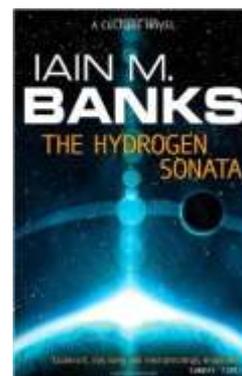


Space Opera Beyond Space: Iain M. Banks' *The Hydrogen Sonata* and the Politics of Subliming

Sara Martín Alegre, UAB
Sara.Martin@uab.cat
2013, 2015



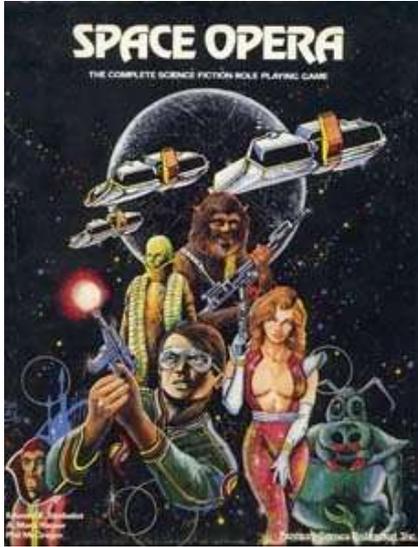
NOTE: This is an extended version of the paper I presented at the 16th International Culture & Power Conference: Spaces, Universidad de Murcia, 2-4 October 2013, organized by IBACS and the Departamento de Filología Inglesa, Facultad de Letras, of the Universidad de Murcia.

ABSTRACT:

The late 1980s saw a renovation of space opera that some critics labelled 'postmodern'. I'll focus here on the last novel by a most prominent author of this newer space opera: *The Hydrogen Sonata* (2012) by the late Scottish writer Iain M. Banks. Banks, whose SF career started with *Consider Phlebas* (1987), wrote high quality space opera. *The Hydrogen Sonata*, one of Banks' novels on the hedonistic alliance of humanoid civilisations known as the Culture, narrates in his characteristic tongue-in-cheek tone the last days of the Gzilt civilisation before all of it moves onto the space of the Sublime to abandon the Real. Many other species have already sublimed but what concerns a faction of the Culture is whether the Gzilt are embracing this option freely since the Book of Truth guiding them seems to be a hoax, an experiment perpetrated by another civilisation.

My concerns are twofold. First, how Banks manages to raise the sense of wonder that characterises SF in his description of space, including the Sublime, while, as Hardesty claims, subtly mocking the sub-genre. Second, whether the Gzilt's accession onto the Sublime comments not only on the limits of utopia (the Culture shows no interest) but also indirectly, as it seems, on Scottish independence, considering a consensus was reached about the then oncoming September 2014 referendum as Banks wrote—in Scotland—the last adventure of the Gzilt. Space acquires, thus, not only physical and metaphysical dimensions but also and political overtones in Banks' thrilling space opera.

Discussions of space opera¹ begin almost customarily by recalling how Wilson Tucker coined the label in 1941² by analogy with ‘horse opera’, that is to say, westerns, and ‘soap opera’ or melodrama. Wilson referred in this way to science fiction dealing



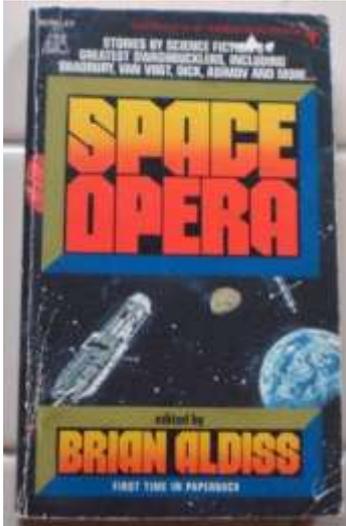
with a spaceship involved in a ‘yarn’ or “exciting adventure story” (Westfahl 2003: 197). As two of the main specialists in space opera, David G. Hartwell³ and Kathryn Cramer, remind us, there is a general misconception regarding ‘space opera’ since this was not a positive label at its inception. Actually, they claim, Tucker applied his “original definition to all bad SF hackwork” (2006: 10) of the type that “often succumbs to formulaic plots and mediocrity” (Westfahl 198). At any rate, by the 1950s the label

had already merged for fans with a certain nostalgia for ‘golden age SF’, signifying their “fondness for outworn, clunky, old-fashioned SF guilty pleasures” (Hartwell and Cramer 12). Hartwell and Cramer themselves attribute to Brian Aldiss’ key anthology *Space Opera: Science Fiction from the Golden Age* (1974) and to Lester Del Rey’s task as an anti-British-New-Wave publisher of space opera also in the 1970s, the final confusion of ‘space opera’ with ‘SF adventure’ of all kinds. *Star Wars’* episode IV, *A New Hope*, released in 1977, gave ‘space opera’ the final push it needed to finally become a respectable SF sub-genre—if not its main genre.

