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Contemporary American Narratives

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Introduction

The future is already here — it's just not very evenly distributed.
– William Gibson

The above oft-quoted maxim by notorious speculative fiction writer William Gibson alludes to the fact that the everyday stuff that will constitute tomorrow's life is already existing today, and that most of what will constitute change is the mere amplification and spread of present-day ideas and technologies that will become more pervasive. Similarly, when it comes to envisioning how the future will be, contemporary narratives seem to be informed by the anxieties that characterize the 21st century: social and political unrest, conspicuous consumerism and advanced technology, to name a few. As a result, writers and filmmakers reproduce this cultural mindset by imagining futures in which human life has been shaped by the current developing tendencies in the application of technology. The implications of total transparency and constant surveillance, the influence of television and the cult of appearance on social relations, and the possibility to extend life after death by overcoming biological limitations—all of these are near-future possibilities that pervade today's popular culture and political discourse. From literary fiction to televisual narratives, it seems that many of the possible futures in the contemporary imagery have a hint of Orwell in them, depicting a society in which freedom is threatened and life has lost its human character.

Far from implying fatalism and characterize contemporary narratives as purely dystopian and hopeless, I will analyze works of literary fiction and a TV series and argue that the way technology is portrayed gives rise to an ambiguity in the nature of these utopias, an ambivalence born out of the tension between the promise of a better life carried out by technology and the problematics that arise in those possible futures.

When I approached this project, I sought to combine my interest in the latest developments in technology with my literary background, and I found out that the two overlapped in some

utopian narratives. As a contribution to the field of utopian criticism, I seek to analyze Dave Eggers' *The Circle*, David Foster Wallace "Tri-Stan: I Sold Sisse Nar to Ecko", Ted Chiang's "Liking What You See: A Documentary" and the critically acclaimed TV series *Black Mirror* in order to investigate how developing tendencies in the application of technology shape society and model social relations in the aforementioned narratives. My work moves from a discussion of utopian texts as possible future worlds to a consideration of the relation of these imagined futures to our present.

My methodology draws on the well-established critical material on utopia by English and North-American scholars. I use the definitions and boundaries offered by these critics to set up my own criteria and to reach my own conclusions about the aforementioned works.

The first chapter will examine how the field of utopian criticism develops from the Renaissance literary tradition of utopias. Utopian literature takes its name from Thomas More's *De Optimo Republicae Statu deque Nova Insula Utopia*, later followed by Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*, Tommaso Campanella's *City of the Sun*, and Etienne Cabet's *Voyage en Icarie*. The common characteristic shared by all these works is the attempt to portray an ideal society, but, although utopia is an old and universal idea, the concept itself still lacks a clear, agreed-upon definition. Chapter 1 will thus put forward a picture of present utopian scholarship, particularly for what concerns its characteristics, in order to provide a theoretical framework and a terminology. The chapter will also trace the origins of dystopian thought in the utopian genre, in order to present how technological development has informed those works traditionally regarded as dystopias and provide a background to explore the issue in contemporary narratives.

In Chapter 2 I will consider Dave Eggers' 2013 novel, *The Circle*, against the backdrop of previous considerations on utopia. Concerned with the rise of social networks and themes of surveillance and omniscience, the novel depicts the effects of the loss of individuality and

freedom, and the threats to privacy and ultimately democracy that may be originating from the Internet and the “global village”. The relationship portrayed in *The Circle* among transparency, surveillance and control stems from the consideration that the essential condition for an absolute power to work is that it needs to be ubiquitous and have total control over its subjects, and thus draws on the mechanism of internalization of power devised by Foucault in describing the Panopticon. The chapter will therefore investigate how panopticism and other forms of surveillance are at work in *The Circle*, and how the cult of transparency and constant visibility influence and shape society.

Chapter 3 will analyze David Foster Wallace’s short story “Tri-stan: I Sold Sisse Nar to Ecko” and Ted Chiang’s “Liking What You See: A Documentary”. My considerations depart from the Foucauldian concept of the internalization of power relations to extend it to the notion of beauty. Arguing that beauty is a social construct, and thus passible of socialization, I will employ David Foster Wallace’s essay “E Unibus Pluram” as a framework to investigate how the media, and particularly television, generate and perpetuate standards of beauty in contemporary society. I will then examine Wallace’s short story in the light of these observations to show the relationship between television, narcissism and the cult of a ‘perfect’ (and surgically perfectible) beauty. I will eventually move to Ted Chiang’s “Liking What You See: A Documentary” to show how the internalization of cultural ideals of attractiveness has a role in shaping interpersonal relations, and to discuss the role of the individual and freedom in a utopian context.

Lastly, in Chapter 4, I will switch to a different media and look at the critically acclaimed British TV show *Black Mirror* (2011 – ongoing), in order to investigate how the utopian narrative framework has been used in other cultural media. The anthology series is generally set in an alternate present or in the near-future and bound by the common theme of the implications of technological progress on social life. In particular, I will focus on two episodes,

“Be Right Back” (the first episode of season 2) and “San Junipero” (season 3, episode 4), insofar as they both display a technology which is able to reverse or abolish the process of dying, and therefore to question human mortality by suggesting alternatives to death. These episodes are thus situated in the backdrop of transhumanist philosophy, which seeks to provide a solution to the problem of death and the temporal finitude of human condition. In this respect, the issue is closely related to the concept of utopia in that death constitutes an anxiety that must be removed in order to consider the possibility of utopia. I will therefore examine the roots of transhumanist thought in Teilhard de Chardin’s work, where he devised a stage of ultimate synthesis of consciousness he called the ‘Omega Point’. The concept was then appropriated by contemporary transhumanists as a metaphor for ‘technological singularity’, a point where our biological thinking will merge with technology. This concept is what belies the possibility of whole brain emulation, that roughly corresponds to uploading one’s mind into a software simulation, which is the starting point of both episodes.

The first episode I will analyze, “Be Right Back”, deals with the possibility of collecting one’s data from social media to create an avatar, and raises some important questions about the persistence of identity in the android replica. Drawing from Locke and Lyotard, I will try to assess whether the process of mind uploading preserves one’s self.

The second episode, “San Junipero”, takes its name from the fictional beach resort town where it is set, and deals with the possibility of uploading people’s consciousness to a virtual world, fundamentally granting immortality. The issue raised in “San Junipero” is therefore the same of “Be Right Back”, namely the persistence of personal identity after death, or at least after uploading. Moreover, “San Junipero” explores the issue of the possibility of life after death within the Foucauldian concept of heterotopia, a place that allows the utopian ideal to be effectively enacted.

Together, the four chapters that follow aim at providing an insight into the aforementioned utopian narratives. My discussion also foregrounds the ties between the social criticism within these narratives and that carried out by some of the major modern social and cultural critics, such as Michel Foucault, Zygmunt Bauman, Jean Baudrillard and Jean-François Lyotard.

As might be already evident at this point, I am reluctant to employ the term ‘dystopian’ with reference to the nature of these works, for I believe that even though technology is often portrayed as problematic, they tend to blur the boundaries between the notion of ‘good place’ and ‘bad place’, and thus refuse a clear inscription into one single genre. In fact, it is often left to the reader or viewer to assess whether the way technology is depicted gives rise to either a eutopia or a dystopia. In addition, the whole matter gets rather complicated if we consider that the near-future worlds which are the subject of these works are startlingly similar to the one we are living in.

1. Utopia, Eutopia and Dystopia

1.1 Utopia: The Absent Definition

Literary taxonomy has necessarily to be a major concern when performing a historical overview of the utopian genre, as the nature of this thesis requires. That is, a general outlook at the discipline known as utopian studies is necessary in order to clearly convey the ideas and arguments that will be covered within this project. Moreover, the fact that the nature of utopian studies tends to encourage discussions and often lack of agreement in terms of definitions and terminology makes an outline of the topic all the more necessary, especially if we consider that the subject is as important to academics as prevalent in popular culture.

The term “utopia” comes from Sir Thomas More’s book *Libellus Vere Aureus, nec Minus Salutaris quam Festivus, de Optimo Republicae Statu deque Nova Insula Utopia*, which can be considered as the general marker for the beginning of the utopian conversation. “Utopia” was, indeed, a lexical neologism created by More to name his fictional island, and its etymology is to be found in the combination of the Greek *οὐκ* (“not”) and *τόπος* (“topos”, meaning “place”). It thus indicates a place that does not exist, a non-place (Vieira 4). Of course, a simple etymology of the term “utopia” as a literary neologism created to name a fictional island is not sufficient to clear centuries’ worth of confusion over what utopia exactly is. The onset of this confusion stems from the very characteristics of the island Utopia, described in More’s work. As we can infer from the title, and from a poem that was included in the front matter of the first edition of More’s work, Utopia is an *optimus* State, one where perfection has been achieved, thus rivaling Plato’s *Republic* and even being superior to it. This is further complicated by the last verse, “Eutopia merito sum vocanda nomine” (“I should deservedly be called Eutopia”, my translation). In it, More uses the term “eutopia” (from *εὖ*, “good”), “good

place”, instead of “utopia”, which creates a tension that has persisted over time stemming from the paradoxical dual meaning of a place that is simultaneously non-existent (utopia) and good (eutopia) (Vieira 5).

For these reasons, More’s work has given rise to lasting ambiguity and confusion when it comes to define utopia both as a term and as a concept: is utopia an unachievable ideal of a no-place, or is it a good place, “one country at which Humanity is always landing” (Wilde 28) and that society should aim to? Even though this question remains still unanswered today, it has paved the way for conversation around the concept of utopia and established More as the founding father of the utopian genre (*The Concept of Utopia* 3).

To provide a definition of “utopia” or a new theory to the already overwhelming amount of utopian scholarship is not the aim of this work. However, I believe it is crucial to present a picture of present utopian scholarship, particularly for what concerns its characteristics, in order to provide a theoretical framework and to establish the terminology that will be used in this thesis.

Lyman Tower Sargent’s “The Three Faces of Utopianism”, later revised and published as “The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited”, is undoubtedly considered one of the key texts in utopian criticism; in it, Sargent deploys a tripartite division, breaking down utopia into ‘three broad directions’ in its forms of expression: “utopian literature, communitarianism and utopian social theory” (“Three Faces” 4). Of the three, his analysis of the literary utopia is the one that is most relevant to this work, due to the definitions of the literary utopia he provides. Sargent, in fact, defines utopia as “a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space” (“Three Faces” 9). It is important to note that Sargent’s definition makes a good point in characterizing utopia as simply “non-existent”, and thus allowing a further distinction between eutopia (a positive utopia, intended to be viewed as considerably better than the author’s society) and dystopia (a negative utopia, intended to be viewed as

considerably worse than the author's society). Far from providing a detailed analysis, Sargent's definitions offer a good list of terms that will, at least, serve to alleviate any confusion as far as basic distinctions within the works of literature considered in this thesis are concerned.

In exploring the concept of utopia, I believe that a preliminary analysis of *what* has been considered as "utopian" might be in order. The field of enquiry is itself problematic, as scholars do not agree on what should be considered a literary utopia, and thus the range of material included in their bibliography varies a great deal. It exists, however, a collection of works that "traditionally" constitute the core of the discussion around utopias, and whose exclusion seems to call for justification: Plato's *Republic* (which, despite having a claimed major influence on More's *Utopia*, can be regarded as the first attempt to put forth an alternative way to organize society), Renaissance utopias such as Bacon's *New Atlantis* and Tommaso Campanella's *City of the Sun*, and Etienne Cabet's *Voyage en Icarie* – although even here some commentators would criticize the inclusion of Bacon due to the incompleteness of his description of the "ideal land" (*The Concept of Utopia* 31). To these, many scholars tend to add Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, Morris' *News from Nowhere*, Harrington's *Oceana*, H.G. Well's *A Modern Utopia* and, due to meaning that I allocate to "utopia" (i.e. a "no-place"), I agree with those commentators who would also include works that came to represent the canonical triptych of twentieth-century dystopia, namely Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Huxley's *Brave New World*. Thomas More's *Utopia* is the only work that is universally recognized as a utopia (*The Concept of Utopia* 11). Thus, although utopia is an old and universal idea, the concept itself remains in an inchoate stage whose boundaries are still to be identified clearly. In addition, many of the definitions of utopia we are offered are troublesome in some way, as they place limits upon the field of enquiry itself. In *The Concept of Utopia* (1990), one of the most complete discussions of the definition of utopia and the one that I will largely refer to in order to sketch the broad outlines of present scholarship, Ruth Levitas sets

out to clarify the meaning of the term. According to Levitas, existing definitions cluster around three aspects: content, form and function, or some combination of these, which seems to be basically the only consensus in approaching the issue.

There is a general agreement among commentators in identifying utopia as a literary genre with one type of a form, one describing an ideal society in some detail. Lest it be misunderstood, it is crucial to note that the term “ideal” does not denote by any means a state of *perfection*, but rather characterizes such a society as a product of the mind and in opposition to the outside world. As Sargent argues, perfection has never been a characteristic of utopian fiction, and very few utopias present societies that their author believes to be perfect (“Three Faces”, 9). Clearly, such a categorization is a rather broad one, but it must account for the changes occurred in the history of literature.

However, it might be helpful at this point to consider George Woodcock’s definition of utopia: “a society permanently constituted and rigidly regulated according to a plan which its founder believes will serve the best interests of the people as a whole” (“Utopias in Negative” 82). Basing our considerations on such a definition, it would be difficult to conceive that the utopist does not believe his model to be the best that he could elaborate. This is far from claiming that the society depicted is perfect, but it is the best possible alternative way to organize society the utopist could foresee.

One of the most interesting attempts at a definition in terms of form, according to Levitas, comes from J.C. Davis, who, in his *Utopia and the Ideal Society*, provides a classification of utopias based on how they deal with what he labels the ‘scarcity gap’, that is the gap between wants and satisfactions, the “paucity of satisfactions weakly coordinated with the desires and aspirations of a community of individuals”, that all utopias (as well as real societies) must address and try to bridge (*The Concept of Utopia* 161).

Davis distinguishes five types of texts, of which only the latter should be considered a

‘proper’ utopia. The first two, Cockayne (which refers to the medieval folk-poem *The Land of Cockayne*) and Arcadia, are to be discarded since they represent, using Lewis Mumford labeling,¹ an ‘escapist’ form which embodies, as Gorman Beauchamp maintains, what Freud calls the pleasure principle: “a child’s world of unrestrained delight amidst unforced plenty” (“Utopia and Its Discontents” 164). The third category is the perfect moral commonwealth, where the issue of the scarcity gap is dealt with by the moral reformation of individuals and the repression of man’s natural instincts. The fourth category is Millennium, which is regarded by Davis as essentially different from the preceding three since social transformation is ensued by gods or other supernatural agents. None of these four constitutes a ‘proper’ utopia, since all of these approaches are unrealistic. According to Davis, “[t]he utopian idealises not man nor nature but organization” (qtd. in *The Concept of Utopia* 163), thus identifying utopia as the product of human agency and accomplished by natural means. He adds that they are descriptions of an ideal society “conceived as total schemes” and projecting “a total social environment” (qtd. in *The Concept of Utopia* 164).

Although one might not agree completely with Davis classification (for instance, the reformation of individuals is at the core of many dystopian works, such as Zamyatin’s *We*), it can be given credit for raising an important issue, that of the scarcity gap, which shall serve as a basis to analyze some of the characteristics of the genre.

First of all, a utopia is inhabited by human beings or humanoid animals, subject to physical and psychological limitations. A second trait is that the ‘(e)utopia of reconstruction’ (which seeks to establish an alternative and better society through a careful planning, in contrast to the ‘utopia of escape’) is fundamentally static and intentionally immune from changes in its social structure. Indeed, if a better society is to be organized through a plan, no one can make any amendment to it, or it would cease to be a plan at all. The reason behind this situation is that

¹ Mumford, Lewis. *The Story of Utopias*. New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922, p.15

“the imagined society is put forward as a model to be followed, and models are frozen images that don’t allow for historical change after they have been instituted” (Vieira 9). No utopist, at least to the best of my knowledge, has allowed for any reform according to the needs of the society he has portrayed.

A corollary of this trait is that most (if not all) of utopian governments are, quoting Beauchamp, “inescapably totalitarian” (“Anti-Politics” 55). Walter Lippman explains that “if a society is to be planned, its population must conform to the plan; if it is to have an official purpose, there must be no private purpose that conflicts with it” (*The Good Society* 51). In a sense, totalitarianism is a logical consequence of the first feature, which states that the utopia is inhabited by men or humanoid animals. If human nature is imperfect, unreliable and subject to the scarcity gap, the totalitarian policy is an implementation that the utopists employ to cope with the conflict between rationality and pleasure and thus prevent the failure of their utopias. The theme of eugenics, that is of improving human nature through biological methods, which appears in many works of utopian fiction (such as Huxley’s *Brave New World* or Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*), has its roots in this consideration.

The third feature of utopia is that it is fictional, even though some utopists might be tempted to consider their work as a blueprint that could be put into practice. It is generally argued that anti-utopianism stems from the failures in actual practice of utopian visions.² Moreover, the definition put forward by Darko Suvin emphasizes a peculiar feature:

Utopia is the verbal construction of a particular quasi-human community where sociopolitical institutions, norms and individual relationships are organized according to a more perfect principle than in the author's community, this construction being based on estrangement arising out of an alternative historical hypothesis. (qtd. in *The Concept of Utopia* 175)

Suvin's paragraph situates utopia in that realm of narrative form and tradition that Northrop

² See for example Woodcock, “Utopias in Negative”, pp. 82-3

Frye has called the anatomy, which deals less with people as such than with mental attitudes (qtd. in *Scraps* 76). The “estrangement arising out of an alternative historical hypothesis” suggests a special kind of suspension of disbelief, for in most cases the literary utopia depicts “a formal inversion of significant and salient aspects of the author's world which has as its purpose or telos the recognition that the author (and reader) truly live in an axiologically inverted world” (Suvin 137). Or as Jack Zipes has put it, the author should be able to create

a mode of discourse which allows him to exaggerate, intensify, and extend scientific, technological, and social conditions from a current real situation to their most extreme point while convincing the reader that everything which occurs in the fantasy world is feasible in the distant future. Belief in reality is at no time expected to be suspended. On the contrary, the reader is expected to bear in mind the reality of his/her situation to be able to draw comparisons and appropriate correspondences with the fiction correlates which are projections not only of the author's imagination but of the probabilities emanating from the social tendencies of the author's environment. (“Mass Degradation” 183)

With respect to content, the problem is a complete absence of a definition of the utopian object. Leaving aside everything that might be considered utopian but does not belong to the literary sphere (such as various attempts to create utopian communities), since it is not the object of analysis of this work, we still confront a subject matter that is not universal but rather subjective, as their content stems from and is inevitably bound to the ideological matrix from which utopias emerge and with which they contend (*Scraps* 99). Different social groupings (whether they are differently located in time or because of their cultural background) perceive differently what is or not desirable, and thus imagined societies created to cope with such perceptions will necessarily be experienced differently. This is further complicated if we are to consider different single observers rather than whole societies: as an example, in his *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*, Krishan Kumar notes that some received Huxley's *Brave New World* as (e)utopian and B.F. Skinner's *Walden Two* as dystopian, in both cases in

opposition to the author's intention (*The Concept of Utopia* 165).

