

UTOPIAN VARIATIONS

UTOPIA IN LITERATURE, FILM, AND POPULAR CULTURE



SEAN SEEGER

Peter Lang

UTOPIAN VARIATIONS

Utopian Variations is a comparative critical study of a variety of kinds of utopia and utopian discourse. Rather than focusing on more familiar forms of utopia, the book considers utopia in relation to a range of topics that have received less attention within utopian studies, including literary modernism, postsecularism, transhumanism, antihumanism, xenofeminism, the Covid-19 pandemic, recent speculation about postcapitalism, and utopianism since the 2007–8 financial crisis. The book also makes an entirely original argument for a re-evaluation of the concept of the utopian blueprint that breaks with academic orthodoxy in this area. As well as drawing on literature, film, and popular culture, there is extensive engagement with social theory, cultural theory, and queer theory, resulting in a rich, wide-ranging study.

A small book on very big ideas. The title tells us there'll be variety, and Sean Seeger delivers that variety not just in terms of the forms discussed but of the texts explored too. *Utopian Variations* is both accessible and interesting. The writing is clear and to the point but there's no sacrificing on the detail. Seeger focuses his attention on the forms of utopia and utopianism that have received less attention in academic work to date, and his chronological approach makes it easy to track the evolution of the central ideas explored. I learnt a lot reading this book and have been introduced to a great many new texts.

– Matthew Leggatt, University of Winchester

Sean Seeger is Senior Lecturer in Modern and Contemporary Literature at the University of Essex. He has published widely on literature, film, and cultural theory. His main areas of interest are twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature; speculative fiction; utopian studies; and queer studies.

UTOPIAN VARIATIONS

Ralahine Utopian Studies

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Volume 38



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Sean Seeger

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Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek.
The German National Library lists this publication in the German National Bibliography;
detailed bibliographic data is available on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Seeger, Sean author

Title: Utopian variations : utopia in literature, film, and popular culture / Sean Seeger.

Description: Oxford ; New York : Peter Lang, 2025. | Series: Ralahine utopian studies, 1661-5875 ; 38 | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2025012282 (print) | LCCN 2025012283 (ebook) | ISBN 9781805840282 paperback | ISBN 9781805840299 ebook | ISBN 9781805840305 epub

Subjects: LCSH: Utopias-Philosophy

Classification: LCC HX806 .S355 2025 (print) | LCC HX806 (ebook) |

DDC 335.02-dc23/eng/20250509

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025012282>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025012283>

Cover image: 'Utopia and Light Bulb'

Artist: Patpitchaya

Source: Adobe Stock

Cover design by Peter Lang Group AG

ISSN 1661-5875

ISBN 978-1-80584-028-2 (print)

ISBN 978-1-80584-029-9 (E-PDF)

ISBN 978-1-80584-030-5 (E-PUB)

DOI 10.3726/b22926

PETER LANG



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Published by Peter Lang Ltd, Oxford (United Kingdom)

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This publication has been peer reviewed.

www.peterlang.com

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Acknowledgements

This book is indebted to many people, not all of whom can be adequately acknowledged here. The first and foremost of these is my frequent academic collaborator, Daniel Davison-Vecchione. Dan has been an inspirational interlocuter and a major spur to my thinking about all things speculative over the last decade, not least during the writing of our various jointly authored articles on literature and social theory. I consider myself extremely lucky not only to have benefited from Dan's unique insights, but to be able to call him a friend.

The book has benefited significantly from the many conversations I had with scholars at the 22nd Utopian Studies Conference at the University of Brighton in July 2022. In particular, I wish to thank the following people for invaluable comments, questions, and criticisms, both during and since the conference: Heather Alberro, Emrah Atasoy, Joe Davidson, Megen de Bruin-Molé, Michael Larson, Frank Lopes, and Katie Stone.

I wish to thank Matthew Leggatt and Liam Knight for generously inviting me to discuss some of my ideas for this book on their podcast, *Utopian and Dystopian Fictions*, in November 2024. It was a very enjoyable experience, the results of which can be streamed on Spotify and other platforms.

My thanks to everyone in the Department of Literature, Film, and Theatre Studies at the University of Essex who has helped to foster the ideal environment in which to write this book, especially Matthew De Abaitua, Josh Ang, Sanja Bahun, Lizzie Bennett, Chris Bundock, Shohini Chaudhuri, Katharine Cockin, Jon Crane, Sue Dawes, Cristina Fumagalli, Kate Gilmour, Sue Hogan, Liam Jarvis, Emma Kittle, Liz Kutí, Annecy Lax, Ed Lee, Jonathan Lichtenstein, Karin Littau, Mary Mazzilli, Emma McClelland, Lilly-Ann Newman, Dan O'Brien, Susan Oliver, Jak Peake, Owen Robinson, Tom Robinson, Joanna Rzepa, Penny Simpson, Sarah Smyth, Comhnall Speed, Holly Pester, Phil Terry, Antonio Vivas, Jonathan White, and Nora Williams.

Beyond Essex, thanks are due to the following people for the many productive conversations I have had with them about utopia, dystopia, and everything in between: Jake Abenson, Chidinma Achebe, Zoe Adonis, Mahnaz Ahangarani, Ash Bailey, Sophia van den Bergh, Brent Garcia, Miriam Jackson, Reuben Martens, Giovanni O’Flaherty, Dayo Ogunkoya, Irina Sadovina, Adam Stock, Immanuel Torres, Hamish Turtledove, Andries Van Dijk, and Yoshida Hisamoto.

Elements of some chapters were previously presented at conferences or seminars at the following institutions. Chapter 1: Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, University of California, Davis (2019). Chapter 2: Institute of Advanced Study, University of Warwick (2023). Chapter 4: Department of English and Comparative Literature, Goldsmiths, University of London (2016). Chapter 5: London Science Fiction Research Community, Birkbeck, University of London (2019). Chapter 6: Utopian Studies Society, University of Brighton (2022). My thanks to the organisers of these events for giving me the opportunity to gather some crucial feedback on my evolving ideas.

Chapter 5 is a revised version of an essay that originally appeared under the title “‘Whatever comes after human progress’: Transhumanism, Antihumanism, and the Absence of Queer Ecology in Lidia Yuknavitch’s *The Book of Joan*’ in the collection *Age and Ageing in Contemporary Speculative and Science Fiction*, edited by Sarah Falcus and Maricel Oró-Piqueras and published by Bloomsbury (Seeger 2023b). My thanks to Bloomsbury for granting permission for the reuse of this material.

Chapter 6 is a revised and expanded version of an article that originally appeared under the same title in the journal *Utopian Studies* in 2023, under the editorship of Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor, Stephanie Peebles Tavera, A. Elisabeth Reichel, and Manuel Sousa Oliveira (Seeger 2023a). My thanks to Pennsylvania State University Press for granting permission for the reuse of this material.

This book is being made available via open access through the University of Essex’s institutional open access fund. My sincere thanks to the University of Essex and its Library and Cultural Services team, especially Open Access Fund Co-ordinator Sean Andersson.

At Ralahine, I'd like to thank the anonymous Commissioning Editor who closely read and commented on the full manuscript. At Peter Lang, my thanks go to Senior Acquisitions Editor Tony Mason, whose help and encouragement throughout the publication process are much appreciated.

Lastly, I wish to thank my family for their support and encouragement throughout the process of writing this book. Thank you, Jackie, Tony, Elle, and Dylan – I couldn't have done it without you!

Introduction

As its title suggests, this book is a study of some of the many forms that utopia and utopianism have taken throughout cultural history. More specifically, it is a study of varieties of utopia that have generally received less consideration within the academic field of utopian studies. While there are many familiar forms of utopia which have been the subject of a substantial amount of scholarly commentary – the classical utopia, the anti-utopia, the critical utopia, and the feminist utopia, to name just a few – there are also, this study aims to show, various kinds of utopia and utopian discourse which merit such attention but which have been either partially or wholly neglected by utopian scholars.

This is not to say that all the topics addressed in the chapters ahead are, from a utopian studies perspective, entirely unfamiliar. This would be a rash not to mention inaccurate suggestion. Indeed, some of the topics – especially techno-utopianism – have recently been recurring reference points in scholarly discussion and debate, as is confirmed by the chapters in which they feature. The twofold thought that underlies the book is rather that, firstly, utopia is more various and multiform than is typically allowed for, and, secondly, that by taking into account forms of utopia and utopianism that are less often considered we shall find that our conception of utopia and its possibilities is enlarged in productive ways. In one sense, of course, this is simply a restatement of the very *raison d'être* of the field of utopian studies: to expand and refine our understanding of utopia. To this extent, the book represents a continuation of the efforts of scholars around the world who have, since the inception of the field in the 1970s, been collaborating on the intellectual project that is utopian studies. It is the intention of the author to make a small contribution to this lively and exciting exchange.

Where the book's claim to originality is stronger, however, is in some of its specifics. There are, for instance, extended discussions of the relationship between utopia and literary modernism (Chapter 1), utopia and

post-secularism (Chapter 2), and utopia and antihumanism (Chapter 5), none of which has yet received anything like adequate treatment within utopian studies. There are also chapters which consider utopia in the context of recent speculation about post-capitalism (Chapter 4), the Covid-19 pandemic (Chapter 7), and the resurgence of utopian discourse since the 2007–8 financial crisis (Chapter 8), each of which has received at least some attention from scholars of utopia, while remaining less well understood than familiar utopian themes. The book also makes an entirely original argument for a re-evaluation of the concept of the utopian blueprint (Chapter 6) that breaks with longstanding academic orthodoxy in this area. Where the book's subjects are somewhat more familiar, as in the cases of queer utopianism and techno-utopianism, these are framed in such a way as to yield fresh insights, either by posing new questions of them (Chapter 3) or by considering them in relation to social and cultural phenomena with which they are not usually associated (Chapter 5). In all these ways, then, the book's innovations lie in the perspectives it offers on some of utopia's less well-known variations.

Utopian Variations is divided into eight chapters, the length of which varies from that of a short journal article (approximately 5,000 words) to around twice that size. The chapters are organised chronologically according to the publication dates of the works they discuss and, as far as possible, into thematic blocks. Chapters 1 and 2 are concerned with distinctive forms of utopianism in works by Olaf Stapledon and Aldous Huxley written between the 1930s and the early 1960s. Chapter 3, which considers the relationship between queer theory and utopianism, charts the trajectory of queer theory from its origins in the thought of Michel Foucault in the 1970s through its consolidation during the 1980s and 90s to its recent utopian turn in the work of José Esteban Muñoz and the techno-feminist collective Laboria Cuboniks, among others. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 are all focused, in one way or another, on visions of life after capitalism, either in the form of post-capitalist speculation in the work of contemporary social theorists (Chapter 4), transhumanism and antihumanism in Lidia Yuknavitch's post-apocalyptic science fiction novel *The Book of Joan* (Chapter 5), or twenty-first-century utopian socialism in Yanis Varoufakis's work of alternate history, *Another Now* (Chapter 6). Chapter 7

turns to the very recent past and considers the utopian and dystopian dimensions of Sarah Hall's novel *Burntcoat*, a fiction taking place against the backdrop of a fictionalised version of the Covid-19 pandemic. The final chapter, Chapter 8, reevaluates the utopian tradition from More's *Utopia* to the writings of the cultural theorist Mark Fisher in order to consider how, why, and to what extent utopianism remains relevant in the face of some of the profound problems confronting humanity today.

Before considering the arguments of these chapters in more detail, a brief word is in order about a topic which this book, perhaps surprisingly, says relatively little about, namely, dystopia. As is widely acknowledged within utopian studies, utopia and dystopia are often less easy to distinguish than the availability of these two contrasting terms might suggest. A decision has nevertheless been made to devote this study almost entirely to utopia and to engage with dystopia only to a much more limited extent (most notably in Chapter 7 and the second half of Chapter 4). The justifications for this are as follows. Firstly, while a clear-cut, once-and-for-all distinction between utopia and dystopia is probably never going to be arrived at, it can be argued that such a distinction is rarely if ever needed. As William Empson (1995) and Ludwig Wittgenstein (2009) each demonstrated in their different ways, the expectation that words will conform to strict formal definitions or fixed sets of necessary and sufficient conditions is often an artificial requirement imposed on language from outside its contexts of use.

In practice, we use and distinguish between the terms utopia and dystopia unproblematically most of the time without needing to be able to say precisely where one ends and the other begins. At the same time, this is not to suggest that there is no scholarly interest or value in exploring when and why the urge to stop describing a given scenario as utopian and to begin calling it dystopian (or vice versa) occurs. On the contrary, as several of the chapters ahead demonstrate (Chapters 2, 4, and 7), understanding what is involved in this linguistic dynamic can play an important role in the interpretation of utopian texts. Relatedly, another reason why the book resists treating utopia to the strict exclusion of dystopia is that, like most of our words, there are circumstances in which the term utopia shades into its opposite in ways which can prove highly thought provoking.

Again, however, this is not to imply that no meaningful difference exists between utopia and dystopia; it is merely to acknowledge that our words possess a remarkable ability to mean more than any codifiable set of rules can fully anticipate.

A further, more prosaic reason for giving only limited attention to dystopia here is that a sequel to this volume, devoted to dystopia and its variations, is currently in progress. Inclusion of this material on dystopia would have resulted in a book of (at least) twice the length and would almost certainly have led to a loss of overall coherence. By focusing (almost) exclusively on utopia in this first instalment and (almost) exclusively on dystopia in the second, the aim is to produce two digestible and complementary studies that can be read either individually or together depending on the needs of individual researchers. For those who, reaching the end of this book, feel that they have only been told half the story, it will hopefully be reassuring to hear that a second instalment is on the way.¹

Ways to Read This Book

It is a sad fact about academia at present that those within it are becoming increasingly time-poor. With few exceptions, academic researchers at all levels are assigned ever more institutional responsibilities and find themselves with exponentially expanding workloads, while the time for clear, careful, productively slow thinking – the kind of thinking that is demanded by meaningful intellectual enquiry in any academic discipline – is steadily eroded. As Mark Fisher – whose thoughts on this and related topics are considered in Chapter 8 – has suggested, the experience of becoming ever more time-poor is not confined to academia: it has become the daily reality

1 For an overview of the dystopian subgenre and some of its literary and cinematic milestones, see my article 'Dystopia and Dystopian Literature' (Seeger 2018a). For an attempt to define dystopia in relation to the longer utopian tradition, see my 'Utopia, Dystopia, and Human Flourishing' (Seeger 2020b).

of almost everyone living under neoliberal capitalism. An adequate response to this unsustainable situation would necessarily involve radical social and political change of the kind that some of the authors discussed in this book envisage (see, in particular, Chapters 1, 4, and 6). Until and unless such systemic change occurs, it is hard to see how most of us are to avoid feeling ever more harried, pressurised, and exhausted by the proliferating demands on our finite time and attention.

In this context, it is therefore not safe to assume that academic readers of this book will have time to read it in its entirety. Ideally, this is how it would be read: from cover to cover, taking in every detail, noting down points of interest, and pausing here and there for as long as necessary to consider the fuller implications of what is being said and to work out where areas of disagreement with the author may lie. In a utopia whose inhabitants no longer experienced time as oppressive, where time poverty had been eliminated, and where every activity could be given the attention it merits, someone wishing to read a book like this one would feel no qualms about taking as long as they needed to do so. In the utopian fiction and theory of some of the authors addressed in this study – Olaf Stapledon (Chapter 1), Aldous Huxley (Chapter 2), Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams (Chapter 4), Yanis Varoufakis (Chapter 6), and, as mentioned, Mark Fisher (Chapter 8) – we are presented with speculations as to what such a utopian condition might be like. In Sarah Hall's *Burntcoat* (Chapter 7), meanwhile, a short-lived utopia takes the form of two people living together under pandemic lockdown conditions and finding they are able to take solace and pleasure in one another in the absence of an awareness of passing time. Taking a step back and considering utopia and its variations over the longer term, it is striking how often the need for free time can be seen to inform a myriad of otherwise very different utopian visions. Given the trivialisation of the notion of 'free time' in contemporary culture and its unfortunate associations with the more corporate ideal of 'rest and relaxation', however, it may be preferable to think of free time as something more like being freed from the imperative of time or, alternatively, as entering into a free relation to time. However it is expressed, the point is that there appears to be a widely shared need – certainly within capitalist modernity and maybe at other times as well – to feel free to fully give oneself to

activities deemed to be inherently valuable without the constant intrusion of an internalised time monitor.

Given where we presently find ourselves, however, and pending a suitably radical upheaval in our collective way of life, for the purposes of this introduction it is assumed that the reader is not necessarily someone with the luxury of working their way through the entire book from start to finish. Such a mode of reading may, for many research purposes, be unnecessary anyway, though it remains an open question to what extent the scholarly habit of dipping into a book to extract the essentials of a single chapter is itself a symptom of the time poverty imposed by contemporary academia. In any case, it will probably be more helpful than not to provide the reader with an overview of the structure and argument of each of the chapters that follow. For readers who are unsure whether they need or can afford to give their time to reading the book straight through, this should help them decide. For readers requiring a summary of each chapter in order to see which ones are likely to be of relevance to their own work, it should also prove useful. Lastly, for readers who already intend to read the entire volume, what follows can safely be skipped as they will find everything said hereafter unfolded much more fully in the chapters to come.

Chapter Outline

Chapter 1 is entitled ‘Science Fiction, Modernism, and Utopia’. The chapter puts forward a reading of two novels from the 1930s by the British author Olaf Stapledon – *Last and First Men* and *Star Maker* – as well as several of his works of nonfiction from the 1940s. The first claim of the chapter is that by considering Stapledon almost exclusively in relation to the science fiction genre with which he is most associated, scholars have – with two partial exceptions both discussed in detail at the start of the chapter – generally neglected the considerable extent to which his work may be seen as continuous with literary modernism. Its second claim is that, considered as an expression of modernism, Stapledon’s work takes on a heightened

significance for scholars of utopia on account of the way his work embodies a distinctively modernist conception of early twentieth-century utopianism. The chapter is divided into sections on Stapledon's conflicted relationship with the Bloomsbury group, his experiences during the First World War, his positioning with regards to the politics of modernism, the modernist dimension of his critical writings and his conception of the science fiction genre, and the modernist utopianism of his novel *Last and First Men*, including its extraordinary portrait of the final human utopia of the so-called Eighteenth Men in the distant future. The chapter concludes by considering how the latter utopia may be read as an attempt to combine the aestheticism and progressive ideals of the Bloomsbury group with Stapledon's own commitments to socialism and egalitarianism. Chapter 1 is thus an exploration of the ways in which three distinct strands of modern culture – science fiction, literary modernism, and utopianism – are brought together and creatively synthesised in Stapledon's work.

Chapter 2 is entitled 'Utopia, Anti-Utopia, and Post-Secularism'. Taking as its case studies four books by Aldous Huxley written between the 1930s and the early 1960s and thus spanning almost his entire literary career – *Brave New World*, *Ape and Essence*, *The Perennial Philosophy*, and *Island* – the chapter advances several key claims. Firstly, it is argued that there is a strikingly high degree of consistency to much of Huxley's thinking about utopia and anti-utopia from the 1930s onward, which we lose sight of when we overemphasise the differences between the various phases of his career as some commentators have done. Secondly, it is argued that Huxley's prognosis for the modern world is outwardly pessimistic, both culturally and politically. Based on his observations of contemporary social and technological trends, Huxley is shown to have foreseen two likely future possibilities: one anti-utopian, the other apocalyptic. The anti-utopian possibility is that of the conformity, standardisation, and disenchantment embodied in *Brave New World*. The apocalyptic possibility lies in the devastation that would be wrought by the use of weapons of mass destruction, as in his somewhat less well-known post-apocalyptic novel *Ape and Essence*. Thirdly, the chapter claims that from the mid-1940s to the end of his life, Huxley also elaborated various positive alternatives to these pessimistic scenarios. The first of these centres on Huxley's increasing turn toward Eastern spiritual

traditions, the influence of which is readily apparent in almost everything he wrote between the 1940s and the 1960s, and which receives its most complete nonfictional treatment in his popular study in comparative religion, *The Perennial Philosophy*. The second alternative explored by Huxley is that of the mind-expanding effects of hallucinogenic drugs, with which he is closely associated today. The chapter then argues that these positive or constructive alternatives are synthesised in a highly imaginative way in Huxley's final novel, *Island*, which is treated here as a rare example in the field of twentieth-century literature of a sincere, unqualified utopia, one whose values the author himself clearly endorsed. As a spokesperson for the island of Pala explicitly states, the aim of the utopian society depicted in the novel is to combine the strengths of Eastern spiritual traditions with those of Western scientific knowledge and secular values. Drawing on recent scholarly research on the topic of post-secularism, the chapter then considers what it might mean, based on the foregoing analysis, to think of Huxley as a post-secular writer. Of particular interest to scholars of utopia, it is suggested, is the way in which Huxley's mature conception of utopia is, unlike much utopianism in the Western world, neither apocalyptic nor millenarian in its inspiration and far more indebted to Buddhism, Daoism, and Vedanta than to Christianity.

Chapter 3 is entitled 'Queer Theory and Utopianism'. Turning from Huxley's late utopian writings of the 1960s to the decidedly anti-utopian, though no less radical, writings of Michel Foucault in the 1970s, this chapter considers the question: what is the relationship between queer theory and utopian thought and politics? As is conceded at the outset, in one sense this question has an easy answer: queer theory shares an obvious affinity with utopian thought insofar as both are concerned with articulating a radical critique of dominant values and assumptions. The focus of the chapter, however, is on the detail, the fine-grained specifics, of how and why this is the case. What are the precise points at which queer theory becomes utopian and where does it diverge from a more utopian orientation? The aim of the chapter is to suggest some tentative answers to these large questions with an eye to fuller treatment of this rich topic in future research. Much of the chapter therefore takes the form of a historical narrative that charts the dual careers of queer theory and utopianism from the 1970s through the heyday

of queer theory (and the low point of modern utopianism) during the 1980s and 90s, before turning to queer theory in the twenty-first century, which the chapter argues began to take an avowedly utopian turn during the late 2000s and 2010s. After considering Foucault's laying of the groundwork for queer theory, the chapter explores some of the criticisms that have been made of queer theory's supposed micro-political orientation, lack of political ambition, and neglect of political economy. It is then argued, on the basis of work by John D'Emilio and Judith Butler, that first-wave queer theory of the 1980s and 90s is not without resources for countering at least some of these criticisms, with the implication that queer theory of this period may have more to contribute to the utopian imaginary than has often been assumed. The following section looks at two much more recent queer theoretical texts – José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* and Laboria Cuboniks' *The Xenofeminist Manifesto*, published in 2009 and 2015, respectively – and argues that, taken together, they demonstrate how there is nothing to prevent queer theory from taking an explicitly utopian turn while also recalling us to the fact that queer theory had in some ways been a utopian undertaking all along. The final section of the chapter compares the utopianism of recent queer theory with the utopian feminism of Amia Srinivasan and contrasts it with the radically anti-utopian argument of Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*.

Chapter 4 is entitled 'Post-Capitalism and Techno-Utopianism'. This chapter offers a detailed account of the spread of a set of ideas that have generally gone under the heading of 'post-capitalism' during the 2010s and 2020s. Post-capitalist theories are attempts to describe and anticipate radical social, political, economic, and cultural change in the near future, culminating in the supersession of capitalism as the dominant socio-economic paradigm and its replacement by one of a number of imagined alternatives. Given the centrality of technology to post-capitalism in all its varieties, the chapter contends that post-capitalist theory ought to be understood as a form of techno-utopianism. The first main section of the chapter analyses the role played by information technology in the most widely read and discussed post-capitalist text to date, *Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future* (2015) by the writer and broadcaster Paul Mason.

The second section focuses on another major post-capitalist text, *The Zero Marginal Cost Society: The Internet of Things, the Collaborative Commons, and the Eclipse of Capitalism* (2013) by the social theorist Jeremy Rifkin, which makes a case for the profound social and economic implications of the spread of 3D printing and the so-called Internet of Things, whereby virtually all human artefacts would be fitted with intelligent sensors and connected to one another via a ubiquitous global network. The third section looks at one of the most politically radical post-capitalist texts, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (2015) by the social theorists Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams. Emphasis is placed here on Srnicek and Williams' ambitious vision of a post-scarcity, post-work society in which mass automation, renewable energy, artificial intelligence, and a form of universal basic income facilitate the transition to a technologically advanced socialist utopia. Having surveyed these hopeful possibilities, the chapter then turns to a group of commentators – Peter Frase, Noam Cohen, Adam Greenfield, Mark O'Connell, and Yuval Noah Harari – who have all put forward much more pessimistic forecasts on the basis of many of the same projected technological developments. After considering some of these writers' arguments, the rest of the chapter is devoted to a reading of Denis Villeneuve's dystopian science fiction film, *Blade Runner 2049*. The main claim of this section is that Villeneuve's film powerfully allegorises how almost every innovation that could enable a post-capitalist future could equally be captured and assimilated by capital, resulting not in a liberated human future but in a hyper-dystopian world that has moved beyond capitalism in some respects while retaining many of its worst features in others.

Chapter 5 is entitled 'Techno-Utopianism, Transhumanism, and Antihumanism'. The argument of this chapter, which centres on a close reading of Lidia Yuknavitch's post-apocalyptic science fiction novel, *The Book of Joan*, is as follows. Firstly, *The Book of Joan* is situated in relation to Anglo-American science fiction's longstanding engagement with the modern ideal of progress and some of the literary tropes commonly associated with it, most notably that of ageing. Secondly, the novel is read as mapping two sharply contrasting potential trajectories for humanity: the acceleration of progress along humanist lines in the form of techno-utopian transhumanism, on the one hand, and the rejection of such progress

and a turn toward antihumanism, on the other. Allowing for the fact that these terms each have multiple, sometimes contradictory meanings, some of which are explored during the chapter, it is argued that Yuknavitch's novel stages a vividly fictionalised conflict between versions of transhumanism and antihumanism, respectively. Thirdly, it is argued that some of the tensions and anomalies present in the novel are best explained by the absence from Yuknavitch's imaginative schema of a third possibility not encompassed by either transhumanism or antihumanism, namely queer ecology. One main reason for Yuknavitch's opposition to transhumanism is its view of embodiment as representing a limitation on human power, a stance she portrays as ecologically ruinous. Yet the alternative put forward in *The Book of Joan* – a rejection of all forms of humanism combined with an unsentimental attempt to renaturalise humanity and resituate it in the natural world – arguably depends upon the same dualism as the humanism it is directed against, raising a number of related problems. In this way, the two opposing poles between which Yuknavitch situates the war for the future can be seen to resemble one another, at least in their underlying philosophical orientation. Posthumanism is considered as an alternative critical paradigm here, but it is found to be unsatisfactory on a number of grounds. Drawing on recent queer theory, the chapter concludes by arguing that queer ecology is able to avoid the binary opposition between nature and culture which compromises Yuknavitch's attempt to think ecologically.

Chapter 6 is entitled 'The Post-Critical Utopia.' Taking Yanis Varoufakis's novel *Another Now* as a case study, this chapter introduces and makes an argument for a new concept in utopian studies: the post-critical utopia. It begins by making four claims: (1) that Varoufakis has written a utopian socialist novel; (2) that this represents a retrieval of a historical form of literature; (3) that the utopia at its centre takes the form of a utopian blueprint; and (4) that two objections to this utopia, posed by one of its main characters, complicate our understanding of *Another Now*, with implications for how we ought to classify it. It is then argued that *Another Now*'s combination of a systematic utopian blueprint with insights drawn from the tradition of the critical utopia qualifies it as a post-critical utopia. In the chapter's final section, the latter concept is considered in the context of existing utopian studies scholarship. The main implications of

the chapter's argument for utopian studies are twofold. Firstly, it shows how Varoufakis's novel represents an overcoming of the dichotomy of blueprint utopianism vs. critical utopianism that has played a decisive role in the work of many utopian scholars and theorists, even where it has been disavowed or seemingly rejected. Secondly, at a meta-critical level, the chapter constitutes a critique of Fredric Jameson's highly influential formalist approach to utopia.

Chapter 7 is entitled 'Quasi-Dystopian Pandemic Fiction'. This chapter, which represents this book's fullest engagement with the topic of dystopia, puts forward a close reading of Sarah Hall's Covid-inspired pandemic novel, *Burntcoat*. Written during the UK coronavirus lockdowns of 2020, *Burntcoat* is a partly realist, partly speculative work of fiction in which a pandemic that very closely resembles that of Covid-19, but which turns out to be somewhat more lethal, leads to a brief period of social unrest and semi-authoritarian government in Britain. The novel is argued to be a 'quasi-dystopia' – a term which is defined and contrasted with other kinds of dystopia in the first main section of the chapter – as opposed to a more conventional dystopia for two main reasons. Firstly, as the chapter's exploration of *Burntcoat*'s unusual combination of generic traits suggests, Hall's novel is one that sits somewhere between dystopian speculation and literary realism, with arguments both for and against including it in the category of dystopian fiction. This, in turn, is partly due to the novel's striking presentation of the fictional pandemic itself, which draws on a very limited palette of dystopian elements within a novel that would otherwise be classifiable as realist literary fiction. Ultimately, it is concluded that *Burntcoat* is a dystopian novel of sorts – a quasi-dystopia – but one that stands in an unusually complex relationship with the actual events to which its author was responding, often in real time. The second reason for regarding *Burntcoat* as a quasi-dystopia is that much of the novel is devoted to describing and evoking the private utopian enclave shared by the protagonist and her lover during an extended nation-wide lockdown. Rather than focusing on the increasingly dystopian situation unfolding in the wider world, the novel places more emphasis on the domestic, intimate, and erotic experiences of its principal characters as they shelter from the pandemic and try – increasingly unsuccessfully – to avoid acknowledging

its full reality. Much of the chapter is spent analysing the complex connections the novel posits between sex, death, and embodiment, and the ways in which the occurrence of a pandemic can refocus our relationship to these by instilling an acute sense of bodily vulnerability. In the latter sections of the chapter, these themes are then considered in relation to two key critical studies: Thomas Horan's *Desire and Empathy in Twentieth-Century Dystopian Fiction* and Benjamin Bratton's *The Revenge of the Real: Politics for a Post-Pandemic World*.

Chapter 8, the final and longest chapter of the book, is entitled 'Utopia, or, What is Left of the Future?'. The chapter begins by rehearsing some of the objections to utopia and utopianism that became commonplace in the latter decades of the twentieth century. In order to understand how utopia came to be so widely disparaged and distrusted, the first half of the chapter offers an account of some of the key turning points in the history of utopian thought and politics. Section 1, *The Rise of Utopia: 1516–1917*, traces the evolution of utopia from the early sixteenth century to the early twentieth, encompassing Thomas More's *Utopia*; the various utopian social movements of seventeenth-century England, most notably Gerrard Winstanley's *Diggers*; the utopian dimension of the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century; and the Paris Commune and numerous forms of utopian socialism in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Section 2, *Utopia in the Twentieth Century: 1917–1989*, traces utopia from the October Revolution in Russia through to the demise of Soviet power, encompassing the early Bolshevik utopianism of Alexander Bogdanov; the career and writings of Vladimir Lenin; the satirical dystopian fiction of Yevgeny Zamyatin; and the period of Stalinist rule. Section 3, *Utopia and the End of History: 1989–2008*, focuses on the period from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the financial crisis of 2007–8, encompassing responses to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, most notably that of the political scientist Francis Fukuyama; the rise of neoliberal capitalism; and the consolidation of anti-utopianism in social, political, and cultural discourse. Section 4, *Politics Since the Financial Crisis: 2007–2023*, shows how, contrary to Fukuyama's confident prediction that liberal democracy would be the world's final political settlement, the early decades of the new century have seen the spread of a range of ideological

competitors to liberalism across the political spectrum, including new forms of authoritarianism on the one hand and new social movements on the other. The following two sections then bring a very different perspective to bear on our post-1989, post-2008 moment, namely that of the cultural theorist Mark Fisher, whose work is enlisted to try to break the impasse resulting from the anti-utopianism we have inherited from the recent past. Section 5 is concerned with Fisher's classic analysis of capitalist realism and with some of the less well-known cultural analysis that underpins it, drawn mainly from his early 'k-punk' blog posts. Section 6 provides a brief commentary on the unfinished introduction to *Acid Communism*, a book project which remained incomplete at the time of Fisher's death and which, it is argued here, provides insight into an unfulfilled utopian turn Fisher was in the process of making at the end of his life. The final section of the chapter draws on the foregoing history and analysis in order to offer one scholar's answer to the question: how much is living and how much is dead in the idea of utopia today?

Science Fiction, Modernism, and Utopia

A key influence on writers such as Arthur C. Clarke, Stanisław Lem, and Brian Aldiss, the British novelist Olaf Stapledon is widely hailed as one of the visionaries of twentieth-century science fiction. His two masterpieces – *Last and First Men* (1999a), published in 1930, and *Star Maker* (1999b), published in 1937 – are epic novels built on an immense scale and covering billions of years of cosmic history. Both novels also possess clear utopian elements insofar as they depict the construction of numerous utopian societies, as well as often envisaging their subsequent decline or collapse.

To date, Stapledon's work has been understood almost exclusively in relation to the science fiction genre. While understandable, this emphasis has arguably led to neglect of the ways in which Stapledon might also be read as a modernist. *Last and First Men* was composed during the 1920s, the heyday of literary modernism, while *Star Maker* bears the imprint of that earlier work throughout. The novels are also notably experimental in both their form – as examples of what Stapledon called 'future histories' chronicling vast stretches of time – and in terms of content – with their extraordinary proliferation of new concepts, social forms, and scientific developments. Lastly, there is the fact that Stapledon maintained a correspondence with Virginia Woolf throughout this period, the latter of whom expressed great admiration for Stapledon's work.

This chapter explores some of the key reasons for taking Stapledon's modernist credentials seriously and makes a case for why his work would benefit from being read through a modernist lens.

I. Stapledon and Modernism

Two scholarly texts, each of which addresses both the broader question of the relationship of science fiction to modernism and the narrower question of Stapledon's own relationship to modernism, merit consideration at the outset. The first of these is Paul March-Russell's innovative study, *Modernism and Science Fiction*, published in 2015, and the second is Patrick McCarthy's highly suggestive essay, 'Stapledon and Literary Modernism', originally published in 1989 as part of *The Legacy of Olaf Stapledon*, an anthology of critical essays edited by McCarthy, Charles Elkins, and Martin Harry Greenberg. While each of these contributions to the literature on Stapledon does important work in helping to situate his writing in its intellectual and cultural context, as well as offering some vital insights into the meaning and significance of particular novels, they can nevertheless be argued to represent only the very beginning of a consideration of Stapledon's modernist status. As helpful as these texts are in giving us an initial orientation, they are by no means the last word on how, why, and to what extent Stapledon might be considered a modernist writer.

Given its broader focus and the fact that it only takes up Stapledon as one exemplary figure among many, it will be helpful to start with the March-Russell study. *Modernism and Science Fiction* works with a two-fold understanding of modernism. On the one hand, modernism is seen as a series of long-term trends in society and culture taking place over the course of more than a century from the 1870s to the 1970s (March-Russell 2015: 9). By slightly extending the reach of modernism beyond its standard sixty- or seventy-year time span, March-Russell brings the chronologies of modernism and science fiction into fuller alignment, and is thus able to plausibly include, for example, science fiction of the 1960s and 70s at the very tail end of the modernist movement. The main motivation for this approach to periodisation, however, is to bring out the various mutual and overlapping influences on modernism and science fiction in order to construct a shared genealogy. In doing so, March-Russell never elides the significant outward differences between, say, Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and Wells's *The War of the Worlds*. Rather, what he wishes to demonstrate is that

modernism and science fiction emerge out of the same cultural milieu, react to many of the same modern anxieties, and engage in a comparable variety of thematic and formal innovations in response to these shared circumstances. Developments which March-Russell shows to have been formative for both modernism and science fiction include: Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection (*ibid.*: 17); discoveries in the field of geology leading to new estimates of the age of Earth (*ibid.*: 17); a crisis of Christian faith and scepticism about the claims of revealed religion (*ibid.*: 5–6); Victorian discourses of cultural decadence and regeneration (*ibid.*: 11); utopian thought and politics (*ibid.*: 49–50); new ideologies including communism and fascism (*ibid.*: 49–50); structural linguistics and the pioneering work of figures like Roman Jakobson (*ibid.*: 8); upheavals in the understanding of time and space initiated by Albert Einstein and others (*ibid.*: 11); time-space compression brought about by the accelerating pace of modern life (*ibid.*: 23–24); and strong reactions to the spread of new technologies, ranging from ecstatic celebration to neo-luddite rejection (*ibid.*: 69). In each of these ways, modernism and science fiction arise from the same cultural matrix and share many of the same preoccupations and inspirations.

In the course of his genealogy, March-Russell comments on a series of representative science fiction writers, including Stapledon, and situates them in the context of the modernist century. Though he does not focus on his work at length, two of March-Russell's observations about Stapledon are highly relevant in the present context. The first is that Stapledon's work responds to each of the key cultural developments listed earlier (*ibid.*: 62–63). As an acute observer of contemporary society and culture, an omnivorous reader, and something of a polymath in his range of erudition, Stapledon was able to digest and integrate these developments and their consequences into his fiction, thereby setting a precedent that many later science fiction writers would follow. Stapledon's novels deal frequently with aliens, other worlds, and largely speculative scientific developments, yet in almost every case these can be traced back to real-world occurrences and trends of the sort that canonical modernists were likewise responding to, from Cubism and relativity theory to Bolshevism and Nazism.

The second pertinent observation by March-Russell is that the ‘multivalence of Stapledon’s writing raises the question of its relationship to modernist form’ (ibid.: 62). By ‘multivalence,’ March-Russell means to refer to the remarkable experimentalism of Stapledon’s fiction, about which we shall have much more to say later. In line with Stephen Kern’s contention that modernism was ‘primarily a set of new ways of seeing and interpreting the world’ and that modernist ‘narrative forms are the literary manifestation of those ways’ (Kern 2011: 2), March-Russell highlights a resemblance between the formal dimension of Stapledon’s work and that of more familiar modernists. Although he does not elaborate on this point, his sense that there is an affinity between the kind of innovations found in modernist writing of the early decades of the century and those of the most original science fiction of the period is confirmed, as we shall see, by a closer examination of Stapledon’s major novels.

Turning to Patrick McCarthy’s essay, ‘Stapledon and Literary Modernism,’ we find there a more detailed consideration of Stapledon’s modernist connections. McCarthy offers two reasons for linking Stapledon with modernism, while also raising an important reservation about assimilating Stapledon more fully to the modernist movement. McCarthy first notes that at the end of his poorly received work of popular philosophy, *Waking World* (1934), Stapledon includes in his bibliography (actually a recommended books list) the following works: James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, the novels of Virginia Woolf, the letters of D. H. Lawrence, and the literary criticism of I. A. Richards (McCarthy 1989: 40), the last of whom was well known at the time as a champion of the poetry of T. S. Eliot (Kohlmann 2014: 18–52). What may be concluded from this list, at a minimum, is that Stapledon was not only aware of the work of these major modernist figures but that he felt he had benefited sufficiently from reading them to wish to recommend them to a larger audience and, by extension, to have his name associated with theirs in print. As McCarthy rightly observes, Stapledon’s recommending of these authors directly contradicts Leslie Fiedler’s claim that Stapledon was ‘baffled and alienated by modernism’ (McCarthy 1989: 40). Indeed, one could go further than McCarthy on this point and argue that, by recommending a selection of recent modernist writing at the end of a book explicitly intended for the edification and spiritual instruction

of the inhabitants of a utopia-to-come, Stapledon was endorsing modernism's *own* self-evaluation as a form of literature positioned in the vanguard of contemporary culture and with the potential to contribute to modern social progress.¹

The second link McCarthy establishes between Stapledon and modernism is arguably more an artefact of the state of modernist scholarship at the time McCarthy was writing than a valid comment on Stapledon's work. As McCarthy himself notes, during the 1980s, Virginia Woolf, to take just one prominent example, was excluded from the modernist canon by influential critics like Hugh Kenner and could still be dismissed as 'a mere English novelist of manners' (ibid.: 50). McCarthy's own understanding of modernism is inevitably a product of this moment in the history of criticism, and shares the tendency of scholars of that period to define modernist literature partly in terms of a drive toward transcendent timelessness or an escape from time – a view which more recent commentators, such as Martin Hägglund, have since powerfully challenged (Hägglund 2012).² In McCarthy's words, 'To achieve a perspective outside the limitations of a particular time and place is the modernist dream, and it is one that Stapledon shared' (McCarthy 1989: 50). On the one hand, this approach does yield a potentially promising result in Stapledon's case: McCarthy is right to note that one of the recurring moments in Stapledon's fiction is that in which an individual or society achieves some form of mystical insight

- 1 This is not to suggest, on the other hand, that Stapledon's recommendations should be taken as a blanket endorsement of modernism in all its forms. Too much of contemporary literature, Stapledon complained in an essay from the early 1940s, consists of 'pregnant cross-word puzzles' (Stapledon 1942: 115) – presumably a reference to some of modernism's more hermetic and inaccessible expressions in works like Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* or Pound's *Cantos*.
- 2 In my own previous research, I have likewise contested the association of modernist literature with timelessness that formed part of the academic consensus among scholars of the 1970s and 80s. See, in particular, my articles 'Derek Walcott on What the Twilight Says' (Seeger 2015) and "A static that contains all the messages ever sent": Tom McCarthy's *C*, James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, and Nonlinear Literary History' (Seeger 2018b) as well as my book *Nonlinear Temporality in Joyce and Walcott: History Repeating Itself with a Difference* (Seeger 2017b).

whereby time is suspended, and eternity is glimpsed (ibid.: 42–43). At these points, the parallels with, for instance, Proust's evocation of Marcel's sense of indestructibility in the moment he tastes the Madeleine or Eliot's evocation of the still point of the turning world are reasonably clear. In placing such an emphasis on these timeless moments, however, McCarthy neglects Stapledon's more consistent focus on historical change. It is in the latter respect that the influence of H. G. Wells is at its clearest: as in the case of Wells's utopian and dystopian writings, Stapledon's major fiction is concerned above all with charting large-scale social and technological developments. For this reason, McCarthy is unconvincing when he claims that Stapledon's literary doctrine involves the 'substitution of aestheticism for historicism as the primary model of order and coherence', and a tendency of the artwork to become its own subject matter (ibid.: 42). These features may be present in some works of modernist literature, but they are not characteristic of Stapledon's work.