¹ See in chronological order: Patricia Monk, “Not Just ‘Cosmic Skullduggery’: A Partial Reconsideration of Space Opera” (*Extrapolation*, 33:4, 1992 Winter: 295-316,); Gary Westfahl, “Beyond Logic and Literacy: The Strange Case of Space Opera” (*Extrapolation*, 35:3, 1994 Fall: 176-185); Joe Sanders, “Space Opera Reconsidered” (*New York Review of Science Fiction*, 7:10, June 1995: 1, 3-6); David Pringle, “What Is This Thing Called Space Opera?” (in Gary Westfahl (ed.), *Space and Beyond: The Frontier Theme in Science Fiction*, Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2000: 37-47); Andy Sawyer, “Space Opera” (in Mark Bould, Andrew M. Butler; Adam Roberts and Sherryl Vint (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, London: Routledge, 2009: 505-509) and, most recently, Alastair Reynolds, “Space Opera: This Galaxy Ain’t Big Enough for the Both of Us” (in Keith Brooke (ed.) *Strange Divisions and Alien Territories: The Sub-Genres of Science Fiction*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012: 12-25.

² Tucker’s original article, which he signed as Bob Tucker, was “Depts of the Interior” (sic), *Le Zombie*, January 1941, p. 8.

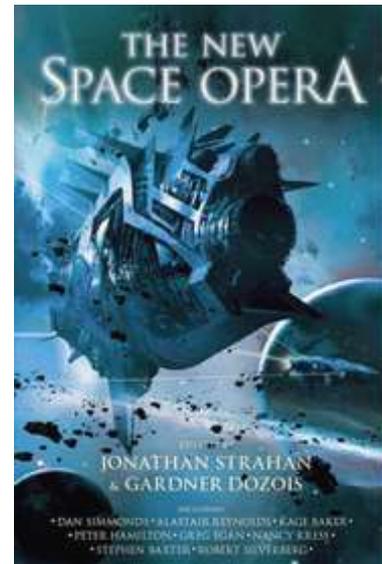
³ See also by Hartwell “Nine Ways of Looking at Space Operas”, *New York Review of Science Fiction* (part I, 18:12 [no. 216], August 2006: 17-21; part II: 19:1 [no. 217], September 2006: 19-21 and part III, 19:2 [no. 218], October 2006: 17-19.



It is simply not true, then, as Westfahl claims, that “[s]pace opera is the most common, and least respected, form of science fiction” (2003: 197), for since the eclectic 1980s this sub-genre, as Hartwell and Cramer stress, has allowed many first-rate SF writers to “embark on a science fiction project that is ambitious in both commercial and literary terms” (2006: 17), with, indeed, Iain M. Banks as a leading model. Westfahl, far less enthusiastic about the return of space opera as post-

modern space opera, complains nostalgically that the contemporary SF novels that represent it might even be “harbingers of the sub-genre’s exhaustion” (2003: 207) as they lack “the fervent conviction regarding humanity’s manifest destiny in the cosmos that distinguished classic space opera” (207). This is, of course, what post-modernism amounts to: questioning the value of the grand narratives shaping the human species since, among other disasters, they have led to two world wars and the appalling genocides unleashed in the 20th century and continuing into the 21st.

So-called ‘post-modern’ space opera is practised, apart from Banks, by writers on both sides of the Atlantic as diverse as Dan Simmons, David Brin, C.J. Cherryh, Lois McMaster Bujold, Vernon Vinge, Ken McLeod, Charles Stross, Alastair Reynolds and a long etcetera. I do not find the label ‘post-modern’ particularly useful since this late 20th century term is being extended in quite a lazy fashion into the 21st century regardless of its logical obsolescence. I’ll grant, though, that what defines contemporary space opera is a self-conscious awareness of the conventions of the



old, un-self-conscious, American space opera (perhaps magnified for Banks as an SF writer working in peripheral Scotland). As Westfahl notes with a certain patronising dismissiveness, in current space opera:

Stories aspire to the epic scope of classic space opera but may be tempered by a hard-edge cynicism (...) or even grave pessimism about humanity's future. Instead of featuring only humans and humanoid aliens, authors embrace extreme variety in forms of intelligent life—humans, aliens, machines or combinations thereof—crafted by evolution, technology or bioengineering. Other heresies include a universe where humans are not dominant, means of transportation other than starships, a rich texture of literary and cultural allusions and an overtly serious intent juxtaposed with a lingering aura of escapist adventure. (2006: 206)

The problem of whether space opera can address serious issues had already been addressed by William H. Hardesty III in an essay significantly titled "Space Opera without the Space: The Culture Novels of Iain M. Banks" (2000). In it, discussing Banks' first five novels, Hardesty worries that "[e]ach is a spirited adventure story; but each mocks the very adventure it presents (...)" (116). Overcoming this concern, he concludes that "the texts operate on the two levels of naïve entertainment and informed commentary simultaneously, gaining some of their power and excitement because traditional storytelling and contemporary narrative fashions interact" (116). When he calls Banks' novels "quite preposterous" (117), he means this as a term of praise.

