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Speculative Fiction of the 2010s

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Introduction

British speculative fiction of the 2010s started with a vision of war, and fracture. In Adam Roberts's *New Model Army* (2010) private militias swarm over the English countryside, organized spontaneously and democratically through Wikis that allow the mercenaries to communicate their preferences for strategy in real time. The interconnectivity of the militias and their decision-making process, facilitated through GPS and the internet, is in contrast with the geo-political zones they occupy and fight over. Scotland has long seceded from the political zone once described as the 'United' Kingdom, and the UK in turn has seceded from the European Union. What remains of Europe is a patchwork of lands, protected by any travelling mercenaries that the local rump bureaucracies can engage and afford. A new kind of political and identitarian power foments – the nation state is no more, and the collective power of the body politic, the literal bodies of the soldiers shaping these zones in combat, emerges: 'Now, belatedly, they're realizing that they're not dealing with the flare-up of ancient European intra-belligerence. Or they are dealing with that, but that's not the problem. The problem is that real democracy has come back' (257–258). These issues of fragmentation and the possibility of something new emerging were played out in several other science fiction novels of this period. Christopher Priest's *The Islanders* (2011) imagines a world in

which a collection of islands, the Dream Archipelago is sandwiched between two large land masses at the planet's poles. The novel acts as a kind of tour guide to the islands, a gazetteer, including encyclopaedia-style descriptions of the islands interspersed with interlinking short stories, drawing the reader's attention to the themes of borders and connections. In one story, a couple are travelling together and considering a sexual relationship. As they go to bed together, the woman says that she does not want their relationship to become physical and the man should imagine a sheet of glass between them. He thinks:

> I knew about glass, but the glass I knew about was not for looking through, nor was it a barrier. On the contrary it was a medium of transient, non-fixed effect, used to control or enhance an electronic flow at some frequencies, while at others it functioned as an insulator or compressor. Her metaphor did not work for me.
>
> Priest 2011: 260

Through the negotiations of the bodies of these lovers, *The Islanders* draws on the themes of connection and distance, the border as a window to another country, and one that can be read through the body politic of an army, or the bodies of lovers in a different kind of boundary negotiation.

New Model Army and *The Islanders* were published at the beginning of the decade, and many of the themes with which these novels are concerned would come to define the 2010s in Britain. The political fracturing of the land was begun with the (failed) Scottish Referendum campaign that nevertheless made a strong case for Scotland as a separate political entity, a case that continues to be reflected in the starkly different political cultures of Westminster and Holyrood. This episode was followed by the fracturing of Britain's relationship with the EU through 2016's Brexit referendum. These issues were centred

around specific events, referenda that anchored the news cycles for long stretches of time, but less easy to quantify was the damage sustained by Britain's communities as a result of the long policy of austerity, officially inaugurated by the Liberal Democrat–Conservative coalition government in 2010, that ate away at the country's infrastructure over the course of this decade. Likewise, the influence of the American culture wars on UK politics and the country's own reckoning with its past – culminating most visibly in the UK Black Lives Matter and decolonization movements – sometimes seemed to result in political polarization often stoked by a news media struggling to keep its head above water in the new attention economy. Finally, the looming existential threat of the climate crisis, (looming because its extant effects are often repressed), provides a terrifying backdrop to these crises. The emergence of new communities and possibilities, linked together by the power of communication technologies, and finding a sense of belonging and shared agency amongst these divisive times, remains hypothetical and experimental but continues to be imagined in speculative fictions.

In response to these circumstances, the speculative fiction of the 2010s has seen a number of trends emerge that I will trace through this chapter. There was already a well-established tradition of weird fiction in the UK, remarked upon in the most significant recent periodization of British sf, known as the 'British Boom' and documented by Andrew M. Butler (2003). Originally including China Miéville and Jeff Noon, in the 2010s this weird tradition shifted ever closer to realism, in the hands of M. John Harrison and Nina Allan among others. The settings for these fictions were largely urban, but a greater focus on rural settings, or at least settings beyond the metropoles, became more commonplace as writers tackled the perceived polarization between the concerns of the urban 'cultural elites' and working-class concerns largely associated with people living in ex-mining communities and rural economies. These class divisions were used as a way of reading the divisions that led to

