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# **Utopian Dreams**

Postmodernism, Imperialism, and the Search for Meaning in Iain M. Banks' *Culture* series

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Master's Thesis

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In this thesis, I discuss postmodernism and imperialism in Iain M. Banks' *Culture* series. My aim is to analyse the postmodern nature and imperialist practices of the Culture, the central utopian society of the series. I base my analysis primarily on the first four novels of the series. The purpose of this thesis is to showcase a link between the postmodern aspects of the Culture and its imperialism. I analyse the Culture's postmodernism in terms of posthumanism, hyperreality, and fragmentation based on a wide array of previous writing on postmodernism. My analysis of imperialism in the series is based on the framework of modernisation theory as well as Antonio Gramsci's work on hegemony. Over the course of my thesis, I explain how the postmodern aspects of the Culture form a system of values that both justifies and enables the Culture's imperialist conduct in relation to other societies. I also show that the Culture's imperialism is fundamentally driven by a search for purpose.

The Culture's posthumanism is most visible in the technological augmentation of its people as well as in the symbiotic relationships of its biological and mechanical citizens. The Culture's hyperreality is evident both from its tendency to gamify reality and from its general veneration of simulacra and simulations over reality. This is exemplified by the significance of games as a recurring motif in the series. The third postmodern aspect, fragmentation, is relevant in regard to the peripheral sub-cultures of the Culture Ulterior. These aspects together show the Culture as fundamentally postmodern. Furthermore, they show how Culture identity is irremovable from Culture products, and that these products embody and spread the Culture everywhere they are.

The Culture spreads through the galaxy via its products, but it also practices active imperialism via the departments of Contact and Special Circumstances. These departments work together to incorporate other societies into the Culture on the pretence that the spread of the Culture is the common good for all. Although its imperialism has a seemingly benevolent aim in the enforcement of prosperity, the Culture is willing to use any means necessary to achieve its goals. As such, the Culture's morally dubious actions are justified by its self-defined correct worldview and the moral imperative to expand and spread its utopian values.

**Key words:** Iain M. Banks, *Culture* series, Postmodernism, Posthumanism, hyperreality, imperialism, hegemony

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## 1 Introduction

Science fiction has always been a genre of what-ifs. In science fiction, we question and push the boundaries of our conceptions. It encourages us to think: “What if things could be different?” As such, science fiction has a clear cultural role in defining the shape of our future. Two common sub-genres of science fiction, utopia and dystopia, showcase a divide in the ways we orient ourselves toward the future and each provides a view of what we culturally consider desirable or undesirable. On one side, dystopian literature, such as William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984) or Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), shows what we fear might happen in the future if the negative trends of our time continue unchecked. On the other, utopian science fiction shows glimpses of what wonders could happen if humanity managed to get its act together. Utopian literature provides us with a direction and, goal-oriented as we humans often are, slaps us on the back and says: “You *can* do it!” This is why I think it immensely worthwhile to read and write utopian fiction, despite the unquestionably greater popularity of dystopia and many other genres. It is, however, important to consider all aspects of our utopian dreams, since, as I show in this thesis through analysis of Iain M. Banks’ *Culture* series, an unchecked utopia is a dangerous direction to take.

The late Scottish author Iain M. Banks (1958–2013) is best known for a series of nine novels and a few short stories, that revolve around a utopian society known as the Culture in the Milky Way galaxy. These works form what is known as the *Culture* series, a complete collection of genre-crossing science fiction stories. The ideas of postmodernism, as I show in this thesis, permeate almost every aspect of the utopian Culture-society, where pan-human people and other alien species live in harmony with sentient robots. Everyone is welcome in the Culture, and everyone’s needs and wishes are catered to, as long as they share the utopia’s worldview. To this respect, the utopia has been described as socialist or even “acclaimed as the great modern utopia of the political left” (Kincaid 2017, 106). The Culture’s development, actions, and day-to-day life are all guided by the executive powers of sentient and unfathomably capable machine intelligences known as Minds. Despite their vast differences, even the Minds are equal citizens alongside their biological counterparts and their rule over the society is the democratic consensus of the Culture.

Whilst it is peaceful, tolerant, and utilitarian, the Culture is also moralist, interventionist, and expansionist. The Culture’s ceaseless expansion aims at the spread of its sphere of influence and way of life throughout the galaxy. Throughout the series, the Culture gradually absorbs

other societies into its sphere of influence. This galactic expansion is achieved at the expense of those other societies' identities, as the utopia converts those it absorbs into its own ideology. The highly developed Culture finds other societies primitive, backwards, and brutal, and, as such, they constitute the Culture's to-be-civilised Other. The Culture's relationships with and attitudes toward its galactic co-inhabitants reveal imperialism as a major theme of the series alongside the postmodern themes that I discuss in this thesis.

In my thesis, I aim to show what makes the Culture of the *Culture* series postmodern and how its postmodern aspects combine with its imperialist behaviour to reveal a search for meaning as the fundamental driving force of the Culture. As I later show, the point of connection between postmodernism and imperialism is found in how the Culture justifies its expansion. Pointing out the disparity between the Culture's utopian values and its imperialistic practices is itself nothing new, and the utopian impulse to expand is a well-trodden aspect of the series, but I instead endeavour to show that there is, in fact, no disparity at all. The Culture does not expand despite its nature but distinctly because of it. Indeed, the imperialist forces that spread the Culture are inseparable from its postmodern aspects and values. As for the primary material of my analysis, I have chosen the first four novels of the *Culture* series, each of which, like all works in the series, provides a different point of view into the world of the Culture. The stories themselves are only loosely connected, and the characters are mostly separate between the works, but the events of the stories form a vague continuum, where large-scale developments in the Culture can be seen. This, I think, makes the series perfect for the sort of overarching analysis of themes that I employ in the following chapters.

Next, I provide an explanation of a few of the key concepts in the Culture-universe, after which I conclude this chapter with a brief introduction of each of the chosen four novels, *Consider Phlebas* (1987, abbreviated as *Phlebas*), *The Player of Games* (1988, abbreviated as *Games*), *Use of Weapons* (1990, abbreviated as *Weapons*), and *Excession* (1996), respectively. Then, in chapter two, I take an in-depth look at postmodernism in the series with a focus on three postmodern aspects: posthumanism, hyperreality, and fragmentation. In the third chapter, I examine the theme of imperialism in the series using modernisation theory and Gramsci's Marxist work and show what it reveals about the state of the Culture. Finally, I dedicate chapter four to combining my findings into a description of the postmodern search for meaning at the core of Banks' *Culture* series. To put it simply, in what follows, I delve into the postmodern state of the Culture and proceed to explain how this postmodern state

leads the Culture toward imperialist pursuits, the aim of which is to find meaning in a meaningless existence.

## 1.1 The Beautiful Powerful Culture

Moving on with the introduction, this section is dedicated to a general description of the society known as the Culture in Iain M. Banks' science fiction series of the same name. In the following, I introduce some central concepts as well as a few important terms and related acronyms in the series in order to provide a base for the analysis and discussion of this thesis. The concepts I introduce appear throughout my analysis and are crucial to grasp what the Culture is all about.

The Culture is a highly advanced space-faring civilisation that occupies vast swathes of 'claimed' space in the Milky Way galaxy. It has no centralised leadership, no home planet or a base of operation and is, as such, without a unified centre. This does not mean that the Culture is not unified, however, as its strongest unifying element is found in its ideology, its worldview. Based on equality and freedom, life in the Culture is defined by post-scarcity; people have everything they could wish for but own only their thoughts. The ideology of the Culture is embodied in its products from clothes to guns to the people themselves. Fittingly, in the first novel of the series, the Culture is described as a "communist utopia", that practices "evangelical materialism" (*Phlebas*, 34). Among the common values of the society, as befits a utopia, hedonism is another major one, and the Culture subsequently offers plenty of pleasurable distractions for all its citizens. The primary goal of the Culture could be summed up as the advancement of *its* conception of the common good for everyone, whether under its utopian umbrella or yet to be under it.

A "decadent mélange of more or less human species" (*Phlebas*, 34), the population of the Culture consists of the various species of the pan-human spectrum alongside other alien species as well as sentient machines. This latter group ranges from tiny drones to the Minds, the enigmatic artificial intelligences of spaceships and entire artificial worlds. The varied citizens of the Culture number in the untold billions but are all united by the general ideology and ways of life of the utopian Culture. Because of the extreme variety on an individual level, when it comes to the behaviour of the Culture, it is useful to think of it as a singular entity. This is especially the case, since "in a society like the Culture, where next to nothing was forbidden, [...] individual power had virtually ceased to exist" (*Games*, 69), which makes individual differences almost completely irrelevant to the Culture as a whole. How the

Culture as a society acts, then, is on common interests collectively decided upon by the Minds that steer its politics and actions. Everything in the Culture from production to everyday life relies on the vast capabilities of the Minds.

The Culture has come far from the humble “twenty or so planets that could fairly claim to have been one of the home worlds of the Culture” (*Excession*, 80). Eons of expansion and technological development have rendered planet-life an old-fashioned and impractical novelty, and, as a consequence, the people have come to live on habitats. These habitats range from gargantuan planet-like ring-shaped structures called orbitals — a concept popularised by Banks — to any number of different spaceships. The most significant of these ships, however, is the General Systems Vehicle, or the GSV. The GSVs are a central concept in the series and some of them even feature as characters in the stories, especially in *Excession*. The GSVs are entire mobile worlds, nexuses of civilisation, that fly around the galaxy like gigantic cruise-ships carrying billions of Culture citizens. Most importantly, however, they epitomise everything about the Culture. In *Consider Phlebas*, the sight of a GSV named *The Ends of Invention* prompts the following description:

General Systems Vehicles [...] represented the Culture — they were the Culture. Almost anything that could be done anywhere in the Culture could be done on a GSV. [...] [T]hey were the Culture’s ambassadors, its most visible citizens and its technological and intellectual big guns. There was no need to travel [...] to some distant Culture home-planet to be amazed and impressed by the stunning scale and awesome power of the Culture; a GSV could bring the whole lot right up to your front door.... (243)

Like any other spacecraft of the Culture, the GSVs are controlled by Minds and effectively serve as their physical bodies.

What differentiates the life of a sentient machine such as a drone or a GSV from that of a human, are the obvious massive-to-astronomical differences in both mental and physical capabilities between them. Due to their superior qualities, machines of all types do most of the labour in the Culture. Menial labour is automated and done by non-sentient servant drones. Humans are left to lead leisurely lives full of fun activities and coddled safety but are also allowed to work if it brings them pleasure. Even death in the Culture is more of a temporary choice of lifestyle. In normal circumstances, dying usually entails entering one’s body and mind-state into Storage until a specified later date of revival. Thus, the lives of the Culture citizens question the boundaries of human life, which fits into the realm of posthumanism. I examine posthumanism in the series more closely later, not just because it is a common aspect

of postmodern science fiction, but also because the posthuman state of its people is one that the Culture wants to impose on everybody in its quest to ‘civilise’ the galaxy and eliminate suffering.

Finally, further two central concepts in the series are ‘Contact’ and ‘Special Circumstances’ or SC, both of which warrant an introduction for later discussion. Both are types of executive branches of the Culture that handle relationships with non-Culture societies. They are, in a sense, the ‘foreign affairs department’ of the Culture on the forefront of its galactic expansion. As these departments provide a possibility of adventure, many of the characters in the novels are associated with these departments in some way. On the one hand, Contact and its personnel work to further relationships with other societies to eventually incorporate them under the Culture umbrella. On the other, the role of Special Circumstances is to take advantage of volatile situations in less-developed societies to create favourable conditions for a takeover. I base my analysis of imperialism in the series in chapter three on these two branches of the Culture and their conduct throughout the four novels.

## 1.2 The Series and the Novels

Each of the *Culture* series’ novels shows the Culture from a different point of view, and so each of them provides valuable insights into the subjects of this thesis. I have chosen the first four, however, because the first and second novels, *Consider Phlebas* and *The Player of Games*, introduce the main themes of the series from two opposing sides, and the third and fourth novels delve deeper into these themes in a natural pace. While the specific temporal in-universe relation of the stories is difficult to pin down, a gradual passing of time does seem to happen between the novels. *Excession*, for example, features technologies that the Culture does not yet have in the earlier novels as well as the occasional reference to earlier events from the first novel. The *Culture* series got its final novel, *The Hydrogen Sonata*, in 2012, after which Banks passed away the following year, which left the series a complete body of work. As it stands, Iain M. Banks’ *Culture* series is among the better-known works of science fiction and has duly garnered analysis from various angles. I think the series veritably invites discussion, especially since Banks designed the Culture as the best society possible (Kincaid 2017, 13), the ultimate utopia. Banks’ vision of such a society as primarily communistic and as a product of information rather than an outcome of revolution (Kincaid 2017, 13) gives the series an undertone of social criticism. Next, however, I introduce each of the four novels I discuss in this thesis.

*Consider Phlebas*, originally published in 1987, serves as the introductory novel to the *Culture* series. The story takes place during a war between the utopian Culture and a rapidly expanding highly religious civilisation known as the Idirans. It is told mostly from the point of view of a shape-changing non-Culture mercenary named Horza. The protagonist works for the Idirans, which importantly makes the main viewpoint of the novel anti-Culture. Thus, the very introduction of the series' titular utopian paradise is cast with doubt. *Consider Phlebas* is at its heart a classic space opera, a romp through a war-torn galaxy, about a person fighting for his principles against an overwhelming foe. In the story, Horza becomes part of a mercenary company in a quest to find and capture a Culture Mind on a dead planet. The novel introduces many of the staple elements of the Culture in its structure, or the lack thereof, philosophy, and people and is important as such, even though the latter novels delve much deeper into the central ideas of the series.

*The Player of Games*, published in 1988, is a major shift in tone from the preceding novel. It follows the story of a Master of Games, the famous Culture genius Jernau Morat Gurgeh, as he is called by the Culture's Special Circumstances department to travel far away to the Empire of Azad and take part in a game that decides the Empire's fate. This game, also named Azad, influences every aspect of the Empire's society from who its leaders are to the thought processes and core values of its citizens. In many ways, the Empire of Azad is an opposite to the Culture, but also a mirror image of it; it is a society entirely based on a system of thought. While playing the game of Azad, Gurgeh eventually finds himself as not just a visitor but a champion representative of his entire civilisation. Unlike the action-filled space opera of *Consider Phlebas* (1987), the narrative of *The Player of Games* revolves around Gurgeh's learning about the differences between his society and that of the Empire, and, because of this, the protagonist's utopian Culture is constantly compared to the comparatively dystopian Empire of Azad.