In a much older article of 1980 Hardesty addressed a similar problem, arguing that although extrapolation, which constitutes the basis of serious SF, and light space opera do not mix well, there are exceptions to this rule. He found one then in Samuel Delaney's 1966 acclaimed *Babel-17*, a novel that sets the calendar a couple of decades back as regards the invention of post-modern space opera. In classic space opera, Hardesty observed,

the writers simply provide any and all elements they need for their plots without regards to plausibility (...). The reader seeks only to be thrilled, to enter a world of clearly-identified good guys and bad guys locked in a violent struggle which will culminate in the defeat of one group or another. Melodrama is the essence of space opera, suspense its defining mood. (1980: 64)

Space opera, always conservative, he added, "cannot be genuinely extrapolative or thought-provoking. It *must* soothe, not ruffle" (68, original emphasis). However, soothing writing is not, as he says, "what an intelligent reader desires (...) from any artist working in a literary medium" (69). Delaney, being that kind of artist, offers thus

in *Babel- 17* “an ironic commentary on itself” (69). So does Banks in all his SF novels, particularly those focused on the Culture.

Banks, who sadly died aged only 57 on 9 June 2013 of a cancer detected only a few months earlier, was the author of 27 novels, of which 12 were SF published under the name Iain M. Banks (the M. stands for his chosen middle name, Menzies). Within this list, 8 are novels⁴ centred on the utopian group civilisation of the Culture formed

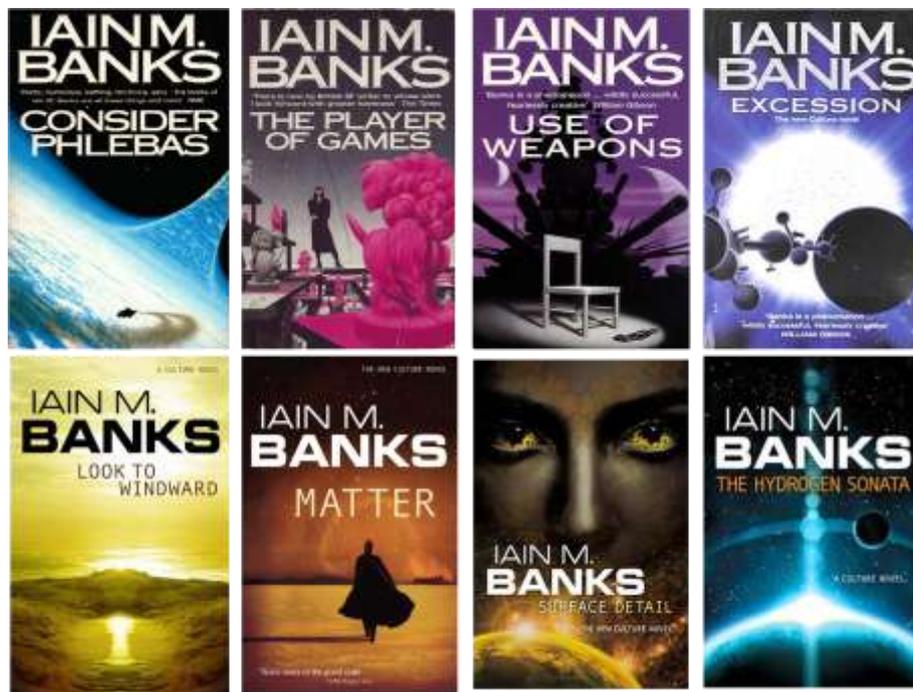


by “seven or eight humanoid species, space-living elements of which established a loose federation approximately nine thousand years ago” (Banks 1994: website). In this post-scarcity society neither humans nor machines are “exploited”, for the Culture is “essentially an automated civilisation in its manufacturing processes, with human labour restricted to something indistinguishable from play, or a hobby” (Banks 1994). Happily dominated

by its powerful A.I. Minds, the Culture’s average organic citizens are radical post-humans devoted to (unsadistic) hedonism, who believe in “socialism within, anarchy without” (Banks 1994). Banks tapped a rich narrative source indeed when he came up with the idea that the Culture would not resist the temptation to spread its utopia to other less fortunate humanoid and non-humanoid civilisations of our own galaxy. The Culture novels deal, thus, mainly with Contact, the Culture segment devoted to, as its name indicates, contacting other civilisations. Banks focuses above all on the adventures of the agents of Special Circumstances, the Culture’s spies and secret manipulators, raising in this way the issue of whether utopia can be damaging rather than enlightening for other civilisations.

⁴ The Culture series includes: *Consider Phlebas* (1987), *The Player of Games* (1988), *Use of Weapons* (1990), *Excession* (1996), *Look to Windward* (2000), *Matter* (2008), *Surface Detail* (2010), *The Hydrogen Sonata* (2012). Banks’ other SF novels are *Inversions* (1998), which connects tangentially with the Culture, *Against a Dark Background* (1993), *Feersum Endjinn* (1994) and *The Algebraist* (2004). His short fiction collection, *The State of the Art* (1991), includes an eponymous novella about the Culture and a couple of Culture-related short stories.

