**Iain M. Banks’ *Excession* and *Surface Detail*:   
 Science Fiction, Utopia, and Gender**

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 **Introduction**  
 Briefly, nothing and nobody in the Culture is exploited. It is essentially an automated civilisation in its manufacturing processes, with human labour restricted to something indistinguishable from play, or a hobby.  
 – Iain M. Banks, “A Few Notes”.  
   
 What he would not have believed was that you could find an entire society – an entire *civilization* – of losers who’d made it. And the Culture was exactly that. Veppers hated the Culture. He hated it for existing and he hated it for – for far too damned many credulous idiots – setting the standard for what a decent society ought to look like and so what other peoples ought to aspire to.   
 - *Surface Detail*  
Although Iain M. Banks’ Culture novels have been acknowledged as utopian works, and have been validated for their contribution to the genre of space opera (Levy, 79), little extensive research has been done on how the novels contribute to the expression of contemporary issues within the body of science fiction utopias. Additionally, while science fiction was considered predominantly male-oriented regarding both content and contributors prior to the 1960s, the past four decades have seen an influx of feminist writers (Levy, 65) who use science fiction utopias as vehicle for the expression of feminist thought (Fitting, 144). This paper will analyze whether *Excession* and *Surface Detail*, two of Banks’ Culture novels,[[1]](#footnote-1) can be considered within the body of feminist science fiction utopias.   
 *Excession* and *Surface* *Detail* revolve around a highly developed intergalactic, post-scarcity society called the Culture, which was established as an unconstrained alliance between a number of humanoid species roughly nine thousand years ago. According to Banks, “there is another force at work in the Culture [besides its human inhabitants], and that is Artificial Intelligence” (“A Few Notes”). Within the Culture all conscious beings, whether biological, artificial, recognizably human-shaped or disembodied, are regarded as equals. The most important forms of artificial intelligence are Drones, which are AIs housed in artificial, laptop-shaped casings that allow them to move freely, and Minds: “the very high-level AIs which were, by some distance, the most complicated and intelligent entities […] in the whole galaxy wide meta-civilisation. (*Surface Detail,* 541).   
 To determine whether the novels can be considered feminist science fiction utopias the conclusion is preceded by three chapters: “Finding Paradise in Space” provides a theoretical background regarding the development and the characteristics of contemporary science fiction utopias; “Feminist Futures” considers the influence of second and third wave feminism on the notion of gender in science fiction utopias; “Transcending the Traditional Human Subject” focusses on the influence of science and technology on the development of feminist thought from the 1980s onward. Each chapter concludes with a close reading analysis of the novels to establish how they contribute to the topic of the relevant chapter. Subsequently, the findings are summarized and connected in the conclusion to validate whether *Excession* and *Surface Detail* can be considered within the body of feminist science fiction utopias.

**Finding Paradise in Space:  
 Emergence of Contemporary Science Fiction Utopias**

“Like all walls it was ambiguous, two-faced. What was inside it and what was outside it depended upon which side of it you were on” (Le Guin, 5). This excerpt from Ursula Le Guin’s science fiction novel *The Dispossessed* illustrates the difficulty of the debate that exists between science fiction critics as Darko Suvin who consider utopia to be “not a genre but the sociopolitical subgenre of science fiction” (61), and scholars of utopian studies who claim that “science fiction is subordinate to utopia” (Vieira, 8). The relevance of the previous debate, for this chapter, is what gave rise to this dispute: the close relationship between utopia and science fiction.   
 Due to their nature, there has always been a close relationship between utopian literature and science fiction. Prior to the establishment of science fiction as a genre, the genre most hospitable to “speculative fictions about new discoveries and technologies that the application of scientific method might bring about” (Stableford, 15) was utopian fantasy, “whose usual narrative form was the imaginary voyage” (15). Additionally, when the traditional utopian framework becomes outdated in the late nineteenth century, “there is a growing tendency for writers of utopian literature to turn to narrative devices characteristic of science fiction” (Ferns, 55). Hence, the uchronia is born; “alternative societies could now be set in the future” (Fitting, 138) rather than being located at a geographically remote or undiscovered place on earth. Moreover, Chris Ferns argues that the convergence between utopia and science fiction increases over time; from the 1970s onward, most works of significant importance to utopian literature “utilize science fiction as the most appropriate vehicle for the exploration of utopian possibilities” (56). Peter Fitting indicates the second half of the twentieth century as important for the forging of a closer relationship between utopia and science fiction as well (135). Consequently, the overlap between the two genres can be considered to go both ways, and further increases after science fiction has been established as a genre. Therefore, in order to adequately examine the causes and characteristics of this intensifying relationship, it is important to first look at the formation of science fiction as a genre.  
