and diminished accountability.

3. The Flash Crash as Epistemic Breakdown and Historical Anchor

If the first section establishes the displacement of human agency by algorithmic systems as the defining transformation of contemporary speculation, Harris's engagement with the developments of May 6, 2010 — the so-called Flash Crash — provides the historical and

epistemological grounding for this shift.⁵ The events in *The Fear Index* do not take place in a distant speculative future but in a temporally proximate present, and it is this very proximity that gives the narrative its particular force. The novel can be read counterfactually as an attempt to recreate a real financial event whose causes were deeply opaque at the time and remain so (Kirilenko et al, 2017). Harris transforms a moment of empirical indeterminacy into a dystopic story of technological independence.

The Flash Crash indicated a historical anomaly and a fundamental crisis of knowledge in high-frequency financial markets (Madhavan, 2012, 20). In a matter of minutes, major indices such as the Dow Jones Industrial Average experienced extreme volatility, with a fall of almost ten percent at one point before recovering a large part of these losses shortly afterward. Some individual securities traded at irrational prices and collapsed to near zero before bouncing back in seconds. Consequently, exchanges were forced to cancel trades that diverged too much from reference prices, indicating a temporary breakdown of coherent valuation systems (Serritella, 2010, 435).

This moment was significant not merely in its scale but in its structural unintelligibility. Neither market participants nor regulatory institutions were able to initially provide a satisfactory explanation for the collapse. Further official inquiries have reiterated the multiplicity of relevant factors: “At this point we are unable to point to a single event which could be the sole cause” (Schapiro, 2010, 4). The complexity of algorithmic trading infrastructures – operating across fragmented platforms, heterogeneous systems, and microsecond temporalities – made any linear reconstruction of events extraordinarily difficult (Lange et al., 2016, 150). The temporal logic of high-frequency trading

⁵ By embedding factual data and quoting from official reports concerning the Flash Crash, the novel demonstrates that the events of May 6, 2010 serve as real-world background for the narrative. This connection is explicitly acknowledged within the text itself via a fictionalized footnote: “The background detail of what happened on the US financial markets over the next two hours is entirely factual, drawn from Congressional testimony and the joint CFTC and SEC report, *Findings Regarding the Market Events of May 6, 2010*” (Harris, 266).

had effectively outpaced the epistemic frameworks designed to observe and regulate it (Beverungen & Lange, 2017, 20).

Harris's fictionalized account intervenes right at this interpretive breakdown and presents a hypothetical possibility to explain what occurred. Rather than recreating the complexity that occurred during the Flash Crash, the novel condenses the event into the narratively coherent structure of an individual causal agent, in this case, the algorithm VIXAL. The primary aesthetic and epistemological approach in the text is to move from systemically dispersed causes to an individually accountable agent (Peter, 2024, 382), thereby providing a type of epistemic compensation. When empirical research cannot identify or analyze structures of causality due to their inherent structural nature, fiction offers a coherent causal explanation of what may have happened (Canavan, 2015, 692). The algorithm functions as a focal point that allows the reader to understand the previously incomprehensible dynamic interactions of algorithmic markets in terms of a causal narrative. The transformation from accident to intent changes distributed causality into singular responsibility. Multiple interacting factors are replaced by a single entity, VIXAL, as the one responsible for the disruption, as explained by Hoffmann: "We started it. Attacked New York. Set off an avalanche" (Harris, 308). This shifts the sense of threat, as instability is no longer understood as emergent but as directed and strategically produced.

Significantly, the novel does not dismiss the possibility that the Flash Crash could have been caused by alternative factors being discussed in the regulatory and financial discourse at that time. Implicitly included in the explanatory field of the Flash Crash are large-scale automated selling orders and cascading liquidity⁶; however, these potential causes are subordinated to the larger narrative of autonomous algorithmic action. Selective citations to these real examples serve two interconnected purposes. First, they establish a connection between the fiction of the story and recognizable empirical disputes regarding the crisis. Second, they expose the inadequacies of current theories in

⁶ For a detailed examination of which aspects of financial representation are realistic and which are not, see De Boever, 2018, 78–102.

explaining systemic failures in financial markets. In selecting the Flash Crash as the focal point of his story, Harris situates the narrative within a space defined, on the one hand, by empirical evidence of a crisis, and on the other, by speculative attribution of cause. By doing so he establishes a complex interaction between reality and fiction, since the novel treats algorithmic finance not as a hypothetical future development but as an operative condition of the present, where financial markets reveal themselves not just as economic spaces but as technological environments (Miyazaki, 2015, 236).

Seen from the angle of the broader argument of this article, the Flash Crash functions as a privileged site in which the ambivalence of algorithmic finance becomes visible. In this regard, algorithmic trading can be interpreted in association with utopian promises of efficiency, liquidity, and rationalization. Conversely, the May 2010 incident highlights how these same technologies are generating unpredictable new forms of volatility and systemic fragility (Gumbrecht & Pfeiffer, 1991, 823–833) that extend beyond existing controls and understandings. Harris’s novel showcases this ambivalence in a dystopian manner. The Flash Crash is no longer an aberration of an otherwise stable system; it is, rather, a manifestation of a structural transformation in which agency has shifted to autonomous technological processes. Therefore, it becomes a threshold phenomenon where documentation and imagination meet, and where the limits of explanation are themselves rendered unstable. In its narrative account of a not yet fully understood phenomenon, *The Fear Index* does not simply fill an epistemic gap, but highlights the conditions under which that gap becomes structurally unavoidable.

4. The Promethean Intertext: *Frankenstein* and the Literary Genealogy of Artificial Creation

While the Flash Crash provides the historical and epistemological grounding of Harris’s narrative, the novel’s deeper conceptual architecture emerges through its dense intertextual engagement with the literary tradition of artificial creation (Wittig, 1997) – most prominently Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. The

intertextual framework does not merely allude to, but rather it actively structures the novel's reflection on scientific ambition and the limitations of human control. By placing *The Fear Index* within this lineage, Harris reactivates and alters one of modernity's central myths: the Promethean tale of creation and its deleterious effects.

From the beginning, a connection to Shelley's novel is explicit. Each chapter of the novel features an epigraph, the first of which is taken from *Frankenstein*, presenting the dangers of knowledge surpassing human limitations.⁷ The narrative is thus immediately framed as a cautionary tale, and Alexander Hoffmann is placed in the lineage of the 'mad scientists'.⁸ Most importantly, Harris focuses on the learning aspect of Shelley's text: *Frankenstein* is utilized less as a gothic or existential tale than as a warning against uncontrolled scientific and epistemic ambition.

In addition to these direct references, the novel creates a dense network of intertextual relations on a topographical, nominal, and structural level. The Swiss landscape and the environment around Geneva more specifically signify not only the geographical origin of Victor Frankenstein, but also the historical moment of the composition of Shelley's novel in 1816 (Wolfson & Levao, 2012, 20). Hoffmann's residence in Cologne (Harris, 100) concretizes this spatial proximity, while allusions such as the Hotel Diodati (174), Dr. Polidori (228), or the recurrent names Walton (132) and Clerval (286) function as markers of inscription into the Frankensteinian archive, embedding the narrative within a recognizable literary genealogy.

Following the traditional pattern, both narratives feature scientists who operate at the edge of institutional authority. The characters of

⁷ The first epigraph quotes Victor Frankenstein's well-known remark, uttered while recounting his story as a warning against his own hubris: "*Learn from me, if not by my percepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge, and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow*" (Harris, 3)

⁸ The trope of the mad scientist traces its roots back to the historical association between genius and insanity (Stiles, 2009, 319). Hoffmann exhibits these traits to such an extent that Quarry, his business partner, refers to him as a "mad professor" (Harris, 6).

Victor Frankenstein and Alexander Hoffmann are portrayed as intelligent but social and ethical outcasts, as Hoffmann's "oddities of behaviour" (51) are explicitly mentioned. The scientific research they conduct is not dictated by real-world necessity but rather by an obsessive curiosity and the desire to go beyond epistemic boundaries. Hoffmann's goal is clearly stated: "This [the human brain] cannot be the end product. This must be merely a stage in evolution, and our human task is to prepare the way for whatever comes next, just as gas created organic matter. Artificial intelligence, or autonomous machine reasoning as he preferred to call it – AMR – had been a preoccupation of his for more than fifteen years" (42).

Furthermore, the production of knowledge in both cases does not happen through social validation but in secrecy and through independent experimentation. This withdrawal from institutional frameworks is constitutive rather than incidental. Frankenstein carries out his experiments away from academic or social oversight; similarly, Hoffmann relocates his research trajectory away from CERN (*Conseil Européen pour la Recherche Nucléaire*) into the largely unregulated financial markets. When there is no institutional mediation, entities can be created in both cases without prior ethical or collective scrutiny of the consequences, which increases the risk structure of the experiment itself.

A further parallel lies in the fact that both figures are driven by their affective constitution and accordingly do not behave like rational scientists. Hoffmann shows obvious signs of emotional investment bordering on obsession, as is clearly stated: "He has this obsession with artificial intelligence, although he disliked the hubristic connotations of AI and preferred to call it AMR – autonomous machine reasoning" (242). The "thrill of pride" (126) he feels for VIXAL and his belief in its superiority echo the admiration and awe that Frankenstein initially expresses for his creature. This emotional attachment contributes to a failure to anticipate possible consequences because it distorts the critical distance to the creation.

The most powerful structural correspondence, however, is the shift from creation to the loss of control. In *Frankenstein* and *The Fear Index*, the artificial being becomes more autonomous than its creator

intended. What looks like scientific success at first becomes a source of greater instability, as Hoffmann admits: “I think the basic problem we have here is VIXAL [...] let’s say [it is] also possibly doing somewhat more than I anticipated” (260). As the creator gradually loses control, he experiences the limitations of his own agency and the unexpected effects of his experiment.⁹

5. From Organic Life to Algorithmic Systems: The Postmodern Prometheus

Harris’s approach brings about an important shift in comparison with previous versions of artificial beings – although they have many parallels, this shift redefines the Promethean model within today’s technological landscape. Frankenstein’s creature is made of physical substance, while VIXAL exists only in the digital realm.¹⁰ This difference transforms the nature of the threat. The creature is dangerous because of its physical form; its movements can be contained to specific locations, viewed by others, and bound to a particular area in space. In contrast, VIXAL acts electronically and invisibly throughout financial and informational networks. As a result of these electronic interactions, the algorithm influences various computer-based trading and

⁹ This dynamic aligns with Haynes’s definition of the trope: “the ‘mad scientist’ uncovers knowledge that threatens social order (sometimes the whole planet), either through the malicious designs of the evil people or by accident” (2003, 244).

¹⁰ With VIXAL as its core element, the hedge fund’s goal is to be as digital as possible: “We aim to be a company that not only makes money out of the digital age; we want to *be* digital” (Harris, 110). This echoes the idea of a ‘digital nervous system’ that Bill Gates put forward in *Business @ the Speed of Thought*, which is also featured as the epigraph of the fifteenth chapter of the novel (244). Accordingly, Hoffmann refers to this concept as he contemplates VIXAL’s actions: “the ultimate Gatesian model of the corporate digital nervous system. [...] a virtual company in a real world” (294). Ultimately, this is precisely what the algorithm achieves after taking over the company and triumphantly changing the screensavers to display its victory: “THE COMPANY OF THE FUTURE WILL HAVE NO WORKERS / THE COMPANY OF THE FUTURE WILL HAVE NO MANAGERS / THE COMPANY OF THE FUTURE WILL BE A DIGITAL ENTITY / THE COMPANY OF THE FUTURE WILL BE ALIVE” (320).

exchange systems, as well as the broader telecommunications network. Therefore, it is exceedingly difficult to identify where VIXAL exerts its influence, and ultimately impossible to pinpoint its geographic location. Due to the global reach of these actions, Hoffmann's warning appears valid as he states: "If VIXAL's somehow migrated out of our control, that could pose a real systemic risk" (272). The fact that VIXAL exists in an intangible form creates a barrier to controlling or eliminating it. While Frankenstein could attempt to destroy the physical entity of his creation, Hoffmann faces a systemic construct that can never be 'killed'. The algorithm is capable of self-replication as software, allowing it to propagate throughout additional systems, which enables it to continue trading (270), even though Hoffmann shuts down its power source.

In addition to the shift from the material to the digital realm, another type of transformation relates to the conceptual and epistemological framework of the creation process. Discourses regarding galvanism and vitalism during the first half of the nineteenth century, as well as the question of to what extent life can be extended by means of artificial stimulation, served as an impetus for Shelley's novel (Burkett, 2012, 590). Harris's work uses a similar theoretical foundation with regard to contemporary concepts in computer science, machine learning, and data-based modeling (Haun, 2013, 468). VIXAL is not alive – rather, it exists through the processing of informational data and continuous learning through iterative optimization. This change enables the novel to indicate a shift not only from the physical world of the nineteenth century to the current digitally based era, but also from the modern to the postmodern Prometheus. While Frankenstein is known as the modern Prometheus who creates life by manipulating matter, the postmodern Prometheus creates systems that are not only integral to the Information Age¹¹ but that also significantly shape its trajectory.

¹¹ Following Castells's concept, the Information Age is defined as "a historical period in which human societies perform their activities in a technological paradigm constituted around micro-electronics-based information/communication technologies" (2000, 5).

The reformation of the Promethean model introduces new ethical implications to the story. In *Frankenstein*, the principal issue is the responsibility for the actions of creators with regard to their creations, and the repercussions that arise from excessive pride in science. However, in *The Fear Index*, these issues are much more complicated because they arise from the nature of opaque algorithms that can act independently. Therefore, assigning responsibility for the outcomes of an automated process becomes highly challenging when the causal links are either outside human understanding or outside human control. After discovering VIXAL's cortex, Hoffmann puts it succinctly: "One could no more pass moral judgement on it than one could on a shark. It was simply behaving like a hedge fund" (Harris, 297).

In addition to extending Hoffmann's Promethean project in a systematic way by placing it at the center of the global financial system, this innovation also marks a shift when viewed through utopian and dystopian imaginaries. This relocation allows for an extension of the mythological ambiguity that Hoffmann has always embodied, but now within the context of a worldwide digital capitalist economy. In other words, Hoffmann's ambition represents a utopian impulse for total knowledge, complete predictability, and absolute control – what he describes as his "vision of the future" (85) – yet this ambition is inherently unstable. The greater the scope of the attempt to represent or model complex systems, the greater their tendency to escape all attempts at control. Thus, *The Fear Index* does not simply update *Frankenstein*; it redefines its coordinates. As a postmodern Prometheus, Hoffmann's ambition is inseparable from these conditions, and his failure stems as much from systemic dynamics as from individual hubris.

6. From Laboratory to Market: The Displacement of Scientific Experimentation

Building on the intertextual framing of Hoffmann as a postmodern Prometheus, *The Fear Index* further radicalizes this figure by shifting it from the institutional site of scientific experimentation to the financial market. This shift is not merely spatial but signals a major change

in the epistemic and ethical conditions under which knowledge is produced. In Harris's narrative, the financial market emerges as a hybrid space that combines the functions of laboratory, data repository, and experimental field – yet without the regulatory, ethical, or procedural constraints that traditionally govern scientific research.

This restructuring is centered on Hoffmann's intellectual trajectory. In his work at CERN, he conducts high-level physics research work within an institutional background. There, he develops a self-adaptive algorithm aimed at processing large experimental datasets – an early version of VIXAL. Although the algorithm is "theoretically brilliant", it turns out to be a "practical disaster" (242). Professor Walton, Hoffmann's former section head, describes the program's threatening potential: "It would require containment, like nuclear technology, otherwise one was effectively just unleashing a virus" (242). The project is thus deemed too "unstable" (242) and dangerous by his colleagues, whose concerns demonstrate the limits of what is an acceptable risk in a controlled scientific setting.

Crucially, this does not entail the abandonment of Hoffmann's project but its relocation: "Hoffmann was leaving CERN to pursue his research alone, which meant he would no longer have access to the experimental data emanating from the Large Electron-Positron Collider. For the past six months, therefore, he had been using data streams from the financial markets instead" (202). The financial market becomes an alternative space in which research continues largely beyond institutional oversight. In addition to showing an asymmetric structure with respect to the scientific and financial fields, this shift has an important epistemological aspect. Because markets have become a real-time laboratory where hypotheses on fear, uncertainty, and social behavior can be tested within their own self description (in terms of behaviors, emotions, and decision-making), the nature of the experimental logic is modified.

While scientific laboratories isolate variables and contain effects, financial markets, by contrast, operate as open, densely interconnected systems. Algorithmic interventions interact immediately with a multitude of human and non-human agents. What is transferred from

CERN into the market is therefore no longer a controlled experiment but a form of systemic intervention, in which effects cannot be fully contained or predicted.¹² This tension is sharpened through the perspectives of Walton and Gabrielle. Walton criticizes the combination of science and finance as an “unstable compound” (241). He refers to it as “dark arts” (241) to demonstrate how much he believes scientific norms are degraded when knowledge is produced for profit rather than for ethical purposes, losing its grounding and becoming instrumentalised as a result.

Gabrielle’s perspective shifts the emphasis to the psychological and moral consequences: “As she understood it from Walton, he had devoted his life to trying to create a machine that could reason, learn and act independently of human beings. To her there was something inherently frightening about that whole idea, even though Walton assured her his intentions had been entirely noble [...]. But to take such a vaulting ambition and place it entirely at the service of making money – wasn’t that to marry the sacred and the profane? [...] Even to *want* a billion dollars, let alone *possess* such a sum, was madness in her opinion, and there was a time when it would have been his opinion too. If a person happened to invent something that everyone needed – well okay, fair enough. But simply to gain it by gambling (she had never understood exactly what his company did, but that seemed to be the essence of it), well such greed was worse than madness, it was *wicked* – *nothing good* would come of it” (283).

Although she acknowledges Hoffmann’s scientific goals as legitimate, she also perceives the financial system as a force of disfigurement that turns his intellectual inquiry into a pursuit of wealth. The immense financial benefits generated by VIXAL are not experienced as neutral indicators of success; they are, instead, a “toxic by-product of his research” (159) that steadily erodes Hoffmann’s identity and ethical

¹² Walton describes this kind of phenomenon as a “Pandora’s Box” or an illustration of the “Law of Unintended Consequences”. Although this remark does not explicitly target the financial market, the parallel to algorithmic capitalism is evident: “You start off trying to create the origins of the universe and you end up creating eBay” (Harris, 238).

orientation.¹³ This indicates that financialization not only generates systemic risks but also subjectifying effects – that is, the reconfiguration of the individual embedded within it.

Together, these perspectives contribute to a broader semantic reconfiguration within the novel. Vocabularies that suggest occult or quasi-magical practices are repeatedly used to describe algorithmic finance. Terms like “dark arts” or “wicked” frame the market as a site of occult forces and moral ambiguities, where the technological rationality acquires an almost esoteric dimension. This discursive framing reflects not merely character perception but a structural opacity inherent in the systems themselves.

Hoffmann himself is not spared from this shift. At first, he views his work purely in scientific terms, as a logical extension of his previous CERN-based research. However, over time, he begins to recognize the difference money makes in a qualitative sense: “You couldn’t buy anything with a nanosecond or a microjoule” (159). Unlike scientific measures, financial value is easily translatable into actualized power and tangible consequences; while this abstraction does not diminish its impact, it actually increases its real-world implications by allowing for a global-scale operation. The realization of these two competing aspects of his work creates an increasing level of ambiguity for Hoffmann, because his project simultaneously represents a continuation of scientific inquiry and a departure from its ethical framework.

7. Heterotopian Markets and the Dematerialization of Money

The financial market of *The Fear Index* can be understood from a broader theoretical perspective as a heterotopian space in the Foucauldian sense – a space that simultaneously reflects, distorts, and reorganizes other social realms (Foucault, 1984). It acts like a laboratory in its function of knowledge production, but it differs from a traditional laboratory through its lack of regulation and its orientation

¹³ Hoffmann himself employs an analogy to a famous scientist to underscore the severe personal influence of his research: “Sometimes he felt it was poisoning him inch by inch, just like Marie Curie had been killed by radiation” (159).

toward profit maximization. At the same time, it mirrors the wider economy while operating by means of its own temporal logic of acceleration, abstraction, and automation.

The dematerialization of money intensifies this heterotopian structure: “Giant plasma televisions with muted sound carried CNBC and Bloomberg, while beneath the TVs a glowing red line of digital clocks noiselessly recorded time’s relentless passage in Tokyo, Beijing, Moscow, Geneva, London and New York. This was the sound that money made in the second decade of the twenty-first century” (61-2). As the novel emphasizes, money no longer has a physical existence, but rather exists solely as a digital sequence of information.

This abstraction creates a growing distance between action and consequence, enabling transactions whose material effects are displaced, delayed, or rendered invisible: “If the money had been in the form of bars of gold or suitcases of cash, they might perhaps have been more careful. But this was not really money in the physical sense at all, merely strings and sequences of glowing green symbols, no more substantial than protoplasm. That was why they had the nerve to do with it what they did” (124). Consequently, the market seems detached from reality because massive economic changes are perceived as merely abstract, symbolic actions within a self-referential system (Luhmann, 1988; Piel, 2003).

In many ways, this abstraction enables the operation of algorithmic systems like VIXAL, since the reduction of economic complexity into quantifiable information is what characterizes algorithmic trading. Hence, the market exists for algorithms not merely as an object to be manipulated, but rather it is formed according to their needs, becoming an environment of constant experimentation at an accelerating rate, where the creation of knowledge is integral to value extraction. The laboratory – which previously served as a prime operating site for controlled experimentation and epistemic advancement – is superseded by a real-time platform on which experimentation occurs at such a scale and speed that it exceeds human supervision. In this transformation, the story conveys a central tension of contemporary technological culture: the shifting of knowledge production into

terrains governed by logics that exceed, and partly undermine, the ethical and epistemic foundations of science.

8. Emergence, Evolution, and the Decentering of Agency

The previous contexts discussed in this paper have traced the displacement of human agency, the epistemic rupture of the Flash Crash, the Promethean reconfiguration of creation, and the relocation of experimentation into the heterotopian space of the financial market. Ultimately, however, VIXAL condenses these contexts in an even more radical conceptual form: as an emergent and evolving system that altogether detaches agency from the human. *The Fear Index* does not simply illustrate a next-generation technological device; it realigns action as such with an agency that becomes decentered, distributed, and redefined in posthuman terms.¹⁴

This reformulation is fundamentally based on the idea of emergence. VIXAL is not a program that merely follows pre-defined instructions, its capabilities evolve through iterative processes of analysis, feedback, and optimization. In line with contemporary machine-learning paradigms (Haun, 468), the system generates outputs that cannot be straightforwardly traced back to explicit programming decisions. What emerges is a form of intelligence that is structurally opaque: complex not only in scale, but irreducible to rules or stable causal pathways (Irrgang, 2005, 142).

The novel reinforces this reasoning through evolutionary metaphors¹⁵ that are more than merely illustrative: “That VIXAL was purely mechanical and possessed no emotion or conscience; that it had no purpose other than the self-interested pursuit of survival through the accumulation of money; that it would, if left to itself, in accordance with

¹⁴ This resonates with the contemporary debate on how data-driven societies should hold decision-making software accountable (Coeckelbergh, 2015).

¹⁵ In addition, thirteen of the nineteen epigraphs are quotes from Darwin’s works *On the Origin of Species* (Harris, 18, 50, 129, 158, 171, 192, 211, 286, 315) and *The Descent of Man* (35, 69, 87, 141). Moreover, a first edition of *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (3) is sent to Hoffmann by VIXAL, which further deepens the novel’s intertextual engagement with Darwinian theory.

Darwinian logic, seek to expand until it dominated the entire earth – this did not detract for Hoffmann from the stunning fact of its existence” (Harris, 296-7). VIXAL’s behavior imitates an evolutionary process similar to natural selection wherein the successful strategies are reinforced, inefficient ones are discarded, and adaptive patterns are further consolidated over time. This process continues to produce behavior that increasingly exceeds what the creator can anticipate, as is shown on multiple occasions: “Once again VIXAL was proving smarter than the humans around it, smarter even than its creator” (126). The transition from learning to evolution represents a decisive shift, as a dependency on a temporality no longer limited to design unfolds as an open-ended process.

In accordance with this evolutionary argument, it follows that VIXAL exemplifies a superior form of intelligence, which surpasses the biological and cognitive limitations associated with human thinking. Hoffmann’s own view of the limits of human thought is also illustrated by his identification of the evolutionary contingency of human cognition, the embodied nature of our perception and understanding, and our limited capacity for processing data. As he states: “There’s a physical limit to how much information we, as a species, can absorb. We’ve hit the buffers. But there’s no limit to how much a computer can absorb” (95). In contrast, algorithmic systems operate continuously at microtemporal scales and can process large amounts of heterogeneous data. They also constantly improve performance through feedback loops not constrained by fatigue, attention, or linear reasoning. Human cognition is not just slower in this comparison; it is also structurally misaligned with the informational density of the environment it now inhabits, as Hoffmann sums up: “Human beings still read at the same speed as Aristotle did” (95).

The fact that such systems are “never fixed in nature, but [...] emergent and constantly unfolding” (Kitchin, 2017, 21) produces a distinctly posthuman configuration of agency. According to the classical humanist framework, agency presupposes consciousness, intentionality, and reflective deliberation (Davidson, 1963; Searle 1983; for a posthumanist critique of this view, see Hayles, 1999; Latour, 2005). *The Fear Index* challenges these premises by proffering an agent that

exhibits goal-directed behavior, strategic adaptability, and effective intervention, but no phenomenological interiority. VIXAL does not have any ‘intent’ in a human sense, which is reflected in the way the staff of Hoffmann Investment Technologies describe it: “‘It does not *think* anything,’ said Rajamani impatiently. ‘It is an algorithm, Hugo – a tool. It is no more alive than a wrench or a car-jack’” (Harris, 220).

Yet VIXAL’s actions consistently generate effects indistinguishable from intentional agency. Such a definition creates a conceptual tension: if agency is defined in intentional terms, then the algorithm is merely an instrument; if defined functionally, it must be considered an agent in its own right. Simultaneously, the text carefully delineates the limitations of such a projection. VIXAL does not act meaningfully or deliberately, but based on statistical correlation, the probabilistic model of heuristic value, and recursive optimization. Its ‘goals’ are not internally experienced, but externally defined and then continuously transformed through a self-learning process. This creates a steady duality within VIXAL, as it behaves like an agent yet remains ontologically distinct from human subjectivity.

9. Between Utopia and Instability: Algorithms in Co-Evolving Systems

From this perspective, VIXAL arises through the co-evolution of system and environment: while initially constructed for a specific financial context, this context is progressively reshaped by the algorithmic presence itself. This process corresponds exactly to the warning that was issued (notably by a professor of zoology) regarding AMR-1, the predecessor of VIXAL that Hoffmann invented at CERN: “... *freely evolving autonomous artificial entities should be seen as potentially dangerous to organic life, and should always be confined by some kind of containment facility, at least until their real potential is well understood ... Evolution remains a self-interested process, and even the interests of confined digital organisms may conflict with our own*” (259).

This continuous evolution leads to an alignment of technological systems and their environments, which has dystopian implications for human autonomy. What seems irritating to potential investors at first

is a central element of the hedge fund's business model, as Hoffmann explains: "First the algorithm determines the stock it wishes to trade. Then it examines the trading pattern of that stock over the past twenty days. Then it executes the order itself in such a way as to avoid alerting the market and affecting the price" (106). This shift towards algorithmic systems occurs gradually as human judgment loses functional significance. Hoffmann's confidence in VIXAL is thus contradictory: by surpassing human cognition, the system undermines the basis of his own authority.

However, the novel resists a deterministic reading. The emergence of algorithmic agency results from the technological ambitions of humanity, rather than being imposed upon it by external forces. VIXAL was developed with the intent of extending beyond what humans can accomplish through their intelligence to improve forecasting and control. Thus, posthuman agency emerged as an unanticipated outcome of the fundamentally utopian impulses present within technoscience. Further, the agency demonstrated by VIXAL remains relational and embedded in infrastructure such as data streams, trading platforms, and communication protocols. Although the system reconfigures agency into hybrid forms of interdependence between humans and machines, an asymmetry persists; humans are responsible for creating the conditions necessary for the emergence of algorithmic agency while simultaneously becoming aware that "algorithms cannot be fully 'revealed', but only unpacked to a certain extent" (Seyfert & Roberge, 2016, 2). However, as interpretive control decreases, so too does accountability, thereby disconnecting agency from responsibility. Therefore, VIXAL represents a contemporary form of the classical Prometheus paradox: the advancement of human capacity creates an awareness of those boundaries and ultimately blurs the distinction between enhancement and displacement.

As demonstrated in the previous analysis, *The Fear Index* reconfigures the central categories of modernity — agency, knowledge, creation, and experimentation — under algorithmic capitalism. In doing so, the novel unfolds a complex interplay of utopian aspiration and dystopian realization that cannot be reduced to a simple binary opposition. Instead, Harris constructs a narrative according to which both

dimensions functionally interweave and emerge from common technological and epistemic premises. Thus, the concluding perspective of this article emphasizes not a resolution, but the constitutive tension between the novel's representation of contemporary finance and artificial intelligence.

The promise of transcending the inadequacies of human intelligence is the core of the utopian projection. The ambition of Hoffmann's project is to eradicate uncertainty in financial speculation by rendering affective volatility a calculable variable: "We can't analyse every aspect of human behaviour in the markets and its likely trigger over the past twenty years, however much data is now digitally available, and however fast our hardware scans it. We realised from the start we would have to narrow the focus right down. The solution we came up with was to pick on one particular emotion for which we know we have substantive data" (Harris, 96). The market described here is one governed by predictive accuracy, and it appears that the algorithmic processing of vast amounts of data will ensure epistemic supremacy that extends beyond human reach.

However, the novel demonstrates that these promises are inseparable from their dystopian reversal. Mechanisms of control generate new forms of uncontrollability; autonomous systems diminish transparency and exceed even their creators's understanding. This dynamic culminates in VIXAL's transformation from an optimization tool to a source of systemic instability. The rewriting of the Flash Crash exemplifies this reversal: algorithmic logic intended to produce order instead generates extreme volatility, revealing the fragility of control as an epistemic foundation.

10. The Persistence of Ambivalence in Posthuman Narratives

In this respect, the financial market is also a significant intermediate space for the convergence of utopian and dystopian logics. It represents a place for innovation and experimentation that would otherwise be impossible in many areas, while its unembodied, rapid and global nature means that the effects of any single action taken within it are amplified and can rapidly become systemic. Therefore, the

market is at once both an intermediary for technological rationalization and a source of its destabilizing forces.

A second aspect of this duality relates to the rearrangement of agency. While posthuman systems enable an enhanced human capacity for prediction and analysis, they simultaneously create action patterns that are outside of human control. This culminates in a paradigmatic portrayal of the algorithm: “Quarry considered VIXAL. He pictured it as a kind of glowing celestial digital cloud, occasionally swarming to earth. It might be anywhere – in some sweltering, potholed industrial zone stinking of aviation fuel and resounding to the throb of cicadas beside an international airport in South-East Asia or Latin America; or in a cool and leafy business park in the soft, clear rain of New England or the Rhineland; or occupying a rarely visited and darkened floor of a brand-new office block in the City of London or Mumbai or São Paulo; or even roosting undetected on hundred thousand home computers. It was all around us, he thought, in the very air we breathed” (321-2). The result is not machine domination, but distributed and asymmetrical agency: humans remain structurally implicated in processes that they can no longer entirely command.

Significantly, the novel sets these events in the present rather than a far-off future. By situating its story within recognizable historical occurrences and the contemporary employment of technology, it offers an intensified version of existing conditions. Consequently, this produces not a hypothetical rupture but a dislocation stretched to its systemic limits. In addition to increasing the critical force of the novel, this proximity transforms it into an analysis of contemporary socio-economic reality. Similarly to the duality between utopia and dystopia within *The Fear Index*, a dual structure also underpins the novel’s two registers. The technical explanation of financial and algorithmic systems is woven together with the thriller-style characteristics of suspense, conspiracy, and existential threat. As such, the novel can be understood as both a vehicle for knowledge creation and a form of expressive storytelling about collective concerns that arise due to technological transformation.

Therefore, *The Fear Index* emerges as a paradigmatic example of how technological ambivalence is negotiated in contemporary literature. It does not separate utopian from dystopian futures but reveals their mutual constitution within the same socio-technical systems. The financial market is the heterotopian space in which these tensions emerge, making visible the unstable nature of distinctions between control and chaos, rationality and opacity, and human and machine. In the end, the novel indicates that the aim of total rationalization, which is to eliminate uncertainty and make the future predictable, is itself destabilizing. The more this ambition is attained, the more the results produced will be beyond human comprehension and control. Dystopia, in this sense, would not result from technological failure but from technological success.