2. Stapledon and Bloomsbury

Finally, McCarthy comes to what he sees as the main point of division between Stapledon and the modernists: Bloomsbury. 'Perhaps,' McCarthy writes, 'I have overstated my case, overlooking factors that separate Stapledon from the modernists' (ibid.: 50). 'Politically,' he continues, 'Stapledon stood well to the left of most of the modernists, who ranged from the fascist Pound to the mandarin socialists of Bloomsbury' (ibid.). McCarthy cites in this connection portions of Stapledon's less well-known novel *Odd John* (2012) from 1935, in which the journalist narrator voices reservations about the Bloomsbury group, while John, a superintelligent being representative of the next phase of human evolution, finds fault with the later poetry of T. S. Eliot, leading McCarthy to make the plausible suggestion that the characters act in these instances as mouthpieces for Stapledon's own views (McCarthy 1989: 48–49). When John reads Eliot's poetry, he is severely disappointed to find that the author of *The Waste Land* and 'The Love

Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', poems which he had greatly admired, had lapsed back into the Christian faith in *Four Quartets*. John finally dismisses Eliot's poetry as a lost opportunity to break with the values of the past, yet as McCarthy astutely observes: 'What is important to note here is that there is no reaction against modernism *per se*; if anything, Stapledon criticises Eliot for failing to carry through, for falling back upon conventional and traditional solutions to problems that require a thoroughly modern response' (ibid.: 47–48). Stapledon's ventriloquised criticism of Eliot is part of his more general criticism of the Bloomsbury group: both are modern without being, so to speak, modern *enough*. In the case of Bloomsbury, both in the view of the protagonist of *Odd John* and that of Stapledon himself, this shortcoming takes the form of a detachment from the realities of the twentieth century through the cultivation of an aloof aestheticism. Whatever Bloomsbury's artistic and intellectual achievements, there was in Stapledon's view an unworldliness to the group which, as a committed socialist and materialist, he saw as a serious limitation.

Again, however, McCarthy risks overstating his case, albeit in the opposite direction this time, when he argues that Stapledon's critical attitude toward Bloomsbury represents his most decisive divergence from modernism. Stapledon's attitude toward Bloomsbury was, as McCarthy acknowledges, by no means one of straightforward rejection. Stapledon's references to Bloomsbury, both in *Odd John* and elsewhere in his philosophical writings and cultural criticism, suggest a somewhat more qualified and sympathetic attitude. His main criticism of Bloomsbury was that its aestheticism meant it was always in danger of losing touch with wider society and, by extension, the problems faced by ordinary people. Given the high value that, as shall be shown, Stapledon placed on Woolf's novels, as well as other, comparably innovative modernist works produced beyond Bloomsbury, Stapledon clearly cannot, however, be read as taking sides against modernist experimentation or voicing a preference for more conventional kinds of writing. Rather, his subtler criticism appears to have been that, precisely *because* Bloomsbury embodied the culture of the future, its failure to break out of its elitist isolation and its increasing turn inwards in later years were hindering wider cultural progress. Stapledon wished Bloomsbury to establish contact with the common reader and to do more

to engage with life in a modern industrialised society. His ideal was what we might call Bloomsbury for the masses – an ideal anticipated in Oscar Wilde's classic 1891 essay, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' (Wilde 1990). Wilde, a transitional figure on the very cusp of twentieth-century modernism, had already suggested that the purpose of socialism was to establish a utopia in which each individual would be free to cultivate themselves as a work of art, harnessing the benefits of modern technology in pursuit of aesthetic ends. Stapledon adhered to a version of this utopian socialist vision throughout his life.

In an essay entitled 'Literature and the Unity of Man' published in 1942, Stapledon criticises a tendency he associated – somewhat inaccurately – with Bloomsbury, whereby the increasingly hermetic and esoteric quality of some modernist writing meant that its 'direct contribution to human unity must at present be very slight' (Stapledon 1942: 115). Reflecting on the social utility of literature in the same essay, he likewise asks: 'is there no more direct and effective way in which writers can work for human unity?' (*ibid.*: 115). What Stapledon here calls human unity is one of the abiding themes of his work, early and late. Beyond the ideal of solidarity, which was an essential element of socialism for Stapledon, achieving unity in his sense of the word implied the extremely ambitious project of establishing a unified global society. It is at this specific point, it can be argued, that Stapledon's politics come closest to those of some of his fellow modernists – including prominent members of the Bloomsbury group.

In 1933, Stapledon was made one of the Vice-Presidents of the Federation of Progressive Societies and Individuals, a British organisation for social reform founded the previous year by the philosopher and broadcaster C. E. M. Joad in collaboration with H. G. Wells. The Federation's principal membership included Leonard Woolf, Rebecca West, Bertrand Russell, and Aldous Huxley, all of whom were linked with modernism in various ways. The Federation's agenda was a combination of reformist socialism, scientific humanism, liberal social values including the defence of civil liberties and the promotion of modern approaches to sex education, and a consistent opposition to nationalism. Stapledon was generally more politically engaged and more radical in his politics than most of the Bloomsbury group: to take two illustrative examples, in 1948, Stapledon

spoke at the World Congress of Intellectuals in Defense of Peace in Poland, an anti-imperialist conference organised by the Soviet Union, while in 1949 he attended the Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace in New York, an event which Bertrand Russell and T. S. Eliot had pointedly turned down invitations to due to its having been organised by a communist group which had achieved a degree of notoriety in the British press. There was nevertheless a clear point of contact between Stapledon's political outlook and that of at least some members of the Bloomsbury group. The opposition to nationalism voiced by the Federation of Progressive Societies and Individuals led it to endorse at different times a number of theories of world government, whereby national decision-making would be subordinated to the decisions of a supra-national organisation which would, ideally, be able to govern the whole of humanity. Although Leonard Woolf wavered on the issue and raised a number of doubts about the consequences of such a scheme for colonised and non-western peoples (Workman 1975), his belief in world government as a route to human betterment paralleled that of Stapledon throughout the 1930s and 40s.³ Much more committed and consistent on this point, however, was Bertrand Russell, who was a passionate advocate for world government and played a key role in promoting the idea among the chief members of Bloomsbury (Rosenbaum 1984: 11–29). Russell held that world government was the only way to 'end the international anarchy that caused the war', in the words of one scholar (*ibid.*: 22). Roger Fry also shared this view for a time, and there is evidence that it was entertained by other Bloomsbury figures on occasion (*ibid.*: 23). Meanwhile, Stapledon's first academic journal article, 'Mr Bertrand Russell's Ethical Beliefs' (Stapledon 1927), though rejected for publication by the philosopher G. E. Moore (himself a major influence on Bloomsbury), demonstrates Stapledon's deep familiarity with Russell's thought and the extent of its influence on his own outlook.

3 For a thorough treatment of Woolf's political thought, including his commitment to the idea of world government, see Peter Wilson, *The International Theory of Leonard Woolf: A Study in Twentieth-Century Idealism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

As Holly Henry has documented (2003: 108–140), however, Stapledon's most direct point of contact with Bloomsbury was via Virginia Woolf. In 1937, Stapledon sent Woolf a copy of his recently published novel, *Star Maker*. Some weeks later, Woolf replied with a short but complimentary note. In a revealing passage, Woolf writes: 'I don't suppose that I have understood more than a small part – all the same I have understood enough to be greatly interested, and elated too, since sometimes it seems to me that you are grasping ideas that I have tried to express, much more fumblingly, in fiction. But you have gone much further, and I can't help envying you – as one does those who reach what one has aimed at' (Woolf quoted in Crossley 1994: 29). The significance of these lines is scarcely lessened by the fact that, as Woolf acknowledges in a diary entry, she had found herself 'more genially disposed' to Stapledon as a result of his high praise for her own fiction (Woolf 1984: 99). Woolf, never inclined to easy flattery of other writers, clearly recognised *Star Maker* as a major literary achievement. Since her letter was first brought to the attention of scholars, there has been speculation as to which aspects of Stapledon's novel led Woolf to compare it with her own work. Patrick McCarthy suggests that Woolf may have seen Stapledon as having 'achieved on the large scale the sort of cosmic perspective' that she had attempted in her novel *The Years*, published the same year as *Star Maker* (McCarthy 1989: 49). More recently, the science fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson has identified several areas where Woolf's later work may exhibit Stapledon's influence (Robinson 2009). Robinson notes that toward the end of her life Woolf had planned to compose a survey of British literature in its successive phases that was to be entitled *Anon*, the projected structure of which may be compared with the evolution of humanity narrated in Stapledon's *Last and First Men*. On Robinson's reading, Woolf's final novel, *Between the Acts*, likewise 'ends with Stapledonian imagery, describing our species steeped in the eons, leading him to conclude that 'Woolf's last pages were a kind of science fiction' (ibid.). Whether or not we are prepared to extend the label 'science fiction' to them, the scale on which these late works of Woolf take place is certainly redolent of what one critic has called Stapledon's 'vast cosmological point of view' (Fiedler 1983: 6) and his ambitious attempt to tell stories in terms of centuries and millennia as opposed to months and years.

3. Stapledon and the Politics of Modernism

Various aspects of Stapledon's life and work stand in a complex relationship to what may broadly be termed the politics of modernism. Rather than try to survey and comment on all of these here, which would require a full chapter if not a short book all by itself, we shall consider two especially significant moments in Stapledon's political formation: one in relation to geopolitics during the First World War, the other in relation to cultural politics in the wake of the Second. In both cases, what emerges clearly is Stapledon's jointly defining commitments to internationalism, on the one hand, and to creative freedom, on the other. What united these twin ideals in Stapledon's mind was a belief in a liberated future for humanity in which the energies previously invested in familiar rivalries and divisions would be placed in the service of the free development of human powers and capacities.

One of the formative experiences of the first generation of modernists was of course that of the First World War, and Stapledon was no exception in this regard. Stapledon fairly consistently opposed the war, though he wavered in 1918, wondering if swift, aggressive military action to bring it to a close might be the most humane solution (Crossley 1994: 132). In the words of his biographer, Robert Crossley, Stapledon 'hated the war and the nationalist rivalries and slurs that motivated its participants and its apologists on the home fronts' (ibid.: 126). Such nationalistic and militaristic sentiments would obviously have conflicted with Stapledon's cosmopolitan vision of a united humanity. At the same time, he seems to have felt a sense of obligation to the war effort and a need to contribute something to it in light of the sacrifices being made by so many others. In Stapledon's own words, 'Somehow I *must* bear my share of the great common agony' (ibid.: 127–128). His solution to this crisis of conscience was to join the Friends Ambulance Unit, a volunteer ambulance service organised by the British Religious Society of Friends or Quakers, despite Stapledon himself not being a Quaker or having any religious affiliation. Stapledon's appointment as an ambulance driver on 15 April 1915 enabled him to participate in the war without, in his own eyes, sacrificing his

principles – ‘a compromise’, as Crossly puts it, ‘between conscientious objection and enlistment’ (ibid.: 131). This did not mean, however, that he was in any way shielded from the magnitude and horror of events. As well as directly observing the day-to-day realities of life in the trenches during 1915–16, in 1917 Stapledon was present for a major French offensive against the enemy line during which one of his unit’s ambulances was destroyed by a German bomb and two drivers were severely injured (ibid.: 142). He later witnessed the shelling of another vehicle and the deaths of its occupants immediately ahead of him on a single-track road, after which he and his colleagues had to remove the debris and the victims’ remains in order to clear a path for themselves (ibid.: 142). This was followed by an extended period of emergency-response shifts in which members of the unit would work for up to twenty-four hours at a stretch with virtually no time for eating or sleeping (ibid.: 142). Mustard gas, a technology first deployed during the war, likewise required Stapledon’s unit to install a gas curtain in the entrance to their dugout and to wear respirators when on duty, making driving difficult due to the reduced visibility. Though he did not suffer from shellshock, heavy German bombardment was also a fixture of Stapledon’s wartime experience, with his own unit’s dugout being hit in March 1918 (ibid.: 143). Despite not being a member of the armed forces, then, Stapledon’s experience of the war was as immediate and personally impactful as that of any member of the modernist generation. Politically, the war served to solidify Stapledon’s commitment to internationalism and his conviction that only a world government could adequately address the problems posed by the present stage of human development.

A second defining moment in Stapledon’s political life came thirty years later, when his high regard for some of the major modernist writers led him to make one of his most publicly visible interventions. In 1948, Stapledon accepted an invitation to act as respondent to the opening address by the Russian author Alexander Fadeyev, co-founder and later president of the Union of Soviet Writers, at the World Congress of Intellectuals. Fadeyev’s speech, scheduled to last just twenty minutes but in the event running to over ninety, took a hard ideological line on avant-garde literature and art, amounting to what Crossley refers to as ‘an hour-and-a-half

harangue punctuated by clockwork applause from the Communist delegations' (ibid.: 359). Among the targets of Fadeyev's criticism were American culture, Hollywood, trends in popular dance, 'British decadence', and, crucially, numerous modernists, including T. S. Eliot, Eugene O'Neill, John Dos Passos, André Malraux, and Jean-Paul Sartre (ibid.). 'If hyenas could type and jackals could use a fountain pen, they would write such things', Fadeyev exclaimed to thunderous applause from his compatriots (ibid.: 359). As well as offering a patient and balanced response to Fadeyev, Stapledon's response provides further evidence of his receptivity to modernism.

In his reply, Stapledon chose to focus on just one of Fadeyev's targets: Eliot. While strongly dissenting from Eliot's conservative political views, Stapledon urged his audience to acknowledge the poet as one of the preeminent literary imaginations of the century (Stapledon 1948). Here and throughout his critical writings, Stapledon clearly saw no incompatibility between his socialism and his endorsement of writers of a far more conservative persuasion. As his speech suggests, one reason for this is that Stapledon apparently distinguished between the short-term or immediate import of modernist literature and its longer-term cultural implications, the latter of which were his main focus. In the case of Eliot, Stapledon regarded the poet's views on social and political topics as deeply reactionary but ultimately irrelevant to his true achievements (ibid.). When placed in a larger context, Stapledon sees Eliot's poetry – and artistic modernism more generally – as anticipating a culture and a world to come – one full of new creative possibilities and undreamt-of forms of expression. Interestingly, Stapledon here makes an implicit link between his defence of modernist innovations and the internationalist stance that had been bolstered by his wartime experiences. No nation or people, Stapledon insists in his reply to Fadeyev, has access to a complete and unqualified perspective on the whole, and all ideologies and systems have their limitations (ibid.). Bringing together his internationalist and cosmopolitan vision of a united world and his championing of modernism, Stapledon concludes: 'How those future men will smile at our crude theories and our adolescent passions! But also they will recognise in our tortuous antics the first, confused, tentative, ludicrous gestures of a new-born humanity'

(*ibid.*). The ambiguity of this passage, whereby Stapledon may be read as referring to political as well as aesthetic doctrines, is revealing and, considering its audience and occasion, surely not accidental. Indeed, it can be argued that these lines, as well as the larger text of which they are a part, constitute one of the clearest indications that Stapledon not only saw modernism as both anticipating and to some extent embodying the culture of the future, but that he also associated literary modernism with social and political progress. Contrary to Fadeyev's doctrinaire Soviet verdict on artistic modernism as a form of cultural decadence, Stapledon takes the more dialectical view that modernism ought to be seen as if from the point of view of a future utopia in which aesthetic experimentalism of the sort engaged in by the modernists is no longer the preserve of an elite. At the same time, as a committed socialist, he appreciates the impossibility of realising such a utopia under capitalism and amidst the nationalism and militarism that he encountered during the First World War. Like many people of his generation, Stapledon felt that in the early decades of the twentieth century humanity stood at a crossroads at every level of its existence, from geopolitics to aesthetics. Literary modernism contained for him utopian intimations of what might lie beyond the present impasse.

4. Stapledon's Modernist Criticism

If modernism in the arts may be roughly defined as a notably innovative approach to form and/or content, Stapledon's claim to modernism would seem to be a secure one in both regards. As well as his experimental approach to fiction, however, which we shall consider momentarily, there are also his innovations in the realm of theory and criticism, which are yet to receive the scholarly attention they deserve. In none of the existing academic commentary on Stapledon is it recognised, for instance, that Stapledon's theory of the science fiction genre surpasses that of H. G. Wells

in its ambition and critical sophistication.⁴ Like canonical modernists such as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Virginia Woolf, and T. E. Hulme, Stapledon not only produced modernist work in a creative mode but wrote modernist-inflected criticism that argued for his particular conception of the field within which he was working.

Stapledon held a highly original view of the science fiction genre – one much more in tune with currents in modernist literature and criticism than with anything that had been written by or about earlier science fiction writers, including Wells. Wells, who had been born in 1866, developed a practice and theory of science fiction that was far more indebted to late Victorian culture than that of Stapledon, who had been born exactly twenty years later in 1886. In 1947, Stapledon's editor Roger Senhouse persuaded him to give a talk in Manchester on the history of science fiction in order to promote his recently published science fiction novella, *The Flames*. In his essay, 'Olaf Stapledon and the Idea of Science Fiction', Robert Crossley notes that the talk had actually been written a decade earlier, shortly after the publication of *Star Maker*, and that Stapledon's 'Jottings at the top of the first sheet indicate that he made the presentation at least three times in 1937 and 1938' (Crossley 1986: 21–42) – that is, during the second great decade of high modernist literary production. Crossley goes on to provide a close analysis of each of the key elements of Stapledon's theory of science fiction, including its notably anti-anthropocentric orientation. Rather than retread ground that has been so well covered by Crossley, we shall instead focus on how Stapledon's lecture – which Crossley elsewhere calls his 'most extensive and learned assessment of the literary tradition in which he made his name' (ibid.: 349) – recapitulates one of literary modernism's defining critical habits.

4 Wells's most complete statement of his theory of (what came to be known as) science fiction is his 'Preface to *The Scientific Romances*', which can be found in Rob Latham's invaluable edited collection, *Science Fiction Criticism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 13–17.

The Manchester lecture is the first recorded instance of Stapledon explicitly referring to his work as science fiction, though by this stage in his career the last of his science fiction writing was behind him. During the lecture, which is entitled 'Science and Fiction', Stapledon makes a striking and notably modernist-sounding claim about the genre. Like some of the major modernists – most notably Virginia Woolf, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, E. M. Forster, and Ford Madox Ford – Stapledon draws a distinction between realist fiction, which he brings under the umbrella term, 'the straight novel', and his own work, which he refers to by turns as either 'science fiction' or 'speculative fiction' (Stapledon 1937). According to Stapledon, the straight novel, the type of novel invented in the eighteenth century and popular throughout the nineteenth, deals with a small number of individuals and provides a detailed treatment of their relationships to one another. The reason science fiction has tended to be regarded as 'barbarous' by critics is that it dispenses with the conventions associated with straight fiction and hence lacks the essential features of the 'well-crafted' novel. As Stapledon puts it, science fiction contains 'no people, no heroine, no love, no talk' (ibid.). This is, to say the least, a surprising way of characterising a genre which, at least up until the time at which Stapledon was writing, had been dominated by precisely these elements.

The science fiction of the 1920s and 1930s, especially in the pulp magazine format which had made it familiar to a wide audience and helped to cement an image of the genre in the public imagination, was filled with heroes, heroines, villains, romance, dialogue, and dramatic adventures.⁵ Stapledon's ahistorical, highly selective, and often misleading comments on previous science fiction, meanwhile, give the impression that an anomalous work like *Star Maker* is representative of the genre more generally, whereas in reality it was an exceptional literary experiment and a radical departure even from the groundbreaking work of H. G. Wells, whose fiction had tended to combine speculative premises with the conventions of the 'straight

5 For an informative overview of the SF of this period, and to fully appreciate how far it diverges from Stapledon's characterisation of it, see Mark Bould's chapter 'Pulp SF and Its Others, 1918–39' in *Science Fiction: A Literary History*, ed., Roger Luckhurst (London: British Library, 2017), 102–129.

novel'. In light of this inconsistency, perhaps the most critically productive and generous approach is to take Stapledon's remarks on the genre as normative rather than descriptive – that is, as saying what science fiction *ought* to be if it is to fulfil its potential as a branch of modern literature rather than what it has *as a matter of fact* been like until now. Read in this way, Stapledon's 'history' is best understood as an implicit commendation of a particular approach to the writing of science fiction, namely one in which, as in literary modernism, innovation and experimentalism of a quite radical kind are accorded priority.⁶ Like Woolf's views on the Edwardians or Eliot's on the Romantics, Stapledon's interpretation of science fiction's history is thus in part a way of lending critical support and legitimacy to his own, decidedly idiosyncratic contributions to the genre.

5. Stapledon's Modernist Science Fiction

Turning from Stapledon's literary criticism and theory to his fictional writings, the continuity between his critical and creative work could not be clearer. Writing in 1930 in response to Stapledon's recently published novel, *Last and First Men*, the literary scholar John Dover Wilson wrote to its author: 'You have invented a new kind of book and the world of Einstein and [the popular astronomer James] Jeans is ready for it' (Wilson quoted in March-Russell 2015: 62).⁷ Writing a little over fifty years later in his book *Olaf Stapledon: A Man Divided*, the most influential critical statement on Stapledon to date, Leslie Fiedler recalls his surprise at how, reading Stapledon for the first time, he quickly discovered that, 'though the book I held in my hands purported to be a novel, it contained nothing

6 For a defence of science fiction against its detractors that is informed by a Stapledonian conception of the genre, see my essay 'Why Read Science Fiction?' (Seeger 2018c).

7 Jeans was a well-known science populariser in Britain at the time Stapledon was working on his science fiction. As Holly Henry has shown, his work influenced the imagination of Virginia Woolf (Henry 2003: 30–58).

like what is ordinarily called a “story” or indeed a proper “character” aside from the narrator’ (Fiedler 1983: 3). This observation on *Last and First Men* is equally applicable to Stapledon’s later novel, *Star Maker*, which may be regarded as a semi-sequel to the former. More recently still, Kim Stanley Robinson has remarked of these works that, ‘There is nothing else in all of literature quite like Stapledon’s two cosmological novels’ (Robinson quoted on cover of Stapledon 1999b). Robinson’s term, ‘cosmological novel’ is fitting as it conveys something of the scale and scope of the two books. *Last and First Men* takes the form of a ‘future history’ chronicling the rise and fall of eighteen successive variants of humanity between the early twentieth century and our final demise approximately two billion years in the future (ibid.). *Star Maker* takes place on an even vaster scale, covering more than eighty billion years of cosmic history, and condensing the entirety of the human history outlined in *Last and First Men* into a single paragraph. With the exception of a handful of noteworthy individuals who receive brief mentions in *Last and First Men* – primarily world-historical figures who exert an influence comparable to that of Jesus or the Buddha – neither book contains any identifiable characters, instead operating at the level of species, planetary systems, and, towards the end of *Star Maker*, the lifespans of entire galaxies.

While Robinson’s reference to Stapledon’s ‘cosmological novels’ is felicitous in one respect, however, it is potentially misleading in another. Stapledon’s approach to fiction writing clearly involves a rejection of the conventions of the realist novel: small- and medium-scale events, spatial and temporal unity, depth psychology, politics framed in terms of the nation state, and many of the familiar themes and preoccupations of the nineteenth-century novel, such as inheritance, marriage, coming of age, and the career of the enterprising individual. Robinson’s emphasis on the uniqueness of *Last and First Men* and *Star Maker* nevertheless needs supplementing by a corresponding emphasis on the books’ parallels with the fiction and, to a lesser extent, the poetry of the modernist movement. In his own brief consideration of Stapledon’s relation to literary modernism, on the other hand, Leslie Fiedler not only downplays but entirely denies any such connection. After acknowledging his recurrent references to the work of Eliot, Joyce, and Lawrence throughout his critical writings and

correspondences, Fiedler unexpectedly concludes that, 'Stapledon remained oddly untouched by the whole adventure of modernism, the subversion of the traditional concepts of character, narrative, and coherence' (Fielder 1983: 35) – a view that runs oddly counter to Fielder's own analyses of Stapledon's major works.

As mentioned, *Last and First Men* describes eighteen successive variants of humanity, each of which differs from its ancestors in key respects, with the differences becoming more pronounced over time. The prelude to the rise of a new human type in Stapledon's fiction typically involves the decline and eventual demise of the reigning society or civilisation, sometimes followed by a period in which organised human life entirely breaks down, usually in the aftermath of deadly world wars. The spans of time in which civilisation is in abeyance sometimes stretch to tens of thousands of years, with the human species reduced to just a handful of individuals during one particularly catastrophic sequence. With the passage of time, however, the species always re-emerges on a global scale, often in a biological form better suited to changed climatic conditions. These pronounced biological differences and adaptations to new circumstances give rise to new traits. To take just a handful of examples, the so-called Second Men have a lifespan of around 200 years and have enhanced empathy; the Third Men have highly developed acoustic abilities, making them especially sensitive to music and leading them to attach primary sexual significance to their partner's ears; the Fourth Men are a race of genetically engineered giant brains, massively intelligent but lacking in emotion; while the Seventh Men have wings, and enter an ecstatic religious state whenever they are in flight. Much of *Last and First Men* is spent elaborating the unique perspective of each of these future species, mapping in a quasi-anthropological fashion the ways in which each new wave of biological and cultural change makes possible new ways of seeing the world and, correspondingly, new scales of value. This is even more the case in *Star Maker*, in which humanity receives only a brief mention, and a plethora of extraterrestrial perspectives are foregrounded. As well as describing the course of evolution on dozens of alien worlds, Stapledon also strikingly attributes intelligent life to stars, which at one stage in the narrative violently retaliate by detonating themselves in immense explosions after attempts are made to harness their

energy for interstellar travel. Finally, the novel culminates in an obscure metaphysical and religious vision which attempts to convey something of the perspective of the Star Maker itself – Stapledon’s name for the godlike force or mind which has created a long sequence of cosmoses in a myriad of unique styles that is not unlike the proliferation of styles that Fredric Jameson finds among the practitioners of literary and artistic modernism (Jameson: 2007: 3–11).

In addition to the many modernist styles that Jameson identifies with the names of individual writers – Baudelaire, Kafka, Faulkner, etc. – there is also of course the perspectivism that governs many modernist works themselves. The eighteen successive human perspectives of *Last and First Men* and the many nonhuman perspectives of *Star Maker* confirm perspectivism to be one of Stapledon’s primary formal techniques. Such perspectivism is a familiar feature of modernist literature and visual art. One thinks, for instance, of the ‘Time Passes’ section of Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, which seems to offer a nonhuman point of view on events; the series of perspectives offered by Joyce’s *Ulysses*, including those of inanimate objects; the radical perspectivism of Proust’s novel, in which new perspectives on characters and events are constantly being revealed; or the juxtaposition of multiple points of view within a single frame in the work of Picasso.

It is worth underscoring that as well as closely following developments in literature and the arts, Stapledon was also trained in, and later taught, philosophy, publishing several minor works on metaphysics, ethics, and politics. The perspectivism of both Stapledon’s fiction and his philosophy bears a clear resemblance to the ideas of some of the major modernist philosophers of the day, though their influence appears to have reached him more through the general climate of ideas than through direct acquaintance with their work. The first of these is Nietzsche, whose doctrine of perspectivism is perhaps best articulated in his much-cited remark that, ‘There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective ‘knowing’; the *more* affects we allow to speak about a thing, the *more* eyes, various eyes we are able to use for the same thing’ (Nietzsche 1994: 92). For Nietzsche, an important figure for such English-language modernists as Joyce, Lawrence, Conrad, Yeats, and numerous others, perspectivism rules out the possibility of a single, universal scale of values which would be true and authoritative

for all individuals. Nietzsche's reference to additional pairs of eyes is even echoed in Stapledon's claim in his work of popular philosophy, *Waking World*, that each new work of art allows us 'to look at the world with new eyes' (Stapledon 1934: 86–87).

A very similar idea is found in the work of another philosopher of the decade immediately following Nietzsche's death, namely the Spanish thinker José Ortega y Gasset, who first outlined his own theory of perspectivism in 1910 and who was generally more highly regarded than Nietzsche in the English-speaking world until the latter's rehabilitation in the 1950s. For Stapledon in his two cosmological novels, as for Nietzsche and y Gasset in their respective philosophies, new perspectives ('new eyes') reveal new facets of the world unavailable from other vantages, encouraging an experimental outlook embodied in Stapledon's case in the form of a multiplicity of civilisations and forms of life each with its own unique way of viewing and evaluating reality. If Stapledon's way of theorising the science fiction genre in 'Science and Fiction' represents the first of his modernist affinities, and his rejection of some of the core components of realism in his creative work marks the second, the third is to be found in his remarkable experiments with perspectivism.

6. Stapledon's Utopianism

Any attempt to recover a form of utopianism from Stapledon's cosmological novels would seem to be doomed from the start on account of the books' cosmic pessimism. Various commentators have noted the Schopenhauerian metaphysical gloom that pervades both texts at points, and it can be argued that, despite Stapledon's real-world political radicalism, the grim inevitability of his many cyclical rehearsals of the collapse, rebirth, and collapse of civilisation bring his fiction within the orbit of the conservatism and cultural pessimism of Oswald Spengler, the influential German nationalist historian whose book *The Decline of the West* exerted a considerable influence over many of Stapledon's contemporaries and was a text familiar to

the author himself. In an astute article on *Star Maker*, Gerry Canavan has gone somewhat further, arguing that, for all its surface variety and inventiveness, the novel

has implications that are as darkly unsettling as they are liberating and exhilarating; the book ultimately blocks any hope for the political future of the human species at the same time that it undermines the theological comforts of the spiritual realm, leaving both writer and reader uncertain where *any* sort of consolation might be found in an infinite and indifferent universe.... [T]he book did not ultimately fulfil Stapledon's hopes for a vision of the cosmos that might solve the political, philosophical, and theological crises he saw all around him. (Canavan 2016: 310)

Canavan's persuasive claim is that in writing *Star Maker* Stapledon did not succeed in composing a philosophical novel that would resolve to the author's satisfaction the many profound problems, both intellectual and political, which he saw it as the purpose of his cosmological fiction to address. Instead, in shifting from perspective to perspective, arriving ultimately at the point of view of the *Star Maker* itself, Stapledon merely pushes these unresolved problems up through a series of stages until we are confronted by the inhuman indifference and unsettling ludic quality of an inscrutable cosmic process. Although Canavan does not consider the novel in these terms, there is a sense in which *Star Maker* may be read as a secularised version of Christian theodicy. Stapledon's commitment to secularism means that his fiction attempts to disclose the rationality of the cosmic process rather than to 'justify the ways of God to men', but the basic pattern and some of the difficulties encountered are very similar. As Canavan rightly says, however, whatever the details that fill out this organising structure, Stapledon's aims are frustrated: *Star Maker* does not manage to fulfil the almost impossibly demanding task of making intellectual and emotional sense of the cosmos at the highest imaginable level of generality.

During a briefer discussion of *Last and First Men* in the same article, Canavan reads the earlier novel as anticipating *Star Maker* in its pessimistic outlook and what he sees as Stapledon's essentially tragic sensibility (ibid.: 313–316). While Canavan is correct in saying that the 'various civilizations of the Men of the future all inevitably hit a limit point and fail, culminating

in the Eighteenth Men, doomed to confront icy death at the edge of the solar system' (ibid.: 315), it can nevertheless be argued that this insistence on limitation and transience does not necessarily entail any particular anti-utopian conclusion. On the contrary, as the episode of the Eighteenth Men itself demonstrates, Stapledon is able to envisage a utopianism that is fully compatible with an acceptance of humanity's inevitable demise and the cosmic meaninglessness of its plight. One way to see this is to draw a distinction between Stapledon's metaphysical pessimism, on the one hand, and his finite hopes for humanity, on the other. At a metaphysical level, most fully explored in *Star Maker*, it is true that Stapledon's verdict on the intelligibility of the cosmos is a negative one. Yet this final unintelligibility – the guiding conviction that the cosmos must inevitably disappoint any human longing for meaning beyond itself – still allows for the possibility of vast social, political, economic, and scientific progress over the course of more than two billion years of human history. While *Star Maker* is more concerned with nonhuman perspectives and the various metaphysical and theological questions touched on previously, *Last and First Men* focuses on the material and social development of human civilisation. If *Star Maker* is the more overtly philosophical novel, *Last and First Men* is more pragmatic and grounded in local human problems of social organisation. Even if, then, as Canavan says, the cosmic pessimism of *Star Maker* is prefigured and to some extent present in its forerunner, *Last and First Men* may contain within it other, more constructive possibilities that are not exhausted by such a reading.

Last and First Men is, in effect, a split-level text, with what might be thought of as a pragmatic base and a somewhat divergent cosmic superstructure. The superstructure is largely as described by Canavan, even if its importance to the novel may be a little overstated in his account. The base, however, which for our purposes includes the entirety of the book's main narrative and its immense century-by-century chronicle of events, tells a rather different story. Artistically, it may be a shortcoming of Stapledon's novel that it does not fully integrate these two levels, one of which may be the expression of Stapledon the metaphysician, the other Stapledon the pragmatic socialist. Despite periodic setbacks, reversions, resource shortages, pandemics, world wars, and near extinction at several

points, the human species endures for two billion years and achieves an unambiguously utopian condition of abundance, peace, stability, and scientific development in at least five of its eighteen future iterations. By far the most advanced of these utopias is that of the Eighteenth Men in the final chapters of the novel.

The Eighteenth Men have achieved a utopian condition far in excess of anything realised by their predecessors. A race of fantastically powerful and spiritually enlightened beings, the Eighteenth Men are capable in principle of living forever, can communicate telepathically with the rest of their species in a form of group mind, and even transmit messages back in time to former ages. Other noteworthy features of their way of life include a plurality of genders beyond man and woman, a celebratory attitude toward sex, and the widespread practice of non-monogamy.⁸ With all material needs taken care of by technology, the Eighteenth Men devote themselves to the arts, scientific research, and profound philosophical reflection. Surveying Stapledon's life and work, it seems clear that the society of the Eighteenth Men constitutes his most fully realised and compelling presentation of his own utopian ideal. In light of this extraordinary vision of the overcoming of alienation, freedom from drudgery, the end of human suffering, and the fulfilment of human powers and capacities, the lurking cosmic gloom of the novel, and the fact that the Eighteenth Men finally succumb to the destruction of the solar system after the sun is engulfed by a supernova, seem less important. Even if, given an unimaginably vast timescale or godlike cosmic perspective, the entire human adventure may be nothing but a brief glimmer in the darkness, the stoical humanism of *Last and First Men* means that Stapledon is still able to find hope, meaning, and great pathos in the achieved utopia of the Eighteenth Men.

8 The queer dimension of Stapledon's novel is of considerable interest but is set aside here due to space constraints.

7. Stapledon's Modernism

During the introduction to the Eighteenth Men in Chapter XV of the novel, the narrator (who is himself a representative of this final human type) makes the following thought-provoking comment: 'As a species, though we are all human, we are extremely variable in body and mind, so variable that superficially we seem to be not one species but many' (Stapledon 1999a: 262). There is much that could be said by way of comment on this fascinating line, which could be taken as a far-seeing anticipation of either the postmodernism or perhaps the posthumanism of more recent times. Instead, though, by way of conclusion, we shall situate it in the context of the modernist moment to which Stapledon was, we are now in a position to see, an active contributor.

The parallels between the Eighteenth Men and the Bloomsbury Group are numerous, as unlikely as the comparison may appear at first. As we saw in our brief survey of Bloomsbury social and political attitudes, some of the most influential members of the group endorsed pacifism, cosmopolitanism, and the ideal of a world government. The group was also known for its progressive views on gender, sexuality, and relationships, and attracted a certain notoriety for its relaxed approach to sexual freedom among members themselves (Licence 2016).⁹ Science and the latest scientific ideas – from Einstein to Freud – were a shared area of interest, and with regards to the arts, members generally adhered to a form of aestheticism that accorded art and literature supreme value (Humm 2018: 45–59). Most of these traits are embodied to some extent in the various utopias that periodically arise in *Last and First Men* between the coming of the Second Men and the flourishing of the Seventeenth. In the case of the Eighteenth Men, however,

9 In a groundbreaking recent study, Nino Strachey has shown that beginning in the 1920s a second generation of Bloomsbury-affiliated youth helped to bring the original circle's advocacy of sexual and gender freedoms further into the public domain (Strachey 2022). In Stapledon's utopia, this move from the private to the public has long since taken place, as the universal practice of non-monogamy and the proliferation of genders clearly indicate.

all of these familiar Bloomsbury characteristics – from the sexual freedom and the universalist political attitudes to the almost religious dedication to high culture – are not only present but integrated into a coherent utopian synthesis. Likewise, in an echo of the endless stylistic variations of high modernism – both between different works and, in the case of texts like *Ulysess* or *The Waste Land*, within them – even the differentiation of the Eighteenth Men into outwardly different species testifies to Stapledon's modernist sensibility. Although, as discussed, Stapledon's radical politics meant he felt it necessary to maintain an intellectual and personal distance from Bloomsbury and remained critical of it in some respects, the portrayal of the inhabitants of his most completely achieved utopia as a transfigured but recognisable reimagining of the Bloomsbury group confirms the extent to which his utopianism was profoundly modernist in inspiration.

As this chapter has aimed to show, Stapledon's writing integrates science fiction, modernism, and utopianism in a highly original way. The richness and complexity of his novels is due in large part to the fact that they stand at a crossroads between these three cultural currents, drawing on elements of each while also reconfiguring them through their relations to one another. *Last and First Men* arguably represents the most successful result of this unique literary experiment. By combining the imaginative and extrapolative range of science fiction, the departure from realist conventions and the formal innovations of modernism, and the blueprint-based scheme for social improvement of the classical utopia, Stapledon was able to craft a form of utopian-modernist science fiction of an unprecedented kind.¹⁰ At the same time, by combining some of the social and artistic ideals of Bloomsbury with his own brand of socialism, Stapledon was able to project modernist values into a utopian future where radical economic and technological change would provide the conditions for every person to fully participate in the collective pursuit of human freedom, scientific progress, and artistic expression.

10 Daniel Davison-Vecchione and I have elsewhere explored the relationship between science fiction and utopia in the work of another prominent twentieth-century author, Ursula Le Guin. See our article, 'Ursula Le Guin's Speculative Anthropology: Thick Description, Historicity, and Science Fiction' (Davison-Vecchione and Seeger 2023).

Utopia, Anti-Utopia, and Post-Secularism

In his informative study, *Aldous Huxley and Alternative Spirituality* (Poller 2019), Jake Poller has meticulously documented Huxley's engagements with a wide range of what he terms 'alternative' spiritualities. These encompass William Blake's poetry; D. H. Lawrence's doctrine of Life Worship; the neo-Vedanta movement; Theosophy; the thought of Gerald Heard, Jiddu Krishnamurti, and Swami Prabhavananda; spiritualism; mesmerism; psychical research; L. Ron Hubbard's Dianetics; tantric meditation; yogic techniques; the writings of Timothy Leary; and the broader psychedelic movement in the United States. Rather than retread ground that has been adequately covered by Poller, this chapter focuses on a slightly different, though adjacent, aspect of Huxley's work, namely, its relation to the phenomenon of post-secularism. More specifically, the chapter develops a reading of the religious and/or mystical dimension of Huxley's treatment of utopia and anti-utopia in both his speculative fiction and in some of his nonfictional writings. While Huxley's reflections on the utopian possibilities of psychedelics have received considerable scholarly attention, the nature and significance of his engagement with world religions is a less settled matter, and it is therefore on this area of his thought that this chapter focuses.