*Use of Weapons*, though published third in 1990, is the first *Culture* novel Banks worked on (Kincaid 2017, 13). It follows an ex-Special Circumstances operative, a mercenary known as Zakalwe, who is called on another mission by Special Circumstances representative Diziet Sma, who is a rare recurring character of the series. Despite the appearance of another action-filled space opera, *Use of Weapons* is, as the ending reveals, more about Zakalwe's attempts at coming to terms with the questionable morality of his life's work. As such, the novel discusses themes such as the morality of power and agency and psychological trauma. It delves into the nature of the departments of Contact and Special Circumstances and thus

provides a look into the seemingly uncharacteristic imperialist ambitions and behaviour of the otherwise conflict-averse utopia. Moreover, Zakalwe's personal trauma works as a small-scale representation of the Culture's ruthlessness when it comes to its expansion.

*Excession*, the fourth novel in the series originally published in 1996, sees the Culture face an 'Outside Context Problem', a thing so beyond the Culture that it necessitates a reordering of worldview. In this case, the Outside Context Problem, dubbed the Excession, is an unidentifiable and unfathomably powerful black sphere from some higher civilisation on some other level of existence. The race to learn the secrets of the Excession unravels a conspiracy inside the Culture that plunges it into another galactic war. In the end, the mysterious object disappears which leaves all involved parties guessing at its significance. The epilogue provides some clarity as the Excession, thus revealed to be a conscious entity itself, gives its opinion on the events that transpired. The story features multiple points of view from Culture personnel such as SC diplomat Genar-Hofoen and Contact inductee Ulver Seich to Minds gone Eccentric. It also discusses the viewpoints of those groups that have parted from 'mainstream Culture' and, as such, the novel is especially useful in examining the Culture sphere's internal fragmentation. In short, the story is a multi-perspective view of a crisis that threatens to destroy both the *status quo* of the galaxy as well as the Culture's hegemonic position as the galaxy's steward.

I have now introduced the four novels that make up the primary material of this thesis. However, I later also briefly discuss two of the short stories in the *Culture* series from the collection titled *The State of the Art* (1991). The short stories I refer to are "A Gift from the Culture" (abbreviated as "Gift") and the titular "The State of the Art" (abbreviated as "State"). Next, I move on to discuss postmodernism in the series. I begin with a general view of the *Culture* series' relation to postmodernism and then focus on posthumanism, hyperreality, and fragmentation in order as specific postmodern aspects of the series.

## 2 Postmodernism

To attempt a solid definition of postmodernism is to look for a needle in a haystack. Jameson (1991, xi), in the well-known work *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, describes the theory of postmodernism as an attempt to define the spirit, so to speak, of an age that is in many ways defined by incoherency, but states that said theory takes “that uncertainty as its first clue”. One principle of postmodernism, that many of its other aspects ultimately come down to, is the abandonment of “the modernist assumption of the possibility of contact with a reality of some kind” (Smyth 1991, 10). Essentially, this means that postmodernism questions any and all overarching truths about reality. These truths are called metanarratives and questioning them is, in Lyotard’s view, what principally characterises postmodernism (Smyth 1991, 10). The principle of questioning metanarratives is behind the many different literary techniques of the postmodernists, and I will bring it up throughout this thesis when a discussed aspect of the Culture reveals a questioned metanarrative behind it, since it strengthens my argument of the Culture’s postmodernity.

Of all the postmodern literary techniques, ‘decentring’ is perhaps most important in analysing the Culture as a whole. Decentring describes the utopia, because it, as I have mentioned, is an amorphous entity without a clearly definable centre or clear-cut borders. Because of its decentred nature, the Culture also has no specific acting force behind it, save from the collective and individual whims of the Minds. I believe this decentred state alone is enough to consider the Culture postmodern, especially since “[a]ny discussion of [...] postmodernism is tied up with the direction of reader response” and hence “postmodernism must be recognized [...] as a condition of reading” (Smyth 1991, 11). Much like postmodernism itself, the Culture is a difficult fit with any absolute definition. Much like the postmodern age, the Culture is also defined by its incoherency. It lacks a coherent social structure or any sort of hierarchy and is instead held together by a combination of values and artefacts that work as its signifiers. Concisely put, it is held together by its *culture*. I discuss many of the signifying elements of the Culture in the following sections, but the essential point to begin with is that the Culture is embodied by everything it produces; there would be no Culture without the products that embody it. This will become increasingly clear throughout my discussion but, for now, it is a useful point to keep in mind.

The Culture, despite its incoherency, features many specific aspects that are often considered postmodern. Although a postmodern reading would perhaps be enough to make the *Culture*

series so, the aspects that I discuss in this chapter provide a more solid base for my argument of its postmodernity. Because postmodernism is such an elusive and multi-faceted concept, it is in any case better to focus on a few specifics at a time. I will discuss three of the Culture's postmodern aspects in this chapter in the following order: first, I examine the prominent posthumanism of the series in terms of the augmented bodies of the Culture's citizens as well as the relationships between the citizens and their environment. Second, I analyse how the concept of hyperreality describes the Culture. I also analyse its tendency to gamify reality as a representation of the utopia's hyperreal state. Third, I examine the Culture sphere's internal fragmentation via the Culture Ulterior. These are smaller sub-societies and other elements that have left the Culture due to philosophical differences. Finally, then, I combine my findings to present the series' titular society as a fundamentally commodified utopia that struggles with finding a purpose for its existence. Before moving to the following sections, it is useful to consider the name of the Culture as a symbol for exactly what it is, for in "postmodern culture, '*culture*' has become a product in its own right" (Jameson 1991, x; my emphasis). Thus, as I showcase in the following, the Culture is both wholly defined by and exists in its products.

## 2.1 Culture of Pleasure - Posthumanism

Posthumanism is concerned with the condition of being human as an interaction between the biological body and the environment outside it. As such, Mahon posits its most simplified basic "unit of analysis" as "human [plus] tools". (2017, 2). Posthumanism revolves around the non-human aspects of human identity, and, for this reason, I see it as a challenge to the metanarrative of 'human' as a clearly definable category as well as a challenge to a human-centric worldview in general. For example, a set of dentures, while they do not originate from the human wearing them, may be a vital part of a person's identity. The same might also be said of one's house or car, or in Culture terms, one's home habitat or protective gelfield suit. Posthumanism often considers humans as forming systems of identity with the non-human, or, in other words, "humans as embodied and embedded in complex social, cultural, narrative, and technological circumstances" (Shapiro 2024, 207). Mahon (2017, 12) argues that humans have always existed in the realm of the posthuman, since "tools and technology have never not mediated" human lives and relationships. This view of "technology not as a mere prosthesis to human identity but as *integral* to it (Nayar 2014, 8; italics in the original) is in line with a strand of posthuman thought called 'critical posthumanism'. Posthumanism in media, however, tends to focus on how modern and future technologies augment human

existence. Science fiction, especially, often features worlds, where artificial elements such as mechanical organs add to and enhance the human form. This way of thinking is the other of the two strands of posthumanism and is called ‘transhumanism’ (Nayar 2014, 6). Both strands can be applied in an analysis of posthumanism in the *Culture* series.

In the world of the Culture, humans are both bio-engineered and implanted with artificial organs that augment every aspect of their lives. One of the most prevalent augmentations in the series, as an example, are organs known as ‘drug glands’ that allow a person to produce a wide array of substances from hormones to narcotics inside the body and distribute them directly. The conscious use of these glands is known as ‘glanding’, and the effects range from improving focus or sleep to shutting off pain or amplifying pleasure. Glanding, though, is just one of the Culture’s many ‘improvements’ to the human. Some other augmentations include the abilities to bypass toxic substances, regrow body parts, and change sex. Longer processes, such as the latter two, are controlled via accessing one’s ‘body settings’, so to speak, as seen in *Excession* (218), when the SC agent Genar-Hofoen enters “into the semi-trance that the average Culture adult employed [...] to check on their physiological settings” and changes the level of gravity his body is used to.

Furthermore, the ability to change one’s sex can be seen to question the metanarratives around gender, especially since many of the characters in the series have undergone such transformations and clearly have fluid gender-identities. For example, it is customary in the Culture to experience both mother- and fatherhood in the course of one’s life. Gender-identity in the *Culture* series is indeed a subject that could be analysed further, especially since the ability to change sex at will is a direct contributor to the equality of Culture society. The Culture has, according to Vint (2007, 87), “[eliminated] bodily distinctions as a ground for social discrimination”, and, as a result, its people are free to express themselves as they see fit. Similarly, the in-universe language of the Culture, *Marain*, is designed to allow for nuanced and diverse expression, and, therefore, it does not distinguish between gender (*Games*, 121) or tend toward such restrictions in general. In terms of pronouns, when discussing characters who have lived with different gender-identities, I use whatever pronoun is used in the novel in question. Gender identity is not particularly relevant for my analysis in this thesis, but it warrants a mention, since it is another area where the Culture’s values of equality and self-expression are clearly visible.

The body-augmentations of the Culture have definite concrete uses, but they are also meant to allow for ample self-expression and enable the kind of hedonistic lifestyle indicative of the society. Indeed, this lifestyle is such a key part of a Culture identity, that the lack of these augmentations or the refusal to use them is considered strange and un-Culture-like. This is seen in *Use of Weapons* (1990, 283) when Zakalwe, who lacks drug glands, is laughed at by a sexual partner for experiencing sub-Culture-standard pleasure. This leads Zakalwe to conclude that, due to the superior qualities of Culture's machines, there was "no sense in breeding super-humans for strength or intelligence, [...] [b]ut pleasure [...] was a different matter" (*Weapons*, 283). The word 'breeding' here is misleading, since the many species that make up the pan-human spectrum of the Culture are not changing in an evolutionary sense. Instead, the customary 'genofixing', genetic manipulation, combined with the added artificial augmentations have brought the people of the Culture to an evolutionary zenith of sorts, in which all involuntary suffering has been removed, and all the pleasures of life have been amplified. In other words, the Culture has chosen "to replace evolution with a kind of democratically agreed physiological stasis-plus-option-list" (*Excession*, 170). On the one hand, the undeniable quality-of-life differences brought about by the Culture's technology are one of its primary 'selling-points' and contribute to the utopia's cultural influence in the galaxy. Leach (2018, 5) agrees, stating that "the posthuman body appears to have become a vehicle for promoting [...] the Culture itself". On the other hand, however, the reverence of its technology is such a major part of its culture that it veers toward techno-fetishism.

According to Mahon (2017, 24), science fiction is "an especially useful shorthand for introducing people to the pro[s] and cons of our posthuman condition", and the *Culture* series is an excellent example. Indeed, Mahon (2017, 140) lists *Excession* and *Consider Phlebas* among works that are "meant to be entertaining representations of posthumanism". Although the series in question has a much more positive outlook on technology than much of other contemporary science fiction, such as Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), the series also explores the negative effects of rampant technological progress. Leach (2018, 11) argues that Bank's *Culture* series "refuses to completely endorse posthumanism" and instead examines "the essentialist concepts of the human" that, to an extent, "posthumanism relies on". Accordingly, in relation to the technological augmentation of the human in the Culture, Leach (2018, 3) raises the question: "What constitutes the parameters of humanity"? Despite the myriad benefits provided to the Culture citizens by their posthuman bodies and other technological marvels, the utopia's inability to provide its citizens with meaningful experiences continually

emerges as a prevalent theme in the series. The Culture can improve the physical person but often fails to improve their lives in a deeper sense. Life in the Culture's post-scarcity abundance seems often to lack a sense of direction. As such, many of the series' characters struggle with the need to find excitement and meaning; they struggle with being human.

The meaninglessness of utopian life is exemplified by the general ennui of the protagonist of *The Player of Games* (1988), Jernau Morat Gurgeh. Kincaid (2017, 30) posits the search for a "cure for boredom" as both a motivation behind Gurgeh's actions in the story as well as a way to showcase the Culture's hedonism. In regard to boredom, Jameson, in *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005, 184), describes the propensity for boredom as one of the primary criticisms laid against utopian ideas of the future. The Culture's hedonism, then, is apparent from the fact that boredom even is such a problem to begin with. Indeed, it is one of the only consistent struggles in a Culture person's life. For Gurgeh, his life's work, being a master of all kinds of games, has lost its shine. He discusses this with his drone friend Chamlis as follows:

Maybe I'm just disillusioned with games [...] I used to think that context didn't matter; a good game was a good game [...] but now I wonder. [...] With no money, no possessions, a large part of the enjoyment [...] disappears. (*Games*, 22–23)

Gurgeh loves winning, but because he has nothing to wager and there is no risk in losing, his victories feel hollow. In the same conversation, Chamlis notes that Gurgeh should not have chosen *Morat*, meaning game-player, as one of his names, but a word meaning 'gambler' instead (*Games*, 23). As this conversation shows, Gurgeh, like many other characters in the series, feels fundamentally bored with life in the Culture, due to its inherent inability to provide a reason, context, so to speak, for his life.

The Culture's difficulties with providing meaning stem from its fundamental belief, that "any form of suffering [is] intrinsically bad" (*Excession*, 170). However, the elimination of suffering includes the removal of the ability to triumph over it. Citizens of the Culture, then, will most likely never experience the joy conquering a challenge, unless the challenge is self-imposed. Gurgeh embarks on his quest to the Empire of Azad precisely because the promise of a truly complicated and challenging game attracts him. Other characters in the series for whom the craving for challenge contrary to the Culture's worldview persists as a motivation include Fal 'Ngeestra in *Consider Phlebas* and the young Ulver Seich in *Excession*. The former enjoys mountain-climbing without safety equipment, and the latter wants entry into Contact, simply because it is one of "the only attributes" that are "difficult to attain" in a

“society in which it was possible look however one wanted to look, acquire any talent one wished [...] and have access to as much property as one might desire” (*Excession*, 197). Even in the wish of its people to overcome challenge, though, the Culture intervenes. Fal ‘Ngeestra could fall and break every bone in her body yet have them promptly regrown. Similarly, Gurgeh faces the ultimate challenge of having to learn the game of Azad on the way and then play against Azadians who have quite literally grown up with it yet cheats almost the whole time by glanding brain-enhancing drugs. Additionally, Gurgeh takes part in gruesome bets of violence against the losing player, but if he ever actually lost, he could simply turn off his pain-receptors and be teleported to safety on his ship. There is an irony, then, in that the one thing Culture citizens often seek, hardship, is the one thing they cannot truly have.

