



Hideous Progeny

Examining how the failings of science and technology have informed a range of dystopian texts, including the author's work, *The Recollector*

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that a number of authors in the dystopian genre have explored the failings of science and technology as a means of generating original literary novums (Bloch 1954), bringing about “a radical change of a whole world” (Suvin 1979), whilst setting their fiction apart from ‘the perceived world’ (James 2001). In turn, this appears to have created a number of key tropes in the genre, including, but not exclusively, the interconnectedness of memory and identity and how more primitive technologies, such as reading and writing, offer a means of resistance (De Certeau 2009) for a text’s protagonists - both of which are explored in this paper.

The opening section provides a critical context, referencing the aforementioned Ernst Bloch (1954) on literary novums and Suvin (1979) on cognitive estrangement, amongst others. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) helps present an original notion that the doctor and monster are actually useful analogies for describing utopian and dystopian modes of expression, respectively – hence the paper’s title.

The remaining sections highlight a wide-range of examples drawn from the genre in order to ascertain whether the close alignment of actual and fictive representations of science’s failings implies dystopian literature should never be considered in purely speculative terms, particularly as so many texts require readers to come equipped with advanced contextual knowledge of the times in which each text was written and published. At various points, comparisons are made with my own original piece, *The Recollector*, (which forms the central part of my PhD thesis), as a method of highlighting how critical engagement with the genre is generating some interesting outcomes in my creative practice.

This paper examines the ways in which the failings of science and technology appear to have created a number of key tropes in the dystopian genre: the inter-connectedness of memory and identity, as well as the inclusion of comparatively primitive technologies such as reading and writing, often characterised as methods of resistance (De Certeau 2009) in a range of notable works within the genre. Even with these specific tropes in mind, this assessment of works could be considered extensive, drawing its examples from: early science fiction, anti-utopian novels of the twentieth century, post-human narratives, those centred on eschatological collapse and feminist works. At various points, comparisons are made with my own dystopian novel, *The Recollector*, specifically to demonstrate how critical engagement with the genre is informing key creative decisions in my writing. My novel is set in the near future when Britain is beset by an unusual epidemic, termed *Demenza*, and with eight out of ten citizens expected to encounter some form of dysfunction to their short- and long-term memory capabilities. The narrative follows a librarian and one whose rare condition - *hyperthymesia* - allows him to recall subjective memories with alarming accuracy. It is a skill that quickly puts him to use in the new regime but becomes equally problematic to the same government as the crisis worsens. Along with an extensive reflective commentary, this will constitute the major part of my doctoral thesis. The critical is very much informing the creative element, in the hope of making an original contribution to both criticism and literature.

Context

The study of science fiction (sci-fi hereafter) altered with the publication of Darko Suvin's *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (Suvin 1979), in which connections are established between the genre of sci-fi and a more established utopian tradition in literature that pre-dates even Thomas More, perhaps reaching as far back as Plato's meditations in *The Republic* (c. 380 BCE). Suvin considers Ernst Bloch's *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (*The Principle of Hope* - published in Three Volumes: 1954 -59) - specifically the inclusion of a *literary novum* in a given text and a necessary ingredient in the creation of progressive or revolutionary literature. This constitutes "a radical change of a whole world" and is necessarily implemented to "estrangle the empirical world of the implied reader" (Suvin 1979: 64), as well as allow an author to set their "fiction apart from the perceived world" (James in Parrinder 2000: 30). Suvin develops Bloch's theory still further, referencing fiction that actively encourages *cognitive estrangement*: that moment when the fictional world of the novel is considered comparable to the reader's own, but

different in some significant way. This could be said to be an extension of earlier theoretical frameworks presented by Bertolt Brecht (*Verfremdungseffekt*) and Viktor Schklovsky (*Priem Ostraneniia*), both highlighting the importance of *defamiliarisation*, or specific effects "on the reader ... through (the) deliberate recontextualization of the familiar" (Spiegel 2008: 369-385). Suvin argues this device helps maintain a distancing effect between the mirror (the novel) and the original object (reality beyond the text) and is evident in some of the earliest examples of sci-fi, including Lucian's *True Story* (2nd Century CE), Johannes Kepler's *Somnium* (1606) and Margaret Cavendish's *Blazing World* (1666). It is worth noting, Suvin's attempts to critically appraise and secure sci-fi's place in the literary canon have been extended and challenged since publication, some stating this legitimising of an otherwise populist genre may well prove reductive in the long term (Govan 1997), whereas others insist sci-fi should be celebrated for being capable of containing a "vast play of codic conventions" all at once (Roberts citing Delaney 2016: 2).