Huxley's early novels of the 1920s – *Crome Yellow* (1921), *Antic Hay* (1923), *Those Barren Leaves* (1925), and *Point Counter Point* (1928) – are usually read as satires on the follies and failings of the Anglo-American world in the early twentieth century, especially the period leading up to and immediately following the First World War. While not without interest, these works are lighter and less philosophically engaged than what we might think of as Huxley's mature work beginning in the 1930s. Despite the satirical intent which they share with *Brave New World*, Huxley was not concerned in these early works either with the theme of utopia per

se or with the religious questions which increasingly came to preoccupy him in the following decades.¹ For the purposes of this chapter, we shall therefore leave Huxley's early fiction to one side and focus exclusively on the work published between 1932 and 1963 – a period that displays, as we shall see, a high degree of intellectual and thematic unity.

Drawing on interviews and remarks from across Huxley's lifetime, Nicholas Murray argues persuasively in his biography of the author that, despite having established himself as a novelist, Huxley was interested above all in ideas, and that the fictional containers of these were for the most part of less concern to him (Murray 2002: 161–2). Murray cites, for example, the following comment by Huxley made early in his career, shortly after the publication of *Those Barren Leaves* in 1925: 'The mere business of telling a story interests me less and less.... The only really and permanently absorbing things are attitudes towards life and the relation of man to the world' (ibid.: 161). As Murray shows, Huxley can be found expressing the same view of the writing of fiction and of the craft of the novelist in a US newspaper interview more than three decades later (ibid.: 162).

One way in which this view clearly informs Huxley's approach to the writing of fiction, as many of his readers have observed, is the argumentative and occasionally didactic quality of the novels of his mature period. Although *Brave New World*, *Ape and Essence*, and *Island* do all feature dramatic incidents, adhere to a linear narrative structure, and depict literary characters in a familiar novelistic manner, in their form they often bear more of a resemblance to the philosophical dialogue than to realist fiction. Large sections of all three books recount arguments among the principal characters about issues such as freedom, truth, art, education, religion, and human nature, during which the unfolding of plot comes to a halt while a series of philosophical views are considered and critiqued. The readings of Huxley's fiction put forward in the current chapter take their lead from the author in this regard by focusing primarily on the ideas

1 The possible exception here is *Crome Yellow*, which contains references to both alternative spiritualities and the possibility of a dystopian future. As neither theme is explored in depth or with the concentration of Huxley's later writings, however, the novel is not considered further here.

which his novels articulate. Without neglecting plot, character, and situation, it can be argued that Huxley's speculative fiction ought to be seen as continuous with his nonfictional writings, and that his relative lack of interest in the usual trappings of literary fiction helps to explain his steady turn toward the form of the essay as his preferred medium of expression from the time of *Brave New World* onwards.

I. *Brave New World*

Published in 1932, *Brave New World* has most commonly been read as a satirical treatment of the emerging mass consumer society that Huxley and his contemporaries found themselves inhabiting. The case for this reading is well supported and by now well known: on this view, the incessant consumption, uninterrupted enjoyment, and mandated pleasures of the inhabitants of the World State represent, albeit in a distorted and exaggerated form, life under modern consumerism. To this extent, *Brave New World* may be seen as a continuation of the earlier satirical work produced by Huxley during the 1920s. What this way of framing the novel arguably neglects, however, is its equally if not more revealing links with the work of the following three decades. When these links are highlighted, and the novel is seen in the context of works like *The Perennial Philosophy*, it can be seen to take on a further range of meanings.

In his guise as social prophet, Huxley appears to have seen the coming of the Fordist era as the beginning of a new phase in world history, one which would sweep aside the cultural heritage of the past and erect idols to new, manufactured gods. In *Brave New World* this takes the form of a society in which Shakespeare and the Bible are forbidden relics of a forgotten world, and where the American industrialist Henry Ford is venerated as a quasi-religious founding figure. On one level, the reading of Huxley's novel in terms of consumerism, Fordism, and mass culture is clearly illuminating. On another, it risks missing the precise nature of Huxley's intervention in the cultural politics of his day. This can be

brought out by considering two passages taken from Chapter XVII of the book, during which Mustapha Mond, one of a small group of World Controllers, debates the merits of the World State with John the Savage, so called because he has been raised on a reservation in a premodern way of life beyond the World State's boundaries:

'We prefer to do things comfortably' [said Mustapha Mond].

'But I don't want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness. I want sin' [said John].

'In fact,' said Mustapha Mond, 'you're claiming the right to be unhappy.'

'All right, then,' said the Savage defiantly, 'I'm claiming the right to be unhappy.'
(Huxley 2007: 211–12)

A tempting way to interpret this passage – one taken by many previous critics – is to see it as staging a confrontation between two rival conceptions of the good life: one in which ease, comfort, and stability are sought at any cost, another in which pain, suffering, and difficulty are held to be essential elements in any worthwhile life. This interpretation clearly fits well with the reading of the novel as a critique of consumerism and the kind of life implied by it. On this account, John's references to God and sin are to be understood primarily in moral terms: as many other remarks by John throughout the novel suggest, a central reason for his rejection of the World State and what it has to offer is its lack of traditional moral values, especially the absence of what he sees as sexual propriety. One limitation of this reading of the exchange, however, is its close focus on what each of the *characters* is saying at the expense of what *the novel* might be understood as saying at this point. Huxley presents us with two viewpoints: Mond's defence of the unfettered pursuit of the maximisation of pleasure and the minimisation of pain, and John's outwardly moralistic objections to this. What remains to be considered here is what the fact of the exchange itself – that is, the *very presence* of this scene in the novel – might be conveying.

Shortly before the passage quoted earlier, we find the following interesting piece of dialogue:

'Then you think there is no God?' [said John].

'No, I think there quite probably is one' [said Mond].

'Then why? ...'

Mustapha Mond checked him. 'But he manifests himself in different ways to different men. In pre-modern times he manifested himself as the being that's described in these books. Now ...'

'How does he manifest himself now?' asked the Savage.

'Well, he manifests himself as an absence; as though he weren't there at all'. (ibid.: 206)

This passage has received surprisingly little attention from scholars, and no commentator to date appears to have considered the relationship of the lines spoken by Mond to the broader philosophical outlook of Huxley's later writings. Again, on initial consideration, Mond's words about God's absence lend themselves to the standard consumerist reading: the World State has no God because, as Mond patiently explains to John in the preceding pages, such a society simply has no need of one. The concept of God has no social utility in a world devoted exclusively to the pursuit of pleasure and the maintenance of the cycle of production and consumption.

We need to pay close attention to the specific words Mond uses here, however. It is noteworthy that he does not say that God does not exist, nor does he equate absence with nonexistence as might be expected. Rather, he says that God *manifests himself as* an absence. Being manifest as an absence is not the same thing as not existing. Likewise, to say that it is 'as though' God were not there is not the same as to say that God is simply not there. Huxley is always precise in his use of words, and we can be sure he would have carefully considered this pivotal episode. A different way to think about the passages cited previously is, then, to read them as registering something that, while absent from the world of the novel in one sense, is present in another.

When John says that he wants God, poetry, and freedom, just as when Mond says that God manifests as an absence, these may be seen as ways in which the novel gestures toward a dimension of human existence which, though it has no meaningful outlet in the context of the World State, persists as an inchoate sense that there is more – perhaps infinitely more – to life than can be registered within the limits of such a system. There is an important difference, in other words, between saying that it is *John* who registers something absent from life in the World State, on the one hand, and saying that this *entire episode* is revealing something about that absence, on the other. What exactly this is will become clearer when we consider

Huxley's subsequent works, but an initial characterisation would be as follows. What Huxley is *showing* us via Chapter XVII – as opposed to *telling* us via John's objections considered in isolation – is that, in the imaginative vision of *Brave New World*, there really is an existential depth to the human situation that the World State is incapable of doing justice to. This meaning of the text is, to be sure, manifest in the form of an absence, but it is nevertheless apparent both here and in other parts of the book – for example, in Helmholtz Watson's uneasy sense of the peculiar emptiness of World State culture (ibid.: 59). Seen in this way, Huxley's novel functions not unlike some of the modernist artworks analysed by Theodor Adorno, in which it is precisely the *negation* of what is presented to us that would represent its utopian fulfilment (Adorno 2013).

2. *Ape and Essence*

As well as some important differences, there are evident continuities between *Brave New World* and Huxley's second work of speculative fiction, *Ape and Essence*, published sixteen years later in 1948. *Ape and Essence* resembles *Brave New World* in that it is also a work of science fiction with a clear satirical purpose, while differing from it in being harsher and less comedic in nature. Where *Brave New World* displays a gentler irony about the anti-utopian world it describes and often elicits a degree of humour from it, *Ape and Essence* is an angrier, bleaker, and more overtly horrifying novel.

The book opens with a frame narrative, in which a pair of Hollywood screenwriters discover the screenplay for an unmade feature film entitled *Ape and Essence*, the script for which comprises the rest of the novel (Huxley 2005: 1–23). While this framing is never referred to again after the first chapter, it serves the purpose of establishing a link between the world of the reader and the events of the screenplay: what we are reading about in the screenplay is a future that we, like its fictional author, are capable of imagining for ourselves in the here and now, that is, in late 1940s America. The screenplay begins with a surreal sequence of imagery in which we are

presented with episodes from a conflict between rival groups of intelligent baboons, some of which are shown to be in control of multiple clones of Albert Einstein, who are kept on leashes and coerced into serving the baboons' war efforts (ibid.: 24–33). After the story settles into a more realistic mode, we realise that the opening sequence has served as an allegory for the proliferation of atomic weaponry and the prospect of mutually assured destruction (MAD) – a military deterrence doctrine that had been given its earliest formulation in 1940. Einstein figures in this sequence as a metonym for modern physics while the baboons stand for political and military forces seeking to exploit the discoveries of physics for their own ends. This much is relatively clear and supports a reading of the novel as a scathing satire on the irrationality of a civilisation that would pursue such self-destructive goals.²

The middle sections of the novel, which describe in repulsive detail the condition of life in the United States in the aftermath of a nuclear war, lend further weight to this reading of *Ape and Essence* as in effect a protest novel directed at the nuclear establishment and what would later be termed the military-industrial complex. As in the case of *Brave New World*, however, there are elements of *Ape and Essence* which start to take on a fuller and perhaps more interesting meaning when considered in relation to Huxley's mature philosophical and spiritual outlook. Starting with the title of the work itself, it can be shown that Huxley's obvious concern with pressing contemporary issues is at the same time an occasion for exploring issues that underly virtually everything he wrote from *Brave New World* onward, including texts such as *The Perennial Philosophy* and *Island* that at first glance seem quite remote from *Ape and Essence*'s post-apocalyptic prognostications.

One obvious parallel between *Brave New World* and *Ape and Essence* is that both novels take their titles from plays by Shakespeare, and both engage in a meaningful way with the passages from which their titles are

2 Mark Taylor has advanced an interesting alternative reading in which the catastrophe that precedes the main events of the novel is understood as an ecological allegory as opposed to a purely nuclear one. See Taylor, 'Aldous Huxley's *Ape and Essence* and Clashing Discourses of Nature' (2020).

taken. In the case of the latter, the passage from Shakespeare is found in Act 2, Scene 2 of *Measure for Measure*, generally classified as one of the so-called problem plays on account of its riddling, enigmatic, and at times darkly humorous tone. The passage in question reads as follows:

Could great men thunder
 As Jove himself does, Jove would never be quiet,
 For every pelting, petty officer
 Would use his heaven for thunder; nothing but thunder!
 Merciful Heaven,
 Thou rather with thy sharp and sulphurous bolt
 Splits the unwedgeable and gnarled oak
 Than the soft myrtle. But man, proud man,
 Dressed in a little brief authority,
 Most ignorant of what he's most assured,
 His glassy essence, like an angry ape
 Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
 As make the angels weep, who with our spleens,
 Would all themselves laugh mortal. (Shakespeare 2008: 2.2.112–25)

These lines are spoken by Isabella, a novice nun, to Angelo, the deputy to the Duke of Vienna, who is appointed to govern the city in the Duke's absence at the start of the play. The lines appear in the context of an exchange in which Isabella is pleading with Angelo for the life of her brother, who is shortly to be executed. Drawing on the Oxford Shakespeare's annotations, a prose restatement of the passage runs roughly as follows. If those in authority had access to Jove's thunderbolts, they would employ them at the slightest provocation. Even the lowest ranked of these authorities would use their godlike power without moderation to meet out excessive punishment for paltry slights and insults. You, on the other hand, Angelo, are using your power in such a way as to attempt to split the unsplitable mighty oak (a tree sacred to Jupiter) rather than directing it at less consequential targets. Nevertheless, whenever human beings are granted some temporary power and authority, their arrogance and ignorance, specifically in regard to their own nature, means they cannot avoid engaging in mischief and foolishness that invariably proves fatal to them. This amuses the onlooking angels, who if they were mortal like us would laugh themselves to death at the sight.

While this paraphrase passes over some further complexities, it clearly brings out the significance of the passage for Huxley in the context of *Ape and Essence*. Although Huxley does not in fact quote the passage in full, suppressing the first eight lines, their parallels with the prospect of nuclear war, the doctrine of mutually assured destruction, and even the splitting of the atom are ones that cannot have been lost on him. It is the final seven lines, however, that are referenced recurrently by Huxley throughout the novel. In his notes to the play, N. W. Bawcutt provides some helpful comments on Shakespeare's use of the phrases 'angry ape' and 'glassy essence'. Bawcutt notes that a possible meaning of 'glassy' is 'transparent as glass', with the implication that Shakespeare is contrasting an 'invisible secret nature' with our outer garb, in this case the brief appearance of authority temporarily bestowed on us that is mentioned in the previous lines (ibid.: 128). Apes, meanwhile, 'were often thought [in early modern England] to mimic human behaviour, and in so doing to make [themselves] ridiculous' (ibid.). Bringing these points together, we are in a better position to understand both the title and main theme of Huxley's novel. On Huxley's construal, what this passage of the play is taken to mean is that humanity has, in effect, a split nature: a bestial outer garb (the 'angry ape') and a purer but more mysterious inner nature (our 'glassy essence') – hence, ape and essence. Whether this is a reading that Shakespeare scholars would find acceptable is less important than the possibilities it affords Huxley for his own creative purposes. *Ape and Essence* is framed by this basic opposition, one which connects in several ways with Huxley's other writings of the 1940s and 50s. In the post-apocalyptic future imagined by Huxley, humanity's ape-like aspect has triumphed, and civilisation has been annihilated. Amidst the ruins, however, our glassy essence, the thing that distinguishes us from beasts, persists and is shown still seeking expression. As in *Brave New World*, this is partly something shown via its negation and partly an indication that the world depicted fails to afford a viable outlet for this dimension of the human.

Ape and Essence is punctuated at intervals by passages of poetry spoken by a Narrator who functions in much the same way as the Chorus in Greek tragedy. The final two lines of one such interlude read, 'Only in the knowledge of his own Essence/Has any man ceased to be many

monkeys' (Huxley 2005: 55). These words are an acknowledgement that what has come to pass is a manifestation only of humanity's superficial outer aspect and not of its essential inner nature. What this nature consists of for Huxley becomes clearer in the course of his nonfictional writings. To anticipate the sections ahead, we can briefly note here the allusion in these lines to the Buddhist concept of the monkey mind, an unsettled default mental condition which meditation techniques aim to overcome and bring to a state of calm awareness (Carr 1993). The catastrophe that has taken place, it is implied, is the product of this untamed monkey mind run amok, in the absence of the means to restore humanity to what Huxley thinks of as its true essence as discovered through meditative and spiritual techniques.

In a further parallel with *Brave New World*, the desolate condition to which the United States has been brought in the novel is portrayed as a product of modern ideals of rationality and control, and is even described by the narrator as 'the consummation of technological progress' (Huxley 2005: 50), reinforcing the case for reading these novels as mapping two pessimistic pathways Huxley could envisage the world taking from the point of view of the 1930s and 40s. Although in the case of *Ape and Essence* progress results in an apocalyptic rather than an anti-utopian outcome, there is a clear similarity to *Brave New World* in the way Huxley presents modern progress as paradoxically self-subverting. There is likewise a further striking parallel with work by Theodor Adorno and his collaborator Max Horkheimer written during these same years yet seemingly unknown to Huxley, according to which the very pursuit of Enlightenment values of freedom, knowledge, and social improvement results in the realisation of their opposite (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002).

An analysis of Huxley's work that stopped here, however, would leave us with an incomplete and one-sided picture of his mature outlook. As the following sections shall explore, there is a *constructive* side to Huxley's writing that compliments his otherwise *destructive* approach to modern secular ideals, one which helps to dispel the impression, based on the two texts considered so far, that he simply despaired of the modern world or turned his back on it.

3. *The Perennial Philosophy*

The fact that Huxley's book-length essay *The Perennial Philosophy* was published in 1945, three years before *Ape and Essence*, is significant as it dispels any easy sense of linear development to Huxley's work, as if he had first investigated the 'problem' in the earlier book and then tried to work out the 'solution' to it in the later one. At the same time, it lends further support to the present contention that Huxley was in the process of unfolding an integrated vision, of which each of his mature works represents one facet, rather than developing a wholly new standpoint in each published work.

Appearing in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, *The Perennial Philosophy* was widely read despite receiving mixed-to-negative reviews from leading critics (Watt 1975: 361–68). In both content and form, the book belongs to what would today probably be called popular philosophy, yet the connotations of that term are liable to mislead in this case. Although it is addressed to a broad readership and is concerned with the sort of large-scale, meaning-of-life-type questions that tend to embarrass professional philosophers, *The Perennial Philosophy* is a serious and searching investigation of a range of social, political, ethical, and spiritual issues, and is underpinned by a quite formidable display of learning on Huxley's part (Huxley 2009).

Because Huxley was a popular writer rather than an academic, he appears to have felt less constrained than most scholars would in adopting strong positions on weighty, controversial, and often undecidable questions. This is not to suggest, however, that *The Perennial Philosophy* is an intellectually inconsequential work. On the contrary, as well as constituting a rich and remarkably wide-ranging anthology of texts drawn from throughout the world's spiritual traditions – including Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Daoism – the book exhibits deep learning in comparative religion and in the vocabularies and frameworks of a host of religious systems. Huxley's knowledge of Eastern spiritual traditions is likewise unusual in a writer not formally trained in the area: in particular, he demonstrates a high degree of familiarity with Buddhist thought, from

well-known Buddhist scriptures, such as the *Heart Sutra*, to quite technical debates within Buddhist thought.

As the book's title suggests, *The Perennial Philosophy* articulates a form of perennialism, a religious philosophy according to which every religious tradition is grounded in the same core spiritual insight, even if that commonality is sometimes lost sight of due to local historical factors. Huxley's approach is thus markedly syncretic: a single paragraph might make reference to Saint Paul's theology, Sufi mysticism, and the Mahayana concept of emptiness. As in the religious writings of another early twentieth-century syncretic author, the Bengali poet and social reformer Rabindranath Tagore, *The Perennial Philosophy* employs syncretism in the pursuit of universal enlightenment. Like Tagore, Huxley argues that a preoccupation with differences in religious affiliation and theological doctrine are a distraction from the one truth which underpins religions in all times and places (Tagore 2011: 147–197). While Huxley allows that there may be various legitimate paths to this one truth – including different rituals, scriptures, narratives, metaphors, and patterns of imagery – the unity of ultimate truth is at the very heart of his understanding of religion.

Turning to the philosophy that Huxley distils from his many varied sources, we find near the start of Chapter II the following succinct statement of what Huxley regards as the ultimate truth:

The divine Ground of all existence is a spiritual Absolute, ineffable in terms of discursive thought, but (in certain circumstances) susceptible of being directly experienced and realized by the human being. This Absolute is the God-without-form of Hindu and Christian mystical phraseology. The last end of man, the ultimate reason for human existence, is unitive knowledge of the divine Ground, the knowledge that can come only to those who are prepared to 'die to self' and so make room, as it were, for God. Out of any given generation of men and women very few will achieve the final end of human existence; but the opportunity for coming to unitive knowledge will, in one way or another, continually be offered until all sentient beings realize Who in fact they are. (Huxley 2009: 21)

The threefold aim of *The Perennial Philosophy* is to explain what unitive knowledge of the divine Ground is, how it is to be achieved, and how it leads to compassion. On one level, this account is offered, not unlike a self-help book, to the individual reader in their private pursuit of enlightenment.

It is on this level that the book has often been read and evaluated (Watt 1975: 361–68).

On another level, however, *The Perennial Philosophy* is advanced as part of a much broader agenda framed in terms of contemporary cultural politics. Underlying much of what Huxley has to say about the human relation to the divine is a suggestive contrast that he draws between two very different conceptions of time, one associated by him with secularity, the other with religious consciousness. There are many passages that could be cited in this connection; one particularly revealing example will suffice for our purposes. This comes in Chapter I, where Huxley remarks that ‘The nineteenth century’s mania for history and prophetic Utopianism tended to blind the eyes of even its acutest thinkers to the timeless facts of eternity’ (Huxley 2009: 20). Despite being a utopian thinker himself, at least on some definitions of the term, Huxley takes a notably negative stance toward utopia in *The Perennial Philosophy*. This is explained by the fact that he associates it with the modern conception of time, in which it is the onward movement of secular historical progress that is the ultimate measure of meaning and value, while what Huxley takes to be the religious concern with the timeless drops from view. Abbreviating a considerable amount of argumentation on Huxley’s part, he can be read as saying that modern utopianism has looked for human liberation in the wrong place. Authentic – that is, spiritual – liberation is, for him, only possible on the basis of a lived connection between human beings and the divine Ground. Secular progress in historical time, which is oriented toward finite realities, cannot substitute for such spiritual enlightenment, which takes its orientation from an eternal source that transcends history.

Adopting the vocabulary of mystics in a variety of religious traditions, Huxley claims that achieving the aims of modern secular humanism, in both its utopian and its non-utopian guises, presupposes the boundless compassion or sense of ‘dying to self’ that only a relationship to the divine Ground can make possible. Whereas secular humanism has tended to be conceived in terms of either independence from or an overcoming of the religious culture that preceded it (Blumenberg 1985), Huxley contends that such bare secularity, assuming it were possible, would lack crucial normative resources required to fuel and nourish the kind of social and moral

progress it aspires to. Here it is important to carefully distinguish Huxley's position from some familiar kinds of reactionary, nostalgic, or anti-modern outlook. Unlike many reactionary cultural commentators, including such immediate contemporaries as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, Huxley does not at any point regard the premodern world with nostalgia, nor is there any sense of regret about the end of old social hierarchies or the coming into being of new social freedoms. Furthermore, Huxley refrains from voicing any objections to the anticlerical strands within secular modernity, the widespread decline in religious affiliation and observance, or the diminishing role of organised religion in contemporary culture. Indeed, for the most part he explicitly approves of these developments. Huxley's cultural programme likewise does not involve retaining the outward trappings, formal conventions, or moral codes of traditional religion. He is, in sum, neither culturally nor socially conservative. As his syncretic conception of religion likewise implies, Huxley remains a committed modernist, one who largely embraces the social, political, economic, and cultural changes that separate his world from that of the many medieval and ancient writers discussed in *The Perennial Philosophy*.

4. *Island*

In light of the apparent anti-utopianism of *Brave New World*, *Ape and Essence*, and *The Perennial Philosophy* discussed earlier, and especially given the way the latter explicitly aligns utopianism with the modern overestimation of historical time and the loss of the eternal, the question of how, if at all, Huxley's outlook is able to make room for utopianism of any sort must now be directly addressed, for which it is necessary to consider his final novel, *Island*.

In the terminology of utopian studies, Huxley's *Island* is an example of what is often called a utopian blueprint, that is, a schematic outline of the key features of an imaginary society that is intended to represent a considerable improvement on the one inhabited by the author (Sargent 1994). Like

the founding text of the modern utopian tradition, Thomas More's *Utopia*, Huxley's novel is set on an island, Pala, in this case located somewhere in the vicinity of the northeastern Indian Ocean (Huxley 2006). Like many utopian blueprints since More, Huxley's provides detailed accounts of how each of the different parts of his fictional society function, from education and healthcare to industry and leisure, typically via lengthy disquisitions by the island's inhabitants.

In Pala, children are raised collectively by Mutual Adoption Clubs to avoid subjecting them to the neurotic structure of the traditional family; trance states are utilised for accelerated learning; citizens switch frequently between roles so as to afford them the widest possible range of life experiences; the state religion combines Vedantic teachings with a demythologised form of Buddhism; ritual sex is practised as another route to enlightenment; and science, technology, and industry are deployed selectively and on a restricted scale to prevent them dominating the other spheres of life. The social structure is a federation of self-governing, mutually supportive units, with some reliance on markets and industrial manufacturing, as well as a non-elected, albeit symbolic, royal head of state. Lastly, drawing on ideas first articulated by Huxley in his two earlier works on his experiments with hallucinogenic drugs during the 1950s – *The Doors of Perception* (Huxley 2004) and its sequel *Heaven and Hell* (Huxley 2004) – drugs are widely used in Pala for the attainment of artistic and spiritual insight, and for training in empathetic understanding. Whereas in *Brave New World*, drugs had been used for the purposes of pacification and social control, in Pala they are part of a comprehensive regimen that integrates Huxley's social, psychological, pharmacological, and religious research.

Despite the stark outward contrast between them, *Island* may be read, in large part, as an extended treatment of an idea which receives a brief mention in the earlier *Ape and Essence*. This appears in a scene in which the Arch-Vicar, one of the leaders of the post-apocalyptic society in which the novel is set, explains the course of world history to the protagonist, Alfred. After Alfred laments the ways in which East and West have failed to adequately learn from one another and consequently made 'the worst of both worlds', his interlocuter responds,

'Just think if they'd made the best!' squeaks the Arch-Vicar. 'Eastern mysticism making sure that Western science should be properly used; the Eastern art of living refining Western energy; Western individualism tempering Eastern totalitarianism.' He shakes his head in pious horror. 'Why, it would have been the kingdom of heaven.' (Huxley 2005: 138)

An unfortunate instance of the orientalist trope of the despotic East aside, this passage clearly anticipates the utopian vision of *Island*, in which Huxley attempts to integrate Western secular culture with elements drawn from his wide reading in Eastern religion. Whereas in the 1940s, however, Huxley regarded the greatest threat to freedom to be totalitarianism, by the early 1960s it is global capitalism which has taken on this role. *Island* ends with the invasion of Pala by Colonel Dipa, an event which is signposted throughout the book as a prelude to the exploitation of the island by oil companies and the almost certain destruction of its carefully balanced way of life. This balance is one in which modern science, technology, and psychotherapy are carefully deployed in combination with spiritual and meditative techniques drawn from Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta. Modern Pala, we learn, was established in the nineteenth century through an alliance between a visiting Scottish doctor and the then king of Pala, described by the former's grandson Dr Robert as the pairing of 'the Calvinist-turned-atheist and the pious Mahayana Buddhist' (Huxley 2006: 128). Calvinism-turned-atheism would appear to stand in this formula for secular modernity, Buddhism for the insight into the divine Ground discussed in *The Perennial Philosophy*, some of the vocabulary of which recurs throughout *Island*.

Speaking with enthusiasm about the vision of modern Pala's two founding figures, Dr Robert describes the way in which they aimed,

To make the best of both worlds – what am I saying? To make the best of *all* the worlds – the worlds already realized within the various cultures and, beyond them, the worlds of still unrealized potentialities. It was an enormous ambition, an ambition totally impossible of fulfilment; but at least it had the merit of spurring them on, of making them rush in where angels feared to tread – with results that sometimes proved, to everybody's astonishment, that they had not been quite such fools as they looked. They never succeeded, of course, in making the best of all the worlds; but by dint of boldly trying, they made the best of many more worlds than any merely prudent or sensible person would have dreamed of being able to reconcile and combine. (ibid.: 129)

From the perspective granted by such passages in *Island*, it becomes possible to appreciate the deeper unity of Huxley's work during the decades we have been considering and to grasp the larger project that, in retrospect, we are able to see unfolding across his fictional and nonfictional writings. With the novel framed in these terms, the character of Dr Roberts – who serves as the wise Virgil-like guide to the novel's despairing Dantean protagonist, Will Farnaby – can be seen as a character who gives voice to many of Huxley's own views. This is one source of the didactic quality that has exasperated some of the book's readers: the spiritual instruction Farnaby receives from Roberts is, like that of *The Perennial Philosophy* almost twenty years earlier, Huxley's guidance to us, his readers.

Beyond their didacticism, the philosophical dialogues that make up a sizeable amount of *Island* may also be read as self-referential. They are partly concerned, that is to say, with commenting on and evaluating the cultural agenda that informs much of Huxley's own work from the 1930s through to *Island* itself. In the lines spoken by Roberts cited previously, three reflections by Huxley can be discerned. Firstly, they provide further evidence that the delicate balancing of elements of a variety of cultures and traditions – a balance that is unrealised in *Brave New World*, hinted at in *Ape and Essence*, more fully exemplified by *The Perennial Philosophy*, and foregrounded in *Island* – remained Huxley's guiding ideal to the very end of his life. Secondly, they acknowledge the difficulty involved in achieving that balance, and display self-awareness about the criticisms likely to be directed at any attempt to do so. Thirdly, there is a sense of the unavoidable failure of such a project to live up to its promise. It is thus possible to hear in Roberts' words Huxley's concession to the critics of *The Perennial Philosophy* that his envisaged fusion of horizons may be beyond his powers.

If so, however, as Roberts' words and indeed *Island* as a whole make clear, Huxley's striving for balance has nevertheless been worthwhile: the inhabitants of Pala are presented as flourishing in a way that seems incredible to the cynical and dejected Will, who is arguably intended to stand for the disenchanted worldview of modern secularism. Whatever its self-acknowledged limitations as formulated in *Island*, Huxley was convinced that a society which cultivated both the material and the spiritual sides of life, and which was able to integrate progress in science and technology

with a relationship to the timeless divine Ground, would be the most humanly fulfilling form of life and would necessarily appear as a utopia from the point of view of his late modern readers. Despite his consistent rejection of secular utopianism, then, Huxley may be read as espousing a *post*-secular variant of utopianism in which the ideal society is one that integrates both secular and religious values.

5. Utopia and Post-Secularism

Having surveyed Huxley's work from the 1930s through the early 60s, we are now in a position to say something about its relationship to what has recently come to be known as post-secularism. After considering Huxley's potential status as a post-secular thinker, our discussion will then conclude with some speculation about the relevance of post-secularism to our understanding of utopian literature.

While still a somewhat controversial term, subject to a number of unresolved scholarly disputes, post-secularism is an umbrella term for a variety of outlooks in which some of the core principles of modern secularism are, if not rejected, at least heavily qualified (Beaumont 2019), including, but not limited to, the secularisation thesis in the social sciences (Graham 2019), adherence to strong or pre-critical conceptions of rationality (De Vriese and Vanheeswijck 2019), and commitment to forms of scientism and/or neo-Darwinism (Ratti 2019). Crucially, proponents of post-secularism acknowledge that their perspectives are being articulated in a context in which society has been profoundly and, in many ways, irreversibly reshaped by secularism, key elements of which are retained within post-secularism itself, including the secular rejection of traditional ideas of religious authority, hierarchy, and orthodoxy (Stoeckl and Uzlaner 2019).

Post-secularism also represents an intervention in debates about modernity. Unlike some recent commentators who contest the very concept of modernity (Latour 2012), post-secular thinkers generally accept that a process of modernisation has taken place, while seeking to transcend modernity

from within by moving *beyond* its guiding principles, as opposed to attempting to go back *behind* them in the manner of reactionary anti-modernists (Mendieta and Beaumont 2019). A brief list of prominent expressions of post-secularism today would likely include the radical orthodoxy movement in Christian theology (Ward, Milbank, and Pickstock 1998); postatheism and so-called 'minimal religion' in Russia (Epstein 2019); nondual Judaism (Michaelson 2009); Gaia philosophy (Lovelock 2016); some forms of deep ecology (Naess 2016); some forms of new materialism (Coole and Frost 2010); New Ageism in some of its manifestations (Hanegraaff 1997); and secular Buddhism (Batchelor 2018). Although scholars have on occasion traced the roots of post-secularism back to the latter twentieth century, it is often taken to be a twenty-first-century phenomenon: of the forty scholars who contribute to the comprehensive landmark collection, *The Routledge Handbook of Postsecularity*, for instance, only four see thinkers from before the twenty-first century as anticipating aspects of post-secularism.

Reflecting on the readings of *Brave New World*, *Ape and Essence*, *The Perennial Philosophy*, and *Island* put forward in this chapter, what the study of the work of Aldous Huxley may be able to bring to the scholarly conversation about post-secularism is fourfold. Firstly, it provides an example of what would appear to be a post-secular outlook being developed in considerable detail as early as the 1940s – much sooner than the work of most scholars of post-secularism would suggest. Secondly, it draws attention to the literary dimension of post-secularism – something that is often only briefly alluded to by the social science and religious studies scholars who have dominated the field to date. Thirdly, it recontextualises Huxley's work: from being the prophet of American counterculture, he becomes a forerunner of contemporary efforts to reconceive the relationship between secularism and religion in a progressive and constructive way. Fourthly, it encourages reflection on the ways in which post-secularism is a product of both Western and Eastern influences – a consideration which has, with the occasional exception (Kong and Qian 2019), likewise generally been lacking in scholarly work on post-secularity to date.

Huxley's work is thus highly pertinent to post-secular discourse in the twenty-first century. His attempt to move beyond secular disenchantment without reverting to a premodern worldview, and to creatively combine

Eastern spiritual doctrines and practices with Western science, philosophy, and psychotherapy, may afford especially fertile ground for further consideration of his status as a precursor to today's post-secular movements. Building on the argument of the foregoing sections as well as Jake Poller's work on Huxley's engagement with alternative spiritualities, the next step in the ongoing conversation about Huxley may be, then, to consider further the extent of his affinities with religious and cultural tendencies almost a century after he was writing. If these prove to be as revealing as this chapter has given us reason to expect, the inclusion of Huxley in debates about post-secularism may require the parameters of this emerging area of academic enquiry to be somewhat redrawn.

Finally, to return to the field of utopian studies, there is the intriguing question of what is revealed about the utopian tradition when one of its central figures is reframed in post-secular terms. How might this affect how we understand utopian literature and thought? A first point to note is that the concept of the post-secular has already come to the attention of literary scholars. John McClure's *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (2007) represented the first major study in this regard, taking as its focus the ways in which twentieth-century writers such as Thomas Pynchon and Toni Morrison created open-ended narratives situated at the meeting point of secularism and post-secular forms of religious experience. Other scholars have engaged with literature informed by non-Western religious orientations and cultural practices, thereby calling into question prevailing Western assumptions about secularity, faith, and reason (Ratti 2012; Cumpsty 2022). Even more suggestively from the perspective of our study of Huxley, both Rose Harris-Birtill's *David Mitchell's Post-Secular World* (2019) and Caroline Edwards' *Utopia and the Contemporary British Novel* (2019) locate post-secular strands within popular works of twenty-first-century speculative fiction, whether as isolated elements or as essential parts of their fictional worldbuilding. In each case, arguments are made for the need to move beyond exclusively secular frames of reference in interpreting the work of some of the most prominent authors of speculative fiction since the turn of the century.

One question that becomes pressing in light of Edwards' analysis of the role of utopianism in contemporary fiction is whether post-secularity in

utopian discourse is a new development or, as Edwards sometimes implies, something with a longer history. Properly answering this question would obviously require a much more thorough consideration of twentieth-century literature than can be provided here, though McClure's contribution has laid the groundwork for this. Based on our reading of Huxley, however, it can be argued that the association of utopianism with post-secularism not only reaches back into the previous century but can be found in rudimentary form as early as 1932 in Huxley's intimations of God's presence-in-absence amidst the hyper-secular condition of the World State. The intertwining of these two tendencies within modern culture has, then, arguably been taking place since at least the early twentieth century.

Ever since the publication of the historian Norman Cohn's classic 1957 study, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (1993), there has been considerable and growing interest in the relationship between utopianism and religion among scholars. One of the main conclusions of *The Pursuit of the Millennium* is that there are striking parallels between medieval and early modern millenarian movements and twentieth-century political ideologies such as Bolshevism and Nazism. Both intellectually and politically, on Cohn's account, modern ideologies closely followed the pattern of much earlier radical religious movements, many of which were motivated by a utopian demand for the overthrow of all existing institutions and their replacement by a new, divinely sanctioned dispensation. More recently, the philosopher John Gray has drawn on and amplified Cohn's analysis in arguing that 'Modern politics is a chapter in the history of religion' (Gray 2007: 1). For Gray, following Cohn, religious beliefs and values have taken on a secular guise during modernity, while nevertheless continuing to function as the covert driving force of many ostensibly non-religious forms of politics, from communism and anarchism to neoliberalism and Silicon Valley futurism. Modern utopianism in all its forms is therefore best understood according to Gray as an outgrowth or secularised reformulation of essentially religious patterns of thought (Gray 2018).

It is unclear where the concept of post-secularism might fit into this history of utopianism, but it seems intuitively to complicate it and to call for further nuancing of the Cohn-Gray line of thought. Again, the work

of Huxley is instructive here. Unlike almost all of Cohn and Gray's case studies, Huxley's utopianism, which is perhaps most completely realised in *Island*, is neither apocalyptic nor millenarian. It also differs from every one of their examples in being far more indebted to Eastern traditions such as Buddhism and Vedanta than to Christianity. Lastly, as we have seen, it is a utopianism that aims to preserve and combine both modern technological innovations and traditional spirituality in a delicate balance achieved through education rather than revolution. It remains for scholars of utopia to investigate whether Huxley's post-secularism is indicative of a deeper or more pervasive tendency within the modern utopian imagination.

Queer Theory and Utopianism

What is the relationship of queer theory to utopianism? Given their mutual interest in challenging dominant norms and values, and in calling for radically new social arrangements, it may seem obvious that queer theory shares affinities with utopian thought. Determining what precisely these consist in is, however, not such a straightforward matter. In order to understand why, we will need to consider the twin careers of queer theory and utopianism over the last forty years, from the 1980s to the mid-2020s.¹

1. The Demise of Utopianism

It is noteworthy that the flourishing of the first wave of queer theory during the 1980s and 90s coincided with the demise of utopianism within wider culture. Theorists from David Harvey (2007) to Fredric Jameson (1991) have explained this drying up of utopian energy as due to the turn toward post-Fordism or so-called flexible accumulation in the 1970s, followed by the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s. Others, such as Ruth Levitas (2011) and Slavoj Žižek (2008), have emphasised the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 as key factors in the widely proclaimed ‘death’ of utopia. Meanwhile, in their analyses of the cultural politics of the period, Franco Berardi (2011) and Mark Fisher (2009) each

1 The present chapter began its life as a much shorter blog post on the topic of queer utopianism (Seeger 2021).

write of the widespread sense of ‘the cancellation of the future’ as it became increasingly hard to envisage alternatives to capitalism during these decades.

As James Ingram notes, this anti-utopian sense of stagnation meant that critics of the status quo found it necessary to seize on ‘ever thinner, weaker, and vaguer’ utopian moments as the possibility of tangible, real-world change receded from view (2016: xvi). Utopianism in the late twentieth century thus tended to become highly abstract and emptied of content: rather than anticipating a better society or specific forms of liberation, the focus of much utopian discourse increasingly became the bare possibility of change itself – the intimation that things might, somehow, someday be otherwise.

A case in point is that of Jameson’s *Archaeologies of the Future*, where it is suggested that, in light of the defensive position that utopians of all stripes now found themselves in, ‘the slogan of anti-anti-Utopianism might well offer the best working strategy’ for those on the left at the start of the twenty-first century (Jameson 2005: xvi). On this view, rearguard action against the dystopian tendencies of late capitalism, combined with fleeting glimpses of utopian hope found scattered amidst works of literature and popular culture, may be as close to utopia as we are able to come today.

This anti-utopian turn was arguably foreshadowed in certain respects by the work of Michel Foucault, who, in response to an interviewer’s question about why he had not sketched a utopia, notoriously replied that ‘to imagine another system is to extend our participation in the present system’ (Foucault 1977: 230). In their study of Foucault’s politics, *The Last Man Takes LSD: Foucault and the End of Revolution*, Mitchell Dean and Daniel Zamora show that this outlook was the result of a growing sense of exhaustion with system building, utopian dreaming, and grand visions of the future in the latter half of the twentieth century (Dean and Zamora 2021). In place of revolution, they argue, Foucault proposed a turn toward the self and a focus on micro-political – as opposed to systemic – change. According to Dean and Zamora, Foucault’s late masterwork, *The History of Sexuality*, published in several volumes between 1976 and 1984, is representative of this inward turn. Crucially, it was also to be one of the main intellectual sources for what was to later become known as queer theory.

It is worth noting in this context that a related criticism to that levelled by Ingram at the diminished utopianism of the 1980s and 90s has also been made of first-wave queer theory. A good example of this is Rosemary Hennessy's book *Profit and Pleasure*, in which Hennessy criticises what she sees as the tendency of prominent queer theorists like Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick to separate gender and sexuality from capitalism and class (Hennessy 2017). Such an approach is problematic, on Hennessy's account, firstly, because it dehistoricises gender and sexuality by untethering them from the development of capitalism, and, secondly, because it dematerialises them by emphasising their cultural construction while neglecting socioeconomic factors such as the changing nature of wage labour or the origins of the modern family.

