Iain M Banks, Ernst Bloch and Utopian Interventions

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I.

This paper will develop a reading of Iain M Banks's "Culture" novels using notions about utopian hope drawn from the work of the German philosopher, Ernst Bloch. Since there are seven novels, a novella and a short story in the series, I will not enter into great detail about particular works, but will rather focus on their overarching theme, albeit with specific reference to the third book, *Use of Weapons*.

Although the novels rank amongst the most commercially successful science fiction of recent years, continuously present in the major bookstore chains of the UK and Australia and translated into languages including Estonian, Spanish and Finnish, Banks does not rate a mention in Fredric Jameson's *Archaeologies of the Future* or in Tom Moylan's *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*. This seems particularly odd, given Banks's focus on utopia and Jameson's and Moylan's own sustained engagement with it. Darko Suvin, perhaps the most eminent of science fiction scholars, does, at least, mention Banks, but only to say that the "Culture" series is "[a] lucid variant at [the] margin" of what he calls the "fallible dystopia,"[1] but without any consideration of how this "variant" might trouble the integrity of the category in question.

The novels treat a utopian space-faring society called the Culture, an amalgam of various species (but not including our own), which lives on im-

mense, nomadic starships or artificial, ring-shaped sun-orbiting habitats, where people are free to conduct lives involving no involuntary labour, changing their sex at will and altering their physiological state with drug glands. To use Suvin's Blochian terminology, the novels contain two nova,[2] the first and most prominent of which is the Mind, the kind of artificial intelligence which controls the ships and habitats and, in effect, makes them possible. Given the Culture's grand scale, these Minds can collectively administer it in ways no human organisation ever could. The issue of authoritarian control is sidestepped by the fact that, in Banks' vision, the character of the artificial intelligence is largely determined by the society that creates it.[3] These AIs are as devoted to freedom and pleasure as are the citizens,[4] rather than being representative of some detached, abstract reason or cold, objective rationality. The Culture does not fight for territory, since the "space" available is to all intents and purposes endless, along with its natural resources, if only one has the capacity to make use of them. The level of technological advancement necessary to achieve this state of affairs also means that it is more than able to defend itself, leaving the Culture's members to live a life of hedonism, regarding outsiders with something very close to polite smugness.

In the first novel in the series, *Consider Phlebas*, Banks offers the rationale that "[t]he Culture's sole justification for the relatively unworried, hedonistic life its population enjoyed was its good works."[5] In fact, the Culture is driven to generate revolutions in societies based on oppression, which it seeks out on its periphery. Its "Contact" section assesses where antagonisms are present, and a "Special Circumstances" section intervenes into and exploits them if this is deemed necessary likely to produce positive changes. As William Hardesty observes: "the ability to interfere for the assumed good of [a] 'lesser' society… is thus equated with a moral imperative to act."[6] As a character in *Use of Weapons* describes it, Special Circumstances deals "in the moral equivalent of black holes, where the normal laws – the rules of right and wrong that people imagine apply everywhere else in the universe – break down. Beyond those metaphysical event-horizons there exist … special circumstances."[7]

Moral black holes exist because the Culture encounters societies it *must* intervene into if it is to live up to its own ethical principle that all suffering is intrinsically bad, yet it cannot do so, precisely because this would at times require means forbidden by those same principles. What the novels are about, then, is how to act in the face of undecidable, irreducible problems. Hardesty argues that these compromised interventions mean that the Culture's utopian principles cannot be upheld, thus leaving it "hegemonic and expansionist."[8] This seems mistaken, however, since a Blochian read-

ing will recuperate Banks's utopia while simultaneously explaining its particular form.

II.