By this, I do not mean that we should neglect the importance of the content of utopian texts, as the dialectical relationship between the historical moment and the utopian alternative is the one that frames and shapes the entire utopian project (*Scraps* 99). The literary utopia is, indeed, an implicit criticism of the utopist's own society, and it exists as a value system to contrast existing forms (Holquist 115). The relationship with reality is seen as one of the key features of utopian literature (in both its eutopian and its dystopian form) also by Fátima Vieira, as she maintains that:

utopists depart from the observation of the society they live in, note down the aspects that need to be changed and imagine a place where those problems have been solved; [...] utopias are by essence dynamic, and in spite of the fact that they are born out of a given set of circumstances, their scope of action is not limited to a criticism of the present; indeed utopias put forward projective ideas that are to be adopted by future audiences, which may cause real changes. (8)

Here, Vieira advances a definition of utopia that assumes the role of the literary utopia in catalyzing historical engagement, thus going beyond cognitive speculation and providing a blueprint for social change. This shifts the focus from the content to the function of utopia.

Turning to the issue of function, scholars like Bauman and Mannheim regard it as the main concern of utopia, as it calls for the exploration of the utopian possibilities in contemporary culture. Levitas has identified three functions, not necessarily mutually exclusive: compensation, critique, catalyst (*The Concept of Utopia* 34).

Apart from Suvin, the function of compensation is addressed also by Alcena Madeline Davis Rogan, who points out that utopia “serves as a blank slate upon which [the author] inscribes a world that is intended to estrange the contemporary reader from their conditions of existence” (“Utopian Studies” 309). This function of ‘escape or compensation’ was discussed also by Mumford, who defined it as seeking “an immediate release from the difficulties or

frustrations of our lot” (*The Story of Utopias* 15), and it is linked to myths and, outside the literary sphere, day-dreams. This function is clearly associated with the aforementioned ‘utopia of escape’, and exemplified for instance in *The Land of Cockayne* or Virgil’s fourth *Eclogue*. Since it represents a passive way to cope with human miseries and emphasizes the unrealistic nature of utopia (thus focusing on the ‘no-place’ interpretation of More’s neologism), compensation as a function of utopia is dismissed in Mannheim’s thought and associated instead with ideology:

[i]n the course of history, man has occupied himself more frequently with objects transcending his scope of existence than with those immanent in his existence and, despite this, actual and concrete forms of social life have been built upon the basis of “ideological” states of mind which were incongruent with reality. *Such an incongruent orientation became utopian only when in addition it tended to burst the bonds of the existing order.* (*Ideology and Utopia* 173, my emphasis)

We can thus infer that, according to Mannheim, the main difference between ideology and utopia is that utopia offers a possibility of change where ideology does not. Ideology then becomes utopia when it transcends the *status quo* and the embedded ideologies are put into practice. As a result, for Mannheim the function of utopia is not that of ‘compensation’, but rather that of a catalyst of social change. This view is shared also by Ernst Bloch, who in *The Principle of Hope* (1954) distinguishes between ‘abstract’ and ‘concrete’ utopia; if on the one hand abstract utopia is compensatory, on the other “concrete utopia embodies what Bloch claims as the essential utopian function, that of simultaneously anticipating and effecting the future” (“Educated Hope” 15); Bloch thus sees utopia as an “an agent of historical change” (qtd. in *The Concept of Utopia* 101) whose function is to effect transformation. This model of utopia would be later reasserted in the work of Zygmunt Bauman, who describes utopia as

an image of a future and better world which is:

- (1) felt as still unfulfilled and requiring an additional effort to be brought about;
- (2) perceived as desirable, as a world not so much bound to come as one which should come;
- (3) critical of the existing society; in fact a system of ideas remains utopian and thus able to boost human activity only in so far as it is perceived as representing a system essentially different from, if not antithetical to, the existing one;
- (4) involving a measure of hazard; for an image of the future to possess the qualities of utopia, it must be ascertained that it will not come to pass unless fostered by a deliberate collective action; Gramsci's well-known view of organised action as the only available way of 'verifying' social predictions fits this attribute of utopia very well. (*Socialism: The Active Utopia* 17)

Bauman, following Mannheim and Bloch, regards the function of utopia as its defining characteristic. However, unlike Mannheim, for whom ideas must turn out to be realizable in order to become utopia (*Ideology and Utopia* 184), Bauman is more cautious in his definition, as despite his claiming that utopias have a crucial and constructive role in the historical process, he does not require utopian projects to be successful, even though he admits that "[u]topias do exert enormous influence on the actual course of historical events" (*Socialism: The Active Utopia* 16). Indeed, he argues that "the fate of utopia, which hinges in a considerable measure on the occurrence of an appropriately social effort, is not determined in advance" (*ibid.* 17).

There remains, in fact, a problem arising from these considerations, that is that of assessing the active historical role of utopia in social transformations, or, as Bauman put it, that of asking "in which way and to what degree these events have been influenced and generated by the presence of the aforementioned visions [of the future] in the public mind" (*ibid.* 10). In fact, if we are to adopt Mannheim's line of thought, in order to identify an idea as a utopia we have to establish not only that a change has occurred sufficiently in line with its content, but also that the idea was instrumental in effecting the change, which in practice is very difficult to do (*The Concept of Utopia* 76). Many critics, including Bauman himself, became skeptical about the effectiveness of utopia as a political force (*Socialism: The Active Utopia* 104), favoring instead

a vision that sees utopia as a means that encourages us to reflect critically upon the present. The perceived function of utopia has thus been transformed from change to criticism.

A reinterpretation of Mannheim is offered by Paul Ricoeur in *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (1986), in which he argues that the function of utopia is “to expose the credibility gap wherein all systems of authority exceed...both our confidence in them and our belief in their legitimacy” (17). Even though he identifies three functions of utopia, which he labels ‘escape’, ‘alternative form of power’ and ‘exploration of the possible’ (310), Ricoeur argues that the escapist function is the “pathology of utopia” (17), since “this disjunction allows the utopia to avoid any obligation to come to grips with the real difficulties of a given society” (17). On the other hand, he recognizes that “the best function of utopia is the exploration of the possible” (310), that is that the utopia puts into question the contingency of the social order and challenges common values with imaginative alternatives for interpreting society. Similarly, Bauman argues that

utopias pave the way for a critical attitude and a critical activity which alone can transform the present predicament of man. The presence of a utopia, the ability to think of alternative solutions to the festering problems of the present, may be seen therefore as a necessary condition of historical change. (*Socialism: The Active Utopia* 13)

Another attempt to assess utopia’s potential as a catalyst of social change can be found in Moylan’s *Demand the Impossible* (1986). In it, Moylan identifies a new genre of utopia which he terms ‘critical utopia’; according to him,

[a] central concern in the critical Utopia is the awareness of the limitations of the Utopian tradition, so that these texts reject Utopia as a blueprint while preserving it as a dream. Furthermore, the novels dwell on the conflict between the ordinary world and the Utopian society opposed to it so that the process of social change is more directly articulated. Finally, the novel focuses on the continuing presence of difference and imperfection within the Utopian

society itself and thus render more recognizable and dynamic alternatives. (10-11)

For Moylan, critical utopia thus challenges the formal limits of traditional utopia, specifically “its tendency to reduce alternative visions to closed and boring perfect systems that negate the Utopian impulse that generated them” (*Demand the Impossible* 151). Critical utopias are not blueprints for ideal societies, but a consciousness-raising device that furthers the process of social dreaming (*Scraps* 82). While I think that basing his definition on the assumption that traditional utopias are accounts of perfect societies is wrong, as I have showed above, there remains the issue of how to convert criticism and the raising of consciousness into agency and social or political action. Moreover, though useful for analyzing a specific set of texts (mainly embedded in New Left oppositional movements), this approach turns utopia from a construction of an ideal society into a tool to criticize the present, thus making the attainability of the utopian project irrelevant.

Nonetheless, Moylan raises an important argument in bringing together the issues of form and function of the literary utopia, and highlights the relationship between them. In particular, this relationship brings with it another issue, namely the potential feasibility of the utopian project and the question of its real possibility. Davis’ work in *Utopia and the Ideal Society* is seminal in this respect. As we have seen, in fact, Davis distinguishes between utopias in the light of their dealing with the ‘scarcity gap’, and discards four out of five categories because their approach is unrealistic and unachievable. This distinction, that Davis made on the basis of form, reveals an issue of practical possibility which affects the function of the utopia. If, indeed, utopia carries a functional definition of social criticism, as argued by Ricoeur and Bauman, then theoretical possibility must be a necessary feature, not necessarily practical possibility. If, on the other hand, the function it performs is that of catalyzing change, as argued by Mannheim and Bloch, then the question of practical possibility becomes crucial lest the function be unattainable (*The Concept of Utopia* 191).

1.2 The Roots of Utopia

In the previous overview, we have seen that this plethora of possibilities in terms of attempting to provide a definition of the concept has led Levitas to the view that ‘definitions in terms of content or form or function are all undesirable’ (*The Concept of Utopia* 179), and thus to call for some definition that is highly inclusive.

Many scholars cast such a definition in trying to pinpoint what could be considered the ‘essence’ of utopia, that kind of energy that seems to inform a wide range of texts: Levitas calls it ‘the desire for a different, better way of being’ (*Concept* 181), Sargent ‘social dreaming’ (“Three Faces” 3), Bloch ‘*docta spes*’ or educated hope, Abensour ‘the education of desire’ (qtd. in *Concept* 106).

This ‘utopian impulse’, which I shall call *utopianism*, also helps clarifying an odd situation. Indeed, while the term ‘utopia’ was a neologism coined by More, there are cultural phenomena which existed before, such as the aforementioned *Republic* by Plato (which is the first example of a ‘utopia of reconstruction’) and all those ‘utopias of escape’—myths, golden ages, arcadias, earthly paradises—which are proof that there were social dreams that can be considered precursors to that literary genre which began with *Utopia*. This classification, however, raises the question of whether it exists a “fundamental utopian propensity” towards utopia in human nature (*Concept* 8); Levitas wishes to avoid this claim, but on the other hand it is a view supported by both Bloch and Sargent, the latter claiming that “utopianism is a common human phenomenon” and that “every culture has produced body utopias” (what I call ‘utopias of escape’) and “there are city utopias [...] outside the Christian West” (“Three Faces” 19).

Whether this characterization of the literary utopia as arising from ‘utopianism’ is accepted or not, there remains to examine whether utopia is an expression of hope or of desire. Levitas, in her quest for a definition that aims to be as inclusive as possible, rejects the idea of utopia as simply a ‘possible world’, justifying her choice with the claim that “to function as criticism

or compensation, utopia does not even need to be believed to be possible” (*Concept* 190). In support of her position, it is easy to see how, for instance, all the four categories dismissed by Davis can actually be included under such a definition. Such a distinction hinges on the difference between desire and hope: while the former can be described as just a ‘wish to have’, the latter carries with it the potential to be realized. It goes without saying that with Levitas approach the subject-matter is not in any way related to form, and can perform all the three functions identified. It seems thus that the most inclusive classification of the literary utopia must be based on desire rather than hope, since the latter would preclude all those utopias labeled ‘of escape’.

Nevertheless, in exploring the concept of utopia for the purpose of this thesis — analyzing utopian narratives as a potential catalyst for social transformation — I am bound to a prescriptive utopianism, that is that kind of utopianism based on hope rather than desire.

1.3 The Dark Side of Utopia

Sargent’s definition of the literary utopia as “a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space” (“Three Faces” 9) is fairly useful in that it allows for dystopia,³ the negative side of utopia, “a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous

³ Some ascribe the first use of this word to Negley and Patrick’s anthology *The Quest for Utopia* (New York: Henry Schuman, 1952), where they say: “The *Mundus Alter et Idem* is *utopia* in the sense of *nowhere*; but it is the opposite of *eutopia* the ideal society: it is a *dystopia*, if it is permissible to coin a term” (248). Others attribute it to John Stuart Mill, who reportedly used “dys-topian” during a speech in the House of Commons, saying “I may be permitted, as one who, in common with many of my betters, have been subjected to the charge of being Utopian, to congratulate the Government on having joined that goodly company. It is, perhaps, too complimentary to call them Utopians, they ought rather to be called dys-topians, or cacotopians” (‘The State of Ireland, 12 March 1868’).

reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived” (“Three Faces” 9).

There is, however, a misconception in the quite common practice of using interchangeably the term ‘anti-utopia’ as a substitute for ‘dystopia’ (“Three Faces 8”); as Sargent claims, such a usage might be regarded as inaccurate, as it could be useful to depict those works that instead attack or criticize the utopian form or a specific utopia. The roots of anti-utopianism can be traced back to the Enlightenment, even though also in this case, as it was with utopia, there exist some predecessors. López-Morillas, for instance, points at satirical utopia as the “anti-utopia *avant la lettre*” since it “offers in embryo many of the ingredients which we find in later anti-utopia” (“From ‘Dreams of Reason’ to ‘Dreams of Unreason.’” 55). A typical satirical utopia, in fact, serves as a means to criticize the present world, but without taking seriously the utopia offered as a substitute, and thus differs from the later anti-utopia in that it does not attack the idea of utopia but just the present world. As such, Voltaire’s *Candide* was a satire against the creed of progress of the Enlightenment, and similarly Samuel Butler’s *Erewhon* was an attack on the Victorian faith in science and technology.

As I have mentioned above, the roots of anti-utopianism might be traced back to the Enlightenment. In the eighteenth century, the unprecedented trust in human reason and in the evolution of man and society towards perfection gave rise to a very favorable climate for the flourishing of utopias, both literary and philosophical. The optimism of the *philosophes*, however, was followed by the total disillusionment of the Reign of Terror in the aftermath of the French revolution, later followed by the Napoleonic hegemony and the Franco-Prussia war of 1870. The anti-utopian values were thus embodied by that movement which countered the ideals of the Enlightenment, namely Romanticism. Thomas Macaulay “an acre in Middlesex is better than a principality in Utopia” (qtd. in *Scraps* 130) is often quoted, as well as these lines from Wordsworth’s *Prelude*:

Not in Utopia, Subterraneous Fields,
Or some secret Islands, Heaven knows where!
But in the very world which is the world
Of all of us, — the place in which in the end,
We find our happiness, or not at all. (301)

The reference to “secret islands” suggests that the target of Wordsworth’s attack are those spatial utopias such as More’s island Utopia. Then, in the 1940s and 50s, the anti-utopian social thought reacted against utopianism by inaccurately identifying it with Marxism. The most representative attack against utopia of that period comes from Karl Popper, who in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945) denounces it for wishing to construct a new world at the cost of sacrificing the good things that exist in the present (Vieira 20). Moreover, Popper argues that “the Utopian attempt to realize an ideal state, using a blueprint of society as a whole, is one which demands a strong centralized rule of a few, and which therefore is likely to lead to a dictatorship” (1:140). Even though I agree with Popper on this respect, as noted above, his work is exemplary in showing how attacks on socialism became attacks on all planning, and thus how the anti-utopian position in the twentieth century stemmed from an anti-communist basis. On the other hand, anti-utopianism started to question the desirability of utopia against the background of the costs it demands (“Three Faces” 22), and it is from this issue that the dystopian narrative was born.

In the twentieth century, the practical application and the feasibility of utopia no longer seem to constitute a serious problem on a theoretical level, thanks in particular to the progress of science, technology and social structures. Indeed, if in the previous tradition of utopian novels “science was often another name for salvation...today, science wears a double face” (Walsh 23), as it might become a source of suppression and control of human nature, depending on the purpose of the user. As a result, the focus of post-twentieth-century utopia shifted from

the feasibility to the desirability and/or the problem of maintenance of such a new society that has been created, and thus the most predominant issue becomes the conflict between the individual and utopia.

The modern dystopia is itself a planned utopia, or ‘utopia of reconstruction’; as every planned utopia, it is thus a “civilization-only-more-so”, to quote Beauchamp, in which the degree of regimentation has been increased “to reorder society in a more harmonious, efficient (but more regimented, repressed) whole” (“Of Man’s Last Disobedience” 285). Functioning as an opposite to eutopia, the aim of dystopia is therefore to emphasize how undesirable it is to impose utopia’s rationalism on the individual, and to expose ‘the price of utopia’, that is individual freedom. As Mumford has argued — correctly, I believe — the emergence of dystopias stems from those venerable values which informed traditional eutopias:

[i]solation, stratification, fixation, regimentation, standardization, militarization—one or more of these attributes enter into the conception of the utopian city, as expounded by the Greeks. And these same features remain, in open or disguised form, even in the supposedly more democratic utopias of the nineteenth century... In the end, utopia merges into the dystopia of the twentieth century; and one suddenly realizes that the distance between the positive ideal and the negative one was never so great as the advocates or admirers of utopia had professed. (“Utopia, the City and the Machine” 277)

Moreover, themes of governmental supreme control and state surveillance are central in most literary dystopias, and often such a control is performed through the usage of technology, so that the State is, as Beauchamp maintains, “an advanced totalitarian state dependent upon a massive technological apparatus” (“Technology in the Dystopian Novel” 54) it exploits to govern and manipulate the individual.