Hennessy is one of a number of critics who see queer theory's way of engaging gender and sexuality as restrictive and as leading to difficulties in situating queer identity and politics in relation to broader social and economic developments (c.f. Penney 2014). Although they do not generally frame these limitations in terms of a failure of the utopian imagination, a parallel may be drawn between these writers' critique of queer theory, on the one hand, and Dean and Zamora's critique of the turn toward micro-politics on the part of Foucault and those influenced by him, on the other. Just as utopianism dwindled to little more than a wisp during the neoliberal era, so first-wave queer theory represents for some of its critics a retreat from large-scale social critique in favour of a preoccupation with individual self-fashioning, leaving it susceptible to commodification and the dilution of its radical potential.

2. The Scope of Queer Theory

These are serious charges. There are nevertheless a number of replies that queer theorists might make in response to them. A first would start by noting that, as queer theorists themselves, critics like Hennessy are contributors to the enterprise they find fault with. Insofar as their own

materialist and class-based analysis of gender and sexuality is successful (as it arguably is), they thereby demonstrate that queer theory is able to encompass broader socioeconomic considerations. Although this does not constitute a defence of the first generation of queer theorists, it does help to demonstrate the flexibility of queer theory and the possibility of broadening its scope beyond the categories of gender and sexuality. Queer of color critique, which addresses the intersection of gender, sexuality, and race, has likewise highlighted queer theoretical blindspots from a position within queer theory itself, as in the work of Roderick Ferguson (2003).

A second reply would be to point out that some queer theorists have been concerned with capitalism and class since the inception of the field in the 1980s. To take one prominent example, John D'Emilio was producing groundbreaking analysis of socioeconomic factors in the formation of queer subjectivity in articles such as 'Capitalism and Gay Identity' as early as 1983. More recently, Lisa Duggan has done important work on the depoliticisation of gay identity under neoliberalism in articles like 'The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism' (2002). In both cases, the study of sexuality is situated non-reductively within an economic frame that preserves what Stuart Hall would term the 'relative autonomy' (Hall 2019) of sexuality from class while also demonstrating the pair's deep imbrication with one another.

The main contention of D'Emilio's 'Capitalism and Gay Identity' is that 'only when individuals began to make their living through wage labour, instead of as parts of an interdependent family unit, was it possible for homosexual desire to coalesce into a personal identity – an identity based on the ability to remain outside the heterosexual family and to construct a personal life based on attraction to one's own sex' (D'Emilio 1993: 470). This, in turn, 'made possible the formation of urban communities of lesbians and gay men and, more recently, of a politics based on a sexual identity' (ibid.). D'Emilio's account of the origin of gay identity is not deterministic: he does not claim that an alteration in economic life *caused* gay identity to come into existence. Rather, his argument is that until specific historical conditions arose there was no 'social space' for such an identity to occupy. D'Emilio shows that while same-sex *desire* is present in the historical record prior to the nineteenth century, homosexuality as an *identity* – as a way of

being and of relating to others – is not. As even this brief sketch hopefully illustrates, D’Emilio’s work provides a *prima facie* reason to think that queer theory need be neither micro-political in its focus nor neglectful of structural socioeconomic change.

A third reply to critics of queer theory’s limited scope would be to reconsider some of its foundational texts. Reflecting on their classic study *Gender Trouble* a decade on from its original publication, Judith Butler commented that ‘the aim of the text was to open up the field of possibility for gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized’ (Butler 1999: vii–viii). The possibilities in question have to do with ways of performing gender, and the scope for subversion of established gender roles and styles. It is true, as Hennessy argues, that both *Gender Trouble* and its sequel, *Bodies that Matter* (Butler 2015), focus almost exclusively on gender and sexuality and that neither offers anything like a systematic analysis of their relationship to capitalism or class (Hennessy 2017). Whether this constitutes as decisive a shortcoming as Hennessy believes is less clear, however.

‘One might wonder’, Butler writes, ‘what use “opening up possibilities” finally is, but no one who has understood what it is to live in the social world as what is “impossible”, illegible, unrealizable, unreal, and illegitimate is likely to pose that question’ (Butler 1999: viii). This is a suggestive observation that may point to a way of reappraising not only *Gender Trouble* but Butler’s work more generally. While taking the invalidation of certain ways of performing gender as its ostensible focus, the remark registers a concern with illegibility and illegitimacy that has continued to inform Butler’s work. In their later books, *Precarious Life* (Butler 2004) and *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015), Butler incorporates economic marginalisation into their analysis and provides an insightful account of precarity, which they define as differential exposure to economic insecurity, violence, and forced migration. In light of these and other works, it has become possible to identify a persisting preoccupation on Butler’s part with the ways in which not only social recognition and representation, but material resources and access to medical care are made available to or withheld from different groups, whether on the basis of gender, sexuality, race, class, immigration status, or some combination of these. As perhaps

queer theory's most influential practitioner, this dual concern with symbolic *and* material infrastructures – a pairing which is even more in evidence in Butler's most recent book, *Who's Afraid of Gender?* (Butler 2024) – ought to be kept in mind whenever queer theory is accused of defaulting to a focus on micro-politics and an over-investment in questions of identity at the expense of material concerns.

3. Utopian Queer Theory

The examples of D'Emilio, Hennessy, Ferguson, Duggan, and Butler serve to illustrate the social and political reach of queer theory. Recent years, however, have seen the rise of a more overtly utopian style of queer theory. Work in this vein explicitly repudiates the anti-utopianism of the neoliberal era and is influenced as much by traditions of radical queer politics and historical events such as the Compton's Cafeteria riot or Stonewall as it is by Foucault's *History of Sexuality*.

Published in 2009, José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, another important example of queer of color critique, articulates a hopeful, future-oriented alternative to what Muñoz sees as the resignation and political timidity of queer culture since the turn of the millennium (Muñoz 2019). Distinguishing between LGBT pragmatism and queer utopianism, Muñoz argues that in focusing on objectives like instituting gay marriage or securing the right of trans people to serve in the military, the queer community lost sight of the utopian aspirations that inspired activists of the 1960s and 70s. For Muñoz, the aim of queer politics ought to be nothing less than the achievement of a world that is no longer structured around either heteronormativity or white supremacy, however remote such a goal may appear from the point of view of our present moment. Even if *Cruising Utopia* does not offer the kind of concrete detail required to realise such a project, it is clearly a long way from the micro-political and reformist tinkering associated with queer theory by some of its critics.

A quite different but no less utopian form of queer theory is represented by *The Xenofeminist Manifesto*, originally published online in 2015 and authored by a feminist collective working under the name Laboria Cuboniks. Characterised by Emily Jones as ‘a feminist ethics for the technomaterial world’ (Jones 2019: 127), Xenofeminism is a queer technofeminism committed to trans liberation and gender abolition, by which is meant the construction of ‘a society where traits currently assembled under the rubric of gender, no longer furnish a grid for the asymmetric operation of power’ (Cuboniks 2018: 55). The ethos of the manifesto is well captured by its subtitle: ‘a politics for alienation’. Those seeking radical change, the manifesto’s authors argue, must embrace ‘alienation’ through the recognition that nothing ought to be regarded as natural. While regarding gender as socially constructed, the manifesto insists that materiality and biology must also not be taken as givens: they can be intervened in through surgery, hormone therapies, and alterations to the built environment. As experiments in free and open-source medicine on the part of feminists, gender hacktivists, and trans DIY-HRT forums demonstrate, technologies that currently serve capital may yet be repurposed as part of an anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal project in which ‘women, queers, and the gender non-conforming play an unparalleled role’ (ibid.: 17). Written in a self-consciously hyperbolic style and blending promethean rhetoric with quasi-science-fictional projections of post-capitalist emancipation, *The Xenofeminist Manifesto* is as exhilarating as it is wildly ambitious.

Although *Cruising Utopia* and *The Xenofeminist Manifesto* differ from one another in many important ways – not only in terms of their form and style of presentation but also in regard to their objectives, theoretical frameworks, and political orientations – there is a fairly clear sense in which they may be taken as representative of a markedly more utopian ethos than that which informed much of the queer theory of the 1980s and 90s. Allowing for all of the points made in previous sections about the various misperceptions of queer theory as an inherently micro-political enterprise concerned primarily with individual self-fashioning, it remains the case that queer theory during those decades was, entirely understandably, much more concerned with critiquing the status quo and pushing back against new forms of reactionary politics as embodied in the New

Right in the United States than with articulating utopian visions of radical alternatives. Gayle Rubin's field-defining 1984 article 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality' (Rubin 1993), for example, while implicitly invoking a horizon of unexplored innovations in sexual culture, is primarily devoted to a genealogy of the homophobia, anti-feminism, and puritanical social attitudes of contemporary US society. Written near the height of America's AIDS epidemic, the article is also a demand for justice for AIDS victims and a call for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people to show solidarity with one another by recognising their shared interests and breaking out of more narrowly defined identity silos. While it could be argued that in taking a utopian turn, the latest generation of queer theorists may be at risk of losing sight of some of the more concrete and tangible aims that animate the work of earlier activist-theorists like Rubin, it is important not to overstate this view. *Cruising Utopia* is, among other things, a call for a return to the queer radicalism of previous decades; *The Xenofeminist Manifesto* is as much a demand for universal access to medical care as it is a techno-promethean prophecy. The utopianism of recent queer theory is thus not only compatible with the sort of practical goals around which queer theory of the 1980s was built but is at least partly continuous with it.

4. Queer Theory and Utopianism

What, then, is the relationship of queer theory to utopianism? Based on our consideration of some of queer theory's more utopian elements, it seems reasonable to draw two initial conclusions, though these are intended as no more than starting points for a much fuller discussion of this important topic within utopian studies.

The first conclusion that could be drawn from the examples addressed earlier – all key texts drawn from across the forty years in which queer theory of a recognisable sort has been in existence – is that queer theory may have more in common with utopian thought than is often assumed.

While, as noted at the outset, it can seem intuitive to link queer theory with utopianism on account of their shared radicalism, in practice the two tend to lead parallel lives in the work of academics, with scholars in queer studies and those in utopian studies rarely communicating directly with one another despite their many shared concerns. As we have seen, however, this is not true of one of queer theory's great innovators, José Esteban Muñoz, whose *Cruising Utopia* represents a significant intervention in both fields at once. Looking further back, it likewise seems clear that if anti-utopianism is associated with a lack of political ambition, a reformist mentality, or a pragmatic refusal to contemplate radical change, the queer theory of the 1980s and 90s was arguably more often written in opposition to the anti-utopian tenor of the neoliberal era than in tune with it. If Dean and Zamora's critique of Foucault's micro-political turn encourages us to expect to find that same tendency reproduced in the queer theoretical work that Foucault helped to inspire over the following twenty years, revisiting some of the examples cited previously may disabuse us of this tempting assumption. Not being a utopian blueprint or manifesto in the strict sense hardly compromises the radicalism of Rubin's 'Thinking Sex', for instance – and the same applies to the work of Hennessy, Butler, and Ferguson.

A second conclusion that could be drawn is that there are signs of an explicitly utopian turn taking place within queer theory today. One strand of queer theory that this new style of theorising clearly contrasts with is the so-called 'anti-social thesis', most notably represented by the work of Leo Bersani (1987) and Lee Edelman (2004). If Bersani's contributions to queer theory contain some of the earliest formulations of this thesis, Edelman's study *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* represents its most complete and unqualified expression. Taking a stance against what he terms 'reproductive futurism', whereby collective visions of the future are always-already secured through a set of heteronormative assumptions about reproduction, sexuality, and the structure of the family unit, Edelman claims that it is the symbolic figure of 'the Child' which in modern Western societies necessarily 'remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention' (Edelman 2004: 3). Queerness, on the other hand, 'undoes

the identities through which we experience ourselves as subjects, insisting on the Real of a jouissance that social reality and the futurism on which it relies have already foreclosed' (ibid.: 24–25). Provocatively embracing both the conservative image of the 'selfishness' (unproductiveness) of queer desire, as well as the nihilistic consequences of his own argument, Edelman envisages a queer politics yet to come in which there is, as he puts it, '*no baby* and, in consequence, *no future*', affirming and even celebrating what the conservative regards as 'the fatal lure of sterile, narcissistic enjoyments understood as inherently destructive of meaning and therefore as responsible for the undoing of social organization, collective reality, and, inevitably, life itself' (ibid.: 13). In its annulment of the category of the future, its undermining of every possibility of social and political collectivity, and its seeming antinatalism, Edelman's position is surely the *ne plus ultra* of queer anti-utopianism.

Given the uncompromising negativity of Edelman's influential argument, it may be hard to see how queer theory could ever recover a more constructive sense of the future in its wake. What *Cruising Utopia* and *The Xenofeminist Manifesto* both illustrate, however, are ways in which it may be possible for queer constituencies to adopt a future-oriented and radically utopian outlook that avoids the various pitfalls associated by Edelman with 'reproductive futurism'. Neither of these texts, for example, either assumes a teleological conception of history of the sort that Edelman rightly criticises, takes the nuclear family as its default model of human sociality, or moralistically disavows queer desire. On the contrary, each of them in their different ways insists that history offers no guarantees and is the outcome of political struggle, that social forms exceeding that of the nuclear family ought to be a central focus of a renewed queer utopianism, and that queer desire could play an active role in reconstituting society by disseminating new social practices and proposing new collective goals. This is, to be sure, a utopian conception of the role queerness might play in the implementation of radical social change, but it does not appear to be one that is susceptible to Edelman's critique of reproductive futurism. There may, then, be a route by which utopian queer theory can move beyond the anti-social thesis while retaining some of the valuable insights the latter has given rise to.

A final question worth considering in the present context, one which has scarcely been touched on so far, is *why* queer theory might display the kinds of affinity with utopianism that this chapter has argued it does. Here a parallel between queer theory and feminism suggests itself. Writing from what she describes as a utopian feminist perspective, Amia Srinivasan has argued in her acclaimed study, *The Right to Sex*, that

Feminism is not a philosophy, or a theory, or even a point of view. It is a political movement to transform the world beyond recognition. It asks: what would it be to end the political, social, sexual, economic, psychological, and physical subordination of women? It answers: we do not know; let us try and see. (Srinivasan 2021: xi)

Put in these terms, the utopian dimension of feminism is clear. For Srinivasan, feminism is only secondarily a branch of theory; it is first and foremost an attempt to change the world by fundamentally altering the position of women within it. Drawing on Srinivasan, we could say that the queer movement – which, like the feminist movement, encompasses theory while also transcending it – poses the question: what would it be for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and gender nonconforming people to be truly liberated? Like feminism on Srinivasan's account, the queer movement has no definite answer to this question as this would require us to imagine such thoroughgoing – indeed utopian – change in human relations that to picture it would necessarily involve us in describing a world far removed from anything that can presently be envisaged. Like the utopian promise of feminism – a world in which women are no longer subordinated to men and patriarchy has been abolished – the promise of the queer movement – a world in which queer people have been liberated and heteronormativity and cisnormativity are no longer enforced – is one which may sometimes find partial expression in theory, but which must ultimately take on a practical guise if it is to, in Srinivasan's words, 'transform the world beyond recognition'.

The queer movement aims to reconfigure how gender and sexuality are understood and enacted across society. In Muñoz's terms, the difference between LGBT pragmatism and queer utopianism is mappable onto the distinction Srinivasan makes between liberal and utopian feminism (*ibid.*: 102). Whereas LGBT pragmatism seeks modest reforms within existing structures

– such as the campaign for gay marriage – the aim of queer utopianism is a fundamental realignment of how gender and sexuality are lived in every sphere of our collective existence. The fact that the latter is, like Srinivasan's feminist future, so difficult to imagine at our present conjuncture is a further way in which it departs from a liberal model of social progress. Prior to the introduction of gay marriage in the UK, for instance, it was in principle easy to determine the impact it would have. The full social, political, and cultural ramifications of the abolition of gender along Xenofeminist lines, on the other hand, are far harder to foresee. As Srinivasan observes of feminism, however, this should not be surprising: the reason utopian social change is so hard to anticipate is that it is largely a matter of practical politics as opposed to radical theory. It is not, that is, something that transpires (entirely) in the mind, but must of necessity be embodied in the actions and behaviours of groups of human agents. Until it is put into practice, it largely remains a mere promise, albeit a promise of great things.

Having said all this, we may be left wondering what the utility of utopian queer theory therefore consists in, and what, if anything, it adds to the work of activists and others committed to concrete, worldly change. As Srinivasan's formulation of utopian feminism shows, the problem here does not lie with utopianism per se; indeed, radical politics may well *need* to be utopian to effect the kind of systemic change that it seeks. Rather, what our discussion up to this point – not to mention the hostile and often lethal environments in which queer people throughout the world find themselves today (Gevisser 2020, 18–40) – prompts us to consider is whether more queer theorising is what is needed, as opposed to more concerted queer activism. This is partly, of course, a restatement of the familiar question of the relationship between theory and practice familiar from the Marxist tradition, but it is also a way of asking more specifically about the significance of queer theory beyond academia. This is not a topic that can be satisfactorily addressed here, but in closing a few thoughts can at least be broached.

The spectacle of academics overestimating the social impact of their work is by now so familiar that it has for some years been the basis for a degree of self-directed humour on the part of academics on social media platforms like Twitter and BlueSky. Clearly, if academic work, including

complex theoretical texts like *Cruising Utopia* or *Gender Trouble*, is as invisible to a wider audience as some of those on social media often suggest, its likely impact, let alone its ability to play a role in the construction of a utopian society, is at best severely limited and at worst non-existent. As Stuart Hall (2019), among others, has persuasively argued, however, split-level models of society in which culture and ideas are seen as mere epiphenomena while beneath the surface of social life the ‘reality’ of economic or power relations churn away in complete isolation from the symbolic realm that overlies them are highly misleading. For Hall, culture and ideas play a complex role in modern societies, one which involves an *interaction* between culture and power as opposed to one-way causal determination of the former by the latter. On these grounds, it can be argued that queer theory is not irrelevant to political activism, even if its social impact has been overstated at times. While it would take a considerable amount of research to decisively demonstrate that, say, Judith Butler’s theorising has played a formative role in altering how many young people conceive of gender and, by extension, the demands they go on to make of politicians, educators, and healthcare professionals, interactions with members of the millennial and Gen-Z generations strongly suggest that this is the case.

Returning to the passage on utopian feminism from Srinivasan cited earlier, it is noteworthy that in denying that feminism is a theory she does not say or imply that feminism *precludes* theorising. What the wording of her remarks instead suggests is that feminism would not be feminism if it were to become an *essentially* theoretical enterprise rather than a political movement for radical change. This distinction is important as it allows for there to be a theoretical component to feminism even if this can never exhaust feminism’s meaning. Political movements are, after all, influenced by ideas, some of which may be drawn from theory even of a narrowly academic kind, as in the cases of the French and Russian revolutions. Likewise, however indirect its influence may be, the utopian thought of the current generation of queer theorists may yet serve to inform activism and policymaking through its permeation of the wider cultural imaginary. To what extent it will do so and with what effects remains to be seen.

Post-Capitalism and Techno-Utopianism

The last decade has seen an explosion of writing on how impending developments in science and technology are set to radically transform society in the near future. Some of the books in this vein associate these changes with a broader phenomenon they call post-capitalism. Rather than designating a specific type of economic regime, post-capitalism has become a catch-all term for a broad spectrum of attempts to envisage an alternative social order. Writing in this area is necessarily highly speculative, moving freely between sober empirical analysis of current trends and freewheeling flights of imagination about the possibilities of emerging technologies.

The potential social, political, economic, and cultural upheaval implied by post-capitalism is deep and far-reaching. It is therefore unsurprising that attempts to anticipate and prepare for such change would have had an impact on the utopian imaginary. Since their inception, utopia and dystopia have been cultural forms that draw much of their energy and momentum from partially foreseeable but not wholly predictable real-world trends. Sean Seeger and Daniel Davison-Vecchione have argued that science fictional texts, including many utopias and dystopias, may often be read as engaging in what they, following the lead of the sociologist Daniel Bell, term ‘social forecasting’, that is, the articulation of ‘a more or less plausible imaginative frame for raising, exploring, and making sense of the agenda of questions that a future society is likely to confront’ (Seeger and Davison-Vecchione 2023a: 172). Crucially, on Seeger and Davison-Vecchione’s account, this does not mean that such fiction is attempting to predict discreet contingencies, such as election outcomes or scientific breakthroughs, which are necessarily unforeseeable. Rather, as the authors argue, such fiction ought to be read as ‘concerned with changes in *general enabling conditions* as opposed to specific future events’ (ibid.: 173). With their significant, if largely inchoate, footprint in the present, future changes

in social framework of this sort – such as the transition to the ‘network society’ in which information technologies would play a key role, forecast by Bell in the 1970s (Bell 1973) – have a degree of cognitive availability to the contemporary observer that is ruled out in the case of sheerly contingent happenings. It is in this sense that one major strand of today’s utopian imaginary may be read as a series of social forecasts directed at the questions – both intellectual and practical – raised by the phenomenon of post-capitalism and the technologies that could plausibly give rise to it.

As Seeger and Davison-Vecchione’s own focus on the science fiction genre makes clear, social forecasting can just as easily be embodied in narrative form as in the kind of sociological forecasts originally produced by Bell in the 1960s and 70s. In this chapter, we shall consider examples of social forecasting of both kinds: in the first case, works of social theory that anticipate post-capitalism in a purely sociological register, and, in the second, a dystopian film – *Blade Runner 2049* by Denis Villeneuve (2017) – that offers a considerably bleaker forecast based on similar technological trends. As we shall see, what these otherwise very different cultural phenomena share is a concern with the socioeconomic ramifications of the latest developments in robotics, artificial intelligence, and autonomous machines. While their framing and presentation of the latter is very different, it is nevertheless suggestive that both some of the most influential works of utopian theory of the last decade and the most critically acclaimed dystopian film of those years should take the very same emerging technologies as the starting point for social forecasts that point toward radically divergent futures.¹

1 I have found social theory to be a particularly fertile resource for the analysis of literary and cultural texts. For my earliest experiment in utilising social-theoretical material in this way, see my article ‘Martin Amis, Neo-Orientalism, and Hubris’ (Seeger 2017a). This approach is much more fully developed in my collaborative work with Daniel Davison-Vecchione. See, in particular, our article ‘Setting the Agenda: Social Forecasting in the Speculative Fiction of Rose Macaulay and Sinclair Lewis’ (Seeger and Davison-Vecchione 2023b).

I. Information Technology and Post-Capitalism

The years 2014–18 saw the publication of a number of major studies on the topic of what an increasing number of commentators have come to call post-capitalism. The most widely read and discussed of these is *Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future* by the writer and broadcaster Paul Mason (2015). *Postcapitalism* is a many-sided book which draws unexpected and sometimes startling links between topics as diverse as birth rates, software engineering, Shakespeare's history plays, fracking, the automobile industry, smartphones, Rosa Luxemburg, business management techniques, and the rise of Facebook. Along the way, Mason touches on many pressing contemporary issues, each of which he relates back to his highly ambitious central thesis concerning economic change in the twenty-first century. The details – and detours – of Mason's book need not detain us here. For our purposes, it will be sufficient to focus on the two key changes that according to Mason's forecast will lead, if suitably nurtured, to the end of capitalism and its replacement by a radically new economic paradigm.

Postcapitalism begins with a historical account of the fate of the modern political left. Mason observes that for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the left generally assumed that capitalism would be brought to an end by the working class, either in the form of violent revolution or democratically at the ballot box. As the proletariat which was to play this role no longer exists in anything like its classical form, however, there would appear to be no realistic prospects for the direct overthrow of capitalism in the way that Marx, among others, had anticipated. Far from capitalism collapsing under the weight of its own contradictions, the period from the early 1980s to the late 2010s saw, on Mason's account, the collapse of the left as a coherent political force. Capitalism, Mason contends, not only withstood the challenge posed to it from the left but achieved a new political hegemony whereby hyper-individualism eclipsed the ideals of collectivism and solidarity. While conceding that the world's hugely expanded workforce may resemble a proletariat, Mason notes that it no longer behaves like one. Surveying the political scene of the late 2010s, Mason likewise holds that

centralised state socialism has ceased to be a live option, no longer holding much appeal even for those identifying as socialists.

Up to this point, the story that Mason tells about the left is a familiar one; it is anticipated in some respects by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's classic study, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (2014), for example. The first thing that makes Mason's book distinctive is that, despite its Marxist credentials, key elements of its theorising owe an acknowledged debt to the management consultant and business theorist Peter Drucker's influential book *Post-Capitalist Society* (1993), which argues that knowledge is increasingly displacing capital as the basis of wealth, that late modern society is best understood as divided not into capitalists and proletarians but into knowledge workers and service workers, and that a non-revolutionary transition away from capitalism during the early decades of the twenty-first century is highly likely. Another notable feature of Mason's book is its creative retrieval of a number of neglected ideas drawn from the unfinished manuscript of Marx's *Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy*. Mason's decision to emphasise a less well-known aspect of this text makes it somewhat difficult to situate *Postcapitalism* in relation to classical Marxist theory. Another complicating factor is the transformation which Marx's insights undergo when reframed in a twenty-first century context. The familiar Marxian conceit that capitalism is destined to give birth to the means of its own overcoming, for example, is retained by Mason, while at the same time being given a technological twist that Marx had only dimly envisaged. Mason also fully endorses Marx's key claim, made in the 1859 'Preface' to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, that 'the material productive forces of a society come into conflict with the existing relations of production' (1981: 21). Where Mason's argument differs from Marx's is in the roles it assigns to technology in this conflict.

According to Mason, capitalism will only be overthrown once an equally powerful alternative has become viable. This would need to be an economic paradigm no less creative and productive than capitalism but incompatible with it and unable to coexist with it. Like Marx and Engel's spectre of communism, this new paradigm will at first be glimpsed lurking *within* capitalism itself:

Capitalism, it turns out, will not be abolished by forced-march techniques. It will be abolished by creating something more dynamic that exists, at first, almost unseen within the old system, but which breaks through, reshaping the economy around new values, behaviours, and norms. As with feudalism 500 years ago, capitalism's demise will be accelerated by external shocks and shaped by the emergence of a new kind of human being. And it has started. (Mason 2015: 7)

Mason attributes the rise of this successor to capitalism to two main factors, both technological in nature. The first is the accelerating automation of jobs, which we shall return to in the next section. The second is information technology, and in particular its tendency to drive down the cost of many commodities to near zero. In the digital age, information, Mason observes, is an abundant and proliferating resource, which monopolistic capitalist structures have difficulty containing. Traditional economic hierarchies tend to require the privatisation of information, but these hierarchies are growing ever harder to sustain as older business models are undercut by new forms of social organisation.

Drawing on both classic texts and less familiar fragments from Marx's corpus, Mason predicts that many commodities could one day be reproduced at virtually no cost, or what economists call zero marginal cost. The marginal cost of a commodity is simply the cost of increasing the quantity of that commodity by one unit: the cost of producing one more car on a production line, for example, or one more iPhone. During the course of a series of bold speculations, largely inspired by Marx's enigmatic brief text, 'The Fragment on Machines' (1973, 704–6), Mason sketches a future in which all human knowledge is freely shared and made instantaneously accessible via an all-encompassing information network that would, in Marx's terms, maximise the utility of social knowledge through the emergence of a form of 'general intellect'. Marx, Mason notes, 'was clear that, in such an economy, the main productive force would be information' (Mason 2015: 124). Citing present-day innovations in information technology, Mason argues that what we are now seeing coming into being is a twenty-first-century approximation of Marx's 'general intellect', with all its associated economic ramifications.

After sketching his hypothetical 'information' society, Marx proceeds to unpack its economic logic and arrives at a striking conclusion: were

such developments to take place, economic theories predicated on scarcity would cease to apply. Historically, of course, the pricing of goods has always been indexed to their scarcity. In Mason's analysis, however, today the dissemination of information is 'corroding market mechanisms, eroding property rights, and destroying the old relationship between wages, work, and profit' (ibid.: 104). This is because information goods are, in principle, endlessly replicable, meaning they can be copied an unlimited number of times. While the first instance of any information commodity has a production cost, its cost of reproduction asymptotically approaches zero. Just as Marx anticipated, then, advances in the means of production are turning zero marginal cost commodities into an everyday reality. It is likewise noteworthy that many digital commodities are now open source and based on non-capitalist business models: Mason's examples here are the Linux operating system, the Firefox web browser, and Wikipedia, a free-access online encyclopaedia run by a non-profit organisation.

The thesis of *Postcapitalism* is thus that the proliferation of abundant information that is occurring today, combined with the near zero-cost reproducibility of an increasing range of goods and services, poses a direct challenge to any economic model based on scarcity, rent-seeking, and private property. Adopting the classical Marxist vocabulary of structural contradictions, Mason contends that 'the main contradiction today is between the possibility of free, abundant goods and information, and a system of monopolies, banks, and governments trying to keep things private, scarce, and commercial' (ibid.: 11). The irreconcilability of unlimited knowledge production with limited forms of ownership constitutes, then, the essential contradiction of twenty-first-century capitalism, which Mason believes will lead to the death of the old paradigm and the birth of a new one: post-capitalism.

2. 3D Printing and the Internet of Things

In *The Zero Marginal Cost Society: The Internet of Things, the Collaborative Commons, and the Eclipse of Capitalism* (2013), the social theorist Jeremy

Rifkin makes some similar forecasts to Mason about the vast social and economic changes which an abundance of information commodities is liable to produce. Like Mason, Rifkin foresees non-capitalist business models and collaborative projects presenting an ever-greater existential threat to the capitalist system. Although Rifkin's book is not written from a Marxist perspective and draws on a quite different range of historical data and examples, the key contention of *The Zero Marginal Cost Society* is essentially that of Mason's *Postcapitalism*, namely, that capitalism's drive toward economic efficiency combined with unprecedented technological innovation will inevitably lead to the production of free or near-free goods. On these and many other points, Rifkin and Mason's analyses coincide despite their differences in other regards.

Although Mason's account of the transition to post-capitalism is concerned primarily with information technology narrowly conceived, Rifkin sees abundant information as just one aspect of a much larger transition which he, following numerous economists and social scientists, calls the Third Industrial Revolution (Rifkin 2011). Like the first two such revolutions, the Third Industrial Revolution will comprise simultaneous, deep-seated changes in the areas of communications, energy production, and logistics. Key drivers of these changes are likely to include additive manufacturing or 3D-printing, big data, and artificial intelligence. It is Rifkin's reflections on energy production and logistics, however, which arguably constitute his most original contribution to the debates around post-capitalism.

Rifkin notes that around the year 2000, the possibility of zero marginal cost goods began to draw the attention of many technology and economics commentators. It was generally assumed at that time that the exciting possibilities opened up by the prospect of near-free goods would only be applicable to information commodities. The benefits of zero marginal cost economics, it was argued, ceased to apply beyond the borders of the digital domain: information may become abundant, but physical goods will not. Rifkin's contention, however, is that the Internet of Things – an immense and immensely complex global architecture integrating communications systems, advanced energy production, and fully automated logistics networks – will drive down the production and distribution costs of many physical goods as well, progressively edging their marginal cost towards zero.

The main enabling condition of this change in the forces of production, on Rifkin's account, will be a decisive and historic shift away from fossil fuels and towards renewable energy sources. Drawing on research by scientists and engineers into energy production, Rifkin claims that the energy needs of a hyper-developed world could be met by abundantly available renewable energy, with all buildings and other large structures refitted with ultra-efficient solar panels, wind turbines, generators, and other equipment so as to be capable of producing and storing electricity. Adding his voice to a growing chorus of engineers, economists, and sustainable development campaigners, Rifkin predicts that in the near future all homes, businesses, and industries will be powered exclusively by renewable energy, as will all transportation and logistics services, eliminating the need for fossil fuels in all but a few areas of the economy as soon as the 2050s (Rifkin 2013: 333–372).

Central to Rifkin's argument is the concept of the Internet of Things. Rifkin anticipates a world in which virtually every human artefact on the planet will be a smart device, capable of generating, storing, and transmitting up-to-the-moment data. Trillions of electronic sensors embedded throughout this new infrastructure will then be able to detect where energy is needed and redirect it there via a sophisticated worldwide energy grid. In this projected scenario, the benefits of free, abundant information and free, abundant energy form a mutually beneficial feedback loop. Like Mason, Rifkin sees the coming of the Internet of Things as giving rise to a new kind of human being. The age of the consumer, Rifkin claims, is almost over. What is occurring today is the rise of what he calls the 'prosumer' – a dot-com-era business term referring to consumers who engage in the production of goods and services. In a discussion reminiscent of Mason's analysis of Wikipedia, Rifkin highlights the ways in which interconnected individuals across the world are increasingly engaged in non-capitalist behaviours whereby information resources are freely shared on a large scale (*ibid.*: 163–186).

Until the recent advent of 3D printing, Rifkin notes, the possibilities open to the prosumer were relatively limited due to technological and legal constraints. 3D printing is a production process whereby a machine produces a three-dimensional object through the sequential depositing of

successive layers of material. Building on the principles of older computer-aided design (CAD) systems, 3D printed objects are constructed according to blueprints stored in a digital file. 3D printing has an almost unlimited number of industrial, commercial, and medical applications: it has already been used to successfully print a wide variety of goods, including clothes, shoes, artworks, car and aircraft components, computers and laptops, food-stuffs, houses and buildings, and even replacement limbs and synthetic human organs via so-called bio-printing. As Rifkin observes, the advantages of 3D printing over production line manufacturing are considerable: the equipment is very low maintenance and the production process requires minimal human involvement; the object blueprints are currently open source, meaning they can be freely shared, reducing costs substantially; and the 'additive' production model is vastly more energy and resource efficient than conventional or so-called 'subtractive' manufacturing. 3D printers are also able to print their own components, removing the need for expensive retooling and allowing for much greater flexibility in the range of goods they are able to produce. Once connected to the Internet of Things, 3D printers would be able to receive designs sent from anywhere in the world and build objects on demand, significantly reducing the need for expensive freight services. Traditional economies of scale would also no longer apply as 3D printers can produce small batches of objects efficiently without incurring prohibitive costs (ibid.: 107–132).

Among the major socioeconomic consequences of 3D printing identified by Rifkin is a reversal of the globalisation process, as end users come more and more to manufacture their own goods on a local basis rather than purchasing them from corporations. As 3D printers start to become a standard feature in the home, the age of the prosumer will be at hand. Looking further ahead, Rifkin suggests that once sophisticated forms of 3D printing and related technologies become ubiquitous within the broader context of the Internet of Things, a truly unprecedented situation may arise in which, allowing for a range of ownership possibilities, the means of production will have become universally accessible.

In sum, like Mason's *Postcapitalism*, Rifkin's book projects a world in which capitalism, via major technological change, ends up innovating its way out of existence. In Marxist terms, Rifkin is forecasting one way in

which the contradiction between material productive forces and the relations of production may be resolved in the present century.

3. Automation and Abundance

One last dimension of Mason and Rifkin's respective post-capitalist visions remains to be addressed: automation. Along with information technology, non-capitalist business models, renewable energy, and 3D printing, the prospect of the mass automation of jobs is widely held to be one of the essential components of any post-capitalist future. The latter topic is insightfully explored in another post-capitalist text from the mid-2010s: *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* by the social theorists Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams (2015). Whereas Rifkin's *The Zero Marginal Cost Society* is written from a position that claims to be beyond the familiar left/right political dichotomy (Rifkin 2011: 160) and Mason's *Postcapitalism* aligns itself with a post-Marxist perspective that has progressed 'way beyond conventional Marxism' (Mason 2015: 38), Srnicek and Williams's *Inventing the Future* is an uncompromisingly radical work of the utopian socialist imagination.

According to Srnicek and Williams, post-capitalism holds out the promise of a post-scarcity, post-work society in which a combination of mass automation, renewable energy, artificial intelligence, and universal basic income facilitate the transition to a high-tech egalitarian utopia. If a new generation of robots and AI can be relied on to produce everything humanity needs, Srnicek and Williams contend, then, as long as the robots are collectively owned, the groundwork will have been laid for a society not unlike the classless civilisation depicted in *Star Trek*, in which material scarcity has been abolished. A year after the publication of *Inventing the Future*, the logic of this position – as well as its ominous alternative – was succinctly summed up and endorsed by the physicist Stephen Hawking in a copiously re-tweeted remark made during an interview: 'Everyone can enjoy a life of luxurious leisure if the machine-produced wealth is shared, or

most people can end up miserably poor if the machine owners successfully lobby against wealth redistribution' (Hawking quoted in Resnick 2016).

There is, then, a radical utopian dimension to *Inventing the Future* which is less apparent in Mason's *Postcapitalism* and largely absent from Rifkin's *Zero Marginal Cost Society*. Srnicek and Williams see post-capitalism as part of a global project to construct what they call 'left modernity' (Srnicek and Williams 2015: 69–84). Neoliberal capitalism, the authors claim, became hegemonic partly as a result of having successfully laid claim to the term 'modernity'. In their view, this is one reason for the contemporary left's disillusion with the idea of historical progress: as the authors put it, for many on the left today, 'modernity is simply a cultural expression of capitalism' (ibid.: 70). For Srnicek and Williams, however, capitalist modernity is only one possible form modernity might take, leaving scope for the invention of alternatives. The utopian promise of modernity, they observe, has today been largely abandoned, primarily due to the conflation of modernity with capitalism (ibid.: 70–1). Drawing on the cultural theorist Mark Fisher's analysis of capitalist realism, Srnicek and Williams characterise the present neoliberal moment as one of intellectual stagnation, imaginative impoverishment, and ideological exhaustion (ibid.: 138). Their extraordinarily ambitious utopian proposal for a left modernity, by contrast, calls for the construction of a hyper-developed, post-capitalist, post-carbon, classless global society. One of the most striking features of this utopia is that the need for conventional forms of human labour would have been almost wholly eliminated. Srnicek and Williams cite in this connection two present-day developments which, they argue, have started to make 'the end of work' conceivable. These are the automation of jobs and the introduction of a universal basic income.

Drawing on a range of studies conducted by technologists, social scientists, NGOs, and economic thinktanks, Srnicek and Williams argue that the automation of work which began with the First Industrial Revolution and continued apace during the twentieth century is likely to speed up rapidly over the coming decades. Historically, the automation of jobs previously performed by human beings boosted productivity by reducing the amount of labour required for a given output. As the authors note, however, the automation of jobs has thus far always resulted in the creation of new

jobs in other fields. From the late eighteenth century onwards, the logic of capitalist development has meant that the replacement of humans by machines has also tended to be accompanied by a surge in demand, thereby ensuring that technological unemployment has only ever been a short-lived phenomenon. Srnicek and Williams's claim – echoed in the work of numerous other prominent social and economic commentators (Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2014; Ford 2016; Benanav 2020; Suleyman 2023) – is that this relative equilibrium can no longer be sustained. The huge advances made in robotics, computing power, software engineering, and artificial intelligence since the 2000s mean that, for the first time, more jobs are becoming liable to automation than can reliably be expected to be replaced. Srnicek and Williams cite data from credible scholarly sources suggesting that 'anything from 47 to 80 percent of current jobs are likely to be automatable' (Srnicek and Williams 2015: 88). Beyond Srnicek and Williams's study, meanwhile, a report prepared by PricewaterhouseCoopers for the British Government's Department of Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy in 2019 found that 35 per cent of UK jobs were at *imminent* risk of automation, while in their important study *The Second Machine Age* the MIT economists Erik Brynjolfsson and James McAfee argue persuasively that current automation patterns are merely a foretaste of the enormous change that lies ahead (2014).

Advances in technology mean that machines are becoming able to fulfil roles which it had previously been assumed would remain the province of human beings for the foreseeable future – a trend which, as Mustafa Suleyman has more recently shown, accelerated far more quickly during the decade from 2013 to 2023 than almost anyone had anticipated (Suleyman 2023). As Srnicek and Williams argue, what is historically unique about this situation is that, in addition to displacing manual workers and some of those engaged in routine cognitive tasks as in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the coming wave of automation is due to displace an increasing number of workers in formerly 'safe' or traditionally middle-class occupations such as the legal profession, sales, professional services, finance, product design, education, and healthcare (2015: 85–106). Examples of the automation of manual tasks drawn from the headlines of the 2010s when Srnicek and Williams were writing include Google's self-driving car, the

driverless vehicle scheme at Heathrow Airport, and Amazon's drone delivery service. Examples of the automation of cognitive tasks from those years to the present would include computer-generated news articles, algorithmic legal decisions, robot surgeons, and Google's intuitive artificial intelligence project, DeepMind. It is, then, not simply the *rate* of anticipated automation which is so significant – though this is, as Brynjolfsson and McAfee emphasise, a development liable to lead to major social change (Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2014: 13–38) – but the *nature* of that automation and the areas of life it is likely to affect.