 **Science Fiction: The Early Beginnings**  
 Whereas utopian literature is an older genre, with a clear beginning when Thomas More’s *Utopia* was first published in 1516,[[2]](#footnote-2) science fiction is a relatively new genre. The rise of pulp fiction magazines in the early twentieth century helped pave the way for the genre to come. Literary critic Brian Attebery states that early versions of these periodicals offered mainly escapist-adventure fantasy, and contained “a fair number of stories that can be considered sf” (33). Subsequently, in 1926 *Amazing Stories* was founded by Hugo Gernsback, and became the first magazine solely dedicated to what he called scientifiction: “stories of scientific extrapolation and outer-space adventure” (33). When Gernsback substituted this term for science fiction in 1929, and this caught on in other magazines, the genre was officially born.   
 Although it can be said that science fiction magazines *Amazing Stories*, *Wonder Stories,* and *Astounding* “were chiefly responsible for creating a sense of sf as a distinctive genre” (Attebery, 32), stories offered in the pulp magazines differed substantially from the science fiction that was to come after the magazine era. This was mainly due to the format employed by most early science fiction stories, which favored “the celebration of scientific know-how” (Latham, 117) over style, plot and character conventions (Attebery, 35). During the 40s and 50s, however, changes took place when a number of writers, such as Isaac Asimov and Robert Heinlein, started to incorporate into their work fundamental questions regarding social dynamics, and experiment with different techniques regarding style and narration (39-40). This then led to a more sophisticated form of fiction, which, as literary critic Paul Carter states, was “both literate and socially critical…It had developed a richness and subtlety of characterization all but unknown [in science fiction prior to the second World War]” (56).  
 **Changing Perspectives:  
 Developments in Science Fiction and Utopia** Accordingly, by the end of the 1950s science fiction has become more than just its pulp component; it begins to be taken seriously as a literary genre by scholars and critics from both in- and outside the field. The rise of a new generation of writers who start questioning traditional genre conventions inspired by social upheavals in the 60s (Latham, 117) contributes to the image of science fiction as a more mature and serious genre. Writers criticize society by challenging the white, heterosexual, male subject who has long dominated literary traditions. Encouraged by the Civil Rights Movement, second-wave feminism, anti-war tendencies, gay movements, and counterculture (Fitting, 142), they “[explore] alternative gender and sexual arrangements – not to mention forms of chemical self-enhancement” (Latham, 117).   
 Additionally, similar tendencies are visible in utopian literature, where the previously mentioned social upheavals, and especially second-wave feminism [[3]](#footnote-3)(James, 225), in the 70s give rise to the emergence of what Edward James calls the critical utopia. He argues that writers of these critical utopias are particularly aware of the flaws of both their own contemporary society and those of the possible utopian alternatives (225). Their main issue with traditional utopias is the static blueprint it offers: it depicts an established society, yet leaves the question of what happens when utopia has been achieved unanswered (224). Hence, writers of critical utopias attempt to create dynamic, developing utopian societies that offer possibilities “of how things might be otherwise” (Ferns, 56). To achieve this goal they frequently turn to science fiction, since “science fiction’s capacity to picture *other* worlds (while indirectly showing our own) [holds] the possibility for being able to imagine *better* worlds” (144). Furthermore, this makes science fiction utopias particularly suitable for the expression of feminist thought, as both feminism and the genres take apart traditional assumptions of right/wrong and possible/impossible. Ursula Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* is an example of a feminist science fiction utopia that displays the previously mentioned characteristics; “Le Guin shows many of the failings of today’s world while pointing to some of the difficulties of the utopian project itself” (Fitting, 145).  
 From the 80s onward additional transformations take place within utopian literature and science fiction that further the close relationship between the genres; rapid technological developments give rise to debates regarding artificial intelligence, cyborgs and what it means to be human[[4]](#footnote-4), and open up a world of information on a scale never thought possible before (Clute, 67). These scientific developments boost feminist thought on how advancements in science and technology could affect women’s lives (Hollinger, 125), which leads to “works which critiqued or explored gender through dystopian visions, role reversals and worlds which split men and women into separate societies” (Merrick, 249).   
 **Satire, Irony, and Utopia in Motion**  
 As previously mentioned, recent science fiction utopias are critical of the process of establishing and maintaining a utopian society, and try to involve the reader in the debate. According to Fatima Vieira “the awareness of the existing flaws in imagined societies [has] a positive intent, though: [it aims to make] the readers keep looking for alternatives” (18). Furthermore, irony and satire are often used to express elements of critique (Vieira, 8), and can be targeted both at the author’s contemporary society and at its utopian counterpart. Yet, Vieira indicates that the nature of the depicted utopia tends to change from positive to dystopian or anti-utopian when most of the satire is targeted at the utopian society instead of the real, contemporary society (15). She mentions Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* as a story where the satire seems to be aimed at the imaginary society: “the result is that, in the end, it is the real world which is valued, and thus the positive dynamic which is typical of [the traditional] utopia is lost” (16).  
 Additionally, Utopia is about bending the imagination, making imaginary leaps to un-existing, yet maybe someday possible societies that differ completely from the author’s contemporary society. As Chris Ferns states, “utopian literature provides alternative scenarios that create an effect of estrangement, [defamiliarize] existing reality, and [make] the reader aware of its provisional quality, its potential to be radically changed” (56). Estrangement can be achieved through irony, or through imagining societies so opposite to the existing society that its effect becomes that of estrangement.  