In addition, the literary dystopia is usually a temporal utopia set in the future, and generally close to the reader’s time; since its temporal setting is the future, the function dystopia performs

is therefore that of prediction, or rather warning, against the growing potentialities of modern technology. Contemporary dystopias, thus, are cautionary tales which serve to address the way current or near-future technological changes can impact our lives.

2. “All That Happens Must Be Known”: Surveillance Society in

Dave Egger’s *The Circle*

War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength.
– George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

Secrets are lies. Sharing is caring. Privacy is theft.
– Dave Eggers, *The Circle*

The comparison is quite overt, and it brings to mind the nightmare of total surveillance envisioned by Orwell, an Oceania where nothing and nobody escapes the all-seeing eye of the Party. Indeed, themes of governmental control and total knowledge to be achieved through means of surveillance are common to many dystopian novels. This proves true even in the eyes of those who have not read Orwell’s novel, but are nonetheless familiar with the catchphrase ‘Big Brother is watching you’. Another example of state surveillance is provided by Zamyatin’s *We*, where the citizens of the United State “live surrounded by transparent walls...beneath the eyes of everyone” (19), in order to ensure that nothing can go unnoticed by the state’s infinite visual capacity. At a first glance, then, it might seem that surveillance is a key feature of works belonging to the dystopian perspective.

Writers of what are commonly considered as (e)utopias, however, have long included elements of surveillance in their utopian projects as well. For instance, Plato’s *Republic*, often considered the first attempt at a literary utopia, provides for a supervisory class, labelled the Guardians, to watch over and maintain the ideal society he envisioned. This is one of the first examples of surveillance or “watching” performed by some kind of supervisor, a concept that will be embraced and expanded by Sir Thomas More in his *Utopia*. More, in fact, creates an upper class in his supposedly classless society, the Priests, who are appointed to supervise morals. The idea that Utopia’s population requires constant surveillance is reinforced by the

fact that “euery house hath two dooers [...] neuer locked nor bolted, [...] for there ys nothyng within the howses that ys pryuate, or annye mannes owne” (55). The lack of privacy is also mirrored in social norms:

There be nether wyn tauernes, nor ale houses, nor stewes nor any occasion of uice or wickedness, no lurking corners, no places of wicked councelles or vnlawfull assembles; but they be in the present sight, and vnder the iyes of euery man” (74)

As a result, surveillance in *Utopia* operates with a different approach than in Plato’s *Republic*: if, in the latter, law is upheld by the Guardians, in More’s island it requires the participation of all its denizens (Marks 182), and thus it becomes an integral part of the society, as well as an effective means to control its members. Without this surveillance, internal harmony and the static immutability of the island would not be preserved, and Utopia itself might collapse (Marks 183). Two more examples can be cited: in Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1888), every citizen of 2000’s Boston owns a credit card that functions also as an ID, and which is used to perform economic transactions and access social services. Needless to say, this credit card system implies also surveillance, since every purchase (both of goods and social services) is recorded in a centralized database, and the central state bureaucracy has control of and access to it. H.G. Wells *A Modern Utopia* (1905) provides another different view, one that emphasizes “the value of freedom”, a key component of which is “a migratory population...as fluid and tidal as the sea” (qtd. in Marks 187). Although he values a society that promotes freedom, Wells envisions a system to manage such a freedom, and puts forth a system of identity papers that must be submitted when arriving at a new location, so that “each and every person in the world can be promptly and certainly recognized, and by which anyone missing can be traced and found” (qtd. in Marks 187). Furthermore, Wells devises a database that could be cross-referenced to “other indices...arranged under name, under professional qualification, under diseases, crimes and the like” (qtd. in Marks 187). Anticipating the concern that such

information might be used by a malevolent force, Wells ensures that “the secret of one’s little concealment” will be protected by the World State’s class of guardians, called the *samurai*, and thus that the “quiet eye of the state” need cause no concern. Even though the supervisory class created by Wells has a close resemblance to the Guardians of Plato’s *Republic*, we can witness a shift in the kind of surveillance performed, which centers less on potentially oppressive visual scrutiny than on the collection and the deployment of information, much of it personal (Marks 184).

We can see, thus, that while the issue of surveillance dates back to Plato, the increasing array of techniques for social control made available by modern science and technology carries with it the question of the desirability of utopia — that is, whether the ‘cost’ of the realization of the utopian project at the expense of individual freedom (“Of Man’s Last Disobedience” 286) is too high. This was probably best expressed by Nicholas Berdyaev in a passage that was later made famous by Huxley, who chose it as an epigraph for his *Brave New World*:

Utopias are realizable. Life is moving toward a utopia. And perhaps a new age is beginning, an age in which the intellectuals and the cultivated class will dream of avoiding utopia and of returning to a society that is non-utopian, less ‘perfect’ but more free. (187-188)

As a result, the line between eutopia and dystopia becomes blurred. This context constitutes the background for that sub-genre that Sargent has called the ‘flawed utopia’, comprising “works that present what appears to be a good society until the reader learns of some flaw that raises questions about the basis for its claim to be a good society”; as such, it tends to invade territory already occupied by the dystopia and the critical utopia (“The Problem of the Flawed Utopia” 225).

Dave Eggers’ novel *The Circle* places itself precisely in this framework. Mae Holland is a young woman who lands a job as a CE (customer experience) representative at the Circle, a huge social-network corporation which is considered the ‘hottest company on the planet’, and

which in less than six years has grown into a “force that subsumed Facebook, Twitter, Google and finally Alacrity, Zoopa, Jefe, and Quan” (Eggers 23). The Circle is run by a triumvirate, composed of Eamon Bailey, the public face of the company, Tom Stenton, the CEO, and Tyler Alexander Gospodinov, the boy-wonder visionary founder. The rapid rise of the company is indeed due to Ty’s Unified Operation System, later renamed TruYou, which combines “users’ social media profiles, their payment systems, their various passwords, their email accounts, user name, preferences” into a single online profile— “one account, one identity, one password, one payment system, per person” (21). This progress in authentication technology, apart from being the first step towards the Circle’s goal of global radical ‘transparency’, has revolutionized the Internet and allowed the company to prosper:

here, all had been perfected. The best people had made the best systems and the best systems had reaped funds, unlimited funds, that made possible this, the best place to work. And it was natural that it was so, Mae thought. Who else but utopians could make utopia? (30)

The reference to utopia is no coincidence, since the mission of the Circle, as I have mentioned above, is based on the belief in human perfectibility through total transparency; the name of the company itself stems from this consideration, as Eamon Bailey explains in the novel: “A circle is the strongest shape in the universe. Nothing can beat it, nothing can improve upon it, nothing can be more perfect. And that’s what we want to be: perfect” (287). Although, as we have seen, perfection is not a characteristic of utopias, the belief in the perfectibility of society or at least its improvement is undoubtedly one of its features.

The flaw in the vision fancied by the Circle rests in the digital technologies provided to support its mantra of ‘transparency’ and thus to contribute to the progress of society, which instead play a crucial role in creating a surveillance state and contributing to the loss of privacy and personal freedom. The utopian position, as Sargent argues, often sees freedom as resulting from the rejection of and the release from the uncertainties of modern life: “We must

improve—and some add even if it costs some freedom. There cannot be freedom to rape, rob, and kill” (“Authority and Utopia” 584). The standpoint that crime, kidnapping and other atrocities should be stopped is shared by the Circle’s think tank, and it leads to the development of technology that allows people to record every moment of their lives: from the tiny SeeChange cameras (because “[w]ho would commit a crime, knowing that they might be watched any time, anywhere?”) to TruYouth, a tracking chip implanted in children’s bones. These technologies are put forth in order to test the acceptance of contentious proposals (both by the reader and by the fictional public within the novel), until the inherent totalitarianism of the company’s proceedings is exposed when the Circle takes over the foundational mechanism of democracy—voting. “Demoxie” is indeed a crucial program in “closing the circle”, since it forces every citizen to create a TruYou account and join the Circle, and thus marks the definitive transition of the company itself from an internet monopoly to an all-controlling dictator. “Closing the circle” does not represent full inclusion and participation, but control: “We’re closing the circle around everyone” — warns Ty — “it’s a totalitarian nightmare” (481).

The relationship between transparency, surveillance and control stems from the consideration that the essential condition for an absolute power to work is that it needs to be ubiquitous and have total control over its subjects. This idea of surveillance and its various ramifications is the focal point of Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1977), which builds on the ideal structure of the Panopticon first devised by Jeremy Bentham.

2.1 The Panopticon and Contemporary Surveillance

As it is widely known, the Panopticon project was initially proposed by Bentham, who designed a prison whose unique architectural shape sought to maximize the visibility of the inmates. The basic structure of this prison was composed of

[a]t the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building (*Discipline and Punish* 200)

Guards in the tower could thus easily scrutinize many convicts while themselves remaining unseen, meaning that the inmates could never be certain whether they are under observation or not. This system of total visibility, however, constitutes only half of the panoptic equation, and his work would likely not have emerged as one of the most popular concepts in contemporary social thought if Foucault had not taken another step forward. Unlike Bentham, in fact, Foucault argued that the power of surveillance lies not in the supervisor, or in the tower, but rather in the very nature of power itself, which should be at the same time visible and unverifiable:

Visible: the inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon. Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so...the Panopticon is a machine for dissociating the seeing/being seen dyad: in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen. (*ibid* 201-202)

Moreover, Foucault claims that the panoptic schema “was destined to spread through the social body; its vocation was to become a generalized function” (*Discipline and Punish* 207), and thus to become a principal means for explaining the modern relationship of surveillance and control. This schema, of course, produces two fields of discussion: the first is the one of the

inmate, which leads to considerations about self-discipline and normalization. The second one is that of the guard, or supervisor, which shifts the focus to the capacity of gaining knowledge and exercising power.

According to Foucault, the primary goal of the Panopticon is

to induce in the inmate a state of consciousness and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. (*ibid.* 201)

Faced with an uncertainty with respect to whether he is being watched or not, the inmate starts to conform to the rules of the institution. This effect of the power relation is well exemplified in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

There was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment. How often, or on what system, the Thought Police plugged in on any individual wire was guesswork. It was even conceivable that they watched everybody all the time... You had to live – did live, from habit that became instinct – in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every moment scrutinized. (6)

The machine of the Panopticon, therefore, ultimately aims to achieve the internalization of control by the inmate (Simon 7). As Foucault puts it,

[h]e who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection. (*Discipline and Punish* 202-203)

It remains to be established, however, at which stage the panoptic mechanism might represent an appropriate metaphor for the contemporary surveillance society. In this respect, Foucault's argument is that the Panopticon "must not be understood as a dream building", but rather is "a way of defining power relations in terms of the everyday life of men...it is the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form; its functioning, abstracted from any obstacle, resistance or friction...it is in fact a figure of political technology that may and must be detached from any specific use" (Foucault 205). The point, thus, becomes whether power seeks to assume a panoptic form in spite of possible obstacles, resistance or frictions (Simon 9). Foucault describes the Panopticon as an

enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded, in which an uninterrupted work of writing links the centre and the periphery, in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed. (*Discipline and Punish* 197)

In order to be rendered operational, the panoptic mechanism requires conditions of enclosure, isolation and training to recognize the cultural apparatus beyond it. The very task of supervising the inmates put constraints on the supervisors — "it tied the 'routinizers' to the place within which the objects of time routinization had been confined. The routinizers were not truly and fully free to move: the option of 'absentee landlords' was, practically, out of the question" (*Liquid Modernity* 10). Entering the condition of new, contemporary surveillance, then, required the panoptic mechanism not only to shift from an enclosed environment to an open and 'liquid' one, but also an adaptation of its supervisory system, while on the other hand maintaining its supervisory capacities. It required, in essence, an extension of the panoptic principles of surveillance that went beyond the structural limits of vision.

In talking about an "instrument of permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent surveillance"

(*Discipline and Punish* 214), Foucault, even though unconsciously, anticipated much of the recent scholarship on dataveillance, defined by Clarke as “the systematic use of personal data systems in the investigation or monitoring of the actions or communications of one or more persons” (499). This shift also marked another crucial difference between the Foucauldian model of the Panopticon and the contemporary means of surveillance, namely that the form of control implied by this dataveillance is not only independent of the formation of the self-policing subject who has internalized the power relation to which he was subject, but actually does not even require any reference to the inmate at all. As a consequence, another transition took place, and the panoptic diagram ceased to represent a society of discipline in favor of what Deleuze defined as a ‘society of control’.

As a totalizing system, in fact, Panopticism fails without the inmate and an adequate cultural apparatus that reminds him he is under surveillance. Speaking of contemporary society, Deleuze claims that “a disciplinary society was what we already no longer were, what we have ceased to be” (3), and that disciplinary societies are in the process of being replaced by societies of control. Similarly, Bauman talks of ‘post-Panopticism’ in describing the present stage in the history of modernity, and that “Foucault’s powerful metaphor of Panopticon no longer grasps the way power is working” (*Liquid Modernity* 85). The surveillance apparatus, thus, does not rely on discipline to act on bodies and minds, but on controlling information about bodies and minds. As Deleuze remarks, “individuals have become ‘dividuals’ and masses, samples, data, markets or ‘banks’” (5, emphasis in original). The concept of the ‘dividual’ is crucial in that it refers to the individual doubled as data, as information, such that the object of the panoptical faceless gaze is no longer the body, but its double, its digital representation. Clarke refers to this entity as ‘digital persona’, “the model of an individual’s public personality based on data, and maintained by transactions, and used as a proxy for the individual” (“The Digital Persona” 79). In a Deleuzian reading of Foucault, Mark Poster argues that the Panopticon has now turned

into a ‘Superpanopticon’ which has virtually no technical limitations, and where “the population participates in its own self-constitution as subjects in the normalizing gaze of the Superpanopticon” (*The Mode of Information* 97), as “the one being surveilled provides the information necessary for surveillance” (“Databases as Discourse” 184).

At this point, there remains the question of whether the surveillance practices under description conform to Foucault’s model, and to which extent the panoptic model is still relevant for understanding contemporary surveillance. For Foucault, the main goal of panoptic surveillance was ‘soul training’, alongside a more general purpose of ‘social control’. Since his formulation, however, surveillance has seen the proliferation of many new purposes, such as consumption and marketing, military operations, education, governance, etc. Moreover, such a proliferation has meant that more and more are constituted as viewers, thus reversing the hierarchies of surveillance and visibility of the Foucauldian model (Haggerty 28); according to Thomas Mathiesen, “[i]n a two-way and significant double sense of the word we...live in a *viewer society*” (219, emphasis in original). What Mathiesen essentially argues is that, while powerful few continue to observe groups who reside at a lower level in the social hierarchy, there has been a transformation resulting in the rupturing of the unidirectional nature of the gaze (Haggerty 29). As a result, the ‘digital personae’ of powerful individuals are subject to scrutiny no less than people of other segments of the social hierarchy. The rise of mass and, more recently, social media, in particular, has fostered a form of surveillance that Mathiesen called ‘synopticism’, an “enormously extensive system enabling the many to see and contemplate the few” (219). Nevertheless, Mathiesen also notes that the Panopticon is not displaced in the presence of this new model; on the contrary, panopticism and synopticism “*have developed in intimate interaction, even fusion, with each other*” (223, emphasis in original).

Similarly, what I want to explore in this chapter is how the modes of surveillance described

in this paragraph conflate in *The Circle*, and how Egger's novel displays this fusion of panopticism (both in the Foucauldian and Deleuzian sense, that is physical and digital panopticism) and synopticism.

2.2 Surveillance in *The Circle*

Issues of panopticism, in both its physical and digital form, can be found in Egger's novel. To underline the Circle's mantra of 'transparency', most of the buildings in the Circleplex, the company headquarters, are made of glass. As Mae walks through the campus, she notices that "[t]here were offices everywhere above, four floors high on either side, every wall made of glass" (3). The Circle thus becomes an all-seeing environment, where "[t]he offices were fronted by floor-to-ceiling glass, the occupants visible within" (7). Even the campus' cafeteria, aptly named Glass Eatery, is made entirely, all of the floors and walls, of glass, so that "[a]t first glance, it looked like a hundred people were eating in mid-air" (15). As such, the Circle built on its cult of transparency to create an environment in which everyone is able to see all, while simultaneously being seen by all; this structure reminds in its principles the structure devised by Bentham, as it allows for maximum visibility under the pretense of ensuring a sense of security and community in the workplace.

Nonetheless, the vast majority of control exercised at the Circle, it being a social media company, takes place in the realm of the digital, and thus it takes the form of dataveillance. Perhaps the most striking example is provided by 'LuvLuv', a sort of dating site that relies heavily on one's personal information collected on the web. In a demonstration of the software, Mae is chosen as a test subject by her love interest of the moment, Francis; through a search on 'LuvLuv', many aspects of Mae's personal life come to light, such as her possible allergies

and the places she likes to go to eat, with the software's creator claiming: "Now I click on the place I like, and if she paid through TruYou, I know what she ordered last time she ate there" (124). The demonstration continues by highlighting also "Mae's preferences for films, for outdoor spaces to walk on and jog through, to favorite sports, favorite vistas" (124)". This passage effectively points out the Circle's aspiration for complete knowledge that the technology it developed might make possible, as proved by Mae's assertion that "[i]t was accurate, most of it", while neglecting to see the ethical implications that morality might reject. Moreover, the claims of Mark Poster about the agency of the subject and its self-constitution as subject of the process of surveillance are made manifest in Eggers' novel. Mae, indeed, acknowledges that "everything that had been on screen" during the software demonstration "was publicly available...all of it culled from things she had posted herself" (125). What bothers Mae the most is perhaps "[h]aving a matrix of preferences presented as your essence, as the whole you" (125), and being treated as a computational object; Mae's frustration can thus be seen as a manifestation of Sherry Turkle's assertion that such capturing of data results in us being "asked to treat ourselves and the algorithm as a black box" (*Reclaiming Conversation* 90).

The process of data collection operated by The Circle, however, is not limited to the digital personae of the individuals under observation, or rather supervision, but it takes place by infiltrating their bodies as well. The all-pervasive surveillance involves various wearable computers, including as part of the health plan a "silver bracelet, about three inches wide" (153) which monitors Mae's health, coupled with a chip that she ingests without her knowledge, allowing the company to "collect data on [Mae's] heart rate, blood pressure, cholesterol, heart flux, caloric intake, sleep duration, sleep quality, digestive efficiency, on and on" (154), along with "blood and tissue oxygen, red blood cell count, and things like step count" (155). All of this is presented to Mae as being guided by the same transparency principle that underlies

everything on campus, and reinforced by the clinic's motto "To heal we must know. To know we must share" (150).