The realistic prospect of automating significant sections of the economy leads Srnicek and Williams to the formulation of one of their key utopian demands:

Our first demand is for a fully automated economy. Using the latest technological developments, such an economy would aim to liberate humanity from the drudgery of work while simultaneously producing increasing amounts of wealth. Without full automation, postcapitalist futures must necessarily choose between abundance at the expense of freedom (echoing the work-centricity of Soviet Russia) or freedom at the expense of abundance, represented by primitivist dystopias. With automation, by contrast, machines can increasingly produce all necessary goods and services, while also releasing humanity from the effort of producing them. (2015: 109)

A fully automated economy would be one in which a robot workforce capable of servicing and maintaining itself guarantees the provision of everything necessary for the reproduction of human life. Its radical political potential – specifically its scope for eliminating economic exploitation, inequality, and class oppression – leads Srnicek and Williams to argue that 'the tendencies towards automation and the replacement of human labour should be enthusiastically accelerated and targeted as a political project of the left' (ibid.: 109).

As Srnicek and Williams acknowledge, in a context of mass automation, an alternative source of income will be required for those newly liberated from the world of work. Drawing on some of the same academic sources as Mason, they argue that a universal basic income (UBI) would be a necessary supplement to a fully automated economy. A UBI is an amount of money paid unconditionally to all citizens without means-testing.

The principle underlying UBI is to guarantee everyone a basic level of material wellbeing irrespective of whether or not they are employed. Among the main benefits of a UBI cited by Srnicek and Williams are poverty reduction, improved public health, reductions in crime, and more time available to spend with family and friends (ibid.: 119). Even more significantly, from the point of view of a post-capitalist utopia, is the transformation in the relations of production which a UBI could help to bring about. A UBI would provide citizens with a means of subsistence without dependency on work, thus eliminating, Srnicek and Williams contend, much of the coercive power of capitalist labour relations (ibid.: 120). Like Mason, Srnicek and Williams see the introduction of a UBI, in combination with a programme of mass automation, as a major step towards the dissolution of the capitalist economic paradigm and its replacement with a post-capitalist, post-work alternative.

4. Technological Dystopias

Srnicek and Williams are not alone in identifying utopian potential in current technological change. Technology likewise provides much of the impetus for the writer and broadcaster Aaron Bastani's call for what he has termed 'fully automated luxury communism' (2019). As Bastani has put it, 'the only utopian demand [today] can be for the full automation of everything and common ownership of that which is automated' (Bastani quoted in Merchant 2015). Meanwhile, the historian Rutger Bregman's bestselling *Utopia for Realists* (2017), while somewhat more pragmatic in its orientation, nevertheless forecasts social change of an almost equally radical kind.

At the same time, albeit from an opposing, right-libertarian political perspective, equally ambitious claims on behalf of technology's ability to remake society over the coming decades have been advanced by some of the most influential figures at the heart of the world of big tech, as detailed in Noam Cohen's book, *The Know-It-Alls: The Rise of Silicon Valley as a*

Political Powerhouse and Social Wrecking Ball (2017). As Cohen and others have argued, this new global elite – a mixture of entrepreneurs, software designers, biotech investors, futurists, libertarian ideologues, and self-proclaimed visionaries – has begun to coalesce into a form of technocracy which threatens to undermine democratic politics. Names typically associated with this trend include Peter Thiel (of PayPal fame), Marc Andreessen (a key figure in the early development of the internet), Larry Page and Sergey Brin (of Google), Ray Kurzweil (also at Google since 2012), Bill Gates (Microsoft), Jeff Bezos (Amazon), Reid Hoffman (LinkedIn), Mark Zuckerberg (Facebook), and, from beyond Silicon Valley, Elon Musk (Tesla and SpaceX). Of these, Cohen argues, Thiel, Kurtzweil, and Musk have been the most notable for their sweeping pronouncements on the technological destiny of humanity, whether in the form of immortality (Thiel), self-aware machines (Kurtzweil), or space colonisation (Musk).

It is partly on account of this embrace of new and emerging technologies on the part of the global tech elite that, in stark contrast to some of the post-capitalist speculation considered previously, a number of considerably more sceptical voices have since emerged in the ongoing debates around technology and its potential social impact in the twenty-first century. Whereas Mason, Rifkin, Srnicek, Williams, Bastani, and Bregman all see the new technologies as – to a greater or lesser extent – liberating human beings from drudgery, exploitation, and material scarcity, these more pessimistic critics see in the same technologies the potential for an unparalleled extension of the apparatus of social control, and even, in some cases, the vanishing of the human altogether.

In different registers and from very different points of view, Peter Frase's *Four Futures* (2016), Adam Greenfield's *Radical Technologies* (2017), Mark O'Connell's *To Be a Machine* (2017), and Jonathan Taplin's *Move Fast and Break Things: How Facebook, Google, and Amazon Cornered Culture and Undermined Democracy* (2017) – to take just four representative examples – all foresee profound threats arising from technology in the near future. For Frase, while mass automation could be made to serve progressive ends, it could just as easily give rise to the nightmarish scenario he dubs 'exterminism' – a neo-feudal order in which the elite, having monopolised the new machines, retreats into fortified enclaves, leaving the majority to fend

for themselves in an ecologically devastated world. Unlike some other commentators on the radical left, Frase sees the projected wave of new developments as decidedly ambiguous in nature, with technology just as liable to exacerbate and entrench existing inequalities as to bring utopian socialism within reach.

Greenfield and Taplin, meanwhile, are concerned with the social and political influence of the latest digital technologies, which they see as paving the way for technocracy – an anti-democratic ideology that first arose in the 1930s but which is rapidly becoming the dominant worldview of today's tech elite. As the cultural historian Roger Luckhurst observes, 'Advocates of technocratic solutions transcended the politically riven landscape of the 1930s: above capitalism, communism, or fascism, they simply promised to run the machine more efficiently' (Luckhurst 2005: 69). In the same way, under the cover of 'neutral' efficiency calculations, 'unbiased' algorithms, and the rhetoric of 'irresistible' technological progress, the latest generation of technocrats is, according to Greenfield and Taplin, increasingly turning against what it sees as outmoded and inefficient systems of government, taxation, antitrust legislation, and state control.

Focusing less on their future implications and more on the uses to which some of the latest technologies are already being put, in *To Be a Machine* the writer and journalist Mark O'Connell interviews prominent members of the international transhumanist movement, for whom the human mind and body are seen as obsolete technologies which ought to be retired and replaced – a belief which, as O'Connell discovered during the course of his research, was 'for all its apparent extremity and strangeness ... nonetheless exerting certain formative pressures on the culture of Silicon Valley, and thereby the broader cultural imagination of technology [today]' (O'Connell 2017: 7). Looking further ahead in order to speculatively chart the longer-term trajectory of transhumanism, the historian Yuval Noah Harari has argued in *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, a suggestive study of current technological trends, that such an outlook, wedded to a programme of self-directed human evolution, has the potential to initiate a new chapter in the history of life on Earth, one in which biology has been transcended and intelligence subsists on a wholly synthetic platform (2017: 428–462).

For anyone familiar with the speculative fiction of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, few of the technologies making headlines in the 2010s and 2020s will seem especially novel. Robots, self-driving vehicles, autonomous drones, artificial superintelligence, synthetic biology, radical life extension, whole brain emulation, mind uploading, cryopreservation, wetware, biohacking, gene editing, nanotechnology, geoengineering, terraforming – none of these is a wholly new concept, even if their implementation had been largely confined to the fictional domain until now. Virtually all of them have been taken up, at one time or another, by writers and filmmakers interested in imagining the future, and in what such imagining might tell us about our own present.

Literature and cinema in the twenty-first century continue to provide a fruitful space in which to explore the issues raised in this chapter so far. One particularly rich example here is Denis Villeneuve's film *Blade Runner 2049*, which can be seen as engaging with some of the most pressing concerns raised by authors like Cohen, Frase, Greenfield, Taplin, O'Connell, and others who have come to harbour deep misgivings about the faith in technology apparent throughout contemporary culture.

5. A Techno-Dystopia: *Blade Runner 2049*

Blade Runner 2049 is a dark, brooding science fiction film released in 2017. It is a sequel to Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), itself a loose adaptation of Philip K. Dick's cult 1968 dystopian novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (2007). In the first *Blade Runner* film, a group called the Tyrell Corporation has created a race of artificial beings virtually indistinguishable from humans known as Replicants. The Replicants are designed to have superhuman strength and are used as disposable slave labour on off-world colonies. As intelligent, self-aware creatures, however, Replicants sometimes refuse to fulfil the roles assigned to them, openly rebelling against their human masters.

Blade Runner 2049 is set thirty years after the events depicted in Scott's original film. During the intervening period, a global ecological collapse has occurred, ushering in an age of extreme scarcity. As the film's opening text informs us, 'this has led to the rise of the industrialist Niander Wallace, whose mastery of synthetic farming averted famine' (Villeneuve 2017). The Tyrell Corporation has meanwhile been bankrupted as a result of a prohibition on Replicant manufacture in response to a series of violent uprisings in the colonies. Wallace has since taken over the remnants of the corporation and put Replicants back into production after devising a new model designed to be more compliant than its forerunners. These events constitute the back-story to the film.

A first thing to note about *Blade Runner 2049* is that, like most dystopian fiction, the film is on one level an exercise in worldbuilding, meaning that the world in which the action takes place reveals as much about this version of the future as the action itself – indeed, arguably more so. Evidence of the fate of the natural world, for instance, is apparent throughout. Almost all plant and animal life has been extinguished. All food is synthesised, and food production takes place exclusively in facilities owned by the Wallace Corporation. Water is strictly rationed: when the protagonist takes a shower, he is blasted with high pressure water for just two seconds while an electronic voice announces, '99.9% detoxified water'. Likewise, whereas in *Blade Runner* East Asian characters and languages had been highly visible, in the sequel we also hear groups of American citizens speaking various Eastern European and African languages, suggesting that mass migration has accelerated in response to global crises.

Los Angeles, the only urban settlement we see, is a looming, overcrowded city bordered to the west by gigantic sea defences built to protect against rising sea levels, and to the north by immense stretches of waste dumping ground. When it first appears on screen, the cityscape itself is an undifferentiated smear of angular, jostling shapes half glimpsed in brief bursts of light against the night sky. When day comes, the sun is scarcely visible as the air outside is thick with pollution. All of this is reflected in the musical theme associated with these sequences: an oppressive wall of sound carried along by an implacable, rapid drum beat and punctuated at points by agitated electronic sounds that rise and fall like distant alarm

signals. Whatever astonishing technological advances have been made in this world, they have clearly not been put to use in protecting the environment or preserving the Earth.

A second key element of Villeneuve's dystopia, one that connects it with the technological themes we have been considering, is the decidedly marginal role played in it by human beings. Whereas the first *Blade Runner* film had made much of the blurring of the boundary between human and Replicant, in the sequel this ambiguity is largely eliminated. In the first scene of the film, set on a Wallace protein farm outside the city limits, the protagonist, known simply as K (Ryan Gosling), is clearly identified as a Replicant from the outset. This point is made emphatically when we see K repeatedly pummelled against a wall by another Replicant until he is shown bursting out the other side amidst a heap of debris in a way which would likely have been fatal for a human being. K's pain threshold is also extremely high, scarcely reacting when a knife is thrust into his side during the same sequence. In this way, we are made viscerally aware that we are following someone who is not human.

When K returns to his flat – a cramped, cell-like living unit in a poorly maintained apartment building – we are given an insight into his domestic life. After he has settled, a warm female voice from off-screen that we assume to belong to his partner tells K that she is putting the finishing touches to his evening meal: 'I'm trying a new recipe. I think you'll like it'. Neither the woman nor the meal materialises, however – at least, not in the form we had expected. K's partner, Joi (Ana de Armas) is revealed to be a holographic simulation, beamed into the room by a projector which traverses the ceiling of the living area. The meal which is then put in front of K – a juicy steak and selection of fresh vegetables – is likewise a mere image positioned so as to cover up the meal K has previously prepared himself: a bowl containing an amorphous, presumably vitamin-enriched foam-like substance.

Joi is a software application designed to serve as a romantic companion. Like the commercially available sex robots that have been criticised by some feminist commentators (Grigoreva, Rottman, and Tasimi 2024), Joi is unfailingly acquiescent and eager to please. Throughout this scene, she constantly assesses K's mood, spontaneously changing her clothes and

hairstyle from one moment to the next to better match it. When K looks uninterested, Joi asks him to read to her, but he declines. Undeterred, she throws the book aside, changes her dress and hairstyle once again, and asks him to dance. At one point, while receiving an upgrade, Joi's 'stats' appear in the air beside her: her height, body type, face type, skin tone, eye colour, lip colour, hair colour, hair style, ethnicity, and language are all customisable like the options on any other digital device. Later in the film, hyper-sexualised advertisements for the Joi model hologram can be seen being projected beside overhead walkways and on the sides of buildings. 'Joi can be anything you want her to be', one slogan informs us.

The sequence in K's flat is notable for the lack of a human presence: it depicts the interaction of a machine – valued for its superhuman strength and resilience – with a piece of software – valued for its tireless, permanent availability. As such, the sequence may be read as both an unsettling fulfilment of some present-day anticipations of progress in robotics and AI – whereby human limitations are overcome at the cost of the obsolescence of the human – and a warning about the tendency of current technological trends to reproduce existing power relations – in this case of a starkly gendered nature.

Blade Runner 2049's main cast of characters in fact includes strikingly few human beings: with the exception of K's boss – who, tellingly, dies at the hands of a Replicant – the only human being with a significant role in the plot is the tech billionaire (perhaps trillionaire) Niander Wallace himself (Jared Leto). Before we are first introduced to Wallace, on-screen text announces the scene's location: 'Wallace Corporation. Earth headquarters'. There is an ambiguity in this wording which is left open: is this the headquarters of the corporation or the headquarters of the planet Earth itself? Such is the influence of Wallace over every aspect of life in 2049, it would seem reasonable to assume the latter.

Shot from a low angle so as to emphasise their extraordinary height, the three great Wallace Towers dwarf the pyramid buildings of the Tyrell Corporation from the first *Blade Runner*. By comparison with the sleek, ultra-corporate styling of the Wallace Towers, Tyrell's architectural preferences seem like an exercise in nostalgia, with their eccentric, pseudo-Egyptian styling appearing almost quaint beside the thrusting, slab-like forms which

have supplanted them. This striking visual contrast is accompanied by a cascade of deep and resonant choral voices on the soundtrack, heightening the sense of immensity and even sublimity which the Towers exude.

During his first on-screen appearance, Wallace outlines his Promethean ambitions before lamenting a major barrier to further progress. Tyrell, we learn, had managed to create Replicants which were able to give birth, but the means to do this was lost in the chaos of the following decades. In a remarkable speech which alludes to both Milton's *Paradise Lost* and some of the more ambitious designs of the tech billionaire Elon Musk, Wallace at one point speaks contemptuously of his own pioneering role in colonising nine planets: 'I brought back the Angels and took us to nine new worlds. Nine. A child can count to nine on fingers. We should own the stars'. Building to a crescendo, he exclaims, 'More. Worlds beyond worlds, diamond shores. We could storm Eden and retake her'.

In sharp contrast to all this, another sequence of the film depicts life amidst Los Angeles' waste dumping grounds, which are inhabited by desperate criminal gangs and assorted outcasts. In one memorable scene, hundreds of orphaned children are shown labouring in a cavernous workhouse built under a toppled satellite dish, where they are tasked with stripping down old technology for spare parts. As their brutal overseer remarks to K at one point, collecting nickel for spaceships is the closest anyone on Earth will get to 'the grand life off-world'.

Summing up the post-capitalist narrative that unites many of the studies of the topic over the last decade, one recent scholarly commentary describes it as deploying 'a broadly Marxist theoretical inheritance to celebrate the substitution of human labour with technology, and the replacement of the traditional class base of the left with a new urban, networked, educated youth for whom modern technological change creates unique possibilities to transcend capitalist society and, in some cases, the human condition itself' (Cruddas and Pitts 2020: 275). In the dystopian scenario projected by *Blade Runner 2049*, on the other hand, the withdrawal of human beings from the sphere of work that is forecast by techno-utopians – and which is allegorised through the film's almost exclusive focus on synthetic lifeforms – has for the most part been realised, though with none of the liberatory effects anticipated by its more enthusiastic exponents.

Likewise, while almost all the advances that form the basis of Paul Mason's *Postcapitalism* have occurred, capitalism has not only endured but entered a new stage in its development, one in which most of humanity has been rendered a surplus population irrelevant to the productive process and kept alive at a bare subsistence level. As in Srnicek and Williams's *Inventing the Future*, the link between work and income has been severed by the proliferation of robots and AI, but rather than this leading to human flourishing amidst an abundance of goods and free time, it has resulted in the ascendance of the tech elite and their control of every aspect of human existence. As in Bastani's *Fully Automated Luxury Communism*, huge progress has also been made in the colonisation of space, but there is no indication that these developments have benefited anyone back on Earth, which has been consigned to near ruin while the new elite push out into the cosmos. Space colonisation – the storming of Eden – has generated unimaginable wealth, yet a just and equitable way of life seems further away than ever, with conditions ranging from the neo-Dickensian to the neo-feudal. The divorce between technological and social progress is virtually complete. Everything that could have enabled a post-capitalist alternative has here been assimilated by capital.

6. Two Paths

Of the two possible future pathways which he envisaged in 2016, the one utopian and the other dystopian, Stephen Hawking noted that, 'So far, the trend seems to be toward the second option, with technology driving ever-increasing inequality' (Hawking quoted in Resnick 2016). *Blade Runner 2049* forecasts a world in which this trend has been allowed to continue. As such, it may be read in a long line of dystopias in which the resources of literature and film are employed to scrutinise tendencies within the author or director's own moment. *Blade Runner 2049* depicts a future in which many of the narrowly technological predictions of today's techno-utopians have come true without their hopes for social improvement thereby being

fulfilled. The question the film leaves us with is therefore how the coming technologies might be made to enrich human life and serve collective social ends as opposed to intensifying existing patterns of inequality, alienation, and ecological devastation.

Although it is neither addressed nor alluded to in the film, it can be argued that the decisive factor here is politics. As Jon Cruddas and Frederick Harry Pitts have argued in an article on both the promise and the pitfalls of post-capitalism as presently understood (Cruddas and Pitts 2020), and as Srnicek and Williams rightly insist throughout their own work, there is no necessary connection between technological progress and social justice: any benefits that new technologies might yield will almost certainly be hard won through political struggle rather than flowing automatically from the inner dynamics of technology itself. As *Blade Runner 2049* powerfully illustrates, even the replacement of human labour by machines – a utopian ideal from Oscar Wilde’s 1891 essay ‘The Soul of Man Under Socialism’, to Bastani’s much more recent call for ‘the automation of everything’ – is fully compatible with hyper-capitalism, oligarchical rule, and vast increases in inequality. Indeed, as the film implies, and as Taplin and Suleyman have argued, there is reason to think that, without significant intervention, the spread of robotics and AI will by default serve to entrench the power of the tech elite to the detriment of democracy and elected governments. There is, in other words, no way to insulate technological change from political influence, and no good grounds for assuming that the technologies that have prompted speculation about post-capitalism will improve the lives of the majority without a sustained effort to wrestle control of them away from our own real-world Niander Wallaces.

Techno-Utopianism, Transhumanism, and Antihumanism

Published in 2017, Lidia Yuknavitch's critically acclaimed science fiction novel *The Book of Joan* describes a post-apocalyptic future in which a combination of global heating and resource wars has left Earth largely uninhabitable.¹ In the aftermath, the elite of the old world has taken refuge in an orbiting space station called CIEL, while the few survivors left below live underground in order to avoid the high levels of radiation on the planet's surface. CIEL extracts what resources it can from Earth via a series of umbilical cord-like connections known as skylines. The space station is ruled over by the celebrity-turned-dictator Jean de Man, whose authoritarian regime employs state propaganda, mass surveillance, and robot enforcers to maintain its grip on power.

During the preceding decades, the human body has undergone significant changes due to radiation levels and other environmental factors, in a process referred to by one character as 'devolution' (Yuknavitch 2017: 151).² With the sole exception of Joan, one of the two protagonists of the novel, the human species is now without hair, fingernails, toenails, or skin pigmentation. The process of mutation has likewise left them without sexually functional genitalia, meaning reproduction by conventional means

1 As stated in the Acknowledgements, this chapter is a revised version of an essay that originally appeared under the title "Whatever comes after human progress": Transhumanism, Antihumanism, and the Absence of Queer Ecology in Lidia Yuknavitch's *The Book of Joan* (Seeger 2023b) in the collection *Age and Ageing in Contemporary Speculative and Science Fiction*, edited by Sarah Falcus and Maricel Oró-Piqueras.

2 All subsequent references to the text in this chapter are given as page numbers in parentheses.

is now an impossibility. Artificial reproduction, including cloning and other techniques, have been attempted aboard CIEL, but the extent of the mutations undergone by humanity cause these to fail in every case. In response, Jean de Man plans to engineer a new species of human which will reproduce asexually, though this plan has thus far been frustrated. De Man remains at war with the rebel faction led by Joan, whom de Man previously captured and pretended to kill in a televised execution intended to demoralise his opponents. He has since learnt that, as the one person resistant to the process of devolution, Joan may hold the key to overcoming the barriers to his scientists' research, leading him to pursue and attempt to recapture her throughout the novel.

In an influential statement on the science fiction genre, Fredric Jameson has argued that 'the most characteristic sf does not seriously attempt to imagine the "real" future of our social system. Rather, its multiple mock futures serve the quite different function of transforming our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come' (Jameson 2005: 217). According to Jameson, science fiction is not an attempt to predict or anticipate the future, but rather a way of historicising the author's own moment by viewing it as if it belonged to the past rather than the present, thereby opening up a critical vantage point which, on Jameson's account, science fiction is especially well positioned to provide. In light of this, it is illuminating to consider how Yuknavitch's novel addresses several pressing contemporary issues and themes – principally techno-utopianism, transhumanism, and the ecological emergency – from the estranging perspective made available by science fiction.³

3 An alternative framing of Yuknavitch's novel to the one offered in this chapter would be to situate it within the broader dystopian turn taken by twenty-first-century American speculative fiction. For a thorough account of the origins and development of this trend, see Valentina Romanzi's superb study, *American Nightmares: Dystopia in Twenty-First-Century U.S. Fiction* (Romanzi 2022).

I. Science Fiction, Progress, and Ageing

The modern ideal of progress as formulated during the Enlightenment period has been profoundly influential within Anglo-American science fiction. During the nineteenth century and, especially, the twentieth, science fiction in Britain and the United States was deeply informed by this ideal. Progress as presented in Anglo-American science fiction could take various more or less ambitious forms, but whatever shape it took it was clearly one of the main organising principles and sources of narrative motivation for a great many texts in this tradition, including work by some of modern science fiction's most celebrated and influential authors and filmmakers.

Sometimes, as in the case of Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot* stories, for instance, progress is present merely as the steady improvement of technical devices and gadgetry (2018). At others, as in Olaf Stapledon's monumental 'history of the future', *Last and First Men*, progress takes the form of the evolution of civilisation in all its respects over the course of billions of years (1999). Elsewhere, progress takes place in the form of a sudden, dramatic shift from the familiar to the utopian, as in Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End*, in which a race of alien beings takes charge of human affairs and administers a prosperous and peaceful new age in world history (2010). In other cases, humanity as it currently exists is rendered obsolescent by some new form of life representing a higher stage of development. This scenario can play out in a utopian guise, as in the case of the evolution of humanity into the immortal Star Child at the end of Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (2018), or take a more dystopian turn, as in Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (2007), in which synthetic lifeforms indistinguishable from human beings yet lacking many of their limitations are implied to be the natural successors to their flawed creators. Even in the case of the latter text, which offers a generally bleak view of the future, the Enlightenment principle of progress is implicitly retained in the form of technology that promises to overcome human frailties.

The homogeneity of this line of authors – as exclusively white, male, heterosexual, and educated in the natural sciences – was thrown into relief by some of the more radical and experimental science fiction of the late

1960s and 1970s. As Tom Moylan has shown, writers of science fiction who participated in and contributed to the counterculture as it developed over the following decade – most notably Ursula K. Le Guin, Marge Piercy, Joanna Russ, Samuel R. Delany, and, slightly later, Octavia E. Butler – helped to diversify Anglo-American science fiction and reorient it around new perspectives, subject positions, and political concerns (Moylan 2010). In doing so, these authors directly contested the foregoing emphasis on the hard sciences, militarism, empire building, and ‘masculine’ values. This important development was relatively short-lived, however, and was followed by a return to what were often more conservative forms as exemplified by William Gibson’s work in the 1980s, and to a more scientific, Enlightenment-inspired outlook as exemplified by Kim Stanley Robinson’s work in the 1990s. To this extent, Yuknavitch’s *The Book of Joan* bears more of a resemblance to the science fiction identified by Moylan as belonging to the oppositional political moment of the 1970s than it does to the majority of Anglo-American science fiction either side of it.

Lying behind much of the Anglo-American science fiction written between the 1920s and the 1960s is the work of H. G. Wells, whose own commitment to progress, and to the belief in the transformative power of science and technology in particular, animates much of his extensive corpus, both in his fictional and nonfictional writings. In novels like *A Modern Utopia* (2005), Wells articulated perhaps the most influential image of a techno-utopian future, where virtually every social and economic problem confronting humanity had been solved, in large part through the application of advanced technologies and modern social engineering. Such was the familiarity of this image thirty years after its initial appearance, Aldous Huxley was able to parody Wells’s vision of an antiseptic, brightly lit future in *Brave New World* (2007) and count on his readers knowing which social prophet he was lampooning. Huxley’s choice of the term ‘World State’ for his anti-utopia takes on further significance in light of recent scholarly work on Wells. In her insightful study, *Inventing Tomorrow: H. G. Wells and the Twentieth Century* (2019), Sara Cole has shown that Wells held to a very specific understanding of the route out of the difficulties that beset the world during the early decades of the century, including the two world wars, nationalist chauvinism, colonial violence, the Great Depression, and

the rise of totalitarian regimes. Wells vigorously opposed nationalism and made a passionate case for the need for unity in the face of the geopolitical divisions of his time. He held that the only alternative to the decline or self-destruction of the human race – something anticipated at points in his dystopian novellas – was a universal, cosmopolitan world state, planned and directed by a single source of governmental authority (*ibid.*: 37). Cole argues that Wells possessed a prescient grasp of the interconnectedness of the modern world and of its links to the condition of total war, leading him to formulate a view of humanity as a collective subject by way of an alternative (*ibid.*: 39–40).

The connection between the idea of a world government or world state and that of a single, collective human subject is not unique to Wells, however. There are anticipations of this linkage in earlier works of science fiction, and it has likewise continued down to the present day, as Seo-Young Chu has explored (2010: 88–93). As Chu notes, both Wells and Olaf Stapledon, one of Wells's most notable epigones, strongly favoured the unification of humanity and the overcoming of tribal differences (*ibid.*: 88). This view was likewise prefigured in the work of various nineteenth-century writers and intellectuals, including Percival Lowell, a US astronomer whose work was an influence on Wells, Stapledon, Asimov, Clarke, and other key figures in Anglo-American science fiction (*ibid.*: 90). Especially important here was Lowell's concept of 'planetary subjectivity', a kind of world spirit in which humanity's differences would be transcended through recognition of a single, underlying species mind. This widely shared, quasi-Hegelian idea is important for our purposes as it helps to fill out the picture sketched earlier of science fiction's relationship to the ideal of progress. As Gary Westfahl has observed, works of science fiction have long had 'an international aura, routinely positing the future emergence of a world government' (2005: 2). Planetary subjectivity, however, while often entailing the institution of a world government, need not necessarily do so. It can take various forms, from Clarke's *Star Child*, which stands for the entirety of human progress focused to a single point, through to the more general underlying assumption – common to works by Wells, Stapledon, Asimov, Clarke, and many others – that there *is* such a thing as a necessary next or even final stage of human development, and that this will entail universal agreement on the

values and goals proper to that stage. Cole has observed that Wells's nonfiction writings embody this same ideal (Cole 2019: 37–40; 87). Wells's popular multivolume history of the world, *The Outline of History*, first published in 1919, for example, switches from traditional history to 'future history' in its final section, casting the First World War as the prelude to a harmonious world state in which international divisions are healed once and for all. As Robert Crossley suggests in his biography of Olaf Stapledon, the narrative structure of Wells's *Outline* was one of the main sources of inspiration for Stapledon's own history of the future, *Last and First Men*, which begins in the fraught decades of the early twentieth century and culminates with the hyper-advanced civilisation of the so-called Eighteenth Men in the distant future (Crossley 1994: 155). Progress, as conceived by Stapledon, is progress on the part of humanity understood – once again – as a collective agent. *Last and First Men* was itself to prove a key influence on other twentieth-century science fiction writers, including Arthur C. Clarke, Brian Aldiss, and Kim Stanley Robinson. There is a genealogy that can be traced, then, from Wells's ideas about progress and unity through the work of Stapledon and then through subsequent waves of Anglo-American science fiction.⁴

An important dimension to the planetary subjectivity which informs such writing is its association of progress with a process of maturation and ageing. If progress as it is imagined in much Anglo-American science fiction can be traced back to the Enlightenment period, it is perhaps best understood in light of Immanuel Kant's epochal formulation, 'Dare to know!' (*Sapere aude*). If, for Kant, enlightenment meant emerging from self-imposed immaturity, then this implied a view of progress as linear progression from ignorance to knowledge, from darkness into the light, and from childhood to a condition more fully approximating adulthood. For H. G. Wells, in both fictional works like *A Modern*

4 There is an interesting sense in which the global orientation of much twentieth-century science fiction thus anticipates what Adam Kirsch has more recently called the 'global novel' of the twenty-first century (Kirsch 2017). For a critical appraisal of this concept, see my article 'Contemporary Fiction as *Weltliteratur*: Adam Kirsch's *The Global Novel*' (Seeger 2020a).

Utopia and nonfictional works like *The Outline of History*, the history of humanity follows exactly this pattern: a linear if halting movement away from an immature, irrational past toward a mature, rational future. For Stapledon in *Last and First Men*, the final iteration of the human species, the Eighteenth Men, are inconceivably wise beings who stand in relation to earlier human groups as adults to infants, and whose minds contain the entirety of human experience heretofore in a manner analogous to an individual's recollection of childhood. In Clarke's aptly titled *Childhood's End*, progress is also explicitly figured in terms of ageing and maturation. With the arrival of the alien Overlords and the dawning of the global utopia, earlier stages of human culture are reframed as a condition of childhood, which must now be relinquished along with the childish beliefs and habits that accompanied them.

The case of the Star Child in *2001: A Space Odyssey* would initially appear to be an exception to this trend: in this case, the final stage of human development takes the form of a mysterious cosmic child, in an apparent subversion of the traditional linear pattern. Taken in context, however, the implied meaning of this sequence is not that there has been a reversion to an earlier stage of development, but rather that every earlier stage has been so vastly superseded that some new symbolism is required to convey the magnitude of the transformation involved. It is noteworthy that, in Stanley Kubrick's film version of the novel, to which Clarke contributed, the protagonist of the story is portrayed, immediately prior to his metamorphosis into the Star Child, as rapidly ageing, appearing in the penultimate stage as an elderly man. Once again, then, human progress is figured via the process of individual ageing, even if this culminates in something so radically new it must be portrayed in terms of the Star Child's symbolic infancy. A further question worth asking here is whether this sequence ought to be read as incorporating an element of decline as well as progress. The fact that the protagonist is portrayed as infirm and bedridden before his final transformation may point to the former. Whether or not old age carries an additional association with decline, however, the broader narrative of the maturation of the human species in which the sequence is embedded – the evolutionary path from the early hominids at the start of the story to

the Star Child at its end – remains linear and cumulative, in keeping with the texts previously considered.

Having seen how progress, maturation, and ageing are explored in some representative works of the tradition of Anglo-American science fiction that descends from H. G. Wells, we shall now turn to *The Book of Joan* to see to what extent Yuknavitch repeats, subverts, or leaves behind these familiar tropes and themes.

2. Transhumanism, Materiality, and Stagnation

One facet of contemporary culture which *The Book of Joan* may be seen as responding to is what has increasingly come to be known as ‘transhumanism.’ This term has been defined by scholars and theorists in a variety of ways and considered from a range of perspectives, from the laudatory (Bostrom 2016; Lovelock 2019) to the critical (Gray 2016; Mason 2019). Perhaps the most instructive brief definition is that of Katherine Hayles, for whom transhumanism is a mode of thought that ‘privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life’ (1991: 2). Published in the same year as Yuknavitch’s novel, meanwhile, Mark O’Connell’s *To Be a Machine* (2017) offers an illuminating account of the international transhumanist movement, which regards the human mind and body in their current form as outmoded technologies in need of upgrading. As O’Connell shows, the epicentre of transhumanist thought is Silicon Valley, but the ideology is increasingly making inroads into mainstream culture and politics. In the eyes of some of its adherents, transhumanism represents the next stage in the evolution of capitalism, often understood in terms of the eclipse of the human. According to the ruthless logic of this position, as technology begins to realise possibilities previously confined to science fiction, the human contribution to the functioning of the capitalist system will become increasingly irrelevant, raising the prospect of a world with no obvious role for the majority of people.

The latter is a minority view, however, with most transhumanists allowing for the continued existence of human beings, albeit in a post-biological form. One variant of this is dataism, whereby the concept of data is elevated to an ontological principle and the human mind is seen as nothing but a quantity of information capable, in principle, of existing in a wholly digital environment. As Yuval Noah Harari shows in his book *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (2017), current exponents of dataism look forward to a future in which, as in Hayles's account of transhumanism, biology has been transcended and mind is no longer constrained by materiality or embodiment. A further important variant is that of the futurist Ray Kurzweil, for whom, in a clear rehearsal of the familiar science fiction trope of planetary subjectivity, the next stage of human progress is expected to take the form of the emergence of a near-omniscient superintelligence or 'singularity' destined to take charge of global affairs (2010). Lastly, there is the work of Zoltan Istvan, an American transhumanist political candidate and theorist of technology who, in line with billionaire venture capitalists such as Paul Allen and Peter Thiel, has argued in a series of books and articles that transhumanism ought to be understood as a moral crusade for radical life extension that is specifically directed against ageing and mortality (2013; 2020; 2021). One thing that Istvan's work highlights is the extent to which the transhumanist movement's attitude toward embodiment is motivated by a recoil from the frailties and vulnerabilities of the human body, which are viewed by Istvan and some of the transhumanists interviewed by Mark O'Connell as the result of a 'bug' in the 'programming' of the human machine.

Following Jameson's suggestion about how to approach science fiction, *The Book of Joan* is not best read as an attempt to intervene directly in debates about transhumanism and the techno-capitalist worldview associated with it. Rather, the novel projects an extreme, hyperbolically imagined future in which we may recognise facets of contemporary life reflected back to us in a distorted yet suggestive form. What Yuknavitch encourages us to think about through her fiction is the role and status not just of the human body but of materiality more generally in the transhumanist imaginary, that is, not so much its explicit content but its guiding assumptions and values. In the words of Christine, one of the novel's

narrators, ‘After we tired of television, after we tired of films, after social media failed to feed our hungers, after holograms and virtual realities and pharmaceuticals and ever more mind-boggling altered states of being, someone somewhere looked down in despair at the sad skin of his or her own arm and noticed, for the first time, a frontier’ (16). Passages like this draw our attention to the attitude toward material embodiment implied by some variants of transhumanism. As Christine also informs us, sexual acts of any kind are prohibited aboard CIEL: ‘Our bodies are meant to be read and consumed, debated, exchanged, or transformed only cerebrally. Any version of the act itself is an affront to social order, not to mention a brutal reminder of our impotency as a nonprocreating group’ (34). As she crucially adds, however, ‘Unlike those in power here on CIEL, reproduction wasn’t what we mourned. We mourned the carnal. Societies may be organized around procreation, but individuals are animals’ (49–50). It is this animal dimension of the human – and, by extension, the human participation in nature – which is portrayed as imperilled by Jean de Man’s drive to ‘perfect’ the human species. One of the main implications of the increasing disembodiment of humanity which Yuknavitch’s novel makes us aware of is thus the elimination of the visceral and somatic basis of much of our experience.

As its name implies, transhumanism is generally understood as an extension of the humanist project initiated by the Enlightenment. As Cary Wolfe observes, on a transhumanist picture of the future of the human species, “the human” is achieved by escaping or repressing not just its animal origins in nature, the biological, and the evolutionary, but more generally by transcending the bonds of materiality and embodiment altogether’, meaning that ‘transhumanism should be seen as an *intensification* of humanism’ rather than as a departure from it (2010: xv). Echoing the terms of Katherine Hayle’s own critique of transhumanism, Wolfe therefore agrees with those who view transhumanism as an extension of the humanist subject’s power into new domains (ibid.). In Yuknavitch’s novel, this transhumanist conjuncture of progress, power, and promethean humanism is strongly evoked by the oratory of Jean de Man, who in one of his holographic propaganda speeches tells the citizens of CIEL that, ‘Your life is not for them, not for the putrid detritus resisting the

future, clinging to Earth for a life that cannot be sustained. Earth was but an early host for our future ascension. Your life can have meaning and justification if you but turn your sights toward a higher truth' (14). In de Man's view and that of the faction he represents, human life as it has been lived up until his own moment is the product of a persistent error, now recognised as such: the mistake of having been unduly wedded to material embodiment. Although at the stage of development depicted by Yuknavitch, de Man's experiments primarily take the form of alterations made to the human body, the logic of his discourse throughout the novel points to a strong mind-body dualism, the fulfilment of which would be the triumph of the former over the latter through the untethering of mind from body. To this extent, the transhumanism practised on CIEL, while being a step beyond that of the early twenty-first century, is arguably only a transitional moment on the way toward the final realisation of the transhumanist ideal of emancipation from our remaining links to the material world.

As John Gray has shown, there are clear parallels between transhumanism and ancient Gnostic traditions, in which a fatal cosmic 'fall' was involved in the movement from purely spiritual being to the flawed condition of embodied, physical existence (2016). The loathing expressed by de Man for humanity's persisting relationship with Earth may, then, be read as a quasi-Gnostic longing for the transcendence of matter. Looking back to the period immediately prior to the wars that have resulted in the apocalyptic circumstances of the novel, Christine observes that it had then 'seemed that technology and evolution were on the cusp of a strange bright magnificence. Technology had made houses smart, and cars, and employment centers, and education. The physical world seemed only a membrane between humans and the speed and hum of information' (75). The subsequent collapse of civilisation obviously represents a major caesura in the history of progress, but the powerful strand of transhumanism aboard CIEL means the seeds of the future implicit in the old world are merely awaiting activation at a later date. The rhetoric and ambitions of de Man imply that escaping from the physical realm altogether remains the dominant vision of a liberated future among the new elite. As we have seen, this is true not only in the context of *The Book of Joan* but also in

regard to the real-world transhumanist movement explored by O'Connell, Harari, Gray, and others.

In the previous section, we considered how a major strand of twentieth-century Anglo-American science fiction was informed by the Enlightenment ideal of progress, often figured via the trope of ageing. As shall be explored in the following section, *The Book of Joan* may be read as subverting elements of this tradition. At the same time, however, other elements of it are taken over and extended by Yuknavitch. The humanist ideal of writers like Wells, Stapledon, Asimov, Clarke, and their inheritors, for instance, morphs into the transhumanism of Jean de Man. The trope of ageing likewise recurs, though it is modified in a number of ways. Firstly, the possibility of ageing, at least beyond a certain point, has been eliminated among the population of CIEL. As a result of material scarcity, no one is allowed to live beyond the age of 50, at which point they submit to assisted suicide and the water and other elements from their bodies are efficiently recycled in what Christine calls 'a finite, closed system' (7). The explanation given for this practice in the novel is the need to conserve resources, yet it surely lends itself to being understood in relation to the turn against ageing taken by contemporary transhumanists. Although the link is never made in the novel, de Man's decision to cap ageing at fifty could be read as a frustrated response to the same bodily limitations lamented by Zoltan Istvan and the Silicon Valley transhumanists: if radical life extension proves unattainable, then ageing can at least be made impossible by preventing anyone from living beyond their fiftieth year.