Academic analysis of Banks' SF focuses, precisely, on the controversial politics of the Culture⁵, mostly leaving the matter of space aside. Exceptionally then, here my focus falls on the representation of space in the last novel, *The Hydrogen Sonata* (2012) as it is not only highly representative of all the Culture novels but also original since it deals with the passage of the human (but not mammalian...) Gzilt civilisation into the Sublime. The neglect of space in the analysis of Banks' *oeuvre* is surprising, particularly because as the author himself argues, the Culture, "in its history and its on-going form, is an expression of the idea that the nature of space itself determines the type of civilisations which will thrive there" (1994).



Banks imagines the Milky Way of the Culture stories (spanning roughly 1,300 to 2,800 AD) as a thriving galaxy, with

(...) a few dozen major space-faring civilisations, hundreds of minor ones, tens of thousands of species who might develop space-travel, and an uncountable number who have been there, done that, and have either gone into locatable but insular retreats to contemplate who-knows-what, or disappeared from the normal

⁵ See: Simon Guerrier, "Culture Theory: Iain M. Banks' 'Culture' as Utopia" (*Foundation*, 28:76, 1999 Summer: 28-38); Farah Mendlesohn, "The Dialectic of Decadence and Utopia in Iain M. Bank's Culture Novels" (*Foundation*, 34:93, 2005 Spring: 116-124) and Patrick Thaddeus Jackson & James Heilman, "Outside Context Problems: Liberalism and the Other in the Work of Iain M. Banks" (in Donald M. Hassler and Clyde Wilcox (eds.), *New Boundaries in Political Science Fiction*, Columbia, SC: U of South Carolina P, 2008: 235-258).

universe altogether to cultivate lives even less comprehensible [in the Sublime].
(1994)

The Culture emerges from the progressive emancipation and later confederation of the humanoid species living on board spaceships when they realise that mutual dependence “would necessitate an internal social coherence” (Banks 1994). That Banks imagines this coherence spreading to thirty trillion people “scattered fairly evenly through the galaxy” (1994) is perhaps overdoing the point but, then, the Culture’s mutual bonds can be kept because distance means very little for the Minds ruling the spaceships, particularly the colossal General System Vehicles.

Of course, galactic-empire fiction, to which, arguably, the Culture novels belong, depends to a great extent on the writer’s ability both to reflect space’s awe-inspiring immensity and to make space travel feasible, somehow. As Palmer argues,

The immense void of space is a temptation to the Western imagination: it seems to ask to be traversed, filled, settled, populated, ordered—and not only spatially but also temporally. Hence, perhaps, the popularity of sf about galactic empires, their gargantuan conflicts, heroes backlit to colossal dimensions by the stars or by starships exploding, in the casual disasters of those gargantuan conflicts, intrigues, and cruelties which are given grandeur by their scale, if nothing else.
(1999)

This has a sinister underside, as Horza, the protagonist of *Consider Phlebas* and a Culture antagonist, notes when regarding the Culture’s exceptional war with the Idirans:

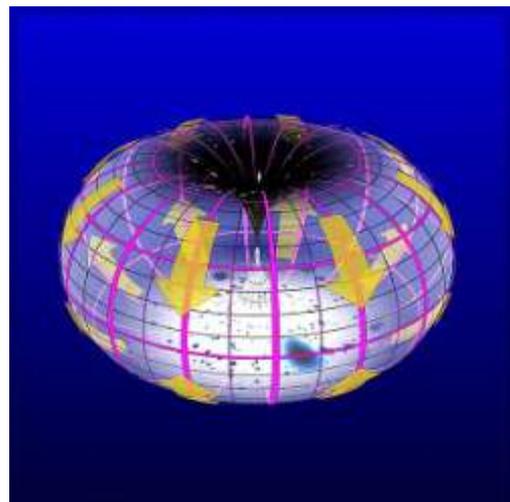
He looked for the Culture ship, then told himself not to be stupid; it was probably still several trillion kilometres away. That was how divorced from the human scale modern warfare had become. You could smash and destroy from unthinkable distances, obliterate planets from beyond their own system and provoke stars into novae from light-years off... and still have no idea why you were really fighting. (CP 33, original ellipsis)



In the same novel, and in the well-known notes on the Culture I'm quoting here (1994), Banks provides the key reasons why the Culture thrives. To begin with, its citizens are not attached to their home planets ("a few handfuls") nor to the "few hundred more" colonised before the Culture rejected anti-ecological terraforming. In the second place, many people live on spaceships, with the kilometres-long GSVs (General Systems Vehicles) housing "millions of people and machines" and "represent[ing] the Culture, fully". Others live in Rocks, "hollowed-out asteroids and planetoids", while the majority lives on Orbitals, massive spinning wheels made of intensively landscaped plates. As we learn in *Consider Phlebas*:

Living space was provided in abundance, chiefly on matter-cheap Orbitals; raw material existed in virtually inexhaustible quantities both between the star and within stellar systems; and energy was, if anything, even more generally available, through fusion, annihilation, the Grid itself, or from stars (taken either indirectly, as radiation absorbed in space, or directly, tapped at the stellar core). Thus the Culture *had no need to colonise, exploit or enslave*. (CP 451, my emphasis)

Banks' fertile imagination led him to envision an alternative cosmology much beyond the galaxy and its divisions into volumes and systems. The Grid mentioned in the quotation is thus supposed to be the connecting tissue between a series of universes which Banks visualises as the layers of an "expanding" onion, as 'hyperspheres'. These emerge from a Cosmic Centre located in what Banks asks us to see as a "doughnut" (1994). To the conventional three dimensions of our universe (or the 'Real'), Banks adds at least eight more, and so we eventually learn in *The Hydrogen Sonata* that the Sublime is located "[i]n dimensions seven to eleven" (HS 17). As Banks acknowledged, "I know it's



all nonsense, but you've got to admit it's impressive nonsense" (1994). 'Amusing', 'witty' and 'droll' seem adjectives more to the point.

