

“Science Fiction and the Contest of Ideology”

Welcome back to the Seminar Series. Next term’s line up is shaping up to be a pretty diverse and exciting set of offerings. Jeffrey will be presenting something from his book length study of Elsdon Best, we have Lloyd looking at mining narratives, Christina dealing with Pitcairn island as a site of discourse, and Paul will be talking about Bill Pearson.

Today, though, let me introduce you... to me.

Today’s paper represents part of an article I’m working on for publication, but also displays an interest that will be extended in a new Honours course offering next year on Utopia and Dystopia delivered collaboratively with Philip Armstrong.

Abstract.

Even a cursory study of Science Fiction texts reveals it to be a field ripe with ideological contest. With its speculative nature, Science Fiction is particularly suited to discussion of different social, political and cultural models, within which particular ideologies are examined, argued for, or contended against.

In this paper, I’ll be defining ideology against some trends of subjects and representation in Science Fiction. In particular, texts from three writers are considered: Ayn Rand’s *Anthem*, Ursula Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* and Iain M. Banks’ *Player of Games*. In these texts, the writers provide useful examples of ideological contest from the middle of the twentieth century to the early twenty-first, producing and, with the latter two, critiquing their own versions of Utopia and Dystopia that reproduce some of the anxieties and desires of their historical moments.

Rand’s superficially dystopian text, crudely echoing some of the formalistic properties Huxley’s *Brave New World*, actually works in reverse of it. Likewise, though seeming to share the social critique of Orwell’s *1984*, it again slips the comparison, actually working to validate an uber-capitalist individualist “utopian” vision (if that isn’t an oxymoron), influential in subsequent neo-conservative policies. In contrast, Le Guin signals a both a distrust with the simplifications of Cold War faith in capitalist democracy and yet her anarchic-socialist utopia is still an “ambiguous” if hopeful model for healthy social dynamics. Finally, Banks’ apparently superficial “space opera” also presents a problematic utopian vision. As an example of a posthuman society, his depiction of the organic-artificial machine symbiosis of the Culture appears idyllic, certainly in comparison with more common views of the rise of machine intelligence, but there are signs of this being, again, a utopian vision contested both from without and within, perhaps engaging with Foucault’s heterotopias.

Firstly, Ideology.

The term Ideology, in one sense, is highly pejorative and highly subjective. As Terry Eagleton puts it, ideology can be “like halitosis... what the other person has... : his thought is red-neck, yours is doctrinal, and mine is gloriously supple.” (4) In one of its pejorative senses, ideology coined in a traditional Marxist frame is equivalent to false consciousness, “illusion, distortion and mystification”, and with hegemonic discourse that misleadingly presents its own dominance as “natural”. Eagleton, though, also lists a number of other senses of the word, ones which are at least as more common and seemingly more neutral:

the process of production of meanings, signs and values in social life;... a body of ideas characteristic of a particular social group or class;... that which offers a position for a subject;... forms of thought motivated by social interests;... identity thinking;... the conjunction of discourse and power

(Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* 1-2)

A useful example of the former definition of “false consciousness” that also demonstrates a more neutral idea of ideology is where cultural critic Walter Benjamin makes comparisons between different modes of historical thinking. In “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, Benjamin makes a distinction between “historicism”, which in his definition presents a mythological, universalised view of history supporting the dominant social class; and “historical materialism”, which he suggests is more interested in studying direct material events that shape society, especially the materialism of modes of production and class struggle:

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognise it “the way it really was” (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical Materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers.... In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to engulf it....

History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the *now*.

(Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”)

As we can see, Benjamin suggests a distrust with received ideas of historical past that “naturalise” the present: one kind of ideological attachment. Yet his own “historical materialism” is rooted in a different kind of ideological recognition of history as not disinterested: a kind of ideology of perceiving ideology. Benjamin’s point here is also relevant for suggesting that ideology reveals its traction with particular historical conditions and moments.