Brexit, and the issues are often conflated to some extent, as in the work of Dave Hutchinson, whose works including the *Fractured Europe* sequence (2014–18) and *Shelter* (2018) draw on these divisions to explore contemporary British politics and masculinity. The fracturing of political collectives and these divisions between the metropoles and the rest of the country, between the different countries of the UK and even between the different regions, resulted in (and were the result of) deep anxieties about the meaning of Englishness in the contemporary world. It sometimes seemed that as the strength of Welsh, Scottish, and Cornish identity grew, English identity was increasingly beset by the lack of a positive identity; the flag of St George had often been associated with racism and an insular 'little England' leaving little room for a positive, democratic vision of what England might come to represent in a time after the empire or, indeed, after the United Kingdom. This manifested in fiction with concerns about the enchantment and disenchantment of the land. Inflected with anxieties about climate change and the threats it poses to the English countryside, this weird literature that seeks to find the magic in the land, the magic that connects landscapes with concepts like 'community' and 'home' also acted as inspiration for Mark Fisher's theorization. A cultural critic and university lecturer, Fisher's best-known work roughly coincides with the decade of the 2010s and in many ways captures the often anxious and pessimistic tone of these debates. The 2010s also saw the US Culture Wars have major ramifications for the UK sf scene, a situation that resulted in the celebration of more diverse perspectives, including a series of texts dealing with the relationship between the individual and the state through the body, and specifically through the experience of pregnancy. Beginning with Joanna Kavenna's *The Birth of Love* in 2010, these texts use more traditional science fictional toolsets, working within dystopia or with technological nova like babies gestated outside of the womb, to engage with healthcare and the body as means of control by the state or by private corporations. Finally, technological anxieties about surveillance technology were in evidence

throughout much of 'hard' British sf, but also provided an opportunity for thinking about how new and utopian interconnected collectives might be brought into being. Tim Maughan's *Infinite Detail* (2019) shows the concerns surrounding the misuse of algorithms, surveillance, and social media while exploring the utopian obverse of these issues – the ability to produce new communities. Perhaps ironically, Maughan's utopian vision of the internet is based on another fracturing, the separation of a local internet enclave from the World Wide Web, allowing a local and democratic mobilization of internet technologies. By finding the utopian possibilities in the fractures, sf of the 2010s offers some hope against a backdrop that has often seemed irrevocably bleak.

Mark Fisher and the speculative theory of the 2010s

Alongside the speculative literature of 2010s Britain there was a continuing speculative theoretical and academic engagement with literature and society. There have often been productive crossovers between speculative theory and speculative fiction (see, for example, Donna J. Haraway's literary-theoretical interventions from the 'Cyborg Manifesto' [1984] onwards, or Jean Baudrillard's theoretical evocation of the politics of J.G. Ballard, cyberpunk and simulation in his 'Two Essays', 1991). The most significant figure to be publishing in Britain during this period, with work that straddled the lines between theory and speculative literary practice, was Mark Fisher. Through his blog *K-Punk*, and later through a series of popular theoretical interventions, Fisher theorized the weird and the eerie, the role of genre in thinking through the politics of contemporary Britain, the relationship between the urban jungle and the eerie rural landscape, and the splitting of identity versus the work needing to be done by solidarity. All of these issues are mobilized in the speculative fiction of the decade and make Fisher a crucial figure both for theorizing these works, and as a primary text

for literary attention, in that he articulates his political-theoretical positions using the motifs and language of speculative fiction and conveys the despairing pessimism and the dreamlike imaginings of his contemporary era.

Fisher's most significant text, *Capitalist Realism*, was published in 2009 in the immediate wake of 2008's worldwide financial crisis that saw the banks bailed out with trillions of pounds of taxpayers' money as financial institutions were deemed 'too big to fail' by political leaders. Fisher continued to publish, teach, and act as a public commentator until his death by suicide in 2017. Fisher's theoretical project is therefore substantially concurrent with the decade of the 2010s and these years saw him emerge as a major voice for understanding the contemporary economic and cultural situation as his work ranged from literary aesthetics, genre, to the politics of British music production since the 1980s. *Capitalist Realism* framed the problems of 'late' capitalism, or neoliberalism, in genre terms, opening with a reading of Alfonso Cuarón's dystopian film *Children of Men* (2006), and threading speculative readings throughout. Fisher described a compulsory realism as a correlate of the Thatcherite neoliberal dogma that 'there is no alternative' to capitalism. Realism as an aesthetic is therefore aligned with the neoliberal agenda and acts as a means of closing down debate about the utopian possibilities of other futures and other possible communities, or ways of organizing society. While capitalist realism closes down these utopian possibilities, the reality itself is 'fungible' according to Fisher: 'Capitalist realism…entails subordinating oneself to a reality that is infinitely plastic, capable of reconfiguring itself at any moment' (54), a phenomenon he reads through Ursula K. Le Guin's novel *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971), in which the protagonist remakes reality with his mind as he reveals his subconscious thoughts and desires to a therapist who then harnesses this power to his own ends. The rational approach associated with 'realism' and the demands for campaigners and citizens to 'be realistic' when demanding possible political outcomes

turns out to be a precarious state, when the reality they are being asked to conform to is, in fact, built on shifting sands where the premises change regularly to suit the flows of capital and the unforeseen disasters associated with the free market and neoliberalism.