This process of collecting biological, physical, behavioral and environmental data is known as self-quantification, and it is a crucial concept in that it falls outside the rules of the panoptical notion of surveillance. In this case, indeed, the process of surveillance becomes "participatory" (Poster 1990, 69), and has pushed some authors to speak of the emergence of a "participatory panopticon" (Campbell and Carlson, 2002). The self-surveillance envisaged by Foucault, however, implied the presence of a self-policing subject which resulted from a hierarchical power relation between the watchers and the watched, so that the inmate internalized the gaze of the watcher. This hierarchical conception of surveillance does no longer work, since the process of self-surveillance is not imposed from the above so to disempower the subject of surveillance, and thus the concept of 'participatory panopticon' becomes redundant (Albrechtslund 2008). The willful provision of information by the subjects of surveillance, and thus their actively taking part in the procedures, however, calls for a new theoretical framework that challenges the hierarchical and panoptical conception of surveillance in favor of an idea of surveillance as a mutual practice.

The tracking bracelet, though, is the less intrusive wearable Mae makes use of, and her 'participation' and the act of sharing herself with others reach an unprecedented level as she decides to 'go transparent' (304). This means she is going to wear a SeeChange camera around her neck, recording and broadcasting every moment of her life, thus being completely visible all the time. This decision embodies what Mathiesen has described as a synoptical perspective on surveillance, Mae's camera-necklace providing "an open window into life at the Circle" (Eggers 310) to her watchers. The reference to people watching Mae clearly embodies Mathiesen's claim that "[i]n a two-way and significant double sense of the word, we...live in a *viewer society*" (219, emphasis in original), where the technology and the system associated

to it enable “*the many to see and contemplate the few*” (219, emphasis in original). The interesting point in this context is therefore the construction of moral behavior in such a society (Tommasi 249), or, as Margaret Atwood put it in her review of the book, what happens when social behavior becomes performance, “in the twenty-four-hour glare of the supervised prison” (Atwood 2013). Sherry Turkle tackles the same issue in her essay, arguing that “Always-on/always-on-you technology takes the job of self-monitoring to a new level... We try to keep up with our lives as they are presented to us by a new disciplining technology” (“Always-On/Always-On-You” 130).

The disciplinary component of ‘going transparent’, “the smaller, improving alterations to her behavior” (Eggers 328), display the Foucauldian notion of the normalizing gaze:

[T]he first time the camera redirected her actions was when she went to the kitchen for something to eat... Normally, she would have grabbed a chilled brownie, but seeing the image of her hand reaching for it, and seeing what everyone else would be seeing, she pulled back. She closed the fridge, and from the bowl on the counter, she selected a packet of almonds, and left the kitchen. (Eggers 328-329)

The passage suggests that, when ethical conduct is influenced by public exposure, social behavior loses authenticity and acquires instead a performative quality (Tommasi 250). Moreover, while Mae feels “liberated from bad behavior” (Eggers 329), by ‘internalizing the gaze’ of the audience she develops a tendency towards social conformity and moderation in the process of identity-crafting. Conscious of being watched, Mae tends to display “approved individual emotions” (Bauman and Tester 125), since “[a]nything immoderate would provoke a flurry of zings⁴ of concern, so she stayed within the bounds of moderation” (Eggers 329). While Mae’s transparency belongs to a synoptic environment, the obedience to standards in her behavior is symptomatic of a panoptical one, the only difference being that her active role

⁴ The Circle’s equivalent to tweets

in her own self-surveillance, as Bauman puts it, “appears in the disguise of the exercise of free will, rather than revealing itself as an external force” (*Liquid Modernity* 86). This tendency towards social conformity also informs Bauman’s notion of ‘confessional society’, “a society notorious for effacing the boundary that once separated the private from the public, for making public exposure of the private a public virtue and obligation” (*Liquid Surveillance* 31).

The same dissolution of boundaries can be witnessed in Egger’s novel between work and non-work. Indeed, sociality is a crucial aspect of one’s job performance at the Circle, as well as his/her participation and esteem within the office. Sociality is indeed integral to the workplace, as a co-worker explains to Mae: “We actually see your profile, and the activity on it, as integral to your participation here... We consider your online presence to be integral to your work here. It’s all connected.” (Eggers 94-95). The Circle, not being defined as “what you might call a clock-in, clock-out type of company” (Eggers 176), erases boundaries between work and non-work, subsuming Terranova’s notion of ‘free labor’, that is, forms of labor “not financially rewarded and willingly given” (Terranova 51) which “we do not immediately recognize as such: chat, real life stories, mailing lists, and so on” (*ibid.* 38); the social networking aspect of Circle thus mirrors “the current capitalist emphasis on knowledge as the main source of value added” (*ibid.* 36). Similarly, the Circle values immensely zings, photos posted, and attendance at company’s events, emphasizing “the *community* aspect of this job. We see this workplace as a community... it requires a certain level of participation” (Eggers 178). Circlers charting their status and constantly seeking to upgrade their Participation Rank (*ibid.* 100) therefore not only represent a digital manifestation of the company’s ideology of transparency, but also a more generalized production of the self and data that contributes to the creation of value in the digital economy and to the disruption of Fordist distinctions between work and non-work. As Bauman maintains in *Liquid Surveillance*, discussing the concept of ‘confessional society’ in the contemporary era, the stimulus to disclose and share one’s

personal information is experienced as both a virtue and an obligation (31), since it constitutes “an essential requirement to be considered active part of the virtual community and therefore of the society it represents” (qtd. in Tommasi 254).

The insistence on joining the community and embracing the rhetoric of the Circle accounts for a compulsory element, as participation becomes a term that cannot be negotiated; the situation reaches a point where “[t]he pressure on those who hadn’t gone transparent went from polite to oppressive” (Eggers 239). Foucault maintains that confession is an act whose “production is thoroughly imbued with relations of power”, referencing to the potentially disciplinary quality of the practice (qtd. in Tommasi 254); for the same reason, the practice of sharing information in *The Circle* belies a power structure, and surveillance in its various forms supports the maintenance of power relations in a way which is no different from that described by Foucault. In a way, surveillance has therefore become normalized, as people eventually comply and agree to surveillance once they notice it cannot be avoided in the society of control (*Liquid Surveillance* 14). The willful disclosure of personal information mirrors Deleuze’s understanding of surveillance as being twofold, both “liberating and enslaving” (4), since “with the tools the Circle made available, Mae [feels] able to influence global events, to save lives even, halfway across the world” (Eggers 242). Surveillance is not experienced as coercion, but rather as empowerment. Refusal to participate in the structure of control, however, leads to social exclusion, thus ensuring that the power relation that maintains the power structure remains upheld. As Bauman argues, “with the old panoptical nightmare (‘I am never on my own’) now recast into the hope of ‘never again being alone’ (abandoned, ignored and neglected, blackballed and excluded), the fear of disclosure has been stifled by the joy of being noticed” (*Liquid Surveillance* 26). This feeling is well expressed by Mae towards the end of the novel:

I think everything and everyone should be seen. And to be seen, we need to be watched...I want to be seen. I want proof I existed...Most people do. Most people would trade everything they

know, everyone they know—they'd trade it all to know they've been seen, and acknowledged, that they might even be remembered. (Eggers 484)

The fear of exclusion thus replaces the Foucauldian incarceration as the major source of anxiety in the contemporary era, where surveillance is not only made possible, but implemented by the very subjects of surveillance itself. As Bauman puts it,

[t]he condition of being watched and seen has thereby been reclassified from a menace into a temptation. The promise of enhanced visibility, the prospect of 'being in the open' for everybody to see and everybody to notice, chimes well with the most avidly sought proof of social recognition, and therefore of valued — 'meaningful' — existence. (*Liquid Surveillance* 26)

Nevertheless, *The Circle* takes another step forward from Bauman's 'confessional society' by promoting an ideology of forced transparency, portraying a society where "[t]he group [forces] its members into public confessions, demanding them to share publicly their secrets, and claiming that sharing in such secrets is the group's right" (Bauman and Tester 124, emphasis in original). In identifying the notion of community through the cult of transparency and constant visibility, and by transforming the assertion of one's individuality into a public spectacle, *The Circle* puts forward a model of society which mirrors Sennett's definition of 'destructive Gemeinschaft', "a community systematically destroyed and methodically destroying its members through the cult of unrestrained sincerity, surrender of one's own privacy and disregard for the privacy of others" (Bauman and Tester 123).

It is precisely under these conditions that the boundary between eutopia, dystopia and flawed utopia becomes even more blurred. At the end of the novel, the pursuit of meaning and intimacy through self-disclosure and forced transparency has come to identify an obligation, "a moral condition—of authenticity and good faith, rather than a social condition dependent for its maintenance upon personalistic, hierarchic ties" (Sennett 171).

The cult of transparency and omniscience carried out by the Circle becomes indeed a subjugating discourse, to the point that, while her friend Annie is in a coma, Mae cannot help “feeling some annoyance” about the fact that “[w]hat precisely was happening in her [Annie’s] mind was unknown to all” (Eggers 490). This lack of complete knowledge is experienced by Mae, who has by this moment embraced completely the Circle’s creed, as “exasperating, really...It was an affront, a deprivation, to herself and to the world” (Eggers 491). Mae’s hopes are therefore turned to a new “world where everyone could know each other truly and wholly, without secrets, without shame and without the need for permission to see or to know” (*ibid.*). What happens in *The Circle* is thus a “celebration of inter-subjectivity as a moral condition” (Sennett 172), a triumph of the doctrine of unrestrained authenticity and “glorious openness” (Eggers 491) to the detriment of privacy. The confusion around the function and value of intimacy gives rise to a new, dystopian (in the eyes of the reader, while it is undoubtedly eutopian in Mae’s view) order of priorities.

3. On Beauty: Everyday Aesthetics in Wallace’s “Tri-Stan: I Sold Sisse Nar to Ecko” and Ted Chiang’s “Liking What You See: A Documentary”

3.1 Man-made Beauty

As we have seen, Foucault argues that the panoptic schema “was destined to spread through the social body; its vocation was to become a generalized function” (*Discipline and Punish* 207). In other words, the Panopticon was to become a principal means to explain the modern functioning of power relationships. In doing so, it relies on the very nature of power itself, so that the subject of a power relation

assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection. (*ibid.* 202-203)

The ultimate goal of the panoptic machine, thus, is the internalization of the power relation by its very subject.

Even though Foucault focused his analysis on the field of surveillance, there exists a similar process of acquiring and internalizing the norms and ideologies of society; this process is known in sociology as ‘socialization’. While issues of gender and race (among others) have been by now widely recognized as socially constructed and as such learned and internalized through the process of socialization, it might be argued that our sense of beauty is subject to the same social norms.

While aesthetics and the nature of beauty as philosophical issues were present as early as Plato, the construction of beauty is a concept that dates back to Kant. In his *Critique of the*

Aesthetic Judgement (1790), the philosopher argues that

the judgement is also called aesthetic precisely because its determining ground is not a concept, but the feeling (of inner sense) of that unison in the play of the powers of the mind, insofar as it can only be sensed. (113)

In Kant's aesthetics, thus, beauty is not an objective property, but it is instead the product of one's mind. This position is also shared by Hume, who asserts that

[b]eauty is no quality in things themselves: it exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty. One person may even perceive deformity, where another is sensible of beauty; and every individual ought to acquiesce in his own sentiment, without pretending to regulate those of others. ("Of the Standard of Taste" 136)

Even though a position of pure subjectivity seems implausible (in some cases, after all, our judgements coincide to a remarkable extent), the intuition that the human mind constructs beauty is indeed a crucial one, as it regards aesthetics as the product of one's culture. In this respect, the works of Kant and Hume can be seen as precursors to Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), where they argue that the way human beings perceive the world (and hence beauty as well) is socially constructed.

As a product of social construction, one's perception of beauty can be the result of a process of internalization; I shall call this process the 'socialization of beauty', a process that is closely linked to the wider process of gender socialization, and that is catalyzed and maintained through sociocultural messages of beauty and attractiveness. Moreover, the process of socialization of beauty begins with the "internalization of societal ideals of attractiveness" (Thompson & Stice 181), which define the extent to which an individual regards his/her own deviance from the appropriate beauty standards determined by societal norms.

As the concept of socialization of beauty is closely related to that of socialization of gender, we can observe the phenomenon of the contemporary construction of beauty through the lens

of the performative theory of gender. Judith Butler, its theorizer, argues that

[b]ecause there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. (522)

Similarly, the idea of beauty, as Kant and Hume noted, does not exist *per se*, but is instead the byproduct of historically and culturally bound practices, "tenuously constituted in time" (Butler 519); one is expected to learn (implicitly) what the cultural conventions are, and internalize those standards as part of his/her belief system. In this respect, the notion of beauty can be seen as a performance in that it is materialized in the imitation or repetition of ideal and narrowly defined corporeal stylizations (Butler 522), and beauty can be understood as the enactment of constitutive acts. To be 'beautiful' is therefore to "compel the body to conform to an historical" (Butler 522) and cultural idea of beauty, and to reproduce the dominant conventions of beauty standards.

Societal norms, thus, generate those beauty ideals which in contemporary society are constantly perpetuated by one of the major socialization agents, namely the media, and particularly television. Continuously exposed to mass images that propose perfect body images, one is expected to perform these expectations of beauty and sexuality.

3.2 The Beauty Ideal in the Media Age

In 1993, David Foster Wallace published his seminal essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction", in which he discussed the crucial role of television in shaping Western culture. In it, Wallace points to the fact that television has become the most prominent and pervasive informational and narrative medium in American popular culture, the average Joe (Briefcase)

spending six hours a day—and “six hours a day is more time than most people (consciously) do any one thing” (“E Unibus Pluram” 160)—watching it, and thus turning the phenomenon of television into the single most powerful creative product and cultural force in Western society.

Moreover, “[t]he most dangerous thing about television”—he writes—“is that we yield to the temptation not to take television seriously as both a disseminator and a definer of the cultural atmosphere we breathe and process” (EUP 155).

In a culture of and about watching, the natural consequence is the emergence of an ontology of appearance; as Wallace argues,

[w]e receive unconscious reinforcement of the deep thesis that the most significant feature of truly alive persons is watchableness, and that genuine human worth is not just identical with but rooted in the phenomenon of watching. (*ibid.*)

In a society dominated by this cult of ‘watchableness’, the ideal beauty is almost inevitably photogenic (or rather telegenic) beauty, a beauty which is the result of the demands of the camera. In an age where much of the information comes at us indirectly, i.e. mediated by the screen (be it TV, PC or smartphone), it follows that the body beautiful must belong to those who are the ‘high priests’ of such screen, the performers who inhabit it: actors. As Wallace puts it (I will quote at length),

[o]ne of the things that makes the people in TV fit to stand the mega-gaze is that they are, by human standards, really pretty. I suspect that this, like most television conventions, is set up with no motive more sinister than to appeal to the largest possible Audience. Pretty people tend to be more pleasing to look at than non-pretty people. But when we’re talking about television, the combination of sheer Audience size and quiet psychic intercourse between images and ogles starts a cycle that both enhances pretty images’ appeal and erodes us viewers’ own security in the face of gazes. Because of the way human beings relate to narrative, we tend to identify with those characters we find appealing. We try to see ourselves in them. The same I.D.-relation,

however, also means that we try to see them in ourselves. When everybody we seek to identify with for six hours a day is pretty, it naturally becomes more important to us to be pretty, to be viewed as pretty. Because prettiness becomes a priority for us, the pretty people on TV become all the more attractive, a cycle which is obviously great for TV. But it's less great for us civilians, who tend to own mirrors, and who also tend not to be anywhere as pretty as the images we try to identify with. (EUP 173-174)

Wallace thus acknowledges that the image of the ideal beauty is shaped by and promulgated by the institution of entertainment *par excellence*, television. It is in a pervasively visual, or better televisual culture, that the contemporary obsession with beauty reaches its zenith, and TV faces are now regarded as the perfect embodiment of Western beauty ideals.

Such a culture clearly proposes images of “unreal standards of beauty and fitness” (“E Unibus Pluram” 174), so that professional beauties like models, actors and TV celebrities become the ideal to aspire to, in a pursuit of mythical beauty goals. Such a proliferation of images of celebrities and celebrated beauty in western media, thus, not only fosters the internalization of beauty standards, but also increases self-objectification, that is the perception of one's body compared to the ideal body (Noll & Fredrickson 624).

Furthermore, in a performative reading which sees the beauty system as the representation of an ideal construction, it naturally follows that all subjects must feel a certain level of inadequacy against it. Such a system, in fact, marks all subjects with the possibility of non-normative ‘otherness’, although this possibility is always regarded as a failure; “indeed, those who fail to do their [beauty] right are regularly punished” (Butler 522). As the beauty ideal is “virtually unattainable” (Thompson & Stice 181), it helps promoting and fostering the pursuit of a ‘perfect’ kind of beauty.

3.3 The Apotheosis of Prettiness in a Televisual Culture⁵

The role of television in the '90s culture is explored by Wallace in another essay, "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young" (1988), which might be regarded as the basis for "E Unibus Pluram". In it, Wallace main claim is that "television and advertising and popular entertainments...have imposed themselves on our generation's psyches for so long and with such power that they have entered into complicated relations with our very ideas of the world and the self" (46). His reaction to this media-saturated environment is what he calls "Image-fiction", a fiction which is

not just a use or mention of televisual culture but an actual *response* to it, an effort to impose some sort of accountability on a state of affairs in which more Americans get their news from television than from newspapers and in which more Americans every evening watch *Wheel of Fortune* than all three network news programs combined." ("E Unibus Pluram" 172)

Whether or not this "Image-fiction" remains a mere subgenre of post-/postmodernism, it seems evident that TV has had a significant impact on some authors (including Wallace himself) who chose to address television in their works, as this has become an integral part of their existence. Indeed, although the link is only implied in "E Unibus Pluram", Wallace himself becomes a creator of that kind of fiction he discusses in this essay. His best example of the role media play in our lives is probably *Infinite Jest* (1996), where he envisages an entertainment so pervasive (or rather *perfect*) it becomes lethally addictive, compelling its viewers to desire nothing else. But Wallace's "[i]nquiry into the role entertainment plays in our collective solipsism and aloneness" (Boswell 200) is present as well in his shorter fiction, such as "Little Expressionless Animals", about the popular TV show *Jeopardy!*, or "Tri-Stan: I Sold Sissee Nar to Ecko".