This point is resonant with thinking about how histories of the future in that so many Science Fiction texts are also lodged in desiring to transcend the specific conditions of their “presents”. Many critics draw on Ernst Bloch’s ideas on Utopia, as a collective desire for the “radically new”: expressed in the term *Novum*. Following Bloch, Frederic Jameson relates a

more neutral vision of ideology with utopian speculations: he explains that “the effectively ideological is also, at the same time, necessarily Utopian” (*The Political Unconsciousness*, 276), linking ideology and its end, utopian vision of the fulfilment of that ideology, as a project that coalesces around the differing group interests in society. This articulation sees utopian ideals as essentially collective enterprise, as opposed to the Freudian pleasure principle that is more personally driven (Carl Freedman, citing Ernst Bloch, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* 64); however, utopias are a collective goal amongst many others, in contest with many other competing utopias representative of ideology of other particular classes, affiliations and interested parties. Competing “nostalgias” for the future might, in a Marxist mindset, ultimately resolve themselves in a universal Utopia, but in the meantime there are pluralities of utopia, each seeking their own “totality”: “closure” of a specific space, in time that is “not yet” “not yet being” or “in front of us” (Jameson, citing Bloch, *Archeologies of the Future*, 5-9; Freedman 64, quoting Bloch).

Science fiction and the Novum.

This In the last century, Science Fiction has arisen as a medium seemingly well suited for utopian foci, whether it is in the positive projection of future or alternative visions, or implicitly expressed in negative anti-utopian or dystopian counterparts. In either or both manifestation (utopian, as it is embedded in partisan ideology is of course contestable), it is centred in various depictions of *Novum*. It should be stressed that *Novum*, though “radically” new, does not mean “purely” new, with past images of the future invested with those pasts’ contexts. Hence, More’s vision of utopia is a “radical” break with the political and social contexts of his English present, but exists in a relationship with this present that it is instructively useful: mirroring and providing commentary on this present. Whether we choose to emphasize the datedness of past version of the future, though, with “anachronistic” ideas that may seem to inhabit the subgenre of “steampunk”, the field of science fiction seems to revel in the “Immanence” and “transcendence” of *Novum*, with the “science” part of the “science fiction” appellation seeming to represent “progress”.

On a superficial level, some Science Fiction texts may be seen to engage with technical innovations for their own sake. As Darko Suvin notes, though, “*Novum* is as *novum* does: it does not supply justification, it demands justification. Where is the progress progressing to?” (Suvin, “*Novum* is as *Novum* Does”, *Science Fiction: Critical Frontiers*). Newness, in itself, is not to be celebrated, and the projection within Science Fictions tends to be one at least implicitly engaging with a problem. For a critic such as Suvin, science itself is not the main subject of “science fiction”, rather the awareness of “a mature scientific method” being used for particular ideological purposes. So what ideological problems are being addressed, and what alternatives are articulated?

Here follow three different examples:

Mid Twentieth-Century Blues

The middle of the twentieth-century, dominated as it was by the figures of war and oppositional politics exemplified by totalitarian regimes, seems ripe for the production of dark projections: *Novum dystopia*.

While the earlier pulp traditions of Science Fiction magazines still offered much of the escapist tropes of “space opera” and some continuing celebration of “futurism”, important works such as *Brave New World* and *1984* are significant examples of shifts to dystopian projections in the 1930s and 1940s. Huxley and Orwell are unlike predecessors such as Wells, Morris and Bellamy, whose tone and themes tended to optimistic and pragmatic projections, writing as they were for cultures earnestly engaged with improving projects in actuality (as Atwood notes, these were writers observing “improvements in sewage systems, medicine, communication technologies, and transportation”). Both are clear reactions to what each author perceives as major threats in their time that are ironically reactions to others’ utopian projects. “Our Ford” represents the neo-deity of Huxley’s vision of mass consumption and media, promiscuity, eugenics: elements that might be treated as optimistic “futuristic” features in others’ work are instead aspects of a repressive society. In Orwell’s *1984*, society has been likewise transformed into a repressive apparatus by the rigorous surveillance, propaganda, misinformation, war and deprivation of the controlling elite. While both display a mistrust with particular tendencies of controlling the masses by the elites of society, another text from this period trumps any nascent revulsion for the masses in these texts.

Ayn Rand and *Anthem*

Born Alisa Rosenbaum in Tsarist Russia, of a wealthy Jewish background, Rand’s early experience with the dispossessions of the early Soviet state and engagement with those resisting “collectivism” seemed to cement a future trajectory towards celebrating “individualism”. Jennifer Burn’s recent study, *Goddess of the Market*, notes the shift in mythic subject for this emerging writer: “in her adventure stories heroic resisters struggling against the Soviet regime now replaced knights and princesses.” (12-13). Her university studies in Petrograd helped to further formulate these views, with a grounding in philosophy providing a basis for later articulations. The influence of Nietzsche, especially, seems formative in grounding her expression of individualist politics, and the ethos of celebrating the “exceptional man”.