The most critically engaged reading of Banks comes from Simon Guerrier, who sees the Culture as a "critical utopia,"[9] in Moylan's sense of the term. A critical utopia addresses the criteria of "the politics of autonomy, democratic socialism, ecology, and especially feminism," and, according to Moylan, "[w]hatever the particular set of images each text sets forth, the shared quality in all of them is a rejection of hierarchy and domination and the celebration of emancipatory ways of being as well as the very possibility of utopian longing itself."[10]

This does indeed describe the main concerns of the novels, which revolve around either the completely unconstrained lives of the Culture citizens themselves, or those of outsiders wary of the lack of structure and power the Culture exemplifies. Either way, every narrative involves the Culture's dealings with some other, undemocratic or hierarchical society, and the (re)articulation of their collective goal of ending suffering wherever they encounter it insofar as this is possible (which isn't always the case).

While Moylan's critical utopian model covers the Culture quite well, the periodisation in his argument does not. His *Demand the Impossible* contains an analysis of Ursula Le Guin, Joanna Russ, Marge Piercy and Samuel Delany as exemplars of the critical utopia, all representative of a very particular cultural moment, that of the New Left in the United States in the 1960s and 70s. While Moylan is effusive about how these writers contributed to an ongoing critical reimagining of the momentum of this period, in the more recent *Scraps of the Untainted Sky,* he argues that science fiction writers have moved on from this kind of engaged optimism:

> Despite the flourishing of scholarship, however, utopian expression itself has declined since the 1980s. Intentional communities have diminished in numbers, the revival of the literary utopia has come and gone, and utopian political thought has been co-opted and devalued … although Kim Stanley Robinson's sf continues the tradition of utopian narrative (refunctioned yet again), the leaner and meaner world of the 1980s and 1990s was marked by anti-utopian deprivation rather than utopian achievement.[11]

This "leaner and meaner world" has largely been brought about in "the neo-conservative restoration occasioned by the administrations of Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and Helmut Kohl,"[12] in a period extending to

the present day and now further articulated through the development of capitalist globalisation and the siege mentality implicit in such notions as the "war on terror." Generally, Moylan continues, this totalising turn has led politically inclined science fiction writers towards totalising, dystopian visions as a means to re-enable critique:

> the analytic strategy of totality enables a critique that recognizes capitalism's reproduction of a "utopia" in which the authentically radical call of Utopia is both co-opted and silenced, leaving in its place tropes of dystopia to represent and inform what critique and opposition remain … The contemporary moment, therefore, is one in which *a critical position is necessarily dystopian.*[13]

Critical dystopias have thus come to manage the tension between utopia and anti-utopia, by creating a "space" of utopian hope precisely by first positing a dystopia, and then offering a depiction of resistance to it from within (either diegetically or in the more didactic terms of an explicit moral). In other words, the critical dystopia is a dialectical negation of the negation of utopia by anti-utopia (that is, the closing-off of possibility by the domination of capitalism):

> the critical dystopian text … is precisely a textual form that leads toward Utopia, for it … negotiates the conflict between Utopia and Anti-Utopia, not in a way that displaces or diffuses that historical contestation but rather invokes Utopia within its own cultural intervention in a time when such oppositional impulses are suppressed or compromised.[14]

According to this argument, the utopian impulse in science fiction is now being expressed through critical dystopia, *necessarily*, as a response to the totalisation of capitalism. But Banks is a problem for this chronology, since he writes critically utopian texts from the mid-80s, the time when the "neoconservative restoration" took hold, through to the present day. For Moylan, however, there was a proviso to this enclosure, in the form of Kim Stanley Robinson, another "lucid variant" at the margin. While Robinson has received a great deal of scholarly attention, Banks has not, which is why the operations of his critical utopia as such a variant must also be explored.

III.

Banks's utopia is very much a positive one – its principles are never really called into question in terms of the kind of freedom its members enjoy. Instead, all the tension in the narratives is focussed on the encounter

with otherness. Hence, rather than posing a totalising vision, Bank confronts the necessarily conceptually incomplete, the specifically historically situated nature of a contingent and mobile utopia encountering a non- or anti-utopian "other."