⁵ "E Unibus Pluram" p.174

The latter, in particular, is a pun on the myths of Tristan and Isolde and Narcissus and Echo, as the title suggests. The piece is about "the origins of the ghostly double that always shadows human figures on UHF broadcast bands" (*Brief Interviews* 235), and treats contemporary TV culture like Greek myths, thus "wresting myth from the literary tradition and inserting it into the popular culture, the new site of our collective consciousness" (Boswell 200).

Narrated by the "fuzzy Hensonian epiclete Ovid the Obtuse, syndicated chronicler of trans-human entertainment exchange in low-cost organs across the land" (*BI* 235), the story is set in "medieval California fluorescent basin" (*ibid.*), where BC stands for Before Cable. "There moved & shook... a wise & clever programming executive named Agon M. Nar" (*ibid.*) and his tragically gorgeous daughter Sisse Nar (Narcissus). Sisse's beauty soon turns her into a TV sensation and an object of worship at national level, but most importantly she draws the attention of Stasis, God of Passive Reception. Stasis' wife, Codependae, thus swears revenge, and appears to Reggie Ecko, a former TV executive himself and obsessed over Sisse, who eventually kills her before committing suicide, in an act of Wagnerian *Liebestod*. In the end Stasis, God of Passive Reception, condemns Ecko's ghost "to haunt forever those most ultra-of broadcast television's UHF bandwidths, to abide there annoyingly & imperfectly juxtaposed with all figures... as an irksome visual echo" (*BI* 253).

The story is both a parody of television's sitcoms and a critique of the unattainable beauty ideals it proposes. From the very first page we understand that "Agon M. Nar's programming *archē* was the metastasis of originality" (*BI* 235), as the success of the network he works for is due to his ability to "shuffle and recombine proven entertainment formulae that allowed the muse of Familiarity to appear cross-dressed as Innovation" (*ibid.*). Wallace thus uses the fictional Satyr-Nymph Network, which only reruns old dramas from "BBC toga'd & grape-leafy mythophilic period" (*BI* 241), as a symbol of the success of (for instance) the E! Entertainment Channel, which has its *telos* in broadcasting biographies of movie stars and

specials about reruns. The juxtaposition of television cultural references and Greek imagery as the source of a mythopoeia for TV reruns thus becomes a metaphor that reflects the national psyche, by providing the American audience with a sense of “profoundly shallow *reassurance*” (“E Unibus Pluram 165, emphasis in original) and sameness it craves, in the form of “trite, hackneyed, numbing television shows” (*ibid.*).

The second way TV has assured itself its six-hour hold on the average American is irony. Although irony was the biting literary device adopted by the “rebellious youth culture of the sixties and early seventies” (EUP 182) to expose hypocrisy, its nature, as Wallace points out, remains a fundamentally negative one: “[i]t’s critical and destructive, a ground-clearing. Surely this is the way our postmodern fathers saw it. But irony’s singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks” (EUP 183). For this reason, TV’s adoption of irony as its dominant mode of expression in both its programming and commercials turned it into the norm, absorbed by the regular rhetoric and institutionalized as part of the televisual establishment. Such a disempowerment of irony is, according to Wallace, an example of the ability of TV to destroy all authority and replace it with itself, until, in McLuhanian fashion, the very televisual medium becomes the message: “[t]he real authority on a world we now view as constructed and not depicted becomes the medium that constructs our worldview” (EUP 180).

In doing so, Wallace underlines the contemporary cultural drive towards narcissism that is fueled by that same irony. In what is essentially a society of consumption and mediation, television “offers itself as a relief from the very problems it causes” (EUP 163), that is, it offers itself as the fulfillment of those needs it creates in the first place. As Wallace claims, “[t]elevision, from the surface on down, is about *desire*” (EUP 152), hence the perpetual dissatisfaction of its audience. But not only does TV contribute to such a dissatisfaction, it also perpetuates the idea that some kind of satisfaction is actually possible, and that entertainment

itself could provide such a full satisfaction to the American desire. As a result, one becomes caught in a self-nourishing circle that on the one hand reinforces the television-watching practice, while on the other contributes to exacerbate solipsism and loneliness. Television, then, comes to define a culture where the promises of consumption and satisfaction become avenues of self-fulfillment, and contributes to an image-based society through massive reproduction of and exposure to mass images. Enter narcissism.

As defined by Freud, in fact, narcissism (in its “secondary” meaning) occurs when adults who remain dedicated to the satisfaction of the self create an “ideal ego” out of which they value themselves. Wallace’s second critique is therefore addressed to the “unreal standards of beauty and fitness” (EUP 174) that television continuously proposes, here embodied by Agon M. Nar’s beautiful daughter Sissee. Indeed, Agon M. Nar “did beget three semi-independent vehicles, daughters, maidens, Leigh & Coleptic & Sissee” (*Brief Interviews* 235), all of which have “undergone their first Surgical Enhancements” (*BI* 236) and soon “blossomed into nymphetiude” (*ibid.*). Agon M. Nar, in fact, “provided for monthly tribute...to the God of Surgical Enhancement, the...plasticly facile Herm (‘Afro’) Deight MD”, thanks to whom his three daughters have turned into “nymphets far, far lovelier than the stony vicissitudes of Nature would have provided solo” (*ibid.*).

However, while Leigh and Coleptic eventually become USC cheerleaders, Sissee turns into “Herm (‘Afro’) Deight the Enhancement *technē*cian favorite & Personal Project”, to the point of getting “eventually nearly 100%-Enhanced” and “[surpassing] her acrobatic sisters & all the fluorescent basin’s other maidens that she seemed, according to *Varietae*, ‘...a very goddess consorting with mortals’” (*BI* 237, emphasis in original). Sissee’s resort to cosmetic surgery is therefore portrayed not simply as a tool that allows her to become more beautiful, but as a vehicle of total (and caricatured) transformation, as Wallace notes that

so vertiginously protrusive was Sissee’s Nar bust that she needed aid to recline, so juttingly

sepulchral her cheekbones that she cast predatory shadows & had to do doorways in profile, & so perfectly otherworldly her teeth & tan... (BI 237)

and that "Sisse Nar's nose was Enhanced into eternal aquilinity" (BI 240).

Sissee's "Deighted pulchritude" (BI 244) allows her to land a starring role in one of Satyr-Nymph Network's productions, *Beach Blanket Endymion*. The show, whose title is clearly a play on the myth of Endymion, condemned to eternal sleep, is a way for Wallace to make an only partially ironic observation on actors and actresses with little to no acting talent, whose place in the entertainment industry is justified only by their physical appearance. For her role as a thespian, indeed,

it was, yes, nonpositive that [Sissee] could not act, & that her unEnhanceable voice was like nails on a slate. But these flaws were not fatal. For Sissee Nar's title role...called only for catatonia. Sissee turned out to be a natural. Forever asleep on Mt. Latmus's rather incongruous beach, she had only to lie there, cross-dressed, Enhanced & immortally desirable; her antinatural beauty was enough (BI 245).

Moreover, Sissee embodies those unreal TV-mediated images of an idealized beauty, an "apotheosis of commercial image" (BI 246), unattainable yet culturally valued. Sissee herself becomes aware of her individuality and of the cultural bias underlying her representation as "the Ultimate Erotic Object of the contemporary industry: ideally proportioned, aesthetically flawless...rapturously passive, & most bewitching yet, in every way 2-D, dimensionally unattainable" (BI 248) when she glimpses her reflection in Ecko's sunglasses.

Sissee herself, however, falls victim to the gap between the idealized and the real, as her reflection appears to her eyes as "*imperfect nay flawed* & inadequately Enhanced & like totally gnarlyly *mortal*" (BI 254, emphasis in original). The realization of a double whom only Sissee, "Skinnerianly raised to fear & avoid & religiously eschew any mirrors" (BI 254), perceives as not-beautiful-enough induces in her a complete paralysis, preventing her from running for her

life and allowing Ecco to shoot her. Sissee's dissatisfaction towards her mirrored-double therefore embodies that 'secondary narcissism' posited by Freud, since she values her bodily appearance in function of an idealized self which embodies unattainable physical perfection.

As "every love story is also {a} ghost story" (*BI* 245), desire and disillusionment thus go hand in hand, and the televisual medium helps create and maintain the perpetual dissatisfaction of its public by perpetuating the idea that some kind of satisfaction (in this case, the attainment of unreal standards of beauty) is possible and within the reach of the audience; as this piece illustrates, it is the agony caused by the unattainability of the unfulfillable beauty ideals proposed by television, the "revelation of her Enhanced and trans-human charms in the first mirror of any sort she had ever gazed into" (*BI* 251), the ultimate cause of Sissee's tragic death.

3.4 Beauty Is the Promise of Happiness: Ted Chiang's "Liking What You See: A Documentary"

The so-called "halo-effect" is a cognitive bias consisting in the tendency to let certain positive traits belonging to a person influence the overall judgement of that person. The term, coined in 1920 by Edward Lee Thorndike, commands an increasing interest in the light of the above considerations regarding the social construction of beauty.

The internalization of cultural ideals of attractiveness, indeed, has interpersonal consequences, so that "good-looking people have tremendous advantages over their unattractive counterparts in many ways" (Sigall & Ostrove 410). The notion of beauty thus contributes to the halo-effect bias, resulting in physical attractiveness influencing social life. The consequence is that, even if unconsciously, "beauty (or its opposite) often functions as a status cue; that is, when it activates patterns of widely shared cultural beliefs it is a status

characteristic just as race and sex are, meeting the same defining criteria and having most of the same sorts of effects as those other status characteristics” (Webster & Driskell 140).

In this context, a physically attractive appearance is therefore seen as a desirable feature, a message reinforced by the exposure to mass images in the media. On the other hand, however, the concept of beauty can also be seen as a subjective limitation for those who do not belong to the realm of the beautiful people, as their social life would be negatively influenced by the lack of the ‘halo-effect’.

This is precisely the point of departure for Ted Chiang’s short story “Liking What You See: A Documentary” (2002), where the issue of ‘lookism’, that is the discrimination of individuals based on their physical appearance, becomes a plot device. The piece is set in a near-future college campus and focuses on a fictional neural technology called ‘calliagnosia’, a reversible brain modification which still allows people to perceive what they see, but makes them unable to process its aesthetic qualities, and thus unable to distinguish between attractive and unattractive people. The condition underlying this technology is that of

associative agnosia, rather than an apperceptive one. That means it doesn’t interfere with one’s visual perception, only with the ability to recognize what one sees. A calliagnosic perceives faces fairly well; he or she can tell the difference between a pointed chin and a receding one, a straight nose and a crooked one, clear skin and blemished skin. He or she simply doesn’t experience any aesthetic reaction to those differences. (Chiang 285)

The central character is Tamera Lyons, who, raised on calliagnosia, chooses to stop using it to see more of the world around her, but the story presents various short monologues (as if people were indeed being interviewed for a documentary film) in which other characters present their point of view on the technology and debate on whether it should be made mandatory in order to create an unbiased and prejudice-free society.

Even though the technology portrayed is fictional, the issues that Chiang’s story touches

upon are not. As the character of Maria deSouza notes,

[t]he deeper societal problem is lookism. For decades people've been willing to talk about racism and sexism, but they're still reluctant to talk about lookism. Yet this prejudice against unattractive people is incredibly pervasive. People do it without even being taught by anyone...Educating people, raising their awareness about this issue, all of that is essential, but it's not enough. That's where technology comes in. Think of calliagnosia as a kind of assisted maturity. (Chiang 284)

Calliagnosia is therefore offered as a possible solution to the issue of lookism; nevertheless, the way Chiang portrays this technology implies that it could produce beauty-blindness only if beauty were a strictly natural and biological phenomenon, a view which conflicts with the above observations on its social construction.

The story, indeed, treats the notion of beauty as the result of evolutionary traits and as related to “the reproductive potential of prospective mates” (Chiang 285): “the single best indicator of youth and health” (*ibid.*) is skin, followed by symmetry and facial proportions that approximate the population mean (the closer to the mean, the more beautiful). Interestingly, the fact that “[c]alliagnosics are *not* blind to fashion or cultural standards of beauty” (Chiang 286, emphasis in original) is directly in opposition to the idea that beauty is the product of societal norms.

The ineffectiveness of calliagnosia on cultural constructs is made evident by the fact that the technology proves useless in preventing racial discrimination, since attempts to induce race-blindness have resulted in failure. As a neurologist explains, “[t]here is no neural pathway that specifically handles resentment towards immigrants, any more than there's one for Marxist doctrine or foot fetishism” (Chiang 308). Leaving aside the reductionist take on racism as ‘resentment towards immigrants’, and thus as mere xenophobia, the passage illustrates how the story treats beauty as a biological fact whereas race as a social construct, and therefore

separates them as two different issues. In doing so, it also reinforces the view that calliagnosia is more a form of oppression than of equality, which reproduces racial and gender ideologies rather than disrupting them.

The notion of beauty in Chiang's story correlates with the underlying issue of hyperreality and mediated representation of unattainable cultural standards of beauty. Walter Lambert, president of the National Calliagnosia Association, defines the portrayal of unrealistic ideals as

pharmaceutical-grade beauty, the cocaine of good looks... We become dissatisfied with the way ordinary people look because they can't compare to supermodels. Two-dimensional images are bad enough, but now with spex, advertisers can put a supermodel right in front of you, making eye contact. Software companies offer goddesses who'll remind you of your appointments. We've all heard about men who prefer virtual girlfriends over actual ones, but they're not the only ones who've been affected. The more time any of us spend with gorgeous digital apparitions around, the more our relationships with real human beings are going to suffer. (Chiang 299-300)

Chiang's description of a hyperreality of mediated beauty ideals, an environment saturated with simulations without an equivalent in reality (Baudrillard 365), closely resembles Wallace's critique of television as an addiction that helps create "difficulties for relationships, communities, and the addict's very sense of self and soul" (*E Unibus Pluram* 163), and exacerbating solipsism and loneliness. Like Wallace with television, thus, Chiang seems to argue that the hyperreality proposed in and by 2-D images serves as a relief from the sense of alienation caused by being around real human beings.

Within this framework of obsessive worship of image culture that conditions the expectations of real human beings, the concept of beauty becomes the ground for a utopian outlook (both in the eutopian and dystopian meaning). In fact, while calliagnosia presents an opportunity for a supposedly unbiased and more equal society, Chiang still raises the question

of whether human relationships and such a reality can be successfully constructed through a mode of blindness and mediation.

Furthermore, “Liking What You See” also investigates the role of beauty in the constitution of self by analyzing the intersubjectivity of the relationship between Tamera and her ex high-school boyfriend Garrett, and how the two ‘relearn’ their self-image after they choose to temporarily turn off their calliagnosia. While Tamera’s experience is a positive one, since she finds out to be pretty by cultural standards, the situation is far more traumatic for Garrett, who is not satisfied with his physical appearance. Tamera’s assertion of the self thus goes through an understanding and appreciation of her own and the other’s appeal, even though she is “completely unselfconscious about her looks; she’s not vain or insecure, and she can describe herself as beautiful without embarrassment” (Chiang 302). In spite of lacking the “false modesty” and “showoffishness” (*ibid.*) of other pretty girls, she nevertheless displays the halo-effect bias when she is “looking at good-looking guys around campus” (Chiang 296) and she finds it “really easy to imagine that [one of them] was a nice guy”; even without knowing anything about him or hearing what he is talking about, she wants to get to know him (Chiang 297).

On the other hand, this new unmediated sense of reality conflicts with her perception of her former relationship. When shown a picture of Tamera and Garret, a friend of her shows amazement when she finds out that he broke up with Tamera:

Ina said she couldn’t believe someone who looked like him would break up with someone who looked like me. She said that in a school without calli, he probably wouldn’t have been able to get a date with me. Like, we wouldn’t be in the same league. (Chiang 304)

Finding out that he does not belong to the elite of the ‘pretties’, Garrett is therefore finding it hard to “really become friendly with girls in college, harder than he expected. And now he’s thinking it’s because of the way he looks” (Chiang 317). For Garrett, then, his physical

appearance becomes an element that disrupts the sense of the self he had created. Calliagnosia is consequently a way for him to feel “more comfortable in [his] own skin, more confident, more secure” (Chiang 290), and this is the reason why he decides to have it reactivated.

The way they look becomes therefore a factor in shaping the relationship between Tamera and Garret, and her newly found beauty allows Tamera to establish a power relationship between her and Garrett. When he first sees her without calliagnosia, Garrett is surprised of how pretty she looks, and Tamera “could see him react. It was like his eyes got wider... We talked for a while on video, and all the time I was really conscious of him looking at me. That felt good” (Chiang 314). In trying to rekindle their former love relationship, Tamera is incorporating the awareness of her self-image and exploiting her physical appeal; she is therefore abusing of her status in a reality unmediated by calliagnosia, asserting her sense of the self at the expenses of Garrett’s subjectivity. Even though their relationship has grown unaffected by the power of images (since they both had calliagnosia when in high-school, it seems at least reasonable to presume that their relationship could continue even if unmediated), they prove to be vulnerable to the constraints of power that a cultural framework shaped by the influence of the media and the cult of mass images impose on them.

In addition, one’s decision of activating or not calliagnosia represents an ontological issue that constitutes a different identity in relation to those who opt for the opposite. The issue raised by Chiang, and briefly touched upon above, is indeed whether a supposedly better society should be constructed through mediation and impairment. Those who undergo the brain modification that constitutes calliagnosia, in fact, deliberately choose to deny the inherent “cost” of collective happiness, which can be seen as a limitation of one’s knowledge. Hence, the question that belies the narrative is whether this kind of deficiency would be preferable to a discrimination based on physical appeal, and if a solution based on some kind of flaw could still be considered a valid one.