However, another student preoccupation, the movies, steered her towards a connection with Hollywood: her emigration to the USA and work ethic displayed her determination and ambition, which, with some luck parleyed into early success as an extra and screen writer in the late twenties despite a lasting linguistic barrier to fluency. Her career as an actress didn’t last, though, with the advent of the “talkies”: her bitterness with this seems to be particularly projected into her readiness to recognise socialism at work in the industry; in her eyes, “pinks” proliferated in all the professional circles she engaged in.

Clearly, she readily adopted some of the national ethos of the US at that time, especially the “merits” of capitalism and individualism, yet Rand was quick to attack any tendency in the US towards the “collectivist” principles she hated in Russia. Thus, although Roosevelt is considered, generally, to have been one of the most popular modern presidents, Rand was

amongst a minority who saw his New Deal policies as a target. Outspoken, and often seemingly “crazed” with her paranoid insights, Rand saw herself and a few of her like-minded right wing intellectuals as being part of a critical “Fifth Column” taking the threat of American bolshevism extremely seriously. As one critic suggests, Rand was intent on cutting the “Gordian Knot” of social complexity in the US with her rather reactionary political sword, and had the personal egoism and confidence to attempt this in the literary field (John Pierce).

Her two major “novels”, *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged* are lengthy and unsubtle criticisms of societies repressing individuals of singular drive and vision. These works provide a lengthy polemic in a fictional frame, a blatant manifesto in parts, that was later solidified in non-fiction works of “philosophy” and political commentary. Rand, a staunch supporter of laissez-faire capitalism, codified her beliefs into the term “Objectivism”. To Rand, this represented an important frame for meritocratic principles: capitalistic social form; secular rationalist epistemology; “selfishness” as an ethical stance; and all unwritten by a belief that this reflected material reality.

While the two lengthy novels make for an extended (if not extensive) discourse on these principles, it is interesting that Rand made an even blunter early critique in a science fiction mode of writing, in her 1938 *Anthem*.

On the surface, there are some similarities between this book and the societies presented in Huxley’s and Orwell’s. Yet while each society is repressive and collective, the details and points made through them differ. In this text, Rand presents a future society of repressive collectivism, where a post apocalyptic primitivism is imposed by a rigid oppression of individualism. This is a society where candle light is the premier technological advancement, sexual encounter tightly controlled for the state’s benefit, and tight set of rules presented to weed out difference. The protagonist narrator presents the text as a collected diary, thereby giving a largely linear discourse setting up the frame of the society, his growing awareness of difference, dissent, challenge, finding a mate, exile and enlightenment. Thus, the very structure presents the Novum model of progress, even as it describes a reclamation of a past ideals lost to the repression of enlightenment.

The narrative style also draws on the lack of fluency in Rand as a writer in this part of her career as a strength, with the narrator’s halting voice betraying the limits of his society’s education. One of the major constraints is established at the beginning: the focus on “we” as a disciplining mechanism:

It is a sin to write this. It is a sin to think words no others think and to put them down upon a paper no others are to see. It is base and evil. It is as if we were speaking alone to no ears but our own. And we know well that there is no transgression blacker than to do or think alone. We have broken the laws. The laws say that men may not write unless the Council of Vocations bid them so....It is dark here. The flame of the candle stands still in the air. Nothing moves in this tunnel save our hand on the paper. We are alone here under the earth. It is a fearful word, alone. The laws say that none among men may be alone, ever and at any time, for this is the great transgression and the root of all evil. But we have broken many laws. And now there

is nothing here save our one body, and it is strange to see only two legs stretched on the ground, and on the wall before us the shadow of our one head....

[Yet] nothing matters save the work, our secret, our evil, our precious work. Still, we must also write, for—may the Council have mercy upon us!—we wish to speak for once to no ears but our own.

Our name is Equality 7-2521, as it is written on the iron bracelet which all men wear on their left wrists with their names upon it.... We were born with a curse. It has always driven us to thoughts which are forbidden. It has always given us wishes which men may not wish. We know that we are evil, but there is no will in us and no power to resist it. This is our wonder and our secret fear, that we know and do not resist.