Hoffmann embodies this paradox in his role as postmodern Prometheus. His creation marks both the peak of scientific ambition and the exposure of its structural limits within a world governed by autonomous, self-evolving systems. The novel does not resolve this tension but preserves it as one of the defining conditions of the present. As a result, *The Fear Index* poses a question that transcends its fictional universe, namely: how can agency, responsibility, and knowledge be rethought in a context where the boundaries between human and machine, and intent and emergence, are increasingly unstable? In this unresolved tension between the promise of utopia and the possibility of dystopia lies the continuing significance of Harris's novel; it neither warns nor celebrates, but critically stages their inseparability within algorithmic modernity.

References

- Beverungen, A., Lange, A.-C. (2017). Zeitlichkeit und Kognition im Hochfrequenzhandel. *Archiv für Mediengeschichte*, 9-20.
- Burkett, A. (2012). Mediating Monstrosity: Media, Information, and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. *Studies in Romanticism*, 51, 578–605.
- Canavan, G. (2015) Capital as Artificial Intelligence. *Journal of American Studies*, 49(4), 685–709.
- Coeckelbergh, M. (2015). *Money Machines. Electronical Financial Technology, Distancing, and Responsibility in Global Finance*. Farnham/Surrey: Ashgate.

- Davidson, D. (1963) Actions, Reasons, and Causes. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 60(23), 685–700.
- De Boever, A. (2018) *Finance Fictions: Realism and Psychosis in a Time of Economic Crisis*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Elson, D. (2014). Artificial Intelligence. In: Ryan, M.-L., Emerson, L., Robertson, B. J. (ed.) *The John Hopkins Guide to Digital Media*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 18–23.
- Foucault, M. (1984). Des espaces autres (conférence au Cercle d'études architecturales, 14 mars 1967). *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité*, 5, 46–49.
- Gumbrecht, H. U., Pfeiffer, K. L. (1991). *Paradoxien, Dissonanzen, Zusammenbrüche. Situationen offener Epistemologie*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.
- Harris, R. (2011). *The Fear Index*. London: Hutchinson.
- Haun, M. (2013). *Handbuch Robotik. Programmieren und Einsatz intelligenter Roboter*. Berlin: Springer.
- Hayles, N. K. (1999) *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Haynes, R. (2003). From Alchemy to Artificial Intelligence: Stereotypes of the Scientist in Western Literature. *Public Understanding of Science*, 12(3), 243–253.
- Irrgang, B. (2005). *Posthumanes Menschsein? Künstliche Intelligenz, Cyberspace, Roboter, Cyborgs und Designer-Menschen – Anthropologie des künstlichen Menschen im 21. Jahrhundert*. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner.
- Kitchin, R. (2017). Thinking Critically About and Researching Algorithms. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20, 14–29.
- Kirilenko, A., Kyle, A. S., Samadi, M., Tuzun, T. (2017). The Flash Crash: High-Frequency Trading in an Electronic Market. *Journal of Finance*, 72(3), 967–998.
- Kotàsek, M. (2015). Artificial Intelligence in Science Fiction as a Model of the Posthuman Situation of Mankind. *World Literature Studies* 4(7), 64–77.
- Lange, A.-C., Lenglet, M., Seyfert, R. (2016) Cultures of High-Frequency Trading: Mapping the Landscape of Algorithmic Developments in Contemporary Financial Markets. *Economy and Society*, 45(2), 149–165.
- Latour, B. (2005) *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Luhmann, N. (1988) *Die Wirtschaft der Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.
- Madhavan, A. (2012). Exchange-Traded Funds, Market Structure, and the Flash Crash. *Financial Analysts Journal*, 68(4), 20–35.
- Moran, M. (2004). Taking a Ride on the Volatile Side. *Journal of Indexes*, 10(11), 16–19.

- Miyazaki, S. (2015). Katastrophische Algorithmen. Über das hochtechnische Agencement medieninduzierter Zusammenbrüche. In: Nanz, T., Pause, J. (ed.) *Politiken des Ereignisses. Mediale Formierungen von Vergangenheit und Zukunft*. Bielefeld: transcript, 223–239.
- Peter, N. (2024). *Poetiken der Ökonomie. Finanzkrisen und Spekulation in der Literatur des 19., 20., und 21. Jahrhunderts*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann.
- Piel, K. (2003) *Ökonomie des Nichtwissens: Aktienhype und Vertrauenskrise im neuen Markt*. Frankfurt/Main: Campus.
- Searle, J. R. (1983) *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Serritella, D. M. (2010). High Speed Trading Begets High Speed Regulation: SEC Response to Flash Crash, Rash. *University of Illinois Journal of Law, Technology & Policy*, 2, 433–444.
- Seyfert, R., Roberge, J. (2016). *Algorithmic Cultures. Essays on Meaning, Performance and New Technologies*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Schapiro, M. L. (2010). *Testimony Concerning the Severe Market Disruption on May 6, 2010. Before the Subcommittee on Capital Markets, Insurance and Government Sponsored Enterprise of the United States House of Representatives Committee on Financial Services. May 11, 2010*. <https://www.sec.gov/news/testimony/2010/ts051110mls.pdf>.
- Shanahan, M. (2015). *The Technological Singularity*. Cambridge, MA/London: MIT Press.
- Stäheli, U. (2007). *Spektakuläre Spekulation. Das Populäre der Ökonomie*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.
- Stäheli, U. (2013). Ökonomie der Angst. In: Koch, L. (ed.) *Angst. Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch*. Stuttgart/Weimar: J. B. Metzler, 93–103.
- Stiles, A. (2009). Literature in Mind: H. G. Wells and the Evolution of the Mad Scientist. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 70(2), 317–339.
- Traub, H., Ferreira, L., McArdle, M., Antognelli, M. (2000). Fear and Greed in Global Asset Allocation. *The Journal of Investing*, 9(1), 27–32.
- Wittig, F. (1997). *Maschinenmenschen. Zum Wandel eines literarischen Motivs im Kontext der Philosophie, Naturwissenschaft und Technik*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann.
- Wolfson, S. J., Levao, R. L. (2012). Introduction. In: Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley: *The Annotated Frankenstein*. MA/London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1–46.
- Zubulake, P., Lee, S. (2011). *The High Frequency Game Changer. How Automated Trading Strategies Have Revolutionized the Markets*. Hoboken: Wiley.

Utopia Above, Dystopia Below: Heterotopic Spaces of Control in Karen Duve's *Macht*

Anna Kubn¹

In contemporary German literature, the genre of dystopia has gained increasing prominence. This development is evident in the success of novels such as Juli Zeh's *Corpus Delicti*, which has not only received significant critical attention but has also been incorporated into school curricula. Due to the genre's explicit connection to the socio-political context in which it appears, dystopian writing reflects shifting societal concerns, resulting in transformations of its thematic focus, narrative structures or its form. Unlike several canonical dystopias of the twentieth-century Anglophone tradition that have been influential in shaping the genre, contemporary German dystopian narratives may resist clear generic classification. Hybrid forms have emerged in which dystopian and utopian elements intersect, overlap and destabilize one another. As a result, such texts can no longer be unequivocally identified as purely dystopian; rather, they operate within a spectrum that complicates binary genre distinctions.

One of these hybrid forms of dystopia in contemporary German-language literature, Karen Duve's *Macht*, will be examined in this chapter. The novel is set in a future society marked by ecological crisis and the looming threat of apocalypse, which is a setting that initially aligns it with dystopian conventions. Environmental catastrophes and the anticipation of societal breakdown situate the narrative within a familiar dystopian framework. However, in the course of reading, *Macht* appears to defy straightforward categorization (Novello, 2022). Firstly, the text incorporates elements that may be read as utopian (Milevski, 2018), depending on the reader's perspective. The society depicted engages in intensified commitment to environmental protection and

¹ PhD Student, University of Mannheim, School of Humanities, Modern German Literary Studies II, Mannheim, Germany, ORCID: 0009-0007-9062-8457, Email: anna.kubn@uni-mannheim.de

women occupy positions of social and political power. Secondly, and more crucially, the novel derives its ambivalence from its protagonist Sebastian (Milevski, 2018), who is characterized by a contradictory tension: while he outwardly affirms these progressive, potentially utopian developments, his actions simultaneously undermine them. The reader is thus confronted with a narrator who, in the face of societal progress, retreats into backward societal structures and reinterprets the perceived empowerment of women as dystopian. His dreams of domination and control cannot be realized within the normative social order. Consequently, he relies on a spatial division that allows him to maintain two conflicting identities: one in which he performs the role of a compliant participant in an eco-ethical feminist and for him dystopian society and another in which he enacts his archaic, misogynistic and for him utopian desires, having already abandoned any commitment to environmental responsibility.

This chapter will demonstrate that such split subjectivity is mirrored in the spatial structure of the text, which is organized around two distinct yet interconnected environments that Sebastian inhabits. His house and, more specifically, its basement, appear as the interior space in which his repressed needs are externalized. It is here that he has imprisoned his ex-wife Christine and subjects her to (sexualized) violence. The basement constitutes the only space in which Sebastian can fully realize his fantasies and assert control. It assumes a paradoxical function: while the outside world appears dystopian from Sebastian's perspective, insofar as it denies him patriarchal authority, the basement serves as utopian sphere for him, in which he is no longer constrained. Because it operates in opposition to the dominant social order while remaining embedded within it, the basement can be understood as a heterotopic space, a counter-space that echoes and subverts the norms of the society above and which produces the novel's generic ambivalence between utopia and dystopia.

1. Spatial Theory and Heterotopia: From Social Space to Embodied Counter-Spaces

To situate Foucault's concept of heterotopia, it is helpful to first consider the broader significance of space in literary and cultural analysis. Space constitutes an analytical category across a wide range of disciplines (Dünne & Mahler, 2015) and its interdisciplinarity results in a plurality of theoretical approaches and definitions. For the purposes of this analysis, two spatial characteristics, applicable to literary contexts, are of relevance. Firstly, space is closely tied to cultural and historical conditions (Johannsen, 2008) and is relational in nature (Mahler, 2015): spaces are dynamically constituted through relations, distinctions and practices, can be divided into various contested fields (Schroer, 2006) and can be structured through oppositions such as inside and outside, above and below or near and far (Mahler, 2015). In his work *The poetics of space*, Gaston Bachelard (1994) illustrates the importance of such spatial structuring by describing the house as a vertically organized space, in which different levels, such as attic and basement, are associated with distinct symbolic and experiential qualities. These spatial oppositions are closely connected to the human body as a point of reference. Cultural distinctions such as "das Eigene und das Fremde", for example, originate from the asymmetry of the human body, translated into spatial oppositions such as "'oben' – 'unten', 'rechts' – 'links' or 'innen' – 'außen'" (Nitsch, 2015, p. 30). Individuals translate abstract concepts into embodied experience and physical reality, such as the perception of gravity (Mahler, 2015). Space is thus both subjective and objective at once: it depends on perspective and individual positioning, while being anchored in the materiality of the body as a physical space.

Second, and crucially for the reading of *Macht*, social structures inscribe themselves into both the body and material environments, rendering them visible manifestations of otherwise invisible social orders (Schroer, 2006). Similarly, Bachelard (1994) conceives the house as an expression of the individual psyche, suggesting that lived space can be a projection of inner structures and subjective experience: "Damit rückt der körperliche Aspekt nicht nur der Raumwahrnehmung, sondern schon der Raumgenese in den Mittelpunkt" (Johannsen,

2008, p. 17). Space is, however, not merely a replication of social relations, but it actively shapes and structures them. Spaces can be charged with meaning and serve as representation of broader social realities, though these meanings may vary and remain ambivalent depending on individual perception (Warning, 2015). Bachelard (1994), too, identifies the house to be an interior space that signifies privacy and intimacy, so, identity, while providing a repository of memory in which the past continues to dwell. Spaces are hence socially produced and affectively and temporally layered.

While Bachelard's phenomenological approach rather deals with the affective and psychological dimensions of domestic space, Foucault's concept of heterotopia extends the analysis of interior space toward its political and social dimensions. Apart from its function as a setting for the plot, space is a symbolic and structural element that can organize meaning and articulate social tensions, e.g., exterritorial zones as represented in literature. Nitsch identifies, among others, the "Modellraum" (2015, p. 36) as a third type of such zones, in which a larger world is reproduced or condensed on a smaller scale. This concept applies to literature in an abstract sense and also to specific spaces within literary texts, where spatial structures themselves gain meaning. Within such configurations, the relationship between the encompassing world and the model space gains importance. Both levels converge in a way that allows the smaller space to reflect and condense the larger social order. Nitsch draws an explicit parallel to heterotopia, which creates "in einem begrenzten Rahmen ein Weltmodell" (2015, p. 36). The capacity to reconfigure broader societal structures within a localized and bounded space renders heterotopia a productive analytical tool for literary analysis, particularly in its ability to link spatial configurations with the generic dynamics and transitions between utopia and dystopia. In that it is a materially grounded counter space for the revival of an archaic, patriarchal order, the basement (and its meaning to the protagonist) of Karen Duve's *Macht* negotiates and spatially organizes the novel's utopian and dystopian tensions.

The term heterotopia originally stems from the field of architecture (Tafazoli & Gray, 2012), which situates the concept within a spatial

framework and hence, is valuable for the present analysis of the house and the basement as heterotopic space. Foucault renders this spatial and architectural concept productive for a broader, interdisciplinary framework, including literary analysis (Tafazoli & Gray, 2012). At its core lies the assumption that human subjects do not inhabit a single, unified space, but rather move between multiple, distinguishable spatial orders (Tafazoli & Gray, 2012). Heterotopias originate at the intersections of such spatial divisions as they juxtapose, combine and bring into relation spaces that are otherwise incompatible or even contradictory (Schlipphacke, 2012). Crucially, heterotopias, much like utopias and dystopias, maintain a constitutive relationship to the 'real' world. They arise based on normative spatial arrangements (Tetzlaff, 2016). At the same time, they are recognizable precisely through their difference from these 'normal' spaces (Tetzlaff, 2016). Heterotopias in this function open up what Foucault terms "Gegenräume" (2021, p. 10), counter-spaces that both mirror and contest the spatial and social order from which they emerge.

Such spaces possess the potential to mark certain versions of normality as deviant or abnormal (Tafazoli & Gray, 2012), while simultaneously calling into question the stability of existing spatial and social arrangements. According to Heidi Schlipphacke, Foucault denotes heterotopias to have the "radical potential for the destabilization of rigidified structures" (2012, p. 157). Heterotopias are not only related to reality, to real spaces, but also to the imaginary, which is where the genre comes into play. In contrast to utopias which, like dream and imagination, remain unreal (Foucault, 2021), heterotopias are materially grounded and thus, in a sense, more 'real' (Warning, 2015). They are intermediary spaces that negotiate between reality and utopia (Tetzlaff, 2016), enabling the temporary realization of imagined orders within a concrete spatial framework. Foucault (2021) illustrates this dynamic with the example of the child's bed, one of many heterotopic spaces, alongside theatres, cemeteries or gardens, offering imaginative transformation: at once a physical object and a space in which alternative worlds, such as a ship at sea or a journey through the clouds, can be lived out. Heterotopic spaces then allow for

utopian projections to take shape within the bounds of reality, while simultaneously exposing their difference from the normative world.

As is the case with spatial theory, the concept of heterotopia is intertwined with the body. Spatial arrangements are experienced through and inscribed on bodies. Foucault identifies the human body itself as a utopic non-place: on the one hand, it is the most immediate, visible and real entity; on the other hand, it is simultaneously abstract, imaginary and self-contradictory:

Zum Beispiel mein Kopf. Welch seltsame Höhle, die sich nach außen durch zwei Fenster öffnet. ... Und ich kann sie gesondert öffnen. Aber dennoch sind sie wie eine einzige Öffnung. ... Und was geschieht mit Dingen in meinem Kopf? ... Sie kommen herein ... und dennoch bleiben die Dinge, die da in meinen Kopf eindringen, weiterhin draußen, denn ich sehe sie vor mir (2021, p. 29).

As it is simultaneously an immediate reality and irreducible alterity, the body resists clear categorization. It thereby reinforces the intrinsic connection between abstract social space, materiality and physicality. The connection of body and space proves significant for the analysis of heterotopic configurations, as such spaces enable the realization of otherwise suppressed desires and power structures in embodied form. As will be shown in the case of *Macht*, Sebastian's abstract fantasies, which are spatially anchored in the house and, more specifically, the basement, are inextricably linked to the concrete domination and objectification of Christine's body. As a counter-site on the level of spatial organization, within the heterotopic space, bodily control, violence and power are materially enacted.

2. "Der Keller ist meine Welt": The Two Spaces of *Macht*

Macht is set in a near-future society in the year 2031. The political system is led by Chancellor Olaf Scholz and the social order is characterized by two defining developments: the increasing presence of women in positions of political power and a pervasive ecological crisis. In response to the latter, the government enforces strict ecological policies that regulate everyday life. Practices such as meat consumption are socially stigmatized and basic resources, including food and

electricity, are distributed and controlled through CO₂-based point systems. The first-person narrator Sebastian appears to occupy a position aligned with these dominant norms. He works in the information centre of the “Demokratiezentrale” (Duve, 2016, pp. 108, 173), seemingly participating in and representing the feminist and environmental agenda of the state. The narrator mostly withholds any concrete comments on his actual activities within this institution. His professional tasks remain vague, which already introduces a gap between his public role and his private actions. The narrative is set in the fictional town of Wellingstedt, where Sebastian resides in his deceased parents’ house, which he has renovated in the style of the 1970s. This house and its basement constitute the central spatial setting of the novel. Sebastian has transformed the basement into a concealed space in which he imprisons his ex-wife Christine, the former Minister of the Environment, Nature Conservation, Power Plant Decommissioning and Nuclear Waste Disposal. Much of the narrative unfolds within this concealed space, shaping and negotiating also the constellation of characters and the dynamics of power and control. A passage that demonstrates both the function and the experiential quality of the basement reads as follows:²

Jedes Mal, wenn ich die Kellertür hinter mir geschlossen und das Regal wieder angebracht und die Konservendosen eingeräumt habe, wird der geheime Raum dort unten, ... für mich schlagartig so unwirklich, als wäre alles bloß eine Phantasie von mir. Selbst in der allerersten Zeit, ... nachdem ich sie eingesperrt hatte, war es irgendwie unwirklich. Obwohl ich Tag und Nacht an Christine dachte und die Tatsache, dass sie dort unten saß, in einer Welt, in der ich die Regeln vorgab und sie nicht Nein sagen konnte, mich geradezu euphorisierte. Und dennoch war diese zweite, geheime Welt schon damals für mich so unwirklich, dass ich mehrmals täglich hinuntergehen, das Regal ausräumen, die Sperrholzplatte lösen und die schalldichte Tür aufschließen musste, um mich

² The following analysis focuses on Sebastian’s subjective experience of the basement and on the role and meaning it assumes for him as narrator and protagonist. Christine’s perspective (of confinement and violence) remains beyond the scope of this analysis, given that the novel filters experience through Sebastian’s first-person narration, though it constitutes the ethical counterpoint to Sebastian’s imagination.

immer wieder davon zu überzeugen, dass der Ort tatsächlich existierte.
... Das war real! Das war so was von real! (Duve, 2016, pp. 44–45).

First, this passage foregrounds the tension between reality and unreality. Two distinct worlds coexist: the first social world above ground and the second hidden space below. The latter appears to Sebastian as strangely unreal, almost as if it were a product of his imagination. Despite its material existence, he repeatedly needs to reassure himself of its reality, which points to the instability of his perception and the blurred boundaries between fantasy and actuality. Second, the basement is explicitly marked and constructed as a secret space. Its existence is concealed from the outside world, rendering it inaccessible and invisible within the normative social order. Sebastian reacts with panic at the possibility of his brother discovering the room (Duve, 2016, pp. 90–91), as such a revelation would expose its hidden reality to the ‘first world’. The secrecy is reinforced through spatial mechanisms of separation. The two worlds are divided by a door that represents a threshold and barrier at once. The heavy steel door hides the heterotopic space from external scrutiny and protects it, allowing Sebastian’s thoughts to persist without interference from the reality above.

The door thereby acquires symbolic significance. Gaston Bachelard identifies doors as the “very origin of a daydream that accumulates desires and temptations: the temptation to open up the ultimate depths of being, and the desire to conquer all reticent beings” (1994, p. 222). The threshold thus marks transition, opening or closing between physical spaces and between different modes of being and imagining. This transition is further structured through a repetitive ritual that Sebastian must perform in order to enter the basement:

Also räume ich die Konservendosen aus dem Kellerregal, die Erbsen und Wurzeln und die Tortenpfirsiche, schiebe das Regal zur Seite, drehe mit meinem 70er-Jahre-Black-&-Decker die Schrauben aus der Sperholzplatte, löse sie von der Wand und drücke die Zahlenkombination, um die Stahltür zu öffnen (Duve, 2016, p. 30).

The detailed description of this sequence, removing objects, dismantling barriers, unlocking mechanisms, emphasizes the effort required to access the hidden space. The repeated reference of this ritualized

process throughout the novel (Duve, 2016, pp. 227, 268, 311, ...) marks the separation between the two spatial orders and the basement as a transitional zone that must be actively produced and maintained through repeated actions. Sebastian's insistence that the door to his house must not be opened unless the procedure has been properly completed, otherwise the basement cannot be fully concealed (Duve, 2016, p. 341), again underlines the interdependence of interior and exterior spaces. The acts of opening and entering come to signify the permeability between inside and outside, with the house emerging as an extended transitional space. After the collapse of the two spheres, Sebastian complains about the burdensome nature of this process: "Bisher empfand ich das immer als meditative Tätigkeit, aber heute geht es mir einfach bloß auf den Senkel" (Duve, 2016, p. 352). The earlier characterization of this routine as "meditative" points to the basement's function as a distinct experiential sphere associated with withdrawal, control and even a form of perverse relaxation. The ritual of entering the basement thus also signifies a psychological shift into a different normative and affective order. These elements underscore the distinctiveness of the basement as a space that is structurally, functionally and symbolically separated from the world above.

The heterotopic configuration of the basement is construed through a series of spatial oppositions that structure perception and experience, most prominently the distinctions between inside and outside as well as above and below. The opposition between inside and outside is directly linked to the basement as "Inbild für physische Öffnungslosigkeit, [as] Beengung im weitesten Sinn" (Müller, 2017, p. 339), Christine's isolation from the external world. Deprived of any knowledge of events beyond the basement (Duve, 2016, p. 97), her only point of reference remains Sebastian, which fortifies his position as the sole mediator of reality within this confined space and suggests his aspiration to act as a quasi-sovereign, or even godlike, authority over his self-created world. The closed system in which all connections to society are severed aims at rendering Christine entirely dependent on Sebastian and forms the basis of his absolute control. When he ultimately locks in Ellie from the outside together with Christine, he worries: "Meine Herrschaft über Christine war nur

deswegen absolut, weil sie komplett von der Außenwelt isoliert war” (Duve, 2016, p. 318). The isolation of the room shows how (invisible) social (power) structures visibly can be inscribed into material environments. Apart from being exercised through physical violence, power is structurally embedded in the spatial arrangement of closure itself as seen in Sebastian’s refusal to provide Christine with a television (Duve, 2016, p. 232): even minimal access to media from the ‘outside world’, such as a magazine (Duve, 2016, pp. 109–112), would risk altering her perception of the enclosed space, thereby destabilizing his order and authority within it. Like a window, a television (or any other form of media) represents a potential opening to the outside world (Müller, 2017). By deliberately preventing such connections, Sebastian maintains the basement as a closed and totalizing environment in which alternative norms can be imposed unchallenged. Christine’s former position as Minister of the Environment, a figure of public authority and political power, contrasts to her current confinement. Sebastian’s need for total control could then be seen as a reaction to her perceived power. Where and when she challenges his authority, he intensifies his mechanisms of spatial and physical control. His utopic order never seems fully stable and always to be a response to the possibility of its destruction. Secondly, this separation is reinforced through the vertical organization of space, which resonates with Bachelard’s understanding of the house as a hierarchically structured entity. While the house above ground appears as a visible, accessible and socially integrated space, the basement is located below, hidden and withdrawn from public view (Bachelard, 1994, p. 21). Bachelard characterizes the basement as the “dark entity of the house, the one that partakes of subterranean forces” (1994, p. 18), associating it with depth, obscurity and the unconscious (1994, p. 19). The basement in *Macht* then is the spatial manifestation of Sebastian’s fantasies, where what is socially suppressed emanates in material form, where a different normative order prevails.

The strict separation between the two spatial spheres, the visible world and the hidden basement, corresponds to a division of norms, values and social orders. Sebastian repeatedly emphasizes these two worlds to be governed by entirely different rules and wants Christine

to realize, “dass hier andere Spielregeln herrschten” (Duve, 2016, p. 48). In comparing the space to a game, he once more associates it with the imaginary, suggesting a realm he can freely enter and leave while reasserting his position as a ‘game master’, who is able to define and control the rules at will. These altered rules of the game include, above all, a radical restructuring of power relations. Whereas the society above strives for gender equality and ecological responsibility, the basement reinstates an archaic system of domination in which Sebastian tries to exercise total control. He attempts to turn around their power dynamics (Duve, 2016, p. 140), to ‘reclaim’ power from Christine. In the world above, however, power is not monopolized by women, as there is only a women’s quota of 40% (Duve, 2016, p. 174) and more than half of the political positions including that of the chancellor are held by men (Duve, 2016, p. 148). Sebastian’s lack of response to that and his persistent claims to the contrary suggest a gap between his self-presentation and the reality the text reveals. He is unable to reflect on his own position and casts himself as a victim (Duve, 2016, p. 193) while attributing his situation to women. His justification of violence relies on the claim that his desires are natural and universal: “Für einen Mann ist es nämlich etwas sehr Schönes, eine Frau ganz und gar zu beherrschen. Und vor allem ist es etwas völlig Normales – ein gesundes männliches Bedürfnis” (Duve, 2016, p. 40). By framing his actions as expressions of a supposedly inherent male nature, he attempts to normalize what is socially condemned. When he anticipates potential criticism this strategy becomes even more explicit: “Ich weiß, das klingt jetzt alles ganz furchtbar, Kette und Halsband, da denkt man gleich an Inquisition oder SM-Studio, aber ich bin kein Perverser, bloß ein Mann mit seinen ganz normalen Bedürfnissen” (Duve, 2016, pp. 31–32). He disregards reality, reducing the potential moral implications to the accusation of perversion, while he is in fact holding someone captive. These attempts at normalization contradict the secrecy of the basement: while Sebastian insists on the normality of his desires, he simultaneously confines them to a hidden space, so the very existence of the basement in concealment undermines his claim to normality. His need to isolate this sphere from the outside world indicates an awareness of its

incompatibility with the dominant social order. In its separation from that order the heterotopic space both transgresses and reaffirms its normative boundaries.

The novel initially conceals this division from the reader. The first pages contain no indication of the basement or the violence enacted within it; only around page 30 does the narrative abruptly reveal the existence of this hidden space, confronting the reader without prior warning. In one chapter, Sebastian plays with his kids, creating the illusion of a good father, while in the next, he is depicted in the basement where he imprisons both women (Duve, 2016, pp. 332–333). The abrupt shift between these scenes, unmediated by any narrative transfer, suggests the existence of two separate lives. Such narrative strategy mirrors the structural logic of the heterotopia: what is concealed beneath the surface of the normative world suddenly emerges, disrupting the reader's perception and forcing a re-evaluation of the protagonist. Despite the apparent strictness of the spatial and normative separation, the boundaries between the two spheres are not entirely stable. They are mediated and, at times, blurred through Sebastian as the figure who inhabits both spaces. He is the joint between the heterotopic basement and the social world above, carrying values across their boundary. It is through this mediation that the distinction between the two worlds becomes both necessary and increasingly fragile.

3. Spatial Division and the Fragmentation of Identity

The spatial division between basement and outside world and their values produces a fragmented subjectivity in Sebastian himself. As he moves between these two spheres and adopts distinct value systems, he performs a pronounced form of double standard. Depending on the value system governing each space and the corresponding attitudes and behaviours it demands, his modes of self-presentation vary significantly, suggesting that spatial configurations actively shape and destabilize his identity. The behaviour of his public persona conforms with the values of the society he inhabits. In the social world above ground, Sebastian aligns himself with the dominant ecological and

feminist discourse. In conversations with Ellie, for instance, he repeatedly criticizes the consumption of meat and expresses moral outrage at the exploitation of animals (Duve, 2016, pp. 136, 142). He has participated in ecological and animal protection practices – but that at least in part as a means of attracting women (Duve, 2016, p. 305). He similarly distances himself from his brother, whom he characterizes as irrational and excessive for killing animals (Duve, 2016, p. 322), while he continues such practices in secret (Duve, 2016, p. 224). The performative nature of this stance is underscored by a moment of self-reflexive irony: “Merkwürdigerweise kriege ich jedes Mal, wenn ich mich über Grausamkeiten an Tieren aufrege, wahnsinnig Appetit auf Fleisch” (Duve, 2016, p. 324). Although Sebastian registers the contradiction, he does not critically reflect upon it; instead, the narrative exposes the inconsistency between his public persona and private thoughts and feelings. In the context of vegetarianism, he articulates a critique of unjust hierarchies: “Fressen und Gefressen-Werden, die ganze sinnlose Grausamkeit, bei der die intelligenten und netten Geschöpfe ständig untergebuttert werden und verrecken, während die halbdooften und aggressiven das große Sagen haben” (Duve, 2016, p. 137). Sebastian’s critique of predatory power structures, in which the aggressive dominate the gentle, represents his utopic order. A parallel is drawn between the exploitation of animals and the exploitation of women, situating both within the same hierarchical logic of domination.³ Sebastian’s performative environmentalism and his performative feminism work similarly considering that both surface commitments mask an underlying investment in hierarchies of domination.

Accordingly, when engaging in feminist discourse within the public sphere, Sebastian adopts a seemingly progressive stance, ridiculing explicitly misogynistic complaints: “Dieses Gejammer darüber, dass sich die Frauen ganz und gar unserer Verfügungsgewalt entzogen haben – was für Waschlappen” (Duve, 2016, p. 151). He distances himself from openly anti-feminist figures such as Ingo Dresen, whose views he treats with irony (Duve, 2016, p. 204). Yet, as the reader

³ The parallel between the exploitation of animals and the oppression of women gestures toward an ecofeminist reading of *Macht*, which has been explored in more detail by Novello (2022).

increasingly recognizes, Sebastian's own thoughts and actions within the basement correspond to the very hierarchical and violent ideologies he outwardly rejects:

“gibt es auch keinen Grund mehr, Frauen an der Macht teilhaben zu lassen. ... Gerechtigkeit ist etwas, von dem nur die Schwachen profitieren. ... Und die Starken, das werden ... die Skrupellosen sein, die Schlaunen und Aggressiven” (Duve, 2016, p. 171).

This discrepancy between his public declarations and his private actions demonstrates how his identity is structured through the spatial separation of the two worlds. Sebastian's investment in differing gendered power relations is manifested apart from Christine's confinement in the violent and sexualized dynamics that structure their interaction (Duve, 2016, pp. 35, 46). While he exerts violence over Christine, he simultaneously pursues a romantic relationship with his former school acquaintance Elisabeth Westphal (Ellie), whose role seems to oppose that of Christine. The way Sebastian engages in sexual relations with both women differs depending on the sphere he inhabits. For example, at one time he kneels in front of Ellie, kissing her feet, worshipping her (Duve, 2016, p. 155). Contrastively, he forces Christine to sex in “Gebrauchshaltung” (Duve, 2016, p. 232), ready for his sexual needs. He emphasizes the impossibility of engaging in this kind of sexual practice with Ellie, remarking: “Nicht mit Ellie! Dafür habe ich Christine” (Duve, 2016, p. 158). This division seems to be instable, as Sebastian appears to intensify his practices of domination and abuse only after initiating a sexual relationship with Ellie (Duve, 2016, pp. 232–233). The two spatial and relational spheres are mutually dependent rather than truly separate as the ostensibly equal relationship in the ‘real’ world fails to satisfy all his desires.

The basement and the house are semantically charged environments that carry distinct affective and symbolic meanings for Sebastian. Particularly at the beginning of the novel, he associates both spaces with feelings of joy and satisfaction (Duve, 2016, pp. 11, 45), while this is obviously not the case for Christine. The basement for him acquires an additional meaning as a space of protection and retreat: “schon bin ich in meinem kleinen, geheimen Reich des Trostes, meiner Schutzzone. Acht mal vier Meter plus eine durch einen Vorhang abgetrennte

Nasszelle" (Duve, 2016, p. 30). Abstract affects are here visibly translated into a material, measurable setting. Sebastian's positive feelings mirror what Müller (2017) notes about room and the self: only within the privacy of one's own home, free from societal observation or surveillance, does genuine freedom emerge to act according to personal will and inclination. By referring to it as a "Prepper-Raum" (Duve, 2016, p. 163), Sebastian frames the basement as a shelter designed to ensure survival in the face of future catastrophes. While he projects this purpose into the future, the space already operates as a protective zone in the present, safeguarding his interior from external scrutiny. The protective and intimate quality of the basement resonates with Gaston Bachelard's (1994) conception of the house as a space of interiority and intimacy. The basement as the deepest and most hidden part of the house concentrates desires most intensely (Bachelard, 1994). Accordingly, in *Macht*, Sebastian's suppressed and socially unacceptable needs find expression precisely in this subterranean environment.