On a second level, the capping of ageing at fifty is treated as symbolic of the social and cultural stagnation of CIEL. Whereas in novels like Wells's *A Modern Utopia*, Stapledon's *Last and First Men*, and Clarke's *Childhood's End*, old age is associated with the culmination of the long journey of the species, in *The Book of Joan* the impossibility of reaching old age aboard CIEL stands for the blocked road to the future. Here, however, a distinction needs to be drawn between the novel's narration of the lives of individual characters, on the one hand, and its narration of the history of the human species, on the other. While the passage from youth to old age *at the level of the species* was represented as a linear path of development in the Anglo-American science fiction surveyed previously, ageing *at the*

level of the individual could, as in the case of the ambiguous concluding sequence of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, potentially signify decline as well. In Yuknavitch's novel, by contrast, history has fallen frustratingly short of the transhumanist aspirations of de Man and his followers. Scientific and technological progress nevertheless remains the preeminent goal, despite prevailing conditions meaning that society is trapped at a specific stage of development, as is attested to by de Man's many failed experiments in engineering a new human species. One conclusion that might be drawn from all this is that the apparent contradiction implied by regarding old age as *both* completion or fulfilment *and* something to be avoided or engineered out of existence is, from the point of view of a character like de Man or a transhumanist like Istvan, not a contradiction after all. The compatibility of the two views might be expressed as follows: while the historical evolution of humanity is best understood symbolically according to one familiar picture of the ageing of an individual human being (the passage from guileless infancy to sagacious old age), part of the promise of such evolution is the eradication of the empirical conditions which constitute ageing in the life of the individual. In this regard, de Man is an inheritor of a set of assumptions and a view of ageing that runs back through more than a century of humanist/transhumanist science fiction.

3. Antihumanism, Nature, and Culture

The Book of Joan, it is important to note, takes place against a backdrop of ecological themes and concerns. The teachings of Joan herself, provided in brief instalments throughout the novel and then condensed into a letter to her partner at the end of the book, emphasise the human continuity with nature over against the alienated condition personified by the inhabitants of CIEL, 'fast becoming pure representations of themselves', in Christine's words (63). By contrast with this, the relationship to nature embodied by Joan is framed as a return to humanity's authentic origins: 'You are giving them back their sacred relationship to the planet and the very cosmos they

came from', a resistance fighter says to Joan (227). As the title of the book suggests, Yuknavitch's novel clearly takes sides in the conflict it portrays, aligning itself *with* Joan and *against* Jean de Man, her nemesis and narrative counter principle. This conflict may be read on at least three levels: there is the war between Joan and de Man themselves, there is the ideological conflict over the destiny of the human species, and there is the more abstract opposition of nature and culture, which is shown to encompass the other two. If de Man's transhumanism may be understood as the end stage of the humanist progress narrative, Joan's prophetic teachings embody an antihumanist worldview running exactly contrary to the former.

In her letter to her partner, Joan writes, 'You deserve a world better than this. You deserve whatever comes after human progress and its puny failures' (266). Joan identifies what has been called progress with the brutal subjugation of nature, including humanity itself through its participation in nature. In opposition to this, Joan's resistance movement represents an antithetical, antihumanist version of the human story. As Joan puts it, 'What if being human did not mean to discover, to conquer. What if it meant rejoining everything we are made from' (227). Returning to 'everything we are made from' is Joan's radical alternative to de Man's longing for the elimination of matter and corporeality. Whereas de Man is convinced that the ultimate human purpose is to transcend the material world, Joan is no less convinced that humanity's true end lies in reversing course and immersing itself once again in the raw, lawless stream of natural processes. If de Man's vision stands for the triumph of control, Joan's represents a relinquishing of control in favour of a deferral to nature in its nonhuman otherness. From Joan's point of view, in a clear echo of deep ecological thought, the humanist conception of progress and its transhumanist progeny inevitably results in Earth's destruction due to its inherent anthropocentrism, treating the planet as little more than a set of resources for human projects.

Joan's antihumanism needs to be distinguished on this point, however, from a dominant current within critical theory which offers a comparable critique of the dominance of technoscientific rationality. In a helpful essay on the politics of posthuman and transhuman technologies, Luciana Parisi has identified a line of thought within critical theory descending from the Frankfurt School and running through to the present day according to

which ‘technoscientific epistemology – or knowledge generated through technoscientific rationalisation or conceptualisation of the real – determines the ontological condition of thought, thus reducing the possible configurations of political subjectivity mainly to what can be known, measured, [or] calculated’ (2017: 215). Set against this, there is what Parisi calls the ‘anti-technoscientific view’ which, as she puts it, ‘works to preserve the ontological condition of thought (that is, of political thought autonomous from the technoenvironment in which it operates)’ and which ‘necessarily identifies technology with power on the one hand and separates the sacredness of human thought from the mechanical and automated systems invented by humans on the other’ (ibid.: 215–16). Despite the affinities between this anti-technoscientific stance and Joan’s antihumanism, there is also a crucial difference, which is arguably decisive for the overall import of Yuknavitch’s novel. This is that the critique of technoscientific rationality on the part of critical theory remains humanist in its ethical and political orientation: as Parisi observes, it attempts to establish a bulwark between human political rationality and the encroachments of technoscience. Joan’s antihumanism, on the other hand, is a repudiation of the entire humanist legacy, radically decentring humanity and stripping it of any claim to uniqueness. For her, the human animal is simply a species among other species, equally a part of nature and equally dependent upon it: ‘We always look up. What if everything that mattered was always down? Where things are base and lowly. Where worms and shit and beetles bore their way along’ (147). Later, in her letter to her partner, she writes:

There is no longer any reason to further a philosophy. There is only being. ‘Knowing’ has one use-value that I can see: Does it extend survival and promote a thriving species, plant or animal? If not, it’s just the life of the mind, and the life of the mind has no telos without relationships to every other alive thing. (263)

Here and elsewhere, Joan’s denunciation of reason and progress is not presented by Yuknavitch as a prelude to a proposal for alternative modes of reason and progress, but as a rejection of any attempt to transcend our common animal existence.

The question of the relation of Joan’s antihumanism to the trope of ageing in Anglo-American science fiction and the role played by ageing

aboard CIEL discussed in the previous two sections is relevant here. Aside from occasional references made to the immense age of planet Earth, the topic of ageing is only engaged obliquely in the Joan strands of the narrative. Nevertheless, Joan's rhetoric of 'everything that mattered' lying at our feet all along is surely suggestive. Maybe, she implies, *our* new beginning will take the form of a return to *the* beginning. Perhaps, that is to say, the fresh start sought by an exhausted human species lies in a recovery of its earliest origins rather than in further onward movement toward a future coordinate on a linear timeline. Breaking with what we have seen is a long-running science fiction convention, infancy and old age would then seem to collapse into one another, with the 'new' life of humanity being marked by its dissolution into the primeval life of nature. This way of construing Joan's antihumanism may help to explain why the trope of ageing is less explicit in these sections of the novel: her ideal implies a timeless condition that is beyond the contrast between youth and old age.

The picture of nature implied by Joan's antihumanism can also be contrasted with that of much ecological theory, to which it stands in a complex relationship. The 'return' to nature envisaged in *The Book of Joan*, it should be noted, does not depend on a conservative or nostalgic image of the natural world. The idea of a pristine, unspoiled nature supposedly in 'equilibrium' with itself has been powerfully criticised by, among others, Timothy Morton, beginning with his major study *Ecology without Nature* (2007). At the same time, however, Joan evidently adheres to a binary opposition between nature and culture, albeit with the former taking priority. Rather than pointing toward the triumph of culture over nature, as in the case of de Man's transhumanism, Joan looks forward to a time when culture will be seen for what it is: a regrettable detour taken by nature in its chaotic striving for life. As the following thoughts on the part of Christine indicate, this view is not confined to Joan but is shared by those aligned with her:

I've been thinking about how our desires and fears manifest in our bodies, and how our bodies, carrying these stories, resist the narratives our culture places on top of us, starting the moment we are born. It's our idiotic minds that overwrite everything. But the body has a point of view. It keeps its secrets. Makes its own stories. By any means necessary. (71)

Passages like this suggest a sharp dichotomy between nature and culture, as well as between body and mind. To this extent, Christine, the Earth resistance fighters, and Joan herself share a common outlook, according to which there has been something like a fateful fall from nature into culture – a fall redolent of de Man’s quasi-Gnostic sense of embodied life as the fallen condition of pure mind, but this time in reverse. The fact that Christine goes on to speak of the body as carrying stories, suggesting that it too is possessed of a kind of narrative sense, might seem to spell difficulties for this reading, blurring as it does the line between nature and culture. This difficulty is defused, however, by recalling that the stories Christine has in mind are not ones *authored* by her body, but rather ones she has manually *inscribed* on herself, and which therefore still take the form of culturally authorised symbols. In the world anticipated by the resistance movement’s antihumanism, in which humanity’s animality is fully embraced and ‘our idiotic minds’ are no longer permitted to overwrite our bodies, there will presumably be no such symbols. Having built such a stark opposition between nature and culture into the narrative and thematic framework of her novel, Yuknavitch is forced to choose between the only two options on offer: transhumanism *or* antihumanism. Presented with this choice, she opts for the latter, accepting whatever tensions and anomalies this may give rise to in the text.

4. The Absence of Queer Ecology

As we have seen, *The Book of Joan* portrays a future in which two possibilities are set against one another: transhumanism and the triumph of culture over nature, or antihumanism and a turn back toward nature, understood as the true source of all life. As a courageous, noble, inspiring figure, Joan is unambiguously cast as the hero of Yuknavitch’s story, while the cruel, sadistic, malevolent figure of Jean de Man is unambiguously the villain of the piece. Insofar as the novel may be read as an indirect reflection on the possibilities open to humanity in the early twenty-first century, confronted by

ecological, technological, and political threats of multiple kinds, however, this dichotomous thinking is liable to seem reductive and may occlude other valuable options. One such option would be *posthumanism*, of the sort formulated by Katherine Hayles (1999) or Cary Wolfe (2010). Posthumanism is more suited than either transhumanism or antihumanism to think the imbrications of nature and culture and to make allowance for the presence of nonhuman forces within the human. There may in fact be intimations of the posthuman in some of the passages of the novel focusing on the narrative carried by Christine's body of the sort we saw earlier, which perhaps accord with Wolfe's observation that posthumanism calls for much greater attention to how materiality shapes mind and thought (*ibid.*: 120). This strand is not, however, sufficiently developed by Yuknavitch to stand as a fully-fledged alternative to the outlooks represented by Joan and de Man. The prefix 'post' in the term posthumanism, on the other hand, may entail its own difficulties in the present context. Despite Wolfe's insistence that 'posthumanism comes both *before* and *after* humanism' (*ibid.*: xv), it is hard to avoid the sense of an implied historical teleology of the sort that *The Book of Joan* is clearly directed against, and which has in any case come to seem dubious in light of the dystopian conjuncture which late modernity has brought us to. To this extent, posthumanism may present problems it is incapable of resolving, whatever its appeal in other regards.

Another, potentially more fruitful approach to the issues of materiality, ecology, and temporality raised by *The Book of Joan* is that of queer theory, and specifically queer ecology. Morton has argued that queer theory has 'a strange friend in nonessentialist biology', according to which 'life-forms themselves undermine distinctions between Natural and non-Natural' (2010: 277). For Morton, an alliance between queer theory and ecology 'would suppose a multiplication of differences at as many levels and on as many scales as possible' (*ibid.*: 275), contradicting views of gender and sexual variability as a 'cultural' imposition on a given set of 'natural' binaries. The absence of this kind of queer ecological thought may help to explain another of the novel's anomalies. At the climax of the story, during the defeat of Jean de Man, it is unexpectedly revealed that de Man 'is not a man but what is left of a woman' (245), with evidence of multiple gender reassignment surgeries, including 'several dangling attempts at half-formed

penises' (245). It is unclear how this scene ought to be interpreted or how it might be integrated with everything else in the novel, and no critic to date has offered a satisfying explanation of it. It could be argued that the seemingly transphobic implications of the exposure of de Man in this way are a further consequence of the novel's nature/culture binary. Whatever Yuknavitch may have intended by making de Man transgender, the framing of her novel in terms of an opposition between 'raw' nature and 'artificial' culture means that she cannot avoid coding him as an 'unnatural' figure, as is implied by the use of the word 'attempts' with reference to his genitalia, which establishes a clear continuity with the earlier references to his many failed attempts to remake the human form. The limitations of the novel's reimagining of nature and of the position of human beings within it are perhaps nowhere more apparent than in its treatment of gender.

In his book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Lee Edelman has influentially criticised what he terms reproductive futurism, an ideology which embodies a culturally pervasive understanding of the future as necessarily oriented toward reproduction within the context of the heteronormative family (2004). At one stage in his argument, Edelman puts forward an interpretation of P. D. James's *The Children of Men* (1992), a dystopian novel focusing on a fertility crisis, which Edelman sees as an especially clear illustration of the logic of reproductive futurism (2004: 12–13). On Edelman's reading, the novel reiterates the reproductive futurist trope of maintaining the social order through reproduction, while childlessness is coded as anti-social, narcissistic enjoyment or jouissance. In the case of Yuknavitch's novel, the rebel faction could perhaps be seen as following Edelman in preferring the 'anti-social' option of refusing the future as represented by CIEL, thereby fulfilling the role of the queer who 'comes to figure the bar to every realization of futurity, the resistance, internal to the social, to every social structure or form' (ibid.: 30). The radical negativity of Edelman's project is not, however, the only queer theoretical lens through which to read this aspect of *The Book of Joan*.

While Edelman's stance, like Joan's own antihumanism, represents a rejection of humanist teleologies, Elizabeth Freeman's book *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* is concerned with thinking history otherwise and with non-teleological ways of relating to time in which

nonnormative gender and sexuality play a central role. On Freeman's account, queerness is a site from which to contest Enlightenment-inspired conceptions of linear time. Queer time, she claims, displaces linear chronologies and makes room for nonlinear modes of temporal experience (Freeman 2010: x-xi). It is noteworthy that for Freeman, 'Moments of participation in queer time are often grounded in *bodily* experiences/pleasures' (ibid.: xi), meaning they transcend the nature/culture binary: queer time is simultaneously natural *and* cultural. Although Freeman does not make connections with ecological thought, the parallels between her understanding of queer time and Morton's reflections on the queer potential of ecology and developments in the life sciences are clear. A further parallel, this time with work in age studies is also relevant here. Cynthia Port has drawn attention to the commonalities between queer subjectivity and the condition of old age: 'No longer employed, not reproducing, perhaps technologically illiterate, and frequently without disposable income, the old are often, like queers, figured by the cultural imagination as being outside mainstream temporalities and standing in the way of, rather than contributing to, the promise of the future' (2012: 3). Port helps us to see, in other words, how both queer people and old people inhabit what Freeman calls in a related context 'structures of belonging and duration that may be invisible to the historicist eye' and which cannot be subordinated to teleological and normative temporal frames (Freeman 2010: xi). As in the case of gender, then, *The Book of Joan's* handling of temporality is arguably constrained by a forced choice between linear progress and its refusal. As Freeman and Port demonstrate, queer theory has much to offer here.

Displacing and implicitly critiquing the tendency within Anglo-American science fiction to rely on a humanist conception of progress modelled on the development of the individual from infancy to maturity, Yuknavitch instead advances an antihumanist agenda in which historicity as such would seem to be suspended in favour of a return to a nonhuman, precultural condition. The role of age and ageing is ambiguous in this context and varies depending on which level of the text one focuses on. At the level of the individual, *The Book of Joan* recapitulates by way of the designs of Jean de Man the generic tendency to associate technological progress with the elimination of bodily shortcomings, including ageing and ultimately

embodiment itself. At the level of the species, however, where the novel takes Joan's side against de Man, the trope of ageing is either replaced by ecological metaphors – such as returning to 'everything we are made from' (227) – or gives way to the timeless present of the nonhuman where, as Joan says, 'There is only being' (263). In this way, Yuknavitch simultaneously contests the humanist/transhumanist conception of progress while reproducing its guiding opposition between the historicity of culture and the timelessness of nature. By contrast, queer ecology's contestation of the dominant nature/culture binary, combined with its ability to forego historical teleology without foreclosing the possibility of historical existence, arguably makes it a more promising candidate for beginning to articulate 'whatever comes after human progress'.

The Post-Critical Utopia

It is a commonplace of modern intellectual history that during the course of the twentieth century there was a decisive and widespread loss of faith in grand utopian schemes for social improvement.¹ The anti-utopian tenor of the century's latter decades, as well as of the early 2000s, is well captured by John Gray's observation that as humanity entered the new millennium it did so in a world 'littered with the debris of utopian projects' and in which secular political hope seemed to be giving way to a resurgence of rival fundamentalisms (Gray 2007, 1). Within the academy, this trend was registered and resisted by numerous scholars who attempted to reimagine utopia in such a way that it would not be open to the sorts of criticisms levelled at the failed utopian ventures of the previous decades. In different ways, Ruth Levitas (2011), Tom Moylan (2014), Samuel R. Delany (1978), Stuart Hall (2021), Raymond Williams (1989), and Fredric Jameson (2005), among others, all pursued ways of thinking utopia differently in order to make it more democratic, more pluralistic, and less liable to authoritarianism. While tending to moderate and soften some of utopia's more sweeping and programmatic ambitions, their efforts were salutary insofar as they significantly extended the range of the utopian imagination and pointed to ways of overcoming some of the limitations of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century forms of utopianism.

Since the global financial crisis of 2007–2008, however, and in the wake of the various major social, political, and ecological challenges of the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the alternative conceptions

1 As stated in the Acknowledgements, this chapter is a revised and expanded version of an article that originally appeared under the same title in the journal *Utopian Studies* (Seeger 2023a).

of utopia and utopianism that arose between the late 1960s and the early 2000s have come to seem less suited to the current moment. One reason for this is that, as many commentators have noted, there is a widely shared sense that what is needed today is change of a fundamental and systematic kind – precisely the kind of change, in fact, that had been envisaged by an older style of utopian text of the sort that largely ceased to be written during the twentieth century and whose proposals came to be seen as inflexible and oppressive by those writers and scholars who sought to democratise and decentralise utopia from the 1970s onward.

One prominent public intellectual who has consistently made the case in recent years for a renewal of a more ambitious form of utopianism is the economist and former Greek minister of finance Yanis Varoufakis. A former academic who previously taught at the University of Essex, the University of East Anglia, and Cambridge University, Varoufakis presided over the negotiation of Greece's debt with the troika (the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund) as part of Alexis Tsipras's Syriza government during 2015 in an attempt to limit austerity measures imposed on the country. Having observed the humanitarian crisis in Greece that resulted from austerity, Varoufakis was well positioned to comment on the shortcomings of contemporary capitalism in his subsequent writings. Published in 2020, *Another Now: Dispatches from an Alternative Present* (2020a) is the latest in a series of popular and widely read books by Varoufakis on economics and current affairs. Unlike his previous work in this vein – *The Global Minotaur* (2011), *Talking to My Daughter about the Economy* (2013), *And the Weak Suffer What They Must?* (2016), and *Adults in the Room* (2017) – *Another Now* takes the form of a novel, more specifically, a science fiction novel. One reason for this switch from nonfiction to fiction is the book's focus on the future. Whereas Varoufakis's previous books had been concerned with the present and recent past, *Another Now* describes events taking place in the near future: between 2025 and 2035.

Drawing partly on the conventions of alternate history, the novel portrays two different realities: our own world in the coming decade, and what is referred to as the 'Other Now'. While identical to our world in every other respect, the Other Now is a world in which recent history has

unfolded very differently, leading to immense social change. The timelines of the two worlds diverge from one another in the year 2008. In 'Our Now', the financial crisis of 2007–8 was met with unprecedented bank bailouts followed by a return to business as usual, whereas in the Other Now, the crisis led to a peaceful global revolution and a transition to a post-capitalist economic system (Varoufakis 2020a, 67–84).² In the Other Now, capitalism has given way to what Varoufakis provocatively calls 'corpo-syndicalism', an economic model in which corporations are remodelled along anarcho-syndicalist lines (42–46). At the heart of corpo-syndicalism is the simple yet radical principle of 'one-employee-one-share-one-vote' (46–53). Each employee owns a single share in their firm, which entitles them to a single vote on any decisions it makes. Crucially, these shares are nontradeable, meaning that share markets and disproportionately influential shareholders do not exist in the Other Now.

Combined with a range of other policies, the one-employee-one-share-one-vote system results in a horizontal style of worker-led management that eliminates hierarchies and facilitates democratic decision-making. As well as being allocated a state trust fund when they come of age, people in the Other Now are maintained by two incomes: their corpo-syndicalist earnings and a government payment called 'universal basic dividend' (54–57). Unlike a universal basic income, which is paid for out of general taxation (and which Varoufakis has elsewhere been critical of for this reason), the basic dividend is funded through a tax on the raw revenues of the corpo-syndicalist firms. Along with public ownership and leasing of land, the corporation tax eliminates the need for income or sales taxes on individuals. Meanwhile, a new international tax system minimises trade deficits while also reallocating funds to the global south and to investment in green energy.

In imagining the Other Now, Varoufakis wishes to describe, then, an alternative to capitalism that remains empirically grounded in the world as it exists today. By taking corporate decision-making out of the hands of unaccountable shareholders, instituting the universal basic dividend, and passing laws to force corporations to equitably contribute to the social good,

2 All subsequent references to the text in this chapter are given as page numbers in parentheses.

the revolutionaries of the Other Now lay the foundations for a life beyond capitalism. The result is one possible construction of a socialist utopia: a society in which political freedom is matched by economic freedom. In this chapter, a case is made for viewing Varoufakis's novel as an example of a new literary form: the 'post-critical utopia', that is, a text that combines a systematic utopian blueprint with insights drawn from the tradition of the critical utopia. The first half of the chapter consists of an analysis of *Another Now*; the second situates the concept of the post-critical utopia in the context of existing utopian studies scholarship.

1. Retrieving the Utopian Socialist Novel

While some of the social and economic policies that define Varoufakis's utopia are comparatively new – international trade is conducted via a bespoke digital currency, for example – the novel in which these are embedded represents a retrieval of an older kind of literature, namely, the utopian socialist novel.

Another Now's most obvious precursors in this regard are *Looking Backward* by Edward Bellamy (2009), *News from Nowhere* by William Morris (2009), *A Modern Utopia* by H. G. Wells (2005), *Herland* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (2015), and Oscar Wilde's speculative essay 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' (1990). As well as incorporating twenty-first-century social and scientific developments, *Another Now* draws extensively on tropes and conventions familiar from these late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century utopian works. Like some of these texts, *Another Now* relies on a fantastic conceit to facilitate access to the Other Now. Whereas in Bellamy's *Looking Backward* the protagonist falls into a hypnosis-induced sleep for 113 years and in Wells's *A Modern Utopia* the lead characters are instantaneously transported to an alien world uncannily like Earth, in *Another Now* a wormhole to a parallel world is opened by malfunctioning experimental technology (29–40). Like its precursors, however, the novel shows little interest in this founding conceit: in the words of H. G. Wells, 'the living interest' lies in its 'non-fantastic elements and not in the invention itself' (2017, 13).

As Matthew Beaumont has shown, the period from 1870 to 1914 – that is, from the initial stirrings of the Paris Commune to the onset of the First World War – witnessed ‘a veritable discursive explosion’ of utopian fiction and speculation (Beaumont 2009, 1). It was during this period that the utopian socialist novel flourished, before going into a rapid and apparently permanent decline. From 1918 onward, utopias decisively gave way to dystopias: whereas novels like *Looking Backward* and *News from Nowhere* had offered visions of a liberated future, dystopias such as Rose Macaulay’s *What Not* (2019), Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (2007), Katharine Burdekin’s *Swastika Night* (Constantine 2016), and George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (2004) tended to offer much more pessimistic social commentaries and forecasts. From the publication of Gilman’s *Herland* in 1915 to the wave of new utopian fiction of the late 1960s and 1970s, conventional utopias were rare and took eccentric forms when they did appear, as in B. F. Skinner’s behaviourist thought experiment *Walden Two* (2005) or Aldous Huxley’s mystical countercultural novel *Island* (2005).

The utopias of the following period – which may be dated from the publication of Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* in 1969 (2017) to the publication of Sally Miller Gearhart’s *The Wanderground* in 1978 (1985) – saw the rise of what Tom Moylan and others have characterised as the ‘critical utopia’ (Moylan 2014). This is a form of utopian fiction that, on Moylan’s account, leaves behind and sometimes explicitly criticises the attempt to offer a comprehensive plan of utopia while retaining utopia’s critical relation to the present and its expression of utopian desire for a better world. It is notable that, in at least one vital respect, *Another Now* more closely resembles the classical or pre-critical utopia than it does the critical utopia of the 1970s and afterwards. This is because, like the former and unlike the latter, it centres on precisely the kind of comprehensive utopian programme that the critical utopia defined itself against. By virtue of its content, then, Varoufakis’s novel more closely resembles the literary utopias of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries than those of the last fifty years.

The specific features of *Another Now* which bring it within the orbit of the classical utopia are as follows. First, the majority of the novel consists of a detailed account of specific social and economic policies. As in the utopian

tradition inaugurated by Thomas More and which perhaps reached its point of exhaustion in the work of H. G. Wells, there is relatively little emphasis on plot or characterisation in *Another Now*, and almost no investment in the kind of worldbuilding associated with the critical utopia. Rather than showing us what life is like in the Other Now, we are simply told by two of its inhabitants how their society is organised. As in Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, these pronouncements are sometimes met with questions by characters from Our Now, but these are primarily a means for Varoufakis to expand on finer points in his economic argument. The account offered of the Other Now is thus, in experiential terms, fairly thin: whereas in, say, Le Guin's utopias we are given an extremely rich and immersive sense of how life goes on in her invented societies, we come away from Varoufakis's novel with lots of *information* about how an alternative to capitalism might work, but with less of a sense of the *experience* of the Other Now. Likewise, while Varoufakis's characters are somewhat more fully rendered than those of Bellamy, Morris, or Wells, they nevertheless serve mainly as placeholders for differing political perspectives.

In saying this, our intention is not to impugn the artistic merits of the book or to suggest that there are right and wrong ways to go about writing a utopian novel. On a charitable reading, the emphasis of *Another Now* on arguments over novelistic detail reflects a particular approach to utopian writing, one with its own strengths and weaknesses. This approach is, however, highly rationalistic: Varoufakis is less concerned to *immerse* us in his utopia than to *argue* us into granting the superiority of corpo-syndicalism to capitalism. Again, in this respect *Another Now* bears a clear resemblance to works like *Looking Backward*, *News from Nowhere*, and *Herland*, which are often much closer in form to arguments or dialogues than they are to narratives.

2. A Critical Utopia?

Like its utopian socialist precursors, *Another Now* also contains characters who voice reservations about the Other Now from the vantage of the world of the reader. Just as Bellamy's, Morris's, and Gilman's protagonists are at

times sceptical, incredulous, or suspicious of what they learn of utopia, so the characters from *Our Now* in Varoufakis's novel do not merely accept what they are told about the Other Now but point out potential shortcomings and raise questions about gaps in the explanations they receive in return.

Two of the objections made to the Other Now are particularly serious, however, pointing to a difference between *Another Now* and a novel like *News from Nowhere*, and indicating its indebtedness to the critical utopia. These are voiced by Iris, a socialist feminist from *Our Now* who recognises the Other Now's appeal but ultimately comes to reject it (157–180). Iris's objections, it should be noted, are treated without any of the irony or derision directed at characters like the old man in *News from Nowhere* who nostalgically longs for the age of capitalism or the macho adventurer in *Herland* who insists on the naturalness of patriarchy in the face of all evidence to the contrary. Iris's critique is portrayed, rather, as posing a serious political and ethical challenge to the world of the Other Now.

Iris's first objection to the Other Now has to do with gender politics. Patriarchy still exists in the Other Now, as is evidenced by the misogynistic murder of the leader of a prominent revolutionary feminist group and the broader failure to end violence against women and advance women's liberation in line with the progress made in other areas of society. It is initially for this reason that Iris sees the Other Now as failing to deliver on its ostensibly utopian promise (157–70). Iris's second objection targets the basic premise of the Other Now. As Varoufakis makes clear throughout the book, the Other Now's economic model is a form of market socialism. Capitalism may have been abolished, but markets remain the means by which goods and services are exchanged (113–55). As a result, human relations are still organised around what Iris calls 'conditional reciprocity': the principle that people do things for each other because it is economically advantageous to them (178–80). By abolishing the inequality, exploitation, and injustices of capitalism while retaining its transactional ethos, the architects of the Other Now have in effect, Iris argues, merely further postponed humanity's true liberation. For Iris, nothing less than the abolition of conditional reciprocity and the realisation of what one of her friends gently mocks as '*Star Trek* abundance communism' will suffice (217). Her critique, unlike those of the naysayers of earlier utopian socialist novels, is thus *ultra*-utopian

rather than *anti*-utopian: an achieved utopia is found wanting from the point of view of a further, perhaps unattainable utopia.

Given the faults Iris finds with the *Other Now*, and the prominence these are given in the final chapter of the book, it may seem that Varoufakis has constructed a critical utopia after all, with his book simultaneously depicting a utopia and undercutting it by highlighting its failings. It can nevertheless be argued that *Another Now* resists this classification. In an essay written for *The Guardian* as well as a series of interviews given about the book, Varoufakis explicitly endorses the main economic proposals that form the basis of the *Other Now*. While acknowledging that he harbours doubts about his utopia's 'unresolved arguments', Varoufakis clearly sees something very much like corpo-syndicalism as the logical successor to capitalism (Varoufakis 2020b).

There is also the fact that, as discussed earlier, the *Other Now* takes the form of a utopian blueprint, of a sort scarcely seen for over a century. Given its author's endorsement of the policies it embodies, this feature of the text would seem to set it apart from the utopian literature of the 1970s. Classifying *Another Now* is therefore not easy: it is seemingly not quite a classical utopia nor yet a critical utopia but something else yet to be determined. Here the term 'post-critical utopia' suggests itself as a potentially informative designation for this kind of writing. By 'post-critical utopia', what is meant is two things. Firstly, the post-critical utopia remains 'critical' in the sense that it has clearly learnt from and internalised the critical utopia's response to the classical utopia. As we have seen, rather than pretending to have arrived at solutions to every problem raised in the text, *Another Now* draws attention to some of the limitations of the utopia it describes and implicitly invites readers to engage with these in order to start to think through how they might be overcome. Second, the post-critical utopia is 'post-' critical in the sense that it moves beyond the critical utopia by *retrieving* an earlier, predominantly nineteenth-century style of utopian blueprint while at the same time *retaining* the critical utopia's awareness of tension, ambiguity, and contradiction. It thereby combines a realistic sense of limitation, fallibility, and unavoidable conflict with a comprehensive and highly ambitious utopian programme. In the remainder of this chapter, we shall consider the post-critical utopia more fully in the context of existing utopian studies scholarship.

3. The Post-Critical Utopia and Utopian Studies

One common assumption within utopian studies that *Another Now* helps to call into question is that of the opposition between the utopian blueprint, on the one hand, and a more indeterminate utopian desire, on the other. While these categories and the relationship between them have sometimes been reconsidered and revised since the establishment of the field in the 1970s, it remains the case that some form of this opposition underlies a great deal of utopian scholarship. In an otherwise innovative recent study of utopianism, for example, John Storey takes it as axiomatic that utopianism falls into two distinct and opposing modes, which he terms blueprint utopianism and radical utopianism (2019, 1). The former is associated with static, inflexible models of utopia that Storey regards as both incapable of effecting real-world social change and politically undesirable, whereas the latter serves the more indirect utopian goals of defamiliarising existing society and expressing desire for a better world (i–xii). While Storey’s championing of radical utopianism and his rejection of blueprint utopianism are somewhat more conclusive and clear-cut than that of some other scholars in the field, his position is arguably only a more explicit articulation of a fairly widespread critical tendency.

In a passage that offers the most widely cited definition of the critical utopia within utopian studies, and which clearly informs many scholars’ understanding of the utopia-as-blueprint versus utopia-as-desire opposition, Tom Moylan writes in his classic 1986 study, *Demand the Impossible*:

A central concern in the critical utopia is the awareness of the limitations of the utopian tradition, so that these texts reject utopia as blueprint while preserving it as dream. Furthermore, the novels dwell on the conflict between the originary world and the utopian society opposed to it so that the process of social change is more directly articulated. Finally, the novels focus on the continuing presence of difference and imperfection within utopian society itself and thus render more recognisable and dynamic alternatives. (Moylan 2014: 10)

In light of our discussion of *Another Now*, it is clear that most of the features that Moylan attributes to the critical utopia are to be found in Varoufakis’s novel: the awareness of the limitations of the utopian tradition is apparent in Iris’s ultra-utopian critique of the Other Now; the conflict between

the originary world and the utopian society opposed to it takes the form of the mass social and political struggle between the opponents and the defenders of the global capitalist system, as well as the lingering tensions that remain in the wake of the revolution; and the continuing presence of difference and imperfection is conveyed by the problems that Iris identifies and by the acknowledgement on the part of the inhabitants of the Other Now that corpo-syndicalism has not resolved every socioeconomic issue in a manner that is satisfactory to all. In each of these ways, both at the level of content and of form, *Another Now* fulfils Moylan's definition and thus bears a partial resemblance to the works by Joanna Russ, Ursula K. Le Guin, Marge Piercy, and Samuel R. Delany analysed in his study.³

There is one key element of Moylan's definition, however, that cannot be extended to cover *Another Now*. This is the specification that 'these texts reject utopia as blueprint while preserving it as dream'. The relationship between, in Moylan's terms, utopia-as-blueprint and utopia-as-dream in *Another Now* is not a straightforward matter: as in More's *Utopia* (1992), with its many layers of irony and ambiguity, how the reader ought to resolve the tensions between Varoufakis's authorial commendation of his utopia and the critical perspective introduced by Iris is a question likely to be answered in different ways by different readers. It remains the case, however, that the core of the text is a meticulously elaborated and resourceful blueprint for a new economic paradigm, one that has coalesced over the course of decades of academic research on the part of Varoufakis himself. If *Another Now* is in part a utopian dream in Moylan's sense of the word, it is more obviously a utopian blueprint.

Again, this is a blueprint – a systematic, prescriptive outline of a possible way of organising society – that is framed and partially qualified by critical considerations and unresolved problems that the text openly draws attention to. Unlike the critical utopia as conceived by Moylan, however,

3 In his 2020 study, *Invoking Hope*, Phillip Wegner considerably extends Moylan's account of the critical utopia, characterising the whole of utopian fiction since Aldous Huxley's *Island* as a series of variations on the form of the critical utopia (205–6). Indeed, for Wegner, even More's *Utopia* functions as a kind of proto-critical utopia: 'I would like to suggest that the utopia in *Utopia* is to be found not in Utopia, the island figure presented in Book Two... Rather, utopia is to be located in *Utopia*, More's book itself, and most particularly in the figure of a dialogue it offers us' (Wegner 2020, 84).

the presence of this critical frame does not mean that the text elevates utopian dreaming *at the expense of* its utopian blueprint, nor does it negate or place under erasure the utopia as its centre. Rather, Varoufakis's utopia is sincerely intended as a viable alternative to capitalism, even if it remains subject to difficulties it is unable to fully address in the form in which it is presented. This delicate balancing of two very different forms of utopianism thereby helps to show how preserving utopia-as-dream need not entail the rejection of utopia-as-blueprint, however well-established this critical opposition may be and however unfashionable the utopian blueprint may have become during the second half of the twentieth century.⁴

While it is expressed in a very different vocabulary and subject to many subtle modulations, a related conceptual opposition can be found at work in the highly influential writings of Fredric Jameson on utopia. In *Archaeologies of the Future* Jameson characterises his approach to utopia as a

- 4 In the decades since the publication of *Demand the Impossible*, Moylan has continued to refine and develop his thinking about utopia, including his views on the relationship between utopian dreaming and more programmatic utopian social and political policy. Much of this work has been collected in his important recent study, *Becoming Utopian*. In this text Moylan agrees with Jameson that utopianism today must start out from a negation of the anti-utopian present: 'Only from this negative standpoint, only by deploying a transformative interpretive critique, can we begin to articulate the negation of the negation' (2020, 3). On the other hand, while accepting Jameson's strictures against any immediate connection between utopian literature and politics, Moylan contends that 'imaginative explorations of the political process are nevertheless central to the utopian vocation' and that utopian texts can 'feed and enliven the political imagination' (32). Moylan later offers a more pointed criticism of Jameson's position: 'if one lingers at the negative and focuses only on the break, one could well be trapped in some contemporary version of Zeno's paradox and thereby neglect expression that registers tremors of emergent political movement' (112–13). These remarks, along with others of a similar nature, suggest that Moylan may be sympathetic to the more programmatic and propositional form of utopian fiction represented by *Another Now*. This impression is undercut, however, by his unequivocal rejection of utopian blueprints: 'becoming utopian', he writes, is 'not a matter of a top-down imposition of a plan or blueprint by a designing authority but rather a dynamic amalgam of experiences by which the many break with the existing world ... and work together toward a utopian horizon' (14). Here and elsewhere in the text, it is clear that blueprints continue to carry authoritarian associations for Moylan. The notion of a democratic, and hence genuinely utopian, blueprint is thus ruled out.

‘utopian formalism’, in which the ostensible content of the utopian text – social and political policies, new institutions, concrete proposals for change, and so on – is bracketed or at least strongly downplayed, and critical attention is focused instead on either the formal means through which utopia is articulated – for example, narrative closure or openness, the use of genre conventions, or the dialogic structure of the classical utopian text – or the role of utopias as expressions of social desire that cannot be satisfied under capitalism (Jameson 2005, xi–xvi). This approach, Jameson claims, ‘has the merit of shifting the discussion of utopia from content to representation as such’ – perhaps the decisive move in Jameson’s argumentative strategy, whereby utopia-as-blueprint is once again relegated to second place (ibid.: xiii).

Jameson elsewhere observes that what he terms his ‘perversely formalist approach’ leads him ‘to substitute the question, What difficulties must be overcome in imagining or representing utopia? for the seemingly more urgent investigation of the nature of utopian desire and the substance of its hope’ (ibid.: 85). For Jameson, ‘the most reliable political test [of the utopian text] lies not in any judgment on the individual work in question so much as in its capacity to generate new ones’ (ibid.: xv). It is as a means of giving voice to an interminable utopian longing, in other words, that utopian texts fulfil their true vocation, not as blueprints for real-world social change.⁵ It is partly for this reason that Jameson concludes his introduction to *Archaeologies* by suggesting that for the contemporary left, ‘the slogan of anti-anti-Utopianism might well offer the best working strategy’ – that is, not full-fledged utopianism or models of positive alternatives, but rather an investment in countering the anti-utopian sensibility of late capitalism through the more indirect path of the negation of utopia’s negation (ibid.: xvi).

Jameson’s interventions in the study of utopia are directed toward how we ought to conceive of the utopian genre and its cultural function rather than toward any actionable objectives articulated within utopian texts themselves. Given the professed formalism of this approach, it is no less viable as a way of reading Varoufakis’s *Another Now* than of reading earlier

5 Daniel Davison-Vecchione challenges some of the prevailing formalist approaches to the study of utopia and dystopia from a sociological perspective informed by the work of Georg Simmel in his fascinating article, ‘The Secret and *The Circle*: Georg Simmel’s Social Theory and Dave Eggers’ *Dystopian Fiction*’ (2024).

utopian works. In the case of *Another Now*, however, there would seem to be a *prima facie* tension between such an approach and the nature of the text. While there is nothing illegitimate about abstracting away from the novel's content in order to consider it either as an expression of an unfulfillable desire for something radically different or as a means of negating utopia's negation under late capitalism, there is arguably something unsuitable or inappropriate in so doing, a sense of inflicting hermeneutic violence on a text whose value seems so clearly to lie in its contribution to current debates about how humanity might transcend capitalism.

Literary texts cannot, of course, dictate the terms in which they are discussed; how we describe them and the uses to which we put them are, to a considerable extent, up to us. Given this inherently creative dimension to the act of reading, however, and given the fateful conjuncture to which global capitalism has brought us, there is a case to be made for setting aside prevailing critical orthodoxy and reading *Another Now* as an important contribution to an initial blueprint, and not merely a dream, of a post-capitalist utopia. This utopia is, to be sure, one that has learnt vital lessons from the critical utopias of the 1970s, not least in its commitment to democratic decision-making and its opposition to top-down organisation.⁶ By incorporating these insights into a remarkably ambitious, systematic, and robustly defended account of a radical alternative to capitalism, however, *Another Now* may represent the advent of a new form of utopian literature: the post-critical utopia.

6 In making the case for the concept of the post-critical utopia, the question inevitably arises of which other texts, if any, it might be applied to. While this question would need to be considered on a case-by-case basis, one author whose work suggests itself is Kim Stanley Robinson. In *Becoming Utopian*, Moylan argues that Robinson's utopian 'explorations grow out of the material conditions and contradictions of their alternative worlds and are not delivered as abstract agendas or answers' (2020, 123). In this way, he has developed an approach to the literary utopia that is 'simultaneously pragmatic and utopian' (ibid.: 135). While Moylan does not read Robinson's novels as offering direct proposals for political intervention or social planning, his emphasis on their concrete and pragmatic character is redolent of some of what has been said in this chapter about *Another Now*. Although it was published too late to be considered in Moylan's study, Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* (2020), which combines conflicting perspectives, an almost journalistic realism, and the articulation of a systematic solution to global heating, may be the Robinson text that best fulfils our definition of the post-critical utopia.