 **A Space Paradise:   
 Utopian Characteristics in *Surface Detail* and *Excession***The results of the previous theoretical analysis serve as a framework that will now be applied to the novels *Surface Detail* and *Excession,* to examine how they can be considered a part of the body of science fiction utopias.   
 The revival of *Surface Detail* protagonist Lededje, former native of a society far less sophisticated than the Culture, within a Culture spaceship, and her subsequent discoveries of how this society works, are comparable to the traditional utopian explorer who suddenly finds herself in a utopian society. Lededje’s arrival can be considered particularly defamiliarizing, since she is killed in the first chapter and wakes up in a different body than the one she died in.  
 She opened her eyes. She had the vague impression of a wide bed, pale sheets and a large, high-ceilinged room with tall open windows from which gauzy, softly billowing white curtains waved out… She stared at herself. First of all, she was entirely the wrong color…[s]he took in the view of a beautiful but entirely un-bodymarked pale-skinned young woman…It looked something like her, she supposed, in bone structure and general bodily proportions, but that was being generous. (59-60)  
Considering this is impossible in the author’s real contemporary society, it can create feelings of defamiliarization and estrangement in readers, which is both a utopian characteristic (Ferns, 56) and a feature of science fiction (Suvin, 7-8). Furthermore, Sensia, avatar of the ship on which Lededje has been revived, introduces Lededje to the Culture in a way similar to the guided tours characteristic of traditional utopias. After Lededje wakes up, Sensia explains the workings of the Culture and answers all Lededje’s questions. However, in contrast to traditional tours of utopia, this one takes place in intervals: explanations are simultaneously interrupted by and conveyed through action or drama scenes. Hence, the tour of the utopian society is neatly woven into the space opera framework of the story, thus preventing info-dumps (James, 222) characteristic of traditional utopias and early pulp science fiction.  
 Moreover, Banks frequently uses irony to express criticism. In *Surface Detail*, the Sichultia are a humanoid civilization that practice a certain form of slavery, called indented intagliation. Whenever two parties have a commercial dispute that cannot be settled in a monetary manner, the losing side can sign over two generations of their offspring to the ownership of the party they are indebted to: “[Intagliates are] trophies, they [are] the surrendered banners of defeated enemies” (71). Due to this practice, they find themselves criticized by the Culture.   
 Like many societies finding their hitherto unquestioned customs and ethical assumptions impacting squarely with the breathtakingly sophisticated summed morality of a meta-civilisation inestimably older, vaster and by implication wiser than themselves, the Sichultia became highly protective of their developmental foibles, and refused to mandate away what some of them at least claimed to regard as one of their defining social characteristics and a vital and vibrant part of their culture. (72)  
The Sichultia are placed as the binary opposites of the utopian society the Culture. Since a utopian society generally portrays the opposite of the author’s real society, the Sichultia can be considered to reflect Banks’ contemporary world. Hence, the irony is used here to criticize contemporary society, which is characteristic of science fiction utopias.  
 Additionally, literary critic William Hardesty states that the novels “[contribute] to an ongoing commentary on the nature of utopia” (116), another characteristic of science fiction utopias written from the 70s onward. In *Excession*, Banks questions the prevalent happiness of utopian citizens, that, according to Fitting, “traditional utopias take for granted” (145). Protagonist Byr Genar-Hofoen is a diplomat for the Culture in the barbaric yet technologically developed society of the Affront. His acceptance and subsequent successful performance of the task, and his general approval of Affront customs, make him the odd one out within the Culture.   
 The Affront appalled the Culture; they appeared so unamendable, their attitude and their abominable morality seemed so secured against remedy…Still, Genar-Hofoen liked them, and had come even to admire them for their vivacity and enthusiasm; he had never really subscribed to the standard Culture belief that any form of suffering was intrinsically bad… (165-170)  
Gestra Ishmethit fails to meet the utopian citizen standard as well.  
 [G]estra felt he had been an outsider all his life…[he] was a freak…[he was] the sort of person the Culture’s carefully meddled-with genes virtually never threw up; a genuine misfit, something even rarer in the Culture than a baby born physically deformed. (146-7)  
Although this can be seen as a critique of the utopian society, both characters are being accommodated for within the Culture. Genar-Hofoen is offered the position of Culture ambassador on Affront territory, and Gestra is offered a solitary existence aboard a Culture ship-storage facility, where they both are the only humans around. Hence, while there might be misfits, the Culture will create possibilities for those misfits to fit in; the positive management of an initially negative situation is indicative of the utopian quality of the society in question. Furthermore, the Culture’s encounter with war demonstrates how a utopian society can deal with conflict. In *Surface Detail* the Culture is involved in a war between pro- and anti-hell civilizations. To minimize loss and damage both sides have agreed to fight the war within a computer simulation: “The vast majority of protagonists on both sides agreed they would fight within a controlled Virtuality overseen by impartial arbiters and the winner would accept the result” (134). Although war is not a concept initially associated with a utopian society, the encounter indicates a society in motion; utopia is not static, and is thus likely to come across and have to deal with less ideal situations. The solution of a virtual war is both utopian and science fictional; technology enables large scale disputes to be settled in computer simulations, thus limiting the loss of life and additional damage.  