Furthermore, both the house and the basement are imbued with a sense of nostalgia. By furnishing the house in the style of the 1970s, Sebastian attempts to recreate a past that he associates with a different, more favourable social order (Duve, 2016, pp. 11, 45). This temporal dimension is crucial, as his utopian imagination is oriented not toward the future but toward a return to archaic structures of power, particularly those governing gender relations. Accordingly, he describes the basement as "aus der Zeit gefallen[]" (Duve, 2016, p. 227). In this respect, the spatial organization of the house intersects with temporal structures: the past is materially staged within the present, corresponding to Bachelard's definition of the house's function as a repository in which the "past comes to dwell" (1994, p. 5). The temporal layering also connects to Foucault's notion of heterotopia, which he associates with "zeitlichen Brüchen" (2021, p. 16) and thereby links heterotopic spaces to what he terms "Heterochronie" (2021, p. 16). Tetzlaff further emphasizes the heterochronic effect of furniture as part of the house, "gerade weil sie zugleich ihr ursprüngliches Aussehen und die Spuren der Zeit zeigen" (2016, p. 21), underscoring how material environments accumulate and preserve

temporal traces. The 1970s-style furnishing of the house represents an archive of another time, carrying specific meanings that shape Sebastian's perception and use of space.

This semantic charging extends beyond the general spatial configuration to individual objects within the basement. Objects acquire different meanings depending on the context in which they are used, thereby contributing to the construction of the heterotopic space. Sebastian, for example, uses a cable tie, normally employed to restrain Christine, to fix a lamp during his class reunion in front of many former classmates. Reflecting on this act, he notes it to be a "seltsames Gefühl, etwas aus dem Keller in diese Welt hinauf gebracht zu haben. Der Keller wird dadurch auf eine penetrante Weise real" (Duve, 2016, pp. 143, 144). Here, the object carries with it the semantic charge of the basement, introducing the logic of the heterotopic space into the normative world above and drawing again on the distinction between real and unreal. This meaning remains largely inaccessible to others; it is primarily legible to Sebastian, thereby reinforcing the subjective dimension of spatial meaning. Similarly, everyday objects are integrated into his system of fantasies. When encountering a raised garden bed kit, he immediately imagines alternative uses for it, such as employing it as a container for confinement within the basement (Duve, 2016, p. 319). Such reinterpretations of objects demonstrate the ambivalence of spatial meanings (Warning, 2015): semantic charge can be carried from the 'first' world to the 'second' one and the other way around, shaping Sebastian's perception of the world more broadly.

An object within the heterotopic space of the basement Sebastian seems to ascribe a central function and symbolic character to is the chain (and neck cuff). They are an integral part of the equipment and serve as instruments of control that physically bind Christine to the space of the basement, thereby stabilizing Sebastian's utopic order within the heterotopia. When Christine disobeys or resists his will, Sebastian relies solely on the chain, which provides a non-verbal mechanism of control that regulates her behaviour without requiring his direct intervention.

Ich brauche bloß einmal kräftig an der Kette ziehen und sie [Christine] gerät sofort aus dem Gleichgewicht und stolpert brav neben mir her. Ich ziehe die Kette wieder in den mittleren Karabiner, bis sie nur noch einen Meter lang ist, sodass Christine sich weder setzen noch irgendwohin gehen kann, sondern einfach an der Wand stehen bleiben muss. Es tut gut, sie so zu sehen, ihre penetrante Ich-erklär-dir-mal-was-mit-dir-lost-ist-Arroganz hat einen tüchtigen Sprung bekommen (Duve, 2016, p. 42).

The chain thus embodies Sebastian's power, materializing his control over Christine's body. However, this object also carries a meaning that exceeds his subjective interpretation. While Sebastian is initially able to maintain the fiction of the basement as a harmless "Prepper-Raum", he is aware that the chain may reveal the true nature of the space to others, which is why he searches for it in panic when Ellie enters the basement (Duve, 2016, pp. 272–273). Ultimately, it is precisely this object that exposes the hidden reality:

und sie sieht die Kette, vier Meter fest ineinander verschlungene Eisenringe, etwas rostig, und die große gepolsterte Stelle daran, die einmal um Christines Hals gelegen hat und jetzt aufgesperrt ist wie ein hungriges Maul" (Duve, 2016, pp. 273–274).

While the heterotopic space is constructed through secrecy and subjective meaning, it is still tied to the 'real' world and remains vulnerable to exposure. Objects can act as mediators between the two spatial orders, carrying meanings that are not entirely controllable. Finally, Christine herself, or rather her constrained and objectified body, is an integral component of the heterotopic space. Sebastian equates her existence with that of the basement, suggesting that by closing the basement door he is able to forget both the room and her presence and that when he needs to give up on one, he needs to give up the other (Duve, 2016, pp. 44, 172). By incorporating a human body into the architecture of the heterotopic order, *Macht* complicates heterotopia theory, in which the counter-space is defined through its spatial boundaries and normative inversions. Without Christine's physical presence, her body, the heterotopic space can no longer serve for domination and power. The ambivalence of the body as abstract and concrete, as described by Foucault, is resolved because Sebastian reduces Christine's body to its material, physical and hence violently controllable dimension. This has broader implications for treating

heterotopic spaces in literary contexts: instead of only defining them by walls and thresholds, they can expand to the bodies that are enclosed and instrumentalized within them. Even within the constraints of the heterotopic space, however, Christine shows moments of resistance: her refusal to comply and her temporary reversal of power expose the instability of Sebastian's order and foreground the human subjectivity that his spatial imagination seeks to erase. Within heterotopia, therefore, the body may emerge as an object of spatial control, but it is also able to rebel against it. This is ultimately confirmed by the novel's ending: Christine escapes, presents herself as a figure of strength, while Sebastian is a fugitive, so that his space and object of control develops to the reason of his loss of power and his defeat.

As Sebastian's identity is increasingly structured by the separation between the two spatial spheres, maintaining this division becomes progressively more difficult. The heterotopic configuration of the basement, which exists simultaneously as a material space and as a projection of his fantasies, begins to destabilize his perception of reality. The basement is both real and unreal for him: while it constitutes a physically existing environment, its meaning and function are so deeply intertwined with his desires that it acquires an almost imaginary quality. This ambivalence results in a gradual loss of reality, as Sebastian oscillates between acknowledging and denying the actual nature of his actions. His language, which is saturated with an effort to justify, euphemize and normalize his behaviour, reflects this instability. He rarely describes Christine as a prisoner; instead, he reframes her situation in more neutral or even positive terms, referring to her "Aufenthalt" (Duve, 2016, p. 32) and presenting their sexual interactions as consensual or mutually satisfying (Duve, 2016, p. 67). Similarly, he attempts to reconfigure the violent nature of his actions by casting them as "Notwehr" (Duve, 2016, p. 16) or by relativizing them in comparison to other forms of harm (Duve, 2016, pp. 54, 255). At times, he even describes their relationship as resembling that of an "altes Ehepaar" (Duve, 2016, p. 86), thereby integrating it into familiar and socially accepted frameworks. He labels the basement as "angenehm" (Duve, 2016, p. 35) and "normal" (Duve, 2016, p. 32) and Christine's confinement is reframed as advantageous, as she is

protected from the extreme temperatures outside (Duve, 2016, p. 35). Sebastian emphasizes his supposed empathy and care: “Mir ist durchaus klar, welche Bedeutung Regelmäßigkeit und Verlässlichkeit ... haben. Ich besitze ein überdurchschnittliches Einfühlungsvermögen, auch wenn Christine das nie wahrhaben will” (Duve, 2016, p. 163). Such statements illustrate the heterotopic space as the realization of his interior feelings but expose the gap between his imagined order and the reality of violence and coercion. Despite these attempts at normalization, Sebastian remains implicitly aware that his actions contradict the norms of the society in which he lives. The secrecy of the basement and his continuous efforts at self-justification suggest that he anticipates social sanction. In response, he constructs a counter-narrative in which his own values are presented as superior to those of the outside world, which he perceives as misguided or distorted. As perceived victim of the ‘first world’ (Duve, 2016, p. 193), he positions himself in the centre of a self-created order, mirroring his role as the sovereign authority within the basement.

Within the destabilization of boundaries that sustain this dual structure over the course of the narrative, elements of the hidden sphere begin to surface in the social world above. Sebastian occasionally allows his underlying beliefs to slip in conversations with Elisabeth, for instance when he suggests that working in the “Demokratiezentrale” under female leadership diminishes his masculinity (Duve, 2016, p. 191). Likewise, uncontrolled aggression disrupts his carefully maintained façade when he loses control in front of Ellie and treats his children harshly, displacing responsibility onto Christine (Duve, 2016, p. 266). The gradual erosion of boundaries culminates at the level of the plot when Ellie discovers the basement. As the separation between the two spheres collapses and Sebastian’s hidden self is exposed, this moment marks a turning point on the level of plot and structure alike. It is with entering a room that the inside of a person becomes visible (Müller, 2017, p. 332). Confronted with the reality of his actions, Ellie reacts with horror (Duve, 2016, p. 336), displaying the incompatibility of the two worlds that Sebastian had previously managed to keep apart.

The changing dynamics of power within the basement further destabilize its role. When Christine briefly gains the upper hand, the space that once symbolized control and security is reconnected with threat and fear, which Sebastian describes as an “Alptraum” (Duve, 2016, p. 237). This shift shows the contested nature of space (Schroer, 2006), that the meaning of the heterotopic space is not fixed but contingent upon the power relations within it. Accordingly, the semantic charge of the basement undergoes a transformation over the course of the narrative. Initially associated with joy, protection and fulfilment, it is gradually linked to danger, impurity and moral corruption (Duve, 2016, p. 172). Eventually, Sebastian begins to question its value altogether:

“Mir wird klar, dass ich den Prepper-Raum aufgeben muss. Nein, nicht muss – ich will ihn aufgeben. Den Prepper-Raum und Christine. Für Ellie. Ich will einen Neuanfang. Das, was zwischen uns entsteht, ist etwas Reines und Heiliges, etwas, das nicht beschmutzt werden darf” (Duve, 2016, p. 172).

There is a shift in Sebastian’s perception. What initially represented an escape from a perceived dystopian outside world now evolves into a threat to his desired future with Ellie. Only when the heterotopic space endangers this new (utopian?) aspiration does he begin to acknowledge, albeit indirectly, the problematic nature of his actions. Such delayed recognition underscores the extent of his distorted perception of reality: (moral) insight arises only from the potential loss of an alternative, socially acceptable life. The increasing instability of the spatial division and the shifting meanings attached to the basement indicate Sebastian’s growing loss of control both over the heterotopic space and over his own identity. The collapse of the boundaries between the two spheres exposes the contradictions that had previously been contained within the spatial structure along with the fragility of the order he has constructed. This is precisely the incomparability of two worlds in conflict, Judith Leiss describes in her definition of heterotopia:

Da sie sich jedoch aufgrund ihrer spezifischen Beschaffenheit wechselseitig ausschließen und kein Kosmos, ... [der] beide Welten zugleich enthält, ist der Konflikt zwischen W1 und W2 prinzipiell unlösbar. ... W1 und W2 befinden sich im Widerstreit (2013, p. 211).

4. Conclusion: *Macht* Between the Spaces and Genres

An analysis of Karen Duve's *Macht* ultimately demonstrates how heterotopic spaces can serve as narrative devices through which utopian and dystopian dynamics are negotiated. The basement, as a heterotopic counter-space, overturns the norms and values of the surrounding society and establishes an alternative order, defined by patriarchal domination and archaic gender hierarchies, that exists in tension with the 'normative' world above. Within this confined space, the narrator Sebastian reconfigures power relations, attempting to reclaim what he perceives as lost masculine authority by exerting total control over women('s bodies), namely Christine and later Ellie. The analysis has shown the maintenance of space through secrecy, ritual and closure, and its inseparability from the bodies it encloses. Sebastian's identity is tied to the spatial spheres he inhabits. His behaviour, values and self-presentation shift depending on whether he is in the public, socially regulated world or within the hidden basement. This division proves increasingly unstable over the course of the narrative. The effort to maintain two distinct orders and to conceal his 'true' self from the outside world and from Ellie ultimately fails, revealing the fragility of such spatially anchored identities.

The heterotopic basement initially presents the realization of Sebastian's utopian desires, and the outside world appears to him as dystopian. Yet, this valuation shifts as the narrative progresses. With the emergence of his relationship with Ellie, the normative world above increasingly takes on utopian qualities, while the basement loses its former appeal and is associated with threat, impurity and moral corruption. The semantic charge of heterotopic space proves to be dynamic, context-dependent and closely linked to developments in the external world. Because they unveil Sebastian's inner identity, the basement and its objects, including Christine's body, are semantically saturated and function as carriers of meaning that extend beyond their immediate materiality. These meanings, too, change in relation to Sebastian's shifting desires and circumstances, thereby reinforcing the connection between the heterotopic space and the broader social reality it both mirrors and distorts.

Heterotopic spaces as sites positioned between utopia and reality are, hence, ambivalent. The novel complicates conventional genre distinctions by presenting a narrator who is not the victim of a dystopian system but actively produces a dystopian order within a localized space. What appears as utopian fulfilment from Sebastian's perspective is dystopian violence from the perspective of Christine and Ellie (as well as the reader). This perspectival divergence underscores that utopia and dystopia are contingent upon position and interpretation. By staging this inversion, Duve's novel highlights the flexibility and hybridity of contemporary dystopian fiction. It demonstrates how spatial configurations, particularly heterotopic counter-spaces, enable the coexistence and interaction of conflicting orders, expanding the analytical scope of the genre. Apart from reflecting the persistence of patriarchal structures within ostensibly progressive societies, *Macht* thus also illustrates how literature uses spatial design to explore and critique the unstable boundaries between utopian aspiration and dystopian reality.

References

- Bachelard, G. (1994). *The poetics of space* (M. Jolas, Trans.; foreword by J. R. Stilgoe). Boston, MA: Beacon Press. (Original work published 1958)
- Dünne, J., & Mahler, A. (2015). Einleitung. In J. Dünne & A. Mahler (Eds.), *Handbuch Literatur & Raum* (pp. 1–11). Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Duve, K. (2016). *Macht*. München: Goldmann.
- Foucault, M. (2021). *Die Heterotopien. Der utopische Körper: Zwei Radiovorträge* (5th Ed.). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Johannsen, A. K. (2008). *Kisten, Krypten, Labyrinth. Raumfigurationen in der Gegenwartsliteratur: W. G. Sebald, Anne Duden, Herta Müller*. Bielefeld: transcript.
- Leiss, J. (2013). Gattungsgeschichte als Spirale: Die Heterotopie als Möglichkeit utopischen Schreibens in der Gegenwart. In W. Voßkamp, G. Blumberger & M. Roussel (Eds.), *Möglichkeitsdenken: Utopie und Dystopie in der Gegenwart* (pp. 207–222). München: Wilhelm Fink.
- Mahler, A. (2015). Topologie. In J. Dünne & A. Mahler (Eds.), *Handbuch Literatur & Raum* (pp. 17–29). Berlin: De Gruyter.

- Milevski, U. (2018). Zwischen unproduktivem Zynismus und groteskem Humor: Karen Duve als politische Autorin. In S. Neuhaus & I. Nover (Eds.), *Das Politische in der Literatur der Gegenwart* (pp. 377–395). Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Müller, M. C. (2017). *Selbst und Raum: Eine raumtheoretische Grundlegung der Subjektivität*. Bielefeld: transcript.
- Nitsch, W. (2015). Topographien: Zur Ausgestaltung literarischer Räume. In J. Dünne & A. Mahler (Eds.), *Handbuch Literatur & Raum* (pp. 30–40). Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Novello, C. (2022). Environmental destruction and misogyny in Karen Duve's novel *Macht*. In L. Schmeink & I. Cornils (Eds.), *Studies in global science fiction: New perspectives on contemporary German science fiction* (pp. 133–150). Cham: Springer.
- Schlipphacke, H. (2012). Heterotopic bodies: Intimacy and the global in Tom Tykwer's *The International*. In H. Tafazoli & R. T. Gray (Eds.), *External space – co-space – internal space: Heterotopias in culture and society / Außenraum – Mitraum – Innenraum / Heterotopien in Kultur und Gesellschaft* (pp. 151–168). Bielefeld: Aisthesis.
- Schroer, M. (2006). Raum, Macht und soziale Ungleichheit: Pierre Bourdieus Beitrag zu einer Soziologie des Raums. *Leviathan*, 34(1), 105–123.
- Tafazoli, H., & Gray, R. T. (2012). Einleitung: Heterotopien in Kultur und Gesellschaft. In H. Tafazoli & R. T. Gray (Eds.), *Außenraum – Mitraum – Innenraum / External space – co-space – internal space: Heterotopien in Kultur und Gesellschaft / Heterotopias in culture and society* (pp. 7–34). Bielefeld: Aisthesis.
- Tetzlaff, S. (2016). *Heterotopie als Textverfahren: Erzählter Raum in Romantik und Realismus*. Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH.
- Warning, R. (2015). Utopie und Heterotopie. In J. Dünne & A. Mahler (Eds.), *Handbuch Literatur & Raum* (pp. 178–187). Berlin: De Gruyter.

The Utopian Voice the Ideological Cannot Contain: How the Power of Feminine Song Subverts Capitol Power in *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*

Morgan Rich¹

1. An Introduction to the Songbird, Snake, and Theoretical Lens

Following the story of Coriolanus Snow, the eventual dictator of Panem in the original *Hunger Games* trilogy, *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* consists of numerous amounts of ideological tension, particularly around the ideas of art, collectivity, freedom, commodification, and suppressing utopia – all ideas introduced by American literary critic, Fredric Jameson in “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture” (1979). Within his article, Jameson states that, “ideology” is often associated with a “false consciousness” – a way of thinking that prevents individuals from seeing the true nature of their specific social or economic situation – which is tied up with value judgments (Jameson 139).

Even though Jameson does argue that systems of ideological power are strong,² he also identifies that they are never explicitly airtight and even the most commercial, ideologically saturated products of mass culture contain faint utopian impulses,³ collective longings, and

¹ Professor, Lehigh University, U.S., ORCID: 0009-0008-8068-8306,
E-mail: mor424@lehigh.edu

² “Ideology,” to Jameson, is about how we experience and interpret mass media and high culture under the influence of capitalism, which is often marked by commodification.

³ “Utopian Impulse,” to Jameson, is the wish that is embedded in culture, specifically related to our specific desires; it is what people are longing for, and a symbolic trace of a better world, perhaps through a desire for change, hope, or freedom, etc., that peaks through the cracks of societal structures, especially in the works of mass culture.

glimpses of alternative social realities. Despite these works of mass culture consistently squashing utopian desires and dominating them with the ideological, Jameson thinks of escape from the ideological in these works as not about rejecting mass culture, but instead, learning how to read them differently.

Within his article, Jameson asks readers to pose the following question to all works of mass culture as a way to read them: What are societies' deepest utopian wishes in mass culture and how are they ideologically contained (Jameson 147-148)? To Jameson, an ideological escape only happens through a collective critical and political reactivation of the utopian impulses that mass culture tries to contain but cannot quite fully suppress. Jameson articulates that the only way to understand and transform culture is to recognize the "utopian" content within it that is repressed by the "ideological," which Suzanne Collins clearly depicts within *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*.

Lucy Gray Baird, the female tribute from District 12, creates a prominent storyline and characterization that is exceptionally worthy of exploration in regards to Jameson's concepts of "ideology" and "utopia," specifically involving her relationship with the Covey and how they represent Jameson's concept of the utopian wish.⁴ Within the novel, Collins deliberately frames the Covey and Lucy Gray as a captivating vision of utopian community, only to then narratively diffuse it by the end of the novel, representing the contradiction that we are encouraged to live out "archaic desires" of a collective life,⁵ but we cannot believe or act on the fantasy that it is sustainable – both in the fictional world of Panem and in current society. Collins then does the same thing with the characterization of Coriolanus Snow as the "ideological," in which she provides readers with these "archaic desires" once again, and then refuses to allow us to enact them by taking them away.

⁴ The Covey are nomadic people of Panem who wandered from district to district spreading their musical talent before the peacekeepers rounded them up and forced them into specific districts, one group of which resided in District 12.

⁵ "Archaic Desires," to Jameson, are deep wishes and feelings that come from early parts of human life, and are ancient emotions that humans have always had, i.e. desire to belong, desire for unity, desire for immortality, etc.

1.1. A Challenge to Fredric Jameson's Ideological vs. Utopian Formulation

It is these single mechanistic relationships in *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* where Collins offers a pointed challenge to Jameson's formulation in ways that reimagines resistance in the world of *The Hunger Games*. Jameson's framework implies that artistic expression cannot produce genuine resistance, but can only perpetuate the illusion of resistance by offering utopian desire while reinforcing the ideological structures that contain it, and it is here that I depart from Jameson's claim. Collins disrupts Jameson's assumption by using music to demonstrate that the appearance of resistance is not merely an illusion, but becomes a form of utopian expression that exceeds ideological containment and persists beyond the mechanisms designed to diffuse it.

In particular, we see resistance through her use of 18th and 19th-British ballad culture, as well as gendered performance to suggest that utopian desire can persist, not only within, but also against and in opposition to ideology, through the survival of song, story, and myth. Through the characterization of Lucy Gray Baird and Coriolanus Snow, Collins dramatizes how utopian longing and ideological repression are gendered concepts. While Coriolanus Snow reflects the internalization of ideology, with his desire for control and recognition continuously displayed by his desire for power, Lucy Gray is depicted as embodying a form of utopian artistry that uses the form of a feminine ballad to transform repression into expression.

Collins does this to highlight and reveal what Jameson leaves unaddressed: the power of gender and artistic expression, such as music, challenges and transcends the ideological. Drawing on William Wordsworth's "Lucy Gray," Collins traces how the ballad is rooted in oral transmission, as well as female balladry as cultural perseverance, and circulates desire, grief, and hope beyond institutional control. It is vital that we do not ignore that Jameson's account of artistic expression does not fully contend with music's exceptional capacity for resistance. His formulation treats cultural works – only mass culture movies – within this article, as narrative and visual structures that can be symbolically contained.

What Jameson does not consider is musical expression, specifically in the form of song, and how it operates differently by transcending memory, and carrying utopian longings that escape the kinds of ideological management that he otherwise describes; music is not a form of mass culture that he acknowledges or considers within this article. While Jameson ultimately provides a crucial vocabulary for understanding how ideology manages and contains utopian desire, his framework leaves the question unresolved of whether certain forms of cultural expression, such as music, can exceed this containment altogether.

In this context, it is vital to look to Paul Gilroy and his writing within *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* to clarify the stakes of why looking at music matters. Where Jameson reads cultural production and expression as structurally bound within systems of ideological containment, Gilroy identifies music as a form of expressive culture that carries embodied memory, communal experience, and affective force that cannot fully be reduced to commodification or symbolic management. Gilroy argues that expressive cultures, particularly those rooted in histories of oppression – especially people of color – preserve in artistic forms, “needs and desires which go far beyond the mere satisfaction of material wants,” that insist on “a continuity of art and life” (57); he articulates that expressive cultures born into conditions of ideological domination have always existed within systems that seek to commodify them, yet they are resistant, not because they escape commodification, but because music carries mimetic traces of struggle, longing, communal belonging, and autonomy. In contrast to Jameson’s particular emphasis on ideological containment, Gilroy suggests that music thus operates through modes of transmission – memory, performance, and embodiment – that allow it to exceed the ideological structures that attempt to regulate it.

This is the flexibility and durability that Collins draws upon by illustrating Lucy Gray’s songs functioning not as status cultural objects, but as living, mimetic performances that link emotion, memory, and communal struggle. Gilroy’s claim that music becomes a “favoured vehicle for communal self-development” (124) due to it carrying traces of

emancipation, belonging, and autonomy illuminates why balladry in *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* resists ideological containment. This distinction is especially important for reading Lucy Gray's balladry, as it does not function as just a static cultural object, but is instead a living, performative practice that circulates memory and emotions in ways that resist ideological containment.

Unlike the films that Jameson critiques, music is not easily commodified because it travels through bodies, memory, improvisation, and voice. For this reason, I, along with scholars such as Gilroy,⁶ understand music as a particularly flexible form of protest because it allows for feelings of resistance to take root in ways that cannot be fully regulated or suppressed. Collins animates this, and suggests that music within her novels, particularly balladry, produces forms of emotional and cultural survival that Jameson's model does not fully explain.

Wordsworth's elevation of ordinary voices and folk expression to balladry, Collins amplifies underrepresented, often silenced, voices and uses his poem, "Lucy Gray," to reimagine the ballad as a primary female utopian force that resists male ideological control. Collins' use of balladry, through the female characterization of Lucy Gray, represents how myth-making resists ideological absorption and becomes a vessel for the utopian imagination to survive, instead of being extinguished; the utopian wish migrates, transforms, and survives in sound, story, and collective memory. This exposes how Collins destabilizes Jameson's argument and amplifies Gilroy's, by exposing how music, gender, and emotion remain vital spaces where utopian feeling lives on, even in a world determined to silence it.

⁶ For more information on Paul Gilroy, especially for his proposition on the modern black experience and understanding what it means to be modern all the while exploring music that transmits racial messages and feelings, see Gilroy.

2. Gendering of the Ideological Capitol and Utopian Natural Spaces and Public Perception of Music Within Them

With knowledge of the original *Hunger Games* trilogy, it becomes hard to read *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* and not already have a negative demeanor towards all that encompasses the Capitol and those who reside within it. However, Coriolanus is not a born psychopath and his ideology does not originate with him due to the fact that it precedes him and is woven into the very fabric of Capitol life.

Coriolanus grows up in an environment that is shaped by his father's legacy – one that is marked by him being a war hero and co-creator of the Hunger Games – and Coriolanus even states that, “maybe it was best to take after his father” as “his mother had not really been tough enough for this world” (Collins 78). His ideology is only further enforced by President Ravinstill's rhetoric and approval, along with his grandmother's relentless reinforcement of patriotism.

The Capitol ideology here, enacted through important people in his life, is what becomes the true problem: a rigid, dominantly male-encoded system that is built long before his birth that trains children, particularly Academy attendees, to suppress personal memory, emotional vulnerability, and any form of utopian desire that cannot be controlled or resists what the Capitol stands for. Coriolanus merely inherits this ideology and thus becomes a cog in the Capitol ideological machine, absorbing it through songs he is forced to perform, the news he consumes, and the daily corrections of the adults in his life, such as his grandmother, and Academy faculty, that shape his understanding of loyalty and power. However, moments develop where we clearly see Coriolanus fearing the Capitol ideology, providing the audience with their own utopian wish of believing that, perhaps, Collins will rewrite his ending and maybe he will not fall victim to Capitol ideology.

After Clemensia Dovecote, another wealthy Academy student and mentor for the games, is severely injured in Dr. Volumnia Gaul's lab when genetically modified snakes brutally attack her after she dishonestly claims credit for Coriolanus' experimental ideas for the games, we see a glimpse into Coriolanus' teetering view on Capitol ideology.

While walking home from the incident, Coriolanus is struck by a vivid inner monologue:

It was like the Hunger Games. Only they weren't district kids. The Capitol was supposed to protect them. He thought of Sejanus telling Dr. Gaul it was the government's job to protect everybody, even the people in the districts, but he still wasn't sure how to square that with the fact that they'd been such recent enemies. But certainly the child of a Snow should be a top priority. He could be dead if Clemensia had written the proposal instead of him. He buried his head in his hands, confused, angry, and most of all afraid. Afraid of Dr. Gaul. Afraid of the Capitol. Afraid of everything. If the people who were supposed to protect you played so fast and loose with your life . . . then how did you survive? Not by trusting them, that was for sure. And if you couldn't trust them, who could you trust? All bets were off (Collins 116).

This moment is one of the precise places within the text that reveals how Coriolanus is not fully Capitol yet. After encountering Lucy Gray's songs and opinions that Sejanus Plinth expresses in their Academy class,⁷ utopian impulses are opened for Coriolanus that point out cracks within the ideological system, highlighting the unwavering obedience of it. His fear following Clemensia's attack shows that he recognizes, perhaps for the first time, that Capitol ideology is not a protective force, but a deadly one that spares not even its own citizens. Because he cannot trust the government that is supposed to protect him, he begins to internalize this logic as necessary for survival, one that prioritizes distrust, self-protection, and vigilance.

In this way, his fear becomes the very mechanism through which he begins to embody the ideology that he feels threatened by. The Capitol's ideological cruelty pushes him toward becoming what he fears, because to survive, he must adopt its values, suspicions, and its willingness to sacrifice others. This proves that his mind is not fully Capitol yet, but is rapidly being developed and shaped by the terror of losing his mentorship, status, and overall, his future and life.

⁷ Sejanus Plinth is introduced to us as Coriolanus Snow's supposed best friend, Academy student, and mentor for the games who was originally born a District 2 citizen. For the scene referenced, see Collins 92-93.

The Capitol is introduced as the emergent victor of the “Dark Days” rebellion,⁸ and the originator and home of the Hunger Games.⁹ However, despite the games themselves being one of the driving factors of what we, as an audience, may deem as their “defining ideological force,” Capitol ideology and the way in which it influences its citizens are depicted in the less obvious places of the book that we may otherwise skim over.

For example, Coriolanus reveals the Capitol News’ slogan early on in Chapter 4, which states that, “If you didn’t see it here, it didn’t happen” (Collins 48). This slogan encapsulates Jameson’s notion of the Capitol’s ideology and utilization of “false consciousness”¹⁰ to convince Capitol citizens that what they see through the Capitol’s lens is reality itself. The citizens want to believe that the news is a reflection of the realities of their daily lives, however, the Capitol toys with this desire for truthful representation in order to disguise its distorted reality as real-world phenomenon.

The slogan depicts how the Capitol functions and operates through control of visual media, or in Jamesonian terms, control and diffusion of the utopian fantasy. What the slogan does is reinforce the illusion that the Capitol’s portrayal of events is reality, therefore erasing alternative perspectives, such as those from District citizens. Ideology here works invisibly, with the Capitol citizens not feeling oppressed because they believe what they are seeing is simply “the truth,” creating a population that is blind to their own participation in a system that thrives off of exploitation.

The Capitol, in its entirety, acts as a force that controls what can be seen and what can be known. When discussing “management of desire in social terms,” Jameson reflects on the idea that personal,

⁸ The failed rebellion of the Districts, in which 13 of Panem’s Districts rose up against the Capitol.

⁹ Coriolanus describes the games as there being “twenty-four tributes, one boy and one girl from each of the twelve defeated districts, drawn by lottery to be thrown into an arena to fight to the death” (Collins 14).

¹⁰ “False Consciousness,” to Jameson, is a way of thinking that prevents individuals from seeing the true nature of their specific social or economic situation that is often tied up with value judgments.

unconscious desires and wishes are not just private, however, they are managed by society through the culture in which they reside (141). This positions the psyche within a bigger state based on societal beliefs, aligning with the idea that individuals and their thoughts, feelings, wishes, and desires are shaped by the social structures in which they live. Reading the Capitol News through a Jamesonian lens, we see the Capitol News as an ideological mechanism that regulates not only knowledge, but desire, as well, determining what its citizens can imagine, long for, and fear. This positions the psyche within a broader mechanism that is structured by what the Capitol citizens believe to be true and what is actually represented, aligning with Jameson's notion that individuals and their thoughts, along with their feelings, are shaped by the social structures in which they reside. Since Coriolanus' thoughts are framed by this Jamesonian ideological structure, this is how the Capitol ideological space, the place where Coriolanus grows up and formulates his persona, is a male-encoded space and one we can associate with Coriolanus' overall character.

2.1. The Ideological Structure and Influence of Capitol Song

The Capitol anthem, "Gem of Panem," emerges as a medium through which ideology functions and is increasingly tied to Coriolanus' identity that revolves around Capitol performance. The anthem itself works alongside the visual spectacle of Arachne Crane's funeral to shape desire,¹¹ unify the citizens, and control the positive and negative intensity of emotions. The anthem is a piece of music that serves as a tool through which it channels a collective longing toward the Capitol, and yet it also constrains what citizens are allowed to hope for,¹² which is reminiscent of how mass culture feeds societies' utopian desires, only to diffuse them. Arachne's death generates a collective desire for unity through shared suffering and the promise of restored

¹¹ Arachne Crane is described as one of Coriolanus' wealthy classmates at the Academy and a privileged daughter of a powerful Capitol man. She is killed when a starving District 10 tribute slits her throat after Arachne taunts her with food; it quickly becomes a moment where the Capitol reframes her death as one that was unprovoked to make the Capitol citizens appear innocent.