In direct contrast with the predictive control explored through the imperial hegemony of Isaac Asimov's classic space opera, *The Foundation Trilogy*, the Mind of the Ship *Arbitrary,* discussing the morality of intervention in the novella *State of the Art*, explicitly argues that:

> Absolute certainty isn't even a choice on the menu … I'm the smartest thing for a hundred light year radius, and by a factor of about a million … but even I can't predict where a snooker ball's going to end up after more than six collisions.[15]

As the Culture series has proceeded, it has become more focussed on the role of unpredictability and consequence, emphasising the degree to which the Culture's interventions are driven by an optimistic desire that cannot be completely quantified, given the uncertain nature of each act. This, I would argue, is utopian hope: by definition not a program, but an openness to the as yet not manifested but desired possibilities inherent in the future, something Bloch refers to as the Not-Yet-Being. This is a drive, an experience of lack as anticipation, an optimistic hunger, and commitment. Carl Freedman writes of Bloch's work that "[the] Utopian hermeneutic is after all a kind of *labor*, a political practice, which makes no claim to empiricist "reflection" but construes its objects in an avowedly interested – a collectively interested – way."[16] If this is so, then it is a very apt description of the Culture, recalling Hardesty's previously cited comments about moral imperatives to action, but casting them in a different light. Apart from the internalised imperative to self-fulfilment of its inhabitants, the Culture's labour involves "finding, cataloguing, investigating and analysing ... [and] where the circumstances appear … to Contact to justify so doing – actually interfering (overtly or covertly) in ... historical processes" in other societies.[17] As Bloch writes, "[the] realm of freedom develops not as return, but as exodus – though into the always intended promised land, promised by process,"[18] which is precisely how the Culture seeks to make its own freedom meaningful by freeing others whom it actively seeks out.

To compare these novels with Bloch's version of utopia, one must, however, explain the *presence* of the Culture, since for Bloch "Utopian plenitude… can be truly apprehended only in a fragmentary form."[19] I would argue that, despite being referred to as a persistent entity, often as if it were an individual ("the Culture thinks this, or does that," and so on) and read as such by all its critics, the Culture is never fully present and, in fact,

can never become so, because of its utopian organisation as much its uncertain engagements. The Culture is literally a utopia in the sense of "no place," a grouping of restless like-Minded cells, unfixed and in continuous, nomadic motion.

The Culture also includes an in-principle Ulterior that fragments it at its edges, so that it can never be clearly outlined conceptually. The Zetetic Elench in *Excession*, for example, is a grouping driven by the same principles and technology as "the Culture proper," but, rather than changing others, it changes itself in accordance with whatever it encounters. The only intra-Cultural organisational entities clearly delineated in the novels are Contact and Special Circumstances, which are precisely instruments of encountering, and even they are closer to principles than institutions, formed out of contingently constructed councils and committed individuals. Every novel is concerned with interspecies engagements, and with how undecidability destabilises their moral character, leaving only the drive to end suffering, and the hope that Contact must be doing the right thing, since they have to do something for existence itself to be meaningful.

A more specific example of the hopeful utopian labour inherent in the idea of the Culture appears in *Use of Weapons*, where the mercenary known as Zakalwe notes that: "There are no Gods, we are told, so I must make my own salvation."[20] He drinks to the Culture's "total lack of respect for all things majestic,"[21] as it allows him to be inspired by the hope that he can be redeemed through service for the atrocities he committed in the past. Zakalwe's disavowal of Gods runs oddly parallel to the words of Judith Brown on Bloch: "As we shape the world through our work so we come to a condition of self-possession. Bloch's conception of authenticity is as a coming-to-ourselves, in which we have reclaimed our human capacities from our alienation, manifest in the worship of the gods and masters."[22]

In this novel's retrospectively oriented counter-narrative, we learn that childhood rivalry developed into adult atrocity, when Zakalwe and his cousin Elethiomel found themselves on opposite sides in war; when pushed to stalemate, Elethiomel drives Zakalwe to suicide by murdering his sister in particularly gruesome circumstances. The man now known as Zakalwe seeks salvation for this act, having taken on the identity of the person he destroyed as a rejection of his own, and thus fights in the hope of forgiveness he can never attain. As Brown reads Bloch, "what is only internal in us must become a self-encounter enabling us to direct our subjectivity into the external world … Possession of the self is finally a collective possession … brought about by shared praxis."[23] This is homologous to the division between saviour and aggressor, which informs Zakalwe/Elethiomel as mercenary, and his attempt to reclaim some essence of himself through