 The previous analysis demonstrates that the novels convey feelings of defamiliarization and estrangement, express criticism towards contemporary society, and engage in the debate on the nature of utopia; *Excession* and *Surface Detail* can be considered science fiction utopias.

**Feminist Futures:   
 Gender in Science Fiction and Utopian Narratives**  
  
“She asked the man she had once been…I am who I ever was. What I called masculinity, what I celebrated in it was just an excuse for *me*-ness, wasn’t it?” (*Excession,* 348). The previous fragment displays an important issue for which feminists have sought and still seek to raise awareness: the construct of gender and gender roles. Literary scholar Jane Donawerth argues that the characteristic of defamiliarization, which is a typical feature of science fiction and utopia, constitutes the genres as a suitable stage for experimentation with the notion of gender, since “gender roles can be more easily revised when the reader is estranged from her ordinary world” (1-2). Additionally, scientific developments influence feminist writings regarding the notion of body and gender. This chapter will consider second and third wave feminism and its influence on the notion of gender in utopia and science fiction.  
 **Emergence of Second Wave Feminism**  
 Although science fiction critic Michael Levy states that a fair amount of female science fiction authors contributed to the genre during the magazine era (65), science fiction was very male-oriented prior to 60s and featured virtually no important female protagonists (Carter, 50); women were confined to the “supporting roles as the ‘others’ of men” (Hollinger, 125). Additionally, while science fiction and utopian writings by women “constitute a continuous literary tradition in the West from the seventeenth century [onward]” (1), which Jane Donawerth and Carol Kolmerten demonstrate in *Utopian and Science Fiction by Women: Worlds of Difference*, Brian Attebery argues that “aside from some early experiments with feminist utopias, such as Charlotte Perkins Gillman’s *Herland*”, gender remained a fairly under-discussed topic (“Teaching Gender”, 146) in both genres. However, under the influence of second wave feminism and gay and lesbian movements (Hollinger, 128) changes began to take place within both genres from the late 60s onward. Alessa Johns holds that the absence of full gender equality in contemporary society required feminists to imagine worlds that have achieved total equality “if [gender] is to become a subject of conscious thought and discussion” (175). Thus, feminist writers had to turn to genres hospitable to utopian imagination for the expression of feminist critique; the possibilities of utopia and science fiction to imagine alternative worlds and to defamiliarize the familiar (175) made them suitable vehicles for the conveyance of feminist thought.   
 **Challenging Gender Conventions**  
 Accordingly, the 70s and 80s witnessed an increase of utopian science fiction narratives, which according to Helen Merrick “consistently challenge and disrupt the perceived ‘naturalness’ of gender…[In the resulting fictive societies] gender is seen (in most cases) to be ‘socially produced’, thus challenging taken-for-granted structures which reinforce gender binarisms” (247-8). These works confront gender conventions by various experimentations with the notion of gender roles. For instance, through the depiction of female-only societies women are established as human (248) instead of Other. In James Tiptree Jr.’s “Houston, Houston, Do You Read?” the absence of men gives women unrestricted access to the entire field of human behavior (248). Without men, women are no longer forced to what Adrienne Rich calls compulsory heterosexuality: “[the] means of assuring male right of physical, economic, and emotional access [of women]” (135). Hence, women can be established as human beings, thus allowing for the deconstruction of traditional gender roles. Furthermore, works such as Ursula Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* and S. R. Delany’s *Triton* defamiliarize traditional notions of sexuality and gender roles. Le Guin’s novel depicts a fictional society where citizens are gender-less and only develop sexual characteristics once a month to enable procreation (Fitting, 143). Since a person’s biological sex is not pre-determined, people can switch between male and female every month; it is possible for a citizen to both bear a child and conceive one. Additionally, the absence of gender prevents assignment of the traditional mother-role to females, and instead constitutes parenting as a group effort. Johns indicates this as a characteristic of feminist utopias: “there is a strong overall tendency to revise the ‘family’ into an egalitarian unit, not based on sex or blood ties alone” (185). According to Merrick, the society depicted in Delany’s novel recognizes over forty different sexes, and equally allows and respects same-sex, heterosexual, and celibate relationships. Merrick argues that in such writings “the socially mediated relation between sex and gender is dissolved into multiplicity and meaninglessness, as ‘sex’ becomes a referent, rather than a determinant of sexuality” (249). Although first wave feminism had considered the previous concepts as well, resulting into works such as Gilman’s *Herland* and Rokheya Shekhawat Hossein’s “Sultana’s Dream”, first wave explorations were less radical than those of the second wave. The idea of forty different sexes or the concept of changing sex to both bear and conceive children were unheard of prior to the 60s. Hence, second wave feminism did not negate first wave explorations, yet took it to the next level.  