Chiang's text, thus, is an example of flawed utopia that represents a point of intersection between the two forms of utopian fiction, the eutopian and the dystopian, since the narrative asks rhetorically "what cost we are willing to pay...to achieve a good life" (Sargent 2003, p. 226). Such a reflection on what kind of trade-off is considered acceptable, as long as it enables utopia to exist, stems from the very nature of any utopia, namely the fact that it exists within a social context. As such, it falls within the argument between the nature of society in general and the individual, and the necessity to find a balance between them through what is known as 'the social contract'.

As it has been noted in Chapter 1, a fictional eutopia is by no means a perfect society, but rather the best possible alternative way to organize society its creator could foresee. It is, following J.C. Davis' argument, an attempt to provide what the utopist believes is a better way to address the 'collective problem' of the 'scarcity gap', the "paucity of satisfactions weakly coordinated with the desires and aspirations of a community of individuals" (qtd. in *The Concept of Utopia* 161). The purpose of any utopia, then, is to "serve the best interests of the people as a whole" (Woodcock 82); in essence, utopias are constituted and regulated according to a utilitarian principle which promotes the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

This collectivistic impulse, on the other hand, necessarily entails the sacrifice of the individual. As Lippmann argues, in so far as men embrace the belief that their morality should depend on utilitarianism,

they commit themselves to the suppression of the contrariness arising from the diversity of human interests and purposes. They cannot escape it. If a society is to be planned, its population must conform to the plan; if it is to have an official purpose, there must be no private purpose that conflicts with it (*The Good Society* 51).

The ultimate utopian ideal, the inescapable bond between the individual and the utopia, can be perfectly exemplified by Mussolini's formula "Tutto nello Stato, niente al di fuori dello Stato,

nulla contro lo Stato” (“All in the State, nothing outside the State, nothing against the State”). Indeed, if we share Beauchamp’s view of utopia as “civilization-only-more-so” (“Of Man’s Last Disobedience 285), we have to face the inherent opposition that the creation of a better society must necessarily entail the limitation of individual freedom and agency (hence the anti-utopian juxtaposition of utopian thought with totalitarian ideology). How, then, can we justify such a teleological system?

In Chinag’s short story, the narrative asks what the relative value of an individual personality is, when viewed in terms of a more just and prejudice-free society promised by technological advancement and calliagnosia. Indeed, rather than choosing to undergo surgery in order to promote more equality, the student’s engagement with calli seems to follow more opportunistic and selfish principles. Garrett, for instance, decides to reactivate his perceptive impairment guided by the fact that he finds it hard to make acquaintance with girls in college; believing that it is because of the way he looks, as he is unsatisfied with his physical appearance, he chooses to revert to a state of not-knowing, of voluntary ‘blindness’ and self-censorship.

Tamera, on the other hand, displays an assertion of her autonomy by (initially) deciding against calliagnosia and mediated reality, and by opposing the idea that it should be mandatory. This kind of resistance, shared by other students, reinforces the concept that the compulsory enforcement of calli would be “Orwellian”, and constitute instead “a tool of oppression” by passing on the idea that “subjugation is actually protection” (Chiang 315). In fact, in order to be effective, calli should necessarily be adopted by everyone: as one student claims, “it didn’t seem like [calli] would help unless everyone else did it too; getting it all by myself wouldn’t change the way others treat me” (Chiang 303). Proponents of calliagnosia, in fact, act on the purely rational basis that “getting rid of beauty would make a utopia” (Chiang 327) and are moved by the idea that a better society could be achieved through rational means. Even though

she eventually decides to get her calli turned back on, Tamera does not act guided by reason or egoism, but she does it out of her love for Garrett; she believes that reactivating calliagnosia would allow her “to get him back...by playing fair” (Chiang 326), realizing that beauty could be a tool to manipulate people and gain advantage over them. Her actions, thus, manifest an assertion of individual freedom and an exercise of free will in opposition to the rationalization of life that lies beneath the beauty-free utopia of a calliagnosic society.

If, then, the question of the individual in utopia revolves around the possibility to express individuality in a utopian context, the best example offered by Chiang is that of Lori Harber, who decides to “go radical ugly” (Chiang 316) and have her nose surgically removed. It is, indeed, what Dostoevsky calls an act of deliberate irrationality that “preserves for us what is most precious and most important—that is, our personality, our individuality” (*Notes from the Underground* 26).

4. The Last Enemy That Shall Be Destroyed: Issues of Transhumanism in *Black Mirror*

4.1 On Death and Utopia

The problem of death and the temporal finitude of human condition are transhistorical issues which confront most human societies. As such, it is logic to assume that, in a genre preoccupied with providing man with the immediate satisfaction of desire, or, to quote Marcuse, with “integral gratification” (16), it would be a predominant theme. If, indeed, we consider utopia as ‘civilization-only-more-so’, to quote Beauchamp, it is clear that it must entail such an immediate gratification as much as the repression of one’s anxieties. In fact, “[a]s long as man experiences himself as subject to time—and such subjection reveals itself most forcefully in the certainty that he must die—he cannot be at peace with himself” (Harries 139). Following Marcuse, in fact, “death is the final negativity of time, but ‘joy wants eternity’. Timelessness is the ideal of pleasure” (231). Such a lack, an incompleteness caused by our temporality, however, appears to be inseparable from human existence, and indeed constitutes, in Heidegger’s view, the essential characteristic of being. In particular, Heidegger maintains that death is constitutive of man’s essence: to be (*Dasein*) for man is to be towards death (*Sein-zum-Tode*).

As he writes in *Being and Time* (1927), the aim of his treatise is to “work out the meaning of the question of Being” (19). In doing so, he acknowledges the ontological priority of ‘becoming’, or “projection” (*Entwurf*, 185), in the understanding of *Dasein*. In such a context, “[t]he ‘ending’ which we have in view when we speak of death, does not signify *Dasein*’s Being-at-an-end [Zu-Ende-sein], but a *Being-towards-the-end* [*Sein zum Ende*] of this entity.

Death is a way to be, which Dasein takes over as soon as it is” (289, emphasis in original). It is only in anticipating this final possibility that man can achieve an understanding of himself as a whole (Harries 144). Heidegger thus appeals to death as a means to give ‘resoluteness’ to one’s Being, as it circumscribes his life and gathers it together:

this understanding is made possible only in so far as Dasein discloses to itself its potentiality-for-Being, and discloses it 'right to its end'. Existentially, however, Dasein's '*Being-at-an-end*' implies *Being-towards-the-end*. As *Being-towards-the-end which understands*—that is to say, as anticipation of death—resoluteness becomes authentically what it can be...*It harbours in itself authentic Being-towards-death, as the possible existentiell modality of its own authenticity.* (353, emphasis in original)

For Heidegger, then, one’s perception of his own mortality is constitutive of his own sense of being an individual self; the two become therefore inextricably linked.

On the other hand, acknowledging that death constitutes an integral part in defining one’s authenticity does not necessarily involve a view of the existence as ‘towards-death’; as Marcuse argues, “the education for consent to death introduces an element of surrender into life from the beginning—surrender and submission” (236). According to him, celebrating death as an existential category betrays the promise of utopia (236).

This view is shared by Ernst Bloch, who refers to death as “the hardest counter-utopia” (9). In Bloch’s philosophy, indeed, from the temporal point of view death represents that moment in which no future (and thus no hope) is any longer possible (Jameson 135). Heidegger’s and Bloch’s views, albeit so distinct in their approach to death, share nonetheless a similarity in their reading of the present as incompleteness, and both project (to borrow Heidegger’s term) the exegesis of the self in the future; for Bloch, however, it is precisely the fear of death that represents the most profound root of utopian thinking:

the Utopian instant, or indeed the Utopian eternity, if it cannot abolish death, may at least rob

it of its sting: for where normally at the moment of dying the individual is brutally wrenched from that future in which alone he might have found completion, now the transfigured time of Utopia offers a perpetual present in which there is a specific, yet total ontological satisfaction of every instant. (Jameson 143)

Death, in fact, constitutes in Adorno's words "nothing other than the power of that which merely *is* just as" (Bloch 10, emphasis in original), and, as such, a strong tie to the *status quo* that the hope of utopia aims to subvert, utopia being "essentially in the determined negation of what merely is...it always points to what should be" (Bloch 12). It should be noted, however, that Adorno and Bloch are not interested in the process of dying, or death as a physical process, but rather on death as an ontological state, which man faces with dread (*Angst* in Heidegger's terms, 227) and that disturbs one constantly, depriving him of any satisfaction:

I believe that without the notion of an *unfettered life*, freed from death, the idea of utopia, the idea of *the* utopia, *cannot* even be thought at all... There is something profoundly contradictory in every utopia, namely, that it cannot be conceived at all without the *elimination of death*; this is inherent in the very thought. What I mean is the *heaviness of death and everything that is connected to it*. Wherever this is not included, where the threshold of death is not at the same time considered, there can actually be no utopia. (Bloch 10)

In the philosophy of Bloch and Marcuse, then, it is necessary to envision a form of existence which does not involve the *Angst* derived from facing death in order to consider the possibility of utopia. Even though none of the aforementioned theorists refers to the elimination of death as the human overcoming of the destructive power of time, this is precisely one of the ultimate wishes of that philosophical movement called Transhumanism.

4.2 Overcoming Limitations: The Potential of Transhumanism

In her famous essay “A Manifesto for Cyborgs,” Donna Haraway argues that the world we live in, infused with technological and scientific progress and blurred ontological boundaries, eliminates all distinctions: “[t]he dichotomies between mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine, public and private, nature and culture, men and women, primitive and civilized are all in question ideologically” (130). Haraway’s negation of boundaries between the traditional categories of subject construction demands a shift in position, a moving away from an anthropocentric frame of reference in the face of the contemporary technologically mediated society: her work therefore decenters the human in favor of the post-human. This posthumanist stance finds its icon in the figure of the cyborg, “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (117).

As a cultural metaphor, then, the cyborg functions as a representation of “lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with...machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints” (Haraway 122). In this way, posthumanism can be understood as the culmination of those socio-political transformations of the latter twentieth century which emphasized the collapsing of ‘the figure of man’ and brought about “a change in the fundamental arrangements of knowledge” as anticipated by Foucault (*The Order of Things* 386-7). Most recently, critics have adopted the notion of ‘Anthropocene’ to refer to the current historical era, where fast-moving progress in informational technology has allowed human influence to alter all life in a global scale. As such, posthumanism aims to understand Man not as a superior and autonomous being, but rather as co-evolving with technology and other forms of life, thus moving beyond a merely anthropocentric view of life. The current scholarship on posthumanism covers a wide range of diverse positions and critical forms whose goal is to re-frame subject formation. For instance, in understanding the posthuman self as relational and expanded, Rosi Braidotti proposes a post-anthropocentric

view where the relational capacity “is not confined within our species, but it includes non-anthropomorphic elements: the nonhuman, vital force of Life” she labels as ‘zoe’ (22), drawing from the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. In Braidotti’s approach, then, the posthuman, “zoe-centered subject is a transversal entity, fully immersed in and immanent to nonhuman (animal, vegetable, viral, technological) relations” (26).

In his *The Phenomenon of Man (Le Phénomène Humain)*, Teilhard de Chardin makes a similar observation on the increasing influence of mankind through technology: “[t]hrough the discovery yesterday of the railway, the motor car and the aeroplane, the physical influence of each man, formerly restricted to a few miles, now extends to hundreds of leagues or more” (240). Such a statement yields for him an interesting result, namely serving as a starting point for the concept of ‘noösphere’,⁶ a space of knowledge and pure thought that, in Teilhard’s philosophy, constitutes the next step in evolution. For this reason, he might be regarded as the forefather of that strand of posthumanism known as transhumanism.⁷

Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) was a Jesuit priest and a distinguished paleontologist, and part of the expedition that brought to the discovery of the skull of the Peking Man. Deeply influenced by this background, he felt imperative for his philosophy to reconcile Christian theology and Darwin’s theory of evolution, building on Bergson’s *L’ évolution créatrice*. As it is easy to realize, many of the ideas he expressed throughout his work were regarded as unorthodox or blasphemous by the Catholic Church.

⁶ The ownership of the concept of ‘noösphere’ is a rather complicated matter. Vladimir Vernadsky is often regarded as the first theorizer. In his 1943 essay “The Biosphere and the Noosphere”, however, Vernadsky claims that “Edouard le Roy...introduced in 1927 the concept of the noösphere as the stage through which the biosphere is now passing geologically. He emphasized that he arrived at such a notion in collaboration with his friend Teilhard de Chardin, a great geologist and palaeontologist, now working in China”. All in all, I believe it is legitimate to think that the concept of ‘noösphere’ is the result of a collaborative effort.

⁷ Some accounts even mention the usage of the term ‘transhumanism’ in a letter to evolutionary biologist Julian Huxley (brother to writer Aldous) from Teilhard. I have not been able to retrieve such a letter. Julian Huxley is the author of the movement’s definitional essay, “Transhumanism” (see bibliography).

According to Teilhard the cosmos is composed of a universal matter, and therefore “all bodies owe their origin to arrangements of a single initial corpuscular type”. Evolution is thus conceptualized as following what he calls ‘the law of *complexification*’ (48, my emphasis); in fact, he explains that “[h]istorically, the stuff of the universe goes on becoming concentrated into ever more organized forms of matter” (49). His account of evolution is thus an account of the emergence, from an undifferentiated mass of matter, of increasingly complex structures. He is, however, well aware of the two laws of thermodynamics, the conservation and dissipation of energy. As he claims,

something is finally burned in the course of every synthesis in order to pay for that synthesis...Laboriously, step by step, the atomic and molecular structures become higher and more complex, but the upward force is lost on the way. (51)

Such a model of creation, therefore, inevitably leads to heat death, a time when energy will be evenly distributed throughout the entire universe, thus reaching a state of equilibrium which would not allow for motion or life. In this way, evolution is nothing more than “a rocket rising in the wake of time’s arrow, that only bursts to be extinguished” (52). Most importantly, it conflicts with God’s promise of eternal life; as I have mentioned above, Teilhard’s whole philosophy is an attempt to reconcile Christian theology with the recent scientific discoveries.

It is for this very reason that Teilhard introduces the concept of ‘consciousness’. If, as he claims, the universe has developed from a homogeneous state, and “consciousness is evident in man”, it follows that “therefore...it has a cosmic extension” (56). Moreover, the development of more complex structures corresponds to a development of consciousness: “Whatever instance we may think of, we may be sure that every time a richer and better organised structure will correspond to a more advanced stage of consciousness” (60). In Teilhard’s words, the concept can be summarized as such: “*Spiritual perfection (or conscious 'centreity')* and *material synthesis (or complexity)* are but the two aspects or connected parts

of one and the same phenomenon” (60-61, emphasis in original).

Teilhard thus understands evolution as a synthesis of structures of increasing complexity. But according to which parameter should we classify the advancement of living beings? According to him, the parameter is the degree of ‘cerebralisation’ (144), the increased unification of the nervous system, and, consequently, the increased intensity of consciousness. Moreover, such a differentiation of nervous tissue allows him to reach to another crucial conclusion, in that it “*provides a direction; and therefore it proves that evolution has a direction*” (146, emphasis in original).

In Teilhard’s view, the result of such observations is therefore that evolution must, at a certain point, shift from biogenesis, *omne vivum ex vivo*, to “a higher function—the engendering and subsequent development of the mind, in one word *noögenesis*” (181, emphasis in original). This process of concentration of consciousness, as Teilhard understands it, along with the universe’s inner drive towards ever increasing complexity, eventually converges into a point of ultimate synthesis: the ‘Omega Point’, the moment at which all thought becomes unified into “some sort of supreme consciousness” (258), and “the noösphere...will reach collectively its point of convergence—at the ‘end of the world’” (272).

There is, eventually, a last repercussion of Teilhard’s *Weltanschauung*, which becomes evident when we are reminded of the prime scope of his thought: to bring together his Christian faith and his scientific approach. And it is precisely in the Omega Point that the two, as everything else in Teilhard’s thought, finally come together:

as St. Paul tells us, God *shall be all in all*...the expectation of perfect unity, steeped in which each element will reach in consummation at the same time as the universe.

The universe fulfilling itself in a synthesis of centres in perfect conformity with the laws of union. God, the Centre of centres. In that final vision the Christian dogma culminates. And so exactly, so perfectly does this coincide with the Omega Point that doubtless I should never have ventured to envisage the latter or formulate the hypothesis rationally if, in my consciousness as

a believer, I had not found not only its speculative model but also its living reality. (294)

The outcome of Teilhard's system is striking, and it fully explains his problems with the Catholic Church: indeed, not only does his theory of evolution exclude the concept of a transcendent God, but also it even sees God as the culmination of the very process of evolution, rather than being the product of an act of transcendence.

As I have outlined above, Teilhard is regarded by some as the forefather of transhumanist thought. His account of transhumanism, nevertheless, is quite different from the picture painted, for instance, by Fukuyama, who speaks of "some sort of odd cult" whose goal is "to liberate the human race of its biological constraints" (even though he raises some important issues involving human rights). Similarly, Bostrom defines transhumanism as "the belief that we are about to transcend our biological limitations by means of technology" ("What Is Transhumanism?"), which would make possible to "[broaden] human potential by overcoming aging, cognitive shortcomings, involuntary suffering and our confinement to planet Earth" ("A History of Transhumanist Thought" 26). Moreover, Julian Huxley's essay "Transhumanism" is not always consistent in attempting a definition. In the opening paragraph, Huxley argues that

as a result of a thousand million years of evolution, the universe is becoming conscious of itself, able to understand something of its past history and its possible future. This cosmic self-awareness is being realized in one tiny fragment of the universe—in a few of us human beings.
(13)

For Huxley, then, the next step in evolution is a cosmic consciousness, thus positioning his view completely in line with Teilhard's thought. However, Huxley goes on to suggest that

[the new understanding of the universe] has defined man's responsibility and destiny—to be an agent for the rest of the world in the job of realizing its inherent potentialities as fully as possible.

It is as if man had been suddenly appointed managing director of the biggest business of all, the business of evolution... Whether he wants to or not, whether he is conscious of what he is doing or not, he is in point of fact determining the future direction of evolution on this earth. That is his inescapable destiny, and the sooner he realizes it and starts believing in it, the better for all concerned. (13-14)

In this passage, Huxley's understanding of transhumanism resembles much more its account provided by Bostrom than the philosophy of Teilhard. A tension is thus created within the discourse: is transhumanism the byproduct of evolution, leading towards a cosmic consciousness (and thus transcending man), or rather a goal to be pursued by human beings?