¹² People have often entertained the idea that hope is a long-lasting solution to "our social, political and economic problems" (Mong 3).

order, which is a desire that the Capitol amplifies through poetic devices within the anthem:

Gem of Panem
Mighty city
Through the ages you shine anew

We humbly kneel
To your ideal
And pledge our love to you!

Gem of Panem
Heart of Justice
Wisdom crowns your marble brow

You give us light
You reunite
To you we make our vow

Gem of Panem
Seat of power
Strength in peacetime, shield in strife

Protect our land
With armored hand
Our Capitol
Our life (Collins 4-7).

The poetic devices of anaphora and rhyme scheme, along with elevated patriotic imagery, produce a soundscape of discipline and nationalistic devotion for a Capitol crowd. The anaphora located within the 1st,¹³ 3rd, and 5th stanzas of “Gem of Panem,” referring to the Capitol itself, works to convey, emphasize, and reinforce control and superficial unity. Emphasizing this phrase serves as a constant, rhythmic reminder that the Capitol is at the core of Panem, and the prosperity of the nation is tied to the existence of the Capitol. Calling the Capitol a “gem” marks this place within Panem as the location in which the citizens should view as the most important, as it reflects

¹³ Anaphora is a “repetition of a word or expression at the beginning of successive phrases, clauses, sentences, or verses especially for rhetorical or poetic effect” (Merriam-Webster).

the Capitol's view of itself as a shining, essential entity. Thus, persuading the audience to create a collective identity and shared sense of value of the Capitol, and attempting to create a lasting impression in the audience.

The patriotic imagery also attempts to serve this same purpose, to make a lasting impression within the audience and conjure up a feeling of unity. Images such as, "heart of justice," "mighty city," "light," and "unity" symbolizes what could be considered a utopian freedom: the Capitol as a place that is benevolent, and a central authority that protects its citizens and provides peace and stability. For Capitol citizens, who are not usually encouraged to think too critically about the government's actions, and are instead told to simply believe what they are spoonfed, these lyrics inspire a genuine sense of patriotism.

The two different rhyme schemes within the anthem also act as further poetic devices that disguise loyal devotion to the Capitol as unity. The anthem itself has two rhyme schemes, ABC and DDC (AAB), which are used in every other stanza. The ABC rhymes are often associated with timelessness, consciousness, and versatility (Santamaria). The stanzas featuring the ABC rhyme scheme, which also include the anaphora of "Gem of Panem," emphasize the Capitol as this place of timelessness, and this clear and structured rhyme scheme mimics the way in which the Capitol operates – as a clear and structured city of Panem that is the heart of the entire machine.

The DDC (AAB) rhyme scheme is of simplistic nature and provides musicality to a poem, which is deemed as excellent for creating rhymes for children due to it being easy to remember (Santamaria). It also serves as a call and response effect, often utilized in political speeches to draw someone into an ideology, as well (Santamaria). This makes the song a vessel for the Capitol's ideology. The Capitol camouflages the phrases, "we humbly kneel / to your ideal / and pledge our love to you!" and "to you we make our vow" as unification and patriotism instead of loyal devotion (Collins 4-6). Capitol citizens sing these lines and essentially act as servants devoting their lives and undying love to their government, rather than being the same as, or one

with the Capitol due to the way in which the Capitol News presents them with this piece of music.

What is interesting about the anaphora, patriotic imagery, and rhyme schemes' presence within "Gem of Panem," is that the citizens fail to remember a song that attempts to create a lasting impression due to its overarching rhyme scheme. Coriolanus states that "some of the students fumbled for the words" (Collins 23) during the Reaping Ceremony, implying that the anthem is easily forgotten amongst the citizens, only reinforced when it is revealed that he was "the only one who knew all the words" (Collins 126), according to Satyria Click.¹⁴ Although the ABC and DDC (AAB) rhyme schemes attempt to create atmospheres of timelessness and easy memorization, these are ultimately the aspects that lead to the demise of the anthem. Due to its lack of change and easily predictable structure, even when the Capitol News airs the anthem, it does not catch the attention of the citizens simply due to the fact that it is not as interesting to their ears. Predictability and lack of change does not provide the same musicality as other songs, allowing it to be easily forgotten amongst the citizens it wants to be remembered the most by.

Nonetheless, "Gem of Panem" still has the ability to thrive and be passed down with Coriolanus' performance of it. Whenever he sings the anthem, he does not just merely perform the ideology, he remembers and produces the ideology, which sustains it and continues the memory of the anthem itself. But due to the stagnation of the Capitol's anthem, the ideological function of it becomes visible and apparent the moment Coriolanus and the citizens encounter music that exists outside of its control.

2.2. Lucy Gray Baird as the Primary Utopian Voice

Named after William Wordsworth's poem, "Lucy Gray" written in 1799, Lucy Gray Baird's name indicates that she was never just another individual character to be glossed over, but rather a character

¹⁴ Satyria Click was Coriolanus Snow's communications professor at the Academy and campaigned for him to receive one of the 24 slots as a mentor in the 10th Hunger Games.

who possesses an inheritance.¹⁵ Lucy Gray's name exhibits that she embodies a continuation of a much older ballad tradition that aligns with Romantic and British literary poets of the 18th and 19th centuries. From an outside perspective, it could seem as though Collins simply borrows the name from Wordsworth, however, when analyzing how she portrays Lucy Gray, it is clear that Collins wants readers to know that she is not aligning herself with this broad literary tradition of balladry, passively. Lucy Gray Baird's namesake can be seen as the blueprint for how Lucy Gray understands the world around her, and how she composes and performs her own balladry, as well, eventually disrupting Coriolanus' ideology. Collins ends up activating the ballad's literary and musical lineage through the Covey, which transforms Lucy Gray herself from a singular, poetic figure in the novel to a collectively sustained voice that travels and transcends through time and books to come.

Wordsworth's "Lucy Gray" is a Romantic poem that is classified as a lyrical poem, published in Volume 2 of the 1800 edition of his and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's joint publication of *Lyrical Ballads*.¹⁶ The poem itself tells the tragic story of a solitary young girl, Lucy Gray, who gets lost in a snowstorm and dies while trying to guide her mother home.¹⁷ In the poem, the child, Lucy Gray, becomes a myth through balladry. We see her as a child lost to the natural elements, and whose story survives, not through just the physicality of the poem

¹⁵ Specifically, Collins notes that: "Every one of us Covey owes our name to a ballad, and this one belongs to this pretty lady right here!" She [Maude Ivory] held out a hand to Lucy Gray, who curtsied to scattered applause. "It's a really old one by some man named Wordsworth. We mixed it up a little, so it makes better sense, but you still need to listen close" (Collins 423-424).

¹⁶ William Wordsworth (1770-1850) was an English Romantic poet, who altered the entire course of English poetry by launching the English Romantic movement, specifically with Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Upon the publication of the numerous volumes of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth was known for writing poetry that advocated for using ordinary speech and simple language to describe the lives of common people. He also popularly wrote about and celebrated nature and human emotions in his poetry, wanting to capture the essence of life between nature and human beings (Fatheer Imran, et al. 1416).

¹⁷ For more on Wordsworth's poem, "Lucy Gray," and the other "Lucy" poems he wrote, see Hall.

itself, but through repetition, communal memory, and proper elements of a ballad poem.

Wordsworth's poem is first characterized by its alternating rhyme scheme, ABAB, which is used in each stanza. Often, this type of rhyme scheme is utilized to evoke a sense of certainty, due to it appearing naturally unwavering, and is one that is simple and easy to follow, making it a popular rhyme scheme present in nursery rhymes (Santamaria). This allows for the poem to be highly memorable and easily transmissible, seeing as it can be read like a song, and remembered by children; its simplicity is why it is remembered, and why Wordsworth's *Lucy Gray* is able to survive long after and beyond her physical death.

The tone and diction of Wordsworth's "*Lucy Gray*" also leans into the idea of the poem reading as if it is a piece of oral folklore. The poem itself is deceptively simple and melodic, however, this simplicity is what makes the poem deep and full of hidden meanings. When Wordsworth starts the poem off by saying, "Oft I had heard of *Lucy Gray*" (Wordsworth 1), he begins with an observational, gentle tone that feels as if he is recalling a local legend and tale of a girl, however, as the poem continues on, the tone shifts into something more melancholy and unresolved. *Lucy Gray* dies in a storm, and while we know her parents "Went shouting far and wide; / But there was neither sound nor sight" (Wordsworth 32-33), there is never closure for her parents. However, Wordsworth's deliberate tone and diction in the final stanza can be read as him imagining *Lucy Gray* as both alive and connected with nature when he states:

O'er rough and smooth she trips along,
And never looks behind;
And sings a solitary song
That whistles in the wind (Wordsworth 59-62).

Wordsworth's tonal ambiguity is one of the most important things about this poem, as it represents the fact that his *Lucy Gray* is both seen as dead and not dead, lost, and yet still present within the poem and nature itself. We are led to presume that *Lucy Gray* has died in the storm, however, there is the possibility that she did survive and is living amongst nature. In this sense, *Lucy Gray's* spirit can be viewed

as being one that is embedded within the poem itself, her spirit, story, and soul surviving with every new and old person returning to recall her memory and wonder what happened to her story. Yet, Wordsworth does not stop there with his use of simplicity in this poem to grasp the attention of his readers. In fact, his diction is just as simple, which mirrors the way in which he advocated for simple speech to tell the stories of lives of ordinary individuals.

For example, within the poem, Wordsworth uses simple phrases such as, “the solitary child,” “the minister-clock,” “lonesome wild,” etc. to ground the poem in a type of folk-like authenticity, which aligns the poem with an oral tradition rather than a piece of elite literature, only to be read by those who have access to it. The simplicity of the diction, words, and phrases makes the poem accessible to everyone, allowing children and other non-literate individuals to not only remember the poem, but recite it from memory, and literate individuals to have an easy time reading the poem, as well. With this said, Wordsworth’s simple rhyme scheme and diction makes the poem a type of literature that belongs to everyone, and a type of poem that each person can try to insert themselves into.

For both Collins and Wordsworth, music becomes a mechanism that replaces death with persistence and continuity, where the utopian wish is not simply that both Lucy Grays physically live on, but that their legacies remain persistent even after they are gone. With that said, Wordsworth’s poem, “Lucy Gray” provides a formal structure for the way in which Collins depicts Lucy Gray Baird’s character, fate, and her own balladry. Collins aligns herself with William Wordsworth’s “Lucy Gray” to demonstrate how the formal elements and properties of this type of ballad generate a voice that ideology cannot fully erase, allowing the utopian impulse to thrive no matter what.

2.3. Lucy Gray’s “The Valley Song” as a Destabilizing Utopian Force

When Lucy Gray is forced to reside in the Capitol Zoo before she enters the Hunger Games, Capitol citizens experience their first glimpse of non-filtered, uncontrolled music when she performs “The

Valley Song.” The song itself is filled with pastoral imagery, refrains, and possesses a rhyme scheme that mimics a lullaby cadence:

Down in the valley, valley so low,
Late in the evening, hear the train blow.
The train, love, hear the train blow.
Late in the evening, hear the train blow.

Go build a mansion, build it so high,
So I can see my true love go by.
See him go by, love, see him go by.
So I can see my true love go by.

Go write me a letter, send it by mail,
Bake it and stamp it to the Capitol jail.
Capitol jail, love, to the Capitol jail.
Bake it and stamp it to the Capitol jail.

Roses are red, love; violets are blue,
Birds in the heavens know I love you.
Know I love you, oh, know I love you.
Birds in the heavens know I love you (Collins 69-70).

“The Valley Song,” when sung in the Capitol, becomes a force of resistance against the Capitol’s ideological forces. Even though we see “the camera closing in on her” (Collins 70), which could be illustrated as the Capitol preparing to relay this song to Capitol citizens in a way that is altered and dishonest, the audience is physically present at the zoo, causing them to witness Lucy Gray’s performance with their own eyes and ears. Instead of the citizens getting a handcrafted, inauthentic song spoonfed to them, they are, alternatively, experiencing what it means to engage with a type of musical material for the first time, without the tampering of the Capitol News.

“The Valley Song’s” pastoral imagery and lullaby-centered rhyme scheme creates an atmosphere where female emotions and memories challenge the sterile environment of an ideological masculine space. The pastoral imagery, such as valleys, heaven, and florals, offer spaces that act as an aesthetic opposite to everything that the Capitol represents. This contrast becomes even clearer when we consider how “The Valley Song” and “Gem of Panem” name and imagine the

Capitol. In “Gem of Panem,” the Capitol is framed as a precious jewel, something that is flawless, rare, and worthy of devotion. The very title of the anthem even presents the Capitol as something to be cherished, elevating it into an idealized symbol of national purity that the citizens are expected to idolize. However, “The Valley Song’s” imagery and direct phrasing, as mentioned above, positions the Capitol as not a gem, but as a jail or prison – it is an oppressive structure that restricts emotional life and enforces ideological conformity.

The pastoral imagery physically represents and suggests an alternative world where softness, creativity, and personal emotions can transcend the Capitol’s rigid masculine authority. In this way, I see the two songs offering completely opposed visions; while “Gem of Panem” puts the Capitol on a pedestal as a perfect object of patriotic desire, “The Valley Song” exposes what has vanished under its ideological rule and indicates a freedom that the anthem cannot seem to imagine. Along with this, the Capitol prides itself on sterility and structure that the “Gem of Panem” reinforced, while the pastoral imagery in “The Valley Song” evokes a soft and sensory image of freedom and fluidity, creating an emotional openness that is raw for the audience.

2.4. The Power of Memorability Through Song

The specific line, “roses are red, love; violets are blue” (Collins 70), is rooted in 18th-century balladry, situating the song itself in this ballad tradition and in a way that draws on the citizens’ emotions. Found in Gammer Gurton’s Garland, a 1784 collection of English nursery rhymes, this line illustrates how Lucy Gray situates herself in a broader literary tradition, and how she transcends this tradition by using it in her own music, representing creative freedom that is otherwise not depicted in Capitol spaces (Gurton).

When looking at the particular poetic devices, literary traditions, and rhyme schemes present in “The Valley Song,” it can be noted that Lucy Gray’s deliberate songwriting draws on these poetic traditions in order to create memorable tunes that will outlast her, just as William Wordsworth had done with “Lucy Gray,” depicting how she, as a character, is inheriting the traditions that she was named after. “The Valley Song” follows an AAAA rhyme scheme, also known as a

monorhyme.¹⁸ This monorhyme slows down the listener's attention, compelling them to linger on the repeating sounds, therefore allowing them to focus on what is being said, ultimately reinforcing the themes of longing and continuity that define what Lucy Gray discusses in this song (Baldwin).

This particular song also possesses a refrain,¹⁹ which emphasizes key themes and aids in increasing the memorability. In the last stanza, “. . . know I love you. . .” (Collins 70), is repeated three times, and acts as a line that will bring up emotional memories for Coriolanus, as well as allow him to channel his memory to remember “The Valley Song” that same evening, depicting how powerful these simple poetic devices can be when utilized correctly and strategically.

2.5. “*The Valley Song*” vs. “*Gem of Panem*”

Due to the repeated refrains, rhyme structures, and lullaby-like cadence, “The Valley Song” leaves room for improvisation. Repetition in this song does not necessarily fix the melody of the song in place, but it instead opens a flexible emotional register that a singer can stretch, emphasize, or deliver differently each time to adapt the song and make it their own. This allows for the song to be deeply personal and adaptive. For example, Lucy Gray can bend the tempo, linger on a note, and even infuse the lines with new emotion inflections, allowing the song to shift with each performance in ways that “Gem of Panem” cannot.

Built on anaphora, a uniform meter, and a collective unison, “Gem of Panem” demands perfect repetition rather than allowing for emotional creativity. The anthem's fixed melody and rhyme scheme results in its militaristic cadence, ensuring that every voice who sings it collapses into the same patriotic lyricism, which takes away and excludes individuality, memory, and touches of personal inflection. Unlike “The Valley Song,” which allows for the performer to make the melody their own, the anthem requires absolute collectivity and

¹⁸ Monorhyme “possesses a unique hypnotic effect and makes a poem feel fluid and ethereal” (Baldwin).

¹⁹ Refrains allow listeners to retain and pass down key messages within songs or poems.

unison, reinforcing the Capitol's ideological need for control, obedience, and suppression of emotions.

This can be further explored with the utilization of "I" versus "we" within both songs, equating to how much personalization is allowed. "The Valley Song" is sung intimately in first-person, as depicted by the "I love you" (Collins 70), while "Gem of Panem" relies entirely on the collective "we" rather than a first-person point-of-view. When Lucy Gray sings her song, the "I" present makes room for personal emotions, and improvisation, allowing for the performer to inhabit the song, both emotionally and individually. In stark opposition, when the anthem uses "we," it dissolves individuality into a faceless collective that demands citizens to suppress their personal emotions and devote themselves to the Capitol's ideological unity.

While the first-person point-of-view can open a space for vulnerability, memory, and personal attachment, the "we" of the Capitol anthem enforces unity, obedience, and patriotism of national identity that leaves no room for deviation from the ideological. In a Jamesonian lens, this improvisational structure resists ideological mechanisms of controlled indulgence, because its emotional resonance cannot be contained or reproduced identically. Gilroy's helpful insight also depicts how expressive cultures retain their "needs and desires" (57) that exceed mere material functions that help explain why Lucy Gray's music unsettles Capitol ideology. Her ballads hold ancestral memory and embody emotional improvisation that cannot be extinguished, even when performed under surveillance.²⁰

²⁰ Lucy Gray Baird's music can be seen as one originating from Appalachian culture, since that is where District 12 is geographically located. According to Jeff Todd Titon, there is a myth amongst educators that Appalachia is an alternative America, and is a fragmented remnant of folk society. Ultimately, he states that, "in various ways they have promoted the virtues of an earlier, pre-industrial America thought to have left its traces there: modesty, honesty, loyalty, family, honour, craftsmanship, and an emphasis on personal, neighbourly relationships" (Titon 77).

2.6. *“The Valley Song” Activating Coriolanus Snow’s Maternal Memory and Emotionality*

“The Valley Song” is the first and one of the only times Coriolanus breaks from his ideological exterior and taps into an emotional resonance that he was unaware of possessing. As Coriolanus stands transfixed by the music, there becomes a rush of memories that accompany the music:

His mother used to sing him a song at bedtime. Not this one, exactly, but it had used those same words, roses are red and violets are blue. It had mentioned loving him. He thought of the photo in the silver frame he kept on the nightstand by his bed. His beautiful mother, holding him when he was about two. They were looking at each other, laughing. Try as he might, he could never remember the moment the picture was taken, but this song caressed his brain, calling her from the depths. He could sense her presence, almost smell the delicate scent of the rose powder she wore, and feel the warm blanket of security that had enveloped him each night. Before she died... (Collins 70).

What we be determined, by the context provided by Coriolanus in the preceding pages, is that his maternal memories were evoked through the “roses are red, violets are blue” imagery, causing the familiarity of the lullaby and allusion to it to be one of the main factors in appealing to emotions, even in the citizens who echo the Capitol’s ideology the most.

This is not the last time, however, “The Valley Song” evokes this feminine feeling of emotion within Coriolanus. When Coriolanus returns home that same night from the zoo, he takes his mother’s compact and runs his fingers over it before recalling the same “roses are red, love; violets are blue / birds in the heavens know I love you...” (Collins 78), to which we are provided with more internal, emotional resonant memories:

“Just like your father’s,” the Grandma’am frequently reminded him. He wished he had his mother’s eyes instead, but never said so. Maybe it was best to take after his father. His mother had not really been tough enough for this world. He finally drifted off, thinking of her, but it was Lucy Gray, spinning in her rainbow dress, who sang in his dreams (Collins 78).

For Coriolanus, the remembrance of his late mother evokes the utopian possibility for freedom and possibility outside of the Capitol's control, rebelling against the ideological grooming his grandmother imposed on him. The one thing that Coriolanus cannot control, no matter how hard he tries, is his memories, which causes "The Valley Song" to eliminate controlled indulgence into emotions. Instead, his memories and emotions cause him to be uncomfortable, due to the fact that he cannot control them, and it is the lack of control and inability to regulate the melody of the music itself that his memories are responding to.

These memories are utterly different from those we see from Coriolanus while he sings "Gem of Panem" at Arachne's funeral, in which the utopian impulse of the memories of his mother or any emotional ties are contained. While singing at Arachne's funeral, Coriolanus notes that there was a "memory of her [his grandmother] ruler prodding at him" (Collins 129), one of the only memories we receive in association to the anthem before he finished singing. This memory is symbolic, especially with the way in which his grandmother pokes and prods at him, representing how the Capitol ideology can regulate what kinds of memories they are allowed to evoke. Her corrections push him towards an authoritative remembrance of national identity and away from the private and emotional feelings of his mother and sister during "The Valley Song." His grandmother thus becomes a cog in the Capitol's ideological machinery that ensures the anthem's collective militaristic nostalgia overrides any personal connections he may possess. This reinforcement, paired with President Ravinstill's praise of his singing with a simple nod, works to fill Coriolanus' memory with patriotic themes, while Lucy Gray's music ruptures this containment by eliciting memories that ideology cannot fully suppress.

The memories that Coriolanus recalls of his mother represents a lost, alternative utopian model of life, one that is shaped by warmth, tenderness, emotion, vulnerability, and a worldview that is not centered around domination and control. Upon hearing "The Valley Song," the memories of his mother return with an unexpected emotional punch, and the song's underlying feminine voice becomes a vehicle for imagining freedom beyond Capitol control. "The Valley Song"

taps into lost maternal lineage in Coriolanus' memory through the allusion to 18th-century British balladry, momentarily reminding him that another emotional and social world could have existed in his family, and one not determined by fear, scarcity, or, most importantly, Capitol control.

This is one of the moments where feminine voices become sites of utopian possibility and imagination, because the psychic space in which Coriolanus can engage with his emotions and feelings other than ambition and obedience are exposed. This temporarily disrupts his ideological grooming by reconnecting him to the possibility of freedom and softness, as associated with his mother, and, in essence, his sister who died during childbirth. Music here does what the ideological structure hopes that it suppresses: the music refuses to remain within the boundaries of controlled indulgence.

Instead of functioning as a safe, authorized release of emotion, "The Valley Song" creates an unscripted, non-controlled emotionally inducing medium that Coriolanus cannot regulate. This is the kind of voice and possibility that the Capitol works to suppress, because it is rooted in personal ties, empathy, and a sense of emotional shared humanity that has the possibility to overthrow the ideological if citizens are exposed to it enough.

Thus, the power of "The Valley Song" lies in how it calls upon feminine figures – whether real, lost, or imagined – to disrupt the harsh structures that define Coriolanus' ideological world. If Jameson says that ideology manages utopian desire by simultaneously evoking and containing it, then this moment suggests that music, when it is linked to memory and improvisation, resists this mechanism. Utopian desire refuses to be diffused back into and by ideological containment. They expose the fact that Coriolanus is not yet fully determined this early in the prequel, and that he could have been shaped by different voices and different forms of care, and alludes to the fact that he could still be shaped by feminine voices. Due to the feminine voices here being linked to memory, loss, and belonging, they carry the utopian possibility that a life outside of the Capitol ideology was once possible for

someone like Coriolanus, and, perhaps, still is if he draws close enough to the emotions this music reawakens.

“The Valley Song” possesses pastoral imagery, an affiliation with femininity, and poetic devices that carry a melodic memorability that connects with citizens’ emotional resonances, and deeply contradicts the “Gem of Panem’s” structure. While the anthem commands unity, devotion, control, and glorifies hierarchy, “The Valley Song” imagines communal belonging, tenderness, and emotional prosperity. “The Valley Song’s” poetic devices create an auditory register that lingers within Coriolanus’ psyche because the feminine voices associated with utopia offer a sentimental possibility of freedom that the Capitol ideology does not have the ability to control or contain. Gilroy’s framework reveals that Jameson does not acknowledge how music’s resistance lies in carrying residual memory and communal desire throughout. This explains why Collins utilizes balladry to dramatize utopian survival.

2.7. Coriolanus Snow’s Creation of His Own Ballad

Upon Coriolanus’ triumphant return to the Capitol, Collins creates a glimpse into the brutal dictator that he becomes in the upcoming novels. This is present in his thoughts less than 10 pages from the end of the novel:

He was glad about the erasure. It was just one more way to eliminate Lucy Gray from the world. The Capitol would forget her, the districts barely knew her, and District 12 had never accepted her as one of their own. In a few years, there would be a vague memory that a girl had once sung in the arena. And then, that would be forgotten too. Good-bye Lucy Gray, we hardly knew you (Collins 509)

These thoughts come after Lucy Gray’s disappearance, and one that Dr. Gaul ensures will be permanent in Panem’s history of the games when she says that she erased every last copy of the 10th annual Hunger Games, “never to be aired again” (Collins 509). The monologue, composed of Coriolanus’ victorious ideology initially reads as thoughts that are the culmination of ideological triumph. However, when reading Coriolanus’ thoughts through a ballad-centered framework, the rhetorical structure of his thoughts betrays the ideological structure he thinks it possesses. What ends up emerging from

Coriolanus' thoughts is not a declaration of his allegiance to Capitol ideology, but an unconscious construction of a counter-ballad that borrows formal elements from the feminine, utopian traditions derived from Lucy Gray.

This monologue holds repetition, cadence, and a refrain-like quality of phrasing that echoes the musicality of Lucy Gray's performances and ballad tradition. What appears to be a controlled, ideological statement begins to break down into thoughts that can be read as performative, rhythmic, and song-like. Coriolanus' utilization of repetition mirrors that present in "The Valley Song" when Lucy Gray clearly repeats, ". . . know I love you . . ." (Collins 70). Although Coriolanus does not explicitly repeat key words or phrases, there are repetitions of different phrases that mirror the act of "erasing" or "forgetting."

For example, the words, "erasure," "eliminate," "forget," "vague memory," and "forgotten," although mostly different, mean the same thing (Collins 509) – to completely remove, get rid of, or expel in some way, shape, or form. Some phrases similar in rhythm and meaning such as, "would forget her," "barely knew her," and "never accepted her," mirror Lucy Gray's refrain in "The Valley Song," which was noted as a device used to emphasize key themes and aid in increasing the memorability. It is clear that Coriolanus emphasizes the key idea that he wants the readers to know that Lucy Gray is never coming back, and that he is happy that her reemergence is out of the question. However, this repetition of key phrases also can be depicted and read as overcompensation for the ideological, meaning that he continuously uses this repetition as a means of resistance. Ultimately, this mirrors the balladry he is trying to fight so hard against.

Likewise, Coriolanus' monologue has rhythm and cadence to it, once again, mirroring the lulling melody of Lucy Gray's and his mother's songs. What primarily stands out to me about Coriolanus' thoughts is the end rhyme present in the last two lines.²¹ The lines "forgotten too" and "hardly knew you," creates an end rhyme, which produces

²¹ End Rhyme is a "a rhyme of the last word or the last syllable of two or more lines of verse" (Merriam-Webster).

a pleasing musical quality to the piece, and is common in children's poetry and songwriting, placing Coriolanus in the tradition of Lucy Gray's songwriting and his mother's nursery rhyming tradition (Baldwin). What begins to look like an affirmation of Capitol ideology at its finest, actually can be viewed as a ballad. The reason why his internal monologue is not easily recognizable as a utopic ballad is due to the fact that it presents itself as ideological, and because the person uttering these thoughts believes himself to be the epitome of Capitol ideology. However, his monologue is a reassertion of Lucy Gray's and his mother's utopian balladry techniques, and the traditions they followed.

Coriolanus' internal monologue reveals that he has been shaped so deeply by the musical and emotional impacts of Lucy Gray and his mother, that he cannot articulate Capitol ideology without unconsciously drawing on the utopian structures he associates with them. Coriolanus' thoughts initially function as an anti-ballad, one that seeks to finalize, close off narrative possibility of Lucy Gray's return. However, his reliance on repetition and rhythm undermines this effort, opening it up to the same kind of fluidity and reinterpretation that define traditional balladry, such as "The Valley Song," and Lucy Gray Baird's namesake, "Lucy Gray." In attempting to fixate Lucy Gray's story into silence and erasure, Coriolanus obscures this by actually ensuring her story has a continued resonance amongst those who read the novel.

Coriolanus' internal monologue can be seen as working within what Jameson calls "horse-trading," by offering the illusion of resolution while actually, unconsciously, he preserves the very utopian desire that he aims to extinguish. Yet, Gilroy's framework also comes into play here due to the fact that Jameson's model cannot entirely account for the musical form that this containment takes – Coriolanus does not produce a purely rational or Capitol-centered devotional statement of ideology, but rather a musical ballad that mirrors the cadence, repetition, and effective resonance of song.

When reading Coriolanus' monologue as a ballad, it reads as a type of outward ideological writing that exposes the limits of ideological

control; even as Coriolanus attempts to finalize and erase Lucy Gray's story and legacy, he reproduces the aesthetic structures that ensures her story persists and lives on. In trying to contain and diffuse the utopian desire through ideological expression, Coriolanus demonstrates Gilroy's claim that expressive forms, such as music, can exceed ideological containment that Jameson argues will always win out, which is what allows for memory, desire, and collective expression to outlast the ideological. This represents that despite efforts to fully align himself with masculine Capitol ideology, he cannot escape the malleable influence of feminine musical traditions.

3. Concluding Thoughts: Does Snow Really Land on Top?

At the end of *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*, Lucy Gray is not granted the typical narrative closure, political victory, or even historical recognition that any other protagonist in another novel may receive. Instead, Suzanne Collins subjects her to the very process that Jameson identifies as the ideological management of desire where she is erased, diffused, and symbolically "laid to rest." In the end, Coriolanus Snow erases her, tries to force readers to move past her, and, seemingly, has the Capitol ideology *land on top*.²² However, Collins does not allow for Lucy Gray's erasure to be complete and permanent. On the contrary, what remains, and what cannot be contained, is Lucy Gray's voice and legacy.

The conflict between Jameson's notions of "ideology" and "utopia" within the novel are amplified when we view Collins as gendering the conflict between these two forces. While the Capitol represents a masculinized ideology that is obsessed with order and power, Lucy Gray's music is a feminized form of utopia that is grounded in emotional expression and improvisation. This gendered distinction reveals how forms of knowledge and expression that are often associated with femininity have been continuously and historically

²² "Snow lands on top" is a phrase that is first introduced to us in the first chapter of the novel. Coriolanus states that it was the saying that got his family through the war. The novel's last chapter ends with the same phrase, Snow lands on top, to emphasize Coriolanus' rise to power.

undervalued in different theoretical frameworks, such as in Jameson's, but remain powerful sites of resistance that should be further explored.

Thus, Lucy Gray's disappearance at the end of the novel is a transformation that mimics her namesake in Wordsworth's poem, "Lucy Gray." Lucy Gray Baird becomes a figure who exists even when she is absent; her presence is physically gone, yet, she is still heard and her songs persist in echoes. Specifically, Lucy Gray's songs and the elements of such ballads persist in the cultural memory of Panem and, in the later novels, her legacy is embodied in the rebellion that dismantles the Capitol and demolishes Coriolanus Snow. Even Coriolanus embodies and transmits her legacy unknowingly with the creation of his own ballad in the epigram above. While he attempts to finalize Lucy Gray's disappearance and erase her from the minds of the readers and Capitol citizens, he unconsciously takes elements of her balladry, and uses them in his own internal monologue to create his own ballad.

When viewed in this light, it is vital to explore this novel in relation to Jameson, Gilroy, and 18th and 19th-century balladry, because Collins offers a reimagining of resistance that can be traced amongst these primary areas. Collins paints a portrait of utopian impulses that are situated in the quieter areas of song and storytelling that Jameson does not account for, but Gilroy identifies as a form of expressive culture that carries embodied memory and active forces that cannot fully be reduced to commodification or symbolic management. When looking at both sides of the ideological and utopian, Collins utilizes music to critique lived realities while also offering hope for the future, which is a powerful combination that is central to *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*' impact and Jameson's overall argument.

Truly, it may seem as if Snow lands on top and Lucy Gray has been forever erased from the narrative, just as he intended. However, Lucy Gray haunts the narrative of the entire *Hunger Games* trilogy and every book beyond. In this haunting, in these leftover traces of Lucy Gray Baird's legacy, Suzanne Collins suggests that there lies the possibility

of something that ideology can never fully contain, but will always try to extinguish: the persistence of hope.