Quasi-Dystopian Pandemic Fiction

Sarah Hall began to write her novel *Burntcoat* (2021) on the first day of the first UK coronavirus lockdown in March 2020.¹ The lockdown involved the government issuing a strict stay-at-home order and the closure of all non-essential shops and services. After a variety of measures during the intervening months – including local lockdowns, new powers to enforce social distancing, and other restrictions – a second lockdown came into force on 5 November, followed by a third on 6 January 2021. The third lockdown was gradually relaxed in England between March and May. By early June, all major restrictions had been suspended. Hall's *Burntcoat*, a novel set in contemporary Britain and taking place for the most part during a devastating global pandemic, is a product of this fraught and traumatic period in the nation's history.

Hall is the author of four collections of short stories, published between 2011 and 2019, and four previous novels, published between 2002 and 2015. *Burntcoat* is her fifth novel, and, like its predecessors, it has received widespread acclaim among journalists, literary critics, and fellow authors. The book is relatively short, running to just over 200 sparse pages, and takes a somewhat unusual form, being divided into a series of stand-alone paragraphs generally no more than a third of a page in length. The narrative structure of the book is nonlinear and partly fragmentary, though never incoherent or difficult to follow. Its prose style is spare, impressionistic, and occasionally lyrical. Everything we see and hear during the novel is filtered through the memories and perceptions of its protagonist, with Hall using a range of techniques to show us the world through her character's eyes.

1 All subsequent references to the text in this chapter are given as page numbers in parentheses.

The overall effect of this approach is to render events and experiences with an intensity that would be harder to achieve with a more conventional style and structure. As we shall see, the formal qualities of *Burntcoat* directly inform its treatment of its main themes.

Burntcoat has a quite straightforward plot that it will be helpful to summarise before commencing our analysis of the text. The novel tells the story of Edith Harkness, a celebrated sculptor born, raised, and now working in an unspecified part of northern England. As the book's protagonist, it is Edith's past and present with which the narrative is primarily concerned. There are two other main characters: Edith's lover, Halit, and her mother, Naomi. In the opening section of the novel, Edith recalls her childhood experience of witnessing Naomi collapse while out shopping due to what turns out to be a blood clot on the brain. The resulting brain damage leaves her mother unable to communicate or care for herself, leading to the breakdown of her marriage and the departure of her husband. Having since managed to persuade the social worker she has been assigned that Naomi is slowly recovering and that mother and daughter are able to take care of each other, Edith spends her teenage years living an isolated life with her mother in a remote rural region where they rarely encounter other people.

Other episodes from Edith's life are interspersed with events happening closer to the present from which the novel is narrated. We hear about Edith's time at university, the first stirrings of her artistic talents, an early love affair she later regrets, and the growth of several friendships. One of the key episodes from the first half of the book, and a turning point in Edith's career as a sculptor, concerns the decision by a local authority to commission Edith to create a major public artwork. The work is situated at Scotch Corner, a real location found at junction 53 on the A1 motorway, also known as the Great North Road, that connects London with Edinburgh and passes through numerous northern counties. The project culminates in the construction of an immense wooden figure that looms over the traffic below and attracts national debate and controversy. Nicknamed 'Hecky' by Edith but officially entitled 'The Witch', the work

depicts a partly nude female figure who is simultaneously being burnt at the stake as punishment for her witchcraft and triumphantly rising from the flames as if being reborn. Edith's artistic accomplishments and burgeoning reputation leads to her receiving a prestigious arts prize that enables her to purchase a peculiar property called Burntcoat which may previously have been either a warehouse or a cattle exchange. Assisted by a friend from her student days, Edith converts the huge building into a two-level studio, with a room for working on her sculptures below and an apartment above. It is from her bedroom at Burntcoat, where she lies dying, that Edith narrates the novel.

Edith later meets the owner of a local restaurant, a Turkish immigrant named Halit, with whom she falls in love. Much of the final two thirds of the novel consists of a series of brief exchanges between the pair, from their first encounter at Halit's restaurant to their final moments together as Halit dies in Edith's arms. Many of the scenes between Edith and Halit are highly erotic and sexually explicit – a noteworthy feature of the text that we shall consider in a later section. It is during the early phase of their relationship that the onset of a global pandemic is announced. The virus – referred to either as AG3 or nova – spreads rapidly to all countries and results in mass death before an effective vaccine is synthesised two years later. In Britain, upwards of a million people die of the virus, and the country enters a phase of semi-authoritarian government to maintain order. Against this backdrop, Edith and Halit, who manage to remain safely secluded at Burntcoat for many months, develop a profound bond and knowledge of one another, leading Edith to reflect that during the first year of the pandemic it is as if 'We had accelerated through a lifetime's relationship' (168). Despite the pair's caution, Halit is nevertheless eventually infected, dying an agonising death after weeks of intensive care by Edith. Edith also contracts the virus but turns out to be one of a small minority said to have entered 'remission'. In Hall's fictional universe, however, remission can only be temporary, with nova always fatal in the long term. By the end of the novel, the virus has made its resurgence in Edith's nervous system, and she knows with certainty that her demise

is imminent. The book concludes with a metaphysical reverie in which Edith appears to have reconciled herself to the transience of life.

I. A Dystopian Novel?

Prior to *Burntcoat*, Hall had authored two novels that may be classified as works of speculative fiction. The first of these, *The Carhullan Army* (2007), is a generically conventional yet artistically accomplished dystopian novel. As a result of sea level rises, international military conflict, and disruptions to supply chains resulting from global heating, an authoritarian government has taken power in Britain and imposed strict curfew laws, resource rationing, and control of reproduction. Compulsory contraception is enforced for women and the right to bear children is assigned by lottery. Although in these regards the novel represents a fusion of tropes and conceits drawn from such classics of the subgenre as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Orwell 2004) and *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood 2017), it departs from these in its depiction of an all-female militia based in Cumbria that tries without success to topple the government. Moreover, the generic nature of the new governmental regime, which is simply named 'The Authority', and about which we learn very little regarding its composition or ideology, suggests that Hall is less concerned with the familiar trappings and preoccupations of authoritarian dystopias than with themes relating to female companionship and solidarity, which are richly explored in the second half of the novel after the protagonist arrives in Cumbria. *The Carhullan Army* thus employs while at the same time creatively transcending a familiar dystopian template.

The second of Hall's speculative novels, *The Wolf Border* (2015), is for the most part a work of realist literary fiction taking place in a world that is almost indistinguishable from the reader's own. Its speculative credentials are therefore slight, and the focus of the book on otherwise mundane events means its links with speculative fiction may appear tenuous. Following Judith Merrill's influential definition of speculative fiction as

fiction involving the introduction of ‘a given set of changes – imaginary or inventive – into the common background of “known facts”’ (Merril 2017: 27), however, *The Wolf Border* may be read as speculative fiction on the grounds that it features two such imaginary changes: the reintroduction of wolves into England and the decision by Scotland to secede from the United Kingdom and become an independent nation. Although these changes are perhaps not essential to the novel – much of its meaning and significance would be preserved if it was lightly rewritten and the speculative elements dropped – they arguably nevertheless serve to prevent the book from being assimilated into the category of realist fiction. The intriguing ambiguity of this experimentation with genre is replicated and more fully explored six years later in *Burntcoat*, which marks Hall’s return to dystopian fiction of a sort.

A clear contrast between *Burntcoat* and *The Carhullan Army* is that, whereas the latter is a recognisably dystopian novel that may be uncontroversially labelled as such, the former is harder to classify due to its employment of a limited palette of dystopian elements within a novel that would otherwise probably be considered a work of realist literary fiction. This is not to suggest, on the other hand, that *Burntcoat* is a repetition of the experiment that Hall had carried out in *The Wolf Border*. Whereas in *The Wolf Border* the speculative elements of the text are kept relatively partitioned and function mainly as a ladder to be climbed and then dispensed with for the sake of an essentially non-speculative narrative, the speculative dimension of *Burntcoat* is arguably more integral to the text, despite the novel as a whole generally maintaining a formal distance from the conventions of the most familiar kinds of speculative fiction: science fiction, utopia, dystopia, and alternate history.

As this somewhat cumbersome account of *Burntcoat*’s generic status itself suggests, placing Hall’s novel in relation to other kinds of fiction is not easy. In some ways, *Burntcoat* resembles the classical dystopia. Like *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it offers us the perspective of an individual inhabitant of (something like) a dystopian society. Like *The Handmaid’s Tale*, it shows us the world both before and after the onset of (something like) a dystopia. At the same time, however, these comparisons are liable to mislead. Unlike *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the ‘dystopian’ section of the narrative is relatively

short, lasting only as long as Britain remains under semi-authoritarian rule. Unlike *The Handmaid's Tale*, more of the text is devoted to the world before and after than is spent on the 'dystopia' itself. Another point of comparison may be post-apocalyptic fiction, with which *Burntcoat* partially shares its anxious mood and ambience. Like John Christopher's classic *The Death of Grass* (2009), *Burntcoat* depicts the breakdown of society and the consequences of this in the lives of its main characters. Unlike *The Death of Grass*, though, only the partial erosion of social structures occurs, not the wholesale collapse of modern life, and society is largely restored by the end of the book. In addition, there is the fact that whereas the texts just mentioned and many others like them are centrally concerned with a particular dystopian or apocalyptic development – whether this be totalitarianism (Orwell), the abolition of women's rights (Atwood), the collapse of the food supply (Christopher), or some other theme – it would be misleading to treat *Burntcoat* as exhibiting such a singular focus on the dystopian or apocalyptic. On the contrary, around a third of the text is spent rehearsing Edith's memories of her life in the decades leading up to the pandemic, while most of the remaining two thirds are devoted to Edith and Halit's relationship, with only occasional references to the wider world they inhabit. If *Burntcoat* is a dystopian novel, then, it is one of a quite unusual kind.

2. *Burntcoat* as Pandemic Fiction

The important differences just noted between *Burntcoat* and the works of dystopian fiction with which it invites comparison imply that Hall has written a novel that sits somewhere *between* dystopian fiction and realist fiction. This raises the question of what it is specifically about *Burntcoat* that positions it at this hard to define literary crossroads. It can be argued that the answer is connected with the fact that *Burntcoat* is one of the first major works of literary fiction to address the Covid-19 pandemic.

Burntcoat is in fact part of a small wave of pandemic fiction that began to appear in Britain almost as soon the pandemic was announced in 2020: Ali Smith's paired novels, *Summer* (2020) and *Companion Piece* (2022) responded in an especially timely way to the phenomenon of lockdown; Sarah Moss's *The Fell* (2021) focuses on the isolation of lockdown; Claire Pollard's *Delphi* (2022) approaches the pandemic via ancient Greek ideas about prophecy and fate; and Daisy Hildyard's *Emergency* (2022) explores connections between the experience of lockdown and the themes of nature, memory, and childhood. Unlike *Burntcoat*, none of these five novels is a work of speculative fiction. There are, though, resemblances between *Burntcoat* and the pandemic fiction of each of these authors: like Smith, Hall began exploring ways to write about the phenomenon of lockdown as soon as it was announced; like Moss, Hall uses her novel to explore the theme of isolation; like Pollard, Hall sometimes imputes a fatalistic quality to the pandemic and shows her protagonist learning to cultivate acceptance of her circumstances; and like Hildyard, Hall shows how lockdown drives her protagonist back into her own past and encourages her to revisit and reevaluate some of her earliest memories and formative experiences. In each of these ways, *Burntcoat* may be seen as part of a wider literary trend arising in 2020 and lasting until at least 2022.

What sets *Burntcoat* apart from each of these writers' novels is its dystopian dimension. While writers like Ali Smith and Sarah Moss treat the pandemic and lockdown in strictly realistic terms, Hall sparingly applies techniques drawn from speculative fiction in order to render a version of the pandemic that simultaneously resembles real-world events and departs from them in a number of suggestive ways. To a limited extent, and in a way that only slightly qualifies the novel's status as a work of realist fiction, *Burntcoat* may be read as an instance of what Sean Seeger and Daniel Davison-Vecchione have termed the 'extrapolative dystopia', which they define as a branch of dystopian fiction that 'works by identifying something already taking place in society and then employing the resources of imaginative literature to extrapolate to some conceivable, though not inevitable, future state of affairs' (Seeger and Davison-Vecchione, 2019: 55). *Burntcoat* involves a degree of this kind of extrapolation insofar as, rather than portraying the pandemic exactly as encountered in the real world,

Hall elects to rename the virus, increase its lethality, and imagine a somewhat more severe version of the events she herself was living through while writing the novel.

As in the real world, some people, we are told, have found nova to be no worse than flu, yet this is qualified by Edith's observation that there are only a 'few' such people (160). As well as bearing a clear resemblance to Covid-19 in its symptoms, the passages describing the spread of nova around the world are equally clearly inspired by the real-world trajectory of Covid as it moved beyond China, eventually reaching all countries. Where nova differs most notably from Covid is in its increased death rate, which although never precisely specified in the novel is implied to be substantially higher than that of the real virus. At the peak of the novel's pandemic period, a grim sequence of snapshot scenes suggests a high number of global deceased, while in Britain an image of rows of mass-produced urns indicates the extent of the mass death that has occurred (126–27). Toward the very end of the novel, after the pandemic has receded, Edith is commissioned to create a national memorial. It is mentioned in passing that over one-million British people died and that everyone who caught the virus will die in time, while those who have been vaccinated without having been infected are likely to survive (201).

By increasing the severity of the pandemic – thereby, in effect, imagining what a 'worse' pandemic would have been like – Hall is able to go on to imagine what the government's response to such a turn of events might have been. A little way into the pandemic, we are given a rapid overview of the deteriorating situation in Britain, with mass protests, a steady stream of medivac helicopters, food shortages, and general desperation (122–124). It is at this point in the narrative that Edith begins to feel that her previous attitude to the pandemic had been complacent, and she begins to worry about the security of Burntcoat (124). One particularly evocative image from this section is that of a burning car briefly glimpsed by Edith and Halit in a nearby housing estate as they break government curfew to make an essential late-night journey (124). A little later, there is an unsettling scene in which Edith has an altercation with an aggressive man while queuing for bread along with many others at a local bakery. After the man verbally intimidates and physically

assaults a young, presumably Chinese woman, loudly reminding her that the virus originated in her country, Edith intervenes and punches the man, driving him away (132). There is a note of desperation about food and other essentials that enters the novel in this scene and hints at fuller social breakdown if things do not improve. 'The man's face', Hall writes, 'was contorted; he'd given himself permission in this ugly new world' (132). The phrase 'ugly new world' verbally echoes and plays on the familiar title of Huxley's *Brave New World*, reinforcing the reader's sense that the fuller significance of this scene is to be found in the context of a longer tradition of dystopian fiction. The violent encounter is thus not to be taken as an isolated incident but as ominously foreshadowing dangers yet to come.

Taken in one way, these and similar passages support a reading of Hall's novel as an extrapolative dystopia. On this view, what these images and episodes suggest is that Britain is heading toward the kind of near collapse that will provoke an authoritarian response on the part of government. Again, however, this characterisation of the book in dystopian terms must be qualified if we are to remain true to the spirit of the text. On closer inspection, one of the fascinating qualities of *Burntcoat* is the way elements like the image of the burning car, the bread queues, the aggressive man, and at least some of the government's strict new social policies are simultaneously dystopian and, *to an almost equal extent*, realistic depictions of familiar scenes from life in Britain during the real-world pandemic. The burning car, for instance, while not a widespread phenomenon, is hardly a radical speculative leap beyond the kind of low-level disorder and disruption found in parts of the country throughout 2020–2021. Indeed, the laconic quality of Hall's prose in this and other scenes describing social breakdown means *Burntcoat* generally does not clarify whether we are reading about disruption attributable directly to the fictional nova pandemic or to a more general real-world malaise characteristic of post-Brexit Britain under successive Conservative Party administrations. The bread queues, likewise, need not be read as imaginative extrapolations: shortages of a range of goods, including basic foods and essential medicines, occurred at various points during the pandemic, often due to panic buying or supply chain issues. Even the encounter with the aggressive man is a pandemic

commonplace rather than an invention of the author: as well as a widely reported increase in social tensions and public aggression, a combination of fearmongering, xenophobia, and the unchecked spread of conspiracy theories led to a well-documented spike in abuse and discrimination directed at East Asian communities (Owen 2024). Finally, while the government measures depicted in the novel are more draconian and invasive than those imposed in reality, they are only so to a quite limited extent, and there is no suggestion that Britain is hurtling toward the full-blown totalitarianism of so many other dystopian narratives.

Another significant scene in this connection is one in which the Prime Minister announces lockdown on television. The announcement and the way it is framed are clearly modelled on Boris Johnson's actual announcement of the same on 23 March 2020, with the difference that the Prime Minister in the novel is a woman. This slight transposition encapsulates *Burntcoat's* relation to actual events: it is different insofar as it is free to partially invent and does not aspire to journalistic accuracy, yet it is the same insofar as what occurs is for the most part a fictionalised restaging of what really happened. We are now in a position to see why this poses a problem for reading *Burntcoat* as a dystopian novel, whether extrapolative or otherwise. Every feature of *Burntcoat* that could be cited as evidence that Hall has written a dystopia can, on a slightly adjusted interpretation, just as easily be construed as either a strictly realistic depiction of actual events and trends or, where the speculative aspect of the novel is strictly unavoidable, a relatively minor and almost incidental deviation from these. The main reason we are inclined to take scenes such as the incident outside the bakery as indicating that the novel is taking a dystopian turn is arguably because of the generic expectations we bring to such episodes having become aware that we are reading a novel that is to some limited extent a work of speculative fiction. It is arguably because we are so familiar with novels and films in which these sorts of encounters anticipate social breakdown of a more comprehensive sort that we are inclined to read them as presaging dystopia rather than as documenting social reality. On a first read, Hall's novel therefore seems more dystopian, whereas on a second, we realise how closely it

approximates the everyday experiences of many people in Britain (and elsewhere) during the pandemic years.

Taking all the foregoing complications raised about genre into account, and with the aim of trying to find a convenient formula for the distinctive kind of hybrid fictional writing that *Burntcoat* represents, the most suitable term for Hall's novel may be 'quasi-dystopian'. Though there may be a worry that 'quasi' is functioning here as something of a critical get-out-of-jail-free card that smuggles a little too much literary theorising into a single, somewhat bland piece of terminology, 'quasi-dystopian' can nevertheless be argued to be a useful term in the present context as it both mirrors the distinctive form of Hall's novel and conveys something of the dynamic interplay of speculative fiction and realist fiction described earlier. A quasi-dystopia may, then, be defined as a fictional scenario that occupies an ambiguous position between real-world actualities and fictional possibilities, and where the difference between the latter two aspects is either negligible or virtually indiscernible. On this definition, *Burntcoat* qualifies as a quasi-dystopian novel.

3. *Burntcoat* and the Erotic

Turning from the form of Hall's novel to some of its key themes, it is noteworthy that, despite the emphasis we have so far given to its dystopian elements, much of the novel consists of an intense, and sometimes intensely erotic, romantic narrative focusing on the burgeoning of Edith and Halit's brief but mutually transformative relationship. Although occasionally punctuated by scenes like that of the violence in the bread queue or images like the mass production of government urns, the novel's main focus is on domestic scenes of a sort that would not be out of place in any contemporary work of realist fiction. Even in this regard, however, where the novel's status as a work of speculative fiction seems most tenuous, further suggestive parallels with dystopian literature are apparent.

In his illuminating study *Desire and Empathy in Twentieth-Century Dystopian Fiction*, Thomas Horan has put forward the most systematic treatment of the role of the erotic in dystopia to date (2018). While readers of dystopian fiction will be aware that it often possesses an erotic dimension, Horan's analysis of its place in a series of classic dystopian novels reveals just how central sex, sexuality, and sexual pleasure are to these sorts of narrative. Horan's key contention is that

the major authors of twentieth-century dystopian fiction present sexual desire as an aspect of the self that can never be fully appropriated and therefore as a potential force for moral regeneration from within the totalitarian state. In a cross-section of twentieth-century dystopian novels, a sexual relationship gradually engenders revolutionary notions of social and personal responsibility. Though these sexual liaisons are frequently ill fated, they show that sexual desire has a propulsive ability to promote positive change even when both the sexual relationship and the resistance it elicits are curtailed. (ibid.: 1)

Allowing for the fact that, in our terms, *Burntcoat* is a quasi-dystopia rather than a classical dystopia of the sort with which Horan is primarily concerned, it is worth considering to what extent Hall follows her canonical precursors in presenting sexual desire either as 'an aspect of the self that can never be fully appropriated', 'a potential force for moral regeneration', or as possessing 'a propulsive ability to promote positive change'. To paraphrase these formulations from Horan, the question we are posing is: to what extent is sex a *subversive* force in *Burntcoat*?

One of Hall's many gifts as a novelist is her ability to write well about sex. Like some of her previous fiction, *Burntcoat* features sex scenes that are, by turns, explicit, sensual, erotic, and involving. Here and elsewhere in her work, Hall's descriptions of sex consistently avoid both the familiar traps into which literary authors notoriously fall: cliché and artificiality, on the one hand, and a pornographic or objectifying gaze, on the other. Whereas in the case of Hall's previous dystopian novel, *The Carhullan Army*, however, sexual encounters between characters are sporadic and play a relatively minor role in the narrative, the second half of *Burntcoat* is partly organised around episodes from Edith and Halit's sex life, whether these are directly depicted or implicitly conveyed by erotically charged

details and cues. The eroticism of *Burntcoat* is part of a broader tendency for Edith's experiences to be rendered in a highly embodied and visceral register. When the national lockdown is introduced, Edith is initially surprised to find herself in Halit's company when she had anticipated being alone for the duration of the pandemic but quickly makes the transition to an unfamiliar way of life. This passage, while not sexually explicit in the manner of many that follow it, establishes their ambience through its use of animal imagery and depersonalised physicality:

The shock of another human nearby when one expects to be alone. The strangeness of a shirtless back, that plate of muscle from spine to shoulder that seems wrongly wingless. In the first week of confinement, we spent hours in bed, deferring the sex, luxuriating in the long mutilation of desire, or eating, or talking, or reading by the stove. (99)

The language Hall uses to convey Edith's relationship with Halit in his physical presence – 'that plate of muscle from spine to shoulder that seems wrongly wingless' – and to evoke the couple's simultaneous sexual playfulness and earnestness – 'luxuriating in the long mutilation of desire' – is representative of the way *Burntcoat* fuses the subjective and objective dimensions of the characters' erotic life at the meeting point of their bodies. Edith elsewhere recalls that the first time she and Halit had made love their bodies had 'worked together like skinned machinery' (52) – a simile that combines the mechanical and the organic, the repetitive and the rhythmic. In another scene from earlier on in their relationship, the pair are so impatient to have sex – 'Nothing can prevent desire in its early stages' (58) – that they do so despite Edith undergoing a heavy period, resulting in both characters being smeared with menstrual blood, with clots gathering in the hair around Halit's thighs (60). 'You kept slipping out,' Edith recalls, 'agonised by the slickness of the movement' (58). Afterwards, the couple 'went to wash, dried each other, a little lost by the direction we had gone, into a new room of the relationship', with Edith instructing Halit in how to insert her tampon (60). It is through unreserved interactions like these, the novel implies, that the physical, psychological, and social barriers that separate Edith from Halit and that conventionally serve to mark the distinctions between individuals are overcome.

It is noteworthy, however, that such moments are accorded a quite specific meaning in the context of the larger symbolic frame of the novel. Edith and Halit's erotic life figures in the narrative as a form of escape, as in this suggestive image of the couple hiding in each other's bodies as Halit's penis enters Edith's vagina: 'If we went deep enough into each other, there would be a hiding place' (103). Not unlike Winston's illicit meetings with Julia in the room above Mr Charrington's shop in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, there is a clear sense in which, as the pandemic worsens and the government takes its authoritarian turn, Edith and Halit take refuge in the shared erotic world they have created as a way to simultaneously forget, evade, and transcend the quasi-dystopian circumstances in which they find themselves. In the same section of the novel, the idyll they begin to cultivate at Burntcoat takes on a momentary utopian inflection via an allusion to More's *Utopia* and the trope of the island-based utopia: 'We planted tomatoes in the yard, pretending we were on an island' (101). This seed of utopian possibility is not developed further, however, and the life Edith and Halit build together is consistently presented by Hall as an *escape* from the world as it exists rather than a sustainable *alternative* to it.

Returning to Horan's analysis of the erotic in dystopian fiction, a clear difference or cluster of differences between Hall's novel and the classic dystopias that precede it has to do with the way in which the subversiveness that Horan associates with dystopian eroticism seems either absent in the case of *Burntcoat* or present only in a much more indirect and diffuse form. During one of Winston and Julia's pivotal meetings in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, we read of their forbidden sexual liaison: 'Their embrace had been a battle, the climax a victory. It was a blow struck against the Party. It was a political act' (Orwell 2000: 145). By contrast, in Edith's mind, 'All we had was love, its useless currency, its powerful denial' (125). The generic conventions of *Burntcoat* as a quasi-dystopia invite such a comparison, leading to the conclusion that whereas the erotic is politically subversive in Orwell, in Hall's fictional world the erotic is essentially apolitical and/or devoid of wider social significance. If this were right, then in Horan's terms the potential for reading the eroticism of *Burntcoat* as 'a potential force for moral regeneration' would seem negligible, marking its departure

from novels by the likes of Zamyatin, Huxley, and Orwell in which the erotic is a potent source of subversive energy.

Things are rarely so simple in Hall's work, however. As we will see in the two remaining sections of this chapter, the fact that *Burntcoat* is a pandemic novel means that there is no direct route from its treatment of the erotic to the conclusion that it has no place for subversion as 'a potential force for moral regeneration'. Indeed, as shall now be argued, it is precisely the immersion of the second half of *Burntcoat* in the seemingly hyper-local qualities of embodied life that enable it to offer an ethical and political vantage point on the shared social reality of vulnerability and inter-dependency that the real-world pandemic revealed.

4. Touch, Immediacy, and Mediation in *Burntcoat*

One of the main ways in which *Burntcoat* approaches the issue of embodiment is via touch. In a dynamic that will be familiar to anyone who has experienced lockdown, much of the second half of Hall's novel is structured by a contrast between the people who occupy one's protective bubble – those who can touch you and whom can therefore likewise be touched – and the people outside it – those who cannot and must not touch you and whom you likewise cannot and must not touch. This dynamic is jointly sustained by physical separation and health concerns: those outside one's bubble are held at a distance in space and kept there in order to prevent the spread of infection. Taking off from the points made in the previous section about the seemingly escapist nature of Hall's exploration of the erotic, it is tempting to read *Burntcoat* as offering an essentially privatised view of touch in which touch is the unmediated, socially unmarked encounter of two bodies in their sheer quiddity or thereness, with no acknowledgement of a wider social frame beyond the insistent need to escape all awareness of it. By contrast with Winston and Julia's 'political act', it would appear that Edith and Halit's intimacy as a flight from the world presupposes an acceptance of the world as it is – including, by implication, the global

networks of power and inequality that Mike Davis has convincingly shown to have considerably worsened the impact of Covid-19 (Davis 2022). It can be argued, however, that it is *through* Hall's exploration of intimacy and touch that she manages to overcome the dichotomy of private and public that a surface reading of her novel might otherwise imply.

In an astute and provocative intervention in debates about Covid-19, its handling by governments worldwide, and the longer-term cultural and political implications of the pandemic, *The Revenge of the Real: Politics for a Post-Pandemic World* (2021), the social theorist Benjamin Bratton has reflected on some of the lessons to be drawn from the years 2020–21. One of Bratton's key contentions is that the collective trauma induced by the pandemic was due not only to the massive loss of life it involved and the partial breakdown of familiar social and economic structures, but also to the damage that the experience of Covid-19 did to a deeply ingrained and widely shared late modern conception of the self. In Bratton's words:

The pandemic has made it easier to see oneself more as *a node in a biopolitical network* to which one is responsible than as an autonomous individual whose sovereignty is guaranteed by free will or in the image of the national autocrat's symbolic prestige, at least for most people. This is a big change. It should be secured. This political epistemology of the species works against the folk image of the somatic body, cleansed of external contaminants, and presumes instead a biological economy of symbiotes. (ibid.: 53–54)

Bratton argues that contrary to an inherited liberal and, more recently, neoliberal picture of the self as an isolated, self-contained, discreet entity that ought to be accorded political sovereignty and which creates itself through its free decisions, the pandemic encouraged an alternative view of human beings as deeply situated within biopolitical webs of influence that run directly counter to such a view. The pandemic thus provides good reason to question any picture of the self in which the actions and choices of individuals can be understood apart from their enmeshment within global patterns of virological and immunological interaction.

Something like this insight is arrived at by Edith through several stages of increasing awareness. Firstly, there is the blissful initial phase of her isolation with Halit: 'To be trapped with a lover is a boon; it has the intensity of

a dream. This is what I thought, those first days' (98). Secondly, somewhat later, we read her reflection on that earlier phase that, 'The complacency and dissonance I'd felt seemed ridiculous' (124). Thirdly, a little further on again, she acknowledges that, 'We were in hiding, but it was harder and harder to keep our world airtight' (127). Finally, after Halit has died and the peak of the pandemic is past, Edith discovers she has caught the virus from him and rapidly declines herself (180–182), only to make a temporary recovery for most of the remainder of the narrative (183–208). During these ninety pages, Edith's journey is one from an illusory sense of isolation from the world brought on by physical distance to a clarity born from accepting her situatedness within a wider world of social and biological relations. In Bratton's terms, we could say she leaves behind her sense of herself as a 'somatic body, cleansed of external contaminants' and moves toward an image of herself as more like 'a node in a biopolitical network'.

A second strand of Bratton's argument has to do with the closely related topics of touch and mediation. The pandemic, Bratton claims, challenged

the insistence that direct and unmediated touch is not only preferable to remote engagement, but that it is authentic in ways that mediated social relations can never be. This is not only a misrecognition of what touch is, it is also a suppression of the sociality of relations we all hold with one another as part of a common biological and technological world. It is a belief that drags attention away from mutual entanglement on behalf of privatized communicative experiences. The problem then is not exactly the prioritization of intimacy over remoteness, but rather *the disqualification of remote intimacy* that societal-scale health care demands. (Bratton 2021: 72)

An appropriate social and political response to Covid-19, he adds later, 'may be less about removing the question of touch from the equation than about actually reaffirming it' (ibid.: 75). On Bratton's account, the pandemic made us aware of both the socially mediated nature of touch, on the one hand, and of the potential intimacy and proximity of that which appears remote, on the other. In effect, both nearness and farness come to take on new meanings: that which is near, such as a handshake, is also far – or, in Bratton's terms, mediated – by virtue of carrying or having the potential to transmit a virus or other agent considered to be 'out there', beyond one's protective bubble, while that which is far is also near by virtue of intruding

into a space that had been understood as intimate or secluded, as in the case of mass medical data collection undertaken within the home and then uploaded to the internet by millions of people worldwide.

Burntcoat displays an awareness of this dynamic while refracting it through its own imaginative approach to the pandemic. The fact that Edith contracts nova and that Halit is the only person who could have infected her given the duration of its incubation period means that the intimacy they have shared and through which they have achieved a new depth of life has at the same time exposed her to the virus that will ultimately kill her. Sex and death are thereby connected via the channel of viral infection: a concrete instance of the altered relation that the pandemic (both in the novel and in reality) has established between the near (the erotic) and the far (the possibility of one's own death). What the reader comes to realise in the concluding section of the novel is that throughout the lockdown scenes Hall has been exploring how the erotic, far from being something radically private that implies what Bratton calls the 'suppression of the sociality of relations', is in reality a fully social mode of relation in which one is multiply exposed to global behavioural circuits that involve risk and unforeseen encounters with unknown others, whether human, animal, or viral.² To return to Horan's analysis of eroticism in dystopian fiction, it can therefore be argued that, although Hall does not treat the erotic as a direct source of subversive social and political energy in the manner of Orwell, she does utilise the erotic as a critical lens through which to consider the entanglement of the near and the far, the human and the nonhuman, and the neighbour and the stranger in a highly globalised, volatile, interconnected world. At the same time, the erotic also serves to bring out the

- 2 The novel at no point alludes to or shows awareness of comparable discourses around AIDS, in which sex and death are likewise linked. Space does not allow for a fuller consideration of this potential reframing of the novel, but it seems likely that different aspects of the text would become salient in a reading that drew on scholarly research on the AIDS crisis of the 1980s. At a minimum, though, it should be noted that at least some of the insights to which the global pandemic has led theorists like Bratton and novelists like Hall are already familiar to those members of the queer community who lived through the AIDS crisis. See, for instance, Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? and Other Essays* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009).

interdependence and mutual exposure to harm entailed by such a world. In these ways, while not an overtly political novel in the manner of many other dystopian texts, *Burntcoat* provides a potential starting point for ethical reflection on how best to approach living in a post-pandemic world.

5. From Fantasies of Control to Shared Vulnerability

A final strand of Hall's novel that we have only touched on so far has to do with Edith's existential angst. Although *Burntcoat* does not quite commit to being an existential novel in the more explicitly and didactically philosophical style of writers like Sartre or Camus, it dramatises its protagonist's sense of objectless dis-ease in a manner that is at times reminiscent of mid-twentieth-century existentialist fiction. Once again, there is both an obvious and a less obvious connection with the pandemic. The obvious connection is that, as was widely reported during 2020–21, the spread of Covid-19, in combination with the extended lockdown periods and other government measures, gave rise to a second epidemic of isolation and anxiety. To this extent, Edith's experience is a faithful portrayal of the angst undergone by millions of people for whom death became a newly present reality and who often felt a sense of dislocation from familiar, identity-confirming routines and habits.

The less obvious and more interesting connection that Hall draws, however, is between Edith's experience of the pandemic and her longer-term struggle to come to terms with impermanence. During the early sections of the novel, we learn of how Edith in her youth had completed an apprenticeship in Japan with a master sculptor named Shun who had introduced her to a worldview – part Buddhist, part Shinto – in which impermanence is embraced and accepted. Responding to the news of Edith's mother's recent and unexpected death, Shun points toward a cedar forest and remarks that 'She cannot lose her nature if she is not separate' – a thought that Edith finds to be 'a beautiful denial of concept' (14–15). Later, while on a spiritual retreat in Southeast Asia, Edith is instructed by a guru who tells the

visiting seekers that death is something to be accepted and that ‘This too is part of existence’, before getting them to meditate on a decaying corpse (90–91). Finally, in the second half of the narrative, Edith learns how Halit likewise accepts death as part of his Islamic faith: ‘Death finds all of us’, he tells her. ‘We came from Allah, we go to Allah. Every creature will taste death’ (100). Despite these spiritual encounters, Edith is unable to overcome her anxiety in the face of the impermanence of things and her related craving for control. It is not until the pandemic has killed millions worldwide, Halit has died in front of her, and Edith herself has contracted the virus that her spiritual outlook begins to shift.

The final paragraph of the novel, which is written in a somewhat different, more metaphysical register to the rest of the text, suggests that Edith may at the end of her life have succeeded in fully embracing Shun’s belief in human oneness with the world (207–208). After recalling a childhood memory of swimming to the bottom of a pool beneath a local waterfall, Edith reflects in the last sentence of the novel that, ‘A life is a bead of water on the black surface, so frail, so strong, its world incredibly held’ (208). Rather than reading this epiphanic moment exclusively as the spiritual realisation of a solitary individual, it is important to situate it in relation to everything that has been said about Hall’s novel in the foregoing sections. If on one level what is described here is Edith’s personal enlightenment, on another level her realisation may be read as an acceptance of her entanglement with and enmeshment in a world which cannot be held at a distance, and which may be nearest to one when seemingly furthest away. Understood in these terms, Edith’s journey may carry a further meaning for the reader of the book. Just as the pandemic teaches Edith that she cannot, through individual resolve or force of will, make herself invulnerable, so the reader is implicitly encouraged to leave behind fantasies of control requiring an impossible degree of isolation from a world that touches them even in their most intimate moments. It is in the way the novel shows how we might be reoriented toward and thus become more fully responsible to the world that the ethical and political core of *Burntcoat* is to be found.

To conclude, we can return to the generic classification of *Burntcoat*. The pandemic in Hall’s novel, like its real-world counterpart, is the product of specific global conditions. In the case of the real pandemic, Bratton and

others have persuasively argued that austerity and cuts to public services during the previous decade meant its effects were considerably magnified in countries like Britain (Bratton 2021: 31–34). Davis draws on an extensive body of evidence to show that ‘the burning or logging of tropical forests, the proliferation of factory farming, the explosive growth of slums, and concomitantly of “informal employment”’ were among the pandemic’s key drivers (Davis 2022: 16–17). Meanwhile, researchers in climate science and freshwater ecosystems have shown that global heating and ecosystem destruction also played a significant role (Parmesan et al. 2022). By writing a quasi-dystopian novel, Hall is able to show how the pandemic disclosed dystopian possibilities that are not only latent, as in the extrapolative dystopia, but already present in the reader’s own world. By strategically deploying dystopian conventions to elicit a familiar set of readerly responses only to redirect those responses back onto actual events, *Burntcoat*’s effect on the reader is thus analogous to that of the pandemic on Edith, whose newfound connection with a world beyond herself means giving up any illusion of separation.

Utopia, or, What is Left of the Future?

Utopianism is responsible for some of the greatest crimes and tragedies of the modern period. Wherever utopian schemes have been put into practice, they have failed catastrophically. In attempting to remake the world and the people within it, utopia showed itself to be blind to reality and to human nature. In neglecting the imperfections of human beings and the institutions they create, utopians turned away from the demands of real politics and escaped into otherworldly fantasies. To any honest observer, the lesson of the twentieth century is clear: utopia must be written off as a failure and put squarely behind us. History shows that utopia is not only practically unachievable but an extremely dangerous ideal, hopelessly out of step with the world as it is.

Such, in any case, was the view of utopia prevailing throughout much of the world in the final decades of the twentieth century. The demise of utopia and the need to reconcile ourselves to our non-utopian prospects became, during these years, part of the reigning common sense of global capitalism. In one respect, this anti-utopianism echoed, however unknowingly, an insight found in the work of one of the century's most influential thinkers: Sigmund Freud. According to Freud, utopia is necessarily a chimera on account of the inherently conflictual nature of the human psyche. In the words of Philip Rieff, for Freud, 'we are frustrated because we are, first of all, unhappy combinations of conflicting desires' (Rieff 1979: 343). For Freud, utopia is an impossibility insofar as it would appear to require the elimination of the psychic and social conflicts to which incompatible human desires inevitably give rise. The failed attempts at utopia in the twentieth century seemed to offer confirmation of this view.

In the twenty-first century, however, and especially during the years since the 2007–2008 financial crisis, there has been a resurgence of utopianism in cultural and political discourse. Surveying social trends since 2008,

it is clear that utopianism has begun making inroads into the collective imaginary once again. Why this should be the case and why it should be occurring at this particular moment in history is a question that is very much worth asking. Answering it will require us to revisit the history of utopia in order to understand how its period of eclipse came about. We will then be in a better position to appreciate why our dystopian present is beginning to elicit some utopian responses.

1. The Rise of Utopia: 1516–1917

Although the concept of an ideally good society has roots in ancient Greek culture, the term ‘utopia’ was coined and first used in print by the English Renaissance statesman, writer, and humanist scholar Thomas More in his philosophical dialogue *Utopia*, originally published in Latin in 1516 and subtitled ‘On the Best State of a Republic and on the New Island of Utopia.’ More’s coinage is a multilingual pun drawing on ancient Greek etymology and meaning both ‘no place’ (*ou-topos*) and ‘good place’ (*eu-topos*) – an ambiguity richly elaborated throughout his layered and elusive text.

Utopia is ostensibly a description of an ideal society in which a simple form of communism is practised, universal healthcare is freely available, and divorce, euthanasia, and a degree of freedom in religion are permitted. It may also be read as a partial critique of that same society, which places severe restrictions on personal freedom, enforces harsh penalties for even minor misdemeanours, and relies heavily on slave labour. While citizens of Utopia have all their basic needs met by the state and benefit from short working hours and increased leisure time compared with More’s contemporaries, they are also subject to a high level of supervision and monitoring, requiring permission to travel from one district to another, for instance, and facing a lifetime of enslavement if they fail to do so on two consecutive occasions. A radical departure from the world of early modern England in some regards, *Utopia* has also been read as a warning and as looking forward to later historical developments. As two commentators

on More's work have put it, 'if Utopia anticipates the welfare democracies of our own time in many respects, the elaborate constraints imposed on its inhabitants also frequently put us in mind of modern totalitarian regimes' (Logan and Adams 2002: xii).

More's intentions in writing *Utopia*, and the uncertain role played by irony in the text, have been the subject of extensive scholarly debate, with no definitive conclusions reached as to its true purpose. Whether his book was intended as a satire and, if so, what it is supposed to be satirising, whether it was meant as a serious intervention in the politics of its day, or whether it was simply a diverting flight of the imagination will probably never be known. Whatever More's objective, the influence of his work on modern culture has been enormous, exceeding anything he could have anticipated. From Francis Bacon's early scientific utopia *New Atlantis* (1626) to B. F. Skinner's behaviourist thought experiment *Walden Two* (1948), and from lunar voyage stories like Francis Godwin's *The Man in the Moone* (1638) to science fiction novels like Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974), many prominent writers have since found More's *Utopia* to be an inescapable reference point for imagining alternate societies and thinking about how life might be conducted differently. Even where specific elements of More's own utopia are subverted or overturned, his basic conception of a genre in which unrealised social, political, and economic possibilities could be explored has remained a crucial resource for subsequent literature and social thought.