Frankenstein

One of the key differences between sci-fi and the dystopian examples that came later is related to *tone*. In sci-fi, authorial attitudes to science and technology could be said to be neutral, whereas in dystopian fiction there is a discernible shift towards an author exploiting a negative attribute of scientific endeavour - with this aspect often becoming the central conceit of an entire narrative. Aldridge draws attention to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) as a singularly important text in the development of such narratives: "Throughout the course of the novel, Shelley criticises the scientific world view for its lack of responsibility and absence of human-centred values" (Aldridge 1983:18). More recent readings of Shelley's work highlight it as a "fable of technologico-scientific irresponsibility - from the Monster as a simulacrum of industrialized reproduction to nuclear physics and biological cloning" (Christie 2008:3). In fact, Shelley's novel could be perceived as a pioneering hybrid of both dystopian and sci-fi genres in that it presents a terrifying world of possibilities, but with a purveying mood of desolation. Shelley's *alternative* Geneva allows doctors like Victor to flourish and an altogether familiar world is set up in opposition to the one inhabited by the author, whilst "verbally existent" all the same; even enabling her to "inquire thematically about the nature of humankind" (Ibid: 72). This very much links with Freud's notion of the uncanny, whereby a writer "pretends to move in the world of common fantastic reality" (Strachey 1955: 17), seen in Victor's animation of inanimate objects, for example. In terms of memory and identity, there can be no physical and emotional release for Victor

and his “hideous progeny” (Shelley 2005: 89) until their mutual destruction at the novel’s conclusion; *creator* and *creature* are re-patriated but must face the consequences of their actions. In many ways, dystopian literature could be said to be the *hideous progeny* of science-fiction: a dark, malevolent figure living in the shadow of its parent, intent on revealing the dark underside of scientific experimentation and progress. Exploring this a little further, Victor signifies utopian optimism: ambitious, hubristic, even visionary, but lacking any sense of humility. Whereas his progeny, (dystopian writing), struggles to be accepted by the parent-figure and provides a counter-narrative centred on a downward, spiralling nihilism. That said, it is important to recognise the ways in which hope, (as also purported by Bloch), frames the monster’s narrative: being able to tell his story in his own words, for instance, enables the reader to consider his human qualities. He is emotional, intellectually elegant and sensitive and - as with much of dystopian literature - reflects the values of the society around him, holding a mirror up to the world and highlighting the true cost of scientific advancement.

Progenies

Following Shelley’s text, many fictional dystopias were published that seem equally concerned with the role science and technology might play as distinct, contributory influences in the development of literary novums. In Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward 2000:1887* (1888) and *The Time Machine* by H.G. Wells (1895), authors initially explore technology’s role in improving the lives of citizens - Bellamy’s text even pre-figuring advancements such as the credit card and the internet a hundred years before their invention. Nevertheless, as both narratives develop, much darker outcomes are imagined for humankind, particularly in Wells’ novel, with one future depicting the establishment of two evolutionary strands for humankind. In a key episode, the Time Traveller visits the wreckage of the British Museum, travelling through “gallery after gallery, dusty, silent, often ruinous” (Wells 1985: 54). His penultimate journey actually transports him millions of years into the future, illustrating how technology can open a window onto a different reality, but one where even the great monuments of civilisation are a distant memory:

All the sounds of man, the bleating of sheep,
the cries of birds, the hum of insects,
the stir that makes the background of our lives
- all that was over ...
The sky was absolutely black. A horror of this
great darkness came on me. (Wells 1895: 66).