 Moreover, from the 1980s onward questions regarding embodiment arise due to advancements in science and technology. Post-human and cyber theorists explore the possible ramifications of the thinning line between both biological and artificial body and intelligence[[5]](#footnote-5), since scientific developments “call into question the very notion of the human being and thus require a radical restructuring of the basis for moral judgment” (Merrick, 340). Accordingly, feminist science fiction utopias explore in various ways how scientific advancements could positively affect women’s lives (Hollinger, 125). For instance, Merrick indicates Sheri S. Tepper’s *Gate to Women’s Country* as a work where science has granted women control over their own bodies, especially concerning the aspect of procreation: “artificial insemination is controlled by women, and rather than ‘farming’ ova, men are ‘milked’ for their sperm” (249). Hence, the roles are reversed. Women gain independence, as science has made available to them aspects that have traditionally been assigned to men.   
 **Feminist Hybridity: The Third Wave**  
 Furthermore, during the last two decades young feminist writers have added contemporary considerations such as racial politics to the sphere of feminist gender critique (Merrick, 251). In the introduction of *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism*, Jennifer Drake and Leslie Heywood argue that the incorporation of intersecting issues leads to a more hybrid form of feminism (7), which is defined by issues as “girls who want to be boys, boys who want to be girls, boys and girls who insist they are both, whites who want to be black, blacks who want to or refuse to be white, people who *are* white *and* black, gay *and* straight, masculine *and* feminine, or who find ways to be and name none of the above” (8). Although these issues are seemingly contrasting, Drake and Heywood point at the unifying abilities this politics of hybridity offers as it accounts “for our lives at the century’s turn” (13); it demonstrates the relation and interdependence between and of all types of sexual orientation and all types of humans (13). According to Merrick this leads to science fiction utopias which challenge gender through the depiction of “characters who are not [clearly] identified as either male or female” (251). For instance, the gender of Jeanette Winterson’s protagonist Billy in *The Stone Gods* and Emma Bull’s protagonist Sparrow in *Bone Dance* is indeterminate; in both works characters sometimes perceive the protagonists as female, and sometimes as male. In Hollinger’s words: “s/he is a figure who escapes labels, who unsettles expectations, who suggests new ways to conceive of the subject” (131).  
   
  
  
 **Disrupting Gender:   
 Feminist Critique in *Excession* and *Surface Detail*** The analysis performed in chapter one established that both *Excession* and *Surface Detail* can be considered science fiction utopias. Additionally, the novels will now be analyzed for the depiction of the previously mentioned characteristics of feminist critique on traditional notions of gender, to determine whether or not they can be considered feminist utopian science fiction works.  
 The portrayal of the Sichultian sub-race the Intagliate, in *Surface Detail*, is in accordance with third wave feminist critique. The role of the Intagliate is comparable both to the traditional portrayal of women, and to the traditional portrayal of racial minorities; they derive their meaning from being Other.  
 For the truth was that the Intagliate were more than just human exotica. They were both more, and less, than extravagant ornamentations in the household and retinue of the rich and powerful, to be displayed like walking, living jewellery at important social events and within the halls of financial, social and political power – though they were most certainly that. (70)   
Within Sichultian society, the Intagliate do not have access to the entire range of human behavior, and therefore can only be established as Other. By transferring Intagliate Lededje into the Culture, the absence of Sichultians gives her access to this range of behavior, thus allowing her to establish herself as a human being instead of Other. This enhances the utopian characteristic of the Culture, and conveys criticism of traditional racial conventions.  
 Moreover, while sex-changes are still fairly controversial and nearly irreversible in contemporary society, in the Culture sex-changes are common, reversible, and accepted, which is elaborately illustrated in *Excession*.  
 It took anything up to a year to alter yourself from a female to a male, or vice- versa. The process was painless and set in action simply by thinking about it; you went into [a] sort of trance-like state…If you looked in the right place in your mind, there was an image of yourself as you were now. A little thought would make the image change from your present gender to the opposite sex. …Within a year a woman who had been capable of carrying a child – who, indeed, might have been a mother – would be a man fully capable of fathering a child. (321)  
Generally, Culture citizens change sex at least once during their approximately 400 year life. However, “some people [cycle] back and forth between male and female all their lives, while some [settle] for an androgynous in-between state, finding there a comfortable equanimity” (321). Thus, by both defamiliarizing and exploring the boundaries of the notion of gender, traditional gender conventions are being challenged. Furthermore, since Culture citizens usually only bear one child during their life, and since long-term monogamy is not considered a norm, it is commonplace for Culture adults to raise a child either together with people who have a children in a similar age division, or to raise them in a household which consists of more than two adults and/or AIs, as to guarantee their socialization.  
 The average Culture child was close to its mother and almost certainly knew who its father was (assuming it was not in effect a clone of its mother, or had in place of a father’s genes surrogated material which the mother had effectively manufactured), but it would probably be closer to the aunts and uncles who lived in the same extended familial grouping; usually in the same house, extended apartment or estate. (321-2)  
Hence, Culture women are in control of their own bodies when it comes to procreation, and parenting becomes a group effort and is not necessarily assigned to female members of society, which are characteristics of feminist utopias.   