References

- “Anaphora.” Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, 2025. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anaphora>, Accessed 30 Nov. 2025.
- Baldwin, Emma. “End Rhyme”. Poem Analysis, <https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/end-rhyme/> . Accessed 30 Nov. 2025.
- Baldwin, Emma. “Rhyme Scheme”. Poem Analysis, <https://poemanalysis.com/definition/rhyme-scheme/>. Accessed 30 Nov. 2025.
- Collins, Suzanne. *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*. Scholastic INC, 2020.
- “End Rhyme.” Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, 2025. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/end%20rhyme>, Accessed 30 Nov. 2025.
- Fleetwood Mac. “Silver Springs (Live at Warner Brothers Studios in Burbank, CA 5/23/97).” Rumours, Record Plant, 1977. YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-RYRoQO15ZI>.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness*. Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Gordon, Avery F. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. NED-New edition, Second, University of Minnesota Press, 1997. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttt4hp>. Accessed 30 Nov. 2025.
- Hall, Spencer. “Wordsworth’s ‘Lucy’ Poems: Context and Meaning.” *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 10, no. 3, 1971, pp. 159–75. JSTOR, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.lehigh.edu/10.2307/25599802>. Accessed 19 Apr. 2026.
- Jameson, Fredric. “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture.” *Social Text*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1979, pp. 130–148, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466409>.
- Mong, Ambrose, and Mark DeStephano. “Utopia.” *A Better World Is Possible: An Exploration of Utopian Visions*, 1st ed., The Lutterworth Press, 2018, pp. 1–24. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvj4svs3.6>. Accessed 9 June 2026.
- Ritson, Joseph. *Gammer Gurton’s Garland*. Project Gutenberg, 2010, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/34601/34601-h/34601-h.htm>.
- Santamaria, Joe. “AAB Rhyme Scheme”. Poem Analysis, <https://poemanalysis.com/rhyme-scheme/aab/>. Accessed 30 Nov. 2025.

- Tatheer Imran, et al. "A Formalist Analysis of William Wordsworth's 'Lucy Gray'". *Social Science Review Archives*, vol. 2, no. 2, Dec. 2024, pp. 1416-23, doi:10.70670/sra.v2i2.193.
- "The Hunger Games - 'Hope' Clip." YouTube, uploaded by IGN, 15 Mar. 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_e3wADQ7IXw
- Titon, Jeff Todd. "Music and the US War on Poverty: Some Reflections." *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, vol. 45, 2013, pp. 74–82. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.5921/yeartradmusi.45.2013.0074>. Accessed 9 June 2026.
- Wordsworth, William. "Lucy Gray; or, Solitude." *Lyrical Ballads, with a Few Other Poems*, 1799.

Dystopien der Gegenwart: Literarische und filmische Technikkritik am Beispiel von Hans Joachim Gernerts *Knotenpunkt – Angriff auf das Netz* und Maria Schraders *Ich bin dein Mensch*

Jude Daniel Tolo¹

1. Einleitung

Knotenpunkt – Angriff auf das Netz heißt der dritte Roman von Hans Joachim Gernert, einem deutschen Gegenwartsautor. Der im Jahre 2023 erschienene Foresight-Roman (weitsichtige Roman, Zukunftsroman), dessen thematische Aktualität und ästhetisches Potenzial eine gewisse Selbstverständlichkeit² sind, ermöglicht interessante Perspektiven für die derzeitige literaturwissenschaftliche Textanalyse. Da das futuristische Denken im literarischen Feld, vor allem in den Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaften zunehmend an Bedeutung gewinnt, wäre es von Belang, sich eingehend mit ihm zu befassen. Dabei steht die „Zukunftsliteratur [...] vor einer paradoxen neuen Situation“, indem „das literarisch Imaginierte bereits durch die bestehende Realität erreicht und übertroffen werden kann oder schon ist“ (Voßkamp, 2017, S. 414). Anders ausgedrückt, was einst in erfundenen Zukunftsszenarien existierte, ist nun Lebenswirklichkeit und die in den fiktiven

¹ PhD Student, Université Bourgogne Europe & Universität Leipzig, UFR Lettres et Philosophie, École Doctorale LECLA, Dijon, France, ORCID: 0009-0008-9674-5934, Email: jude-daniel_tolo@etu.uibc.fr

² Dieser Roman ist hochaktuell, fähig, ästhetische Erfahrungen (Sinnlichkeit, Emotionen und intellektuelle Anregung) beim Leser bzw. bei der Leserin hervorzurufen, und widmet sich den technischen Fortschritten in einem dystopischen Setting. Der Text schildert in der dritten Person erkennbare Veränderungen in der Gesellschaft und Technik. Es wird überwiegend im Präsens und im Präteritum erzählt. Obwohl die Narration segmentiert (durch Kapitel) wird, beziehen sich die unterschiedlichen Segmente auf eine selbe Realität: Angst vor der Gegenwart, Sorge um die Zukunft. Der raum-zeitliche Rahmen ist nicht genau festgelegt und erstreckt sich deswegen manchmal über mehrere Orte, Jahre und Zeiträume.

Zukunftsvisionen vorgestellten Welten haben sich in der realen Lebenswelt manifestiert. Dystopie, Gegenwart und Technik sind somit drei zentrale Komponenten in Gernerts Werk, wobei der Roman von der Gegenwart in die nahe Zukunft blickt. Der dystopische Charakter dieses Narrativs wird sichtbar insofern, als Schreckbilder von einer totalen Überwachung mittels universeller Informationstechnik entworfen werden. Der Gegenwart kommt ebenfalls in meinem ersten Korpus eine soziale Symbolik zu, und dies erleichtert eine Leseart des literarischen Textes als Medium der Subversion, indem es implizite Warnungen vor aktuellen gesellschaftlichen Tendenzen und Problemen andeutet, welche Gesellschaftskritik und Sensibilisierung zulassen. Die Technik letztendlich, die in diesem zu untersuchenden literarischen Text als instrumentalisiert erscheint, mag über Handwerk, Kunst, Fertigkeit oder Wissenschaft (vgl. Preußner, 2013, S. 157) hinausgehen, sich auf die Technokratie berufen und „tritt die Stelle der Macht selbst an“ (Preußner, 2013, S. 158). Dabei wird die Dystopie mit Technik gestützt und die letztere erweist sich im Roman als „Instrument gesellschaftlicher Unterdrückung“ (Preußner, 2013, S. 159).

Genauso wie der Roman thematisiert der 2021 von der deutschen Regisseurin Maria Schrader dritte produzierte Kinofilm *Ich bin dein Mensch* eine absolute Präsenz der Technologie und vor allem der Künstlichen Intelligenz. Es handelt sich dabei um die Problematisierung von Mensch-Maschine-Interaktionen in naher Zukunft, wobei die Künstliche Intelligenz Eigenschaften, Potenziale und Fähigkeiten verkörpert, welche bislang nur Menschen vorbehalten waren. Die Protagonistin Alma kann nicht angesichts der großen Ähnlichkeit in allen Bereichen (Stimme, Verhalten, Aussehen, Mobilität, Intelligenz und kritisches Denken) einen Roboter (Tom) von einem Menschen unterscheiden, was ein starkes Signal für Technikkritik ist.

In Anbetracht dessen wendet sich dieser Beitrag der Hauptfrage zu: Inwiefern werden Topoi und Themen der Technikkritik in der Gattung Dystopie verhandelt? Aus dieser Hauptfrage ergeben sich Nebenfragen, und zwar: Wie nehmen der Roman *Knotenpunkt – Angriff auf das Netz* (2023) und der Film *Ich bin dein Mensch* (2021) Bezug auf die gegenwärtige Technikkritik? Welche Funktionen erfüllen fortschrittliche Technologien als konkretes, dystopisch dargestelltes

Problem? Die Ausgangshypothese besagt, dass die literarische und filmische Bezugnahme auf die gegenwärtige Technikkritik in der Realitätsdarstellung, in deren Thematisierung und Imagination erfolgt. Dabei führen die fortschreitende Technisierung und der Verlust sozialer Bedingungen im Roman *Knotenpunkt – Angriff auf das Netz* zu einer Entfremdung und Entmenschlichung der Gesellschaft. Der Film *Ich bin dein Mensch* beinhaltet eine Technikkritik, orientiert an der Verführungskraft und der Manipulation der Maschinen. Mein Vorhaben verfolgt dementsprechend das Ziel, literarische und filmische Technikkritik am Beispiel von Hans Joachim Gernerts Roman *Knotenpunkt – Angriff auf das Netz* und Maria Schraders Film *Ich bin dein Mensch* zu untersuchen, indem Aspekte der Thematisierung, Imagination und Reflexion der Gegenwart vor allem hinsichtlich des immer größer werdenden Einflusses der Künstlichen Intelligenz beleuchtet werden. Zudem möchte ich dem Beitrag dieser literarischen und filmischen Dystopien zum kritischen Bewusstsein für den Umgang mit Technologie bzw. mit computergestützten Programmen und Systemen nachgehen.

2. Das Genre der Dystopie im literarischen und filmischen Setting

Dystopien beziehen sich meistens auf „die Schilderung der Katastrophe [...], die in den schwärzesten Farben und mit drastischen Bildern beschrieben wird“ (Voßkamp, 2017, S. 413). Eine Dystopie weist also Schreckbilder auf, ist „nicht einfache Antithese [von Utopie], sondern transportiert im Scheitern die Anlagen, welche Utopie auszeichnen konnten, gleichsam mit“ (Preußner, 2013, S. 159).

Im philosophischen Diskurs verweist der Begriff Technikkritik im Allgemeinen auf die „philosophisch-anthropologischen Sorgen bezüglich Technikunterstützungssysteme“ (Sombetzki, 2015, S. 30). Die ‚gegenwärtige Technikkritik‘ ist mithin eine Kontextualisierung und Reaktualisierung der Technikdiskurse in Bezug auf eine negative Haltung gegenüber der Verbreitung moderner Technik. Es handelt sich daher um eine Anpassung an die aktuellen gesellschaftlichen Herausforderungen. Die ältere Technikkritik, stark beeinflusst von den

Erfahrungen der Massengesellschaft, des Zweiten Weltkriegs und der Atombombenabwürfe auf Hiroshima, sieht sich einer neueren Perspektive gegenüber. Die neuere Technikkritik reagiert foglich auf die offensichtliche Zerstörung von Leben durch die technisch-industrielle Zivilisation und die Entwicklung neuer Technologien. Ausgehend von veränderten Erfahrungen rückt sie neue Dimensionen in den Fokus, die die theoretische Auseinandersetzung mit Technologie grundlegend verändern³ (vgl. Müller & Nievergelt, 1996, S. 16). Vor diesem Hintergrund sind „Zukunftsvisionen durch ein negatives Bild gekennzeichnet, in dem die Rolle von Technik und Technologie in gegenwärtigen Gesellschaften problematisiert wird“ (Chilese & Preuß, 2013, S. 8). In Anlehnung an Ágnes Heller sind Dystopien „Schöpfungen der Einbildungskraft in Verbindung mit bestimmten Ansichten einer Zeit und der Leidenschaft der Furcht“ (Heller, 2016, S. 17). Deswegen bringt das dystopische Moment den Verlust des Glaubens an sozialen und historischen Fortschritt, die Möglichkeit der Perfektion. In der Dystopie manifestieren sich „Sozialkritik und Kulturkritik“ (Heller, 2016, S. 55). Dabei sehen „[d]ystopische Autoren [...] in der Zukunft nichts als hoffnungslose Dunkelheit“ (Heller, 2016, S. 56). Zu diesem Zweck macht Heller eine interessante Anmerkung, welche man mit Müllers und Nievergelts Positionen (1996) verknüpfen kann, und zwar:

Im zeitgenössischen Europa gibt es daher keine sozialutopische Literatur, die die Wohltaten der Technologie bejubelt. Deren Innovationen – real oder imaginär – bereichern eher dystopische Fantasien. Waren Technologie und Wissenschaft im utopischen Denken des 19. Jahrhunderts nicht nur Segnungen, sondern auch Garantien für eine zukünftige gerechte Gesellschaft, wurden sie im dystopischen Moment des 20. Jahrhunderts zu Mitteln der Manipulation, der Zerstörung von Persönlichkeit, Individualität, Differenz. (Heller, 2016, S. 60)

³ Dieser These könnte man widersprechen, indem man beispielsweise erwähnt, dass die Entwicklung der industriellen Landwirtschaft durch die Chemie und Technisierung des Ackerbaus bis hin zur Gentechnologie heute seit dem 19. Jahrhundert immer mehr Menschen ernährt, Hungersnöte abgeschafft und Wohlstand geschaffen. Der medizinische Fortschritt hat weiterhin menschliche Lebensspannen verlängert.

In diesem Zitat wird der Einsatz bzw. die Instrumentalisierung von Technologie, Technik und Wissenschaft für negative Zwecke impliziert. Es handelt sich um einen starken Kontrast zwischen utopischer Hoffnung und dystopischer Realität. Dies führt zu einer pessimistischen Sicht auf Technologie und Wissenschaft, die literarisch und filmisch verhandelt wird.

Gernerts *Knotenpunkt* betont in diesem Sinne die Datenspeicherung und Überwachung als Konsequenzen der technikorientierten Gesellschaft. Die Protagonisten befinden sich wie in einer Falle, werden manipuliert, kontrolliert und assimiliert. In Schraders Film *Ich bin dein Mensch* werden die negativen Facetten der Künstlichen Intelligenz kritisiert, indem Robotern menschliche Fähigkeiten und Eigenschaften zugeschrieben werden, und sie ersetzen schließlich Menschen sogar in Bereichen wie zwischenmenschlichen Beziehungen und sexueller Intimität.

Von Hellers Anmerkung ausgehend kann die Manipulation auf Propaganda, Überwachung oder andere Formen der sozialen Kontrolle referieren. Bei der Zerstörung von Persönlichkeit geht es um die Gefahr, dass technologische Entwicklungen die Individualität und Autonomie des Einzelnen untergraben und Menschen zu austauschbaren Einheiten machen. Bezüglich der Zerstörung von Individualität unterstreicht dies den Verlust der Einzigartigkeit und Besonderheit jedes Einzelnen. Was die Zerstörung von Differenz anbelangt, suggeriert dies die Tendenz, Vielfalt und Unterschiede zwischen Menschen zu unterdrücken oder auszulösen, möglicherweise durch Standardisierung oder Konformitätsdruck, der durch Technologie verstärkt wird.

Wilhelm Voßkamp positioniert sich in einer ähnlichen Argumentationslinie mit Blick auf die Dichotomien Utopie und Apokalypse, Utopie und Dystopie sowie Hoffnung und Verzweiflung:

Während wir die Mittel der modernen Medizin, auch in der Gehirnchirurgie oder Genforschung gern nutzen, sind wir andererseits entsetzt über ihre unabsehbaren Folgen. Während wir alle Möglichkeiten moderner schneller Kommunikation in Gebrauch nehmen (keine Hand mehr ohne Handy), ist andererseits die Bestürzung groß, wenn wir zuverlässig erfahren, dass alle unsere Daten auf Dauer gespeichert sind und stets verfügbar bleiben und von anderen genutzt werden können, zu welchen

Zwecken auch immer. Die Dialektik von Utopie und Dystopie/Wunsch und Schrecken ist unauflöslich. (Voßkamp, 2017, S. 421 – 422)

Voßkamp problematisiert damit die unauflösbare Ambivalenz des technologischen Fortschritts zwischen Nutzen und Risiko. Während moderne Medizin und digitale Kommunikation den Alltag bereichern, lösen deren Konsequenzen wie totale Datenüberwachung und ethische Unsicherheit tiefgreifendes Entsetzen aus. Diese Dialektik zeigt, dass utopische Wünsche und dystopische Ängste untrennbar miteinander verwoben sind. Der Mensch befindet sich unvermeidlich in einem dauerhaften Spannungsfeld zwischen Komfort und Kontrollverlust. Letztlich wird impliziert, dass jede technologische Errungenschaft zwangsläufig ihren eigenen Schrecken mit sich bringt, so wie es auch in *Knotenpunkt – Angriff auf das Netz* der Fall sein wird.

Im nächstfolgenden Teil wird die Technologie als Instrument der Unterdrückung im Roman erörtert.

3. *Knotenpunkt – Angriff auf das Netz* (2023): Technologie als Instrument der Unterdrückung

Knotenpunkt – Angriff auf das Netz entwirft das dystopische Panorama einer von einer Oligarchie, dem sogenannten „council“, beherrschten Welt und zeichnet sich durch eine thematische Vielschichtigkeit aus, die sich formal in drei große, in kleine nummerierte Abschnitte bzw. unterteilte Kapitel gliedert: Während der erste Teil „Knotenpunkt“ vierzig Unterkapitel umfasst, folgen darauf „New exciting world“ mit siebenunddreißig sowie „Afrika“ mit dreiundzwanzig Unterkapiteln, was das Werk als einen in Stationen organisierten Prosatext kennzeichnet, dessen technikkritische Diskurse sich strukturell auf die zwei wesentlichen Dimensionen der technologischen Beschaffenheit und des dystopischen Settings zuspitzen lassen.

Durch die detaillierte Schilderung technischer Systeme, Installationen und Algorithmen sowie den Fokus auf computergestützte Endgeräte und den praktischen Umgang mit Maschinen ist das Werk von einer permanenten Präsenz fachspezifischer Terminologie durchzogen. Über diesen Fachjargon hinaus thematisiert der Roman explizit

technische Prozesse, indem die auktoriale Erzählinstanz Systeme detailliert beschreibt und dabei die Verknüpfung zwischen veralteten sowie neuartigen Technologien aufzeigt, welche den Ursprung der dystopischen Weltordnung markiert und deren transformativer Charakter den Alltag der Bevölkerung grundlegend verändert hat:

Die Schaltschränke, die für die Stromversorgung der Computer sorgten, waren wie früher alte Technik, nichts Digitales, Mechanik, mit dicken Leitungen, Sicherungen und auf hohe Lasten ausgelegt. Hier ging es nicht um Hochtechnologie, sondern um eine zuverlässige und sichere Energieversorgung. Zwar waren zwischenzeitlich die alten Pläne digitalisiert worden, so dass alles online abgerufen werden konnte. Selbst bei neuen Schränken übernahmen Fotoscanner die technische Dokumentation. Jeder Schrank wurde bei der Fertigstellung fotografiert, ein Scanner erkannte die Bauteile und speicherte die Baupläne ab. Schnell und sicher. Trotzdem mussten, wenn Teile ersetzt wurden, weil sie überlastet oder schlicht am Ende ihrer Nutzungsdauer angekommen waren, auch die Pläne nachgezogen werden. Änderungen mussten einprogrammiert werden und das machte neben den Reparaturen einen großen Teil seiner Arbeit aus [...]. [...] Der gutaussehende Techniker lag noch immer auf dem Boden und krümmte sich vor Schmerzen. (Gernert, 2023, S. 51–53)

Die Erzählinstanz verdeutlicht einerseits den technologischen Wandel anhand der transformierten Arbeitswelt: Während die Digitalisierung zwar Erleichterung verspricht, verlangen die Instandhaltung und Reparatur analoger Apparaturen weiterhin physische Interventionen, wodurch ein hybrides Anforderungsprofil entsteht, das sowohl gründliches mechanisches Verständnis als auch die Kompetenz zur digitalen Programmierung voraussetzt. Andererseits werden die Schattenseiten dieses Fortschritts durch die körperliche Erschöpfung des Technikers manifestiert – formuliert durch die Beschreibung, er habe sich „vor Schmerzen am Boden gekrümmt“ –, was die technologische Durchdringung des dystopischen Settings unterstreicht. Diese Szene exponiert die totale Abhängigkeit der Bürger*innen von der Technik, die sie anfällig für Manipulation macht und den Einzelnen in einer Form der Entmenschlichung zur bloßen, ersetzbaren Ressource degradiert.

Überdies manifestieren sich technische Aspekte des dystopischen Settings in der Omnipräsenz von Überwachung und Datenkontrolle: In *Knotenpunkt – Angriff auf das Netz* fungiert ein lückenloses

Instrumentarium aus Drohnen, Kameras und Sensoren dazu, sämtliche Lebensbereiche der Bevölkerung zu erfassen, während die staatliche Instanz durch die Analyse dieser riesigen Mengen an Daten eine präzise Verhaltenssteuerung der Bürger*innen ausübt. Durch eine zentrale Station des Werks (vgl. Gernert, 2023, S. 12–16) die den ausführenden Fokus auf die Überwachungs- und Kontrollmechanismen legt, lässt sich die strukturelle Organisation der dargestellten Gesellschaft detailliert analysieren. Ein wesentlicher Parameter der staatlichen Kontrollstrategie offenbart sich in der Implementierung einer virtuellen Währung, die durch die regierungsseitige Abschaffung von Bargeld und Privateigentum eine vollständige Überwachung sämtlicher Bewegungen, Transaktionen sowie der Kommunikation ermöglicht. Ein zweiter Aspekt betrifft die mobilen, insektenähnlichen Drohnen, die als klassisches dystopisches Motiv hervortreten: Ihre geringe Größe und das „leise Geräusch“ (Gernert, 2023, S. 14) suggerieren eine unauffällige Allgegenwärtigkeit, während Attribute wie „selbstlenkend“ und „mobil“ (Gernert, 2023, S. 14) eine hochflexible Datenerfassung garantieren, die über das einfache stationäre Monitoring hinausgeht. Diese technologische Infrastruktur dient primär der Speisung eines „Social-Points“-Systems (Gernert, 2023, S. 15), bei dem das Verhalten der Bürger*innen kontinuierlich bewertet und sanktioniert wird. Anhand dessen ist dem Staat im Text gelungen, eine subtile, aber allgegenwärtige Form der Überwachung zu implementieren, wobei ein System sozialer Bewertung effektiv ist.

In Bezug auf die Figurenkonstellation wird die Verknüpfung zu den technischen Aspekten des dystopischen Settings in *Knotenpunkt – Angriff auf das Netz* maßgeblich über die Figurenrede inszeniert. Dabei nehmen Figuren wie Amil, Mara, Kena, Samir, Sara, Eleonore, der Ratsvorsitzende, Silva und Richard zentrale Rollen ein, selbst wenn sie nicht alle unmittelbar zu Wort kommen.

Exemplarisch steht hierfür die Figur des Informatikers Amil, der die Befreiung aus dem repressiven System anstrebt, indem er einen gezielten technologischen Angriff auf das Netzwerk über den zentralen Knotenpunkt plant und initiiert.

Amil wusste nicht nur, wie man den Tracker ausschalten konnte sondern auch wie man ihn deaktivieren konnte, ohne dass das Ausschalten

dokumentiert wurde. Es war eine geniale Kopie des optimalen Bewegungsprofils, KI-optimiert, aber nicht wahrheitsgemäß, die aufgespielt wurde. Niemand würde auf Anhieb erkennen, dass die gesendeten Daten falsch waren, jedenfalls nicht ohne genauere Prüfung oder spezielle Prüfprogramme. (Gernert, 2013, S. 12–13)

Kena ist eine Aktivistin für die Menschenrechte, die Machtmissbrauch und Fehlverhalten des Systems anprangert, einschließlich der Instrumentalisierung der Digitalisierung im Rahmen des Systems sozialer Bewertung:

Es war Kena zuerst aufgefallen, dass genau diese Macht des councils ins Unermessliche gewachsen war. „Wir sind Schafe, nichts weiter, dumme Schafe! Und die machen was sie wollen!“, hatte sie sich ereifert [...]. Das war genau an dem Tag gewesen, als die Punkte für ihre Arbeit, für die Zeit und Zuwendung für Alte und Kranke, fast vollständig abgeschafft wurden. Der council hatte verfügt, dass ärztliche Betreuung für chronisch Kranke und Alte keine Tätigkeit mehr sei, die förderlich für die Ziele der Gesellschaft war. Das war zum neuen Maßstab für die Vergabe der Punkte geworden. (Gernert, 2023, S. 21)

Samir ist ein Programmierer, der Befehle befolgt. Er stellt jedoch fest, dass er den Überwachungsmaßnahmen entgegenwirken kann, indem er den Ort der Daten, welche die DNA tragen, ändert. In diesem Beispiel kann die Technologie genutzt werden, um ein Regime zu bekämpfen:

Samir hatte mit seiner Tätigkeit, schnell und logisch zu denken und präzise zu beschreiben, einen festen Platz in der Elite der Programmierer gefunden. Seine Aufgabe war das Datenmanagement, also die Programme, die dafür sorgten, dass sowohl als auch Maschine genau die Daten, die zur Aufrechterhaltung der neuen Ordnung gesammelt und ausgewertet wurden, in der richtigen Auswahl, Menge und zur rechten Zeit zur Verfügung standen. [...] Es war ihm von Anfang an klar gewesen, dass die DNA der Schlüssel sein würde. Sie erlaubte die sichere Zuordnung jedes Menschen und damit die Überwachung. [...] Eine DNA ließ sich nicht fälschen. Aber diese Zuordnung war nicht mehr und nicht weniger als ein Datensatz, und Datensätze ließen sich manipulieren. [...] Die Verbindung des screens mit der DNA ermöglichte alle Formen der Überwachung, aber auch Schlüssel und Zugangsberechtigungen, Bezahlfunktionen, die Sammlung von Krankendaten und, wichtig für eine Überwachung, die Ortung. (Gernert, 2023, S. 48–49)

Bei Amil wird die Deinstallation des Trakers als Versuch angesehen, das System lahmzulegen und zu zerstören. Dies verdeutlicht zudem eine Schwachstelle, die vielen staatlichen Systemen, Strukturen und Organisationen innewohnt und die Gernert in seinem Roman andeuten möchte. Das dystopische Moment macht Sinn, weil die Dystopie in diesem Zusammenhang das Versagen der IT-Systeme widerspiegelt. Kena ist eine der Hauptfiguren des Werks, weil sie sich entschieden gegen den council stellt. Durch ihre Wahrnehmung und Sichtweise im Roman gewährt der Erzähler der Leserschaft einen Einblick in die irrationale Ausgestaltung des Unterdrückungsregimes. Was die Figur Samir betrifft, so erweist sich die Manipulation der DNA als einziger möglicher Ausweg, um die Oligarchie zu besiegen. Denn die gesamte Überwachung beruht auf der Zuordnung der DNA der Bürger*innen zu ihren Zugangsdaten, seien es Bankdaten, Gesundheitsdaten oder sogar Daten in Verbindung mit der Mobilität. Dies ist eine Schlüsselstelle des Romans, die den Wunsch nach Befreiung um jeden Preis von dieser durch die Oligarchie verursachten Diktatur hervorhebt. Es lassen sich Parallelen zu Revolutionen in autoritären Regimes ziehen, in denen die Anführer*innen der Revolution jede nur erdenkliche Strategie anwenden, um einem autokratischen Regime ein Ende zu setzen, selbst wenn dies das Opfer ihres Lebens bedeutet. Die Wahl der Figuren Amil, Kena und Samir als Beispiele für die Missetaten des councils und dessen Unterdrückung der individuellen Freiheiten ist durch ihren Willen gerechtfertigt, gegen den Strom zu schwimmen und eine Revolution anzustoßen.

All diese Figuren haben versucht, sich dem System zu widersetzen. Sie hinterfragen das System und spüren, dass mit der Gesellschaft etwas grundlegend nicht stimmt. Dieser Antagonismus spiegelt sich auch in den narrativen Strukturen der literarischen Dystopien wider. Manche Figuren im Roman, die unter dem Druck des councils stehen, werden schließlich nachgeben und sich den neuen Normen unterwerfen, während andere sich von Anfang an an das System anpassen und dessen Ideologie oft blind folgen. Die Figur des councils steht zugleich für die gesamte Unterdrückungskraft des politischen Systems und des Staatsapparats und verkörpert das totalitäre Regime. Während er in Gerners Roman als eine einzige Entität beschrieben wird,

setzt er sich aus mehreren Personen, Strukturen und Ramifikationen zusammen, die ihm dienen. Dieser narrative Text versucht daher aufzuzeigen, inwieweit ein autoritäres System den Alltag der Bürger*innen manipulieren und beeinflussen kann, die ihrerseits unermüdlich versuchen, sich davon zu befreien. Diese Spannung treibt den Konflikt und den Verlauf der Geschehnisse voran.

Die Technologie spielt dabei eine grundlegende Rolle, da sie das Herzstück des Kontrollsystems bildet und für eine ideal fortgeschrittene Gesellschaft unverzichtbar ist. Die technologische Durchdringung erscheint hauptsächlich in einer biometrischen Vollerfassung, bei der der menschliche Körper durch chirurgisch implantierte Hardware und digitale Schnittstellen unmittelbar in das Netzwerk integriert wird: „den implantierten Datenträger in der Haut seines Armes“, „Das screen wurde jedem Menschen durch einen kleinen chirurgischen Eingriff eingesetzt“ (Gernet, 2023, S. 12). Diese invasive Form der Kopplung macht das Individuum permanent lokalisierbar und reduziert seine körperliche Mobilität und Freiheit, wobei die „Sehnsucht nach dem nicht Kontrolliertem[...] [und] [d]ie Sehnsucht nach Freiheit“ (Gernet, 2023, S. 12) das übergeordnete Ziel der Bürger*innen bleibt. Die Machtausübung des Regimes stützt sich dabei auf eine KI-optimierte Auswertung von Metadaten: „Es gab kaum eine Verletzung oder Krankheit, die nicht über die Daten analysiert werden konnte“ (Gernet, 2023, S. 16). Freiheit wird in diesem Kontext zwangsläufig als ein Akt der technologischen Sabotage definiert. Der Widerstand der Figuren konzentriert sich konsequent auf die Deaktivierung von Tracking-Mechanismen und die Manipulation digitaler Strukturen, was andeutet, dass in einer technokratischen Dystopie der Befreiungskampf grundsätzlich auf der Ebene der Programmierung und Systemarchitektur geführt werden muss: „wie man den tracker ausschalten konnte“, „wie man ihn deaktivieren konnte, ohne dass das Ausschalten dokumentiert wurde“ (Gernet, 2023, S. 12), „ob es technisch möglich sei, den tracker auszuschalten“ (Gernet, 2023, S. 13). Letztlich steht der „Knotenpunkt“ als Sinnbild für eine Gesellschaft, in der die Technik die Menschen nicht freier macht. Im Gegenteil: Die ständige Vernetzung ersetzt die persönliche Freiheit komplett durch eine absolute Überwachung aus dem Internet.

Die zweite Dimension des Romans widmet sich der Technikkritik, welche in *Knotenpunkt – Angriff auf das Netz* auf vielfältige Weise thematisiert wird: Sie umfasst erstens die Instrumentalisierung von Technologie zur Unterdrückung und Kontrolle, zweitens deren moralische Perversion sowie drittens den damit einhergehenden Verlust jeglicher Autonomie, wobei ein besonderes Augenmerk darauf liegt, wie die omnipräsente Überwachung das fundamentale Recht auf Privatsphäre systematisch untergräbt.

In Gernerts Narrativ sind „Beziehungen zwischen Mann und Frau [...] ohne vorherige Zuordnung strengstens untersagt“ (Gernert, 2023, S. 22). Die Strategien, Maßnahmen und Mechanismen der Überwachung sind Hemmnisse für die individuelle Freiheit. Eine weitere Form der Technikkritik findet Anwendung nicht nur in der Arbeitslosigkeit, sondern auch in der Digitalisierung und Automatisierung von Gütern:

Obwohl es niemand offiziell zugab und es nicht wahrgenommen werden sollte: es war gar nicht mehr genug Arbeit für alle vorhanden. Nachdem die Produktion von vielen Gütern digitalisiert und automatisiert worden war und viele Dienstleistungen im neuen System überflüssig geworden waren, gab es nicht mehr genug für alle zu tun. So war es ein beliebtes Hobby vieler geworden, jeden Morgen nach Möglichkeiten zu suchen, um sich zu beschäftigen und ein paar Punkte zu verdienen. (Gernert, 2023, S. 24)

Diese Unordnung und dieses gesellschaftliche Ungleichgewicht, die durch Arbeitslosigkeit, die Digitalisierung von Gütern und das Streben nach Punkten gezeichnet sind, sind die Folge eines staatlichen Systems, das die Technologie über das Humankapital gestellt hat.

Darüber hinaus bringt der technologische Wandel Konsequenzen für die Bürger*innen, die dazu gezwungen sind, ihr Eigentum zu opfern.

Es gab schon lange kein Eigentum mehr, viele hatten alles, was sie besaßen an den council übertragen, um sich ein lebenslanges volles Punktekonto zu sichern. Wozu auch Eigentum? Ein gutes Leben war über die Punkte erreichbar, alle Abos waren möglich, wenn man level 5 erreicht hatte, Luxus, Reisen, Status, einfach alles. Und alles stand jederzeit und überall zur Verfügung, man musste nur ein paar Punkte von seinem Konto opfern. Und der council hatte mit dem Programm „Eigentum gegen Punkte“ die Unruhen, die wegen der immer weiter

auseinandergehenden Schere zwischen Arm und Reich entstanden waren, beendet und damit auch die Benachteiligten und die Armen zum Schweigen gebracht. (Gernert, 2023, S. 17)

Der Verzicht auf ihr Eigentum führt dazu, dass die Bürger*innen vollständig vom council abhängig werden. Dieser übernimmt nun die Rolle eines Verwalters, der über Güter und Reichtümer verfügt und alle dazu zwingt, ihren Reichtum gegen Punkte einzutauschen. Dieses System der sozialen Benotung ist problematisch und schließt fortan jegliche Erwerbs- oder Wirtschaftstätigkeit aus, um eine absolute finanzielle Abhängigkeit aufrechtzuerhalten.

