

# 'Better to Create Your Own': On the Legacy and Utopianism of Iain M. Banks's Culture Series

**By Joseph S. Norman**

The Culture - Iain M. Banks's 'personal utopia' or 'secular heaven', explored and expanded in ten sprawling, epic texts published between 1987 and 2012 - is one of the most radical creations in all of literature. It is an intergalactic civilisation often viewed as completely without poverty, inequality, material scarcity, internal conflict, or imperial drive; a web of societies which offer humans (alongside AIs and aliens) total control of their own bodies and minds: as such, the Culture offers command over death itself. The Culture provides an alternate vision - necessarily incomplete but still startlingly vivid - of how humanity could (*should*) be. Yet it is a complex-, ingenious-, and flexible-enough literary creation that it can simultaneously act as a prism through which we see different facets of lived historical reality in a new light.

It has been ten years since Iain Banks's untimely death, and eleven since the publication of his final Culture book *The Hydrogen Sonata* (2012), and the scale of the impact of this series (in literature as well as in broader culture) continues to be discussed. As an academic and fan of Banks's work, I have been writing about the Culture for over ten years. Following shortly behind both a lavish reissue of the series,<sup>1</sup> and coinciding with the publication of a long-awaited book of drawings and notes from Banks's Culture sketchbooks,<sup>2</sup> I wish to offer some thoughts here on the joys and legacy of the Culture series as well as how it engages with the meaning of utopia and utopianism at present.

The Culture series grew from Banks's original intention to reclaim the space opera genre - then dominated by tales of outer space colonised by patriarchal, capitalist concerns - for the political Left. Iain Banks started to tell Culture tales as an aspiring undergraduate writer at the University of Stirling during the mid-1970s. *Use of Weapons*, the first Culture novel he wrote, was eventually published in 1990 as the third in the series, and I was privileged to view the

original manuscript in Banks's archive during 2016. This dog-eared, typewritten, ring-bound document provides a unique insight into Banks's creative process: demonstrating his early inspiration from boy's adventure stories, the novel's protagonist Zakalwe - once subject to a complex revolving cycle of different names - introduces himself as 'Engin. Shias Engin', in a clear pastiche of Ian Fleming. Subsequent drafts chart the deftness with which Banks (with crucial input from his friend Ken MacLeod, who would later emerge as an equally talented SF writer) developed the ambitious, dual narrative structure of *Use of Weapons* in its published form. The warm correspondences between Banks and his fans, politely dissecting the nuances and subtle clues woven into that story, further emphasise that novel's complexity. It was a sheer delight to read Banks and MacLeod bantering with each other in the marginalia of those drafts, teasing each other's writing and their editorial habits. The number of drafts of Banks's later novels held in the archive diminishes in inverse proportion to the extent of his ambition.

What seems perhaps even more radical than the vision of socialism in the stars outlined above is that - viewed from within a cultural imaginary fixated on the dystopian possibilities of ChatGPT and DALL-E, as weaned on decades of apocalyptic, Skynet futures - Banks's Culture is enabled by the existence of artificial intelligences (AIs) who are *fundamentally benevolent and sympathetic to the plight of human beings*. Banks's AIs (who take various forms, but mostly as 'drones' or 'Minds') use their near-limitless processing power to allow humans to live in peace and freedom. Banks was pro-AI from the outset. As a humanist, atheist, and socialist, he preferred to place his trust in techno-scientific development, rather than his faith in gods, or his capital in the market. Banks's series is built on this fundamental *optimism* about the potentials of AI development: his narratives dramatise the idea that automation might provide the answer to humanity's problems.

It seems a futile, even distasteful, pursuit to speculate on the opinions of the deceased, but I do suspect that - given his firm support for government - Banks would have agreed with Yuval Noah Harari that AI should be regulated by the State.<sup>3</sup> Until it *becomes* the State. Until *it* evolves into a *they*: into self-evidently superior entities who are far removed enough from us that they can see the bigger picture and who are powerful and kind enough to fix our problems. Importantly, Banks dares to imply that such intelligences have not 'hacked the

operating system of our civilisation', as concerns Harari,<sup>4</sup> for such beings are characterised by being radically more intelligent than humans and could have nothing to gain from exploiting, replacing, or destroying us, and nothing to lose by offering us their support.

Banks's point is that AI should be used to support society's administration and bureaucracy - tasks for which it is best suited - freeing up our time to enjoy ourselves in creative endeavours. In turn, AI would still be free to carry out its own creative interests due to the immense processing powers it is capable of. What no one wants is for AIs to take over human creativity, leaving us with only the admin remaining; clearly this is a dystopian scenario. And Banks's characters raise similar concerns. There is a moment in *Look to Windward* (2000) when Mahrai Ziller, a composer of classical music, raises the hypothetical question of an AI writing a fresh symphony that would be stylistically indistinguishable from Ziller's own works. The Mind admits that it could do so, prompting Ziller to ask: 'So [...] what is the point of me or anybody else writing a symphony, or anything else?' The Mind offers two different responses: suggesting that the act of creation would still provide a sense of personal satisfaction for the composer, and that the listeners would feel similar satisfaction knowing that a member of the same species was the creator. (Given that there is no money and no scarcity in the Culture, commercial goals are of no concern.) This does not satisfy Ziller, and he asks, 'suppose they weren't told it was by an AI'?<sup>5</sup> In response, the Mind pre-emptively offers one of Harari's most important warnings, that an AI should be legally obliged to declare itself as such,<sup>6</sup> implying its concern if such 'information is being concealed'.<sup>7</sup> But the Mind then elaborates on its defence of AI art through analogy: a group of mountain climbers 'take days, sweat buckets, endure pain and cold and risk injury' to reach the summit 'only to discover there a party of peers freshly arrived by aircraft and enjoying a light picnic.'<sup>8</sup> Its point, of course, is that