In Banks' version of the Milky Way civilisations mature as people do and eventually reach a point in which they might decide to move onto the Sublime, which is a sort of galactic retirement house but also an ultra-utopian material territory devoid of conflict where there is "no annihilation, no utter destruction, no genocide or specicscide or their equivalents" (*HS* 65). Subliming, as clarified in *Look to Windward* (2000) involves "leaving the normal matter-based life of the universe behind and ascending to a higher state of existence based on pure energy" (164). The process is heralded by the arrival of mysterious custodial objects called the Presences, and entails something as simple as chanting 'I Sublime, I Sublime, I Sublime' together with your dearest ones. Immediately, "Off you went, just folding out of existence as though turning through a crease in the air that nobody had noticed was there before" (*HS* 510). This, however, is by no means the same as reaching Heaven. The Chelgrians, a non-human civilization that has partly sublimed, can still contact their 'gone-before'



"through suitable enabled devices or people" (*LTW* 225).

Eventually, the Culture itself develops its own Contact section, the Numina, specialising in reaching the Sublimed, as *Surface Detail* (2010) narrates. One of the

Chelgrian, Estodien, explains to a Culture member, Quilan, that the departed have "made heaven real" (224). Yet, another Chelgrian, a professor of Divinity, disagrees with the overlapping of the religious Heaven and the reality of subliming (also with the digital domains that other civilizations have created to simulate Heaven). He sees in the Sublimed "something beyond heaven. And unfortunately, therefore, useless. But a start. Or an end. Or a start, again, of another sort of life (...)" (*LTW* 225).

The Culture, as Banks had already explained in *Excession* (1996) is not interested in Elderhood, the status which comes after Subliming, believing it still has much to spend its youthful energy on. Whereas “individuals and small groups of people and Minds did sublime all the time” (E 82), and splinter groups meditate on what decision to make, the “bulk of the Culture” procrastinates, avoiding Subliming for the time being, though the chance to move on has been around already for 8,000 years. The Culture majority justifies their choice on two basis: one, avowedly childish, is their curiosity for the yet unknown parts of the universe and for other possible universes. The other, much more serious, is “an expression of the Culture’s extrovertly concerned morality”, for the sublimed Elder are found to be “derelict in their duties” (E 82). The Culture is scandalized that “tyrants went unchecked, hegemonies went unchallenged, genocides went unstopped” (E 82) and cosmic catastrophes unaverted, as the Sublimed enjoy “the most brilliant lucid dream, for ever” (HS 321).



Banks further explains in *Excession* that for the civilizations set on subliming towards Elderhood, “reliance on the material universe came to seem vestigial, untidy, pointless and even embarrassing” (E 141). Sublimers fail to understand why other civilizations are not compelled to go their way, but both Banks and the Culture deride them for turning “what was a normal but generally optional part of a species’ choice of fate into a religion” (E 259). Within the Culture “the cult was regarded as rather a pointless one” and subliming viewed “more like moving house than entering a sacred order” (E 259). The real dream of the top galactic civilizations calling themselves the Involved, which include the Culture, is not reaching another dimension within the known universe but that “one day it would be possible to travel from one universe to another (...). To achieve that would surely be to Sublime, truly to Transcend, to consummate the ultimate Surpassing and accomplish the ultimate empowerment” (E 271). Funnily, Banks claims that this is a dream “which virtually every technologically advanced civilization clove to with almost religious faith” (E 271).

A civilization ready to sublime, always long-lived and stable, may show “a host of warning signals” (*LTW* 164), among which Banks highlights “a degree of society-wide ennui, the revival of long-quiescent religions and other irrational beliefs, and interest in the mythology and the methodology of Subliming itself (...)” (*E* 164). Reviewer Stuart Kelly finds this tepidness, or “inherent lassitude”, a sign that “utopia can be very boring” (2012). He believes that in *The Hydrogen Sonata* “Banks suggests, more than in the other books, that there is something wanting about the Culture” and that it is “trapped between two unilateral conformities; transcendence and materialism” (2012). This is, for me, a serious misreading of the novel, since what Banks questions are the reasons of the Gzilt civilisation to Sublime. These are based indeed on religious belief, particularly on the Gzilt’s erroneous conviction that they are a ‘chosen people’ with, perhaps, a special mission to carry out beyond their natural territory. As the dismayed Culture Minds point out, the Gzilt wilfully “regard Subliming not as retirement but as promotion” (*HS* 72).