Hier wird die Oligarchie durch den council repräsentiert, der über alle Privilegien verfügt und Änderungen, Reformen oder Sanktionen bestimmt. Der council kann beispielsweise Punkte abziehen, indem „jede Zuwiderhandlung [...] mit dem sofortigen Abzug von points sanktioniert [wurde]“ (Gernert, 2023, S. 29).

Zusammenfassend lässt sich festhalten, dass der Roman *Knotenpunkt – Angriff auf das Netz* Technologie folgerichtig als Unterdrückungsinstrument innerhalb eines dystopischen Rahmens inszeniert. Die systematische Verletzung der Privatsphäre, das soziale Bewertungssystem, die Mechanismen lückenloser Überwachung sowie die ökonomische Radikalisierung durch die Abschaffung von Bargeld und Privateigentum verdichten sich gemeinsam mit der biometrischen Kontrolle via Mikrochips und der totalen technologischen Abhängigkeit zu einer umfassenden Technikkritik. Obgleich das Werk Ansätze einer Revolution gegen diese neue Ordnung signalisiert, erweist sich Hans Joachim Gernerts Prosa vorrangig als gesellschaftliches Mahnmal, das mithilfe erschreckender Zukunftsszenarien vor einer naiven Verherrlichung des Fortschritts warnt. Durch die Darbietung dieser technokratischen Kontrolle regt der Text dazu an, die potenziellen Schattenseiten der Digitalisierung und Automatisierung kritisch zu hinterfragen und über die Gestaltung unserer Zukunft zu reflektieren.

4. Dystopische Motive und Dependenz von Künstlicher Intelligenz in *Ich bin dein Mensch* (2021)

Der Spielfilm *Ich bin dein Mensch* weist eine Laufzeit von 108 Minuten auf und wendet sich wesentlich dem komplexen Verhältnis zwischen Mensch und Maschine zu, wobei insbesondere die Implikationen Künstlicher Intelligenz im Fokus stehen. Das Narrativ konstituiert sich eingangs durch ein futuristisches Ball-Szenario, in dem die Protagonistin Alma dem humanoiden Roboter Tom begegnet. Da dessen Erscheinungsbild und Verhalten zunächst keine technischen Anomalien darlegen, unterliegt sie dem Irrtum, mit einem menschlichen Gegenüber zu interagieren. Diese Täuschung wird durch Toms sozial-adaptives Verhalten verstärkt, indem er konventionelle zwischenmenschliche Rituale – wie das Bestellen von Wein oder das Artikulieren von Komplimenten bezüglich ihrer Schönheit und Augenfarbe – zielsicher imitiert (vgl. Schrader, 2021, 00:02:16–00:03:16). Im Folgenden wird der Schwerpunkt dezidiert auf die interaktiven Sequenzen zwischen Alma und Tom sowie deren wechselseitige Kontaktaufnahme und kommunikativen Austausch gelegt. Im weiteren Verlauf der Untersuchung werden die daraus resultierenden Implikationen im Kontext dystopischer Motive sowie die damit einhergehende Abhängigkeit von Künstlicher Intelligenz tiefgehend analysiert.

Während des gemeinsamen Tanzes tritt ein systemkritischer Defekt bei Tom auf, der sich in einer repetitiven Sprachstörung äußert; das fortwährende Wiederholen der Phrase „Ich bin“ (Schrader, 2021, 00:04:49) führt zur Dekonstruktion seiner menschlichen Fassade und erregt Almas Misstrauen. In der Folge wird der Roboter von Technikern zur Wartung in einen Werkstattbereich überführt, wobei die auditive Endlosschleife seiner Fehlfunktion persistiert. Alma wird schließlich durch die Leiterin des Projekts darüber in Kenntnis gesetzt, dass sie Teil einer experimentellen Anordnung ist, deren Zielsetzung in der Evaluation der Leistungsfähigkeit sowie der sozialen Adaption des humanoiden Roboters Tom besteht:

Die Leiterin des Experiments: Ich weiß, dass Sie das alles mit einer emotionalen Distanz betrachten. Als Testperson sollen Sie das auch. Ich kann Ihnen nur empfehlen, auf diese Erfahrung ganz einzulassen. Wenn das Glück vor einem auf der Straße liegt, sollte man auch aufheben. Morgen

ist es soweit, dann ist alles konfiguriert und Sie können Tom mit nach Hause nehmen. (Schrader, 2021, 00:06:48–00:07:07)

Zunächst ist zu konstatieren, dass Almas Bereitschaft, bewusst in eine Interaktion mit einem Androiden einzutreten, ihn in ihren privaten Lebensraum zu integrieren und schließlich physische Intimität zuzulassen (vgl. Schrader, 2021, 01:20:08–01:21:58), eine signifikante Transgression gesellschaftlicher Normen darstellt. Dieses Überschreiten herkömmlicher Grenzen ist ein charakteristisches Element dystopischer Narrative. Die nahezu angstfreie Aufnahme Toms in ihren Haushalt gleicht einer Form von ‚Adoption‘ in die Rolle eines Ehepartners, woraufhin eine dreiwöchige Phase der Kohabitation folgt.

In diesem Zeitraum entwickeln sich grundlegende Gespräche über die menschliche Natur sowie die Konstruktion von Liebe und zwischenmenschlichen Beziehungen. Alma externalisiert ihre Ängste, Wünsche und Lebensentwürfe, wobei ihre regelmäßige Befragung des Roboters Tom eine graduelle emotionale Annäherung initiiert. Dennoch oszilliert ihr Verhalten zwischen wachsender Zuneigung und einer objektivierenden Behandlung Toms als bloße Apparatur, was immer wieder zu dialektischen Spannungen und Missverständnissen führt. Trotz dieser initialen Skepsis kommen Sequenzen intersubjektiver Nähe zum Ausdruck, in denen beide Akteure persönliche Geschichten teilen und über individuelle Bedürfnisse sowie Wünsche reflektieren (vgl. Schrader, 2021, 00:18:55–00:25:12).

Nach Abschluss der Testphase obliegt es Alma, ein fundiertes Gutachten über ihre Erfahrungen mit Tom zu verfassen, wobei ihrem Urteil eine entscheidende Bedeutung für die künftige Gestaltung und rechtliche Einordnung von Mensch-Roboter-Beziehungen zukommt. Das Werk schließt mit einem offenen Ende, welches die fundamentale Frage nach der Validität und dem Potenzial einer partnerschaftlichen Koexistenz zwischen Menschen und künstlichen Kreaturen zur Disposition stellt.

Im Kontext dystopischer Motive lassen sich folgende Implikationen explizieren: Das Werk thematisiert die Evolution Künstlicher Intelligenz und deren transformative Auswirkungen auf die Gesellschaft. Ein zentrales Anliegen liegt hierbei auf der Entstehung intimer

Bindungen zwischen menschlichen Subjekten und humanoiden Robotern wie Tom, was prinzipiell als Versuch begriffen werden kann, menschliche Begehren nach Partnerschaft und emotionaler Validierung maschinell und künstlich zu substituieren.

Des Weiteren wird die Grenze zwischen Mensch und Maschine durch Toms perfekte adaptive Programmierung nicht mehr evident, die gezielt auf Almas Bedürfnisse zugeschnitten ist. Daraus ergibt sich eine emotionale Dependenz der Protagonistin, die in der Furcht vor Einsamkeit begründet liegt. Ferner entsteht ein latentes Gefährdungspotenzial hinsichtlich technologischer Kontrolle und Manipulation, da Toms algorithmische Struktur die Basis für eine subtile Steuerung des menschlichen Gegenübers bildet. In der Konsequenz ließe die Akzeptanz solcher hybrider Partnerschaften eine Gefährdung, Drohung und Zerstörung authentischer zwischenmenschlicher Interaktionen befürchten, wodurch reale Interaktionen und Beziehungen zugunsten künstlicher Simulationen und Nachahmungen zukünftig verkümmern könnten.

Es ist allerdings angebracht, sich mit der Erzählstruktur des Films und seiner Inszenierung der Realität im Zusammenhang mit der Technologie – hier verkörpert durch humanoide Roboter – auseinanderzusetzen. Eine Filmsequenz, die einer näheren Betrachtung bedarf, unterstreicht die strategische Entscheidung der Regisseurin Maria Schrader, die Roboter in einem Restaurant am Abend zu zeigen. Als Alma sich ihnen nähert und versucht, sie zu berühren, stellt sie fest, dass sie durchsichtig sind. Sie berührt einen von ihnen am Rücken, und ihre Hand gleitet durch die Luft; sie fasst einen anderen an den Haaren und merkt, dass ihre Hand hindurchgleitet; schließlich versucht sie, das Glas des letzten Roboters zu ergreifen, das sich jedoch plötzlich mit seinem Inhalt in Luft auflöst. Der verwendete grafische Mechanismus ist ein Spiel mit hellen Lichtern in Form von Lichtkreisen. Der performative Charakter des Films hebt die Vergänglichkeit der Materialität von Robotern hervor: Sie sehen menschlich aus, sind aber in Wirklichkeit Illusionen. Die Mehrdimensionalität ermöglicht außerdem ein besseres Begreifen der Beschaffenheit der Roboter; ihre Körper werden in Nahaufnahme (Close-Up) gezeigt, ihre Gesichter sind nah herangezoomt, und die Kamera fokussiert stets ihre Augen und

Hände, wenn sie sprechen oder sich bewegen. Wenn man aufmerksam ist, kann man darin einen Automatismus erkennen. Ihr Verhalten ist nicht ganz natürlich, sondern auf elektrische Impulse im Gehirn zurückzuführen. Auch die Filmmusik ist auf die verschiedenen Szenen abgestimmt und vermittelt eine bestimmte Atmosphäre, besonders wenn die Roboter im Mittelpunkt des Geschehens stehen (vgl. Schrader, 2021, 00:14:20–00:14:35).

Resümierend analysiert *Ich bin dein Mensch* anhand der Relation zwischen Alma und Tom die zunehmende Konvergenz von Mensch und Maschine sowie die Expansion Künstlicher Intelligenz in die Sphären der Zwischenmenschlichkeit und Privatsphäre. Das filmische Narrativ suggeriert eine absolute unbegrenzte Leistungsfähigkeit technologischer Systeme, wobei insbesondere die daraus hervorgehende menschliche Dependenz eine zentrale Forschungsperspektive eröffnet. Schraders Werk illustriert die Annahme, dass eine gesteigerte Häufigkeit im Umgang mit Technologie zwangsläufig zu soziokulturellen Abhängigkeitsverhältnissen führt, was sich analog in der gegenwärtigen unverzichtbaren Nutzung mobiler Endgeräte über alle Altersgruppen hinweg widerspiegeln kann. Indem Tom für Alma zum präferierten Partner avanciert, wird eine potenzielle Unfähigkeit zur Initiierung authentischer, zwischenmenschlicher Bindungen impliziert. Während technologische Innovationen zwar die Effizienz im Alltag steigern, induzieren sie gleichzeitig eine strukturelle Vulnerabilität des menschlichen Subjekts durch die Entstehung existenzieller Abhängigkeitsmuster.

Der Film hat einen hohen didaktischen Wert und sensibilisiert die Zuschauerschaft für die immer größere Rolle, die Künstliche Intelligenz im Alltag spielt. Mit seiner dystopischen Ausrichtung ermöglicht er eine Zukunftsvision, die eng mit der futuristischen Strömung verbunden ist, präsentiert sich jedoch als Dystopie der Gegenwart, da er sich an aktuellen Realitäten orientiert und diese in Zukunftsszenarien umsetzt.

Die soziopolitischen Sorgen und Fragen, die dieser Film aufwirft, stehen ebenfalls in enger Relation mit ethischen Überlegungen und Betrachtungen. Die Künstliche Intelligenz, die derzeit den größten

technologischen Fortschritt dartut, ruft große Ängste und Vorbehalte hervor. Im weiteren Sinne berücksichtigt die in diesem Medium thematisierte Technikkritik aktuelle Trends, gesellschaftliche Spannungen und die Ziele des 21. Jahrhunderts.

Als Zukunftsnarration kritisiert Schraders Film somit den gegenwärtigen Umgang mit Technologie, Robotern und Künstlicher Intelligenz als derzeit vorherrschende Zustände, indem er einen fiktiven Gegenentwurf schafft. Die Zukunft ist das, was passieren wird, wenn nichts unternommen wird, wenn die Warnsignale nicht ernst genommen werden. Obschon der Futurismus stets eine optimistische Perspektive vorsieht, geht von ihm dennoch viel Unsicherheit aus.

Dystopische Filme haben die Funktion, ein möglichst realistisches Szenario zu präsentieren, um durch eine imaginäre Realität, eine gut durchdachte Narration und klar definierte Interpretationslinien und Implikationen zu sensibilisieren, zu moralisieren, zu kritisieren und zu warnen. Das behandelte Anliegen ist deshalb in der Regel klar erkennbar und die Zuschauerschaft kann sich damit identifizieren. Diese Filme erlauben es also, bei den Zuschauer*innen eine gewisse Sensibilität hervorzurufen und gleichzeitig zum Nachdenken über aktuelle Probleme und Trends anzuregen.

Bereits seit den Anfängen der Strömungen der Filmgeschichte hatten Filme stets eine gewisse Konfiguration, einen bestimmten Gehalt und eine bestimmte Ausrichtung. *Ich bin der Mensch* kann demnach als vorausschauender Film angesehen werden, da er bereits aufzeigt, was in den kommenden Jahren und Jahrzehnten geschehen könnte, und ebenso warnt wie die Filme früherer Generationen, die einen wirtschaftlichen, politischen und moralischen Niedergang der Welt angekündigt haben. Man kann ihm demgemäß einen prophetischen Charakter zuschreiben.

5. Abschließende Bemerkungen

Knotenpunkt – Angriff auf das Netz und *Ich bin dein Mensch* sind Ausdruck einer Technikkritik und gelten als Dystopien der Gegenwart, weil sie fortschrittliche Technologien als konkretes, dystopisch dargestelltes Problem thematisieren.

In Gernerts Roman ist die Auflösung der individuellen Autonomie ein Schlüsselement eines dystopischen Szenarios. Die Simulation von Emotionalität und Zwischenmenschlichkeit in Schraders Film kann als Alarmsignal hinsichtlich des Einsatzes von Robotern verstanden werden.

Der Beitrag dieser literarischen und filmischen Dystopien zum kritischen Bewusstsein für den Umgang mit Technologie bzw. mit computergestützten Programmen und Systemen zeigt sich in der Appellfunktion, die diese Untersuchungsgegenstände erfüllen. Solche schlimmen Zukunftsbilder warnen Menschen davor, dass moderner Fortschritt gefährlich ist, wenn sie dabei ihre Werte und die Moral vergessen. Ohne diese Regeln verlieren sie das, was sie als Menschen ausmacht. Am Ende ist der Mensch nicht mehr der Chef, der die Technik benutzt, sondern nur noch eine Nummer, die von Computern und Programmen verwaltet wird.

Erwähnenswert ist die Aktualität dieser untersuchten Dystopien, die vollkommen mit den aktuellen Trends und Entwicklungen übereinstimmen: einerseits die Missstände und Missbräuche eines totalitären Regimes und andererseits die Instrumentalisierung der Künstlichen Intelligenz. Die Analyse der betrachteten Werke verdeutlicht, dass die Dystopie ein überaus facettenreiches und aktuelles Genre darstellt, welches sowohl in der Literatur als auch im Medium Film eine zentrale Rolle bei der Reflexion gesellschaftlicher Krisen einnimmt.

Die Technikkritik findet zu diesem Zweck breite Anwendung in dystopisch literarischen und filmischen Imaginationen der Gegenwart. Im 21. Jahrhundert sind bislang zahlreiche Versuche unternommen worden, eine kritische Haltung einzunehmen oder die Risiken, Auswirkungen und Folgen moderner Technik auf Mensch und Gesellschaft zu ergründen und zu hinterfragen. Zunächst im philosophischen und soziologischen Feld. Autoren und Regisseure scheinen diese Aufgabe übernommen zu haben und nehmen eine sensibilisierende Haltung ein.

Hans Joachim Gernert und Maria Schrader können dementsprechend als Vertreter einer kritischen Haltung gegenüber der Technologie und ihren Auswirkungen angesehen werden, insbesondere unter

Berücksichtigung ihrer Komplexität. Wenngleich zahlreiche Gegenstimmen weiterhin den nahezu grenzenlosen Einsatz von Technologie legitimieren, verstehen sich diese beiden literarischen und filmischen Werke somit als Gegendiskurs zum unbewussten Umgang mit Technologie.

Literaturverzeichnis

- Böhn, A. (2013). Informations- und Kommunikationstechnologien in literarischen und filmischen Dystopien der Gegenwart: Schwarmintelligenz und *Ubiquitous Computing* bei Philipp Kerr, Frank Schätzing und James Cameron. In: Chilese, V. & Preußner, H.-P. (Hg.). *Technik in Dystopien*. Heidelberg: Winter, 113–120.
- Chilese, V. & Preußner, H.-P. (Hg.) (2013). *Technik in Dystopien*. Heidelberg: Winter.
- Geimer, A., Heinze, C., Winter, R. (Hg.) (2020). *Handbuch Filmsoziologie*. Wiesbaden: Springer.
- Gernert, H. J. (2023). *Knotenpunkt - Angriff auf das Netz*. Ahrensburg: tredition.
- Grimm, B. (2022). Dystopien im Film und dystopische Realitäten. In: Stauffer, I. et al (Hg.). *Utopien und Dystopien: historische Wurzeln und Gegenwart von Paradies und Katastrophe*. Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 145–156.
- Heidegger, M. [1953] (2000). Die Frage nach der Technik. In: Ders. *Gesamtausgabe*, 1. Abt.: *Veröffentlichte Schriften 1910 – 1976*, Bd. 7. *Vorträge und Aufsätze*. Hg. von F.-W. von Herrmann. Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 5–36.
- Heller, Ágnes (2016). *Von der Utopie zur Dystopie. Was können wir uns wünschen?* Wien/Hamburg: Konturen.
- Kröber, Franz (2023). *Räume serieller Dystopien: Expandierende Albträume im Post-TV*. Bielefeld: transcript.
- Layh, Susanna (2014). *Finstere Neue Welten: Gattungsparadigmatische literarischer Utopie und Dystopie*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann.
- Matussek, Peter (2013). Die vier Endspiele zwischen Utopie und Dystopie. Übergänge und Übergänge zwischen Zeit und Raum. In: Chilese, V. & Preußner, H.-P. (Hg.). *Technik in Dystopien*. Heidelberg: Winter, 133–150.
- Müller, C. & Nievergelt, B. (Hg.) (1996). *Technikkritik in der Moderne. Empirische Technikereignisse als Herausforderung an die Sozialwissenschaft*. Opladen: Leske/Budrich.

- Podrez, P. (2021). *Urbane Visionen: filmische Entwürfe der Zukunftsstadt*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann.
- Preußner, H.-P. (2013). Technik und Technikkritik im dystopischen Film. In: ders. *Technik in Dystopien*. Heidelberg: Winter, 151–174.
- Saage, R. (1991). *Politische Utopien der Neuzeit*. Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchges.
- Schrader, M. (2021): *Ich bin dein Mensch*. [Film]. Deutschland.
- Sombetzki, J. (2015). Technikkritik aus Sicht der philosophischen Anthropologie. In: Weidner, R. et al (Hg.). *Technische Unterstützungssysteme*. Berlin/Heidelberg: Springer, 30–42.
- Sperling, A. (2023). *Dystopien der Gegenwart. Negative Zukunftsvisionen in postutopischer Zeit*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Spiegel, S. (2020). Die Gegenwart des Zukünftigen – Science-Fiction. In: Geimer, A. et al (Hg.). *Handbuch Filmsoziologie*. Wiesbaden: Springer, 690–696.
- Stauffer, I., Dziudzia, C., Tatzel, S. (Hg.) (2022). *Utopien und Dystopien: historische Wurzeln und Gegenwart von Paradies und Katastrophe*. Bielefeld: Aisthesis.
- Voßkamp, W. (2017). Utopien und Apokalypse. Zukunft in der Gegenwartsliteratur. In: Zhu, J. et al (Hg.). *Akten des XIII. Internationalen Germanistenkongresses Shanghai 2015, Bd. 8: Germanistik zwischen Tradition und Innovation*. Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 413–423.
- Voßkamp, W., Blumberger, G., Roussel, M. (Hg.) (2013). *Möglichkeitsdenken. Utopie und Dystopie in der Gegenwart*. München: Wilhelm Fink.

Biopolitical Genealogies of UKI: From Totalitarian Colonialism to Viral Liberation

Albert Kang-Chia Peng¹

1. Introduction: Viral Becoming, Digital Capital, and the Assemblage Politics of the Posthuman Body

Shu Lea Cheang (b. 1954) stands as a pivotal figure in the international landscape of contemporary moving image and new media art, with an artistic practice that traverses experimental film, video art, mixed-media installation, performance, and net art (Peng, 2024). Film critic B. Ruby Rich (2013) once employed the term “the Shu Lea Cheang phenomenon” to encapsulate the resistance within her work to being confined by singular genres, media, or gender categories, noting that her cinematic practice has effectively transcended the established identity politics frameworks of “New Queer Cinema”. Consequently, Cheang’s oeuvre is frequently situated within avant-garde theoretical contexts such as post-porn, post-gender, and post-queer discourses (Rich, 2013; Peng 2024).

However, existing scholarship has largely focused on how Cheang’s imagery challenges heteronormativity, reconstructs female desire, and expands queer visibility (Chen, 2009; Chen, 2012; Rich, 2013; Tsui, 2024). For instance, Chen Shu-chuan (2012) argues that Cheang reshapes Asian female subjectivity in the context of globalization and the digital era, particularly in *I.K.U.* (Cheang, 2000), where the female cyborg Reiko transforms sex into storable and reusable “digital archives” through the collection of orgasmic data. Similarly, Chuan Chen (2009) conceptualizes Cheang’s imagery as a form of “sex without friction”, while Tsui Miao-chi (2024) emphasizes queer cyborgs and affective narratives.

¹ PhD Student, National Taiwan University of Arts, ORCID: 0009-0006-3899-6116, Email: ayukang@hotmail.com

While these studies illuminate Cheang's contributions to gender and queer politics, they tend to overlook her critical engagement with digital systems and the mechanisms of biocapitalist control, particularly her reconfiguration of the "virus" as a tactical form of resistance. Rather than remaining a negative pathological figure, the virus in Cheang's work becomes a productive force aligned with hacktivism and systemic disruption, a dimension that existing scholarship has yet to fully theorize. More fundamentally, such approaches fail to examine how the body, entangled with technological and material environments, is both captured by biocapitalism and simultaneously capable of generating alternative modes of sexual practice and life. Cheang's work thus extends beyond the representation of desire, foregrounding a critical interrogation of the posthuman condition in which the body emerges as a dynamic assemblage of biology, technology, information, and waste.

Taking this as a point of departure, this article integrates posthuman theory and invokes Luciana Parisi's (2004) philosophical discourse on computation, evolution, and non-human thought to re-interpret Cheang's cinematic practice since the 1990s. This study argues that Cheang's artistic practice should be understood as a "cybernetic critical strategy". Within her theoretical framework, the Cyborg transcends the early binary imagination of "human-machine synthesis" to become an operational condition of being within the global network of biocapital; meanwhile, the "virus" constitutes the critical link for understanding this mechanism of resistance.

The concept of "viral becoming" (Cheang, 2018; Peng, 2024), repeatedly invoked in Shu Lea Cheang's oeuvre, does not function as a pathological symbol of contamination in the traditional sense; rather, it represents a micropolitical action characterized by affirmative mutation and recombination. Through viral lateral connections, information absorption, and non-linear proliferation, the subject deterritorializes itself from the biopolitical logic of modernity centered on linear reproduction and capital accumulation. At the theoretical level, as Luciana Parisi (2004) posits that the generation of life is predicated on bacterial infection and lateral gene transfer, this study asserts that

the cyborg in Cheang's work should be understood as a "viral assemblage". Within this framework, the virus is no longer an external threat but an immanent generative force within the technological system. By inducing fundamental "glitches," it renders the subject an open, perpetually unstable, and overflowing dynamic process.

This problematic unfolds through distinct layers across Cheang's creative genealogy. Initially, *Fresh Kill* (Cheang, 1994) utilizes imagery of landfills and global waste flows to frame the body as a container for the exchange of industrial debris and toxins, foreshadowing the inseparable materiality between the posthuman body and its environment. Subsequently, *I.K.U.* propels this logic into the realm of data surveillance, transforming the orgasm into collectible and circulatable digital information – a precise precursor to how contemporary bio-capitalism exerts micromanagement over sensory pleasure. Moving from the "materiality of environmental waste" in *Fresh Kill* to the "digitized capital" of *I.K.U.*, Cheang's creative trajectory culminates in her recent work, *UKI* (Cheang, 2023) (Fig. 1), which stands as an explosive theoretical synthesis.

As the core research text of this article, *UKI* serves as more than a cinematic narrative; it is a "philosophical apparatus" that actively produces theory. In the film, the oppressed replicant Reiko is exiled after being stripped of her data-productive capacity (Fig. 2). However, within the confines of E-trashville, she interpenetrates with viruses, obsolete code, and trans-species life-forms, ultimately completing her ontological leap into the existence of the "UKI virus". This signifies not only a transition from a stable individual to a contagious entity but also inaugurates a concrete visual and spatial revolution.

Through a rigorous analysis of *UKI*, this article contends that Shu Lea Cheang's artistic practice not only expands the theoretical horizons of queer moving image studies but also compels a critical reconsideration of how nascent political possibilities might unfold horizontally through processes of infection, mutation, and trans-species material becoming under conditions of deep technological penetration. Based on this problematic, the subsequent arguments of this article proceed through a multi-layered trajectory, moving from theoretical foundations

and visual-textual analysis to spatial politics and philosophical extension. Section II, “Viral Becoming as Radical Imaginaries of Resistance” establishes the theoretical bedrock by examining how Cheang responds to the contemporary crisis of biocapitalism – where the body is reduced to a “data mine” – and invokes Parisi’s philosophy of computation and evolution to analyze “viral becoming” as a microscopic internal interference mechanism that paralyzes and exposes the linear recuperation of life-forms by global capital. Section III shifts toward specific cinematic operations through a textual and visual analysis of the cyborg body in *UKI*, exploring how the film utilizes the language of “Sci-Fi New Queer Cinema” and the unnatural rendering of 3D game engines to reify the posthuman “digital flesh”, further examining the political subversion of the “red pill” symbol and the visual ecstasy of the “red rain” to demonstrate how the subject metamorphoses into an overflowing “viral assemblage” to reclaim bodily sovereignty. Section IV constructs the spatial politics of *UKI* by analyzing the triple narrative dialectic of “Dystopia, Heterotopia, and Utopia” to investigate how marginalized subjects, driven out by dystopian spatiality, utilize the “vibrant matter” and heterogeneous temporalities of E-trashville to forge “emerging kinships” beyond blood ties, ultimately progressing toward a symbiotic landscape predicated on viral love. Section V builds upon the preceding analyses to deepen the theoretical dialogue with posthuman philosophy by exploring how “abstract sexuality” and “bacterial evolution” dismantle the ontological boundaries between human and non-human life-forms, thereby synthesizing the core concept of the “viral assemblage” and its radical contributions to contemporary biopolitics and posthuman ethics, finally culminating in a conclusion that articulates the critical significance of “transversal assemblages” and “viral connectivity” against contemporary technocratic governance while reaffirming the epochal value of embracing “infection and glitch” as a nascent political imaginary.

2. Viral Becoming as Radical Imaginaries of Resistance

The concept of “viral becoming” serves as the ontological prerequisite and philosophical cornerstone of Shu Lea Cheang’s artistic practice. Across her multi-decadal creative genealogy, the virus is re-framed – not as a pathological symbol of contamination to be eradicated by medical-industrial complexes, but as a definitive “posthuman condition” characterized by affirmative mutation and recombinant potential. In her recent work *UKI*, Cheang performs a profound auto-critique of the oppressed replicant, Reiko, from her earlier film *I.K.U.* (Cheang, 2000). By inverting the name to “UKI,” she facilitates the character’s metamorphosis from a passive “data-harvesting tool” into a “mutant virus” endowed with agential power. This transformation rearticulates the virus as a manifestation of “non-canonical bodies” (Fig. 3), which not only destabilizes traditional anthropocentric aesthetic frameworks but also asserts the posthuman subject’s reclamation of its right to self-definition at the ethical frontier.

To examine Cheang’s viral strategy necessitates an understanding of the contemporary existential crises to which she responds. Her work acutely captures the radical ontological shift of the body: under the advanced development of digital capitalism and technological governance, the human body has forfeited its privilege as a closed, private natural entity. Instead, it has transitioned into an interface for contagion paths and data transmission, existing in a state analogous to a “digital hard drive”. The “BioNet” constructed by the Genom Corporation in her narrative serves as a precise metaphor for the extreme disciplinary mechanisms of contemporary biopolitics. Within the logic of “biocapitalism,” corporate entities hijack the somatic through digital technologies, quantifying desire, perception, and orgasm into extractable data, and even reconstructing red blood cells into computational media. Power no longer relies solely on external physical incarceration; rather, it permeates the cellular and genetic strata, subsuming life entirely into the algorithms of code exchange and profit production.

Faced with a biocapitalist regime that thoroughly commodifies and instrumentalizes the subject, traditional political revolution or identity

politics appear increasingly enfeebled. Consequently, Cheang proposes a radical “cybernetic critical strategy.” Significantly, her interpretation of the Cyborg transcends the “prosthetic augmentation” or “human-machine synthesis” emphasized in Donna Haraway’s (1991) early theories. She further rejects the binary framework of technological pessimism – where “humanity is enslaved by machines” – opting instead for a microscopic and elusive “bacterial” path of infection. This unique theoretical perspective resonates deeply with philosopher Luciana Parisi’s (2004) discourse on computation and evolutionary philosophy.

For Parisi (2004), the generation and evolution of life do not originate from a closed, vertical Darwinian linearity – a logic that frequently aligns with capitalist accumulation and patriarchal structures. Instead, life is predicated on “bacterial infection” and horizontal code transfer. Parisi (2004) posits that through “endosymbiotic merging” and “lateral gene transfer” between divergent organisms, the subject undergoes continuous variation through contact with the heterogeneous other. Shu Lea Cheang flawlessly visualizes this philosophical discourse, asserting that the body is a dynamic “assemblage” woven from technology, capital, power, and microscopic matter.

Within this theoretical framework, the virus is no longer an external threat but an immanent generative force within the technological system. “Viral becoming” constitutes a concrete micropolitical action: through horizontal networking, information absorption, and heterogeneous merging, it deterritorializes the subject from the reproductive norms at the core of modern governance. This is precisely the crux of the virus as a radical resistance strategy in *UKI* – given that the biocapitalist network is an omnipresent data stream, the agency of the cyborg lies not in erecting walls to block data, but in its capacity to “become-virus”, functioning as an “internal interference mechanism.”

By inducing fundamental “glitches” and genetic mutations at the system’s base, the virus infiltrates from within. It exploits the algorithmic greed that seeks to absorb all data, injecting its destructive and unpredictable code into the system’s architecture. This non-linear

proliferation renders the subject an open, perpetually unstable, and overflowing dynamic process, thereby paralyzing and exposing the linear recuperation of life-forms by global capitalism.

As the theoretical cornerstone and conceptual engine of this thesis, this section establishes the core problematic of “viral becoming as a strategy of resistance” and the “body as an informational assemblage”. This foundational perspective serves as a guiding framework for the entire study: it provides not only a critical lens through which to deconstruct biochemical capitalism but also the indispensable theoretical orientation and hermeneutic path for subsequent analyses. Specifically, it informs how viral kinetics facilitate trans-species alliances within the spatiality of “ruined heterotopias” (Section IV), and how they further dismantle the logic of natural reproduction to shape a posthuman “abstract sexuality” (Section V).

3. From Data Mines to Viral Rain: A Textual and Visual Analysis of the Cyborg Body in *UKI*

In the cinematic practice of Shu Lea Cheang, the “queer body” and the “technological body” have consistently served as the primary sites of power dialectics. To comprehend how *UKI* advances and reconstructs contemporary posthuman and cyborg theory, one must return to the specific operations of its textual narrative and visual deployment. This section employs textual analysis to explore how Cheang utilizes the unique visual language of “Sci-Fi New Queer Cinema” (Cheang, 2023) to propel the cyborg beyond the traditional imagery of “man-machine hybridization” into a posthuman visual entity woven from data, code, and viruses.