While Fisher's prognosis was that capitalist realism was closing down alternatives to the status quo, he found some alternatives still survived, haunting the late-capitalist machinery. In 2014's *Ghosts of My Life*, Fisher adopted Derrida's concept of hauntology from *Spectres of Marx* (1993), a portmanteau term that evokes beings that are not quite there through drawing on haunting and ontology in the same term. Fisher particularly saw the hauntology of alternative affects and ways of being in certain strains of British music, some of which he described as inhabiting alternative realities where British culture could have turned out differently. Fisher imagines a 1990s Britain culturally defined by Bristolian record producer Tricky's dark and complex trip hop, instead of the mainstream 'Britpop' of rock bands Oasis and Blur, which was promoted by Tony Blair as part of the 'Cool Britannia' rebranding of the country. Fisher calls Tricky, 'the herald of a future for British music that never materialised' (41), and describes the work of Goldie and Tricky together, writing:

> theirs was not a music that petitioned for inclusion in any kind of ordinariness. Instead, it revelled in its otherworldliness, its science-fictional glamour. Like art pop's first pioneer, Bowie, it was about identification with the alien, where the alien stood in for the technologically new and the cognitively strange – and ultimately for forms of social relations that were as yet only faintly imaginable.
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> Fisher 2014: 42

This was music that promised a Britain that might revel in strangeness and difference, rather than seeking to find a bland monoculture to act as a baseline default into which others could

be ‘included’. Trip hop, jungle, and these other ghostly genres evoked the kind of radical spaces imagined in music subcultures and the unregulated urban spaces to be found in China Miéville and Jeff Noon’s British Boom novels and those weird fictions that would follow in the 2010s. While dreaming of these radical spaces, Fisher’s tone is funereal. For Fisher, these hauntings are just that – spectres of a past that never was, and of a culture that can never be. These traces of radicalism in the British underground are glowing embers of a long-past possibility that cannot be recaptured, a tone that is tempting to read biographically given the pain of Fisher’s life-long experience with a depression that would ultimately end his life. The melancholy of identifying these hauntological cultural figures, moments, and modes is combined with the conviction that they could have led to an alternative culture, an alternative Britain, to the one we currently inhabit. This conviction filters through Fisher’s work and places his critique at a juncture between identifying the dystopian tendences in British culture, and recognizing the flickering utopian impulses that have never flourished, but surely may yet offer a vision for a better future.

Fisher most directly dealt with speculative fictions in his sustained analysis *The Weird and the Eerie* (2016) and his essay ‘Exiting the Vampire Castle’ (2013). *The Weird and the Eerie* mapped out definitions of those titular terms and discussed them predominantly in terms of an English culture, drawing on the ghost stories of M.R. James, perhaps best known for the short story ‘The Monkey’s Paw’ (1902); the titular preserved paw grants the owner a wish, but it will be granted at a cost. The couple who come into possession of the paw wish to have their money problems solved, but it turns out this comes at the expense of their son’s death, the windfall arriving in the form of a compensation payment for his workplace accident. Fisher begins by discussing the two terms in the light of Freud’s essay on the *unheimlich* (commonly translated as ‘the uncanny’, but this does not satisfy Fisher and he uses the German). For Fisher, Freud’s eventual conclusions do not explain the status this

essay has accrued as one of the key interventions in aesthetics of the twentieth century; rather, Fisher points to the theories that Freud picks up and puts down again, his numerous examples and hypotheses, and the ways in which repetition and the figure of the doppelganger circulate throughout. Fisher is positioning the weird and the eerie as distinguishable from, and even opposite to, the *unheimlich*; he sees the *unheimlich* as a view of the outside taken from the inside, whereas, 'the weird and the eerie make the opposite move: they allow us to see the inside from the perspective of the outside' (2016: 10). In Fisher's differentiation, 'the weird is that *which does not belong*' (10), and can be described through the example of a cinematic montage placing incongruous images against each other, as in surrealism. Meanwhile, 'the eerie seldom clings to enclosed and inhabited domestic spaces; we find the eerie more readily in landscapes partially emptied of the human' (11). Therefore, in Fisher's analysis, the eerie raises questions of agency. With humans absent from the scene, the terror comes from the knowledge that something inhuman must be the source of any sounds or activity in the landscape. An example of this might be the M.R. James story 'The Mezzotint' (1904), in which the titular mezzotint (a printed copper plate), features the aspect of a country house, with no human figures present. As the story progresses, a figure does appear, but its inhumanity strikes terror into the viewer.[1]