For Wells’ narrator, his identity has been rooted in

the physical world and the inclusion of “absolutely black” (ibid) infers the author is dismissive of any reality that bears few traces of the ordinary, everyday experiences of any Victorian citizen, and perhaps illustrative of how our individual and collective identities are intertwined with material reality.

Anti-Utopias

If it can be assumed “utopian works typically sketch a future in which technology improves the everyday life of human beings and advances civilization, (then it is equally true dystopian works) offer an opposite view” (Witalec 2003: 2). Witalec asserts that within the dystopian genre “technological advances (actually set about enslaving) humans or regiment their lives; a collective loss of memory and history (making) mankind easier to manipulate psychologically and ultimately lead to dehumanisation” (Ibid). Collective identity and history in this context are inextricably linked, with the assumption that a ruling class - usually a totalitarian government - advances its political agenda via a range of scientific and technological tools. This may seem rather reductive in terms of explaining the complex relationship between any ruling class and the general population, but this is something I decided to explore in *The Recollector*. In my novel, technology emerges that is initially designed to help a crisis-hit Britain manage the outbreak, but once an opposition party steps in to prove they can manage the emerging catastrophe more effectively than the one appointed to govern, they actively invest in scientific research that helps them pursue a markedly different political agenda. A mistrust of dictatorships lies at the heart of my novel and firmly places it in the anti-utopian tradition, as described by Witalec (2003).

The first part of the 20th century saw a range of authors publish works that could be said to express similar anti-utopian sentiments. Claey's (2017) highlights an important distinction between *actual* political dystopias and their *literary* counterparts, contending the former exists as a separate entity, even if they have helped generate memorable novums along the way. He also details how history notes of a real “shift from a concentration on political collectivism (as seen in texts the first half of the twentieth century) to that of the impact of technology, population growth and environmental degradation” (in the latter half of the same century) (Claey's 2017: 488). This shift proved critical in the development of the genre: it became the natural platform for writers to express how scientific advancement can carry a heavy burden for humankind, prioritising machines that were once designed and created to work for them, not against them. In E.M. Forster’s highly prophetic “The Machine Stops” (1909), humans’ over-reliance on

science and technology has rendered them subject to an omnipotent, global *Machine*:

In the dawn of the world our weak must be exposed on Mount Taygetus, in its twilight our strong will suffer euthanasia, that the Machine may progress, that the Machine may progress, that the Machine may progress eternally.

(Forster 1909: 34).

Here, technology is presented as lacking the qualities that define the best of human endeavour: compassion, the ability to reflect and be accountable for one's actions. If life below ground depicts a world where individuals are cut off from their communities and their own pasts, then Forster's central character witnesses a more visceral, meaningful life emerging among the surface-dwellers, located far above the burrows. Kuno's revolutionary plea is aimed at those who prove so willingly compliant: "The Machine proceeds - but not to our goal. We only exist as the blood corpuscles that course through its arteries, and if it could work without us, it would let us die" (Ibid). Re-visiting Marx proves useful here, more precisely the argument that in capitalist regimes the "human is reduced to a mere appendage of the machine" (Marx and Engels 1848: 12). Reducing human potential until it signifies a smaller, composite part within an inhuman system of machinery, permits Forster to distance his characters from the need to understand their own collective identity, as well as any shared view of history - or what I term *social memory* - defining them instead in purely utilitarian terms. I was keen to explore this in my own work. And so, it is the average citizen of *The Recollector* who bears the weight of corporate and civil negligence and - as witnessed in Forster's text - this is accomplished on an epic scale. The whole of my fictive Britain is enveloped in a terrible "murk", a smog that some speculate is likely to be the originator of the Demenza outbreak and permeates the entire narrative:

A mile later, we pause at another major crossing, the traffic here five lanes deep on each side and the murk so pooled and thick we're forced to don our protective masks. (Taylor-McCartney 2020).

In many ways, my "murk" serves as a symbol for Demenza itself, linked as it is to ongoing research making connections between toxic particles found in vehicle emissions and dementia sufferers living near to roads, particularly in cities (Carey et al. 2018).