 The Culture’s view on gender is contrasted to that of the Affront, their binary opposites in *Excession,* which reinforces the utopian quality of the Culture and the critique on gender conventions.  
 [The Affront] had discovered at a relatively early point in their development how to change the genetic make-up of […] their own inheritance – which almost by definition needed little further amendment, given their manifest superiority…Affronter society rested on a huge base of ruthlessly exploited juvenile geldings and a sub-class of oppressed females…It was generally regarded as significant – within the Culture if nowhere else – that one of the few aspects of their own genetic inheritance with which the Affront had deemed it desirable to meddle had been in the matter of making the act of sex a somewhat less pleasurable and considerably more painful act for their females…[T]he Culture’s attempts to persuade the Affront that there were other ways to control fertility and familial inheritance besides those which relied on the virtual imprisonment, genetic mutilation and organized violation of their females [were met with dismissals]. (168-9)  
The ironic remark regarding the Affront’s superiority-complex serves to ridicule and render obsolete their notions and treatment of the gendered subject. Similar to the traditional portrayal of minorities, Affront females and geldings are established as Other; their definition is based on being non-male. The complex and diverse notion of gender depicted in the Culture deconstructs traditional gender conventions, since it allows subjects to be established based on the characteristics they possess, instead of those assigned to them based on traditional practices. The introductory quote of this chapter contributes to this assumption, as it reinforces the idea that traits and values are characteristic of people, not of gender. Byr Genar-Hofoen, protagonist in *Excession*, is a male Culture citizen intend on staying male his entire life, who revels in promiscuous behavior, and whose main goal is to “to bed as many women as possible” (323). However, he then falls in love with female character Dajeil, who continues to reject him as long as he continues his “infantile obsession with penetration and possession” (324), which he considers normal masculine behavior. In order to be with her, he follows her to a planet devoid of other human life, changes sex, and as a female has a monogamous sexual relationship with Dajeil; they both agree that Byr has changed a lot. Yet, as soon as three of Dajeil’s friends arrive on the planet, Byr lapses back into her old behavior and sleeps with one of them. Afterwards, Byr realizes her behavior has nothing to do with her gender; “She asked the man she had once been…I am who I ever was. What I called masculinity, what I celebrated in it was just an excuse for *me*-ness, wasn’t it?” (*Excession,* 348).

**Transcending the Traditional Human Subject:  
 The Influence of Science and Technology on Gender Conventions**  
  
 What a strange, almost absurd situation to be in, she thought. To be in this perfect but…self-confessed simulation, talking to a glorified computer about her fate … Could she simply be turned off as just a program, nothing genuinely alive at all? – *Surface Detail,* 91   
  
Scientific advancements from the 1980s onward have affected the traditional framework that constitutes humanity. According to Sherryl Vint, author of *Bodies of Tomorrow*, “we are living in a time when technology is able to radically alter the body…We have entered the realm of the post-human, the debate over the identities and values of what will come after the human” (7). Science fiction provides a suitable stage for writers to explore the concept of the post-human, since the genre “[considers] how science and technology are disrupting and revising many conventional ideas about human subjectivity and human embodiment” (Hollinger, 133). Furthermore, the explorations of post-humanism and cyber theory in this area are significant for the development of feminist thought (133), since both are concerned with identity and embodiment issues of the human subject. **Defining the Post-Human Subject**   
 According to Elena Gomel ethical dilemmas and questions of identity and embodiment are central to the explorations of the post-human subject, considering that the traditional concept of humanity, containing the biological human body as host of the non-artificial human brain, is no longer conclusive (340). In *How We Became Posthuman* N. Katherine Hayles argues that the idea of information as a separate, disembodied entity is important for the deconstruction of the traditional human subject, since “this construction [implies] that embodiment is not essential to human being” (4). This leads to the conceptualization of the post-human, in which “there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals” (3). In “Becoming More (than) Human”, Myra J. Seaman similarly indicates the post-human as a “malleable representation or construct” which transcends traditional boundaries (248). Additionally, both argue that technological add-ons are not what define the post-human subject; just the possibility of body modification through genetic and technological augmentation “necessarily changes our sense of identity…As expectations of body change, expectations of selfhood change as well” (Seaman, 249). In Hayles’ words, “the construction of the posthuman does not require the subject to be a literal cyborg…The defining characteristics involve the construction of subjectivity, not the presence of non-biological components” (4).  
 Furthermore, the emphasis on the construction of subjectivity necessarily implicates conventional notions of embodiment, as subjectivity is no longer automatically a traditionally embodied construct. Consider for instance “the possibility of the actual production of subjectivities housed in bodies that are no longer recognizably human or even organic, such as genetically engineered organisms or Artificial Intelligences (AIs)” (Gomel, 342), or cyborgs. The cyborg and the artificial intelligence are subjectivities that simultaneously transcend and challenge the traditional human subject, as they give rise to the question of what it means to be human. Gomel analyzes the possible consequences of accepting artificial intelligence as an ethical subject equal to man, rather than a mere computer program that can be shut off as if it were a convenient tool. She argues that “the issue of the rights of [AIs] ultimately rests on the question of embodiment” (349). The post-human as defined by both Seaman and Hayles is a construct that allows for the addition of the cyborg and artificial intelligence as ethical subjects, since “[p]osthumanism transforms the humanist subject into *many* subjects, [by releasing the body from the constraints placed on it by nature and ideology], and allowing it to roam free and ‘join’ with other beings, animate and inanimate” (Seaman, 248). Consequently, the post-human subject transcends and challenges traditional notions of the human subject and embodiment.  