We strive to be like all our brother men, for all men must be alike. Over the portals of the Palace of the World Council, there are words cut in the marble, which we are required to repeat to ourselves whenever we are tempted:

"We are one in all and all in one.

There are no men but only the great WE,

One, indivisible and forever."—

We repeat this to ourselves, but it helps us not.

Equality 7-2521 displays both the habits of indoctrination and the will to dissent in this speech. Even though he does not have the apparatus to articulate his difference clearly, he nonetheless can still sense and defend his difference. Innately, it appears recognises his own resistance to a culture of "year zero" and learning to unlearn. Even where he parrots the dictum of castigating difference, he also takes pride in his own special status as a thinking, empirically-driven rationalist. Rand much stresses her narrator as this "stand out" figure, not least with imbuing him with exceptional height, but particularly emphasizes him as an intelligent, rational dissenter, testing his society's norms, and able to reconstruct an electrical experiment with the leftover apparatus stumbled upon, that has survived the apocalypse. Likewise, he appears to have stumbled upon a realisation of sexual ethics that makes him romanticise love over the state's view of controlled sexual encounter.

While he does not succeed in changing his society from within, indeed he is lucky to escape with his life, luckier to end up with his female companion, "Liberty 5-3000", and *extremely* luckier still to discover an intact modernist mansion with a library, clothes and a generator just a handful of days away from the settlement. Tellingly, while the hero's first focus in this house is to start reading and affirming his sense of his role as special autodidact, his companion is instead rooted in front of the wardrobe and mirror. Hence the message of the book is mythologised around Rand's philosophical-political manifesto, centred around the discovery of "I", the "unspeakable word" through self-enlightenment or physical self-reflection:

My hands... My spirit... My sky... My forest... This earth of mine....

What must I say besides? These are the words. This is the answer.

I stand here on the summit of the mountain. I lift my head and I spread my arms.

This, my body and spirit, this is the end of the quest. I wished to know the meaning of things. I am the meaning. I wished to find a warrant for being. I need no warrant

for being, and no word of sanction upon my being. I am the warrant and the sanction.

It is my eyes which see, and the sight of my eyes grants beauty to the earth. It is my ears which hear, and the hearing of my ears gives its song to the world. It is my mind which thinks, and the judgment of my mind is the only searchlight that can find the truth. It is my will which chooses, and the choice of my will is the only edict I must respect.

Many words have been granted me, and some are wise, and some are false, but only three are holy: "I will it!"

Whatever road I take, the guiding star is within me; the guiding star and the loadstone which point the way. They point in but one direction. They point to me.

...

And now I see the face of god, and I raise this god over the earth, this god whom men have sought since men came into being, this god who will grant them joy and peace and pride.

This god, this one word:

"I."

Looking to the future, Rand's individualist hero names himself (with Rand's trademark tact and humility) "Prometheus" (conflating his experiments in rediscovery of electricity with the mythical offering of fire and knowledge to humanity), and his love, who he had labelled "the Golden One", now becomes "Gaia", the earth goddess of fertile productivity:

Here, on this mountain, I and my sons and my chosen friends shall build our new land and our fort. And it will become as the heart of the earth, lost and hidden at first, but beating, beating louder each day. And word of it will reach every corner of the earth. And the roads of the world will become as veins which will carry the best of the world's blood to my threshold. And all my brothers, and the Councils of my brothers, will hear of it, but they will be impotent against me. And the day will come when I shall break the chains of the earth, and raze the cities of the enslaved, and my home will become the capital of a world where each man will be free to exist for his own sake.

For the coming of that day I shall fight, I and my sons and my chosen friends. For the freedom of Man. For his rights. For his life. For his honor.

And here, over the portals of my fort, I shall cut in the stone the word which is to be my beacon and my banner. The word which will not die, should we all perish in battle. The word which can never die on this earth, for it is the heart of it and the meaning and the glory.

The sacred word:

EGO

In many ways, this position channels Nietzschean ideals of the "death of god", the "ubermensch", and the "will to power". Such a political stance is controversial, of course, with such a blunt utopian vision based on self-interest even questionable as a utopian model at all. As Jameson sees it, utopia is about a collective ideal, whereas Rand valorises the individual as an end in itself. Of course, this apparent paradox resolves itself into the group identity of "selfish" capitalism: a collection of individualists.