In 'Exiting the Vampire Castle', Fisher once again uses a motif from fantastic literature to explore contemporary politics, this time using the figure of the vampire to discuss the 'call-out culture' that he identifies among contemporary leftists. The practice of 'calling out' initially began as a well-meaning attempt to give learning opportunities to activists who might be able to 'be better' if informed that their behaviour was harmful, or damaging in some way. It also offered opportunities to root out more damaging behaviours by challenging activist communities to address issues of sexual exploitation or systemic racism. However, driven by the polarizing effects of social media, call-out culture began to

police the speech of others, looking for increasingly minor deviations from the political narrative accepted (often implicitly) by a wider group, and pillorying individuals who failed to live up to the standards deemed to be required. Punishment could involve ostracism from online groups, or from in-person activist communities, an atmosphere that made communication – especially communication that might involve disagreement – stressful, and incentivized non-confrontational (and therefore less productive) political conversation. Fisher describes this atmosphere through his own experiences:

> 'Left-wing' Twitter can often be a miserable, dispiriting zone. Earlier this year, there were some high-profile twitterstorms, in which particular left-identifying figures were 'called out' and condemned. What these figures had said was sometimes objectionable; but nevertheless, the way in which they were personally vilified and hounded left a horrible residue: the stench of bad conscience and witch-hunting moralism. The reason I didn't speak out on any of these incidents, I'm ashamed to say, was fear. The bullies were in another part of the playground. I didn't want to attract their attention to me.
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> Fisher 2013: n.p.

Fisher saw this as a major barrier to solidarity in leftist movements, and advocated for creating spaces where difficult conversations could be had in a spirit of solidarity. There were some critiques of Fisher's position at the time, and more broadly there has been a public debate about whether 'call-out culture', or arguably its successor 'cancel culture', exist, and if they do about which 'side' of the political divide bears the brunt of the chilling effect (Norris 2021). However, given the affective atmosphere Fisher describes, it is fair to argue that a *belief* in call-out culture would have a chilling effect on speech, regardless of any material evidence or long-term consequences for those who have been 'called out' or 'cancelled' –

and, indeed, the online vitriol in response to 'Exiting the Vampire Castle' led to Fisher leaving Twitter permanently. In reference to activists who had dismissed the political interventions of the working-class comedian Russell Brand, partly through focusing on his use of (to use Brand's words) 'proletarian linguistics' (quoted in Fisher) that they found sexist, Fisher analyses what he calls, 'this grim and demoralising pass, where class has disappeared, but moralism is everywhere, where solidarity is impossible, but guilt and fear are omnipresent – and not because we are terrorised by the right, but because we have allowed bourgeois modes of subjectivity to contaminate our movement' (2013: n.p.). The other example Fisher gives is the online pillorying of Owen Jones, a journalist and author responsible for the most successful and mainstream critique of British class politics in the 2010s, a reaction that Fisher simply puts down to a distrust of 'celebrity', or popular culture, and one that would, taken to its logical conclusion, dismiss any left-wing voice unless coming from 'a position of impotent marginality' rendering it useless in affecting any change. Fisher uses the Vampires' Castle as an image to describe this environment, where bourgeois identities are used to deflect from class consciousness:

> the Vampires' Castle was born the moment when the struggle *not* to be defined by identitarian categories became the quest to have 'identities' recognised by a bourgeois big Other… the Vampires' Castle seeks to corral people back into identi-camps, where they are forever defined in the terms set by dominant power, crippled by self-consciousness and isolated by a logic of solipsism which insists that we cannot understand one another unless we belong to the same identity group.
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> Fisher 2013: n.p., original emphasis

Fisher particularly draws attention to the elision of class in such discussions, and the impossibility of criticizing the Vampires' Castle without being accused of standing with racists, sexists, homophobes and the rest. In using the Vampires' Castle as an image for this politics, Fisher invokes the Gothic, anti-Catholic representation of the priesthood, as seen most quintessentially in Matthew Gregory Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), to describe this new bourgeois politics as a kind of corrupted and anti-democratic zone of power, claiming victimhood while accruing moral superiority. Most importantly perhaps, Fisher identifies the fracturing of the British socialist movement into multiple identities put to work policing each other as serving the interests of capitalism, because call-out culture acts as a deflection from solidarity and class struggle. Writing in 2013, Fisher did not yet see the divisions that would come to the surface in the Brexit referendum campaign, or in the conspiracy theories that spread through social media, becoming prominently visible in the various covid pandemic conspiracies, but Fisher's analysis points to the fracturing of political identity as both a cause and consequence of capital's attack on community, society, and even nationality. Fisher also saw the role of social media as crucial to understanding the methods of the Vampires' Castle and as a potential route out of it:

> We need to think very strategically about how to use social media – always remembering that, despite the egalitarianism claimed for social media by capital's libidinal engineers, that this is currently an enemy territory, dedicated to the reproduction of capital. But this doesn't mean that we can't occupy the terrain and start to use it for the purposes of producing class consciousness.
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> Fisher 2013: n.p.

The associations of social media with surveillance, advertising, the power of capital and the authoritarianism of the state are taken into account here, but with the acknowledgement that social media may have a role to play in changing the face of British politics, or even being a place to foment political revolution. In finding this grain of hope, Fisher captures the dystopian/utopian tone of much speculative fiction of the 2010s.

The British Boom and weird fiction

For speculative fiction in Britain the most recent significant literary periodization trend is what has been called the 'British Boom' in science fiction, which took place in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The British Boom tapped into the broader phenomenon of weird fiction, one which is part of an American tradition stretching back to H.P. Lovecraft and encompassing the work of significant contemporary authors, particularly Jeff Vandermeer. Vandermeer contributed to the canonization of the genre through his work as an editor alongside Ann Vandermeer, as well as contributing his own writing, including *Annihilation* (2014), which was later made into a significant film (2018) directed by Alex Garland and starring Natalie Portman. However, while this British tradition spoke to the genre of the weird, it did so from a position self-consciously located in Britain. The texts associated with the boom did not simply repackage the American themes and concerns that tend to dominate the science fiction space, but laid claim to an originality based in a serious consideration of the role of Britain (and, more specifically, England) as a potential site of fantasy and subversion, as I have argued elsewhere (McFarlane, 2019: 304–308). Noon showed us a Manchester inhabited by animal-human hybrids on psychedelic drugs while Miéville's London found anthropomorphized rats and jungle music subcultures in the capital's hidden nooks and crannies. The British Boom drew on specific regional areas and their characteristic

communities (particularly their music scenes) to create a speculative fiction that refused the cultural tendency to flatten all territory into an American franchise, and created something really new. Politically, these texts implicitly dealt with a post-Thatcher era that had left many urban communities behind, creating the underground worlds of jungle music and club culture that invited weird alternative identities to flourish, hidden from the light of mainstream society. This weirdness and difference provided a tempting milieu for speculative fiction, and the British Boom was born.

Inevitably, the speculative fiction of the 2010s draws on this background as it deals with similar problems in a new context. The financial crash of 2008 brought Reaganite and Thatcherite policies of the free market to an unsurprising apotheosis, and the system was propped up by the public purse so that the perpetrators were largely safe from consequence while insecurity was the order of the day for the precariat and working people. The age of austerity and the so-called gig economy that grew up around it once more created conditions for communities to fall through the cracks and to grow together in unexpected ways. This time, however, people found it ever more difficult to come together physically (due to finances and shift work) and social media stepped into that space. This tendency has only been exacerbated by the global pandemic that began at the decade's end (many would date this from March 2020 when the UK entered the first of its lockdowns). Weird and unexpected communities have grown up around conspiracy theories, and the attention economy that provokes social media companies to prioritize clicks and eyeballs above all else has fuelled political polarization. Politics was quick to capitalize on the proliferation of online voter data; the campaigning company Cambridge Analytica was shown to be scraping user data from social media accounts to target advertising personally and to promote the causes of Brexit and the election of Donald Trump in 2016. British speculative fiction of the 2010s drew on the tradition of region-specific sf to imagine ways to find solidarity in this divided world and to

combat the internet monopolies which, once again, threatened to flatten out culture into a homogenous reflection of their own monopolies.