Such a difference in the definition of the concept underlines a rhetorical issue within the debate that still persists. While, indeed, some theorists have developed an approach which sees transhumanism as an evolution of consciousness (particularly in earlier iterations, such as in Teilhard), and in particular the mind as the object of the evolutionary process, others see it as firmly rooted in the idea of technological enhancement and as a liberation from the 'biological constraints' of the body. The reason behind such different and at times contradictory shapes, besides the ambiguity present in Huxley's essay, often lies in a reading of Teilhard's philosophy mediated by contemporary technological discourse, particularly computer science.

To condense Teilhard's view, discussed above, he essentially argues that evolution consists of the emergence of increasingly complex structures over time, matched by the parallel development of consciousness. However, as Steinhart argues, "we can refine Teilhard's vision by replacing his vague nineteenth-century notion of consciousness with the more precise notion of computation" (4). Even though one might object whether Teilhard, who was after all an eminent scientist, actually needs such a 'refinement', the rhetorical replacement of 'consciousness' with 'computation' is rather interesting. But are consciousness (or thought) and computation really the same thing? According to Steinhart, the answer is 'yes'. Like a man

with a hammer who believes everything he encounters needs pounding, Steinhart goes on to discuss the concept of the Omega Point. Reinterpreting Teilhard's notion through a computational lens, "detaching the mind...from its material matrix, so that it will henceforth rest with all its weight on God-Omega" (Teilhard 288) becomes for Steinhart a metaphor for "the Omega Point is a super-computer that runs all possible human body-programs" (16). Deprived of its Christian mysticism, Teilhard's theory of the Omega Point is thus transformed into the notion of the 'technological singularity', a rather common concept within the contemporary transhumanist stance. Raymond Kurzweil, for instance, defines the Singularity as "a future period during which the pace of technological change will be so rapid, its impact so deep, that human life will be irreversibly transformed" (7), adding that

[T]he Singularity will represent the culmination of the merger of our biological thinking and existence with our technology, resulting in a world that is still human but that transcends our biological roots. There will be no distinction, post-Singularity, between human and machine or between physical and virtual reality. (9)

Steinhart's and Kurzweil arguments therefore fit into that contemporary transhumanist assumption that consider thinking as an activity which is somehow quite easy to simulate, hence their using indifferently 'computation' for 'thought'. But, as Lyotard warns, "the body and the mind have to be free of burdens for grace to touch us. That doesn't happen without suffering" (19).

Lyotard's "Can Thought go on without a Body?" is a reflection on the same issue, structured as a dialogue between HE (an engineer, presumably) and SHE (a philosopher) and concerning "the sole serious question to face humanity today" (9): the fact that

[w]hile we talk, the sun is getting older. It will explode in 4.5 billion years...Wars, conflicts, political tension, shifts in opinion, philosophical debates, even passions – everything's dead already if this infinite reserve from which you now draw energy to defer answers, if in short

thought as quest, dies out with the sun. (8-9)

What is the point—HE asks—of doing philosophy, if its great questions will “stay unanswered right up to the end, flawlessly formulated, though now both grounds for raising such questions as well as the place to do this will no longer exist” (8-9)? Moreover, with this ineluctable event, not only life, but thought itself “will have stopped – leaving that disappearance absolutely unthought of. It’s the horizon itself that will be abolished” (9-10). HE goes on to explain:

[s]olar death implies an irreparably exclusive disjunction between death and thought: if there’s death, then there’s no thought. Negation without remainder. No self to make sense of it. Pure event. Disaster. All the events and disasters we’re familiar with and try to think of will end up as no more than pale simulacra. (11)

Hence the proposition, which clearly draws from contemporary transhumanist thought: to simulate “conditions of life and thought to make thinking remain materially possible after the change in the condition of matter that’s the disaster. This and this alone is what’s at stake today in technical and scientific research” (12). “That is: how to make thought without a body possible” (13).

As with Steinhart and Kurzweil (here in the form of a parody, though), the underlying assumption is that the human brain is not quite different from a computer, so that “theoretically the solution is very simple: manufacture hardware capable of ‘nurturing’ software at least as complex...as the present-day human brain, but in non-terrestrial conditions” (14), as if the only possible difficulty were “to manufacture a hardware capable of nourishing our software or its equivalent” (14). In concluding his speech, HE further claims that the real problem with these “organs of bodiless thought” (15) simply lies in the fact that

they operate on binary logic, one imposed on us by Russel’s and Whitehead’s mathematical logic, Turing’s machine, McCulloch’s and Pitt’s neuronal model, the cybernetics of Wiener and von Neumann, Boolean algebra and Shannon’s information science. (15)

The problem, for Lyotard, is thus that “human thought doesn’t think in a binary mode...It accepts imprecise, ambiguous data that doesn’t seem to be selected according to preestablished codes or readability” (15). In other words, human brain is analogic.

It is at this point that SHE opens her defense of philosophy, stating that analogical thought is peculiar in that it “never satisfies the logical demand for complete description. In any serious discussion of analogy it’s this experience that is meant, this blur, this uncertainty, this faith in the exhaustibility of the perceivable” (17). With a pun to the representatives of technological transhumanism, SHE goes on to claim that “[i]t isn’t enough for these machines to simulate the results of vision or of writing *fairly well*” (17, my emphasis). According to SHE, in fact, “thinking and suffering overlap” (18), and it is precisely the body, in its separation from the world, what gives rise to “the possibilities of meaning” (18.), and hence thought. In this way, the question of simulating the world and thought without this *lack*, “without suffering”, seems absurd: “If you think you’re describing thought when you describe a selecting and tabuling of data, you’re silencing truth. Because data aren’t given, but givable, and selection isn’t choice” (18). In other words, thought cannot be abstracted from being-in-the-world, and thus cannot be simulated.

However advanced, SHE questions the ability of computers to suffer:

the unthought would have to make your machines uncomfortable, the uninscribed that remains to be inscribed would have to make their memory suffer...Otherwise why would they ever *start* thinking? We need machines that suffer from the burden of their memory. (20)

In posing such questions, SHE shifts the focus on the ability of technology to address not the mechanics of thinking, but rather *the reason why* we think. Lyotard’s account of suffering as the catalyst of thought can therefore be viewed as a variation on Heidegger’s stance that the experience of death and lack is what fundamentally defines us as human.

In any case, regardless of the position, what the aforementioned thinkers are preoccupied with is essentially the future, a future which might not necessarily include the notion of ‘human’ we are familiar with. What this future would entail is however left open.

4.3 Identity and Nature of the Self in Black Mirror’s “Be Right Back”

The intimate relationship with technology and how this affects us are central concerns of *Black Mirror* (Brooker, 2011–), a British anthology television series (whose ownership recently shifted from Channel 4 to Netflix) touching upon various topics associated with the latest or near-future technological developments and their implications on human interactions. Under these premises, it is no surprise that *Black Mirror* should appropriate the transhumanist notion of a technology which is able to reverse or abolish the process of dying, and therefore to question human mortality by suggesting alternatives to death. Indeed, such issues are explored in two episodes, *Be Right Back* (2013) and *San Junipero* (2016).

Be Right Back is about a young couple, Martha and Ash, about to move into Ash’s old family house in the country. Ash is presented as totally immersed in social media and more concentrated on his Twitter profile than on Martha and his real life. While returning a rental van, Ash is killed in an accident, and even though it is not made clear, a series of clues might lead one to assume that it is precisely because of his addiction to his smartphone (for instance, the fact that he reaches for the phone as soon as gets into the car). A friend of her, arguing that Ash was “a heavy user, he’d be perfect”, suggests Martha a new app that mimics the deceased. The software is based on the collection of data from social media profiles which it employs to create a digital avatar. After finding out that she is pregnant, Martha decides to try it. Ash’s replica goes through three different phases: the first is a sort of chat-bot, but as Martha uploads

more and more content from Ash's social media postings, the avatar is upgraded to duplicate his voice, so she can talk to him on the phone; eventually, Martha purchases a physical replica made of synthetic flesh that looks like a human-size doll. Despite being physically identic to Ash, though, the android lacks some personality traits and nuanced emotions, which prompts Martha to get rid of it by making it jump off a cliff. However, as the android is about to jump, she stops it. The episode ends with Martha's daughter, now seven, who is allowed to visit Ash's replica in the attic on the occasion of her birthday.

By contrasting the performed self of social media with the 'true' self, and thus underlying the gap between behavior and consciousness, the episode raises some important questions about identity. These questions cluster around two main issues: the first is the ontological position of the android, while the second is the persistence of Ash's identity in the replica.

However paradoxical it may seem, the first question that arises from *Be Right Back* concerns the ontological state of the android: is the android human? Such a seemingly absurd question indeed masks a fundamental philosophical debate, that relates to what defines a human being as such. If, for instance, we are to follow Locke's definition, a person is

a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places; which is done only by that consciousness, which is inseparable from thinking, and as it seems to me essential to it; it being impossible for anyone to perceive, without perceiving that he does perceive. (335)

For Locke, then, the account of personhood sees consciousness as the fundamental constituent of being human. Even though it might be debatable whether consciousness is a unique human prerogative,⁸ the fact that the android can be self-conscious would accordingly make it a human.

⁸ Thomas White, for instance, notes that dolphins have some concept of self (see bibliography).

The concept of consciousness, however, is no less deceptive than that of personhood. The notion of a conscious mental state, for instance, might be regarded as such if it involves qualitative or experiential properties, known as ‘qualia’. The term, coined by C.I. Lewis, is used by philosophers to refer to the phenomenal aspects of our mental lives. In other words, the phenomenal character of an experience is what it is like subjectively to undergo that experience; the qualitative character of an experience might be illustrated for example by the peculiar taste of oysters or a pineapple (Locke 19). Moreover, it should be noted that a qualitative character is not restricted to sensory experiences, but belongs to experiential states in general, such as experienced thoughts or desires (qtd. in Tye).

Under this perspective, the android cannot be said to be conscious, since it lacks these qualia: when ordered to jump off the cliff, the android agrees, obeying its ‘administrator’. At this point Martha gets mad at it, claiming that “[Ash] would have been scared...he would have been crying”. When the android reacts by begging for its life, it becomes quite obvious that it is merely performing, and it does not experience such feelings. Moreover, the fact that it simply obeys Martha’s order (totally in line with Asimov’s second law of robotics) clearly demonstrates a lack of free will arising from an equal lack of consciousness. As Hasker argues, indeed, consciousness is a necessary precondition for any freedom or self-determination (qtd. in Van Gulick). Another element that works in favor of the android’s lack of consciousness is its lack of memories of what was never posted online.⁹ There are two scenes in which this is made evident: the first is when the android refers to Martha’s sister as a “friend”, which prompts Martha to reply “That was my sister. You know her”. The second one is when the android picks up a photo depicting a young, smiling Ash, and comments it with “Funny”. The comment stems from a social media post that Ash shared while still alive. What the android does not know, but the viewer does, is that the circumstances behind that picture were not

⁹ For the correlation between memory and autothetic consciousness, see Tulving.

‘funny’ at all, since it was the first family outing after Ash’s brother had died, and the boy was giving a fake smile.

It is evident, at this point, that the lack of consciousness makes the android non-human, despite the difficulties that arise when embarking into a discussion (here merely touched upon) of what defines a human being as such. The android is, in Baudrillard’s words, a sheer simulacrum of the lived experience, an image of Ash without reference to the original (366): as Martha asks, “he is not him, is he?” And being “just a performance”, an image, the android is eventually hidden in the attic, as Ash’s mother used to do with the photographs of the loved ones after their death.

The issue of consciousness explored in *Be Right Back* thus fits into the contemporary trashumanist discourse by putting into practice the stance of SHE in Lyotard’s essay: what if mimicking, simulating human thought *fairly well* is not enough? The goal of creating an Artificial Intelligence undistinguishable from a human is central to transhumanist thought since Turing’s seminal essay “Computing Machinery and Intelligence”, in which he posited that a computer that could play successfully “the imitation game” would be proof that thought can occur in computers as well, and therefore is not a property belonging solely to humans. If we take this assumption from a materialist point of view, and hence from that position in the philosophy of mind known as “property dualism”, it follows that thought and other phenomenological features must be originated from the electrochemical activity of the brain. The natural conclusion is that producing a copy of the activity of a biological brain will ensue in the emergence of a consciousness.

Be Right Back, however, seems to confute this theory, or at least Turing’s position: the fact that the android can behave like Ash and follow natural language patterns when speaking (it is able to mimic sarcasm, for instance), and thus representing a very good candidate for passing the Turing test, is clearly not enough for it to have a consciousness. Once again, then,

replicating all the brain functions does not necessarily entail the formation of a consciousness or anything else that can be considered at the core of our existence. The undefinable ‘something’ that the android lacks therefore suggests that a person is something more than merely the sum of all her information.

The second main issue explored in the episode is closely connected to what has been said so far, and concerns the metaphysical question of the persistence of identity. The android owns some of Ash’s memories, his same voice, and, from roughly the second half of the episode, a synthetic body which makes it physically identic to Ash. Nevertheless, we have seen thus far that the lack of a consciousness prevents the android from being considered a human being. A second question, however, still lingers: can the android and Ash be considered the *same* person?

The episode itself is rather ambiguous in this respect, particularly for what concerns Martha’s reactions towards the android. If, indeed, on the one hand she says “You look like him on a good day” when she sees the synthetic body for the first time, which makes us think that she considers it a distinct individual, albeit extremely similar, on the other her “I missed you so much” suggests the android is actually Ash. Moreover, while the fact that he lacks a consciousness prompts Martha to hide it in the attic, there is ‘something’ that prevents her from carrying out her resolution of making it jump off a cliff. In order to answer the above question, we should set out to identify what matters in the definition of personal identity and its continuity.

According to Olson, there are fundamentally two ways in philosophy to define identity: the synchronic identity and the diachronic identity (“Personal Identity” 353). When, in the previous section, we concluded that the android is not human, we addressed the question of the synchronic identity, that is the one which focuses on self-concept. Lacking consciousness, we can discard the possibility that the android could have the same identity as Ash.

The matter becomes increasingly complicated when we approach the question from the diachronic point of view, that is the continuity of one's identity over time. This problem is known as the Persistence Question, and can be expressed as “[u]nder what possible circumstances is a person who exists at one time identical with *something* that exists at another time (whether or not it is a person then)?” (“Personal Identity” 357). According to Olson, there are three possible answers, or approaches: the first is what he labels the ‘somatic approach’, which is based on a brute physical relation; the second answer is the ‘psychological approach’, that states that one’s persistence relies on a psychological relation; the third answer is called ‘simple view’, and states that no approach is sufficient to affirm one’s persistency (“Personal Identity” 357), but it will not be treated here.

The somatic approach might at a first glance be qualified as pretty easy to dismiss: there is clearly no physical continuity between Ash and the android, therefore they cannot possibly be the same person. However, as the Theseus paradox illustrates,¹⁰ establishing a physical continuity is not as easy as it might seem. Moreover, if we tackle the problem by applying Nozick’s theory of the “closest continuer”, which states that “something at t_2 is not the same entity as x at t_1 if it is not x 's closest continuer. And "closest" means closer than all others” (97), it becomes evident that the android is actually Ash’s ‘closest continuer’, both from the psychological and the physical point of view. It may be argued, though, that simply being the best candidate is not the same thing as being identical, and the episode seems to suggest precisely this: as we have seen, Martha laments that the android is “not enough” of Ash, despite the physical similarity and the fact that it shares some of Ash’s memories.

Proponents of the psychological approach, on the other hand, maintain that what matters most in defining one’s identity is the psychological continuity with one’s past self. As Locke

¹⁰ The paradox is recorded in Plutarch’s *Life of Theseus*, and explores the metaphysical question of the persistence of identity by asking whether a ship that had been restored by replacing every single wooden part remained the same ship.

claims, “being the same consciousness that makes a man be himself to himself, personal identity depends on that only” (226). If we see consciousness as the self-awareness of one’s own narrative of experiences (Stone 826), we can thus conclude that the android lacks psychological continuity with Ash, in that their sharing narrative experiences is not complete, but partial, since the android remembers only what Ash posted online and therefore is not quantitatively the same as Ash. For the same reason, however, it may be objected that a person who has undergone a permanent amnesia, or suffers from Alzheimer’s, is not the same person he was before. Moreover, identity is a one-one relation, and psychological continuity is not necessarily so. If Ash’s ‘consciousness’ could be transferred into two or more androids, this would result in two or more future entities to be psychologically continuous with Ash, which is logically impossible (Williams 44-45).

Perhaps the answer to the question of the persistence of identity might come from Parfit, who claims that psychological continuity does not guarantee identity; on the other hand, it is not identity what really matters, but rather survival (137). In this view, the answer is that it does not matter whether the android *is* Ash. The fact that it possesses some sort of psychological continuity with him, albeit partial, might explain Martha’s decision not to destroy it and hide it in the attic instead. What *Be Right Back* suggests is thus that even an imperfect copy, a ‘closest continuer’, might not *be* the same person, but might *count* as such. This reading is supported by the conversation between Martha and Sarah after the latter has signed her up for the software:

Martha: “It won't be him.”

Sarah: “No, it's not. But it helps.”

Even if it is not Ash who has come back, it does not really matter, since the alternative can still be a father figure for Martha’s and Ash’s yet unborn daughter.

4.4 Heaven Is a Place on Earth: Death and the Afterlife in “San Junipero”

The Black Mirror episode *San Junipero* is closely related to *Be Right Back* in that it explores a scenario dealing with death, and raises the question of the possibility of an afterlife. Rather than theologically, however, the matter is investigated from a technological perspective.