Similar tensions between state and citizens are explored in Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), an

unflattering critique of Russian communism and thought to be Orwell's model for *1984* (1949). It imagines a period following a Two Hundred Years' conflict that has annihilated ninety nine percent of Earth's human population. The modern industrial society is taken to its extreme conclusion, presenting a ruling party that considers *free will* to be the root cause of all unhappiness. The novel is very much a product of its time, Zamyatin exploring the over-promotion of collective consciousness and identity, with the relegation of I to second place and with it any memories of a world prior to the one presented in the novel. That said, emphasising the need for all citizens to be socially useful is certainly utopian in essence. Moreover, Trione states for any truly democratic, socialist regime to flourish, the cult of the individual must be "relegated to second place to benefit the greater, wider community" (Trione 2008: 10). D-503's act of maintaining a private journal, perhaps implies Zamyatin's inherent distrust of a system that demands all-encompassing control of its citizens. It also indicates another established trope in the dystopian genre: that of the isolated rebel harbouring a private, forbidden text, as evidenced in Smith's diary in *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* and the many books Montag rescues from fires in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953).

Acts of Resistance

In Bradbury's disquieting novel where firemen are tasked with tracking down and burning outlawed books, reading alone becomes an empowering act: "A book (is) a loaded gun in the house next door. Who knows, who might be the target of the well-read man?" (Bradbury 2013: 56). Early into the narrative, its protagonist Guy Montag marvels at the sacrifice made by one citizen: "There must be something in books, something we can't imagine, to make a woman stay in a burning house; there must be something there" (Bradbury 2013: 35). For Michel De Certeau "reading is tactical resistance par excellence" (De Certeau 2009: 56) in that the cultural act of reading is never passively done by a *consumer* - who may also be a *producer* - with information being passed between individuals to be used and interpreted in a multitude of ways, subtly displacing or upsetting the "microphysics of power" (Ibid: 58). Towards the end of Bradbury's novel, Montag learns that resistance will take the form of individuals recounting entire texts from memory, in place of the books as physical objects:

And when they ask us what we're doing, you can say, *We're remembering*. That's where we'll win out in the long run. And someday we'll remember so much that we'll build the biggest goddamn steamshovel in history and dig the

biggest grave of all time and shove war in it and cover it up. (Bradbury 2013: 145).

In both *We* and *1984*, the use of autobiographical writing also functions as a means of recording personal memories as a way of promoting and celebrating the cult of individuality. In Orwell's novel, Winston works for the *Ministry of Truth* doctoring and editing historical documents to ensure they corroborate the main political party's agenda. This method of censorship resembles the actions taken by the government in Bradbury's work, whereby all books are presented as oppositional to the government's agenda, so therefore must be destroyed. This in fact plays into Orwell's Oceania being "portrayed as invulnerable to progressive change" (Resch, 1997: 139). Yet Wolk (2015) takes a more positive view of such societies, indicating that many dystopian protagonists demonstrate "persistence towards free thought and expression that combats technology. Through the use of writing and reading, the characters find that they open the shunned gates of free thought, causing serious concerns for their governing systems" (Wolk 2015: 3). This same trope is explored in my own work, *The Recollector*. From the outset, it is clear my protagonist is engaged in the illegal act of hoarding a sizeable collection of personal effects in a secret attic space within his own home, a practice outlawed by his government who insist all citizens must turn their back on the past and commit to living in *Present-Time*.

At the centre of the room is a writing desk containing another antique object: a typewriter that came into my possession only a few years ago. The last few months I've been using it to commit fragments of my unusual tale to paper. Manually. Off-line. (Taylor-McCartney 2020).