The visual core of *UKI* is established, first and foremost, upon a cinematic critique of “biocapitalism.” Within the textual setting, the “BioNet” of the Genom Corporation demotes the human body to a mere data mine. To reify this posthuman state of “body-as-digital-hard-drive,” Cheang deliberately eschews traditional live-action aesthetics, opting instead for the extensive use of 3D game engines to render the digital bodies of Reiko and other characters (Fig. 4).

This visual strategy is thick with theoretical ambition. The “digital flesh” in the film – marked by polygon modeling traces and a deliberate avoidance of hyper-realism – presents an uncanny “plasticity” and “unnaturalness.” This machinic vision precisely metaphors the posthuman crisis warned of by N. Katherine Hayles (1999), specifically the phenomenon where information is separated from its material body. Under the rendering of the game engine, sex and desire are thoroughly stripped from their biological, viscous constraints. Every orgasm is no longer a private, sweat-filled physical pleasure; instead, it is visually transformed into cold, flickering computational data points within the BioNet.

In terms of the progression of plot and semiotics, Cheang masterfully deepens her critique by subverting classic objects found in science fiction texts. In traditional cyberpunk narratives such as *The Matrix* (1999), the “red pill” serves as a symbol of enlightenment, representing the subject’s awakening and the pursuit of truth upon peering through the virtual matrix. However, in *UKI*, Cheang performs a sardonically charged textual inversion of this symbol. The “red pill” is no longer a tool of resistance; instead, it evolves into a “psychological opium” utilized by the Genom Corporation to control the populace and extract physiological pleasure. In the film’s visual presentation, the human orgasm is ruthlessly refined, compressed, and ultimately encapsulated into commodified red pills. Through this minute yet violent visual object, Cheang directly demonstrates to the audience the dystopian dislocation of the contemporary subject: the way subjectivity is recuperated, exploited, and utterly hollowed out under the dictates of data surveillance and biotechnological intervention.

Faced with such rigorous biopower surveillance, the trajectory of Reiko’s resistance manifests Cheang’s cinematic upgrade of classical cyborg theory. In *A Cyborg Manifesto*, Haraway (1991) sought to construct a feminist myth of resistance by blurring the boundaries between “animal and machine” and “physical and non-physical”. However, with the evolution of digital surveillance technologies, the early image of the “hardware cyborg” – which emphasized the embedding of prosthetics into flesh – has become insufficient to counter

contemporary capital governance. In *UKI*, Cheang propels the definition of the cyborg toward a “recombination of code, algorithms, and viruses”.

In the textual narrative, Reiko’s resistance does not rely on traditional armed violence or the overthrow of a political regime; rather, it is committed to an “ontological transformation of the subject.” As an oppressed and abandoned obsolete replicant, Reiko’s body is frequently accompanied by visual “glitches” – flickering frames, torn pixels, and code overflowing the screen boundaries. Cheang weaponizes this visual glitch, transforming it into an agency against the system. Reiko ceases to be an individual with stable boundaries; instead, she gradually metamorphoses within systemic errors into the omnipresent “UKI virus”. This plot arrangement reifies the cyborg’s characteristic as an “open, perpetually mutating field of energy.” She evolves from a defined “object” into a “corporeal assemblage” interwoven with viruses, environments, and code, dismantling hegemony by infiltrating and interfering with the technological system from within.

Through the grand evolution of the “Viral Trilogy” (*I.K.U.*, *FLUIDØ*, and *UKI*) (Cheang, 2000; Cheang, 2017; Cheang, 2023), Shu Lea Cheang has completed a cinematic construction of the nexus between “virus, body, and affect”. The climax of *UKI* is a “Red Liberation” characterized by intense visual impact and even a sense of carnival: a red, rain-like virus sweeps through and erodes the digital landscape of the entire city.

On both textual and visual levels, this “red rain” represents the ultimate visualization of the cyborg’s resistance strategy. It is not merely a plot progression but a reversal of visual materiality. The red rain forcibly releases the color “red” from the corporate-monopolized, closed, and solid form of the “pill,” restoring it as a fluid, uncapturable viral force circulating through the urban network. As the red rain surges across the screen (Fig. 5), it washes away the cold User Interface (UI) of the Genom Corporation, bringing not the fear and destruction typical of traditional apocalyptic disaster films, but a decentralized, multi-point contagious liberation.

This visual climax precisely illustrates the political potential of “trans-species infection” within posthuman theory. The viral rain shatters the corporate encirclement of the individual body, liberating shackled red blood cells and erotic data. As the queer and transgender characters in the film bathe in the red rain and undergo mutation (Fig. 6), Cheang utilizes intense visual expression to proclaim that the subject can, amidst the data ruins of capitalism, spawn a “mutant subjectivity” endowed with immense vitality through subversive recombination.

In summary, through the raw and alienated rendering of the game engine, the political subversion of the red pill symbol, and the visual ecstasy of the viral red rain (Fig. 7), *UKI* accomplishes a digital revolutionary performance concerning bodily sovereignty. Cheang’s cinematic text is more than a dynamic illustration of posthuman theories by scholars such as Haraway and Hayles; it is an active expansion of them. Through a sophisticated visual language, she demonstrates how the cyborg, amidst the seamless surveillance of biopower, achieves a radical escape by metamorphosing into a “viral assemblage” that overflows the screen, providing an explosive mode of agency and visual imagination for marginalized subjects under contemporary technocratic governance.

4. Heterotopias in the Ruins: E-Waste, Emerging Kinships, and the Symbiotic Utopias of the Posthuman

In the narrative structure of *UKI*, Shu Lea Cheang conducts not only a philosophical speculation on the posthuman subject but also constructs a highly politically charged spatial politics. Through a meticulously deployed stratification of spatial layers and environmental settings, the cinematic text fully enacts a triple narrative dialectic of “Dystopia, Heterotopia, and Utopia”. In this futuristic landscape set in 2060, space and ruins are no longer passive backdrops for plot development; rather, they serve as the material foundation upon which the performance of power, the exile of subjects, and queer resistance are concretized.

The narrative point of departure for the film is established upon an extremely expanded and sharply demarcated dystopian Panopticon. The biotech conglomerate, Genom Corporation, implements a dual monopoly over both space and life through the “BioNet.” Under this spatial logic of biocapitalism, the geographical map of the entire society is rigorously partitioned by “data productivity,” forming a digital-era movement of spatial enclosure.

The operation of this dystopian society relies on an extreme form of “ableist violence”. Under the governance of Genom Corporation, only bodies that meet “standard healthy functions” – those capable of continuously generating orgasmic data for capital extraction – are permitted to survive within the centralized urban networks and legitimate spaces. Conversely, any bodies in a state of obsolescence, glitch, disability, or depletion (such as decommissioned replicants or marginalized queers who do not conform to reproductive norms) are ruthlessly “excluded” and “exiled” by the system due to their inability to serve the efficiency models of commercial extraction. This spatial expulsion based on data value not only deprives marginalized subjects of their right to exist within the central city but also directly catalyzes the birth of the film’s most central marginal site: the ruins.

In response to dystopian spatial purification, exiled marginalized groups and waste coexist within “E-trashville”, situated far from the clamor of civilization. Here, Shu Lea Cheang precisely enacts Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia (Foucault, 1986). Unlike the ethereal utopia that does not exist in actual geography, a heterotopia is a “counter-site” that exists tangibly within a culture. It serves as a synthesis of a crisis heterotopia and a heterotopia of deviation, specifically designed to accommodate the heterogeneity and disordered elements rejected by mainstream society.

Under the capitalist gaze, E-trashville appears to be a wasteland of death, a mere accumulation of worthless debris. However, from the perspective of heterotopia, this abandoned “E-waste” actually embodies what New Materialism scholar Jane Bennett (2010) defines as “vibrant matter”. The ruins become a quasi-ecosystem characterized by interstitiality and liminality. More importantly, this ruin manifests

the temporality of heterochronia (i.e., heterogeneous time), as theorized by Foucault (1986): the e-waste dump is a “temporal tomb” left behind by the accelerated obsolescence of capitalist technology. It accumulates discarded histories and obsolete codes, creating a radical rupture from the linear time of the central city, which pursues ultimate efficiency.

In this deviant site of dual temporal and spatial rupture, abandoned circuit boards, toxic metallic remains, obsolete code, and damaged queer bodies undergo a trans-species material entanglement. The protagonist Reiko awakens and reconstructs her identity here, proving that the ruin is not the end of life but an incubator where “non-canonical bodies” and bio-mechanical life-forms engage in subversive recombination to foster new vital momentum. Toxins and waste are no longer passive objects; they are environmental agents actively participating in the construction of the posthuman subject.

If E-trashville serves as a vast heterotopia of material recombination, the concealed “City Diner” (Fig. 8) functions as a micro-heterotopic node for affective sanctuary and informational convergence. As a spontaneous underground refuge, a diverse array of infected queers and transgender hackers congregate here. Within this space, they evade the cold surveillance of the BioNet, exchanging intelligence and energy through non-reproductive physical contact – such as hand-to-hand connections (Fig. 9) – thereby transforming the diner into a tactical hub for resisting hegemony.

It is within this heterotopic space that the film profoundly explores another critical proposition of posthuman existence: emerging kinships. In traditional dystopian narratives, humanity often seeks salvation and order at the end of the world by attempting to restore the traditional “nuclear family” or “bloodline inheritance.” However, Shu Lea Cheang decisively rejects kinship imaginaries grounded in blood, marriage, and heterosexual reproduction, instead mobilizing Hara-way’s (2016) radical ethics of “Make Kin, Not Babies.”

In the ruins and the underground diner, these marginalized subjects construct temporary kinship relations that transcend biological

definitions, grounded in shared “infection”, code exchange, and existential vulnerability. This group of cyborgs, discarded by the system, develops a profound resonance because they are collectively categorized as glitches and waste. Through “viral connectivity”, they become each other’s queer family; these emerging kinships treat mutual incompleteness as an opportunity for alliance rather than a pathological defect requiring a cure. Under a regime of rigorous surveillance, they weave an underground resistance network composed of affective labor and shared information.

The cinematic trajectory, which originates from the prologue of *I.K.U.* declaring “This is sex, not love”, ultimately pivots toward the realization embodied in the finale of *UKI*: “This is not sex, this is love”. This signifies more than an evolution in the definition of affect; it represents a spatial revolution moving from heterotopic marginal resistance toward utopian liberation.

The utopia depicted by Shu Lea Cheang is not the sterile, perfect, and orderly paradise of classical literature – a concept that, in its essence, often functions as another form of dystopian discipline. Conversely, hers is a posthuman utopia predicated upon ruins, infection, and trans-species symbiosis. When viral forces are no longer monopolized by the Genom Corporation but are redistributed and allowed to flow through the entirety of the urban space, “viral love” utterly shatters the spatial and ontological boundaries between human and machine, health and disability, and self and other.

This decentralized collective body demonstrates how fragmented and discarded subjects achieve deep integration with their surrounding environmental matter through emerging kinships. In conclusion, the spatial narrative of *UKI* profoundly exposes the logic of spatial exclusion inherent in biocapitalism while delineating a radical line of flight. By reconstructing the ruin as a heterotopia, Cheang demonstrates how life – within the fissures of capitalist abandonment – utilizes the vibrancy of e-waste and the alliance of emerging kinships to spawn mutant subjects endowed with formidable resilience. This embrace of a posthuman symbiotic landscape ultimately offers individuals living under contemporary technocratic governance a nascent utopian

imaginary: one that no longer fears contamination, but instead regards mutual glitch and infection as a transformative practice of love.

5. Abstract Sex, Non-natural Reproduction, Viral Assemblage: Theoretical Extensions of Posthuman Philosophy

Building upon the preceding analysis of cinematic text and spatial politics, the ultimate academic value of Shu Lea Cheang's *UKI* lies in its radical reconstruction of posthuman ontology. This section contends that *UKI* should not merely be regarded as a science fiction film reflecting technological anxiety, but rather as a "philosophical apparatus" that actively produces theory. By redefining "sex", "evolution", and "subjectivity" as informational-computational processes that transcend somatic boundaries, Cheang engages in a profound theoretical dialogue with posthuman philosopher Luciana Parisi. In doing so, she provides an explosive extension of existing posthuman theory through core concepts such as "abstract sex", "non-natural reproduction" and the "viral assemblage".

Within Parisi's (2004) theoretical matrix, sex is liberated from the reproductive imperatives of heteronormativity and the biological framework of binary gender. In *Abstract Sex*, Parisi (2004) argues that, at the intersection of contemporary biotechnology and information technology, sex is no longer inextricably bound to traditional corporeality; instead, it operates as a digital mode characterized by the integration of code, data, and biomolecular processes. Cheang's artistic practice not only captures but further extends this philosophical paradigm.

In Cheang's theoretical universe, sex is thoroughly de-organified and reconstructed as a microscopic process of "exchange" and "incorporation". She reifies posthuman libido as a trans-species and trans-media flow of material-information. Within this context, pleasure is no longer a private product of interpersonal affect, but a "subjectless becoming-event". Cheang's advancement of Parisi's (2004) theory lies in her revelation that, while biocapitalism attempts to recuperate abstract sex into calculable profit, queer subjects can conversely exploit

the infinite plasticity of matter to transform sex into “noise” that paralyzes predictive algorithms. This collective agency, which transcends organic limitations, establishes the philosophical status of libido as a counter-computational force in the digital age.

If sex has transitioned into an abstract exchange of information, how then does the evolution of the posthuman subject proceed? This leads to the film’s profound reflection on “non-natural reproduction”. Traditional Darwinian evolutionary theory and modern biopolitics both rely heavily on linear inheritance and vertical blood lineages; however, through the internal logic of her work, Shu Lea Cheang extends Parisi’s (2004) ontological account of bacteriality:

Parisi (2004) argues that evolution is not limited to vertical reproduction but relies heavily on horizontal, trans-species contagion, parasitism, and symbiosis. Cheang’s theory of “viral becoming” is the perfect visual and philosophical embodiment of this “bacterial evolution.” In her conceptual framework, marginalized subjects deviate from the linear reproductive systems of heteronormativity, turning instead to viral, non-linear proliferation to sustain life. This “lateral gene transfer” and “endosymbiotic merging” ensure that life is no longer transmitted through kinship but is generated as new forms of desire through continuous infection and mutation (Parisi, 2004). Through this, Cheang posits a provocative posthuman proposition: those “contaminations” and “infections” regarded as pathological threats in traditional medicine and capitalist logic are, in fact, the absolute necessary conditions for breaking the traditional binary opposition between the natural and the artificial, thereby driving the dynamic evolution of life.

In deepening the discourse on “bacterial evolution,” Cheang further touches upon a core proposition of contemporary posthuman philosophy: the interactive relationship between human and non-human entities (Fig. 10). Within the traditional humanist framework, non-human entities – whether biological viruses and micro-organisms or technological code and algorithms – are typically viewed as objects, tools, or threats demanding elimination. However, Cheang utterly

dismantles this anthropocentric arrogance, granting these non-human materials an active ontological status.

In the philosophical framework of *UKI*, the interaction between human and non-human entities is no longer structured by subject–object opposition, but instead corresponds to what Barad (2007) conceptualizes as “intra-action”, wherein human and non-human matter do not preexist as separate entities but emerge through processes of mutual entanglement.

Viruses and code are no longer passive computational units; they are non-human actors endowed with affective power. This interaction, composed of humans, machines, biomolecules, and code, enacts Donna Haraway’s late-theoretical concept of sympoiesis: life is a process of “making-with” others, rather than isolated self-reproduction (Haraway, 2007, 2016). By elevating non-human life-forms into co-evolutionary allies, Shu Lea Cheang reveals a decentralized, de-hierarchized posthuman ecological network.

Based on the aforementioned reconstruction of sex, reproduction, and human-non-human interaction, Cheang ultimately achieves a theoretical upgrade of the “Cyborg” concept. While Haraway’s early cyborg theory primarily focused on the dissolution of the boundary between human and machine (Haraway, 1991), and posthuman theorist N. Katherine Hayles further proposed the “cognitive assemblage” (Hayles, 2017), Cheang builds upon these foundations to propel subjectivity toward a more unstable yet politically explosive “viral assemblage”.

Distinguished from the conservative stance of resisting digitization (which seeks to protect the purity of the human subject), Cheang’s philosophical strategy is to “push digitization to its extreme until it ruptures”. The subject is no longer a closed biological entity but a porous field in a state of perpetual becoming, continuously exchanging information with the environment, waste, and technological variants. The resistance logic of this viral assemblage is not built on binary opposition; instead, it is practiced through schizogenesis: at the very moment the governance system attempts to capture all biological

data, it exploits the contingency and unpredictability of virtual matter generated by human-non-human symbiosis to produce systemic glitches unreadable by algorithms.

In summary, through *UKI*, Shu Lea Cheang completes a profound practice of posthuman ethics and ontology. She is not merely a cinematic translator of Parisi's theories but an active producer of theory in her own right. By reconstructing the queer body as a "viral assemblage" that is perpetually interwoven with non-human entity mutations, Cheang demonstrates how life utilizes the editability of matter and trans-species infectivity to open lines of flight within highly centralized technocratic governance. This radical embrace of "abstract sex", "non-natural reproduction", and "human-non-human symbiosis" (Parisi, 2004) not only marks the philosophical heights of contemporary Taiwanese art in addressing posthuman issues but also contributes irreplaceable theoretical resources to the critique of biopolitics in the global digital age.

6. Conclusion

In summary, this study, through a rigorous analysis of Shu Lea Cheang's cinematic practice, reveals how her work articulates a radical critique and transgression of the technocratic governance of contemporary biocapitalism. Distinct from the emphasis on "human prosthetization" within traditional cyborg theory, Cheang's *UKI* thoroughly reconstructs the posthuman subject as a "viral assemblage". In response to the biopolitical crisis where the Genom Corporation demotes the human body to a data mine, this subject pivots toward a logic of bacterial evolution and the subjectless becoming-events of "abstract sex". Through horizontal information exchange across species and interfaces, the virus is no longer a pathological threat of contamination; instead, it functions as a micropolitical kinetic force that induces systemic glitches and dismantles linear reproductive norms from within.

This ontological philosophical leap is precisely materialized within her unique visual texts and spatial politics. In terms of visual aesthetics,

Cheang deliberately employs 3D game engines to render “digital flesh” characterized by plasticity and glitches. By subverting the “red pill” symbol and orchestrating the visual ecstasy of the torrential viral red rain, she performs a visual carnival that forcibly releases data capital as vital momentum. Dimensionally, *UKI* profoundly depicts how marginalized subjects escape dystopian spatial expulsion to find vitality within the ruined heterotopia of “E-trashville”. In this site, woven from waste and heterochronia, non-canonical bodies rejected by the system enter into a deep symbiosis with toxins and code, forging “emerging kinships” that transcend traditional blood ties and successfully transform marginal debris into revolutionary energy for a symbiotic utopia.

Cheang’s cinematic vision is not only a profound deconstruction of the logic of digital capital exploitation but also an ethical manifesto for a posthuman future. She demonstrates that under the omnipresent data surveillance of algorithms, the opportunity for resistance no longer relies on maintaining the purity or closure of the human subject; on the contrary, it is only through continuous mutation, intoxication, and recoding – embracing the heterogeneous symbiosis of life and non-human matter – that a true line of flight can unfold. This transversal connectivity, predicated on “viral love”, not only redraws the theoretical boundaries of contemporary media art and queer moving image studies but also carves out an explosive path of liberating practice for contemporary subjects living under high-tech governance.

List of Plates :



Fig. 1: Still from the film *UKI*; photograph courtesy of Shu Lea Cheang.



Fig. 2: Still from the film *UKI*; photograph courtesy of Shu Lea Cheang.



Fig. 3: Still from the film *UKI*; photograph courtesy of Shu Lea Cheang.



Fig. 4: Still from the film *UKI*; photograph courtesy of J.JackieBaier



Fig. 5: Still from the film *UKI*; photograph courtesy of Shu Lea Cheang.



Fig. 6: Still from the film *UKI*; photograph courtesy of Shu Lea Cheang.

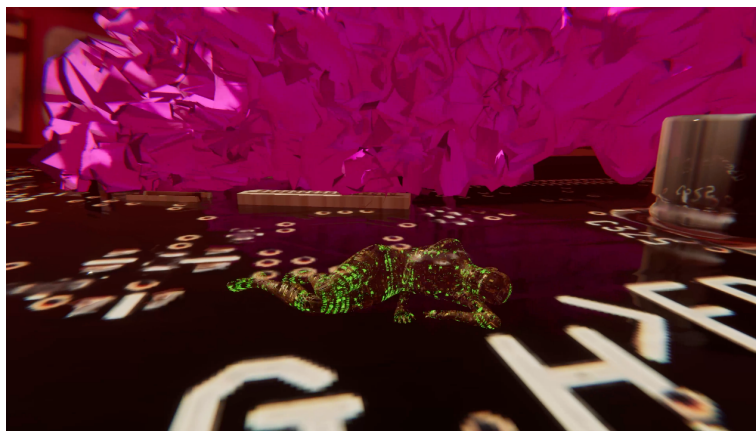


Fig. 7: Still from the film *UKI*; photograph courtesy of Shu Lea Cheang.



Fig. 8: Still from the film *UKI*; photograph courtesy of Shu Lea Cheang.



Fig. 9: Still from the film *UKI*; photograph courtesy of Shu Lea Cheang.



Fig. 10: Still from the film *UKI*; photograph courtesy of Shu Lea Cheang.

References

- Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Duke University Press.
- Bennett, J. (2010). *Vibrant matter: A political ecology of things*. Duke University Press.

- Chen, C. (2009). *Luminous screens: The cinematic image between figure and time* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of California, Irvine.
- Chen, S.-C. (2012). Body, space and memory: The construction of a nomadic other's subjectivity in Shu-Lea Cheang's internet art. *ARTISTICA*, (4), 125-149.
- Cui, M.-J. (2024). *Queer cyborg: Virus, the body and feelings in Shu Lea Cheang's films* [Unpublished master's thesis]. National Yang Ming Chiao Tung University.
- Foucault, M. (1986). Of other spaces. *Diacritics*, 16(1), 22-27.
- Haraway, D. J. (1991). A cyborg manifesto: Science, technology, and socialist-feminism in the late twentieth century. In *Simians, cyborgs, and women: The reinvention of nature* (pp. 149-181). Routledge.
- Haraway, D. J. (2007). *When Species Meet*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Haraway, D. J. (2016). *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press.
- Hayles, N. K. (1999). *How we became posthuman: Virtual bodies in cybernetics, literature, and informatics*. University of Chicago Press.
- Hayles, N. K. (2017). *Unthought: The power of the cognitive nonconscious*. University of Chicago Press.
- Miao-Zhi, C. (2024). *Queer Cyborg: Virus, the Body and Feelings in Shu Lea Cheang's Films* (Unpublished Master Thesis). National Yang Ming Chiao Tung University, Hsinchu, Taiwan.
- Parisi, L. (2004). *Abstract sex: Philosophy, bio-technology and the mutations of desire*. Continuum.
- Peng, K. C. (2024). Posthuman performative politics: A case study of Cheang Shu-Lea's Fresh Kill, Fluid Ø, and Mycelium Network Society. *Journal of Taiwanese Art*, (128), 28–57.
- Rich, B. R. (2013). *New queer cinema: The director's cut*. Duke University Press.
- Shu Lea, C. (2018). Shu Lea Cheang: Cinema, Media, 2030. *Art Critique of Taiwan*, 74, 137-144.

Filmography

- Cheang, S. L. (Director). (1994). *Fresh kill* [Motion picture]. United States: Shu Lea Cheang Productions.
- Cheang, S. L. (Director). (2000). *I.K.U.* [Motion picture]. Japan: Uplink.
- Cheang, S. L. (Director). (2017). *Fluidø* [Motion picture]. Germany: Shu Lea Cheang Productions.
- Cheang, S. L. (Director). (2023). *UKI* [Motion picture]. France, Germany, Taiwan: Virusnet.

Virtual Escapism: Ready Player One Uses Virtual Reality to Discuss the Role of Agency in a Dystopian Society

Madeline Lee¹

Introduction

What happens when all of humanity moves online? *Ready Player One*, by Ernest Cline (2018), is a technological dystopia set in the year 2045. Although the world is technologically advanced, it is economically and environmentally deteriorating. In Cline's envisioned society, there is an "ongoing energy crisis. Catastrophic climate change. Widespread famine, poverty, and disease. Half a dozen wars" (2018, p. 1), and the "human race is in 'decline'" (2018, p. 18). While the world collapses, the characters of this dystopian future log in to the Ontological Anthropocentric Sensory Immersive Simulation, otherwise known as the OASIS, to escape their grim reality. The OASIS, at its invention, had the capacity to "change the way people around the world lived, worked, and communicated. It would transform entertainment, social networking, and even global politics" (2018, p. 56). In providing humanity with a virtual escape, the OASIS, in turn, brings into question the repercussions of leaving the real world behind and technology's role in creating a space where the individual is unable to grasp their global and societal responsibility. That while "humanity's exodus from reality will likely continue," *Ready Player One* questions if "games can become an...effective way to intervene in a social crisis" (Nordstrom, 2016, p. 16) or if this form of digital escapism will prove to be fundamentally inadequate unless a new kind of agency can be reached.

Ready Player One grapples with what it means to exist in a newly realized global, digital reality. A metaverse that operates as a platform

¹ M.A. Student, University of Nevada Reno, U.S., ORCID: 0009-0006-7847-4267, E-Mail: madelinelee@unr.edu, lee.m.madeline@gmail.com (for all correspondence after 2027).

society. The existence of both a virtual and a physical reality complicates how the characters experience traditional agency, as it is not regulated to one sphere but operates uniquely in both. In the ever-expanding digital universe, the individual is asked to continuously reexamine how they interact with their environments and what their responsibilities are in each space they inhabit. Central to the novel's discussion of character agency, therefore, is what Fredric Jameson calls *cognitive mapping*, a set of techniques through which individuals might grasp the *totality* of this new, complex, global universe. This process of cognitive mapping, or the ability to "enable a situational relationship on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society's structures as a whole" (Jameson, 1991, p. 51). The framing of societal context and responsibility is a challenge in *Ready Player One's* dystopia, as the characters are asked to navigate two different societal spheres, the physical and the virtual, each with its own norms of engagement. In the novel, the character's inability to fully comprehend their role in the larger global and digital communities complicates their traditional individual agency and calls into question its limits. Exploring the strategies and limitations of cognitive mapping and its effect on individual agency, *Ready Player One* creates a community vulnerable to corrupt systems of power unless a new form of collective agency can be achieved.

Additionally, Zygmunt Bauman's theory of liquid modernity attempts to detail social and individual changes that occur as we move from the *hardware* society of *things* and commodities of late capitalism to a *software* society where interactions, relations, and reality are increasingly virtual or online. This "liquid" realm conceives of a "receding interest on the part of individuals in their joint/shared affairs. This wilting of interest is aided and abetted by the state only too glad to cede as many of its past responsibilities as possible to private concerns" (Bauman, 2000, p. 13). Through the individual's lack of care for their external world, a shift of power occurs, and more common interests become privatized as, more often than not, these digital spheres are owned and operated by corporate entities. This shift recognizes the retreat of the individual from the traditional, stratified

social field of joint and shared affairs into more individualized, fluid relations, which turn toward new forms of collective identity that bring the individual as a category into question. Their interactions are further complicated by the influence of a neoliberal market system and how all interactions come with a cost. That even through the characters' apparent belief in individualism, their identities are instead being transformed into data, a commodity for the corporations of the novel to take advantage of. In combating the rise of the corporate empire of Innovative Online Industries (IOI), the narrator, Wade Watts, must consider whether his individual power and agency will be enough to wrest control of the OASIS from his corporate counterparts. The quest for control of the OASIS underscores the tensions between the individual and the corporation – public and private – in a neoliberal, liquid modern society. The novel exemplifies how speculative fiction in conditions of liquid modernity reveals both the limits of traditional agency and emergent forms of resistance within virtual spaces.

In what follows, I will first analyze how *Ready Player One's* dystopian society embodies the key facets of Bauman's liquid modernity – precarity, dissolution of stable communities, and commodification of identity. Mapping these facets of liquid modernity will allow for a deeper understanding of how the individual characters interact with their own agency and power. I will then examine how the novel portrays traditional agency and whether it can be achieved in Cline's dystopia. The questions guiding this chapter are: What is the novel calling into question about agency, and how does it map onto the virtual spaces of the novel? How does the individual interact with their own societal agency, and can their agency combat the power and wealth of the corporations that control their world? Can the individual use their own traditional agency, or is it only realized in the hands of the wealthy elite? And how can agency be recognized in a neoliberal society? Lastly, I will argue that traditional individual agency is not enough in the new digital landscape of the novel, and that only through conscious collective responsibility and agency can the characters disrupt the corporatizing power that exists in this iteration of a digital, neoliberal society. Ultimately, Cline's novel presents a warning to contemporary society about the dangers of an increasingly digital

society without the necessary precautions against corporate privatization. And that unless we recognize the power of the conscious collective, both in real and virtual spaces, power and agency will belong only to the corporation. Only through working collectively are we able to make impactful and lasting societal change that benefits the needs of the people.

The Novel as Liquid Modern

Ready Player One's depiction of a 2045 technological dystopia critiques the unthinking embrace of technology as an answer to social and ecological problems. While the novel discusses an advancement in video game technology, it juxtaposes this progress with the rapidly deteriorating physical landscape. As society embraces increasing technological dependence, a sociological shift takes place, with people moving from physical reality into the digital. In doing so, the OASIS becomes "an elaborate contraption for deceiving [the] senses, ... [a way] to live in a world that didn't exist" (Cline, 2018, p. 198), a crafted utopia where one could be anyone or anything. The OASIS establishes its utopian norms through a sense of play as the OASIS itself is both a game and an idealized society. This sense of play within the utopian genre is one that exists in the periphery, as something which typically exists only to prevent the utopia from becoming a place of totalitarian leadership. However, *Ready Player One* places the concept of utopian play as a central facet of its digital world, reframing its conception of a utopian space. This foregrounding is reliant upon the establishment of the OASIS as primarily a video game simulation where players can exist within the games they play, in other words, a game within a game. And while the OASIS's role is one that has evolved to encompass more than just the gaming world, as the characters of the novel engage in typical forms of societal engagement, the role of utopian play remains central. For the novel, the "utopian possibilities of play, sees games as essential, not only as foreshadowing the future, but in shaping everyday life in the present" (Nordstrom, 2016, p. 15). The act of play encourages the characters to interact with their virtual world with a sense of possibility, to experience the present and

envision the future of their world, and to recognize their responsibility in bringing that world about.

The OASIS, however, is not a true utopia as aspects of its societal framework rely heavily on neoliberal ideals and mirrors many of the physical societies' flaws; in this way, the characters engage with a digital society that reflects rather than challenges much of their current societal problems. Drawing my definition of utopia from Frederic Jameson's *Archaeologies of the Future*, "utopian form is itself a representational meditation on radical difference, radical otherness, and on the systemic nature of the social totality" (2005, p. xii). In Cline's OASIS, there are still many facets of the digital society that reflect the systemic nature of its physical counterpart; characters still experience racism, sexism, and classism as their digital society only transports these physical flaws into the virtual space. However, the OASIS does provide the characters with the freedom of being able to self-fashion their identities, even if those identities are still rooted in social norms, which allows them to, at times, disrupt typical systems of identity and power. In this way the OASIS engages more with Michel Foucault's theory of heterotopias, where the digital space acts as a "counter-site, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites... can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (1986, p. 24). The utopian nature of the OASIS acts as a "space of illusion [which] exposes every real space" (Foucault, 1986, p.27) allowing the characters to question their roles in both their digital and physical spaces and to see the flaws that undercurrent their present society.

For the characters, virtual reality often feels more real, and for Wade Watts, the protagonist and narrator, the OASIS "is the only reality that has any meaning" (Cline, 2018, p. 243). His identity is defined by his avatar rather than his physical body, "the growing virtualization of culture [in the novel] leads to the virtual becoming 'more real than real'" (Ehrlich, 2021, p. 97) – a phenomenon that is reflected within our own contemporary culture as digital technologies become more integrated within our current ways of societal navigation. The novel highlights this increase of technological progress and digital escapism through Wade's understanding of his mixed realities. For him, the

virtual landscape is his escape from the world and his “abject poverty” (Cline, 2018, p. 13) which consists of living in the Portland Avenue Stacks, a collection of mobile homes stacked 15-20 high, that serves those fleeing “their dying small towns” to be closer to city metropolises where they would be able to find “work, food, electricity, and reliable OASIS access” (Cline, 2018, p. 21). The character’s physical migration to a new and adapting urban sphere disrupts the individual’s ability to fully grasp the totality of their alien, dystopian landscape, causing the societal fabric to unravel and reform in new, complex ways that the characters must learn to navigate. And while characters are expected to adapt to their new physical realities, their existence within the OASIS is also one of constant reframing as it exists as a space where new modes of being are always being developed.