Such a position is also noted in subsequent Science Fiction writers: notably those invested in the Cold War politics of American patriotism. Robert Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* is a particularly extreme manifestation of this: a utopian fascistic future, where an alien invasion provides a testing ground for concepts of individual worth as earned militarily. David Seed, analysing *Starship Trooper's* narrator, suggests he "justifies war as an elaboration of the survival instinct applied to larger and larger groups", a direction that seems suggested in the militant inflation of "ego" at the end of *Anthem*. Other writers such as Larry Niven, writing science fictional survivalism in texts like *Footfall*, are harnessed into similar neo conservative support: seeming to underwrite Reagan's "star wars" programme as much as Rand underwrites "greed is good" and self-interested capitalism as patriotic goals.

Different Cold Wars?

For other writers, though, Cold War politics did not resolve themselves so readily in an easy moral equation of patriotic jingoism. Ursula Le Guin writing in the 1960s and 1970s is notable for using Science Fiction to further open up political discussion to liberationist agenda. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, her depiction of society peopled by humans who move through cycles of being gender neutral to a brief position of "male" or "female" in "kemmer" (the reproductive stage of the cycle) makes for an excellent opportunity to question the "natural" divisions of gender in our own society, by allowing the perceptions of a normative "male" observer to shift to seeing Getheneians as "natural". This shift in perspective of the participant observer is also fundamentally underwritten by alternating the narrative perspective with his local chief informant, Estraven. Such an examination questions the simplistic moral symbolism seeming to mirror *Anthem's* use of "light" as reason and knowledge, opposed to darkness as ignorance and received tradition. The title is taken from a Gethen poem that displays a much more subtle conception of relationship: "Light is the left hand of darkness" suggests an integral and symbiotic relationship.

Writing in the same pan-human universe (the Ekumen or Hainish cycle), Le Guin uses similarly anthropological techniques to objectively and subjectively examine supposedly binary political systems in *The Dispossessed*.

Superficially, there are some similarities between some themes in this book and *Anthem*: the protagonist, Shevek, is a scientist and "exceptional" man, who at points in the some of the problems of a collectivist society, and the novel posits a particular social laboratory of twin planets with differing political systems that enables this comparison. Yet there are also striking differences and the conclusions to be drawn from the two texts are perhaps starkly different.

In terms of Novum, there are elements of technology and progress at stake in this tale. Shevek is a brilliant mathematician and physicist, who has assembled new principles for simultaneity technology that would revolutionise transportation and communication in the dispersed collection of worlds that make up the interstellar league of the Ekumen. Such an innovation has been a great individual undertaking, in the face of having to shift work patterns in a society beset with shortages and environmental disaster, and a culture that tends to shy away from specialisation and the privilege attached to such, with figures of

orthodox practice. Shevek's work, though, is also the object of ideological contest: scholars and commercial interests on Urras bid to support Shevek's work, leading him to visit the sister planet to attempt to finish and more fully disseminate his theories. The "ansible", an instantaneous communication device derived from Shevek's research, becomes a technology at the centre of ideological contest, though this is resolved in Shevek's decision to share it with all. This technology comes to underpin interstellar civilisation, which is otherwise burdened with a massive relativistic time lag.

Socially, Le Guin's *Novum* revolves around the direct comparisons of

Another element of *Novum*, paralleling the dispersed perspective of *Left Hand of Darkness*, is Le Guin's tactics in structuring her plot in a non-linear fashion. As the reader progresses through the text they are presented with alternate chapters, with alternating settings, and alternating timelines: there is sequence here, but it is two separate series, with one depicting Shevek's life, upbringing and professional and family development on Anarres, interspersed with the trip and growing understanding of Urras' society and culture. Such a parallel structure at once places the difficulties and comprehension of societies' values against each other, and helps to realise, in parallel, both Shevek's frustration with some of the setbacks to his work in Anarres, alongside his impending rejection of Urras as a much worse alternative.

At the beginning and the end, the societies meet in the staging post of the wall surrounding Anarres space port:

Like all walls it was ambiguous, two-faced. What was inside it and what was outside it depended upon which side of it you were on.

Looked at from one side, the wall enclosed a barren sixty-acre field called the Port of Anarres. On the field there were a couple of large gantry cranes, a rocket pad, three warehouses, a truck garage, and a dormitory. The dormitory looked durable, grimy, and mournful; it had no gardens, no children; plainly nobody lived there or was even meant to stay there long. It was in fact a quarantine. The wall shut in not only the landing field but the ships that came down out of space, and the men that came on the ships, and the worlds they came from, and the rest of the universe. It enclosed the universe, leaving Anarres outside, free.