Much of the tension of the novel, is centred on my narrator's efforts to hold onto his store of artefacts whilst retaining his place within the ruling *Party*. Critically, for their insubordination, Zamyatin's D503 and Orwell's Smith undergo a series of punishments with the aim of reconditioning each protagonist, explored decades later by Anthony Burgess in *A Clockwork Orange* (1962). Technology clearly empowers ruling elites whilst allowing them to monitor and ensnare citizens exhibiting any sort of non-compliance, or wilfully rebellious behaviours in the case of my protagonist in *The Recollector*. In my work, Blythe's insubordination requires him to spend months at a *Behaviour Reformation Camp* as he awaits trial, learning to suppress any innate urge to relive the past through acts of remembering, in favour of following a more muted existence:

It's difficult to get a true handle on time when there are no clocks on display. Instead, you use other means to figure out the time of day: dips in your blood sugar to indicate you're hungry, the cycle of your daily ablutions, daylight turning to dusk through your cell window. (Taylor-McCartney 2020).

Post-Human

Running parallel to these developments in both sci-fi and dystopian genres, "the twentieth century (also comes to exemplify an) age of robotics, cyborgs, organ replacement, the mechanical substitution of limb ... genetically modified implantations and the androidist blurring of human-machine boundaries" (Claeys 2017: 490). In Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1931), Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot* (1951) and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) authors openly postulate on what life might well look like in a *post-human era* (Ferrando 2014). In *Brave New World*, John the Savage's battle against soma[1] and society is, of course, hopeless. Capitalism affords them an ignorance that will protect them from the truth about the inherent pleasures of individual freedom, but potentially saves each of them from a fate similar to the one experienced by Huxley's savage. Again, Marx should not be underestimated as a key influence on Huxley's thinking at the time of writing *Brave New World*, arguing that under capitalism the proletariat are treated as commodities "whose weal and woe, whose life and death, whose sole existence depends on the demand for labour" (Marx and Engels 1848: 67). In Huxley's work, egg production is carried out by whole legions of machines - science and technology fused together so the assembly lines resemble mass-farming and the commodity of human life, its sole output. Of course, one of soma's principal effects is to help its users to forget about their place in time. Memories of a different past are presented as problematic, or even obstructive. By comparison, in *The Recollector*, Dementia sufferers are prescribed a drug called *Memocept*. It is designed to stall the development of the disease but has one dominant side-effect that means patients are unable to see much beyond the present - appearing disconnected from a more remote past and echoing Huxley's deployment of soma; in my work, society proves unable to reflect or project effectively through time, reinforcing Resch's suggestion that a dystopian society attempts to cancel the future as well as the past in order to function more effectively.

Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) raises a number of interesting questions about the ethical treatment of replica humans and could also be said to contain a collective act of national forgetting. Here, society

prefers to think of its clones as wilful donors and, ironically, it is the clone who aspires to make sense of her own past; to mark out her own identity as separate and distinct to the collective view of reality. This is perhaps the genre's natural successor to Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Again, it is the scientist depicted as an unfeeling parent-figure, refusing to establish a single law protecting the ethical rights of clones. Ishiguro profiles Kathy's recall abilities to help define her humanity and autonomous spirit, structuring much of the narrative around a series of flashbacks and long-term memory recalls. Indeed, Kathy is obsessed with the past: Hailsham, childhood friends, even an old cassette tape; wilful acts of reminiscence appear to help her cope with the actuality of her grim present and even bleaker future. Teo states: "Kathy's recollections ... often begin with happy memories of childhood innocence, but as that memory links up with other memories, her recollections eventually reach a sad or unhappy conclusion" (Teo 2014: 122). The effect of *cognitive estrangement* for the reader of Ishiguro's text, is partly diminished by the author's use of a first-person narrator and one whose subjective view of the action establishes a deeper level of empathy in the reader. Ishiguro's novel also illustrates how "realism [can] bring these problems home rather than to estrange us further from them" (Hillegas 1961: 489). The same stylistic approach has been employed in my own work, whereby a first-person mode of narration serves to provide readers with an insight into the mind of an individual with hyperthymesia[2], but hopefully to also heighten the text's immediacy:

I'm suddenly aware the drone is within
fifty metres of my position. This is
another

of their tests, I'm guessing - the lens on
the machine's tiny camera reflecting light

- winking at me or even taunting me. I
use the edge of my right hand to wipe
away

tears. It pays not to be sentimental these
days; to long for a past that is never

coming back. (Taylor-McCartney 2020).