*the people who spent days and sweated buckets could also have taken an aircraft to the summit if all they wanted was to absorb the view. It is the struggle that they crave. The sense of achievement is produced by the route to and from the peak, not by the peak itself.*

Ziller grumbles at this, dryly suggesting the climbers might be inspired to take up

flying, but the Mind is firm: 'Better to create your own.'<sup>9</sup>

This makes a firm point about AI art but also underlines Banks's central message in the Culture: better to create your own 'gods' in the form of the Minds, than wait for real gods to reveal themselves. Better to create *our own* selves and *our own* societies rather than leaving it to nature, to faith in supernature, to 'progress', to fate. In the words of Rutger Bregman: 'it is not technology itself that determines the course of history. In the end, it is we humans who decide how we want to shape our destiny.'<sup>10</sup>

We too worry that AI will replace us. Defensive humour also characterises our response at the eerie end-products these systems produce at the current stage. In online forums Banks fans experiment with the uncanny irony of asking AIs to write new Culture books, about their views on their fictional counterparts, and about which of Banks's famously idiosyncratic ship names is their favourite. The answers are indeed often worryingly human, amusingly strange, or unsatisfyingly oblique. This is often also the case with the Minds in Banks's writing, who also produce uncanny forms of AI art: Hassipura in *The Hydrogen Sonata* is a beautiful 'network of sand-canal, sandfalls, sand weirs, pools, lakes and whirlpools'<sup>11</sup> artificially created by a drone who spends its years obsessively forming and polishing each individual grain of 'sand' to create the desired effect. *The Hydrogen Sonata* provides another example of non-human art, The Sound, all that remains of a long-departed alien civilisation: a colossal musical instrument created by carving out a system of ancient caverns so that the wind comes 'thundering through and across those colossal pipes, creating a noise like an orchestra of hundreds of gigantic organs'.<sup>12</sup>

It seems that, while we worry that AI art threatens human creativity and livelihood through perfect imitation, Banks suggests that non-human beings would eventually produce art so radically new that it might once again be readily distinguished from that of humans. The above examples are just some of the many instances where Banks depicts strange and wonderful fictional artworks within his own. But, overall, art does seem less popular within Banks's utopia itself: many artworks are created by people connected to the Culture, yet I find it fascinating that most of these individuals are in some way uncooperative or dissatisfied with utopia, even in open rebellion against it (such as Ziller). There

seems to be only a single work of art depicted in Banks's series created by a contented citizen of the Culture: the poem 'Slight Mechanical Destruction', which forms an Epigraph to *Use of Weapons* and is attributed to a recurring character within the series, Diziet Sma. Written by Banks in March 1978, the poem is one of his earliest works out of which the rest of the series developed. This perhaps suggests that there can be little motivation to create art in a society without conflict, or that Banks's hedonistic utopians have transferred their creative energies into other aspects of life.

But it also reflects another core aspect of any utopian vision: the notion that science fiction's alternate and futuristic worlds can only go so far in that depiction, what Fredric Jameson calls 'the structural impossibility of utopian representation'.<sup>13</sup> Like all SF, Banks's writing draws all sorts of aspects of the historical present into its SF imaginary, meaning that these texts produce a refracted image of our lived reality, and that Banks - despite the undeniable force of his talent - necessarily falls short of imagining the full detail of his utopian aspirations. Reading of the Culture, we dare to imagine a harmonious humanity at the same time as we are reminded of the conflicts through which Banks lived and wrote. Robert Duggan reads *Look to Windward* (2000) as reflecting 'the cultural aftermath of the first Gulf War',<sup>14</sup> for example, and recognises 'the politics of the West Bank in Banks's *Matter* (2008).'<sup>15</sup>

And this process whereby any utopia must reflect its context necessitates the possibility of various counter-readings of the Culture: for example, Sherryl Vint<sup>16</sup> and Patricia Kerslake<sup>17</sup> read it as it as a kind of hegemonic imperial force, while Jude Roberts<sup>18</sup> asserts that the Culture is not as post-colonial as it believes because Banks, as a Scottish author, does not write from a post-colonial position. Certainly, to read the series is to read echoes of the dystopian present alongside those of a utopian possibility.