 **Cyborgs, Artificial Intelligence, and Feminist Critique**  
 Subsequently, the concepts of the cyborg and artificial intelligence as post-human subjects have been of particular importance for the development of feminist thought. In *Cyberpunk Women, Feminism and Science Fiction*, Carlen Lavigne indicates Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” as a significant contribution to the body of feminist works that explore the influence of science and technology on the lives of human subjects (22). She states that Haraway suggested the image of the cyborg as “the key to breaking down cultural oppositions such as man/woman, human/machine, and organic/inorganic” (82). Since AIs and cyborgs defy precise classification within these traditional categories, they can serve “to illustrate the arbitrary nature of current cultural dichotomies” (82). C. L. Moore’s 1944 “No Woman Born” is an early exploration of feminist thought that uses the figure of the cyborg to raise questions regarding what it means to be human, and to “examine the implications of gender” (Hollinger, 203). When female protagonist Deirdre’s body is destroyed in a fire, her brain survives and is put in a mechanical body. However, the two men who saved her and created her new body fear that this artificial body will destroy her female personality, since “for them, any question of Deirdre’s humanity is inextricably intertwined with her gender” (Lavigne, 28). Although Moore’s story disrupts gender conventions through the figure of the cyborg, it is less radical than the feminist explorations that emerged during and after the 80s. In “(Re)reading Queerly” Hollinger argues that “in spite of Moore’s (proto)feminist challenge to notions of gender construction and femininity – in spite of her suggestion of femininity as masquerade – her cyborg is, finally, trapped within the binarisms of a heterosexual perspective on the nature of woman” (205). Since the concepts of the artificial intelligence and the cyborg transcend conventional notions of embodiment, they necessarily defamiliarize traditional notions of gender, sexuality, and compulsory heterosexuality. Hollinger explains that “the technobody” (205) is not dependent upon the heterosexual matrix for its existence, thus rendering the assumption of the necessity of compulsory heterosexuality obsolete. Therefore, the concept of artificial intelligence can be used to deconstruct the presumed naturalness of gendered behavior; “the artificiality of any gender behaviors [the AI] demonstrates are automatically called into question, and if [it] can ‘pass’, so much the better for illustrating the artificial nature of the human thought processes and performances it so seamlessly imitates” (Lavigne, 85). This happens in Marge Piercy’s *He, She and It*, where an AI called Yod is placed in a male body, while his programmer is female. She feels that she needs to balance Yod’s masculine body traits by programming feminine sensitivities into him; he is portrayed “as an amalgam of masculine and feminine influences” (Lavigne, 89). Hence, gendered behavior is challenged since it is portrayed as the product of human construction, rather than a set of traits intrinsic to the post-human subject.  
 **Redefining Humanity:  
 Gender and Embodiment Issues in *Surface Detail* and *Excession***The previously examined characteristics of feminist thought will now be applied to *Surface Detail* and *Excession* to analyze their contribution to the feminist debate regarding gender, identity, and embodiment.  
 In the Culture AIs are considered post-human subjects, who have access to the same range of rights and possibilities their biological counterparts have access to. In *Surface Detail* this attitude is contrasted to that of the Sichultian society. Sichultian Lededje finds herself, her consciousness that is, housed in a Culture computer substrate after her biological body has died. Since her own society does not recognize AIs or disembodied consciousnesses as human subjects, she wonders what is to become of her. The starting quote of this chapter illustrates the difficulty of the issue of human identity and embodiment. For Lededje, identity and embodiment are interdependent; without a body she is just a program, and programs have no identities since they are not considered alive. In the Culture, however, embodiment is not a necessary requirement for a conscious subject to be considered as such, which ship-Mind Sensia, whom Lededje refers to as glorified computer in the excerpt, explains to Lededje: “You’re essentially a fully functioning, viable independent mind-state and incontrovertibly sentient, with all that that implies regarding rights and so on” (91). The idea that a conscious being need not have a body, artificial nor biological, to be considered equal to a traditional, embodied human subject defamiliarizes the notion of the traditional human subject, and enhances the utopian nature of the Culture.   