The physical blends that occur between human and non-human entities, is perhaps representative of another sort of blurring that takes place between sci-fi and dystopian genres in the second half of the twentieth century. Indeed, the *human-machine* interface becomes quintessentially "the transforming relationship of the twentieth century" (Clareson 1977). This is most evident in works by William

Gibson, *Neuromancer* (1984) and Philip K. Dick, *We Can Remember It for You Wholesale* (1966) and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968), the latter two texts becoming the foundational material for the films *Total Recall* (1990) and *Blade Runner* (1982) respectively - and two striking examples of how memory and identity are often interlinked. Indeed, in Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano* (1952) the villain is "the development of technology which has proceeded lawlessly without consideration of its effect on human life and human values" (Hillegas 1961: 10). Even the "book's title points more generally to increasingly uneasy relationships between humans and machines; the *player piano* being an earlier historical example of how technology can replace the human element" (Ibid: 146). Of note, Vonnegut's novel imagines a world changed by a Third World War, indicating another branch of the dystopian genre: worlds depicting near or complete breakdown.

Eschatological Catastrophes

Some argue the current fascination with these narratives has its roots in the actual horrors that were witnessed at various points during the 20th century. "The images of Nazi death camps, of mushroom clouds and human silhouettes burned onto pavements ... of urban wastelands and ecological devastation are all part of our cultural heritage. Apocalypse is our history" (Berger 2000: 1-2). In terms of social memory informing a public's sense of their collective identity, Berger notes that if apocalypse can be considered part of humankind's past, it might equally describe its future. J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962) and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) present novums centred on complete eschatological breakdown. As with many of Ballard's works, his text "depicts characters who see ... chaotic breakdowns in civilisation as opportunities to pursue new modes of perception, unconscious urges, or systems of meaning" (Self 2016). In one section of the novel, Ballard writes: "The brief span of an individual life is misleading. Each one of us is as old as the entire biological kingdom, and our bloodstreams are tributaries of the great sea of its total memory" (Ballard 1962: 81). Whereas McCarthy's text - a radical re-imagining of the archetypal road novel - explores the destruction of individual and collective identity, as much as it does the purpose of living. It presents a future as seen through a dark, dystopic lens; a world where technology has failed humankind in every sense. The remaining survivors resemble wild animals, living entirely viscerally and at the mercy of an insatiable hunger, unforgiving elements and - in the case of the father and his young son - the pursuit of a better life if they can reach a mythical, coastal idyll:

There was a lake a mile from his uncle's

farm where he and his uncle used

to go in the fall for firewood ... The lake
dark glass and window lights

coming on along the shore. A radio
somewhere. (McCarthy 2006: 12).

Recalling the past for McCartney's heroes is a futile, fragmentary experience at best - and set up in direct opposition to the horrors of the present. Furthermore, Mars-Jones (2006) indicates the essence of the novel's achievement is "its poetic description of landscapes from which the possibility of poetry would seem to have been stopped, along with their ability to support life" (Mars-Jones 2006: 56). It may even be that the past in McCarthy's novel is presented with a certain nostalgia for all that has been lost and is something I have attempted to embed in my own text. Citizens in *The Recollector* are required to sever all ties with individual and collective histories that existed prior to the outbreak. New laws make for a more stable social order, but customary freedoms are hugely curtailed for this to succeed. Many of those secretly and openly rebelling against this new mode of experience, become fixated on holding onto their memories, personal artefacts and old routines of life as proof of their own place in history. In this sense, individual and collective acts of remembering are criticised by the ruling elite for demonstrating a longing to restore a version of Britain that never really existed, founded on near-mythical representations of sovereignty and democracy, that simply have no place in the new order.