Mark Bould identifies the focus on regionality as a revival in weird fiction: 'In its focus on landscape, rural lifeways, and horrors ancient and modern, supernatural and secular, this revival formulates complex, anxious responses to the destabilizations of globalised modernity, including climate upheaval; it constantly risks, without necessarily falling into, a dangerous nativist essentialism' (2022: 148 n5). He argues that this new weird is related to the English eerie (as identified by Fisher) and the 'pictureskew', a concept developed by China Miéville as 'not a contradiction to the picturesque, but its bad conscience' (Miéville 2018: n.p.). Of course, Miéville, one of the key writers identified in the British Boom, continued to work during this period, publishing *Railsea* in 2012, a weird rewriting of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) set on a planet connected by a sea of intersecting railway lines. The image of the railway is prominent in Miéville's work – his Bas-Lag novel *The Iron Council* (2004) features a group of railway workers gone rogue, building the railway line as they travel, so that they can choose their own path in a kind of Communist-trade union inspired fantastic utopia. In his non-fiction work, *October: The Story of the Russian Revolution* (2017), the railway is also an important symbol as it carries Lenin in and out of exile and bears communications across the vast, quickly-changing landscape of Russia's vast terrains. In Britain, of course, the railway has strong working-class and collectivist connotations as a public transport traditionally staffed with well-unionized workers, while Miéville's use develops this into themes about determinism and the individual or collective's ability to shape the future. The railway connects different parts of the country, and it was subject to savage cuts following the Beeching reports (named for their author Richard Beeching) of the 1960s Conservative government under Harold Macmillan.[2] This event served to shut down a large number of rural stations and many miles of rail line, contributing

to the isolation of some communities and the privileging of the metropoles. Therefore, the image of the railway serves to bring together the themes of class war, urban-rural division, and self-determination versus contingency.

Building on the tradition of the British Boom, Nina Allan's work brings the regionality characteristic of British Boom science fiction to life in weird fiction that echoes the work of M. John Harrison in its almost magic-realist intermingling of the mundane and the fantastic. Allan's debut *The Race* (2014) has five distinct sections that rewrite the same stories, acting as a palimpsestuous, and at times hallucinatory, engagement with themes of familial abuse, working-class struggle, and the role of representational art in constructing and maintaining selfhoods and political identities. The first section introduces us to the world of the titular race; a working-class community in an alternate reality Britain is centred around dog-racing that acts as the centre of a gambling economy and as a major focal point for socializing and maintaining community connections. The protagonist, Jenna makes some money crafting bespoke gauntlet gloves for the racers, while her brother Del has effectively wagered his daughter's life on his next race, relying on his unlikely success to repay the loan sharks who have taken her hostage. The next section is told from the perspective of Christy, a writer living in what seems to be the Hastings of our reality. Christy suffers sexual abuse at the hands of her brother, Derek, and their story is a mirror-world version of Jenny and Del's relationship, begging the question of whether Christy is the writer of the story of section one. The following sections add layers and offer different ways of nesting the different narratives together, creating a recursive portrayal of Christy's psychic state, but also a magical realist evocation of Britain and British culture. Jenna/Christy grows up without a mother, with only her emotionally-distant and preoccupied father and her abusive brother. Jenna's work as a gauntlet artisan in the first section reads as a dream of the possibility of the community acceptance and economic productivity that Christy lacks, as social ties for her are almost non-

existent and there is very little help forthcoming from the state, no security net to speak of. The book speaks to the loneliness of a contemporary Britain sucked dry by the austerity politics promoted as a response to the 2008 financial crisis from 2010, and a longer history of working-class neglect dating from post-industrialization and particularly the Thatcher era.

Allan followed *The Race* with *The Rift* (2017), which once again walked the line between the everyday and the fantastic to show the bizarre and extraordinary worlds that exist in what appears to be mundane reality. The book is primarily told from the point of view of Selena Rouane, an assistant in a jeweller's shop whose life shifts on its course when her long-lost sister Julie, missing and presumed murdered, reappears after nearly twenty years. Julie returns with a story that mashes up the mundane with both the horrific and the fantastic. She has fallen through a 'rift' in space time, suddenly transported from Lake Hatchmere near Manchester to the planet of Tristane, (the root 'trist/triste' suggesting a planet of melancholy). The novel intricately describes the geography and architecture of this other planet. Julie also got into a car with someone she calls Stephen Barbershop, someone who Selena knows as Steve Jimson, a murderer convicted after Julie's disappearance who always claimed himself innocent of involvement with Julie. The book consists largely of Selena's narrative and Julie's story, but these sections are interspersed with sections from imaginary books, threaded through with intertextual references to *The X Files* and *Picnic At Hanging Rock*, sections from imaginary novels based on Julie's story, newspaper articles and the scripts of conversations between the two sisters. The treatment of the text as a kind of compendium, and the use of 'found' literatures shows the influence of Jeff Vandermeer whose *City of Saints and Madmen* (2001) uses similar techniques to explore an imaginary world from several angles, or Priest's *The Islanders*, but here these techniques are put to use for the darker ends of exploring the (lack of) separation between fantasy and reality. The *Rift* forms a diptych with *The Race*, as both deal with the ways in which the trauma of sexual

assault separates people from the others around them, creating isolating worlds within worlds. Allan's use of the fantastic proves the point made in magic realism – that this is a true representation of lived experience rather than an escapist fantasy. The horror of sexual assault snatches Julie from her quotidian experience and she can never return, not unlike an alien abduction, or a fall through an unexpected black hole into another universe.