The second major period in the history of utopian literature was the nineteenth century, which witnessed an unprecedented proliferation of utopian writing, much of it broadly socialist in orientation (Beaumont 2009). Prominent examples of this trend include Edward Carpenter's *Towards Democracy* (1883–1905), Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888), William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890), and Oscar Wilde's 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' (1891), among many others. While there are important differences in form and content between these texts, each of them envisages a post-capitalist society where economic as well as political equality has been achieved, even if the means of attaining this are understood in diverse and sometimes opposing ways. While clearly rooted in the beliefs, values, and assumptions of the late Victorian era, there is also

a clear sense in which the more speculative dimension of utopian socialist fiction often anticipates elements of twentieth-century science fiction, as scholars like Darko Suvin have shown (2010).

Utopia is by no means an exclusively literary affair, however. One of the most distinctive features of utopia as a cultural phenomenon is that it encompasses both a rich literary tradition and a variety of real-world political projects. Utopia has not, in other words, been confined to the work of imaginative writers, but has exerted a considerable influence on political actors, sometimes on a large scale. It is for this reason that, despite the importance of the nineteenth century for the history of utopian literature, it would be a mistake to think either that utopia had leapt over the centuries separating More from Morris, or that utopia had persisted in a principally literary guise during that time. On the contrary, in the intervening centuries, utopia had entered the realm of politics, where it was to have a decisive impact on the course of events.

Seventeenth-century England saw multiple successive utopian political movements advocating for radical change at a national level, including the Levellers and Fifth Monarchy Men (Hill 2020). Of these movements, it was the religious reformer Gerrard Winstanley's Diggers which, as John Storey has argued, represented the most overtly utopian alternative to the status quo (Storey 2019: 42–57). Initially arising in response to the privatisation of land as a result of a series of enclosures, the Diggers' project quickly developed into a much more ambitious initiative seeking to replace England's late feudal, early capitalist settlement with a radically egalitarian, proto-anarchist network of self-sustaining rural communities (Hill 2001: 161–184).

Like Wat Tyler and John Ball, key figures in the Peasant's Revolt of 1381, Winstanley's politics were rooted in a reading of the Bible that emphasised its implications for social justice. His political pamphlet, 'The New Law of Righteousness' (1649), which set out the aims of the Diggers and made an impassioned case for the abolition of social hierarchies and land ownership, took as its point of departure a passage from the New Testament's Book of Acts: 'And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need' (King James Bible, Acts 2:44–45). On this basis, Winstanley

was able to make what he saw as the orthodox Christian case that, since all people are equal in the eyes of their creator, both aristocratic privilege and property in land are to be deemed illegitimate on Biblical grounds.

These principles were put into practice in a number of Digger colonies on previously vacant areas of land in Surrey, Kent, and Northamptonshire, where food was distributed freely to any who came to join the communities and contribute their labour. Each of these colonies was later overthrown, however, after local landowners hired armed men to drive the communities from the land. Undeterred, Winstanley's second pamphlet, 'The Law of Freedom in a Platform' (1652), went further, arguing that an authentic Christian society could only be established on the basis of the wholesale abolition of social rank, property relations, and wage labour. Although no further attempt was made to realise this vision during the remainder of Winstanley's lifetime, his conviction that society should be organised on the basis of full political and economic equality served as a common reference point and source of inspiration for many later utopians.

One of the most decisive turning points in the history of utopia was to come a little over a century later. Scholars of utopia are generally agreed that the French Revolution (1789–1799) represents the moment at which utopia entered the political mainstream. Prior to the events in France, utopia had been articulated via literary and philosophical works, political pamphlets, and various defeated uprisings by marginalised social groups, especially rural labourers. The concept of utopia was present in the public imagination of Europe during this time, but it was not a dominant idea in political life. The French Revolution was to change all of this by demonstrating that society could be radically transformed, not just in the realm of fantasy, but in reality. This transformation was to have far-reaching consequences for how social and political change was understood right down to the twentieth century. As Richard Rorty has put it:

The French Revolution [showed] that the whole vocabulary of social relations, and the whole spectrum of social institutions, could be replaced almost overnight. This precedent made utopian politics the rule rather than the exception among intellectuals. Utopian politics sets aside questions about both the will of God and the nature of man and dreams of creating a hitherto unknown form of society. (Rorty 1989: 3)

The lesson drawn by many observers of 1789 was that society is the contingent product of collective human agency, rather than the necessary result of either an immutable human nature or an unquestionable divine decree. What the demise of the *Ancien Régime* was taken to have shown was that, far from being essential, unalterable features of any viable way of life, the institutions, laws, and social structures that had been taken for granted in France – and, by extension, throughout much of medieval Europe – were in fact the outcome of a series of human decisions. These decisions could have been different, and therefore so could society.

The following century provides many examples of the kind of intellectual alluded to by Rorty: those for whom the French Revolution, whatever its shortcomings in practice, represented the birth pangs of a new age, and for whom utopianism was now the norm in politics. As well as utopian socialists such as Bellamy and Morris, there were communists like Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, and anarchists like Peter Kropotkin and Mikhail Bakunin. In different ways and from very different perspectives, all of these writers envisaged the end of capitalism and a transition to some form of classless society, organised either around the principle of voluntary cooperation, as in the case of Kropotkin's ideal of 'mutual aid' (Kropotkin 2022), or that of solidarity, as in Marx's dictum 'from each according to his ability to each according to his need' (Marx 1996). While the nineteenth century also witnessed significant revolutionary events, including the liberal and democratic upheavals of 1848 and the Paris Commune of 1871, it was not until the early twentieth century that an explicitly utopian project on a comparable scale to that of the revolution in France was launched.

2. Utopia in the Twentieth Century: 1917–1989

Vladimir Lenin, one of the principal architects of the Russian Revolution of 1917, was deeply versed in the works of Marx, elaborating on Marx's ideas in his own theoretical writings and aiming to realise communism as anticipated by Marx in his own native Russia (Lenin 2009). Lenin was also

an admirer of Winstanley's Diggers, his own hostility to religion notwithstanding, and had Winstanley's name carved into his Alexander Garden Obelisk of 'great revolutionary thinkers', which also included Marx, Engels, and More, among others (Buck-Morss 2000: 43). Lenin likewise shared the nineteenth-century utopian socialists' belief that there were still lessons to be learnt from the French Revolution, though he agreed with Marx that it had been deeply flawed, ultimately serving the interests of the bourgeois class, and that the Paris Commune represented a far more important event from the point of view of socialism (Lenin 2009: 33–51). Lenin was also the co-founder of the Bolshevik Party along with his early collaborator and later political opponent Alexander Bogdanov, a remarkable Russian polymath who, as well as developing an early version of information theory, was the author of the 1908 novel *Red Star*, the first Bolshevik utopia and a celebrated work of Russian science fiction (Bogdanov 1984).

In the tradition of the seventeenth-century man in the moon subgenre, *Red Star* relates how a Bolshevik Party member is brought by Martians to their home planet, where he encounters a society in which the major pathologies of capitalist society identified by Marx – alienation, exploitation, and class division – have been eliminated. The Martians are enlightened communists whose civilisation is defined by egalitarianism, freedom of occupation, and the priority of leisure. While there is a fantastical quality to Bogdanov's novel, there is little doubt that the Martian civilisation represents an approximation of its author's own vision of an achieved utopia. Despite being a work of science fiction set on another planet, *Red Star* may therefore be read as a literary distillation of the utopian hopes that inspired the early Bolshevik movement (Krementsov 2011: 33–54).

Within just a few years of the Revolution, however, this image of utopia was seeming ever further out of reach and was beginning to be replaced in the minds of some Russian writers by more dystopian speculations. Lenin was the head of state during this period, acting as head of the government of Soviet Russia from 1917 to 1924. As a follower of Marx, Lenin shared Marx's dream of a united, post-capitalist world where the means of production would be collectively owned and the state would have, as Marx put it in an influential formulation, 'withered away' (Lenin 2009: 16–21). On the way to true communism, however, Lenin foresaw that a transitional

phase of state power would be needed in order to fend off resistance from rival factions and opponents of the revolution. Borrowing a phrase used by Marx in a letter of 1852, Lenin argued for the necessity of a 'dictatorship of the proletariat', whereby the power of the state could be brought to bear on enemies of the new regime (*ibid.*: 75–92).

During Lenin's subsequent premiership, this power – in the form of prison camps, state terror, and mass executions – was used to discipline and punish citizens perceived as disloyal. The new Soviet state was built around a centralised, planned economy, with production and distribution controlled directly by government. Bogdanov's attitude to 1917 and its aftermath was, meanwhile, decidedly ambivalent (Krementsov 2011: 93–128). On the one hand, he continued to believe that the overthrow of autocracy must count as an emancipatory step, maintaining his defence of both the revolution of 1917 and the defeated earlier revolution of 1905, and remaining an adherent of Marxism. He was nevertheless dismayed and appalled at the events following 1917 and was strongly opposed to Lenin's methods once the latter was established in power. To the end of his life, Bogdanov continued to believe that the goal proposed by Marx – the creation of a new kind of society that would exist solely for the sake of the free realisation of human powers and capacities – was the logical end point of modern social development, while nevertheless detesting the means by which Lenin had set out to achieve it. Bogdanov remained a critic of Leninism and the new regime until his death in 1928.

Throughout the revolutionary years, Bogdanov had observed a leadership cult growing around Lenin and the erosion of democracy within the Bolshevik Party. The rise of Joseph Stalin confirmed everything he had feared. Stalin took power after Lenin's death in 1924 and initiated a period of unprecedented repression. The immense failure of Stalin's collectivisation of industry and agriculture, and the new form of authoritarianism that accompanied it, were to prove definitive of the Stalinist era (Kotkin 2018). The ensuing Great Famine resulted in the starvation of at least 3.5 million peasants, possibly many more (Davies and Wheatcroft 2003), while the Great Purge, during which all political opposition to Stalin (both real and imagined) was crushed, is estimated to have seen more than half a million citizens executed and millions more exiled (Conquest 2008). This was also

the period of the construction of the Gulags: a vast system of forced labour camps which incarcerated almost twenty million people over the next three decades (Applebaum 2004). Even before the Stalinist period, however, it was clear to some Russian observers that the country that was emerging in the wake of the revolution was a betrayal of its utopian hopes. This view was perhaps best articulated by Yevgeny Zamyatin, another Bolshevik Party member and a prominent Russian author during the 1910s and 20s.

Completed in 1921, Zamyatin's novel *We* was likely the first text to be banned by the Soviet Censorship Board, later leading to the black-listing of its author. A version of the novel nevertheless began to circulate outside Russia, with an English translation appearing in the United States in 1924. Although abridged and containing many errors, the book was a profound influence on the two most widely read and best-known dystopian novels of the century: Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, both of which bear the imprint of *We* at many points. Like the societies later imagined by Huxley and Orwell, the society depicted in *We* is characterised by total social control and the absence of free thought. *We* extrapolates from Zamyatin's observations of post-revolutionary Russia in order to imagine a world in which a successor regime to the Soviet Union has conquered the planet and maintained its dominance into the distant future. In the world of OneState, each hour of the day and all activities are rigidly scheduled and accounted for, with even sexual intercourse taking place at an appointed time. Citizens wear standard issue uniforms and are assigned numbers instead of names. Power is centralised in the figure of the ominous Benefactor, while the only written expression permitted outside of scientific research is state propaganda. As the novel's protagonist, D-503, puts it, the hyper-totalitarian, pseudo-mathematical aim of OneState is

to integrate completely the colossal equation of the universe. Yes: to unbend the wild curve, to straighten it tangentially, asymptotically, to flatten it to an undeviating line. Because the line of OneState is a straight line. The great, divine, precise, wise straight line – the wisest of all lines. (Zamyatin 1993: 4)

Written in a hyperbolic style, *We* is a scathing satire that borrows tropes from the work of H. G. Wells and other science fiction authors

in order to comment on the experience of Zamyatin's contemporaries and to offer a warning about Russia's future. As a portrait of a society purged of difference, desire, creativity, and contradiction, *We* charts the distance travelled since Bogdanov's pre-revolutionary, ultra-utopian *Red Star*. The revolutionaries had dreamt of Mars; what they got was OneState.

Between them, as Peter Fitting (2010) and Gregory Claeys (2017) have shown, Wells, Zamyatin, Huxley, and Orwell, along with some less well-known writers of these decades, such as Rose Macaulay and Katharine Burdekin, jointly constructed a new literary subgenre: dystopian fiction. Whereas the utopian literary tradition from More to Morris had focused on visions of the good society and the good life for human beings, dystopian fiction took as its subject the many ways in which freedom might be eroded and human flourishing thwarted in the modern world. As well as serving as critiques of the particular social and political circumstances in which they were produced, these dystopian novels also often served the anti-utopian purpose of warning later generations of the dangers involved in attempting to implement utopian projects. During the century since these texts began to appear, they have consequently become ubiquitous and near-universal cultural shorthands for authoritarianism, oppression, and the defeat of secular progressive hope.

3. Utopia and the End of History: 1989–2008

Between the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, there was much commentary, both scholarly and journalistic, on the failure of the Soviet experiment. Very often the same lessons were drawn from the events of these years – lessons which were to inform the political common sense of the following decades. In 1989, the political scientist Francis Fukuyama formulated the first of these in a particularly dramatic way:

What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government. (Fukuyama 1989: 4)

By 'the end of history', Fukuyama did not mean that there would be no more historical events, but rather that the end of history understood as a competition between rival political ideologies may be at hand. From Fukuyama's perspective, the Cold War had shown that there remained just two, mutually exclusive political and economic options in the modern world: centralised state communism on the Soviet model, or liberal democracy and the free market. The spectacular failure of the first meant that the second ought now to be declared the winner. Whatever its faults, some combination of liberalism and capitalism was now the only serious contender for political legitimacy.

The second lesson drawn from the Soviet collapse had to do with utopia. For many commentators, including those who had been critics of the Soviet Union during the preceding decades, the inability of the Soviet system to deliver on the revolutionary promise of 1917 meant that utopia had been 'refuted' by the course of events. As Ruth Levitas has observed:

Television and press commentary on the collapse of communist regimes referred repeatedly to the collapse of utopia, with utopia itself equated with Marxism, communism, and totalitarianism. Politically, both Marxism and utopia were regarded as 'over', and wider political and intellectual discourses followed the same trend. (Levitas 2011: x)

The thought behind this equating of the failed Soviet regime with utopia – and hence the discrediting of utopianism in all its forms – was that if the Soviet Union had been the most ambitious attempt ever undertaken to realise utopian ideals, then what its failure signified was that utopia had been *empirically* refuted, that is, not just defeated argumentatively but shown to be unviable in practice. On the assumption that the initial identification of the Soviet Union with utopia is well-founded, this is a forceful criticism as it appears to place the weight of history on the side of utopia's critics: if, it was reasoned, the Soviet utopian project had decisively failed (along with

its equivalents in China and Cambodia), then the same verdict applies to utopia *as such*. The one stood or fell with the other.

This, then, was the multi-pronged attack that appeared to have vanquished utopia during the 1990s and early 2000s. Liberal democracy had emerged victorious at the end of the Cold War, history was over, and the collapse of the Soviet Union had proven utopia to be an impossible dream. Aside from piecemeal revisions to liberalism and capitalism to be made on an ad-hoc basis, no further ideological struggles lay ahead. In such a context, the very idea of utopia seemed like a quaint reminder of an earlier and in some ways more innocent age: a time when there were still political ‘ideas’ to argue about, and when there could still be substantial disagreement about social and political ends. From its origin in More’s ambiguous text of 1516 to its seemingly unambiguous demise in 1989, utopia had served as a repository for the collective hopes and desires of those dissatisfied with the world as they found it. In the final decade of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first, utopianism was widely agreed to be exhausted. Utopia’s almost five-hundred-year adventure was seemingly over.

4. Politics Since the Financial Crisis: 2007–2023

During the twenty-first century, however, Fukuyama’s ideological end stage of history has proven to be a mirage. This is clearly indicated by the path taken by world events since the global financial crisis of 2007–2008. Contrary to Fukuyama’s confident prediction that liberal democratic capitalism would be the world’s final political settlement, the early decades of the new century have multiplied political possibilities and highlighted a range of ideological competitors. Indeed, as John Gray has argued, it may even be the case that what we are witnessing in the 2020s is the worldwide demise of liberalism as such and its replacement by a range of post-liberal and non-liberal alternatives (Gray 2023).

Xi Jinping’s proto-totalitarianism, Donald Trump’s illiberal democracy, the resurgence of fascist and quasi-fascist parties across Europe, and

what Gideon Rachman has called the phenomenon of the new populist 'strong man' (Rachman 2023) all remind us that the link between capitalism and liberalism is contingent; it is possible to retain the former while dispensing with the latter. At the same time, the emergence of movements on the radical left in response to post-2008 bank bailouts and economic austerity measures also runs counter to Fukuyama's end of history narrative. During the decade following 2008, Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party in Britain, Alexis Tsipras's Syriza in Greece, and Pablo Iglesias Turrión's Podemos in Spain all commanded a broad support base, especially among younger voters, through their combination of populist tactics, commitment to renewing democracy, and economic policies significantly to the left of the established consensus in their respective countries. Likewise, although he was unsuccessful in seeking the Democratic Party nomination in 2016 and 2020, the fact that Bernie Sanders, a self-described socialist who has articulated a comparatively radical critique of US structural inequality (Sanders 2023), came close to being a contender for the presidency indicates that the political field has diversified considerably since Fukuyama's prophecy of 1989.

Beyond the form of the traditional political party, the post-2008 period has also seen an efflorescence of radical protest movements on a scale not seen since the US civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. In response to economic austerity and the sense that governments were acting to 'socialise the losses, privatise the gains' of financial speculation, the grassroots anti-capitalist Occupy movement was born in the occupation of Zuccotti Park in New York's Wall Street financial district in September 2011. The now familiar slogan adopted by the movement, 'We are the 99%', focused attention on the disparities between a hyper-wealthy elite and an increasingly impoverished and insecure majority. While the phrase itself is generally attributed to the anarchist anthropologist David Graeber, who gave a series of popular public lectures on capitalism, debt, and the 99 per cent at Zuccotti (Graeber 2014), the 1 per cent had earlier that year already been the subject of a widely shared article by the Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz, in which he observed that the 1 per cent of the US population who control 40 per cent of the wealth no longer understand that 'their fate is bound up with how the other 99% live.

Throughout history, this is something that the top 1% eventually do learn. Too late' (Stiglitz 2011). After the protestors were forced from Zuccotti in November, Occupy morphed into a global movement with demonstrations and occupations held in more than thirty countries.

Black Lives Matter (BLM), a social justice movement opposing anti-black violence and white supremacy, was founded in 2013 in response to the murder of the African American teenager Trayvon Martin. As well as achieving worldwide visibility through its effective use of nonviolent civil disobedience tactics to draw attention to the unlawful killing of dozens of African Americans at the hands of police, BLM also formed alliances with movements for indigenous and LGBTQ rights, and inspired protests and related movements in Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Japan, New Zealand, and the UK (Lowery 2017). In 2020, the murder of George Floyd, a 46-year-old African American man who died after a police officer knelt on his neck for almost eight minutes, led to BLM protests in over 2,000 US towns and cities, with an estimated 10,000 separate demonstrations involving as many as 26 million participants over the course of the following four months – the largest protest movement in the nation's history (Buchanan, Bui, and Patel 2020).

Three years earlier, on 21 January 2017, the day after President Donald Trump's inauguration, the Women's March on Washington saw between 3 and 5 million citizens take a stand against the new president in defence of women's rights, human rights, and justice for racial and sexual minorities – a day of protest second in magnitude only to 6 June 2020, when the unrest following the death of George Floyd reached its peak (ibid.). Also beginning in 2017, with accusations of sexual misconduct against the film producer Harvey Weinstein, the global #MeToo movement drew attention to the ubiquity of sexual violence against women and the need for renewed feminist activism (Alcalde and Villa 2022). Related campaigns over the following two years saw further sizeable demonstrations against the Trump administration, including numerous 'Handmaid' protests, in which protestors dressed in red cloaks and white bonnets in the style of women forced into sexual slavery in Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* took to the streets to oppose restrictions on reproductive rights and entrenched misogyny in US society, sometimes marching

under the slogan 'Make Margaret Atwood fiction again' (Beaumont and Holpuch 2018). On 24 June 2022, however, the worst fears of these groups were confirmed when the now conservative-leaning US Supreme Court overturned the 1973 *Roe v Wade* ruling protecting women's right to an abortion up to 24 weeks and granted states the power to instead determine their approach to abortion rights on an individual basis.

Two other notable twenty-first-century movements for radical change are Extinction Rebellion and Just Stop Oil, established in the UK in 2018 and 2022, respectively. Like BLM, Extinction Rebellion uses nonviolent civil disobedience to raise public awareness about environmental issues neglected by mainstream political parties, primarily global heating, species extinction, and climate inequalities (Extinction Rebellion 2018). As its name suggests, Just Stop Oil is specifically directed against fossil fuel production, and its activists have tended to employ more disruptive and attention-grabbing tactics than Extinction Rebellion, including large-scale traffic obstruction, interruption of popular sporting and musical events, and vandalism of corporate property, making them Britain's 'most troublesome protestors since the suffragettes', as one commentator has put it (Rusbridger 2023). These movements have coincided with highly visible interventions in international debates about climate policy by the Swedish teenage activist Greta Thunberg, which have served to raise awareness of the urgency of the climate crisis, especially among children and young people, who have followed Thunberg's lead in proving themselves to be highly effective environmental activists (Thunberg 2022).

Combined with the retreat of liberal democracy and the rise of authoritarianism around the world, the social pathologies, environmental problems, and economic injustices that are the targets of these diverse activist groups point to a political situation very far from the ideological equilibrium anticipated by Fukuyama. Whereas Fukuyama and those who shared his outlook on the post-1989 settlement had held that small-scale alterations to existing structures would be all that was needed for the foreseeable future, since 2008 an increasing number of constituencies have been calling for much deeper and more radical kinds of change. Here it is important to recognise the far-reaching implications of the demands made by movements

like Occupy, BLM, Just Stop Oil, and the various left populist parties. While these examples obviously do not exhaust the field of radical politics today, taken together they represent an unignorable collective demand for equality, solidarity, and ecological responsibility.

5. Fisher on Capitalist Realism

One of the most theoretically sophisticated critiques of contemporary society and culture to appear since 2008 is that of the British cultural theorist and political activist Mark Fisher. Fisher's work offers a somewhat different analysis of the post-1989 and post-2008 settlements to that of the groups discussed previously – one that has since exercised a considerable influence both within the humanities and social sciences and throughout wider cultural discourse (Colquhoun 2020). Completed during the financial crisis and published the following year, Fisher's widely cited and discussed book *Capitalist Realism* (2009) provided a vocabulary and conceptual toolkit for a new generation of radical activists and critics of neoliberal capitalism. The full sweep of Fisher's interests and concerns is better represented, however, by the many essays included in the posthumously published collection *k-punk* (2018), which may be read as an extended commentary on some of the dominant cultural and political trends of the early twenty-first century.

Compiled by the London-based radical publisher Repeater, *k-punk* gathers work written by Fisher between 2004, shortly after the launch of his blog *k-punk*, and 2016, the year before he took his own life at the age of forty-eight after a struggle with depression.¹ Running to more than 800 large pages, *k-punk* is an extraordinarily rich and wide-ranging book, condensing decades of reflection on society, politics, and culture into a single, huge volume that encompasses early versions of many of the ideas presented in Fisher's celebrated trio of books –

1 Some of what I say in this section began its life as a blog post on the topic of Fisher's work (Seeger 2019).

Capitalist Realism (2009), *Ghosts of My Life* (2014), and *The Weird and the Eerie* (2016) – as well as various interviews given between 2010 and 2014.

In his editor's introduction to the book, Darren Ambrose observes that, looking back over the pieces that make up *k-punk*, one is led to the 'incredibly sad realisation that this is all there is, and all there ever will be' (Fisher 2018: 26). When news of Mark's suicide broke, it elicited a wave of deeply felt blog posts, online commentary, and personal reflections from friends and colleagues across the UK and beyond. This sense of loss pervades the experience of reading *k-punk* and has inevitably shaped the way the book has been received and read (Colquhoun 2020). Despite the circumstances of its publication, however, as well as the book's sustained emphasis on the worst aspects of life under late capitalism, the overall impression left on the reader of *k-punk* is not one of despondency but rather an awareness of new possibilities, including a revitalised feeling for the utopian potential of art and music.

Fisher was an early adopter of the blog as a platform for cultural criticism. Blogging appealed to Mark because it represented a form of communication which was fast, interactive, and, perhaps most importantly, communal. As he puts it in one of the many posts included in the book, Web 2.0 technologies are 'the work of the multitude', an expression of the impulse to share which represents the best side of the internet (Fisher 2018: 201). Another aspect of blogging that appealed to Fisher was that it encouraged shorter, punchier interventions, as opposed to the more ponderous, longer form writing expected of academics (ibid.). It can nevertheless be argued that Mark's posts not only survive their incorporation into such a sizeable printed text but work surprisingly well in their new medium. While some of the distinctive qualities of the blog format are inevitably absent, *k-punk* compensates for this by providing a clearer sense of continuity than is available from posts accessed individually via a web browser. In his preface to the book, Simon Reynolds writes of how, in his correspondence with Mark, he became aware of 'a gigantic edifice of thought in the process of construction' (ibid.: 15). The scope and interconnectedness of Mark's thinking is thrown into relief by *k-punk*.

Fisher's approach to cultural theory had its roots in the work of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (Ccpu), 'a para-academic organisation

loosely tethered to Warwick University's Philosophy Department', to which Mark belonged in the 1990s (ibid.). Through his participation in Ccru, Fisher developed what he calls 'a way of doing theory through, not "on", pop cultural forms' (ibid.: 31). Insofar as the work collected in *k-punk* may be said to adhere to a methodology, it is to be found in this way of thinking critically about society and culture via books, films, pop songs, and television programmes. Fisher's approach ought to be distinguished in this regard from more traditional forms of cultural studies of the kind associated with the Birmingham School in England. Whereas the latter tends to read cultural texts primarily as *symptomatic* of broader social, political, and economic trends (Hall 2016), Fisher's analyses are no less concerned with the new horizons that such texts are able to disclose than with how they reflect familiar realities. While there is much insightful analysis in the classic cultural studies mode throughout *k-punk*, it is in his creative and sometimes utopian deployments of literature, film, TV, and music that Fisher sets himself apart from many other cultural theorists.

For our present purposes, the most salient aspect of *k-punk* is its characterisation of the present. One thing that emerges more clearly from this book than from *Capitalist Realism* is the extent to which Fisher wished to frame late capitalist society in explicitly dystopian terms – that is, as a social form which may be compared in certain respects with the scenarios depicted throughout dystopian literature and film. *k-punk* incorporates a significant amount of Mark's writing on novels, films, and TV programmes, thereby helping to flesh out what could be thought of as the 'imaginary' of capitalist realism. Whereas the 2009 book had been a slender volume with a more restricted purview, *k-punk* provides a much fuller sense of how Mark's social thought is informed by his engagement with specific writers and filmmakers, most notably Franz Kafka, J. G. Ballard, Margaret Atwood, William Burroughs, and David Cronenberg, all of whom are discussed and alluded to frequently.

The concept of capitalist realism is by now widely familiar. In essence, it is the thought that the culture which the present stage of capitalism has given rise to serves to make any alternative to capitalism unthinkable. Capitalist realism is the mindset and default outlook of a society in which capitalism has saturated social and intellectual space, leaving no political or imaginative standpoint from which to envisage alternatives. As he

acknowledges, Fisher's thinking on this topic owes an intellectual debt to the work of Fredric Jameson, whose book *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) is a clear forerunner of *Capitalist Realism*, and whose famous observation that it has become easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism is cited several times in the course of *k-punk*.

Drawing on both Jameson's analysis and work by the Marxist geographer David Harvey, Fisher understands the dystopian condition of what he terms 'late, late capitalism' (Fisher 2018: 227) as one in which highly circumscribed forms of political freedom coexist with increasingly severe forms of material deprivation and economic inequality. On the one hand, as subjects of late capitalism, we are free, within certain limits, to believe whatever we like and to consume whatever we desire from a preset menu of options. On the other hand, the context in which these limited forms of freedom are exercised is one where a growing number of people's basic material needs are not met, and where the sustaining conditions of their lives, such as employment and housing, are increasingly precarious. In these circumstances, in which access to adequate income, shelter, nutrition, and medical care is restricted to an ever-shrinking section of the population, the value of existing political freedoms is also thereby undermined. On Fisher's analysis, the ideology of capitalist realism is responsible for normalising this situation, in which artificial scarcity and extreme inequality have become not only an accepted part of everyday life, but seemingly a feature of any possible world we are capable of imagining. It is against this dogma, which casts the failings of a specific socioeconomic regime as ineradicable features of the human condition, that much of Fisher's work is directed.

Central to the narrative which underpins *k-punk* is the transition from Fordist to post-Fordist manufacturing. In line with commentators like Harvey, Fisher sees this development as simultaneously a key turning point in the history of capitalism, the beginning of a new economic regime of flexible accumulation, and a major consolidation of capitalist class power. Although written from a radical left standpoint, *k-punk* is critical of the responses of both the political right and the political left to this post-Fordist turn. Right-wing reactions to post-Fordism and the profound social disruption it has unleashed are regarded by Fisher either as impotent attempts to

revive moribund traditions – as in the case of the ‘right-wing autonomism’ of Phillip Blond’s Red Toryism and Maurice Glasman’s Blue Labourism (ibid.: 468) – or as incorrigibly racist, sexist, and homophobic projects – as in the case of the Trump administration, the various anti-migrant populist parties across Europe, and the worldwide resurgence of nationalism. Responses from the left, meanwhile, are seen either as lamentably acquiescent – the traditionally leftwing Labour Party’s capitulation to neoliberalism and militarism under Tony Blair being one of Fisher’s key examples (ibid.: 463) – or lacking in political traction and efficacy – a recurring target for Fisher here being the predominantly anarchist ‘horizontalist left’ (ibid.: 542).

Although his criticisms of left horizontalism are carefully qualified, Fisher voices misgivings about it on the grounds that its anti-hierarchical thinking and tactics have by this point been absorbed by neoliberal capitalism itself through new schools of management theory (ibid.). Another objection he poses to contemporary anarchism is that it tends to essentialise institutions, regarding the state, parliament, and the media as hopelessly corrupted by existing power relations (ibid.). All of these, from Fisher’s anti-essentialist political perspective, remain open to being recaptured and repurposed by a resurgent left (ibid.). For the most part, Fisher favours a fairly traditional political party structure for the left, which he claims needs to be preserved for the sake of ‘institutional memory’ and in order to guard against the fragmentation which he associates with anarchist organising (ibid.: 530).

Fisher’s consistent critique of the left in all its contemporary varieties, however, is that it has failed to adapt creatively to a post-Fordist world. On Fisher’s reading of the period from 1979 to 2016, it is neoliberalism and, more recently, the associated ideology of capitalist realism that the left has been singularly unsuccessful in countering. During these decades, many on the left either fatally underestimated the historic significance of neoliberalism or, as in the case of the Labour Party, sacrificed their principles and embraced it (ibid.: 463–468). Although Fisher’s sympathies lie unambiguously with the radical left, then, what *k-punk* as a whole presents is an image of a moribund late capitalist world in which even capital’s opponents have either capitulated to it or ceased to be able to envisage meaningful alternatives.

6. Fisher on Acid Communism

The final section of *k-punk* comprises the unfinished introduction to *Acid Communism*, a book project which remained incomplete at the time of Fisher's death. The inclusion of the latter material means that it is possible to observe a broad overall direction to Fisher's thinking, and to have at least some sense of where it would have been headed next.

Fisher's own response to the condition of late, late capitalism takes three main forms. The first is a series of specific engagements with current affairs in Britain, as in his running commentaries on the 2010 student protests and the 2011 London riots, which resemble the 'interventions' of Stuart Hall in their timeliness and refusal of ahistorical abstraction. The second is to introduce and explore the rich concept of 'popular modernism', a term which unites much of the writing on literature and popular culture collected in *k-punk*. Popular modernism, also referred to in some posts as 'pulp modernism', is a form of popular culture which challenges the aggressive uniformity and ideological complicity of mass culture (ibid.: 353). Fisher contends that what popular culture 'lacks now is the capacity for *nihilation*, for producing new potentials through the negation of what already exists' (ibid.: 321). On Fisher's account, this capacity to critically negate or displace the world as we know it was present throughout selected works of twentieth-century literature, music, film, and television.

In the case of literature, the novelist J. G. Ballard comes in for particular praise for having 'innovated a kind of pulp modernism in which the techniques of high modernism and the riffs of popular fiction intensified one another, avoiding both high cultural obscurantism and middlebrow populism' (ibid.: 75). By being both accessible to a broad readership and starkly critical of that readership's complacent worldview, Ballard's dystopian fiction 'rescued Britain from Eng Lit., from "decent" humanist certainties, and Sunday supplement sleepiness' (ibid.: 40). Some of the funniest passages of *k-punk* are those where the pieties of 'Eng Lit.' are confronted by an aggressive punk ethos distilled from a range of countercultural sources from Joy Division to Gilles Deleuze. Fisher's evident familiarity with the English literary canon does not prevent him from sacrificing some sacred

cows: ‘*nothing* will ever interest me in W. H. Boredom’ (ibid.: 37), he insists in one post, while in another he asks, ‘What better way to destroy something than send in Martin Amis to praise it?’ (ibid.: 74).

It is music, however, which forms the heart of popular modernism, and Fisher’s writing on pop music is one of the highlights of the book. Fisher had once been in a band, D-Generation, who described their sound as ‘techno haunted by the ghost of punk’ (ibid.: 13) – in many ways an apt characterisation of *k-punk* itself. It is clear from the elevation and eloquence of the prose in his music posts that pop music was profoundly important to Fisher, who writes about the haunted electronic soundscapes of Burial, for instance, in something like the way F. R. Leavis once wrote about T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (ibid.: 323–324). Various episodes which were key to Fisher’s developing relationship with music are recounted in *k-punk*, though none seems to have been as important as his epiphanic experience listening to the English post-punk band The Fall in 1983. After hearing their music, Fisher felt that the world ‘had returned, expressionistically transfigured, permanently altered’ (ibid.: 323). Given this remarkable experience, it is understandable that music was to become what Fisher terms his ‘main mood-altering drug of choice’ (ibid.: 568). The Fall’s music is the epitome of popular modernism for Fisher as it unites both the capacity for nihilation lacking in mass culture and a sense of other realities just out of reach (ibid.: 323–342). Whereas Ballard’s dystopian fiction serves a largely negative function in Fisher’s analysis, The Fall combine the oppositional stance of punk with utopian intimations of a different world. Fisher’s posts on The Fall contrast sharply with those on the contemporary music scene, which include a scathing takedown of the Glastonbury Festival for its role in the ‘embourgeoisement of rock culture’ (ibid.: 268), as well as a sharp critique of indie music for its stifling of pop’s critical potential (ibid.: 321).

The unfinished introduction to *Acid Communism* represents Fisher’s third response to the condition of late, late capitalism. As projected in these pages, acid communism is not so much a political or economic programme as an alternative ethical outlook offered to those wishing to break the grip of capitalist realism on their imaginations. There is a shift in emphasis in this section of the book away from the resolute negativity of many of the blog posts toward something more affirmative. *Acid Communism* opens

with a passage from Herbert Marcuse's classic 1955 work of utopian critical theory, *Eros and Civilisation*, a text which Fisher takes as his point of departure despite it being, as he acknowledges, decidedly out of fashion among leftists today (ibid.: 753). Regarding the latter's utopianism, Fisher contrasts Marcuse with Theodor Adorno: whereas in Adorno's work 'the idea of a world beyond capital is despatched into a utopian beyond' that cannot be represented, 'Marcuse vividly evokes, as an immediate prospect, a world totally transformed' (ibid.: 755). Based on the material presented in *k-punk*, *Acid Communism* would have offered an uncompromisingly hopeful vision – the utopian counterpart to the dystopia described in *Capitalist Realism*.

The key contention of the material available to us is that during the 1960s and 1970s, the possibility of a genuine alternative to capitalism began to emerge, drawn together from various countercultural tendencies, including 'experiments in democratic socialism and libertarian communism' across Europe, the United States, and Latin America (ibid.: 754). It was during these decades that 'the possibility of a world beyond toil' of the kind imagined by Marcuse became conceivable (ibid.: 754). What neoliberalism was really directed against, on Fisher's account, was neither the Soviet Union nor social democracy, but rather the dream of a post-capitalist society (ibid.: 754). Neoliberalism figures in this narrative as a last-ditch attempt to prolong the life of the capitalist system, thereby preventing the emergence of an economically liberated humanity (ibid.: 757). In order to preserve the status quo and foreclose alternatives, neoliberalism successfully installed the doctrine of capitalist realism as the reigning common sense of the late modern era. Another strategy pursued by neoliberals was that of maintaining an artificial scarcity of time, through a combination of longer working hours, stagnating wages, and increased job precarity. All of this has served to 'distract us from the immanent possibility of freedom' (ibid.: 756), which Marcuse saw as the promise inherent in a world whose productive capacities outstrip humanity's actual needs and where all routine human labour has become replaceable by machines.

While there are some suggestive remarks on the way drugs like LSD enabled participants in the countercultures of the 1960s and 70s to grasp that 'the categories by which we live are plastic, mutable' (ibid.: 763), it is

in his reflections on popular music of the period that Fisher's vision of acid communism is at its most affecting. Whereas in our lives today we have become exceptionally time-poor, the music of those decades embodied a fundamentally different way of experiencing time (ibid.: 760). Fisher writes poignantly in this connection of songs such as 'Sunny Afternoon' by The Kinks and 'I'm Only Sleeping' by The Beatles as utopian glimpses of a life not subordinated to the logic of capital (ibid.: 759). Such music once held out the possibility of 'worlds beyond work, where drudgery's repetitiveness gave way to drifting explorations of strange terrain' (ibid.: 760).

It is clear from these notes that the completed *Acid Communism* would have read more like a highly creative post-capitalist manifesto interspersed with inspired reflections on popular culture and social theory than a classical utopian blueprint in the manner of the More to Morris tradition. What we can glean from the tantalising nineteen pages that we have of the text is that Fisher's suggested starting point for thinking about utopia today would be to begin with 'a certain mode of time', one allowing for 'a deep absorption' (ibid.: 760).

7. Utopia Today

The radical political projects of the various groups surveyed earlier, along with the trenchant cultural critique of capitalist hegemony of which Mark Fisher is but a single prominent example, are indicative of widespread and growing discontent with the status quo during the twenty-first century. Taken together, they are powerfully expressive of a range of vitally felt human needs which cannot be fulfilled under present conditions.

Although movements like Black Lives Matter and Just Stop Oil are almost exclusively oppositional in orientation – their respective aims being to end anti-black violence and to end fossil fuel production – they can be seen as incipiently utopian insofar as the full realisation of their objectives would necessarily involve the construction of a world almost unrecognisably different to the one in which we currently live, whether this be a

society free of racism or one that has undergone full decarbonisation. As the evolution of Fisher's thinking from diagnosing capitalist realism to anticipating acid communism suggests, utopianism may be a necessary element in any programme for radical change in the coming decades. Slavoj Žižek, another key influence on Fisher, has distinguished between 'utopia as simple imaginary impossibility' and utopia 'in the more radical sense of enacting what, *within the framework of existing social relations*, appears as "impossible"' (Žižek 2008: 310). It is the latter mode of utopianism which, following Fisher's lead, calls for exploration today.

Unlike some of the utopians of the past, we no longer have faith in historical laws, secular providence, or inevitable progress. Unlike many previous radicals, as T. J. Clark has observed, we no longer see any value in 'turning over the entrails of the present for signs of catastrophe and salvation' (Clark 2012). As post-Freudians, our utopianism likewise involves accepting that compromises must be struck between competing desires, and that some degree of rivalry between ideals is inescapable. The experience of the twentieth century has also chastened us about any form of politics that does not prioritise democracy and place democratic decision-making at the centre of any new structures it establishes. For all these reasons, one traditional kind of utopianism – the imposition of utopia from above – is over, and its passing should not be regretted.

Utopia as the dream of an unrealised world, however, a world that can seem hopelessly remote from our dystopian present, must be held onto. To dispense with it would be to impoverish ourselves both ethically and imaginatively. The change that is now needed if worsening inequality and disastrous global heating are to be overcome will require a massive collective reorientation. Envisioning such profound change is the province of utopianism.

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