Feminist Texts

It is worth mentioning that both sci-fi and dystopian genres have been instrumental in bringing marginal voices to the foreground, particularly with regards to memory and identity and in female authors exploring methods of resistance. In Doris Lessing's *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974), Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* (1991), Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986) and *Oryx and Crake* (2003), we see women writers postulating on the likely outcome of specific kinds of scientific and technological collapse. These texts explore the resultant roles women might play in revised social structures that emerge from such scenarios. In P.D. James's *The Children of Men* (1992) science clearly fails to rescue humankind from near-extinction and the author's attitude is made explicit in the text's opening pages: "The discovery in July 1994 that even the frozen sperm stored for experiment and artificial insemination had lost its potency was a peculiar horror" (James 1992: 9). James' text seems to follow a strand of political thought established in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986) whereby female experience is reduced

to a perfunctory, biological function. The novum of infertility employed in both novels, permeates all aspects of each and is done to reveal the fragility of male-centric politics when tested by an external factor. More recently, Christine Dalcher's *Vox* (2018) presents a different perspective on how men might employ technology to control a female population. Its premise is that a newly established conservative Christian government establishes a law that prohibits women from speaking more than a hundred words a day, thereby allowing the state to enforce male supremacy within every sub-section of society. Women are fitted with high-tech bracelets that deliver electric shocks if they breach their limits, with shocks increasing in severity the more any women transgress. Early on, the novel's narrator states: "Think about waking up one morning and finding you don't have a voice in anything" (Dalcher 2018: 7). The novel's heroine exhibits real "frustration at being unable to voice her true, complex thoughts and feelings ... and strikes a chord with some of the disempowerment many women currently feel" (Alter 2018). It has been interesting to see Atwood return to Gilead in *The Testaments* (2019), the much-anticipated sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*. De Certeau's (2009) reflections on reading and writing as acts of resistance are witnessed in Aunt Lydia confessing to an unknown reader occupying future time: "writing can be dangerous" (Atwood 2019: 5). Atwood has her one-time antagonist use a confessional mode to have readers revisit, review and redress history's view of Aunt as monster, whilst following her ongoing attempts to orchestrate Gilead's downfall, from within its male-dominated social hierarchy.

By drawing on key examples from the genre, including my own work, *The Recollector*, this paper has explored how the failings of science and technology appear to have informed a range of authors working in the genre, creating a series of dominant tropes: the inter-connectedness of memory and identity, as well as reading and writing as acts of resistance, (De Certeau 2009). In many ways, any singular dystopian text with a literary novum founded on a failing of science or technology, leads the reader back to Shelley's genre-defining *Frankenstein*. Her monster - Victor's *hideous progeny* - acts as a suitable analogy for dystopian literature itself: a sinister reminder that scientific and technological advancements are founded on utopian principles but often speculate on darker outcomes for humankind where progress goes unchecked. As I write this, the nations of the world find themselves dealing with existential challenges presented by the Coronavirus pandemic. Remarkably, social commentators are already highlighting the fact that planetary-wide lockdown of industries, travel and traditional ways of working, may have hit "the

pause button” on climactic breakdown, as well as make humans re-evaluate the role science and technology might assume on the other side of the crisis. In positive terms, scientists have engineered several vaccines to fight the virus, whilst technology enables people to maintain close contact with one another as the need for the social isolation becomes ever more essential. These truly are dystopian times we are living through and may well provide people with a rare glimpse at reality being informed by the literature, instead of the other way around. Maybe readers are turning to these speculative works in higher numbers than ever before, not merely out of

some gruesome fascination to see prophesy become reality, but to look for likely solutions to the unique problems it presents. For without some semblance of *hope*, there can be only *hopelessness* - and it is former, rather than the latter, that could be said to define our humanity (Bloch, 1954).

End Notes

[1] Soma acts as a form of opiate that helps its citizens cope with the reality of living in a dictatorship: “... there is always soma, delicious soma, half a gramme for a half-holiday, a gramme for a week-end, two grammes for a trip to the gorgeous East, three for a dark eternity on the moon ...” (Huxley, 2016: 55-56)

[2] A rare condition, commonly known as super-memory, whereby an individual is able to recall subjective memories with an unerring accuracy and level of detail that is unrivalled. There are meant to be only a dozen officially recognised cases worldwide.

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