Before moving to the discussion of hyperreality in the next section, it is important to briefly examine another side of posthumanism in the Culture. As I have explained, posthumanism is also about our relationships with our environments. Nayar presents the philosophy of posthumanism as “all about the embedding of embodied systems in environments where the system evolves with other entities, organic and inorganic, [...] in a mutually sustaining relationship” (2014, 51). This description fits the society of the Culture especially well, since it is populated both by organic creatures and sentient machines such as drones and spaceship Minds. Furthermore, the largest inorganic citizens of the Culture, the GSVs and habitats, literally are the environments in which other citizens live and can have personal relationships with their inhabitants. Thus, Culture society consists of fundamentally posthuman symbioses of organic and inorganic entities. I consider this a heightened version of the posthuman state of Banks’ contemporary twentieth century, the era of postmodernism, where inorganic entities from telephones and computers to cars and all sorts of household appliances had started to increasingly moderate human identity. As a continuation of the identity-moderating influence of the inorganic on the organic, the reverse is just as relevant in the Culture; through personal relationships, organic creatures also moderate the identities of their sentient environments.

## **2.2 Culture of Images - Hyperreality**

In addition to the posthuman state of the Culture, the society also exists in a state of hyperreality. This is evident, as I explain in this section, everywhere from Culture citizens’ engagement with virtual-reality games and other reality simulations to their general attitudes toward truth. Just as the utopia’s posthuman elements create a struggle to find meaning for many of the characters, many struggle with the Culture’s hyperreality as well. More

specifically, the struggle to find a sense of stable truth in hyperreality rises as another postmodern aspect of the *Culture* series. In this section, I analyse hyperreality in Culture-society and show how it, alongside the posthumanism discussed in the previous section, adds to the postmodern meaninglessness of the series' titular utopia.

The term *hyperreality*, coined by Jean Baudrillard, refers to a state of 'diluted' reality, where the *real* of reality gets obscured by its representations. According to Shapiro (2024, 120), "[i]n hyperreality, there is an excess of images and limitless visibility" and "the dimension of imagination that is linked to representation" disappears. This is tied to two terms: *simulacra* and *simulation*. The former refers to depictions of reality that "[conceal] the state of non-existence of conventional 'truth'" (Shapiro 2024, 120). However, just as the environment mediates individual identity in posthumanism, so too do simulacra, models of the real, "act upon" and "transform 'the real'", thus becoming "a major part of 'the real'" (Shapiro 2024, 135). The latter term, simulation, then, in Baudrillard's original sense, refers to this process of blending together of reality and its representations (Shapiro 2024, 125). As such, the very concept of the simulacrum, and hyperreality in general, questions the metanarratives of 'conventional' truth. Hyperreality also questions the existence of an underlying reality behind its depictions. This places discussions of hyperreality, simulacra, and simulation in literature firmly in the area of postmodernism.

The terms simulacra and simulation are both relevant in a discussion of the hyperreality of the *Culture*. To begin with the former, when Gurgeh gets blackmailed by a drone with footage of him cheating at a game against an upstart game-player, he thinks: "Anybody could make up anything they wanted; sound, moving pictures, smell, touch... [...]. Where nothing could be authenticated, blackmail became both pointless and impossible" (*Games*, 69). The blackmailing drone must then rely on sending the footage to "a Mind of unimpeachable moral credentials" (*Games*, 69). In a similar vein, the fringe game of *Damage*, that I discuss later, has to be judged by a non-emotional alien species that is incapable of imagination, because no-one else can be trusted. In a society where any information can simply and indistinguishably be made up, the validity of information reverts to the trustworthiness of individuals. In an article on hyperreality in magical realism, Arva (2008, 1) sums up Baudrillard's hyperreality as "a world in which the distinctions between signified and signifier have all but disappeared through successive reproductions of previous reproductions of reality". This is exactly in line with what Gurgeh thinks about the *Culture*. When reality is increasingly saturated with simulacra, the line between signifier and signified ceases to

matter. This process, as I mentioned earlier, is the process of simulation. Simulation, then, is the condition on which the Culture's culture of hyperreality is based. It is, however, clear from the extorting drone's invocation of moral credentials as a measure of truth, that there exists a need for stable truth in the Culture.

This lack of stable and reliable truth leads many of the utopia's citizens to create meaning on their own terms by engaging with simulations, that allow them to fully immerse themselves in alternate worlds. This happens on two distinct levels. On the one hand, the 'regular' Culture citizens engage in hyper-realistic virtual reality games, in which they lead alternate lives inside fantastical worlds and enjoy larger-than-life narrative experiences. The Minds, on the other hand, enjoy their free time with "[m]etamathics; the investigation of the properties of Realities [...] intrinsically unknowable by and from our own" (*Excession*, 138). Via the practice of metamathics, the Minds simulate entire alternate universes, which essentially serve as elaborate thinking exercises. The state of engaging in metamathematical thought is endearingly known by the Minds as 'The Land of Infinite Fun' and it is the Mind-equivalent of virtual-reality, where they let their imaginations fly "vanishingly far away from the single limited point that was reality" (*Excession*, 140). Both of these types of simulations, the virtual reality games and metamathics, are hyperreal in that "if you ever did lose yourself in [them] completely [...] you could forget that there was a base reality at all" (*Excession*, 140). They both recreate the real as simulacra that in turn influence actual reality.

Arva argues that the simulacra of magical realism differ from Baudrillard's view, as they are "the result of an aporetic attitude toward reality" and "[recreate] the real [...] as an immediate, *felt* reality" (2008, 1; italics in the original). Arva's view is that felt reality reconstructs traumatic events that cannot be completely registered due to "the 'pressure' of the initial event" (2008, 2). These types of simulacra "[simulate] the overwhelming affects" (Arva 2008, 2) of real events and, in doing so, depict them on an artistic level. This magical realist view of hyperreality, then, describes the Culture's collective attitude toward reality. To the Culture, reality is something to be conformed to individual wants and needs, and this attitude manifests in the various simulations on offer in the Culture. The *feltness* of simulated reality is important to the Culture, because the society values radical self-expression, but also because many of its people display a need for escapism. When a stable, reliable reality is difficult to connect to, it becomes important for people to create their own realities, if for nothing else than to orient themselves in the world and maintain their identities. As Arva (2008, 8) states, "we are who we are only by producing images of ourselves and our world

through imagination". The Culture as a whole also exhibits a sense of anxiety concerning its identity, especially in relation to other societies of the galaxy.

On a galactic scale, the Culture moulds reality to suit its needs through its imperialist conduct, which I discuss in the next chapter, but on a domestic level, the ability to lose oneself in hyper-realistic simulations is a sign of the utopia's attitude toward reality. The extreme realism of one such simulation is shown when Zakalwe spends a night on a GSV playing a virtual-reality game in his sleep: "He did not actually sleep that night; instead he was a bold pirate prince [who] [...] lead a brave crew against the slaver ships of a terrible empire" (*Weapons*, 275). During the game, he even engages in completely life-like sexual activities with other players. Waking up the next morning "after [...] weeks of compressed time" (*Weapons*, 275), Zakalwe thinks that, even though he knows his life as a pirate was not 'real', "that seemed like the least important property of the adventure" (*Weapons*, 275). In these games, reality can be whatever one wants, with the one requirement that it *feels* real. These simulated experiences add to the Culture's individual freedom and capabilities for self-expression, but they also exemplify the society's hedonism. The virtual-reality games 'happen' in the player's mind, but, importantly, they also happen on the body as completely realistic sensations. The simulation of the senses is clearly a major avenue for the Culture's hedonistic lifestyle, just as many of the previously discussed posthuman augmentations of its people are as well.

The simulation of sensory experience in the Culture goes even further in *Consider Phlebas*, as the protagonist Horza takes part in a game of *Damage* played amid the Idiran–Culture war on the soon-to-be-destroyed Vavatch Orbital, a habitat of the Culture. Played only at locations about to face their final moments, *Damage* is a card game where players control the emotions of other players as well as their own. This is achieved with "consciousness-altering [...] fields" (*Phlebas*, 212), the effects of which also reach outside the game table. Additionally, the game is played with real human lives. *Damage* is, according to Horza, "to real life what soap opera is to high tragedy" and "banned everywhere" (*Phlebas*, 199). Here, the game is established as a sort of imitation of life, a type of simulacrum. The game also attracts sensory addicts known as "the moties, victims of the game's emotional fall-out; mind-junkies who only exist to lap at the crumbs of ecstasy and anguish" (*Phlebas*, 200), who stand close to the game table to experience the heightened emotions of the players. These people are addicts of emotion, who cannot live without the heightened version of reality that the game presents. In other words, the 'moties' are addicted to representations of real feelings. The concrete time

limit of the game, the time before the venue's impending annihilation, serves to intensify the game as well as to symbolise "the mortality of all things" (*Phlebas*, 201). As such, the game itself is, in this respect, a representation of life. Horza considers the Culture a decadent and debauched enemy and is subsequently biased against everything it represents, but whichever way one looks at it, the game of Damage is more of a caricature of life. In Damage, those in the Culture in need of some taboo entertainment can experience the highs and lows of life as an intensified representation.

When discussing hyperreality in the Culture, I consider it valuable to further examine the recurring motif of games in the series. The game of Damage is an important plot point in *Consider Phlebas*, but there are other examples: *The Player of Games* revolves around the hyper-complicated game of Azad, and Zakalwe in *Use of Weapons* experiences life in the Culture partly by playing a game. In addition to these examples, there is 'The Land of Infinite Fun' of the Minds in *Excession*, which I consider a type of game as well. There seems to be a tendency to gamify reality in the series both in the Culture and outside it, such as in the case of Azad. Indeed, it is Azad, a game literally meant to simulate the complex workings of a real society — a game whose "set-up assumes that the game and life are the same thing" (*Games*, 94) — that most clearly demonstrates the link between reality and games in the series. While playing his final game against the Emperor of Azad in the novel's climactic scene, Gurgeh finds himself as not just a representative of the Culture but as an embodiment of it in the way he plays: "[H]e played as the Culture. He'd habitually set up [...] the society itself [...]; a net, a grid of forces and relationships, without any obvious hierarchy or entrenched leadership" (*Games*, 340–341). The Emperor of Azad, consequently, embodies his own society. I return to this scene later in the chapter on imperialism, but as it relates to hyperreality, it firmly establishes a link between reality and games in the series; it establishes reality *as* a game. The Culture's attitude towards reality, then, becomes clear as it tries to win the Empire of Azad over via the game of Azad. The game acts as a simulation of the conflict between the two cultures, but because its outcome has a significant effect on reality, and because it works as an abstraction, it is elevated above the real conflict. To return to Arva's (2008, 1) words on simulacra, it seems that games to the Culture "[recreate] the real [...] as an immediate, *felt* reality".

As the gamification of reality by the Culture indicates, there is a tendency in the Culture to elevate representations of reality, simulacra, above reality itself. This is already established as a fundamental aspect of the Culture in the epigraph of *Consider Phlebas*. The epigraph reads:

“Idolatry is worse than carnage” and is a translation of a part of the second surah of the Quran (II, 217). Idolatry, the worship of images of the divine as if they were the divine, could naturally be linked to hyperreality, a state where the signifier overtakes the sign. In the context of the Culture, this ‘idol-worship’, the elevation of simulacra over reality, takes multiple forms. As I have discussed, the Culture’s virtual-reality games let players experience whatever adventures they wish with all the associated sensory data; the game of Damage revels in the whole spectrum of emotion; and metamathics enables even the Minds to convincingly lose themselves in alternate worlds. All these simulacra or simulations are aimed providing entertainment and pleasure to the utopian citizens. When the Culture destroys the aforementioned Vavatch Orbital, even war is made to please the senses:

Not merely destroyed [...] but obliterated, taken carefully, precisely, artistically apart; annihilation made into an aesthetic experience. The arrogant grace of it, the absolute-zero coldness of that sophisticated viciousness ... it impressed almost as much as it appalled. (*Phlebas*, 295)

The posthuman elements of life in the Culture from glancing to body modification also emphasize the importance of sense-based pleasure to the utopia. All of this exemplifies the Culture’s ‘idolatry’, or, in other words, its state of hyperreality with ubiquitous simulacra. As the Culture crates simulacra of reality, reality and simulation blend together, anything can be fabricated, and even tragedy becomes entertainment.

As he watches the aftermath of the destruction of Vavatch Orbital, Horza remarks: “This was what the Culture offered, this was its signal [...]: chaos from order, destruction from construction, death from life” (*Phlebas*, 295). In Horza’s view, the Culture seeks “to take the unfairness out of existence” (*Phlebas*, 295), and he hates it for what he sees as utopian decadence. To him, the Culture’s free-form and pluralistic nature is equivalent to chaos. The Culture, however, sees what it offers in a different light. Instead of chaos, the utopia offers freedom from strife, and its posthuman and hyperreal elements embody its system of values. This system of values that Horza hates, is, in fact, behind the Culture’s undeniable influence over the myriad civilisations of the galaxy. In the next section, I examine the Culture’s values in comparison with its sub-societies and other peripheral elements and conclude my chapter on postmodernism in the *Culture* series.

### 2.3 Unity in Disunity - Fragmentation

I have already discussed the difficult-to-define nature of the Culture, which in large part stems from its lack of a clear centre. The Culture does not have a clear home planet; it does not consist of a single species of people, or even a specific group of species; and its society does not have a defined structure or leadership around which to orient itself. Instead, the Culture is held together by a loose set of shared values that are embodied in the Culture's products from the GSVs to the posthuman bodies of its people. These products advertise the utopia's way of life and thus contribute to its cultural influence in the galaxy. A society as widely spread is bound to have a vast array of differing views, and, as such, it is common for groups to split off from the Culture to form their own societies and sub-cultures based on their differences. These outside elements of the Culture form what is known as the Culture Ulterior, the peripheral sub-cultures of the 'Culture proper' that are philosophically separate but remain in its sphere of influence. In terms of the Culture's postmodern aspects, I consider the network of elements that forms the Culture's sphere of influence an example of fragmentation, which is another aspect that is commonly associated with postmodernism.