"good works" on behalf of the Culture. Bloch wrote: "[o]nly hope under-stands and also completes the past, opens the long, common highway."[24] So Zakalwe/Elethiomel's eternally deferred redemption through service is only made possible by the shared work of his interventions within the Cul-ture's own in cases of interspecies engagement. He also tries to intervene into a corrupt society as an individual without the Culture, but fails because he is incapable of managing the multiple variables he destabilises.[25]

Zakalwe's is an eternally deferred redemption because, unlike other Special Circumstances mercenaries who die in their service, he is con-stantly brought back to life after being rescued at the moment of death. When first recruited by the Culture, he had met Chori, an alien serving a familial honour debt that will only end when she dies.[26] When Zakalwe is beheaded on a mission and waits for months, having a new body grown, he finds out that Chori has died during service, her repaid debt standing in sharp contrast to his progressively more ludicrous escapes/recues.[27] Left as only a head, he is projected into an almost entirely symbolic dimension: for Banks, the mind *is* the brain,[28] which is why artificial life is equal to the biological. In the process, Zakalwe also loses the one remaining link to his atrocity, a bone fragment from his cousin lodged into his chest. This loss makes his mind – and hence his consciousness of his own history and drive to act – the only persistent element in his biography, since his specific materiality has been stripped from him. It also elevates his labour to the level of a symbolically, eternally deferred, impossible and anticipatory de-sire to reclaim himself.

Banks's Culture novels evoked a Blochian principle of utopian hope within mainstream science fiction during a climate of "critical dystopia" – his utopia is both open and processual. Jameson notes that Bloch's *The Prin-ciple of Hope* "is a vast and disorderly exploration of the manifestations of hope on all levels of reality,"[29] and therefore "necessarily unsystematic," so much so that it could be "expanded indefinitely to match the infinite realities of the world itself."[30] Each of Banks's novels is similarly a simultaneously positive and negative staging and working through of the problems of build-ing utopia.

This is the second novum to which I referred earlier. Where for Bloch the hopeful, utopian anticipation exists in the mundane, everyday life even of capitalism itself (hence the distrust of staged, descriptive utopias), the second novum in Banks's Culture series is the depiction of a utopia, which itself contains and is maintained by this hopeful, utopian anticipation. To depict the achievement of utopian conditions is insufficient. Rather than the end of history, utopia itself becomes a – potentially ultimate – staging point for a temporal (historical) utopian hope.

IV.

If Moylan has provided us with an extremely useful set of analytical distinctions, the periodisation through which they are articulated is troubled by writers such as Robinson and Banks. Reflecting on the closures of this same period, and in acknowledgement of Moylan's argument about the critical dystopia,[31] Jameson argues that we need to retain a properly impractical utopian impulse, so as to keep clear a space for oppositional thinking, an impulse which he calls "anti-anti-utopian attitude":[32]

> Utopia thus now better expresses our relationship to a genuinely political future than any current program of action … The formal flaw – how to articulate the Utopian break in such a way that it is transformed into a practical-political transition – now becomes a rhetorical and political strength – in that it forces us precisely to concentrate on the break itself: a meditation on the impossible, on the unrealizable in its own right.[33]

"Thinking the break" is a line of flight from the totalising demand of the present order, a stubborn refusal to think only in terms of prescribed practicality, since the latter leads back to a legitimisation of that order. The irreducibility of the moral problems the Culture encounters when trying to intervene on behalf of utopian principles enacts the anti-anti-utopian call to meditate on the impossible, the irresolvable, through the maintenance of hope, with a commitment to act on it. The anti-anti-utopian attitude is a principle of stubborn hope very much in line with what Banks evokes through the Culture's "moral black holes," and their retention of a sense of non-totalising, expansive utopian praxis by intervention into these "special circumstances." However, as Moylan notes, in Jameson's own version of the totalisation of "late capitalism," "he often reiterates our incapacity to imagine a radically new future or even to move towards transformative solutions from with the ideological limits of the situation in which we currently exist."[34]