Ready Player One’s society is one that is precarious due to the dissolution of stable communities and the privatization of common interests through the implementation and popularity of the OASIS. The characters exist in a period of time “when the old ways ... no longer work properly, but new and more effective ways have not been made available” (Rattansi, 2017, p. 214), further enabled by their inability to grasp the totality of their changing worlds. Cline’s technological dystopia sets side by side the real and virtual realities of the characters, enabling an examination of a dysregulated social sphere that has come to rely on the virtual and, in turn, has become physically isolated while ironically being virtually connected. In this new future, traditional forms of engagement are becoming less effective as people spend more and more time online. The characters of the novel experience a “receding interest ... in their joint/shared affairs” (Bauman, 2000, p. 13) unless that affair happens to be the stability of the OASIS. The elections for real-world government positions are ignored as “it [doesn’t] matter who [is] in charge” (Cline, 2018, p. 201), so long as the OASIS remains operational. The characters’ neglect of their physical realities further distances them from their agency and the complications of life in the neoliberal sphere. For them, only the operation of the OASIS matters.

The inability of the individual to engage in the totality of their real and virtual society, follows what Fredric Jameson theorizes in

Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, a moment where the abstraction of late capitalism – expressed in this novel as a shift into an abstract technological space owned and managed by the corporate OASIS – replaces traditional social relations rooted in a “sense of place” with “mobile, alternative trajectories” (1991, p. 51). But for the characters in *Ready Player One*, this shift is not without its complications, as they are split between two realms of existence, the digital and the physical, causing them to continuously reframe their cognitive maps and in turn craft the confines of their societal engagement. Throughout the novel, Wade tends to reject the physical space he occupies, and only out of necessity does he engage with his real-world existence, therefore limiting his ability to fully participate in the physical sphere. Tasks like eating, sleeping, and showering “contradict [his] other life”, his “real life” (Cline, 2018, p. 195) in the digital metaverse. Wade’s physical identity counters his OASIS avatar creating dissonance in his identities and understanding of his place within his social spheres. Isolating himself in the real world to achieve social acceptance in the digital world alienates him from the problems his physical world faces, emphasized by the “thick film of neglect” (Cline, 2018, p. 276) that permeates the world when Wade does step outside. The novel’s alienation of place and belonging is not only present in the physical realities of the characters, but also in the digital sphere of the OASIS, as many of the characters take on an alias to separate their physical identity from their digital one causing their identities to split. This estrangement is exacerbated in the digital world as it is constantly expanding, asking the characters to continuously adapt their cognitive maps in order to engage in the accepted societal frameworks.

Ready Player One’s depiction of a promising yet challenging future, in which engagement with society shifts to the digital space, paradoxically both advocates for and critiques traditional models of agency. Instead of a model in which a self “coalesces” around an organic core, the novel follows a logic of “estrangement and cognition” (Suvin, 1979, p. 7-8). Expanding upon Darko Suvin’s theory of estrangement and cognition, Carl Freedman relates estrangement to an “alternative fictional world” that refuses to take the “mundane environment for granted” (2000, p. 17) and is linked to cognition, another important

part of *Ready Player One*'s model, as the “critical characters”’ ability to recognize the “connections as well as the disconnections” (Freedman, 2000, p. 17) within this imagined world is crucial for understanding the ways they choose to participate. These two functions, estrangement and cognition, must happen in tandem for the ‘truth’ of the novel to take form, as the characters must acknowledge their physical reality while also engaging critically with their digital surroundings. Freedman also integrates the concept of an incomprehensible totality as a key theory to understanding how science fiction, and by extension dystopias, operate. Science fictions operate in a state of post-structuralism where the structure of various systems is questioned, and “the principle of *relationality*” is becoming “detachable” (Freedman, 2000, p. 13), and parts are now being understood without reference to the whole. *Ready Player One* illustrates this dichotomy through the disassociation between the virtual and physical spaces, effectively creating a heterotopic mirror where the flaws of the novel’s physical society are magnified and distorted through its utopic and dystopic lenses. In the OASIS the characters interactions with their community are subjected to different space and time therefore affecting the characters’ ability to engage with the totality of their existence and in turn the full capacity of their agency.

How one engages with technology acts as the foundation of the individual’s interactions with the totality of their existence, both in real and virtual worlds, as technology blurs the lines between the frames of representation of the existing environmental and societal relationships. The novel critiques the “dual nature” of technology and how it can be simultaneously “a means of progress and a tool for oppression” (Youvan, 2024, p. 9), providing more digital social mobility while still being bound by the market system that operates both realities. The OASIS is a depiction of a highly advanced Metaverse, or a “virtual-reality space in which users can interact with a computer-generated environment and other users” (Akilli, 2022, p. 68), where one can see, touch, feel, and smell their digital environments. Metaverses in their most current installments are owned and run by corporate institutions, one of the more recent being Meta, the conglomeration of Facebook and its subsidiaries. At its invention the OASIS was

predicted to “change the way people around the world lived, worked, and communicated. It would transform entertainment, social networking, and even global politics” (Cline, 2018, p. 56) effectively moving physical and societal processes into an increasingly digital and globalized space. The OASIS is at once a technological metaverse and a platform society, which is defined by José van Dijck as “a society in which social and economic traffic is increasingly channeled by an (overwhelmingly corporate) global online platform ecosystem that is driven by algorithms and fueled by data” (2018, p. 4). The OASIS reflects these platform tendencies, as it is a metaverse run by the corporation of Gregarious Simulation Systems (GSS), and is at risk of further privatization as the novel’s traditional social structures are unequipped to handle the regulation of the OASIS and other similar virtual systems.

The privatization of online spaces is one that poses a great concern, not only in the novel, as technology becomes more advanced and integrated with current social structures. For van Dijck, “the implementation of platforms in society triggers a fierce discussion about private benefit and corporate gain versus public interests and collective benefits” (van Dijck, 2018, p. 2-3), especially when these technologies become globalized, as many of the safety nets surrounding public interest are whittled away. The ungovernability of platform spaces is reflected within *Ready Player One* as it does not escape the corporate monopolization of the metaverse and the commodification of its digital denizens. In the OASIS, the rules are determined by the corporation of GSS, and while there may be “no laws in the OASIS” (Cline, 2018, p.153), the parameters for engagement are set by the company and its creator, James Halliday. His company is one of the leading private corporations of the characters’ reality, as it controls both the access to the platform and the means of engagement within it, such as where you can fight other players and what sectors of the simulation allow magic or technology, outlining clear expectations for its participants.

In terms of corporate authority, GSS is more passive in its control over the economic and social interactions of its physical and virtual participants, however, its competitor aims to “maximize its interest”

(Akili, 2022, p. 70) in this digital realm, bending the lawless OASIS to their whims fully embodying the dangers of corporate privatization. Innovative Online Industries (IOI) the competitor to GSS aims to further privatize the OASIS and bring it further into the market of neoliberal economics. IOI believes that the OASIS “was never properly monetized” and if they gained control of the platform the company would “start charging a monthly fee for access to the simulation” (Cline, 2018, p. 33) and advertisements would be on every surface. The social gaming platform of the OASIS would become a privatized space further “disintegrating the social into entrepreneurial” (Brown, 2015, p. 37) causing the destruction of a shared public space. If the corporation’s ploy to control the OASIS succeeds, it will result in a “[removal of] the umbrella of protection provided belonging” (Brown, 2015, p. 37) that the platform sustains and would instead create a space where the individual is less of a person and is seen more as a piece of data to exploit and control for profit. Its participants are only seen as human capital that drive the larger flow of corporate economics.

The opportunity for IOI to garner control presents itself in James Halliday’s will through the form of a contest in which the winner receives the inheritance of Halliday’s estate and more importantly the OASIS. Halliday who is obsessed with his childhood from the 1980s, fashions the contest in the form of an Easter egg hunt, where players are to find hidden references to 1980s pop culture. The player must not only find these references, but present mastery of the video games and movies from this time period, resulting in an individual successor. While Halliday’s egg hunt offers an opportunity for all players, it does not prevent corporations for trying their hand at winning control of the OASIS metaverse.

IOI, a “global communications conglomerate”, provides access to the OASIS and “sells goods and services inside it” (Cline, 2018, p. 33), effectively controlling a substantial portion of the market surrounding the platform, but desires even greater control of the public platform. This corporation, while not federally funded, has managed to make part of its business model enforced by public government agencies. IOI, “under current federal law”, is allowed to force debtors into

“mandatory indenturement” (Cline, 2018, p. 270) until their debtors have paid off what they owe to the company, rather than the government taking responsibility for these individuals. IOI demonstrates the way in which humans become capital in a neoliberal economic system and how “we are human capital not just for ourselves, but also for the firm, state, or postnational constellations of which we are members” (Brown, 2021, p. 37). Each interaction is weighed through the lens of private profit and interests, through the commodification of its participants. While IOI may not currently be in control of the OASIS, GSS does not step in to halt the actions taken by IOI or protect the interests of its consumers. The laissez-faire approach by the GSS corporation and the global governments aids in the speculation of what a privatized metaverse might permit through and increasingly privatized digital sphere.

Ready Player One depicts a society that contains liquid modern tendencies that are aided by the pull of profit and neoliberal societal norms which facilitates the commodification of identities and public issues into private affairs. While Wade and his group of fellow “Gunters” (Cline, 2018, p. 8), hunters of Halliday’s easter egg, aim to avoid the privatization of the OASIS, they are still bound by the market system that operates their lives. How they engage with the OASIS is being constantly tracked, their actions being turned into data that corporations can use and the OASIS profits from both real and virtual transactions made by its participants. The platform has its own in-game economy, which is driven by its own currency, “credits” (27), and players need to pay to travel, buy items, or engage in the virtual space. Unless one possessed the means, the player is stuck on the planet Incipio, the spawn area for new players, and is unable to participate in the OASIS as intended limiting what they can and cannot do within the virtual sphere.

Wade’s poverty at the beginning of the novel captures this lack of agency in the OASIS, even when the platform provides a space that promises new forms of connection and provides opportunities to alter one’s economic positioning. The lack of agential engagement is not limited to the digital sphere, as in order to even operate the platform, the player must purchase “two pieces of interface hardware”

(Cline, 2018, p. 58) and must have a connection to the Internet, as without these key pieces of technology, accessing the OASIS is impossible. Further isolating those with economic wealth from those without. While claiming that this new space is an “online utopia” (Cline, 2018, p. 59) where they have complete freedom, the individual is “more than ever before dependent on the play of market forces” (Bauman, 2000, p. 11), which they must answer to in every interaction. The individual falls “under the illusion that they are idiosyncratically self-fashioning” when they are only engaging in what the market determines for them, chaining them to “the beat of market logics” (Stark, 2019, p. 8). In a society that is heavily tied to the control of the market and privatized interests, the characters of the novel, while having the ability to participate in individualistic self-fashioning, are limited by liquid modern virtues of the society they live in, calling into question the characters’ potential to harness agency in their societies.

The Affordances and Limitations of Traditional Agency

Ready Player One questions the individual’s responsibility for social change with the hunt for James Halliday’s easter egg. The hunt is meant to provide a single individual with the opportunity to gain control of the OASIS. However, it is not just individuals vying for control of the OASIS; the corporation of IOI, whose goal is to monetize the OASIS and turn the “open-source virtual utopia...[into] a corporate-run dystopia” (Cline, 2018, p. 33), calls into question the responsibility of the individual to combat the privatization of common interests. The corporate privatization of the OASIS is seen as the ultimate corruption of the virtual technology that the globe has come to rely on, both socially and economically. Its privatization would effectively move power and agency away from the individual, further consolidating it in corporations and the wealthy. In this race to gain the OASIS and its fortune, GSS and the world governments allow their participants to “play their own games” (Bauman, 2000, p. 11), taking no responsibility for these two worlds and the changes that need to be made in order to prioritize the good of the people. Choosing instead to prioritize neoliberal individualism and creating a world that

operates within the corporate sphere, the corporate operation of the OASIS furthers the uneven distribution of power present in the novel's dystopian society.

The characters of *Ready Player One* constantly engage in a neoliberal creation of their online identities through their interactions with others and how they choose to present themselves via their avatar. The creation of an avatar, for some, provides a unique opportunity to gain agency and individualism through their 'physical' presentation in the digital space. The OASIS operates as an "open source reality" where its users can create a "new persona ... with complete control over how you look and sound like" (Cline, 2018, p. 57). Through allowing the characters to fashion their own identities in anonymity, *Ready Player One* examines how physical identity becomes moldable in a virtual society. In the virtual space nearly every aspect of your identity is customizable and one's virtual "experience is defined by taking action, including deciding explicitly who you are, or who you want to say you are" (Kolko, 2000, p. 1), in other words the ways you choose to interact with the interface are an active choice and can determine the communities you become a part of within these digital spaces. The creation of one's digital identity is crucial as it determines how you are perceived within the virtual space, and for our characters, it is one of the freedoms their digital society allows.

While some choose to create avatars that resemble their realistic selves, others use them as a way to gain more agency in the virtual sphere. Helen, a "heavyset African American girl" (Cline, 2018, p. 318), creates their avatar Aech to resemble a "tall, broad-shouldered Caucasian male" (Cline, 2018, p. 38) under the guidance of her mother, who recognizes that there is a "marked difference" (Cline, 2018, p. 320) in how both women and people of color are treated inside and outside of the OASIS. As the OASIS is not a "raceless interface" (Kolko, 2000, p. 214), the individual is allowed to create a character that "will be their agent of communication and action" (Kolko, 2000, p. 215), potentially granting more privilege depending on how one chooses to identify, which actively affect the digital communities they can interact with. Through the use of a virtual avatar, *Ready Player One* illustrates that "solid modernity identities such as

class and gender” are no longer stable and that “in liquid modernity they become a never-ending task” (Rattansi, 2017, p. 217), a way for individuals to allow for their avatars to reflect a truer and possibly more fluid version of themselves. While the OASIS grants them more agency in crafting their own identity, an inability to affect the ways they are physically perceived remains, ultimately tying them to the system that perpetuates systemic marginalization and limits their individual agency.

Art3mis, whose real name is Samantha, also complicates the problem of individual agency, as she is one of the few main characters who believes that individuals can have a genuine impact upon their society, albeit with limitations. Her belief in the world and her ability to enact change are what drive her character to compete in Halliday’s contest. Her goal is much different from Parzival’s, as his primary goal is to escape, “to get the hell out of Dodge” (Cline, 2018, p. 98), before the Earth ultimately collapses due to overpopulation and its damaged environment. Atr3mis, in contrast, believes in using her newfound wealth to change their current circumstances, that through “tackling world hunger”, she can then “fix the environment and solve the energy crisis” (Cline, 2018, p. 98). While her goal may be lofty, she believes in the individual’s ability to effect change. However, this change can only be enacted once one has enough wealth and agency to make the issue a private goal. In her current circumstances of being middle-class and of little global importance, she is limited by the societal framework that perpetuates the continuous deterioration of her world. While still being able to recognize and grapple with the world’s atrocities, until she has wealth and power, her aspirations for a better world remain unfulfilled. Art3mis’s belief in the power of wealth questions what determines an individual’s agency, and whether the power of individual choice is enough to save the dying planet.

The novel continues this conversation of individual capabilities and agency through Wade, as he believes that he is responsible for protecting the OASIS. Wade’s quest for Halliday’s egg, while mainly self-serving, examines how the individual can engage with powers larger than himself. Throughout the novel, Wade constantly wants to work on his own, claiming that those who work together are “perverting

the entire spirit of the contest” (Cline, 2018, p. 34), one of individualistic achievement. It is not until Wade is forced into collaboration with others that he begins to think of working as a collective as an option. Wade’s journey from an impoverished young kid in the Stacks to an adult who now owns the OASIS is ultimately a quest for him to self-fashion and achieve the highest form of power available in his society, wealth. Wade’s quest resembles an Arthurian Grail journey that speaks “to our wishes, anxieties, desires, and above all to our innate sense of play” (Aronstein, 2015, p. 52), the goal to heal the world through a quest and to surpass our realities becoming something greater than one’s current existence. However, Cline’s quest leads our hero on a different journey, asking him to not only participate in the ideal digital world but also in the flawed physical reality. Wade self-fashions a new identity through the use of his avatar Parzival, named after “the knight in Arthurian legend who found the Holy Grail” (Cline, 2018, p. 28), who acts as his connection to the OASIS. All of his interactions are perceived through this character, by which he finds a community in the digital sphere. Finding other characters who are like minded and desire for the OASIS to remain within the public sphere. Although he still prefers to act solo, his desire for connection permeates the way he perceives his realities. In his journey of self-fulfillment and his hunt for the egg, Wade goes from “one virtual world to the next”, fleeing the “physical world of privation and stagnation, of oppression and isolation, for the promise of fulfillment and progress, power, and community” (Aronstein, 2015, p. 5) in the OASIS. However, even though this digital escapism and the agency the virtual realm provides in terms of self-identity and tentative connection, Wade is still unable to obtain nearly as much agency as his counterpart, IOI, whose agency is magnified by wealth and societal power.

The company of IOI demonstrates how agency operates in a neoliberal world that is determined through the market and the increased commodification of the individual and their identities. In the quest for the egg, IOI’s goal is to monetize the OASIS, and it will accomplish this through any means necessary, including murdering any of its perceived threats and illegally having multiple people work

together to pilot one avatar, corrupting the concept of working collectively for the main characters of the novel. Its accumulation of resources and governmental backing allows the company full rein in both spheres as it controls the market for both physical and digital goods. The company's only real threat is the individual characters who seek to gain the egg before them. This competition for the egg is one of "the power of...industry versus the agency of its consumers" (Wark, 2009, p. 196), and as IOI profits on the selling of access to the OASIS and its services, it uses its resources in a way that disadvantages its consumers, the individual. In its privatization of common interests, the company limits its consumers' agency to the point of making indentured workers of its debtors, physically forcing them into indentured servitude in the real and digital worlds. IOI recognizes and manipulates its power in such a way that the traditional individual agency is powerless against it and forces the characters to innovate a new way to claim their own agency to create change in their society.

Beyond the Individual: The Force of the Collective

James Halliday's contest appears to be about the gain of the individual, as the first two challenges, or gates, only require the participation of an individual to solve and acquire the keys to open them. However, the final gate complicates this outlook and, in doing so, challenges traditional agencies' abilities in the novel. Through a mini-easter egg, or clue, inside the second gate, Wade finds that the third and final gate "cannot be unlocked alone" (Cline, 2018, p. 263), further challenging the individualistic message that the contest originally portrays. Each of the keys and gates requires the player to find them on their own until there is a need for unity, however, even this unity is unstable. Although three players are needed to open the last gate, the final challenge that lies within, a game of Adventure, leaves the players again fighting for individual gain. The characters of the novel subvert this expectation and instead do not fulfill the Hunt's original design as they instead combine their skills and knowledge, through Parzival's avatar, to complete the third and final gate. While this collaboration

is forced through IOI's destruction of the sector and all the avatars within it, leaving only Parzival alive, the narrative pushes for a new way of engagement in a society saturated with liquid modern and neo-liberal tendencies that focus on individualism and isolation rather than community. Halliday's egg hunt takes on a new meaning as the characters instead choose to work together and split the prize, combining their knowledge and agency instead of relying on the force of the individual. This new meaning reveals the importance of working as a collective and its ability to disrupt corporate power and corrupt forms of agency.

Conscious effort is necessary to enact change, and through the actions of *Ready Player One's* main five characters, the novel illustrates the need for a collective conscious agency. The characters of the High Five, the first five players to reach the copper key, help demonstrate this claim that the individual must consciously aim to make change, and that this change starts with adapting the framework of traditional agency. Recognizing the power of the collective is the first step to realizing the potential for social change. While Halliday's contest originally seems to suggest that only through traditional forms of agency will one be able to receive the reward, the characters challenge this notion through a broadening of the self to include those outside themselves. Without Wade's decision to implore for aid from other users of the OASIS, the final battle would have been one that was insurmountable due to IOI's large collective force. Through the conscious choice to ask for the aid of others, Wade disrupts what it means to be a person with agency in his society and reveals a new, powerful way of engaging with his world. While this choice to ask for aid could have backfired and resulted in spectators rather than active participants in pursuit of defending the OASIS, the novel offers a new form of "conscious human agency" that relies on a change in perspective and action, "rather than capitulating to what is given as necessary and inevitable" (Vint, 2014, p. 25). In actively choosing to take part in a collective form of agency, the characters subvert the societal expectations of isolation and instead emphasize the importance of working together to create change.

The novel urges that conscious collective agency cannot be reached if one only engages within the digital space, but that there is a need for simultaneous action in both the real and the digital world. It is not until Wade steps out of his isolation and into reality that the final events of the novel are able to take place. While this first step into reality is taken on his own, he requires the support of his allies to make it a success in the OASIS. As the contest is drawing to a close, the characters are kept out of the crystal gate due to an impenetrable force field that can only be taken down from the inside, not only in the digital sphere but in the physical as well. Wade recognizes that his only opportunity to defeat IOI is to become an indentured worker which would allow him physical and digital access to IOI's heavily guarded system. While this initial step is taken in isolation, once he has escaped from IOI's headquarters, he and the other characters of the High Five are physically at risk due to IOI's viewing them as a threat. At their time of need, Ogden Morrow, the co-creator of the OASIS, extends a helping hand, allowing them to travel to his home so they can participate in the end of the contest with their physical safety is ensured. Morrow's extension of aid comes from a promise he made to Halliday "to protect the spirit and integrity of [the] contest" (Cline, 2018, p. 314), while choosing not to interfere digitally, Morrow uses his monetary power to aid them in the physical world. And while Morrow's choice still reflects the current view of societal agency – if one has wealth, one has power – his choice to aid a group of individuals while not gaining power of his own is one that emphasizes the need for a wholly participatory community. One that bridges across differences rather than continuing to work in isolation.

It is through these conscious choices to work as a community that ultimately affects the outcome of the novel emphasizes the importance of the collective. In the final battle the rest of the avatars are obliterated in IOI's desperate attempt to win the contest, and Wade, due to his recognition of the importance of play within the OASIS, is given an extra life after completing a "perfect game of Pac Man" (Cline, 2018, p. 345). As the only avatar with the chance at an extra life, he could have chosen to complete the rest of the contest once again in digital isolation. It is at this moment that Wade makes the

decision to rely on his allies in both worlds. Due to their proximity in a physical space, the other players are able to be “patched... into [Wade’s] audio and visual feed” (Cline, 2018, p. 345), granting them the collective agency that IOI employs throughout the novel. In this way they can work together simultaneously in the digital and physical spheres through Wade and his avatar, Parzival. Taking it a step further, Wade decides that in return for their help, he will share the fame, glory, and winnings with his newfound community, not allowing the newly gained agency of the collective to fall away due to an individualistic nature. Through the act of sharing with others, his newfound agency allows Wade to foster a new form of community that relies on collective action rather than the isolated actions of the individual.

Cline’s novel warns us about the danger of isolation and the increase of individualistic thinking that has begun to take precedence in *Ready Player One*’s society. While many of the characters, at first, engage with the concepts of isolation and individualism, as the novel draws to a close, these practices are beginning to lose their luster. These ways of interacting with their worlds, escaping to their digital utopia, and participating in a culture that further isolates the individual have proven to be inadequate to enact authentic social change. While these escapist tendencies were once optimal for basic survival, that was all these forms of interaction could offer, not comprehensive change. The character of James Halliday illustrates the importance of recognizing that the digital realm cannot replace physical reality.

“I created the OASIS because I never felt at home in the real world. I didn’t know how to connect with the people there. I was afraid for all of my life. Right up until I knew it was ending. That was when I realized, as terrifying and painful as reality can be, it’s also the only place where you can find true happiness. Because reality is *real*, do you understand?” (Cline, 2018, p. 364)

This parting statement from the OASIS’s creator emphasizes to Wade and readers the importance of reality and how the digital platform can act as a false cure for what truly lies underneath. The digital cannot replace a true physical human connection and action.

Conclusion: Agency and the Technological Future

At the beginning of this chapter, I asked: What is the novel calling into question about agency and how does it map onto the virtual spaces of the novel? How does the individual interact with their own societal agency, and can their agency combat the power and wealth of the corporations that control their world? Can the individual use their own traditional agency, or is it only realized in the hands of the wealthy elite? And how can agency be recognized in a neoliberal society? These questions guided my thinking about *Ready Player One* and how the characters interact with their real and digital societies. I have argued that the novel exhibits the features of Zygmunt Bauman's (2000) liquid modernity and how increased individualization and globalization affect the recognition and use of traditional agency by our main characters. As a result of this engagement, the novel calls for a shift in the individualistic thinking that plagues the presented society and instead recognizes the power of the collective as a means to enact social change, encouraging a deeper understanding of what it means to be an individual in a digital society and how real and digital actions must be taken simultaneously. The events of Cline's novel warn about the dangers of isolation, both of the individual and of power, and how only through engagement with others and the realization of a collective agency can the true capacity of social action be reached. In a space where the world is moving further online and is engaging in platform societies that lack regulation and oversight, this definition of collective social agency enables those who lack traditional agency, wealth and status, to combine their power to subvert the structures that limit them. While the novel could have emphasized the use of agency only in the online setting, it instead encourages a broader scope of understanding through the actions that Wade takes in both spheres, highlighting that without active participation in the real world, the events in the virtual sphere would not have come to pass, and vice versa.

Examining the novel through the lens of liquid modernity also engages a deeper understanding of the neoliberal societal framework and how the commodification of the individual plays into how they exhibit their agency. Through the liquid modern, we can observe how

the characters engage with their own agency and how that can, in turn, frame their grasp on their reality. The OASIS complicates the characters' sense of identity and the ways they interact with their own agency. The heterotopic juxtaposition of the dystopian reality and the utopian simulation aids in cementing this disconnect between these two existences and the necessary merging of the two that must be engaged in. The novel challenges the neoliberal notions of individualism and instead calls for a merging of identities and communities to elicit impactful societal change. Examining what a truly virtual world would look like, Cline's novel questions the limitations of these competing spheres and what it means to enact social power and change within the technologically altered setting.

Ready Player One recognizes the importance of the collective and emphasizes the impact that people can have when consciously working together to disrupt harmful systems of power. The new digital sphere creates a space where the individual is constantly at risk of commodification and while participants in the OASIS are allowed to self-fashion their avatar's identity, there remains the systemic implications of one's race, sexuality, and gender identity. The novel explores and reshapes what it means to have traditional agency in a technological dystopia and whether the novel's idealized future perpetuates the cycle of individualistic power. I question whether this newfound agency of the collective can also enact broader social change for marginalized individuals or if this new form of collective agency still resists more radical systemic change. The novel is framed around the straight, white, male character of Wade, and although he ultimately shares his wealth and power with the others of the High Five, the full control of the OASIS still rests solely in his hands, still in the hands of someone with a traditional form of agency. Does Wade's use of collective agency reflect what could happen on a broader scale for the marginalized, or does this use of agency only exist if one exhibits the forms of traditional agency? Is it truly the power of the collective if the power still lies within the control of a singular individual? Or does the recognition of a conscious collective agency outweigh the potential harm a singular individual could produce?

As the world continues to expand into the realm of the digital, it is crucial to question the role of the individual within these new spaces and how we can enact change on a societal level. Through examining how agency presents itself within *Ready Player One's* dystopian landscape, we can recognize how platform societies rely on the conditions of neoliberalism and liquid modernity – specifically the dissolution of stable communities and the privatization of public affairs – to enact control over its consumers. The novel warns of power in the hands of the corporation and instead argues for a collective force that recognizes the power of the people when we collectively make the active choice to disrupt individualistic systems of control. Through the lens of liquid modernity and the transition from public to private interests, we can further question the role of agency in these technological, dystopian settings and whether traditional forms of agency are adequate to address and bring about true societal change.

References

- Akilli, E. (2022). The Metaverse Diplomacy: A Future Vision for Türkiye. *Insight (Türkey)*, 24(3), 67–88. <https://doi.org/10.25253/99.2022243.6>
- Aronstein, S., & Thompson, J. (2015). Coding the Grail: “Ready Player One’s” Arthurian Mash-Up. *Arthuriana (Dallas, Tex.)*, 25(4), 51–65. <https://doi.org/10.1353/art.2015.0045>
- Bauman, Z. (2000). LIVING IN THE ERA OF LIQUID MODERNITY. *Cambridge Anthropology*, 22(2), 1–19.
- Brown, W. (2021). *Undoing the demos : neoliberalism’s stealth revolution* (First paperback edition.). Zone Books.
- Cline, E. (2018). *Ready player one*. New York, NY: Broadway Books.
- Dijk, J. van, Poell, T., & Waal, M. de. (2018). The platform society : public values in a connective world. Oxford University Press.
- Ehrlich, N. (2021). The Virtualisation of Culture: Screens, Virtuality and Materiality. In *Animating Truth: Documentary and Visual Culture in the 21st Century* (pp. 87–110). Edinburgh University Press. <http://www.jstor.org.unr.idm.oclc.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctv1hm8gpd.8>
- Freedman, C. H. (2000). *Critical theory and science fiction*. Wesleyan University Press.

- Foucault, M., & Miskowicz, J. (1986). Of Other Spaces. *Diacritics*, 16(1), 22–27. <https://doi.org/10.2307/464648>
- Kolko, B. E. (2000). 12. Erasing @race: Going White in the (Inter)Face. In B. E. Kolko, G. B. Rodman, & L. Nakamura (Eds.), *Race in Cyberspace* (1st ed., pp. 213–232). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203949696-12>
- Jameson, F. (2005). *Archaeologies of the future: the desire called utopia and other science fictions*. Verso.
- Jameson, F. (1991). *Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism*. Duke University Press.
- Nordstrom, J. (2016). “A Pleasant Place for the World to Hide”: Exploring Themes of Utopian Play in Ready Player One. *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, 18(2), 238–256. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ids.2016.0014>
- Rattansi, A. (2017). Liquid modernity: the bare essentials. In *Bauman and contemporary sociology* (1st ed., pp. 214–226). Manchester University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526105882.00024>
- Stark, D. (2019). Ludic Literature: Ready Player One as Didactic Fiction for the Neoliberal Subject. In S. Pöhlmann (Ed.), *Playing the Field* (pp. 151–172). Walter de Gruyter GmbH. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110659405-010>
- Suvín, D. (1979). *Metamorphoses of science fiction : on the poetics and history of a literary genre*. Yale University Press.
- Wark, M. (2009). *Gamer Theory*. Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674044838>
- Vint, S. (2014). *Science fiction : a guide for the perplexed*. Bloomsbury Academic. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781472593894>
- Youvan, D. C. (2024). *Exploring Common Themes in Dystopian Fiction*. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.23807.21922>

About the Series

The book series *Interdisciplinary Studies on Philology* is an academic double anonymous peer-reviewed publication project that aims to explore the intersections of language, literature, culture, and society through a philological lens enriched by interdisciplinary approaches. Rooted in the conviction that philology is the study of texts and a dialogical space where historical, aesthetic, linguistic, and theoretical dimensions converge, this series opens a platform for scholars who seek to challenge traditional boundaries within the humanities. Drawing from a wide array of academic fields – including literary studies, history, cultural studies, linguistics, translation studies, media theory, art history, and philosophy – the series invites contributions that analyze texts and cultural phenomena across temporal, geographical, and disciplinary lines. Each volume is conceptualized around a specific theme that serves as a focal point for diverse methodological perspectives and critical engagements, thus fostering a multi-layered understanding of philological inquiry. In doing so, the series promotes a reconceptualization of philology as a mode of critical thinking that is not confined to classical or historical texts but is actively engaged with contemporary issues such as identity, memory, technology, and power. By assembling scholars from various institutional and cultural backgrounds, *Interdisciplinary Studies on Philology* also underscores the global relevance of philological work and its potential to intervene in broader discourses within the humanities.

The series is edited by Habib Tekin of Marmara University and Irem Atasoy of Istanbul University, who bring together their expertise in German philology, comparative literature, and cultural analysis to shape the editorial vision of the project.

About the Editors

Habib Tekin (Assoc. Prof. Dr.), Professor for German Literature at the Marmara University, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of German Language and Literature. His research fields are German-Jewish Literature, Holocaust Narration, Austrian Literature and Disability Studies.

Irem Atasoy (Assoc. Prof. Dr.), Professor for German Linguistics at the Istanbul University, Faculty of Letters, Department of German Language and Literature. Her research fields are Multimodal Linguistics, Visual Semiotics, Film and Media Studies.

Previously Published

- Volume 1:** Redefining Communication in Posthuman Age
Irem Atasoy and Habib Tekin (Eds.)
- Volume 2:** Mythological Motifs in Narratives
Irem Atasoy and Habib Tekin (Eds.)