 However, the Culture recognizes that embodiment can influence identity: “The precise form that your physicality took had a profound, in some ways defining influence on your personality” (150). This indicates the difficulty and the arbitrariness of these issues. To Lededje, born an Intagliate, embodiment had simultaneously been what defined her and what renounced her as a subject; she was established as woman, other, and possession, yet never as a human being. The possibility for her to be re-invented, “her soul, the very essence of her being, rehoused […] in a new body” (149), into almost any form or object she can imagine defamiliarizes traditional concepts of embodiment, thus allowing her to establish herself as a human subject. Whereas Lededje’s initial body was sooth-black and female, her disembodied consciousness is color- and genderless; she could be re-invented into a silver-skinned male body or even choose a gender-neutral see-through shape. Thus, cultural oppositions such as man/woman and black/white are deconstructed. Additionally, her new physical body started out genderless, which reinforces the idea that bodies are initially human and that gender is secondary to human embodiment: “The body blank I used didn’t come with defined genitalia at all; it was told to become female at the same time as the basic Sichultian characteristics were programmed in” (183). This indicates the utopian characteristics of the Culture as well, which Lededje addresses when she explains her view of the Culture as a safe haven:  
 All those years, all those times I tried to run away, the one thing nobody ever asked me was where I might be running *to* […] I was running away to the Culture, because I’d heard they’d escaped the tyranny of money and individual power, and that all people were equal here, men and women alike, with no riches or poverty to put one person above or beneath another. (159)  
 Furthermore, traditional concepts of gender and embodiment are challenged through the depiction of the Minds’ use of avatars. The inherently genderless ship Minds have the option to represent themselves to humans on a smaller and more comprehensible scale, which is still defamiliarizing due to the use of human sized avatars whose bodies can be either biological or artificial, yet whose artificial consciousness defies the notion of the traditional human subject. Although avatars can have gendered bodies, the Minds controlling them are genderless and usually choose to represent themselves in such a way that their avatars are not automatically linked to a certain gender. For instance, the avatar Amorphia in *Excession*: “Amorphia was deliberately formed to look not simply neither male nor female but as perfectly, artificially poised between maleness and femaleness as it was possible to be” (6). In *Surface Detail*, avatar Demeisen is perceived by Lededje as male. She has to remind herself the avatar is a representation of a genderless AI: “She knew that technically he was an it, not a he, but she still thought of him as male. All she had to remember, of course – she told herself – was that whether a he, a she, an it or anything else, Demeisen was the ship” (289). Since she applies her gendered perceptions on a being that transcends those concepts, her perception of the genderless Mind as male indicates the arbitrariness of traditional gender conventions. Additionally, the possibility of non-traditional sexual relations challenges conventional notions of sexuality. In *Excession* this is conveyed through Genar-Hofoen’s confrontation with drone sex: “ It was Genar-Hofoen’s turn not to say anything. He found the whole idea of drone sex – even if it was entirely of the mind, with no physical component whatsoever – quite entirely bizarre” (214). Both the idea of two artificial beings engaging in an act traditionally attributed to biological beings only, and the idea of this traditionally physical act being performed solely in the mind, defamiliarize conventional notions of sexuality and challenge the traditional heterosexual framework.

***Excession* and *Surface Detail*   
 as Feminist Science Fiction Utopias**  
The theoretical and close reading parts in “Finding Paradise in Space” established that *Excession* and *Surface Detail* are contemporary science fiction utopias. Additionally, the theoretical analysis in “Feminist Futures” and “Transcending the Traditional Human Subject” demonstrates that the characteristics of science fiction utopias make them suitable vehicles for the expression and exploration of feminist thought. Hence, gender conventions can be and are challenged in various ways within feminist science fiction utopias. Subsequent close reading analysis of the novels demonstrates the expression of feminist thought regarding the concept of gender: subjects are established based on the entire range of human behavior; conventional notions of gender, identity, and embodiment are defamiliarized; glimpses of possible alternatives are offered. Both works allow for the deconstruction of traditional gender conventions, thus contributing to the feminist debate regarding this topic. Consequently, both *Excession* and *Surface Detail* can be considered feminist science fiction utopias.  
 **Suggestions for Further Research**  
So far, little critical consideration has been devoted to the space opera, as it is generally considered the least sophisticated sub-genre of science fiction. However, Banks’ Culture novels are generally known as space operas, yet do contribute to the expression of feminist thought. Additionally, critics such as Michael Levy argue that space opera has developed and become more literary during the past three decades (79). It would be interesting to analyze space operas to determine whether and how they contribute to debates regarding contemporary issues, and to examine how and why they have developed from their early escapist beginnings into a more mature format.

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1. There are a total of ten Culture novels: *Consider Phlebas (*1987)*, The Player of Games(*1988)*, Use of Weapons* (1990), *The State of the Art* (1991), *Excession* (1996), *Inversions* (1998), *Look to Windward* (2000), *Matter* (2008), *Surface Detail* (2010), and *The Hydrogen Sonata* (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. That is, the beginning of the literary genre. The concept of utopia and utopian thought existed long before Thomas More invented the term. See Fatima Vieira’s “The Concept of Utopia” in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* for an in-depth analysis of the history of utopian thought. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The influence of feminism on utopia and science fiction will be further analyzed in chapter two. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The influence of science and technology on the traditional notion of the human subject and on the development of feminist thought will be further analyzed in chapter three. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The influence of science and technology on the notion of the human subject and gender conventions will be further analyzed in chapter three. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)