

ENTERTEXT

Ageing Culture: Senescence, Rejuvenescence and (Im)morta
Culture Series.

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Abstract

ural ageing process, cope with or prolong the inevitability of death, and even to live forever, have preoccupied writers from the very beginning. Science fiction, which frequently speculates on the social, political and existential possibilities of nascent technology and scientific developments, is the latest mode of engagement with these themes, written in a post-Enlightenment era in which our ability to achieve these long-held desires seems somewhat plausible, or at least not-impossible.

writing in the SF sub-genres of space opera and/or cyberpunk that explores the

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and bioengineering, may be used to extend the human lifespan, improve our bodies and gain a deeper understanding of the workings of our minds.

Space Opera of the 90s and 00s, writers such as Iain M. Banks, Ken Macleod, Alastair Reynolds, Neil Asher, Kim Stanley Robinson and Peter F. Hamilton, sought to overturn the widely perceived failings and inadequacies of classic Space Opera from the 1920s and 30s, and re-a contemporary audience.³ In their fiction, New Space Opera writers frequently extrapolate from nascent technoscientific developments, such as developments in gene-technology and genetic engineering, proposing that the mysteries of ageing and human mortality can and will be overcome in the future. Human life extended far beyond currently accepted norms is a common trope of New Space Opera, often providing several benefits, such as people travelling far out into the solar system, living fundamentally more peaceful lives

Cities in Flight series (*They Shall Have Stars* [1956], *A Life for the Stars* [1962], *Earthman Come Home* [1955], and *The Triumph of Time*

In the prefatory remarks of the essay collection, *Immortal Engines: Life Extension and Immortality in Science Fiction and Fantasy*, the editors posit three key areas of nascent scientific research relating to ageing and immortality: 1) the developments in computer science th and immortal

5 The successful development of these three areas to an advanced degree, and their widespread integration and accessibilit existence in its current form.

In *Aging: Concepts and Controversies*, Harry R. Moody outlines the key reasons why ageing remains such a mystery, arguing that different parts of the body

human body; in fact, it is almost their *modus operandi*. As Banks states in his essay results of genetic manipulation in every cell of their body; it is arguably the most

³⁰In effect, the more Zakalwe lives, the more part of him seems to die.

This disturbing reading of the protagonist foreshadows the huge revelation at posing as the calm, poetically-inclined Cheredenine Zakalwe, but is in fact actually his sadistic foster brother, Elethiomel, who murdered Cheredenine, and assumed his identity. Therefore, the young-yet-old man who stands before the Ethnarch is consumed and made hollow, not only by the sheer weight of his experiences, but also through the subconscious guilt that he endures regarding his act of fratricide many years ago. The Zakalwe speaking with the Ethnarch is a man haunted turn, consumes him, leaving him similarly ghostly.

The old man bald, face deeply lined, dressed in robes which hid the modest
blinked as she
n
Beychae put on some glasses he was old fashioned enough to wear his age
rather than try to disguise it and peered at the man.³²

Through this traditional, and fairly stereotypical, depiction of an older, male scholar, Beychae becomes instantly familiar; recognisable in him are all of the negative attributes that are often associated with older people: hair

particularly when the parameters of senescence can be changed freely and readily. This conversation, and that which follows it, acts as a clear exposition of the two positions in the age-related debate explored in *Use of Weapons* process of ageing without interference from genetics, pharmaceuticals or transplants

as represented by Zakalwe. Natural ageing, although often complete with deeply unfortunate consequences, can be seen as simpler and more honest; however, the example

context for deceit. Life-extension by intervention, by comparison, is more controlled -ageing treatments remove or certainly reduce the need to feign youth, yet they carry with them a whole new range of unique problems.

biological ageing process, but cannot (or perhaps will not) halt his mental development, therefore continuing to age psychologically. While his body will remain fit and healthy if physical damage does occur the relevant part can be replaced reasonably simply and very effectively accumulate memories and experiences at the normal rate.

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Still, should anyone still feel that their life is becoming dull or purposeless, as

in the series generally affect members of SC, who, due to the nature of their work, are more at risk of danger and violence due to their interaction with those from outside of the Culture.

in 1991, provides further engagement with many of the issues raised in *Use of Weapons*. This story marks the return of SC employee, Dizimet Sma, this time on a mission to Earth in the 1970s to find her friend, former SC colleague and former-lover, Linter, who is part of a team that clandestinely landed on Earth, in order to perform research. The results of this

Contact

-ageing treatments and life-extension/-enhancement technologies, but has now chosen to have these alterations almost entirely removed or reversed, so that he can pass for an Earth-human and live on Earth. Therefore, he has had to come to terms with the return to natural, gradual biological ageing, and a drastically reduced lifespan.

In a similar manner to Zakalwe and Beychae in *Use of Weapons*, Banks uses the opposing views of Sma and Linter to provide a further dialectic on the arguments

while at the same time considering new scientific advances and their impact on life and literature.⁴²

As well as the potentials for life-extension and life-enhancement offered by the Culture, and the various options available to control bodily death, their mastery of technoscientific advances provide Culture inhabitants with the means to continue living eternally (theoretically), in one of two basic forms. Firstly, a Culture citizen may choose simply never to allow their body to die: by replacing cells, tissues, organs and other physical components vital for life as necessary; continually halting the biological ageing process; and avoiding fatal conflicts of any kind.