Since the entrance into the Sublime entails a communal majority decision that must be reached by democratic consensus, not just faith, it is tempting to see the Gzilt

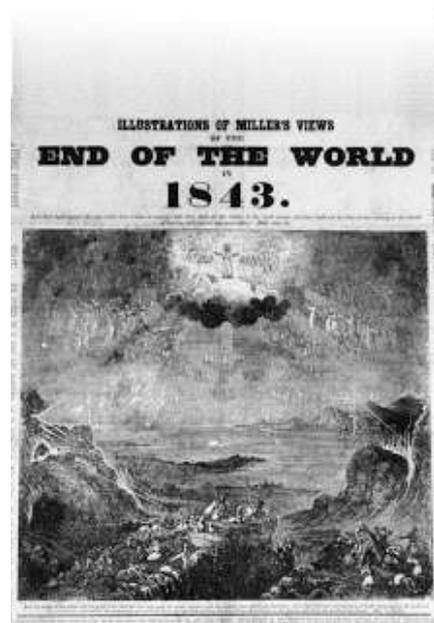


as an analogy for the Scots facing independence. After all, as a main character reflects watching the countdown is “a lot like watching election results” (*HS* 511), or referendum results for that matter: “There was a slow start to the Instigation, but the numbers quickly swelled about a quarter of an hour in, according to the news channels still covering events, and by the start of the last third of the hour it was obvious almost everybody was making the transition” (*HS* 511). I am not, of course, the only one to have noted this analogy to which at least a review and an interview refer. Andre J. Wilson’s review for *The Scotsman* (October 2012) explains that the Gzilt are going to “ascend to a higher plane of existence in the hi-tech equivalent of the fundamentalist Rapture”. Yet he ends up reading the novel as “a satire on the Scottish independence debate worthy of Jonathan Swift”—a negative one. “Our politicians and their advisers”, Wilson concludes “should take note of a book that not only contemplates political suicide, but cultural self-immolation as well”. This, again, is a misreading since Banks’

pro-independence opinions, fuelled by his hatred of pseudo-Thatcherite New Labour, are well known. He was candid enough to declare himself heavy-hearted about independence, for “I think I'd still sacrifice an independent Scotland for a socialist UK, but... I can't really see that happening.” (“Scotland and England...” 2011, original ellipsis). Yet, he certainly wanted to see an independent Scotland, a socialist country based “on the Scandinavian model” within Europe (2011).

The very grim joke that Banks plays on the Gzilt is the revelation that their *Book of Truth*, handed down by the Zihdren, and an accurate prophecy of their technological progress over a few millennia, is nothing but the result of a “sociological experiment” (HS 497) by the cranky Zihdren Philosophariat Apposital, “a small renegade research team” (HS 112) which simply sought to “settle an argument between two groups of scholars with opposite theories” (HS, 498). A local Gzilt guru, Briper Drodj, calling himself the Scribe, “elaborated on the basics” (HS, 498), mostly on the idea of being a ‘special’ people. The Zihdren, who Sublimed long before the Gzilt, felt nonetheless “conscience-stricken” (HS 498) enough to send a representative to disclose the prank. The plot hinges, precisely, on the efforts of an over-ambitious Gzilt politician, the Septame Banstegeyn, to keep this untimely revelation under wraps at whatever cost to ensure the success of the crucial transition (and his own immortality in the History books). This is counteracted by the efforts of an accidental Gzilt hero, the musician Vyr Cossont, entrusted by her militia regiment (of which she’s the only survivor after an attack orchestrated by Banstegeyn) with the task of finding an old friend: the longest-living Culture human, Ngaroe QiRia, and the only witness that can attest to the truth of the revelation—or, rather, to its falsity. A group of Culture Minds aids Vyr, not so much to interfere with the Subliming but, typically, because there is “a distinct chance that things might get interesting” (HS 39) and become a “challenge” (HS 76).

The interview with Michael Flett presents a quite direct impression regarding Banks' motivation to imagine the *Book of Truth*. Relaxing in a Spanish spa, Banks recalls (in Flett 2012), he remembered a TV show in which Stephen Fry discussed 'The Great Disappointment' suffered by the American Millerites. This Christian sect led by William Miller believed on the basis of preacher Samuel S. Snow's prophecies that Jesus would return on October 22 1844—which, of course, he did not. Banks added to this ridiculous situation the idea that a holy book could turn out to be provable by natural rather than



supernatural reasons. He did not bear Scottish independence in mind, at least, "Not consciously." As he adds,

You never know what's going on underneath, you know the surface, as it were. I don't think so. I very much doubt it. As I say, you can never be absolutely certain, but I wouldn't say so, no. I think if I was going to be influenced by anything the book would have been something more overtly political rather than a sort of mixture of political and religious. (in Flett 2012)

Yet, when another interviewer, Michael Parsons, asserts that "most of the human politicians in your books are very evil—the model for good politics is the Minds", Banks replies that

One of the things that has annoyed me so much over the last three decades is the denigration of the idea of public service. Politicians of most stripes have denigrated the public, private good public bad. It's doing down the idea that people want to do the best they can for other people. We need greater honesty in politicians. They seem incapable of giving a straight answer to a straight question. (in Parsons 2012)

This suggests that the key to the plot of *The Hydrogen Sonata* is not at all the fact that the *Book of Truth* is a counterfeit holy book, but, rather, that the main politician safeguarding the success of the Instigation (or Subliming), Banstegeyn, is preventing the Zihdren experiment from being publicly disclosed—even murderously. The whole point of the novel, and how it applies to Scottish independence, has nothing to do then

with the religious reasons why the Gzilt decide to Sublime but with the fact that they make the decision to Sublime *lacking crucial information*. They might, after all, have decided to Sublime regardless of the revelations about the *Book of Truth* but this is not a choice they are given.⁶ And *choice* is here the uppermost concern.