Like all good literature, Banks's writings continue to appeal to new readers because they continue to resonate with the concerns of subsequent generations. Duggan recognises the prescience of Banks's Culture debut *Consider Phlebas*, published in 1986, which he reads as 'looking ahead to terrorism in the post 9/11 world'.<sup>19</sup> Banks's *Look to Windward* was published in July 2000 and clearly can

also only look ahead to the tragedy of the following year; yet, through a narrative focused on a potential terrorist attack on an especially grand performance of one of Ziller's symphonies, this Culture book clearly also speaks to the developing political context into which it emerged.

The rapid development of AI is only one way in which the world has changed dramatically since Iain Banks passed away in 2013. Banks would not live to see Donald Trump become President, would not see COVID-19 reshape the world, or Putin bring war to Ukraine. But, through its vast metaphorical potential, the Culture series can still offer fictional analogues for many of the historical contexts that followed. While Banks would not see the debacle of the UK's EU 'Brexit' Referendum play out, *The Hydrogen Sonata* is concerned with a vote taken by the Gzilt civilisation, to decide whether they leave our known reality behind and transition to a new dimension - an action known as Subliming - or continue as they are; that the Subliming Vote is revealed to have been promoted according to false information seems especially topical. The antagonist Veppers from *Surface Detail* is a caricature of an immoral CEO, whom readers at the time of publication in 2010 were more likely to connect with the politics of the Republican Tea Party than they were with Trump, who had not yet set his sights upon the White House; yet it is difficult not to re-read that book now without being reminded of Trump's boastful swagger and misogyny in Veppers. Most notably, Banks would not live to see Elon Musk declare the ultimate goal of his SpaceX company as 'interplanetary colonization',<sup>20</sup> allegedly drawing direct inspiration from the Culture books.<sup>21</sup> We can only imagine how Banks would have responded to the multi-layered irony of the world's richest person, the latter vigorously opposed to AI development, colonising and privatising outer space in the name of a socialist, anti-imperialist utopia, enabled by benevolent AIs. But the Culture lives on in its readers' minds, beyond the dubious goals of ambitious billionaires.

Positive utopias are notoriously difficult to imagine, even during times of relative peace. It is especially difficult to envisage future peace in a world marred by division, destruction and conflict. Yet to give up on utopianism is to give up on hope. I sometimes channel Banks's initial vision of the Culture into the language of a prompt that I set my creative writing students: the challenge of imagining their personal utopia or secular heaven. How can you have story without conflict? How to make it convincing? How to avoid sheer decadence? Can conflict support peace? Such a task cuts to the heart of the oldest human questions: What makes a

good life? What is happiness? And - while I am constantly amazed by the range of imaginative responses my students produce - they often struggle to maintain a radically harmonious vision that does not slip into a more dystopian scenario eventually. Iain Banks is one of the few writers to achieve this.

The Culture refuses to represent itself through symbols: it desires to separate itself from nations and corporations by adopting no anthems, no flags, no emblems in its name. Through this attempt to circumvent ideology, the Culture would be known and judged only by the actions of its people: *by its culture*. Occasionally, however, Banks did provide symbolic representations of his utopia. My favourite takes the form of an artistic medium that Banks treasured: music. Here Djan Anaplain, a woman who aspires to utopianism, listens to a piece in which she hears 'the influence of the Culture signalled by a chord sequence constructed from mathematically pure whole-tone scales reaching forever down and up'.<sup>22</sup> Through this science-fictional version of a modernist serial composition wherein each musical interval is equal, Banks provides the perfect metaphor for the egalitarian social arrangement of his utopia.

I would choose to live in the Culture, which I am convinced is the case for most who read of it; and - as Ken MacLeod observes<sup>23</sup> - it is one of the very few, if not the only, utopia for which this is the case. Which seems slightly odd given that the ideas on which the Culture is based are - by acknowledgement of their author - highly personal. But Banks had much more than just big ideas. As Bregman argues, 'Everyone who reckons themselves progressive should be a beacon of not just energy but ideas, not only indignation but hope, and equal parts ethics and hard sell.'<sup>24</sup> Banks's ideas are not just progressive but truly radical, and his fiction overflows with the virtues outlined above. If 'the most vital ingredient for political change' is the 'conviction that there truly is a better way',<sup>25</sup> then I can think of few authors with as much dedication to the promise of utopia as Iain Banks. His Culture series expresses the truth in the mantra: 'Better to create your own', and as such it is Banks's most significant contribution to literature. The Culture - Iain M. Banks's 'personal utopia' or 'secular heaven', explored and expanded in ten sprawling, epic texts published between 1987 and 2012 - is one of the most radical creations in all of literature. It is an intergalactic civilisation often viewed as completely without poverty, inequality, material scarcity, internal conflict, or imperial drive; a web of societies which offer humans (alongside AIs and aliens)

total control of their own bodies and minds: as such, the Culture offers command over death itself. The Culture provides an alternate vision – necessarily incomplete but still startingly vivid – of how humanity could (*should*) be. Yet it is a complex-, ingenious-, and flexible-enough literary creation that it can simultaneously act as a prism through which we see different facets of lived historical reality in a new light.

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*(c) The Bottle Imp*