> Could a story change a place? Selena wondered. It was almost as if Julie's version of Hatchmere […] had contaminated the real one, bleeding into it through the rift to make it more like itself. The idea was ridiculous, she knew that, and yet that was how it felt to her, standing there at the side of the road where Julie had stood – perhaps – twenty years ago, balanced upon the hair's-breadth dividing line between one version of reality and another.
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> Allan 2017: 373–374

The influence of narrative on a sense of place shapes it, and Allan characterizes contemporary provincial Britain as a place of dystopia, a scene from a disaster movie:

> Selena thinks of those provincial English cities that become dead zones at night, their precincts and underpasses sinister suddenly, like sets from disaster movies their pavements and car parks flyblown and rain-streaked. Industries laid to waste and workers demonised, history demolished. Racketeering and rent rises, unemployment and bomb damage, decade after decade after decade of governmental neglect.
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> Allan 2017: 365

The setting is important from a characterization perspective, as the loneliness of contemporary Britain makes it all the more believable that Selena would cling to someone who appears from nowhere claiming to be her long-lost sister, but it also situates the text as a commentary on contemporary Britain, a place in search of new communities, identities and narratives.

Impact of the American culture wars on UK sf fandom

While the UK dealt with the Scottish Independence Referendum and the Brexit Referendum, the 2010s saw the culture wars in US politics become increasingly entrenched. The backlash against Barack Obama, the USA's first black president, and the rise of reality television star and political reactionary Donald Trump saw increasingly bitter divisions between Republicans and Democrats, and these often along lines of social issues such as racism, gun ownership, policing, and abortion. These fed into the political polarization seen more broadly across cultures, fuelled by economic crises and social media communication, but they also had specific impacts in speculative fiction fan communities and sf literature, both in the US and abroad. In the US, the main event around which discussion of the culture wars in sf fan cultures circulated was the Sad Puppies debacle. The Sad Puppies (named ironically for a dismissive and sarcastic way of describing someone upset on the internet), were a group of sf fans who claimed that science fiction fan culture had been monopolized by 'social justice warriors' at the expense of the quality of the literature itself. The group realized that with only a small, coordinated group it was possible to change the nominations on the ballots of the Hugo Awards, the most important science fiction fan awards in the US, awarded annually by the members of the World Science Convention ('Worldcon'). They began in 2013 by trying unsuccessfully to get works written by their organizers onto the ballot, an aim they

achieved in 2014, when the Worldcon took place in London. In 2015, they organized full suggested 'slates' of nominations for consideration by members, while an even more extreme group, the 'Rabid Puppies', offered a similar slate that it asked supporters to submit without alteration. These attempts to subvert the award process were defeated by the mobilization of Hugo voters to vote against Puppy nominations, even to the extent of having to vote for 'no award' in cases where the entire shortlist was comprised of puppy nominees (see Walter 2015). The Puppies were similarly defeated in 2016 (see Barnett 2016). Rather than a measure of popularity, or artistic merit, the Hugo Awards were in danger of becoming a proxy zone for political arguments, but the issue was dealt with via a change in the voting regulations in 2017 which made bloc voting of this kind more difficult. The 2010s also saw the rebranding of a number of major awards as fandom took steps to come to terms with some of its difficult history. In 2015, the World Fantasy Awards changed the design of their trophies. Previously these had taken the form of a small bust of H.P. Lovecraft but, in recognition of the racist premises of Lovecraft's writing (particularly fundamental to his famous story 'The Call of Cthulhu', 1926) the design was changed in 2015. The James Tiptree Jr. Award, named for Alice B. Sheldon's nom de plume and given in recognition of science fiction or fantasy exploring gender norms, was renamed The Otherwise Award in 2019. Concerns had been raised about Sheldon's death by suicide after killing her ailing partner, leading to discussions about whether Sheldon's act was an example of 'caregiver murder'. Finally, the Joseph W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer was renamed the Astounding Award following winner Jeannette Ng's critique of Campbell as a fascist in her 2019 acceptance speech in Dublin.