What makes *The Hydrogen Sonata* so chilling despite its very many thrilling action scenes and comical moments (courtesy of the sharp Minds) is the ambiguity of Subliming. “[N]o one ever came back saying, shit, it’s horrible; don’t go” (HS 64), Banks writes. Yet the handful of very confused returnees, including at least one very eccentric Mind, are “seemingly incapable of describing the realm they had left” beyond claiming it was “wonderful” (HS 64). This is read as a positive proof of its material delights—heavenly or otherwise—but it is not evidence strong enough for the always cautious Minds to recommend that the Culture also sublimes. The fuzziness of that space and the Culture’s uncharacteristic wariness about the Sublime suggest that not all is well on the land of beyond. This is why not all Gzilt individuals join in:

The final figures for those making the transition into the Sublime had come in at over ninety-nine point nine per cent, as far as anyone could tell, with little variation between planets and habitats. (...) This was, unless you were absolutely determined to regard the whole process as an act of tragic collective insanity, an excellent and satisfying result. (HS 515)

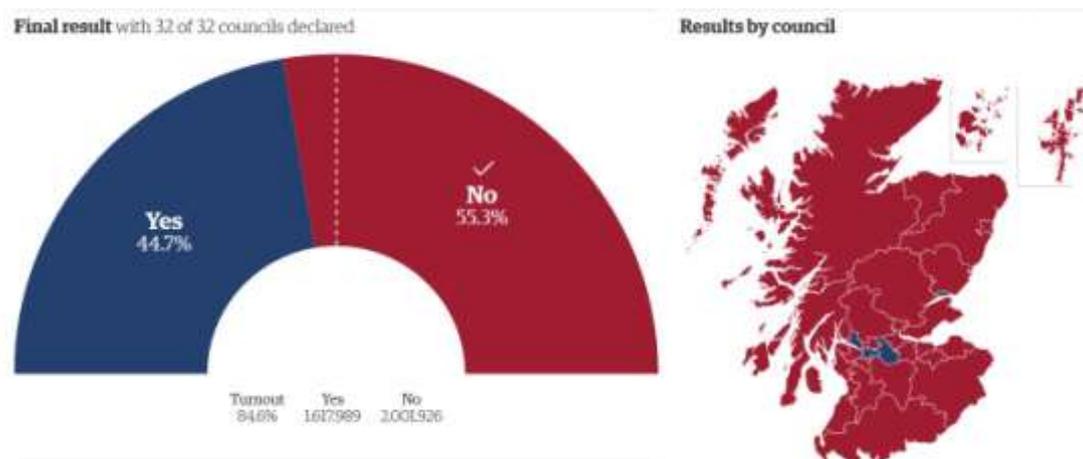
Vyr’s final decision not to ‘outload’ and face instead utter loneliness—among scavenging aliens looting the remaining possessions of the departed Gzilt—is a logical solution to her own personal disappointment and wariness but also a peculiar comment on collective democratic choice.

Banks died fifteen months before the Scottish referendum for independence (18 September 2014). Presumably, he would have voted ‘yes’, yet whether he



⁶ Not all Gzilt agree with the Subliming. Banks mentions a small group of dissidents calling themselves ‘Resist’. Their anti-Subliming views are also shared by Vyr’s own 14th militia Regiment—the ones who, unfortunately, first discover the lie behind the *Book of Truth* and are, so, wiped out by Banstegeyn.

intended his novel to be read politically or not, and despite the author’s own downplaying of the political issues to stress the religious factor, there is some kind of covert fear expressed in its pages. After all, the main question the galaxy debates in *The Hydrogen Sonata* is whether the Gzilt are embracing Subliming “rather early” (HS 193). This is not necessarily a denial of the right to choose democratically, but, I would argue, a call to choose rationally, bearing in mind all the possible consequences. Perhaps, and I am here wildly speculating, this is too the reasoning behind the majority



‘No’ that prevented Scotland from declaring her independence: the ‘no’ may not have expressed at all a collective wish to remain in the United Kingdom but, rather, a collective concern that crucial elements were lacking to make an informed decision about Scotland’s future (like whether the European Union would eventually welcome Scotland, having warned it would not). This decision, like Subliming, it must be noted, should have been irreversible, as the possibility of a nation going independent only to repent later some years later cannot be contemplated. The massive vote in favour of Subliming characterizes Vyr as one of the tiny 0.1% of the Gzilt population concerned that “the whole process” might be “an act of tragic collective insanity” (HS 515), yet her decision to remain behind, stranded in the ruins of her civilization, is not available to the common voter in real life, whose options would be either internal or external exile. Banks, nonetheless, seems to be alluding with Vyr to the position of the citizen who agrees with democracy but not necessarily with the results of democratic choice.