The episode is set in 1987 in the fictional coastal town of San Junipero, where shy Yorkie meets party-loving Kelly at Tucker’s, the local club; soon the relationship between the two evolves into a romance. When one day Yorkie, unable to find Kelly anywhere, is suggested to “try a different time”, however, it is revealed that the town is nothing but a simulation. San Junipero, in fact, is a virtual reality where people’s consciousness can live on after they have passed away in real life. Yorkie is indeed an old woman affected by locked-in syndrome as a result of a car accident, and wishes to be euthanized so that she can “pass over” permanently, while Kelly suffers from terminal cancer. The system has been created to function as a nostalgia therapy for the elderly, and both Yorkie and Kelly can visit the simulation for a maximum of five hours per week, as a sort of trial period before they choose whether they wish to be uploaded after their death. While Kelly decides to marry Yorkie in real life in order to sign her euthanasia papers, she is still reluctant to follow Yorkie in San Junipero: her former husband decided not to ‘pass over’ because their daughter had died when the system was not yet available, so neither will she. Eventually Kelly decides she is ready to join, and her consciousness is uploaded to San Junipero so she can be with Yorkie, while her material body is buried alongside her husband and daughter.

The technology portrayed in *San Junipero* represents therefore the ultimate goal of transhumanism, the promise of defeating death through a process known as mind uploading, or whole brain emulation (WBE): the possibility of leaving behind our corruptible biological body and achieve a potential immortality by inhabiting a software simulation. As Bostrom puts it,

[i]f we could scan the synaptic matrix of a human brain and simulate it on a computer then it would be possible for us to migrate from our biological embodiments to a purely digital substrate (given certain philosophical assumptions about the nature of consciousness and personal identity). (“What is Transhumanism”)

Such a technology is reportedly forthcoming, given the advances of computational neuroscience in understanding and modeling the human brain, and many transhumanists share Kelly’s enthusiasm when she contends that “[u]ploaded to cloud, sounds like heaven”. As Bostrom notes, however, the matter raises several concerns regarding the ethics and the philosophical implications of the practice.

The issue of splitting a human body from its conscious, or rather a consciousness from the body it inhabits, can be possible only by assuming that the two are separable entities. It is necessary, thus, to conceive the human being according to the point of view of a Cartesian dualism. Descartes’ theory, also known as mind-body problem, actually originates much earlier in Plato’s *Phaedo*, where he presents several arguments for the immortality of the soul, and is therefore consistent with many religions that feature the promise of a life after death. Such a framework, however, was contested by Locke, who conceived one’s identity as constituted by consciousness (as we have seen in the previous paragraph), and not by some immaterial substance as the soul. The issue raised in *San Junipero*, then, is the same presented in *Be Right Back*, and the one Bostrom puts in parenthesis: the persistence of personal identity after death, or at least after uploading (since one could just ‘visit’ San Junipero without necessarily being dead, as both Yorkie and Kelly do).

Once we have established such a framework, it is clear that transhumanism presupposes what was called a ‘psychological approach’ earlier on, so that one’s persistence relies on a psychological relation between the being inside the computer and the person who undergoes uploading. Contrary to the situation in *Be Right Back*, however, it is much easier in the context

of *San Junipero* to assert the psychological continuity between this-worldly Yorkie and Kelly, among others, and their counterparts in San Junipero. Again, by consciousness we mean the self-awareness of one's own narrative of experiences (Stone 826), and thus we look at the relationship between memory and consciousness (Tulving 1) as a means of establishing psychological continuity. For instance, seeing a car crashing in *Top Speed* makes Yorkie start, as she remembers the car accident she was involved in; a young man approaching Kelly at the bar counter tells her that "both of [his] kneecaps had kind of just worn down", as he remembers having undergone surgery; and Kelly is well aware of the fact that she has been married, and having had a daughter. Moreover, we have no reason to suspect that their memories are merely partial, as was the case of the android in *Be Right Back*.

Even though we can readily agree upon the presence of a psychological relationship between people and their counterparts in San Junipero, however, this is not enough to prove that the one in the simulation is actually the real person. Indeed, the situation portrayed in *San Junipero* lends itself to (at least) one simple objection: provided that both Yorkie and Kelly access the town as 'visitors', this implies that they do it while still alive; at a certain point, then, there will be *two* of them: the one who 'sleeps' while her brain is connected to the simulation, and the one inside the simulation. Since identity is a univocal relationship, it is clear that one would of course be a copy, or a replica, while the other would be the 'real' person, but who is whom? Olson calls this concern "the duplication problem" ("The Central Dogma of Transhumanism" 42), and, according to him, it would be inconsistent not only with the fact that there would be an original and a replica whose difference would be impossible to establish, but also with the solution proposed by transhumanism, which claims that oneself, and not merely a replica, could exist in a computer ("The Central Dogma of Transhumanism" 42).

One might be tempted, though, to assert that obviously the 'real' Yorkie and Kelly are the ones 'sleeping', that is the person within their body. After all, the Yorkie and Kelly made of

flesh are not just psychologically, but also biologically continuous with their identity, while their counterparts in San Junipero are not. This, however, is not possible, given that the transhumanist position maintains that in the possibility of uploading only psychological continuity is relevant, but not biological continuity.

In the light of these considerations, then, it would seem that the entire transhumanist project of uploading one's consciousness, and thus one's person, in a computer is based on false premises, derived from the assumption that replicating one's consciousness would be sufficient to recreate one's identity (not to mention the materialistic belief that copying the brain structure would entail recreating consciousness). Even by admitting the possibility of scanning one's brain and uploading it, the result would be a mere digital copy of the reference subject. The heavenly San Junipero, therefore, does not host Yorkie's and Kelly's real consciousness but a simulacrum of the lived experience not much different from the android of *Be Right Back*. Also in this case, thus, the choice of the two elderly women of 'passing over' to San Junipero is motivated by survival and especially by love: the desire that a part of them, even if just a replica, could continue to live out of love for the other.

San Junipero, then, portrays a vision of the afterlife which is not based on some theology, but rather built on the belief that technological progress can represent a possibility to overcome human's biological finitude, albeit far from the transhumanist promise of uploading one's consciousness into a computer. In doing this, the episode merges the mainly religious discourse upon the existence of an afterlife with a simulation made possible by computers and technology, and hence belonging to the domain of science. As a site that reconciles a vision of Heaven, typical, as Sargent notes, of the early mythical utopias ("Three Faces", 10) with the possibility of actually realizing it in a this-worldly space, San Junipero can be said to embody the concept of 'heterotopia'.

The notion was coined by Foucault to indicate, in opposition to utopias, which are

“fundamentally unreal spaces”,

counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. (“Of Other Things” 24)

Heterotopias are therefore spaces which produce a representation of something that is by its very nature impossible to locate, namely utopias; as such, San Junipero constitutes the materialization of an afterlife that would otherwise be located beyond the earthly level.

Particularly, San Junipero embodies many of the types of heterotopias listed by Foucault. The simulation, functioning as we have seen as a nostalgia therapy for the elderly, is therefore a form of “crisis heterotopia...reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis”: the elderly, indeed (“Of Other Things” 24). Moreover, Foucault adds that

one should perhaps add retirement homes that are, as it were, on the borderline between the heterotopia of crisis and the heterotopia of deviation since, after all, old age is a crisis, but is also a deviation since, in our society where leisure is the rule, idleness is a sort of deviation. (25)

The heavenly coastal town, then, has been created for the elderly, but, as Kelly remarks during her first encounter with Yorkie, “San Junipero is party town, no one’s judging”. It is linked, therefore, “to time in its most fleeting, transitory, precarious aspect, to time in the mode of the festival” (26). It is place where the normal flowing of time is interrupted, and individuals can escape their real-life situation by ‘visiting’ a heterotopia which is at the same time “oriented toward the eternal” (for ‘full timers’) and “absolutely temporal” (for ‘visitors’) (26).

A darker side of San Junipero emerges when it is noted that “the locals are like dead people”, an image which conjures in the mind a comparison between the town and a cemetery.

The cemetery is indeed associated with the belief of the immortality of the soul, and so is the simulation, as a space in which the simulacra of the dead can continue to live. Like the cemetery it is, thus, a space where the dead still possess a material presence.

The issue of the possibility of life after death, linked to the notions of immortality of the soul, and consciousness, is therefore explored in *San Junipero* within the concept of heterotopia, a place outside of all places where the utopian ideal can be effectively enacted. The idea of overcoming death through technological means is thus realized by juxtaposing the religious notion of heaven with the creation of a computer-driven simulation. In *San Junipero* heaven is, after all, a place on Earth.

Conclusions

Over the course of this thesis, utopian critical theory has been employed as a framework to present how technological development, which has informed 'traditional' dystopias, might constitute a valid background to explore the issue in contemporary narratives as well. In doing so, I have highlighted in my discussion the ties between the social criticism present within these narratives and carried out by social and cultural critics, such as Foucault, Bauman and Lyotard. My study of the utopian imagination leaves off at the very end of the twentieth century with David Foster Wallace's "Tri-stan: I Sold Sisse Nar to Ecko", to move to the twenty-first century with Dave Eggers' *The Circle*, Ted Chiang's "Liking What You See: A Documentary" and the TV series *Black Mirror*. Glancing at the recent history of utopian thought reveals a way of surveying contemporary society's present anxieties and possible futures. By way of conclusion, I would therefore like to reflect on whether and how the utopian imaginary contributes to contemporary political thought and constitutes a possible catalyst for social transformation.

In January 2017, the New York Times reported a surge in the sales of Orwell's *1984* after Kellyanne Conwell, an adviser of the newly elected US President Donald J. Trump, used the phrase 'alternative facts' in an interview on NBC's "Meet the Press". Soon comparisons were made with the Orwellian doublethink, the power of holding "simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them" (44). Something that closely resembles also the concepts of 'fake news' and 'post-truth', the latter elected as word of the year 2016 by the Oxford Dictionaries, and defined as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief". It is no surprise that a parallel with Orwell would arise almost naturally, as he wrote that "[t]he Party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears. It was their final, most essential command" (103). Moreover, the famous catchphrase

“Big Brother is watching you” brings to mind the nightmare of total surveillance of Oceania, a totalitarian society where nothing escapes the all-seeing eye of The Party. Apparently, however, the kind of surveillance performed today has shifted from a potentially oppressive visual scrutiny to the collection and deployment of information, much of it personal (Marks 184).

In Dave Eggers’ *The Circle*, the Foucauldian model of the Panopticon and its Deleuzian extension into dataveillance promote a cult of transparency that influences and shapes society. In contemporary society, of which *The Circle* is a not-so-different near-future transposition, the conception of surveillance devised by Foucault does no longer work, since the willful provision of information by the subjects of surveillance challenges the hierarchical power structure in favor of an idea of surveillance as mutual practice. Nevertheless, the disciplinary component of control and the power structure that belies it remain in the spontaneous practice of sharing information, as today surveillance is not experienced as coercion, but rather as empowerment. Moreover, the whole cult of (forced) transparency to the detriment of one’s privacy and the way people agree to surveillance portrayed in *The Circle* parallel the revelations made by whistleblower Edward Snowden about mass surveillance today. In the post 9/11 world, Snowden’s leaks require a reflection on how surveillance often might seem an unquestioned requirement of contemporary society. For this very reason, I do find that many critics are too quick in dismissing *The Circle* as merely a dystopia, without stopping to consider how the near-future depicted is extraordinarily similar to our present.¹¹

¹¹ One more thing on this point: FrontRow is a recently released wearable camera, meant to be worn as a necklace, that allows one to livestream hands-free. I believe that the similarity with *The Circle*’s SeeChange and Mae ‘going transparent’ is something that should give us pause.

P.S. As I am writing this thesis, Facebook’s founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg is facing US Congress to discuss the role of the company in a massive data breach (50 millions of profiles having been violated), and to clarify which actions the company will take in order to protect the privacy of its customers.

On the other hand, the Orwellian Oceania could not be more different than our world in many respects: we are not overwhelmed by a dictatorship (at least not in Western countries), we do not experience any restriction in our movements, as our society has become—as Bauman has it—liquid and globalized, thus favoring the exchange of people and goods, and instead of a communist totalitarian system we are rather victims of unrestrained consumerism. “We were keeping our eye on 1984,” Neil Postman wrote. “When the year came and the prophecy didn’t, thoughtful Americans sang softly in praise of themselves. The roots of liberal democracy had held. Wherever else the terror had happened, we, at least, had not been visited by Orwellian nightmares” (1). What Postman means, in a time where the President (Ronald Reagan) was a former entertainer and polished communicator (sounds familiar?), was that in many respects contemporary society looks a lot more like Huxley’s *Brave New World* than like *1984*. The reference to Reagan and the Entertainment is not casual, since Postman was well-aware of the impact of television in postmodern society and the ways the media shape our lives. If indeed Orwell was the one who introduced the telescreen with its double function—to be seen but mainly *to see*—, it was Huxley who conceived television as a means of control on the basis of its ability to become so lethally addictive, or, in Postman’s words, to amuse us to death.

A similar inquiry into the pervasiveness of television and its hold on the average American is the subject of much of David Foster Wallace’s work, both fiction and not. In what is by now considered a milestone essay in televisual culture, “E Unibus Pluram”, Wallace points out how television has come to define a culture where the promises of consumption and satisfaction become avenues of self-fulfillment, and how it contributes to an image-based society through massive reproduction of and exposure to mass images. In doing so, television reinforces a cultural drive towards narcissism, passivity and solipsism. Moreover, in a culture of and about watching, the natural consequence is the emergence of an ontology of appearance, a cult of ‘watchableness’ that contributes to offer an image of ideal beauty based on the “unreal

standards of beauty and fitness” (“E Unibus Pluram” 174) of actors and TV personalities. This proliferation of celebrated beauty, furthermore, not only fosters the internalization of beauty standards, but also increases self-objectification, that is the perception of one’s body compared to the ideal body (Noll & Fredrickson 624).

Wallace’s short story “Tri-Stan: I Sold Sisse Nar to Ecko” departs from these observations to expose the gap between the idealized beauty and the real, as Sisse, considered “the Ultimate Erotic Object of the contemporary industry: ideally proportioned, aesthetically flawless...rapturously passive, & most bewitching yet, in every way 2-D, dimensionally unattainable” (BI 248) perceives her reflection as “*imperfect nay flawed & inadequately Enhanced & like totally gnarly mortal*” (BI 254, emphasis in original). Through Sisse, thus, Wallace highlights how the televisual medium creates and maintains the perpetual dissatisfaction of its public, as it prompts Sisse to value her bodily appearance in function of an idealized self which embodies unattainable physical perfection.

Similarly, Ted Chiang’s piece “Liking What You See: A Documentary” is a reflection on the interpersonal consequences of the internalization of cultural ideals of attractiveness. Chiang takes his inspiration from an experiment conducted by psychologists where they left a fake college application in an airport, changing only the photo of the fictitious applicant. The results showed that people were more likely to mail in the application if the applicant was found attractive (Chiang 337). The plot device of Chiang’s story is precisely the issue of ‘lookism’, that is the discrimination of individuals based on their physical appearance, and a fictional neural technology called ‘calliagnosia’ which makes one unable to distinguish between attractive and unattractive people. Within a near-future framework that closely resembles an exacerbation of Wallace’s televisual culture of mediated beauty ideals, the concept of beauty becomes in Chiang the utopian ground to reflect on whether human relationships and an

unbiased and supposedly more equal society can be successfully constructed through a mode of blindness and mediation.

Moreover, “Liking What You See” investigates the role of beauty in the construction of the self and in interpersonal relations, by analyzing the evolution of the relationship between Tamera (the protagonist) and her ex-boyfriend Garrett once they both decide to temporarily turn off their calliagnosia. The story shows how her newly found beauty allows Tamera to establish a power relationship between her and Garrett, and how the influence of the media and the cult of appearance help establish constraints of power and shape their life.

The proliferation of concepts like ‘alternative facts’ and ‘fake news’ in what is by now recognized as the post-truth society has undermined the notion of what is real and what is not, thus causing a merger of true and fictional and a collapse of reality. The result is an ontological unease where the world is a parade of simulacra that replaces our cognition of reality, the Pascalian *divertissement* that diverts attention from the constant sense of dread caused by our anxieties. And to confront this reality means eventually coming to terms with the biological finitude of human condition, an issue that besets most human societies.

If we consider utopia as ‘civilization-only-more-so’, to quote Beauchamp, it naturally follows that it must entail a form of repression of this anxiety, to the point that Ernst Bloch refers to death as “the hardest counter-utopia” (9). Even though Bloch refers simply to the elimination of the dread associated with death (the Heideggerian *Angst*), the philosophical movement known as Transhumanism has among its core values “the belief that we are about to transcend our biological limitations by means of technology” (“What Is Transhumanism?”).

The forefather of this movement being a Jesuit priest, Teilhard de Chardin, it is no surprise that the contemporary ideology, despite the changes derived from a reading of Teilhard mediated by contemporary technological discourse, should inherit the philosophical problems of Christian eschatology. If, indeed, we could overcome our biological constraints by

uploading our mind into a computer, would that ‘person’ be us, or merely a simulation? Such a reflection is the subject of two *Black Mirror*’s episodes, “Be Right Back” and “San Junipero”, that deal with the issue of the persistence of identity after the process of mind uploading. If, indeed, a technology that would allow to scan one’s brain to simulate it into a computer is reportedly forthcoming, the matter raises several concerns regarding the philosophical implications of the practice. Both episodes seem to highlight an inner problem in the transhumanist project, namely that what would exist in the simulation would not be ‘us’, but a replica, a simulacrum of the reference subject. On the other hand, the episodes invite the viewer to reflect on related issues: while “Be Right Back” asks if it is identity what really matters, or rather survival, “San Junipero” employs the Foucauldian concept of heterotopia to display the possibility of producing a material representation of something that is by its very nature impossible to locate, namely utopias.

A possibility, even a distant one, can be a powerful thing. And so it goes with these narratives born out of the utopian imagination. From the implications of willful disclosure of information and mass surveillance, to the impact of television and its unreal standards of beauty in interpersonal relations, to the repercussions of extending life through brain uploading, we witness how a contemporary social commentary emerges out of the future utopian societies portrayed. Speculative fiction writer William Gibson once said that “the future is already here—it’s just not very evenly distributed”, meaning that it is only a matter of time until present-day technologies will develop and become widespread in tomorrow’s life. However, Gibson’s quote also implies that there exist some inequalities, or at least some problematics, associated with the promise of a better life carried out by developing technologies, and that these issues might influence a future built on them.

In the impure form that characterizes these works, where the boundaries between eutopia and dystopia are often blurred, the utopian ideal, as opposed to that driving force that many

scholars identified as the 'essence' of utopia (see Chapter 1.2), assumes instead a process-oriented dimension, thus giving rise to a relation of these imagined futures to our present.

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