*Excession* introduces two societies from the Culture Ulterior: The Zetetic Elench and the AhForgetIt Tendency. Both of these ex-Culture societies differ philosophically from the Culture proper and thus work well as points of comparison to examine the Culture's values in more detail. In this section, I compare the Zetetic Elench and the AhForgetIt Tendency as well as other Culture Ulterior elements with the Culture proper to provide a clear picture of the worldview of the series' titular utopia. My examination of the Culture sphere's philosophical differences in this section leads into my analysis of the Culture's imperialistic conduct and spread throughout the galaxy, all of which I examine in the next chapter. After this section, I conclude this chapter having provided an understanding of the various postmodern aspects of the Culture.

As I previously established, the Culture is willing to welcome all who embrace its worldview. However, the utopia's freedom of self-expression ensures that leaving the Culture is just as easy as joining it. This is seen in a short story titled "A Gift from the Culture" (1991, 16–17), where the ex-Culture protagonist recalls how generously the Culture helped him leave by forging new papers and providing education on the society to which he emigrated. In *Excession* (170) as well, the diplomat Genar-Hofoen, one of the protagonists, expresses a desire to leave the Culture by literally becoming a different species, an Affronter. This wish is

eventually granted after his duty to Special Circumstances is fulfilled. The freedom to leave applies to the Minds as well, and some of the GSVs and other ships use this freedom to take long ‘sabbaticals’ away from Culture duties or become ‘Eccentrics’ to fully commit to their personal interests. Leaving the Culture always happens on the pretence that one is welcome back anytime. For Genar-Hofoen as for many others, “[i]t [the Culture] was a motherland he wanted to leave and yet know he could always return to if he wanted” (*Excession*, 170). Those who leave can still enjoy all the benefits of being associated with the Culture proper, both because of their Culture-made bodies and because the Culture will support them whenever they want. Indeed, the genofixed posthuman bodies, intricate drones, and powerful GSVs always carry the Culture with them and will thus passively spread the Culture’s influence, whether nominally part of the society or not.

The Zetetic Elench is a Culture Ulterior society properly introduced in *Excession* (87) via an ‘Explorer Ship’ named *Peace Makes Plenty* who is investigating a lesser-known part of the galaxy and logging its findings. The constant search for something new is characteristic of the Zetetic Elench, because the society wants to “[seek] out the undiscovered not to change it but to be changed by it” (*Excession*, 87). This wish to be altered by otherness is precisely what separates the Zetetic Elench from the Culture proper. By contrast, although Culture life is free-form on an individual level, the utopia’s “monosophical approach” is described as “unlikely ever to throw up” what the Zetetic Elench is ultimately looking for, a “pan-relevant truth” (*Excession*, 88). To put the difference between the two societies in simple terms, the Culture is fundamentally convinced of its own way of thinking and subsequently wants others to think the same way, whereas the Zetetic Elench wants to be influenced by new ideas in their search to discover an underlying objective truth. Here, the search for reliable truth appears again, this time as the driving force behind a Culture Ulterior society, whose separation from mainstream Culture stems precisely from the latter’s inability to provide such truth.

A constant influx of fresh perspectives makes the Zetetic Elench “one of the most rapidly evolving in-play [relevant in the galactic scale] civilisations” of the galaxy, but it still inherits from the Culture “the ability to remain roughly the same in the midst of constant change” (*Excession*, 88). This is because, much like being a member of the Culture, being an Elencher is mainly characterised by a corresponding attitude or worldview. This is especially true since Elenchers are never “the same entity twice” (*Excession*, 88), which means that their attitude toward change is the only stable part of identity they have. In the case of the ex-Culture

society, their characteristic attitude is summed up as the will “to be changed rather than to enforce change upon others, to incorporate and to share rather than to infect and impose” (*Excession*, 18). Compared with the Culture’s seemingly uncharacteristic imperialism, the Elenchers’ way of radically embracing difference rather than enforcing sameness seems an opposite. In the final chapter of *Excession*, the eccentric ship *Shoot Them Later* ponders what is to be learned from the events that surround the Excession’s discovery, and muses that the Excession found the Zetetic Elench “too eager” and the Culture itself “too hesitant” (*Excession*, 445) in their reactions to the object. The Excession *itself*, revealed as a conscious being, states in the novel’s epilogue in a report to its own civilisation that “in the [...] matter of the suitability [...] for [further] communication or association it is my opinion that the reaction to my presence indicates a fundamental unreadiness” (*Excession*, n.p.). Neither the Culture nor the Zetetic Elench are ready to accept such fundamental otherness as the Excession represents.

Moving on to examine another Culture Ulterior society, the AhForgetIt Tendency is introduced (*Excession*, 189) via a character with grafted wings named Leffid. According to him, the Tendency is a society that regards mainstream Culture as “far too serious and not nearly as dedicated to hedonistic pursuits as it ought to be” (*Excession*, 189). Because Leffid enjoys a full array of Culture-based body modifications, the Tendency that he represents seems more closely linked with the Culture proper than the Elenchers. He does not even draw a clear line between the Culture and the Tendency choosing instead to identify with his home habitat (*Excession*, 189). As the name suggests, the AhForgetIt Tendency is more of a group of extreme partiers than a unified society, but its existence highlights the fact that the Culture proper, even with its ample individual freedom and pleasure, is too strict for some. This is because it still maintains a specific purpose, a direction for its actions. This purpose, of course, is the quest to ‘civilise’ other societies by forcing them to be like the Culture. By contrast, the most significant task of Leffid’s life seems to be the acquisition of sexual partners, a task in which his beautiful wings are meant to help, although remembering his partners’ names proves to be a problem.

What the Zetetic Elench and the AhForgetIt Tendency indicate about the Culture, is that the Culture is focused on its mission to change all other societies to conform to its own set of values. Even though groups and individuals are allowed to leave the Culture, and indeed even assisted in doing so, someone who has been a part of the utopia will always carry some of its aspects with them. In this way, it is difficult to fully detach from the Culture, especially since

it will always be there to help when needed. This is precisely why the ex-Culture elements are known as the Culture Ulterior; they are the Culture, only peripheral. Even though the society is internally fragmented in this way, it is still held together by the products that embody it. Whether spaceship, body-modification, gun, or anything else, a Culture product exists to present the Culture's worldview and as a subsequent invitation to join the utopian society. A person who takes up the offer will have anything they could want, provided it does not harm the Culture, and will thenceforth be an emissary of the Culture, whether they want to or not. The key question, then, is: why would anyone not want to?

I have now analysed the postmodernism of the Culture from three angles: posthumanism, hyperreality, and fragmentation. The society is posthuman, because its biological citizens are heavily augmented with technology and because they live in personal relationships with their mechanical environments, who are also citizens of the Culture. This ensures that Culture citizens are completely safe from all suffering. However, it also means that any meaningful challenge becomes almost impossible to find. When everything is easy, experiences cease to matter. Additionally, the Culture's tendencies toward hyperreality blur the line between reality and simulacra. This happens especially in entertainment, which often takes the form of simulation games that offer experiences on-par with reality, if not even more enjoyable. Both the posthumanism and the hyperreality in the society exemplify its worldview, where suffering is to be eradicated and pleasure to be amplified. The fragmentation of the Culture showcases that not everyone agrees with its mainstream philosophy, but, at the same time, the freedom to leave based on differing views is exactly in line with the Culture's freedom of self-expression. In any case, the utopia is always just around the corner to aid and welcome back. Next, I move on to examine imperialism in the series based on this understanding of the postmodern values of the Culture.

### 3 Imperialism

Science fiction media has its fair share of evil conquerors and oppressive empires to the point that it could be considered a cliché. From the empires of *Star Wars* or *Dune*, oppressive regimes are a common element in science fiction. The Culture, then, stands out among its peers from other series as a far less overtly oppressive and even peacefully prosperous utopia. Despite its utopian living standards, the Culture still engages in the expansionist behaviour and machinations expected from a powerful science fiction regime. This behaviour is contrasted with other civilisations throughout the *Culture* series, namely the more outwardly disagreeable Empire of Azad in *The Player of Games* and the warlike society of the Affront in *Excession*. In this chapter, I examine the utopian Culture's imperialist behaviour in relation to Azad and the Affront to show how the Culture hides its imperialist intentions underneath a mask of benevolence. I argue that expansion is the primary driving force of the Culture and present a reason for this toward the end of this chapter. I analyse the Culture's seemingly benevolent imperialist conduct through the framework of modernisation theory as well as by using Gramsci's concepts of 'hegemony' and 'state'. I begin this chapter with an introduction of these latter concepts and follow it up by providing the framework of modernisation theory. The rest of this chapter is divided into two sections. The first section focuses on Contact and Special Circumstances as the tools through which the Culture practices imperialism. In the second, I analyse the Culture's hegemonic position and role in the galaxy by comparing it with the enigmatic 'Elder Civilisations' of the series. Next, though, as stated, I introduce the concepts of hegemony and state.

Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) is considered a Marxist writer who is perhaps best known for a unique take on the concept of *hegemony*, on which much has been written throughout the years. Even though Marxism itself may feel outdated in some respects, Gramsci's work has managed to stay relevant, Crehan (2022, n.p.) argues, due to "Gramsci's lack of precision, the flexibility and openness of his Marxism". What makes it especially valuable, is that Gramsci's work caused a significant shift in how hegemony was historically conceived (Lester 2000, 7). Although Gramsci is read from various angles, Gramscian hegemony, essentially, means the "intellectual and moral leadership [...] whose principal constituting elements are consent and persuasion" (Fontana 1993, 140). Additionally, "[i]deology, culture, [and] philosophy" alongside "the intellectuals" who maintain them are all "intrinsic to the notion of hegemony", because "hegemony necessarily implies the creation of a particular

structure of knowledge and a particular *system of values*” (Fontana 1993, 140; my emphasis). The aspects of persuasion and consent that are the basis of hegemony could, in simple terms, be called ‘soft power’, but hegemony is certainly related to ‘hard power’ as well. In contrast to hegemony, Gramscian dictatorship is a system defined by practices of domination and coercion. It is these two sides of the same coin, hegemony and dictatorship, that together form the Gramscian concept of state (Fontana 1993, 143). I analyse the Culture and its imperialist behaviour from these two sides of the Gramscian state in this chapter, although, as becomes clear, the departments of Contact and Special Circumstances, through which the Culture practices its imperialism, both veer more toward the means of dictatorship in their behaviour. It is in how the Culture governs what it already has where the concept of hegemony is more applicable. Next, though, I introduce the framework of modernisation theory.

Modernisation theory concerns itself with finding the reasons behind the disparities between ‘Western’ and ‘Third World’ countries. The relationships between the Culture and the ‘less-developed’ civilisations of the Milky Way galaxy can also be examined through the lens of modernisation theory, as there exist similar elements in the relationships between them, especially in regard to the hegemonic position of the Culture. Banuri (1990, 33–34) summarises the core ideas behind twentieth century modernisation theory in terms of four common ideas shared by its various schools of thought. According to Banuri (1990, 33–34), these ideas are: A view of history as a linear path of progress; rationality as the cause for Western economic progress; similar views of “core values, such as freedom, justice, equality, creativity, and [...] power as [...] defined in the West”; and a “positivist assumption [...] that the means for achieving social ends are separable from the ends themselves”. Each of these four points finds its equivalent in the philosophy of the Culture as it relates to the other societies of the galaxy. Next, I go over each point in relation to the *Culture* series before moving onto the two subsections of this chapter.

To begin with the first point, a view of history as linear progress, Genar-Hofoen wonders at the precise balance of various cultural aspects that enable a society to “end up as one of those in play in the great galactic civilisation game” (*Excession*, 97). The idea that a correct type of civilisation will eventually reach the stars and join “the great commonality of the galactic meta-civilisation” (*Excession*, 167) speaks of the Culture’s deterministic philosophy toward evolution. This point is corroborated in the short story titled “The State of the Art” (1991, 104), in which Earth is described as “an almost classic sophisticated stage three” with “an intelligent human-ish species there, or at least the beginnings [...], or the possibility of one”.

The Culture clearly has classifications for different types of civilisations and sees certain types as likely if not bound to proceed along a linear path of success. Indeed, the Culture considers intelligence, typically, as the most important trait “that took a species into space” (*Excession*, 97), i.e. the trait that determines the long-term viability of a given species. It then follows that the society with most intelligence ought to be the most powerful, and vice versa. In accordance with this view, the Culture has given all executive power over to its Minds, whose astronomical mental capabilities are undoubtedly the best in the Culture. So convinced of this intelligence-hierarchy is the Culture, that it “believes every civilisation should be run by its machines” (*Weapons*, 264). This raises the question of an individual’s “[p]olitical agency”, which, according to Badino and Omodeo (2020, 12), should be considered alongside “the risks of techno-scientific fetishism, which leads to [...] the alienation of individual and collective power in the name of transcendent developmental logics”. As I have already discussed, the Culture’s reverence of its machines and other technology, its heralds in the galaxy, could certainly be considered techno-scientific fetishism. As it then follows, in the Culture, “individual power had virtually ceased to exist” (*Games*, 69), and the Culture considers this not only a logical outcome on the road of technological development but the correct outcome as well.

From the Culture’s point of view, decision-making based on the consensus of Minds is necessarily rational, which fits Banuri’s second point: rationality as the cause for progress. Because the Culture “[wants] other people to be like them” (*Weapons*, 264), it ‘helps’ other civilisations join the galactic society by giving them technology and knowledge. As a result, it leads “the Culture’s great long straggling civilisational caravan wending its way towards progress” (*Excession*, 167). The Affront are an example of this practice of civilisational ‘uplifting’, because, in the process of dragging the bellicose species into the galactic community, the Culture provided “some deftly managed suitable-technology donation” while letting the Affront believe it “was some really neat high-tech theft on their part” (*Excession*, 167). In uplifting other civilisations in this way, the Culture creates a network of ‘lesser’ civilisations that are to some extent dependent on the Culture’s technology. I consider the power relationship thus created a distinctly technocratic one, since it is defined by the side with more technological aptitude having the leading position. This, then, is tied to the concept of “scientific hegemony, that is, the intrinsically political dimension of science and meta-science” (Badino and Omodeo 2020, 12), which relates to Gramsci’s broader concept of ‘cultural hegemony’. The Culture sees its hegemonic position as the outcome of its supreme

rationality, the fundamental correctness of its worldview. However, in its quest to bring other civilisations into its sphere of influence, the Culture ensures its own continued hegemony.