There was another Culture novel in the making which, seemingly, will never be published. Although the previous one, *Surface Detail* (2010), is chronologically set

about four centuries after the events in *The Hydrogen Sonata*, inevitably the Sublime has become the space towards which, ultimately, the whole space-opera yarn of the Culture has been pointing. 'Ironic' falls very short as an adjective to describe the series' accidental closure. The author's early death shortly after publishing this novel only gives the odd physical but yet immaterial space of the Sublime even more bizarre connotations. In view of the Culture's shared dream of reaching other universes beyond the known dimensions and the Milky Way, Banks' space opera would have presumably moved in that direction. Sadly, we will never know.

WORKS CITED

Note: excluding those referenced only in footnotes

- Aldiss, Brian W. (ed.) *Space Opera: Science Fiction from the Golden Age*. London: Futura; Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1974.
- Banks, Iain M. "A Few Notes on the Culture", *Sf-Lovers Archives at Rutgers University*, 1994. <<http://www.i-dig.info/culture/culturenotes.html>> (Accessed April 2014)
- Banks, Iain M. *Consider Phlebas* (1987). London: Orbit, 1998.
- Banks, Iain M. *Excession* (1996). London: Orbit, 1997 (1999).
- Banks, Iain M. *Look to Windward* (2000). London: Orbit, 2001.
- Banks, Iain M. *Surface Detail* (2010). London: Orbit, 2011.
- Banks, Iain M. *The Hydrogen Sonata*. London: Orbit, 2012.
- Flett, Michael. "Iain M Banks – the Cultured interview." *Geek Chocolate*, 27 December 2012.
<http://www.geekchocolate.co.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=296%3A%20iain-m-banks-the-cultured-interview&catid=47%3A%20interview&Itemid=68> (Accessed April 2014)
- Hardesty III, William H. "Semiotics, Space Opera and *Babel-17*." *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* (13:3-4) pp. 63-69, 1980.
- Hardesty, William. "Space Opera without the Space: The Culture Novels of Iain M. Banks." Westfahl, Gary (ed.). *Space and Beyond: The Frontier Theme in Science Fiction*. Westport, CT, Greenwood, 2000: 115-122.
- Hartwell, David G. & Kathryn Cramer, "Introduction: How Shit Became Shinola: Definition and Redefinition of Space Opera". Hartwell, David G. & Kathryn Cramer, (eds.) *The Space Opera Renaissance*. New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 2006: 9- 20.
- Kelly, Stuart. "*The Hydrogen Sonata* by Iain M Banks – review: Stuart Kelly celebrates 25 years of Iain M Banks' Culture novels." *The Guardian*, Wednesday 10 October 2012, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/oct/10/hydrogen-sonata-iain-m-banks-review>> (Accessed April 2014)
- Palmer, Christopher. "Galactic Empires and the Contemporary Extravaganza: Dan Simmons and Iain M. Banks." *Science Fiction Studies*, 26:1, pp. 73-90, 1999

- March. <<http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/77/palmer77.htm>> (Accessed April 2014)
- Parsons, Michael. "Interview: Iain M Banks talks *The Hydrogen Sonata* with Wired.co.uk." *Wired.co.uk*, 16 November 12, <<http://www.wired.co.uk/news/archive/2012-11/16/iain-m-banks-the-hydrogen-sonata-review?page=all>> (Accessed April 2014)
- "Scotland and England: what future for the Union?", *The Observer*, 28 August 2011, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2011/aug/28/scottish-independence-snp-iain-banks?INTCMP=SRCH>> (Accessed April 2014)
- Westfahl, Gary. "Space Opera". James, Edward; Mendlesohn, Farah (eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP, 2003. 197-208.
- Wilson, Andre J. "Book review: *The Hydrogen Sonata* by Iain M Banks." *The Scotsman*, 13 October 2012. <<http://www.scotsman.com/the-scotsman/books/reviews-and-news/book-review-the-hydrogen-sonata-by-iain-m-banks-1-2570941>> (Accessed April 2014)

CREATIVE COMMONS LICENSE



Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (by-nc-nd)

You are free: to Share — to copy, distribute and transmit the work under the following conditions:

Attribution — You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work).

Non-commercial — You may not use this work for commercial purposes.

No Derivative Works — You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work. You're specifically forbidden to generate academic research and publications based on this paper, though you may quote from it. If you wish to cite it, the correct **citation** would be:

Martín Alegre, Sara. "Space Opera Beyond Space: Iain M. Banks' *The Hydrogen Sonata* and the Politics of Subliming" (2013, 2015) Bellaterra: Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2015.

This should be followed by the DDD web address of the document where you found it.

Notice — For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work. If in doubt, contact the editor, Sara Martín Alegre (Sara.Martin@uab.cat)