By focusing on and affirming the closure of the negative, and articulating the break as an "impossible" moment in our current ideological orientation, Jameson loses any sense of positive articulation, which would seem to be precisely what is needed in conjunction with the recent resurgence of oppositional movements. Acknowledging this, Moylan calls for the opening up of "a broader critical terrain that energizes the disruptive *and* anticipatory pedagogy of utopian narrative. For if we linger at the negative and focus *only* on the break, we could well find ourselves trapped in some contemporary version Zeno's paradox and thereby neglect the expressions that register the tremors of emergent political movement."[35]

We might also fail to notice the patient torchbearers, such as Banks,

who have been hopefully critical all through the "dystopian turn."

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NOTES

[1] Darko Suvin, "Theses on Dystopia 2001" in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, eds Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini, (Routledge: London, 2003) 196.

[2] The novum is a radical, world-transforming "newness." The word's use as noun or adjective in this context, when in Latin it would normally function as a verb, leaves its pluralisation tricky. I have been advised to use "nova" rather than "novums."

[3] Iain M Banks , *Look to Windward* (London: Orbit, 2000) 126.

[4] When not engaging with "base reality," the Minds spend their time in intellectual pursuits such as shaping model universes in the "metamathical" Land of Infinite Fun as described in Iain M Banks, *Excession* (London: Orbit, 2000) 236.

[5] Iain M Banks, *Consider Phlebas* (London: Orbit, 1987) 484.

[6] William H Hardesty, "Space Opera without the Space: The Culture Novels of Iain M Banks " in *Space and Beyond: The Frontier Theme in Science Fiction*, ed Gary Westfahl (London: Greenwood Press, 2000) 120.

[7] Iain M Banks, *Use of Weapons* (London: Orbit, 1992) 261.

[8] Hardesty, "Space Opera without the Space," 120.

[9] Simon Guerrier, "Culture Theory: Iain M Banks's 'Culture' as Utopia" in *Foundation* 76 (Summer 1999) 28-37.

[10] Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (London: Methuen & Co, 1986) 12.

[11] Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (Colorado: Westview, 2000) 103.

[12] Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* xiv, 184.

[13] Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* 187 (my emphasis).

[14] Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* 191-2.

[15] Iain M Banks, "The State of the Art" [1989] in *The State of the Art* (London: Orbit, 1991) 99-205, 170.

[16] Carl Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 2000) 66.

[17] Banks, *Consider Phlebas* 484.

[18] Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (volume I), trans Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995) 205.

[19] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* 66.

[20] Banks, *Use of Weapons* 233.

[21] Banks, *Use of Weapons* 259.

[22] Judith Brown, "Ernst Bloch and the Utopian Imagination," *Eras*, edition 5, November 2003, date of access: 17 November 2008, <http://arts.monash.edu.au/publications/eras/edition-5/brownarticle.php>.

[23] Brown, "Ernst Bloch and the Utopian Imagination".

[24] Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988) 51.

[25] Banks, *Use of Weapons* 84.

[26] Banks, *Use of Weapons* 257-9.

[27] Banks, *Use of Weapons* 262.

[28] Banks, *Use of Weapons* 255-6.

[29] Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971) 120.

[30] Jameson, *Marxism and Form* 121.

[31] Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005) 154.

[32] Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* xvi.

[33] Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* 232.

[34] Tom Moylan, "Making the Present Impossible: On the Vocation of Utopian Science Fiction", in *Demanding the Impossible: Utopia and Dystopia*, eds Andrew Milner, Matthew Ryan and Simon Sellars, *Arena Journal* 31 (2008) 79-108, 84.

[35] Moylan, "Making the Present Impossible" 88.