Banuri's third point, similar views of core values as defined by the civilisation in the hegemonic position, is an easy fit with the Culture, because a Culture identity is mainly defined by belief in Culture values. I have already discussed these values, but the deliberate spreading of them makes a key point about the Culture's position of cultural hegemony.

Bianchi quotes Gramsci on the role of education in hegemony as

that of creating new and higher types of civilization; of adapting [...] the morality of the broadest popular masses to the [...] continuous development of the economic apparatus of production; hence of evolving even physically new types of humanity. (Gramsci in Bianchi 2020, 170)

In the Culture's case, a traditional view of the 'apparatus of production' does not work, since its machines can produce anything and everything that the society can produce with no required work on the humans' part. I instead consider the 'apparatus of production', as it relates to the Culture, the system of producing more of the Culture itself. The utopia produces more of itself by incorporating other societies into it and by teaching them to think like it does. Subsequently, "[e]very relationship of 'hegemony' is necessarily an educational relationship of building new social and political subjects" (Gramsci in Bianchi 2020, 170). As the Culture spreads its values by donating artifacts that embody those values, its technology, as well as by providing knowledge to 'less-developed' civilisations, it reproduces. By reproducing in this way, the Culture ensures a continuous income of new social and political subjects, as well as the continued existence of the Culture's 'ruling class', the Minds.

It is important to remember here that the Culture also spreads through much more conventionally imperialistic means. For example, an eccentric ship named *Shoot Them Later* in *Excession* (1996, 403) mentions its Idiran crew members, which reveals that the Culture–Idiran war in *Consider Phlebas* ended with the losing side being subsumed into the Culture. The Affront nearly faced the same fate shortly after their discovery by the Culture, as "[s]ome Culture Minds had argued [...] that a quick war against the Affront was exactly the right course of action". Because of the utopia's traumatic conflict with the Idirans, however, "the Culture would neither need nor seek to achieve such a martial zenith again" (*Excession*, 166). The events of *Consider Phlebas* evidently mark a shift in the Culture's approach to imperialism from coercion and outright violence to more covert and persuasive means. Despite the unwillingness toward open warfare, the Culture still places a high value on its

weapons. This is evident from the fact that, unlike other Minds, warship Minds have a “guarantee of serial immortality” (*Excession*, 422), which makes them perpetually unafraid of death. With all its power, the Culture makes sure to keep the use of its weapons limited to Culture-related individuals. In “A Gift from the Culture” (14), the titular gift is a speaking handgun capable of mass-destruction, whose use is “limited to Culture genofixed individuals only through epidermal gene analysis”. This “antique; not obsolescent [...] but outdated” gun is apparently “hardly more intelligent than a household pet, whereas modern Culture weaponry is sentient” (“Gift”, 17). As weapons from guns to warships are Culture products, they are also representatives of its utopian splendour. The act of giving guns sentience is yet another new height of the Culture’s reverence for its products, its idolatry, but also a clear sign of the want to keep power strictly within the Culture’s sphere of influence.

The fourth point, then, the assumption that ends and the means of achieving those ends are separable, is most clearly seen in the actions of Contact and Special Circumstances. I analyse both departments in depth in the next section, but the latter, especially, essentially serves as a tool of imperialism as it operates outside of the Culture’s established morality to further the society’s agendas in conveniently hazily named ‘special circumstances’. Throughout the series, the characters who are associated with these departments take part in morally questionable schemes, that usually end up with the Culture’s incorporation of another ‘less-developed’ society. Gurgeh’s visit to the Empire of Azad as an operative of SC ends with him unknowingly ending the entire civilisation as it was. In a similar vein, SC diplomat Genar-Hofoen’s personal operation turns out to be part of an elaborate scheme to get the Affront under Culture control. Zakalwe’s work for SC in *Use of Weapons* illustrates this side of the Culture even clearer. Zakalwe’s work entails service as a military leader in one warzone after another on ‘less-developed’ planets to steer their history in the Culture’s favour. A successful assignment subsequently creates favourable conditions for the Culture to further their influence on the society in question. This meddling in other civilisations’ matters is obviously interventionist, but, as I’ll discuss in the next section, it has also clearly taken its toll on Zakalwe’s life. It is convenient for the Culture then, that Zakalwe is not from the Culture, and thus fits as a tool to be used.

### 3.1 Tools of the Conqueror - Contact and Special Circumstances

I have already explained that Gramsci’s concept of the state is composed of two distinct but related forms of control: hegemony and dictatorship. In this section, I analyse the departments

of Contact and Special Circumstances as they relate of these two sides of the Gramscian state. In my view, Contact is a more hegemonic branch of the Culture, since its duties include diplomacy and ‘advertisement’, whereas Special Circumstances is an interventionist tool of the Culture and as such represents the coercive and forceful aspects of dictatorship. It is, however, useful to note that the distinction between the departments is in no way clear, because their roles change throughout the series. For example, during the Idiran–Culture war of the first novel, Contact serves as the Culture’s military, and military ships are called ‘Contact-Units’. Although Contact’s role is broader than the clandestine Special Circumstances’, after the war, the use of outright force and other coercive means generally falls into the domain of the latter. As I explain in detail later, however, the two departments are also linked in that the involvement of SC is usually preceded by the work of Contact, which is why I discuss the latter first.

To begin with Contact, then, I first elaborate the differences between the two departments further. Contact is composed of the “Culture’s semi-military emissaries” (*Excession*, 19), whose most crucial task, as the department’s name implies, is making contact with other societies. An example of this is seen when Diziet Sma writes about the preparations on a Contact ship surrounding the possible contacting of planet Earth, that apparently happened in the 1970s when

the ship [...] [soaked] up [...] every bit of information it could find anywhere on the planet [...]. A fraction of this avalanche of data [...] was stuffed into the heads of those of us sufficiently close in physique to pass for human on Earth, after a little alteration [...], and so by the start of '77 I was fluent in German and English. (“State”, 105–106)

It is clear from this recount that the process of making contact starts with extensive information-gathering, which then creates a base for the following diplomatic work. Knowledge of a civilisation’s history, cultures, and languages is important, since the diplomatic work of Contact aims at influencing other civilisations in the Culture’s favour. In other words, Contact exists “to discover, investigate and — occasionally — change” (*Games*, 134). The discovery of the Empire of Azad, however, according to a drone from Special Circumstances who comes to inform Gurgeh of his mission, is “a larger problem than Contact usually has to deal with” (*Games*, 97). The drone explains that “as a rule it’s possible to go by the book”, since Contact has “built up enough experience with every sort of *barbarian* society to know what does and does not work with each one” (*Games*, 97; my emphasis). The use of the word ‘barbarian’ speaks volumes of the Culture’s attitude toward less technologically

developed and philosophically different societies; the Culture clearly thinks it is morally above them. The drone describes the methods of gathering experience on ‘barbarian societies’ as follows: “we monitor, we use controls, we cross-evaluate and Mind-model and generally take every possible precaution to make sure we’re doing *the right thing*” (*Games*, 97; my emphasis). In this light, one of the key purposes of Contact, discovery and ‘investigation’, could better be called spying. Whatever it does, however, the Culture is sure it is in the right.

The nature of the relationship between Contact and Special Circumstances is exemplified further when, sometime after arriving in the Empire, Gurgeh’s companion drone takes him on a concealed tour around the capital city to see the hidden brutal side of Azadian culture. This trip clearly traumatises Gurgeh, and afterwards he develops a habit of tuning into private Azadian broadcast channels to watch all sorts of violent broadcasts, difficult to understand to the Culture-born protagonist. Among these are military executions, torture sessions of non-Azadians, and other such atrocities. The drone tries to console Gurgeh by telling him

that the Contact section, the whole Culture in fact, was like him, [...] unable to help the man lying injured in the street, that they had to stick to their disguise and wait until the moment was right. (*Games*, 274)

The drone’s words make it clear that Contact discovers, spies, converses, and nudges societies in favourable directions but it *does not* intervene directly, however much the Culture might find a given situation disagreeable. This, then, is where Special Circumstances comes into the picture. Due to the careful information-gathering of Contact, the Empire of Azad is deemed outside of Contact’s business-as-usual and the matter is therefore turned over to Special Circumstances, the part of the Culture that *does* intervene. Gurgeh is sent to the Empire because the Culture wants an SC intervention, and Contact thinks that a society structured around a game is bound to “fall apart at the seams” (*Games*, 169) if an outsider wins. In this case, the game of Azad is a ‘special circumstance’. It is an opening in a society that is otherwise unlikely to ever accept the Culture’s way of thinking.

The Culture, via Contact, deems the Empire of Azad too backwards and barbaric *not* to ‘civilise’ by force, and it subsequently uses Special Circumstances to enforce change. It is clear, then, that SC is a tool of coercion. The evaluation work done by Contact before a decision to conquer is made shows a clear connection between the Culture’s values and its imperialistic conduct, although the combination of the regular work of Contact and the Culture’s military might during the Idiran–Culture war indicates the connection as well. Nevertheless, the case of Azad exemplifies how the department of SC operates. The animosity

of the Empire toward the Culture is revealed by Emperor Nicosar in a conversation with Gurgeh after the final game is almost over in the latter's favour:

You disgust me, Morat Gurgeh, [...] you treat this battle-game like some filthy dance. It is there to be fought and struggled against, and you've attempted to seduce it. You've [...] replaced our holy witnessing with your own foul pornography... (*Games*, 357–358)

As Gurgeh plays in the manner of the Culture as “a god with the power to destroy and create at will” (*Games*, 345), he presents to Emperor Nicosar the Culture's worldview as well as its undeniable power. Here, Gurgeh performs a dual function: he persuades with a showcase of the Culture's wondrous potential and threatens by implying the Culture's coming victory. The final game is both an offer and a threat to the Empire of Azad. It is Nicosar's violent rejection of the Culture, then, that seals the Empire's fate. After the commotion surrounding the final game, Gurgeh is told by his companion drone (*Games*, 376) that the Culture would eventually have conquered the Empire no matter which side won the Game, and this fact was conveniently told to the Emperor before the game to impose pressure.

The events of *The Player of Games* are a prime example of the respective roles of Contact and Special Circumstances. These events also further showcase how the imperialism practiced by the Culture is based on its values, since a refusal to adhere to the utopia's worldview is met by forceful conquest. Even without forceful conquest, however, the Culture Minds in Contact and SC are constantly scheming and evaluating opportunities to spread the Culture's sphere of influence further. A similar situation is seen in *Excession* in the case of the Affront. The violent Affront are, like the Azadians, a society that is too different from the Culture to accept its worldview. Even though diplomatic relations between the two cultures are ongoing at the beginning of *Excession*, the Culture's discovery of the novel's titular Outside Context Problem, the Excession, soon leads to the breaking of those relations. The resulting brief war is a bid to control the Excession, but, as I have already mentioned, the Excession's “appearance” is also “used as part of a plot to entrap the Affront so that they could be laid low and have a Cultured peace imposed upon them” (*Excession*, 445). This plot is, admittedly, described as a conspiracy of a small group of Minds, which makes its relation to SC unclear. However, the plan to trick the Affront into a war they could not possibly win aligns perfectly with SC's way of operating in such situations. It is also useful to consider that this type of amoral activity usually conducted by SC is not public knowledge in the Culture anyway. Therefore, I think that the conspiracy in *Excession* can be considered an SC operation. In this

case, like in the case of Azad, Contact evaluates the possibilities of incorporating a new society, and when no diplomatic solution is found, the Culture steps outside of its own moral boundaries and achieves what it wants by force. The SC agent Diziet Sma (*Weapons*, 284–285) describes this fittingly by saying that “in Special Circumstances we deal in the moral equivalent of black holes, where [...] the rules of right and wrong [...] break down”.

The recognised amorality of Special Circumstances is an interesting facet of the Culture’s expansion, since the Culture is, at least nominally, so averse to conflict and the suffering it entails. SC operations, then, must somehow be justified so as not to put the entire value framework of the Culture under question. Fittingly, the strategic planning of the Minds is described as “the sliding scale of their dialectical moral algebra” (*Weapons*, 56). Every action by the Culture is constantly evaluated by the Minds to maintain a sort of morally optimal course. The dialecticality of the process refers to the fact that decisions are often made based on conversations between multiple Minds. This process is seen throughout *Excession* as the Minds of many famous ships try to arrive at a consensus. Still, individual Minds make rogue decisions that impact the Culture. This is possible, because thoughts are “[p]ractically the only form of private property” recognised in the Culture (*Excession*, 66), which as a rule significantly favours the powerful Minds. Whatever decision the Culture makes, however, and whatever morally bankrupt scheme the Minds hatch, what ultimately matters is that the Culture expands. Since the Culture’s way of life is, in its own view, so correct, the spread of it must necessarily be morally right. In other words, the Culture’s system of values justifies its imperialistic conduct. As Vint (2007, 86) puts it, in the Culture, “conflict is eliminated by the elimination of cultural [...] difference”. In this respect, Special Circumstances serves as an amoral tool for moral justice.

Perhaps the most gruesome example of the moral bankruptcy of Special Circumstances is seen in the ending of *Use of Weapons*. Throughout the story, there are flashbacks into the deeply traumatising defining events of Zakalwe’s life that revolve around a person called Elethiomel or ‘the chairmaker’, who seems to be Zakalwe’s nemesis. To briefly explain the relevant story, Elethiomel joined Zakalwe’s family as an adopted brother to Zakalwe and his sisters and they grew close over time. The turning point of their relationship boils down to a fundamental betrayal of trust by Elethiomel, after which the two characters ended up on different sides of a war on their home planet. The defining event in Zakalwe’s life happens when he is presented with a chair made from his sister’s bones by Elethiomel, which gives the latter his macabre moniker. At the end of the novel, it is revealed that this event caused

Zakalwe to commit suicide, and the protagonist of the story has, in fact, always been ‘the chairmaker’ himself and has only adopted Zakalwe’s identity. Throughout the novel, the protagonist is wracked with guilt, that is, until the end, left unexplained. What is clear, however, is that the protagonist of *Use of Weapons*, ‘Zakalwe’, is a person who is fundamentally adept in the ‘use of weapons’; a person to whom anything is a weapon.