Alongside these methods of rejuvenescence, Banks incorporates a further piece of related, speculative technology into his texts, which has a profound effect on the lives (and deaths) of the Culture inhabitants, and other civilizations in their galaxy: Soulkeepers.⁴³ An individual can have their personality and memories – what –religious sense – up until that moment, captured and saved as digital information, known as a

process of backing up is often performed automatically at regular intervals using a

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a kind of Cyborg enhancement that can effectively save the soul like a computer file. Soulkeeper technology, therefore, renders the prospect of immortality via constant revention possible.

As well as this potential for physical immortality offered by Soulkeeper revention into an entirely virtual reality (VR). As Banks outlines, the development of VR environments almost indistinguishable from the (corpo)real world is an important component of the Culture:

The dozen or so civilizations which would eventually go on to form the Culture
 rtual reality as palpably real
 d believability exhibited as a matter of
 course by the virtual environments available on demand to any Culture citizen
 had been raised to such a pitch of perfection that it had long been necessary
 at the most profoundly saturative level of manufactured-environment
 manipulation to introduce synthetic cues into the experience just to remind
 the subject that what appeared t 47

These VR environments are often used in similar circumstances to the less-
 sophisticated versions in our own world elaborate games and immersive fantasy
 scenarios for purposes of entertainment; recreations of wars, and
 combat/reconnaissance missions used in military training; and simulations of
 difficult/emergency scenarios used for training pilots, drivers, etc. albeit with a
 distinctly higher level of verisimilitude. In the texts *Look to Windward* and *Surface
 Detail*, however, VR is put to a much more interesting and controversial use.

The Chelgrian race, with whom much of *Look to Windward* is concerned, have
 created or recreated
 building their own heaven

⁴⁸In his later Culture novel, *Surface
 Detail*, Banks develops the idea of virtual afterlives further: in this novel, the Culture
 reality: a vast network of realms that (re)create a kind of postmodern bricolage of
 depictions of infernal realms from various sources. Also, by reflecting a similar kind
 of network or web-like logic to that of the Culture but inverting its utopian nature to
 become distinctly dystopian, Banks allows these virtual hells to form a mirror image
 of the Culture itself.

These virtual hells provide a very real threat of eternal pain and suffering after
 death. The Culture regards this as no different from torture or cruelty in any other

⁴ Quote obtained from the back cover of HarperCollins paperback edition, 2009.

⁵ George Slusser, Gary Westfahl, Eric S. Rabkin, ed. *Immortal Engines: Life Extension and Immortality in Science Fiction and Fantasy*. (University of Georgia Press: Georgia, 1996) viii.

⁶ Moody. 19.

⁷ Ibid. 16.

⁸ Banks, 1994. This essay, published only online, has never contained page numbers. <http://www.vavatch.co.uk/books/banks/cultnote.htm> (accessed 02/06/12).

⁹ There are thousands of alterations to that human-basic inheritance - blister-free callusing and a clot-

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ The major changes the standard Culture person would expect to be born with would include an optimized immune system and enhanced senses, freedom from inheritable diseases or defects, the ability to control their autonomic processes and nervous system (pain can, in effect, be switched off), and to survive and fully recover from wounds which would either kill or permanently mutilate

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¹² Moody. 85.

¹³ Banks,

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Iain M. Banks. *The Player of Games*. London: MacMillan, 1989. 11.

¹⁶ Moody. 17.

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¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ *The Academy of Medical Sciences: Rejuvenating Ageing Research*. 25.

²⁰ Ibid. 25. Addition my own.

²¹ *The Academy of Medical Sciences: Rejuvenating Ageing Research*. 31.

²² Iain M. Banks, *Use of Weapons*. 114. Abbreviated to *UoW* henceforth.

²³ Ibid. 30.

²⁴ Ibid. 30.

²⁵ Ibid. 83.

²⁶ Ibid. 129; 26-29.

²⁷ Ibid. 27.

²⁸ Ibid. 26-27.

²⁹ Ibid. 26.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid. 21.

³² Ibid. 216.

³³ Ibid. 217.

³⁴ Ibid. 248.

³⁵ Arthur C. Clarke.

(1953). <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/utopias>.

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th July 2012, British Library

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Foundation: The International Journal of Science Fiction, 2005; 93 (4?); Vol:34; no.1. pp. 116- 124. 116.

³⁸ Iain M. Banks, question and answer session. The Roundhouse, London. Wednesday 06/10/12.

³⁹ Banks, *A few notes*.

⁴⁰ Banks. *The State of the Art*. 129; 136.

⁴¹ Ibid. 196.

⁴² Slusser, Westfahl, Rabkin. viii

⁴³ Banks, *Look to Windward*. 166.

⁴⁴ *Surface Detail*. 109.

⁴⁵ *Surface Detail*. 111.

⁴⁶ *Surface Detail*. 78.

⁴⁷ LTW. 351.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 166.

⁴⁹ Although the fact that, in the final scene of the novel, Zakalwe is awaiting the arrival of a poet friend, and that, whilst waiting, he ponders the poetic qualities of some of his thoughts, strongly implies that he is Cheradenine and not Elethiomel. 626-627.

⁵⁰ Ibid. The Roundhouse. 06/10/12.

⁵¹ *Longing for Life Extension: Science Fiction and Later Life*. Teresa Mangum. *Journal of Aging and Identity*, vol 7, No.2, June 2002, 2002. 80.

⁵² 171; Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, JR, *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*. Wesleyan University Press: Middletown, 2008. 1.