Looked at from the other side, the wall enclosed Anarres: the whole planet was inside it, a great prison camp, cut off from other worlds and other men, in quarantine. (1)

Shevek, crossing that wall, and taking his "solitary" flight in one of the ships to Urras also enters a quarantine zone: though it depends on perspective whether he is being quarantined from the crew's potential pathogens, or they from his "infectious" politics. The rest of the narrative engages with this tactic of flipping perspective: Shevek seeking to fit in or at least understand and appreciate the societies on Urras, against his memories of Anarres: each planet considers the other its moon.

Although Shevek shares the physical heritage of Anarres' inhabitants (in Terran perspective they are hairy apes), the culture is as alien as those of the representatives from the other planets, and Shevek comes to realise that he has made a mistake desiring Urras, and through Urras, the greater interstellar society:

I thought it would be better, not to hold apart behind a wall, but to be a society among others, a world among the others, giving and taking. But I was wrong – I was absolutely wrong.... Because there is nothing, nothing on Urras that we Anarresti need! We left with empty hands, a hundred and seventy years ago, and we were right. We took nothing. Because there is nothing here but States and their weapons, the rich and their lies, and the poor and their misery. There is no way to act rightly, with a clear heart, on Urras. There is nothing you can do that profit does not enter in, and fear of loss, and the wish for power. You cannot say good morning without knowing which of you is superior to the other, or trying to prove it. You cannot act like a brother to other people, you must manipulate them, or command them, or obey them, or trick them.... There is no freedom. It is a box – Urras is a box, a package, with all the beautiful wrapping of blue sky, and meadows and forests and great cities. And you open the box, and what is inside? A black cellar full of dust, and a dead man. A man whose hand was shot off because he held it out to others. I have been in Hell at last. Desar was right; it is Urras; hell is Urras. (300)

While such a speech clearly demarks the divide in Shevek's perspective between his ascetic Utopian society, and the manifest ills of power and discord in Urras, this is still a problem of perspective. This speech is part of a conversation with a representative from a future Earth: she gives her own spin on the comparison by adding her own context the example of an Earth despoiled, ruined:

we multiplied and gobbled and fought until there was nothing left, and then we died.... We destroyed ourselves. But we destroyed the world first. There are no forests left on my Earth. The air is grey, the sky is grey, it is always hot. It is habitable, it is still habitable – but not as this world is. This is a living world, a harmony. Mine is a discord. You Odonians chose a desert; we Terrans made a desert. (301)

The assumed subtitle for the book, "An Ambiguous Utopia", then resolves itself as that: a vision that is tested and still found wanting, a vision that has problems of its own, and one that is contestable dependent on perspective. Even Shevek's final stance is one that is predicated on comparison: Anarres is not an absolute, final utopia, but rather one that acts as a corrective or correlative to its other Urras. Le Guin's own position is harder still to pin down; though she might be expected to side with her sympathetic protagonist, here and elsewhere, her anthropological mantle results in a substitution act or transference: like Woolf's "Mrs Brown", Shevek is a tool to examine a situation from another perspective (unlike the simple didacticism of Rand). Perhaps, for Le Guin, Utopia is representative of the "next goal" Novum, judged by her pattern of criticism of static societies.

Posthuman possibilities?

Iain M. Banks is a writer who may seem, superficially, to step back to pulp traditions of “space opera” in his writing, so may seem less hardcore in his examination: his humour and postmodern irony include some serious and troubling undertones in examining his versions of oppositional ideologies.

His chief society depicted in his oeuvre is the hedonistic, libertarian Culture: a society that may, like Anarres, be considered loosely socialist-anarchic, but one instead predicated on plenty. It is a largely pan human dispersed society, living mostly in artificial constructs (massive wandering space ships, or constructed orbital rings). It is also a “posthuman”, or cyborg society, possibly channelling Haraway’s celebration of this dynamic. The culture mixes organic machines, sometimes disparagingly termed “meat”, with highly sophisticated drones and great AI Minds, usually located as a governing body to the great ships or orbitals. The organic part is constituted by the posthuman body, which is perfected beyond “human basic”: self-repairing, altering to different conditions, with a degree of self-regulation including the use of drug glands. This is an example of a utopian hedonistic human society paternally looked after by machine intelligence, in ways unlike many current depictions of human machine relations, and one that Banks is clearly sympathetic to, at least on one level. When asked if he would like to inhabit the Culture’s version of society, he replied: "Good grief yes, heck, yeah, oh it's my secular heaven ... Yes, I would, absolutely ... I haven't done a study and taken lots of replies across a cross-section of humanity to find out what would be their personal utopia. It's mine, I thought of it, and I'm going home with it – absolutely, it's great." (CNN interview).