It is the character of Elethiomel, then, who perhaps best represents the nature of Special Circumstances. When meeting Zakalwe’s living sister at the end of *Use of Weapons*, he tries to rationalise the ‘chairmaker’ event, the murder and mutilation of, essentially, a family member, by thinking: “*What was I to do? [...] The point is to win. [...] Everything must bend to that truth*” (*Weapons*, 394; italics in the original). Indeed, it is implied that the man known as Zakalwe was picked by the Minds as a mercenary for the Culture precisely because of his willingness to use any and all means to succeed. The final epilogue of *Use of Weapons* titled “Prologue” (407–411) shows Diziet Sma, Zakalwe’s contact in the Culture, recruit another suitable individual from an unknown planet to the Culture’s cause, which presumably begins another story of violence like Zakalwe’s. The epilogue shows that the Culture Minds are on a constant lookout for the correct types of people to serve as useful tools for Special Circumstances and that the story of *Use of Weapons* is but one of many tragedies caused by the Culture’s behaviour. Here, the moniker of ‘chairmaker’, warrants a closer look as well. At one point in the story, the protagonist remembers Diziet Sma’s words:

But the throne [...] is the ultimate symbol for many cultures. To sit, in splendour, is the highest articulation of power. The rest come to you; [...] and to sit, to be made less animal by that evolutionarily uncalled-for posture, signified the *ability to use*. (*Weapons*, 251; my emphasis)

The ideal tool for the Culture is a ‘chairmaker’, a person who does not rule, but creates the conditions for ruling. In the light of my analysis, the function of Special Circumstances is to enable the Culture’s value-based imperialism without the regular people of the Culture having to confront the moral implications of Culture rule.

The imperialism of the Culture, then, appears to be structured to protect its citizens from having to confront the inconvenience of a guilty conscience. The Culture’s imperialistic aspects thus resemble its posthuman and hyperreal aspects, as the latter two, in their respective ways, also protect Culture citizens from suffering. In this sense, pains of conscience join disease, injury, death, and boredom as things to be eradicated, since they do not fit the Culture’s utopian ideal. The imperialism, then, has a fundamentally utopian and

fundamentally postmodern character precisely because it reflects the values of the Culture on multiple levels. To put it in simple terms, the Culture would not have attained its position of power in the galaxy without the practice of imperialism, but it also would not practice imperialism without the system of values that its prestigious position allows and encourages it to hold. The Culture's entire system of values, its way of life, is intrinsically tied to the need to expand by any means necessary. Thus, the description of "evangelical materialism" (*Phlebas*, 34), that I referred to earlier, sums up the Culture's imperialism perfectly. Vint (2007, 86) invokes the same evangelical imagery and generally posits the "evangelical impulse" as the "seductive danger of any utopia". To continue with the metaphor, the Culture 'evangelises' its materialism via its 'missionaries'. The 'missionaries' of the Culture, its products such as GSVs, drones, sentient guns, and posthuman people, all embody what they evangelise. They spread the 'gospel' of the self-defined utopian superiority of the Culture.

### 3.2 Galactic Custodians

I have now examined the ways in which the Culture engages in imperialistic behaviour using the departments of Contact and Special Circumstances and shown how this imperialistic behaviour is directly linked to the Culture's utopian values. There, however, remains the question of *why*? Is there an end-goal to the Culture's expansionism, and if there is, then what is it? In this section, I analyse the Culture's relationship with the 'Elder Civilisations' of the series and discuss the process of 'subliming'. I also examine the Culture's position of power in the galaxy as a whole using the now familiar concept of hegemony. Ultimately, I show that the Culture has a fundamental existential problem in its relationship to the rest of the galaxy, in that its very existence lacks a foreseeable endpoint. After this section, I pull all of my previous analysis together and present a concluding look at the meaningless postmodern imperialism of the *Culture* series.

I have left the Elder Civilisations hitherto unexplained simply because they do not have much bearing on the events of the four novels. This is because the Elder Civilisations, in a similar manner to the Outside Context Problem in *Excession*, exist on a different level of reality altogether. The somewhat unclear act of entering this higher state of being is known in the series as 'subliming', and many civilisations in the series' galaxy have undergone this transformation, thus exiting the group of active civilisations in the galaxy that is known as the "galactic meta-civilisation" (*Excession*, 167). The Culture looks up to the Sublimed Elders for their brave decision of facing the ultimate unknown, but it is by no means incapable of

subliming as well. In fact, many of the Culture's citizens who have grown tired of living and entered Storage "only wanted to be brought back if and when the Culture finally became one of the Elders itself" (*Excession*, 82). The Culture, apparently, "could have sublimed anything up to eight thousand years ago" (*Excession*, 82) but it has not, "determining instead to surf a line across the ever-breaking wave of galactic life continuation" (*Excession*, 82). The act of subliming could be seen as a sort of civilisational death and ascendance, and the disappearance of a society's essence into a higher state of existence has definite religious symbolism. At the same time, some see it "more as a practical lifestyle alteration than a religious commitment" (*Excession*, 259), though I think this view merely represents the materialistic Culture's generally mundane interests. The former view, however, is highlighted when Genar-Hofoen encounters a religious sect that preaches sublimation as the "highest expression of our quintessential urge to be greater than we [are]" (*Excession*, 261). Sublimation is thus presented as an enlightened goal for every society to strive toward. If other civilisations have sublimed, and if subliming brings about an ascendant state of being, then what holds the Culture back from doing so as well? In my view, the refusal to sublime indicates a sense of unfulfilled purpose.

Hoberek's article, "Postmodernism and Modernization" (2011) gives some clues as to what the felt purpose of a society in the Culture's position could be. In the article, Hoberek gathers together various analyses of postwar United States — a nation that, in our current era at least, is comparable to the Culture in terms of its hegemonic position in relation to many other nations — from the point of view of "postmodernism as the worldview of the late twentieth-century US middle class" (2011, 2). Hoberek (2011, 3) discusses Fromm's early idea of postmodernism as a situation in which even though the modern person's capacity to influence the world around them had increased and "the *problem of production*" (Fromm in Hoberek, 2011, 3) had been solved, the modern person experienced a lack of both individual and societal power, which results from a fundamental sense of futility regarding mastery over nature. In terms of the modernised US, the solution to this sense of meaninglessness comes in the form of "US efforts to modernize other parts of the globe" to "enable middle-class Americans to recover their lost agency" (Hoberek 2011, 5). This includes what Hoberek calls "the transformation of citizens of the so-called third world into proxy Americans" (2011, 5). Indeed, according to Hoberek (2011, 6), modernisation theory works well because it answers the question of middle-class powerlessness with the issue of 'third world' deprivation. I have already compared the Culture's relationship with 'less-developed' societies to the relationship

of Western and ‘third world’ countries as understood by modernisation theory, but Hoberek provides an especially fitting parallel to the state of the Culture.

To formulate Hoberek’s (2011) points in the terms of the *Culture* series, I must return to where my analysis started, to postmodernism. So, to recapitulate, the Culture’s postmodernism manifests in three major aspects of the society: the posthuman state of its citizens; the societal hyperreality seen in its propensity to depict reality as a game; and the internal fragmentation of the Culture sphere. These three aspects together create a sense of aimlessness for life in the Culture. Its citizens are ‘engineered’ for ease and comfort, which drives them to seek fulfilment in simulated alternatives for their regular lives. The existence of the Culture Ulterior speaks of larger scale dissatisfactions in the Culture sphere as well. This paints a picture of a society stuck in a postmodern limbo, continuing its existence through eons and changing slowly if at all, all the while slowly dividing into smaller fragments as groups and individuals split from mainstream Culture to follow their own visions of life. Individuals in the Culture have immense control over their lives, but, at the same time, they paradoxically experience a total lack of agency in regard to the society they live in. This lack of agency finds no remedy inside the Culture, because the utopia cannot offer social mobility, nor can it offer a tangible reason to really do anything at all, since anything can so easily be done by its godlike technology. In accordance with Hoberek, agency in the Culture is rediscovered in the grand quest to ‘modernise’ and impose the Culture’s utopian ideals onto the rest of the galaxy and beyond.

The Culture’s imperialist ambitions, as I have discussed, have a clear link to its system of values. Through its imperialist conduct, the Culture has attained a hegemonic position, whereby other societies must exist in a framework of acceptable behaviour as defined by the Culture or risk enforcement. Here, the name of the Culture again symbolises culture as a concept, since the process of modernisation, put simply, is the process of imposing a certain culture onto another. In *Excession* the galactic Culture-led *status quo* is described as follows:

[I]t would be a niceness that was enforced leniently, patiently and gracefully, with the sort of unflappable self-certainty the Culture couldn’t help displaying when all its statistics proved that it really was doing the right thing. (327)

The word ‘statistics’, here, indicates that the Culture’s engagement in imperialist conduct, as well as the resulting hegemonic position of the Culture, is a mathematical conclusion of the Minds. The description also emphasises the hegemonic persuasive nature of the Culture’s ‘rule’, as opposed to a dictatorial one. My previous analysis of Contact and Special

Circumstances showed that the Culture, in the Gramscian sense, uses the more coercive means of dictatorship to obtain new ‘subjects’, but here it becomes apparent that it switches to a distinctly more hegemonic style of governance once Culture rule has been imposed. Indeed, Bianchi (2020, 168) follows Gramsci’s invocation of the hybrid Centaur to incarnate the interdependent nature of consent and coercion as inseparable halves of one body since “it is not just that coercion cannot exist without consensus. Consensus cannot exist without coercion”. Despite the Culture’s imperialist actions, but also distinctly because of them, the Mind-led Culture positions itself as the benevolent custodian, so to speak, who guards the galaxy from conflict and suffering. This guardian–subject relationship between societies mirrors the relationship between the Minds and the humans of the Culture, where the former takes care of the latter.

The more I analyse the workings of the Culture, the more the interests of the Minds emerge as the Culture’s true motivation. To use language relevant to Gramscian hegemony and Marxism in general, the Minds emerge as the ultimate ‘ruling class’. The Minds make all the executive decisions; they calculate the optimal course of action and formulate the Culture’s worldview; they keep the Culture’s citizens from harm and enable them to live their utopian lives. The bodies of the Minds even serve as the primary living spaces of Culture citizens. Since I have already examined the Culture as a unified entity, here, this unified entity takes the form of a self-replicating machine-like system that is built and maintained by machines and exists to serve the interests of those same machines. To borrow the title of the third act of *The Player of Games* (291), the Culture is a “*Machina Ex Machina*”, a machine that emerges from machines. Here, again, the concept of state is important. In Gramsci’s own words (in Bianchi 2019, 154), the “state is seen as the organ of one particular group, destined to create favourable conditions for the latter’s maximum expansion”, but, as Bianchi (2019, 154) continues, the expansion must necessarily appear as “an expression of the whole society” to be successful. In this way, the Culture’s statistical prosperity and the spread of its utopian standards of living via imperialism masks the more intrinsic reason for the Culture’s expansion, the Minds’ search for meaning by moulding reality in their desired image.

Some more sinister aspects of the Minds’ control of the Culture are hinted at in a particularly telling passage as Genar-Hofoen investigates the archives on a prestigious old MSV (M stands for medium) named *Not Invented Here*:

Also included [...] were some fairly wild claims [...] that the MSV was [...] part of a conspiracy of mostly very old craft which stepped in to take control of

situations which might threaten the Culture's cozy *proto-imperialist meta-hegemony*; situations which proved beyond all doubt that the so-called normal democratic process of general policy-making was a complete and utter ultra-statist sham and the humans — and indeed [...] the drones — had even less power than they thought they had in the Culture... (*Excession*, 171–172; my emphasis)

These archive entries are presented more-or-less as conspiracy theories, but the events of the series, of course, show that there is significant truth to them. Moreover, the group of conspirator craft referred to here does, in fact, machinate the war against the Affront, which gives credence to the archive entries in question. When the Culture's hegemonic position is threatened, coercive action takes precedence over the peaceful values of the utopia. This follows the established interdependence of consensus and coercion; in the Culture, the consensus of Minds is required for coercion, and coercion enforces this consensus.

Another interesting aspect of the Minds' relationship with the Culture's imperialism is seen in the fascination of multiple Minds toward what I would call 'artefacts of coercion', that is, things that signify the coercive means of dictatorship. Before I discuss further, it is important to point out the re-occurrence, here, of the Culture's fixation on signifiers that I brought up in the section on hyperreality. To continue with an example, the General Contact Unit *Grey Area* displays a clear interest in artefacts of coercion:

The ship was like a museum to torture, death and genocide; it was filled with mementoes and souvenirs from hundreds of different planets, all testifying to the tendency towards institutionalised cruelty exhibited by so many forms of intelligent life. (*Excession*, 339)

Although shocking, the purpose of the *Grey Area*'s collection is to show why the Culture's imperialist behaviour is necessary. To this respect, the fresh Contact recruit Ulver Seich remarks while inspecting the items on display that "stopping this sort of shit was exactly what SC, Contact, the Culture was about, and [she was] part of that civilisation, part of that civilising" (*Excession*, 340). The ship's fascination with these artefacts of coercion is presented as educational, but the *Grey Area*, importantly, also engages in torture as a hobby. It acts as a sort of 'vigilante' by finding people on non-Culture worlds who are responsible for large-scale suffering and tortures them by trapping them in never-ending nightmares, where they repeatedly experience the suffering that they have caused others. It describes this behaviour to a fellow Mind as "History to be unearthed. Truth to be discovered" (*Excession*, 52). This marks the distribution of self-justified punishment as a way to engage with truth.

Another example is found also in *Excession* in a GSV named *Sleeper Service* whose hobby is to create elaborate war-scenes from various pan-humans in Storage. These scenes depict past events but are inaccurate in that the real posthuman people who comprise them no longer resemble the ancient people depicted. I consider these scenes an example of the postmodern concept of ‘pastiche’, that Jameson (1991, 17) calls “a neutral practice of mimicry” and “a kind of blank parody”. The GSV creates types of historical simulacra that showcase the absurdity of war. This hobby is less gruesome than that of the *Grey Area*, but it still indicates a fascination with the coercive means of dictatorship in the form of artifacts that signify coercion, be they weapons, soldiers, or torture-instruments, again from an educational angle. I see the Minds’ fascination with coercion as an implied wish for dictatorship. In this respect, the *Grey Area*’s self-justified punishment of non-Culture despots is strikingly similar to the wider Culture’s behaviour toward the Idirans, the Azadians, or the Affront, all of which aims at the enforcement of, and punishment for not conforming to, a worldview formulated by the Minds. In a similar vein, the scenes created by the *Sleeper Service* depict the formative conflicts that predate the formation of the Culture and thus foreground suffering as intrinsic to all societies that are still in their ‘barbaric’ nascency. The ship’s process of depicting a famous battle on one of the Culture’s ancient home worlds is described as follows: the people “were the most important component of the scene; *they were the reason it was all here*” (*Excession*, 81; my emphasis). The Minds see themselves as the optimal lifeform and organic sentient life as the root of all suffering.

From these examples, the Minds’ frustrations with the shortcomings of organic life emerge as a clear underlying aspect of the Culture’s worldview. As such, the Mind-led Culture aims toward the eradication of suffering by minimising all reason for conflict. It achieves this by creating a society where there is no reason for conflict and a people are almost incapable of both experiencing and causing suffering. The unlimited pleasure and comfort of the Culture guarantees that its citizens stay content, and those for whom this is not enough are free to join the Culture’s great effort of galactic conquest. As the Minds seek to create the ideal galaxy, they are certainly not above the use of the very same means of coercion that the Culture claims to despise, because coercion is necessary to enforce the consensus of the Minds. In this view, the Culture’s hegemonic position is not merely a byproduct of ‘the spreading of the common good’ but the distinct aim of it. It is not enough that other societies simply adhere to the Culture’s views; the Culture has to become the only society with any authority in the

galaxy. Only under the supreme rationality of the Culture Minds can a world without suffering exist.

This brings me back to the question of subliming, of why the Culture has, even after thousands of years, still not undergone this ascension. Toward the end of *Excession*, about to face the end of its life, the *Sleeper Service* ponders at how long it takes to know an individual's moral impact on the world:

Perhaps, indeed, that was the real attraction of Subliming [...]; the sort of strategic, civilisation-wide transcendence that genuinely did seem to draw a line under a society's works, deeds and thoughts [...]. Maybe it wasn't anything remotely to do with religion, mysticism or meta-philosophy after all; maybe it was more banal; maybe it was just... *accounting*. What a rather saddening thought [...]. All we're looking for [...] is our *score*... (*Excession*, 421; italics and non-bracketed ellipses in the original)

The Culture does not want to sublime, because it is sure of its 'score'; the Culture is certain it is doing the right thing. To this respect, the Elders who have sublimed and "become as gods to all intents and purposes" appear to the Culture "derelict in the duties which [...] less developed societies [...] ascribed to such entities" (*Excession*, 82). Furthermore, the Culture believes that "the very ideas [...] of good, of fairness and of justice just ceased to matter" (*Excession*, 82) after sublimation, and so the Culture "decided to attempt to accomplish what the gods [...] could not be bothered with; discovering, judging and encouraging — or discouraging — the behaviour" (*Excession*, 82) of the lesser societies of the galaxy.

The Culture refuses to sublime because it sees the stewardship of the galaxy as its fundamental purpose. Having attained its hegemonic position through gradual and continuing conquest, the Culture treats the galaxy as a great civilisational game of the Culture Minds. In this sense, reality to the Minds is not much different than the imaginary realm of metamathics, as both function as playgrounds for testing and observation. The difference, of course, is that reality is shared by other entities, over whom the Minds think they should justifiably rule. In the Culture's view, subliming would mean a voluntary exit, a giving-up of its utopian ideal. To whatever end, the Culture wants to see its vision fulfilled and to 'top the leaderboard', so to speak, once the final score is counted. This is how the utopia searches for meaning. In searching for its purpose, the Culture has made the galaxy into the ultimate simulation, a civilisational game played by machines afraid to let go of their control and face the next step of their own existence.

## 4 Conclusion and Further Studies

I have now analysed postmodernism and imperialism Iain M. Banks' *Culture* series and shown how the utopian society known as the Culture is fundamentally driven by a search for meaning. I used the concepts of posthumanism, hyperreality, and fragmentation to show that the Culture's worldview and its state of being are both defined by their postmodernism. In terms of *posthumanism*, Culture citizens' augmented bodies and optimised living spaces, with whom they have symbiotic relationships, remove all inconvenience and discomfort from their lives while allowing the expression of the Culture's values. Consequently, the citizens have access to almost anything they want but are unsatisfied with the Culture's inability to provide meaningful experiences. Second, the Culture's *hyperreality* is seen in its propensity to both present reality as a game as well as to generally venerate the representations of reality. This hyperreality, alongside the posthuman elements of the Culture, amplifies the freedoms of the Culture citizens, but it also showcases a difficulty with finding a sense of stability and reliability in existence. Third, the Culture is in a constant process of *fragmentation* as elements of it split off to follow their own agendas. This, however, does not remove them from the Culture, but instead enables them to spread the Culture's sphere of influence on their own terms. These postmodern aspects together form a picture of the Culture's ideology embodied by every product of the Culture. Without a societal structure, the Culture exists precisely in its products, and these products spread the Culture onward.

Furthermore, I have analysed the *imperialism* practiced by the Culture and shown a clear connection between it and the society's postmodernism; the Culture's system of values directly enables its imperialistic expansion. To analyse the Culture's imperialist conduct and its position of power over other societies, I employed Gramsci's concepts of 'hegemony' and 'state'. I analysed the more coercive aspects of the Gramscian state via the departments of Contact and Special Circumstances, whereas I used the concept of hegemony for the overall analysis of the Culture's position. I examined how the morally dubious imperialism of the Culture seemingly contradicts the Culture's utopian worldview but argued that this is not in fact true, because the attainment of a position of power by any means necessary is precisely the point of the Culture's expansion. Finally, I examined how the Culture sees itself in relation to the Elder Civilisations and the other societies of the galaxy and showed that the Culture finds its purpose as the galactic steward who takes control over evolution itself to slowly but surely create the ideal universe without suffering.

Even though I have used some evocative language such as ‘techno-fetishism’ and ‘moral bankruptcy’ to describe the Culture and its actions, I do not wish to imply that the Culture’s influence over the galaxy is necessarily a moral wrong, nor do I wish to imply that a society such as the Culture would not, at least in some aspects, be a desirable direction. In fact, many readers of Banks’ *Culture* series would probably lean toward a positive outlook on the utopian society, as, indeed, was Banks’ intention. The author, in an interview conducted by Jude Roberts in 2010 (in Kincaid 2017, 113), puts this simply by saying that “the Culture came about [...] as [...] a single-use solution to a particular problem. [...] I wanted him [Zakalwe] to be on the side of the good guys”. If I were to give my opinion on the matter, I would lean into a positive direction as well. The Culture, as I have shown, has some obvious problems in its quest to eliminate suffering, and the ‘utopian impulse’ to force prosperity upon others is a serious consideration when thinking in terms of the common good. Perhaps it is true that, for a society to truly prosper in the long term, it would have to be controlled by something more than mere humans, but this raises the classic question of whether machines would ever be truly interested in preserving humanity in the first place.

The purpose of this thesis, however, has not been to make such judgements. Throughout my thesis, I have examined the postmodern, indeed utopian, aspects of the series’ titular society alongside the imperialism it practices not to present the Culture as morally righteous or bankrupt, but because of the seeming dissonance between the two. This is what makes the Culture’s imperialism so interesting to me, but the series provides ample possibilities for other subjects of analysis as well. For example, I already touched on the presentation of gender in the series, but a society where a person can change their physical form at will has interesting implications for sexuality and other aspects of identity as well. Other noteworthy aspects of the Culture are its communist and socialist elements which, I think, could be looked at in more depth from a Marxist point of view, especially since the utopia is intrinsically anti-capitalist. Yet another viable avenue for further study can be found in the societal implications of human–machine relations, a vital avenue for both the future and the now. All in all, whereas dystopias are a warning too often confused for the promise of an exciting techno-fantasy, utopias are dreams of a better world that often get dismissed as unrealistic and political, especially since they call for major societal changes and serious shifts in our current developmental trends. Whatever the case, utopias such as Banks’ Culture should be carefully considered to find even small-scale developments to work towards.

In any case, the analysis and awareness of utopian science fiction is vitally important as humankind makes gradual progress toward becoming like the science fiction it writes about. Today, in 2025, amidst news of rapidly improving deep-learning AI models, the increasing capabilities of robotics, and the tightening hold of technocratic corporations over national politics and governments, just to name a few relevant topics, it is more important than ever to seriously consider the directions we are heading in. Art can and does influence the way we humans think, and there is no question that hopeful visions of the future are needed for people to have hope in the first place. The bleakness of dystopian science fiction undeniably has its charm, but if every depiction of the future revolved around the inescapable power of corporations and the diminishing freedom and value of the individual, not to mention humans in general, society would, I think, be ever more willing to accept just such a future. In this, utopian science fiction serves as a counterbalance that provides brighter vistas into the future. After all, who would not wish for a bright future for all?

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## Appendices

### Suomenkielinen lyhennelmä

Tässä tutkielmassa käsittelen skotlantilaisen Iain M. Banksin postmodernin Culture-tieteisfiktiosarjan keskeistä yhteiskuntaa eli Kulttuuria. Tarkoitukseni on osoittaa, että Kulttuuri-yhteiskunnan harjoittama imperialismi juontaa juurensa sen postmoderneista piirteistä, ja että imperialismiin perimmäisenä tarkoituksena on merkityksen etsintä. Tutkimusmateriaalinani toimii pääasiassa Culture-sarjan neljä ensimmäistä romania, *Consider Phlebas* (1987; suom. Muista Flebasta), *The Player of Games* (1988; suom. Pelaaja), *Use of Weapons* (1990; suom. Aseiden käyttö) ja *Excession* (1996; ei suom.). Teoksista jokainen tarjoaa erilaisen näkökulman Kulttuurin toimintaan ja asukkaisiin. Aloitan esittelemällä Kulttuurin keskeiset piirteet, minkä jälkeen siirryn tarkastelemaan Kulttuurin postmoderneja elementtejä järjestyksessä posthumanismin (posthumanism), hypertodellisuuden (hyperreality), sekä sirpaloitumisen (fragmentation) näkökulmista. Postmodernismin jälkeen käsittelen Kulttuurin harjoittamaa imperialismia sekä modernisaatioteorian että Antonio Gramscin hegemonian (hegemony) ja valtion (state) käsitteiden avulla.

Kulttuuri on teknologisesti pitkälle kehittynyt utopistinen yhteiskunta, jolla ei ole keskeistä hallintoa tai selvää yhteiskuntarakennetta, ja jossa ihmiset ja koneet elävät tasa-arvoisesti. Kulttuurin toimintaa ohjaavat sen voimakkaimmat jäsenet, eli Mielet (*Minds*), jotka ovat suunnattoman älykkäitä koneälyjä. Kulttuurin erilaisia asukkaita yhdistävät selvien yhteiskuntarakenteiden sijasta utopian yhteiset arvot sekä Kulttuurin maailmankuva. Kulttuurissa ei ole omaisuutta tai velvollisuuksia ja näin ollen tasa-arvo ja vapaus ovat sen tärkeitä arvoja, mutta myös hedonismi on keskeinen osa sen asukkaiden elämää. Kulttuurin utopistiset elementit, kuten sen asukkaiden muokatut kehot sekä sen taipumus arvostaa simulaatiota todellisuutta enemmän, tuovat esille Kulttuurin läpikotaisesti postmodernin luonteen, jota analysoin tässä tutkielmassa. Pintapuolisesta rauhanomaisuudestaan huolimatta Kulttuuri harjoittaa imperialismia ottamalla vähemmän kehittyneitä yhteiskuntia hallintaansa ja muuttamalla ne itsensä kaltaisiksi. Imperialismi onkin toinen tutkielmassani käsittelemistäni aiheista. Tutkielmassani osoitan yhteyden sarjan postmodernismin ja imperialismiin välillä sekä selitän, mitä se kertoo niin Kulttuurin perimmäisistä tavoitteista kuin utopian tavoittelun potentiaalisista vaaroista yleensäkin. Seuraavaksi käsittelen Kulttuurin postmodernismia kolmesta aiemmin mainitsemastani näkökulmasta.

Posthumanismi tutkii ihmisen identiteettiä osana ihmisen ja tämän ympäristön luomia verkostoja. Toisin sanoen se tutkii ihmisen suhdetta ihmisen ulkopuolisiin elementteihin kuten teknologiaan. Kulttuurin asukkaiden posthumaani olemus on selvästi näkyvillä heidän teknologiansa avulla muokkaamissa kehoissaan. Nämä teknologiset lisäykset antavat Kulttuurin ihmisille laajan kirjon hyödyllisiä ominaisuuksia aina kehonsisäisestä huumausaineiden erityksestä keinotekkoisten rauhasen avulla kykyyn vaihtaa biologista sukupuolta tai kasvattaa menetettyjä raajoja uudelleen. Nämä ja monet muut vastaavat ominaisuudet mahdollistavat Kulttuurin asukkaille ominaisen hedonistisen elämäntavan, joka suuntaa kaiken kärsimyksen poistamiseen ja vastaavasti kaiken nautinnon korostamiseen. Posthumanismiin liittyvät kuitenkin myös ihmisten ja ympäristön suhteet, mikä konkretisoituu Kulttuurissa ihmisten ja heidän asuttamiensa avaruusalusten välisinä henkilökohtaisina suhteina. Tämä johtuu siitä, että kyseiset avaruusalukset toimivat Mielten fyysisinä kehoina. Koska Mielet ovat Kulttuurissa tasavertaisia kansalaisia, ovat niiden ja ihmisten väliset suhteet kirjaimellisesti ihmisen ja tämän elinympäristön välisiä suhteita.

*Culture*-sarjan posthumanismi siis sekä ilmenee Kulttuurin yhteiskunnan elämäntavasta että mahdollistaa sen toteutumisen. Kulttuurin teknologinen kehitys johtaa myös sen asukkaiden elämän yleiseen vaivattomuuteen. Teknologia tekee Kulttuurin ihmisistä yli-inhimillisen kestäviä ja pitää heidät turvassa kärsimykseltä. Tämän lisäksi täysin automatisoidut palvelijarobotit tekevät kaiken työn ajattelevien olentojen sijasta. Kulttuurin asukkaat saavat tehdä työtä vapaaehtoisesti, mutta vain työn itsensä vuoksi, sillä Kulttuurissa ei ole rahaa eikä henkilökohtaista omaisuutta ylipäättään, yksilön ajatuksia lukuun ottamatta. Monien valinta tehdä työtä sen täydestä vapaaehtoisuudesta huolimatta osoittaa, että Kulttuurin asukkaat kaipaavat elämälleen enemmän merkitystä kuin mitä jatkuva rentoutuminen tai juhlinta voi tarjota. Tämä kaipuu toimiikin romaaneissa useiden hahmojen motiivina, minkä seurauksena he osallistuvat tarinoiden seikkailuihin. Esimerkiksi *The Player of Gamesin* (1988) päähenkilö Gurgeh lähtee matkalle Azadin valtakuntaan, koska hänen tavallinen arkensa mestaripelaajana ei riskin puuttuessa enää kiinnosta häntä. Vastaavasti yksi *Excessionin* (1996) päähenkilöistä, Genar-Hofoen, haluaisi Kulttuurin kansalaisuuden sijasta tulla kokonaan osaksi Affronterien väkivaltaista yhteiskuntaa.