However, the interplay and constitution of Novum is also made more clear in the Culture’s obsession with perfectibility. Jameson views the primal manipulations of Utopian desire as sited on the body; reading Ernst Bloch’s analysis of Utopic, Jameson notes that superficially, false consciousness ideologies can tend to offer “visions of eternal life, a transformed body, and preternatural sexual gratification” (Political Unconscious) - looking at the Culture’s embodied Hedonism, its focus on posthuman corporeality, with engineering to alleviate sickness and death, to enable gender choice, to self-produce drug glands, signals that perhaps genetic manipulation has led to an unhealthy arrogance. One of the main features of Banks’ books is also the figure of Utopia being potentially “boring”: which may further produce a kind of arrogance.

As one of the “involved” races in the galaxy, this arrogance is also tested against its relations with neighbouring societies. Unlike Shevek, who comes to an isolationist stance of utopia apart, Banks’ Culture is more interested in spreading their version of utopia in a kind of secular evangelicalism, where even the Culture’s apparent misfits can act as missionaries.

In one book, *The Player of Games* sets up another utopian / dystopian double, where the apparent utopian framing of Marat, an uber-gamer of the Culture, is presented as an individual who does not “fit” in Culture. He displays competitiveness, a desire for ownership, and even selfish tendency to cheat, so long as his reputation can remain intact. Being trapped in a blackmail situation by an apparently aberrant drone, seeking to join the dodgy secret enclave of Special Circumstances, a part of the Culture involved with coercing or tricking societies into “progress”, Marat is offered an assignment to play the ultimate game that is the core to the social and political hierarchy of the Empire of Azad. Marat,

though at times disdainful of this “inferior” culture, comes to enjoy his playing of the highly complex game, which is a window on the society as a whole. Just as the game is a personal challenge that, through contest, is equivalent to job interview or examination for different roles in society, Marat comes to see this barbarous empire as more of a challenge and more interesting (energetic, etc), than the Culture. However, as the endgame approaches, it is revealed how much Marat has been manipulated: instead of playing for himself, it is revealed that Special Circumstances has presented him as a surrogate for military action: the game is a symbolic war between the cultures. It is also revealed just how barbaric Azad is: grotesque torture, gender enslavement, interspecies domination is rife. The endgame takes a symbolic role as ideology of respective societies are depicted on the board: Azad’s harsh, combative style versus the fluid, decentred culture, finally able to mobilise and overwhelm opposition.

[The emperor had] made the board his Empire, complete and exact in every structural detail to the limits of definition the game’s scale imposed.... No wonder he’d been so desperate to play this man from the Culture, if this was what he’d planned all along.... The Emperor was playing a rough, harsh, dictatorial and frequently inelegant game and had rightly assumed something in the Culture man would simply not want to be a part of it.... He had to reply, but how? Become the Culture? Another Empire?... He thought of mirrors, and reverser fields, which gave the more technically artificial but perceivably more real impression; mirror writing was what it said; reversed writing was ordinary writing He saw the closed torus of Flere-Imsaho’s unreal Reality, remembered... warning[s] about deviousness; things which meant nothing and something; harmonics of his thought. Click. Switch off/ switch on. As though he was a machine. Fall off the edge of the catastrophe curve and never mind. He forgot everything and made the first move he saw.... an Archetypally Culture move... [but] an attacking Culture move.

(269-271)

The game comes to represent a direct political manipulation with the Emperor finally losing control, murdering his subjects, and attempting to destroy Marat rather than forfeiting the game. Azad topples, and the Culture come in to pick up the pieces.

As an argument for utopia, then, this is problematic. Comparisons ensue between the Culture as a final player of sinister manipulation and intervention: if Culture is a utopia, it has its cruel, pragmatic and meddlesome features, with a parallel with US and British self-appointed guardianship of other states, and their propagation of a particular political model. This raises the question of how it is possible to not only achieve utopia, but how to defend it?