Posthumanististen piirteiden lisäksi Kulttuurin postmodernismi ilmenee myös sen hypertodellisessa olotilassa sekä sen taipumuksessa luoda erilaisia simulaatioita todellisuudesta. Hypertodellisuuden käsite viittaakin juuri tilanteeseen, jossa todellisuuden 'kuvista' tulee todellisuutta tärkeämpiä. Prosessia, jossa todellisuuden kuvausten ja itse

todellisuuden rajat katoavat kutsutaan *simulaatioksi*. Kulttuurin asukkaille simulaatio on arkipäiväinen asia, sillä sen ihmiset elävät kokonaisia elämiä todellisuuden kaltaisissa virtuaalitodellisuuspeleissä, kun taas Mielet kuluttavat aikaansa *metamatematiikan* parissa, jonka avulla ne rakentavat kokonaisia mielensisäisiä vaihtoehtoisia todellisuuksia. Sekä tavallisten kansalaisten että Mielten harrastamat simulaatiot liittyvät varsinaiseen hypertodellisuuteen siten, että niihin uppoutuessaan henkilö voi unohtaa oikean todellisuuden olemassaolon kokonaan.

Kulttuurin simulaatioista on huomattavissa sen yleinen taipumus esittää todellisuutta simulaation, tarkemmin ottaen pelien, muodossa. Todellisuuden pelillistäminen onkin esillä jokaisessa neljässä romaanissa. Ensimmäisessä esiintyvä *Damage*-peli perustuu keinotekoisesti luotuihin tunnetiloihin ja symboloi karikatyyrimäisesti elämää. Toisessa tarinan keskeinen elementti on Azadin yhteiskunnan ydin eli monimutkainen Azad-peli, jonka lähtökohtana on sen ja elämän täysi verrattavuus. Azad ei sinänsä liity Kulttuuriin, mutta Gurgeh'n osallistuminen peliin toimii simulaationa yhteiskuntien välisestä konfliktista, joka Gurgeh'n voiton myötä ratkeaa Kulttuurin voitoksi Azadin valtakunnasta. Kolmannessa romaanissa päähenkilö Zakalwe tutustuu Kulttuurin utopistiseen elämäntapaan osallistumalla nukkuessaan virtuaalitodellisuuspeleihin, joka tuntuu yhtä todelta kuin oikea elämä kaikkia aistimuksia myöten. Neljännessä romaanissa taas esitellään Mielten harjoittama metamatematiikka.

Todellisuuden simuloiminen lisää Kulttuurin kansalaisten itseilmaisun mahdollisuuksia sekä auttaa utopian elämään kyllästyneitä kokemaan todentuntuista seikkailuja. Näin ollen Kulttuurin hypertodellisuus sopii sen utopistiseen arvomaailmaan ja aiemmin käsittelemieni posthumanististen piirteiden ohella suuntautuu kärsimyksen ja epämukavuuden poistamiseen elämästä. Hypertodelliset piirteet eivät kuitenkaan jää vain simulaatioiden tasolle, vaan näkyvät myös paljon laajemmin koko Kulttuurin luonteessa. Koska Kulttuurin tärkein yhdistävä tekijä on sen arvomaailma, ovat tätä arvomaailmaa edustavat tuotteet Kulttuurin ydin. Tässä suhteessa mikä tahansa Kulttuurin tuottama asia ihmisten posthumaaneista kehoista avaruusaluksiin ja aseisiin on itsessään Kulttuurin edustaja, ja näin ollen jokainen sen tuote on kehitetty äärimmilleen sen arvojen mukaisesti. Kulttuuri asettaa suuren arvon tuotteilleen, ja *Consider Phlebasin* alkusanoissa viitataan kuvainpalvontaan suhteessa Kulttuuriin, joka on tarinassa vihollisen roolissa. Kulttuurin suhde sen tuotteisiin on hypertodellinen siten, että koko Kulttuuria ei ole ilman sen tuotteita, jotka kantavat sen olemusta. Todellisuuden kuvaus on Kulttuurissa todellisuutta tärkeämpi.

Sirpaloituminen on kolmas postmoderni piirre, jota käsittelen tässä tutkielmassa.

*Excessionissa* esitellään niin kutsuttu *Culture Ulterior* eli Kulttuurin ulkopuoliset mutta sen vaikutuspiiriin kuuluvat pienemmät yhteisöt sekä yksilöt. Kulttuurin arvoihin kuuluvan valinnanvapauden ansiosta kaikki utopian filosofiaan tyytymättömät ovat vapaita ”poistumaan” Kulttuurista. Tässä heitä jopa autetaan, jotta poistumisesta aiheutuisi mahdollisimman vähän haittaa. Kaikki Kulttuurista poistuneet ovat kuitenkin aina tervetulleita takaisin. Kulttuurista poistumisen mahdollisuus on kuitenkin kyseenalainen siksi, että poistuneet yksilöt ja yhteisöt kantavat aina Kulttuurin tuotteita mukanaan ja ovat siten erottamattomia itse Kulttuurista. Tästä syystä *Culture Ulterior* näyttäytyykin jälleen toisena Kulttuurin arvojen, erityisesti valinnanvapauden, ilmentymänä. Se ei kuitenkaan edusta todellista vapautta erota niin sanotusta emoyhteiskunnasta. Kulttuurin sirpaloituminen vahvistaa käsitystä sen arvomaailmasta ja osoittaa, että Kulttuurista poistuminen on lähes mahdotonta, sillä Kulttuuri-identiteetti muodostuu sen tuotteista ja arvomaailmasta.

Kulttuurin postmodernit elementit luovat yhdessä pohjan sen harjoittamalle imperialismille, sillä kirjoissa tapahtuva toisten yhteiskuntien valloitus perustuu juuri Kulttuurin näkemykseen siitä, millainen maailman tulisi olla. Imperialistisella toiminnallaan Kulttuuri pyrkiikin tekemään muista yhteiskunnista itsensä kaltaisia. Toisin sanoen se pyrkii poistamaan kaiken konfliktin poistamalla kaiken erilaisuuden. Imperialistisia toimiaan Kulttuuri harjoittaa sen kahden ulkopoliittisen osaston, Kontaktin (*Contact*) ja Erityisolojen (*Special Circustances*), välityksellä. Kulttuurin imperialismia voi tarkastella modernisaatioteorian (ks. Banuri 1990) kautta, sillä modernisaatioteoria keskittyy niin sanottujen länsimaiden ja kehitysmaiden välisiin suhteisiin, jotka ovat voimatasapainon ja vaikutusvallan kannalta verrattavissa Kulttuurin ja sarjan muiden, vähemmän voimakkaiden yhteiskuntien suhteisiin.

Hoberek esittää (2011), että länsimaiden muuhun maailmaan kohdistuva modernisaatioprojekti on toiminut vastauksena länsimaiden työväenluokan kokemukselle kyvyttömyydestä vaikuttaa maailmaan. Vastaavasti Kulttuurin kansalaisten vaikutusvallan puute, sekä siitä juontuva elämän merkityksettömyyden kokemus, saavat ratkaisun imperialismiin kautta. Esimerkiksi *Excessionissa* Ulver Seich haluaa olla osa Kontaktia juuri siksi, että siihen kuuluminen on yksi Kulttuurin ainoista vaikeista asioista saavuttaa, sekä siksi, että Kontaktissa ja Erityisoloissa yksilön toimilla on todellista merkitystä. Suurin osa romaanien päähenkilöistä onkin jollain tapaa tekemisissä näiden Kulttuurin osastojen kanssa. Näin ollen Kulttuuri tarjoaa ratkaisuksi kansalaisten postmoderniin merkityksettömyyteen mahdollisuuden edesauttaa Kulttuurin itsensä imperialistista laajenemista.

Mainituista osastoista laajemmin eli Kontaktin tehtävä on kerätä tietoa toisista yhteiskunnista ja muodostaa tähän tietoon perustuva arvio siitä, miten Kulttuurin kannattaa ottaa niihin yhteys. Oletuksena on, että Kulttuuri haluaa ottaa yhteyden muihin yhteiskuntiin, sillä alkeellisempien yhteiskuntien salainen ohjailu sopivaan suuntaan on tärkeä osa Kulttuurin vaikutusvaltaa sarjan galaksissa. Vaikuttaessaan muihin yhteiskuntiin se luo perustan niiden vääjäämättömälle liittymiselle osaksi Kulttuuria itseään. Kontakti siis laajentaa Kulttuuria väkivallattomin keinoin. Mikäli Kontaktin tiedustelusta selviää, että kyseessä oleva yhteiskunta ei suhtaudu Kulttuuriin myönteisesti eikä ole valmis hyväksymään Kulttuurin maailmankuvaa, kuten esimerkiksi Azadin tilanteessa, siirtyy tilanne Erityisolojen vastuulle. Erityisolot on Kulttuurin imperialismiin välineistä se, joka keskittyy varsinaiseen voimankäyttöön Kontaktin sitä vaativaksi määrittelemissä tilanteissa.

Erityisolojen toiminta esiintyy romaaneissa moraalittomana suhteessa Kulttuurin utopistiseen maailmankuvaan ja arvoihin, ja sitä kuvaillaankin moraalin ulkopuoliseksi toiminnaksi. Kulttuurin postmodernin maailmankuvan mahdollistaman imperialismiin aiheuttama kärsimys ei kuitenkaan ole yhteisen hyvän levittämisen valitettava sivutuote, vaan imperialistinen toiminta tähtää nimenomaan Kulttuurin valta-aseman saavuttamiseen ja laajentamiseen mitään keinoja kaihtamatta. Romaaneissa tapahtuvien valloitus toimien lisäksi esimerkiksi *Grey Area* -nimisen avaruusaluksen harrastama 'väärintekijöiden' kiduttaminen Kulttuurin ulkopuolisilla planeetoilla kertoo Kulttuurin halusta rankaista niitä, jotka eivät ajattele sen tavoin.

Kulttuuria voi hyvin analysoida hegemonian käsitteen kautta. Hegemonia viittaa hallitsemisen tilaan, jossa valtaa ylläpidetään ohjaamalla tietyn ryhmän ajattelua esimerkiksi koulutuksen avulla. Hegemonia on täten luonnostaan "pehmeää valtaa" ja sen kääntöpuolena toimii diktatuuri, jossa valtaa ylläpidetään käyttämällä voimaa. Gramscin valtion käsitteessä ilmenevät vastaavat kaksi puolta, sillä se toimii suostumuksen (*consent*) ja pakottamisen (*coercion*) yhteistyöllä. Vastaavasti Kulttuuri pakottaa muut yhteiskunnat liittymään osaksi itseään, mutta on itsessään hegemoninen ja pyrkii ylläpitämään haluttuja arvoja sekä Mielten laskelmoimaa maailmankuvaa kansalaistensa keskuudessa. Kulttuuri pakottaa suostumaan sen näkemyksiin ja sen kansalaisten, erityisesti Mielten, suostumus mahdollistaa imperialismiin jatkumisen.

Viimeisenä on syytä käsitellä Kulttuurin suhdetta niin sanottuihin *sublimoituneisiin* yhteiskuntiin. Sublimaatio on *Excessionissa* esitelty epäselvä prosessi, jonka seurauksena

kokonainen yhteiskunta poistuu reaalityodellisuudesta jollekin toiselle olemassaolon tasolle. Kulttuuri ihailee sublimoituneita yhteiskuntia niiden rohkeuden vuoksi, mutta kieltäytyy kyvystään huolimatta tekemästä sitä itse. Kulttuurin mielestä sublimoituminen osoittaa osaltaan myös vastuuttomuutta suhteessa vähemmän kehittyneisiin yhteiskuntiin, joiden oikeutettuna huoltajana ja vartijana se pitää itseään. Sublimoitumisen sijasta Kulttuuri on päättänyt jatkaa hegemoniaansa pitääkseen huolta siitä, että nuoremmat sivilisaatiot käyttäytyvät sen haluamalla tavalla jatkossakin. Tätä tehtävää Kulttuuri pitää oikeutettuna velvollisuutenaan. Kulttuurin kotigalaksista on tullut sen pelaama suuri sivilisaatiopeli; siitä on tullut Kulttuurin simulaatio.

Tutkielmassani olen osoittanut Kulttuurin postmodernin olemuksen ja sen imperialistisen toiminnan välisen yhteyden sekä merkityksen etsinnän Kulttuurin motivaatioksi niin yksilön kuin koko yhteiskunnankin tasolla. *Culture*-sarja tarjoaa kuitenkin monia muitakin aiheita tutkittavaksi. Posthumanismiin liittyen esimerkiksi ihmisten ja koneiden väliset suhteet ovat tärkeä tutkimusalue tulevaisuuden kannalta. Myös niin sukupuoleen, seksuaalisuuteen kuin muihinkin identiteetin osa-alueisiin liittyvät tasa-arvo kysymykset, ovat sarjassa esillä erityisesti Kulttuurin ihmisten muuttuvuuden vuoksi. Mielestäni onkin tärkeää pohtia, millaisia yhteiskunnallisia vaikutuksia ihmisten kyvyllä muuttaa kehoaan voisi olla, tai miten koneiden täysi ja todistettu itsetietoisuus vaikuttaisi ihmisten ja koneiden välisiin suhteisiin. Utopioilla on tulevaisuuden kannalta tärkeä rooli, sillä ne auttavat ohjaamaan meitä positiiviseen suuntaan ja antavat ihmisille rohkeutta uskaltaa toivoa parempaa. Kulttuuri kuitenkin osoittaa, että yhteisen hyvän tavoitteluunkin voi liittyä vaarallisia puolia.