While the Hugos and these other awards bodies have been traditionally based in the USA – although the Worldcon has increasingly taken place outside the US since 2010 – and the Sad Puppies debacle was primarily reflective of US politics, these developments were

widely followed and reported, and had a big impact on UK fandom as well. An immediate result was a greater concern for diversity in sf awards and attention to the demographic make up of the nominations. This was primarily discussed through analysis of submissions to, shortlists for, and winners of, the annual Arthur C. Clarke Award for best science fiction novel published in the UK. The Clarke Award is unusual in publishing full lists of the novels submitted, and therefore holds some good data on changes in the diversity of not just the shortlists but also the wider field in the UK over time. The evidence showed that the Clarke Award became more diverse over the 2010s, sometimes exceeding 30 per cent women in the submissions. While this is clearly a long way from gender parity, this was an improvement on the previous decade, which more often saw submissions from women under 20 per cent (Hunter 2019). The Clarke Award also showed diversity in its winners during the decade 2010–20, with six women being honoured and three writers of colour (Tade Thompson, Colson Whitehead, and Namwali Serpell). These are, of course, blunt metrics for assessing diversity, but the trend in UK fandom and awards culture was towards highlighting perspectives that had previously gone unrecognized and, based on the Clarke Award data, this meant a greater award platform for Black writers and women dealing with issues related to gender and power.

The importance of women writing on gender can also be better understood in the context of the American culture wars. As the culture wars stoked up polarization on the issue of abortion in the USA (culminating in 2022 with the US Supreme Court's overturn of the landmark Roe vs Wade ruling that protected the right to abortion at a federal level), a whole genre of feminist dystopias, taking Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) as an origin text, proliferated. In the US these novels included Hilary Jordan's *When She Woke* (2011), Meg Ellison's *The Book of the Unnamed Midwife* (2014), and Leni Zumas's *Red Clocks* (2018). These dystopias dramatize and explore the threats to bodily autonomy

experienced in the contemporary USA through speculative dystopias and have been criticized for using the genre of the slave narrative to do so (Crawley 2018), finding horror in the idea that what has already systematically happened to enslaved Black Americans might one day happen to white women. In the UK, writers built from this genre with a twist, more often situating their writing on reproduction as a critique of eugenics (in the tradition of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, 1932) while also feeding into contemporary anxieties about the threatened National Health Service in the UK as austerity over the 2010s led to substantial cuts and privatization syphoned money ringfenced for healthcare into private profits (McFarlane 2022). It would not be right to say that the moral or religious objections to abortion are settled in the UK – there have been worrying comments in recent years from Conservative Members of Parliament, including Jacob Rees-Mogg and the Health Secretary at the time Jeremy Hunt. It is also the case that abortion has not been decriminalized in the UK, meaning that women are still arrested in some cases of stillbirth and miscarriage (Das 2022). This situation means that there is little room for complacency in UK abortion politics. However, in speculative fiction the issues tend not to be framed in terms of religious fundamentalism to the same extent as the American feminist dystopias, but in terms of healthcare, agency, and control.

Perhaps most significantly is the focus on ectogenesis in these novels. Anne Charnock's Clarke-Award winning *Dreams Before the Start of Time* (2017), Helen Sedgwick's *The Growing Season* (2017), and Rebecca Ann Smith's *Baby X* (2016) all imagine a future where babies are gestated outside of the womb. Furthermore, all three novels imagine this development in technology as an intrusion of private profit into the private world of gestating and birthing babies. Ectogenesis, that is the gestation of foetuses outside the womb, is not currently possible, but there have been advances in this technology during the course of the decade. Lamb foetuses have been gestated in 'bio-bags' with the intention that

this technology could be available to premature babies in the near future. The feminist implications of this have primarily been explored by Sophie Lewis (2019), a British commentator living and working in the USA, who sees bio-bags as posing a risk to the (already under threat) availability of abortion. Given that legislation surrounding abortion is often based on the viability of the foetus, the availability of bio-bags could reduce the timescale for abortion and result in more forced parenthood. However, on the other side of this debate, there is a tradition of radical feminist promotion of ectogenesis as a tool for overcoming the biological burden of carrying children, and thereby working towards women's liberation, see for example the work of Shulamith Firestone (1970), and the liberal feminist tradition has continued in this vein to some extent, as Evie Kendal (2015) argues from a bioethics perspective that ectogenesis could lead to gender equality, particularly in granting women greater, more equitable access to the workplace.

Rather than offering women freedom from the literal burden of carrying the next generation (as envisaged by techno-utopian feminisms such as Firestone), I have argued elsewhere that reading these novels:

> shows the difficulties that women in the UK face as they consider the future of reproduction in a society where universal healthcare is under a slow but constant assault. In their different ways, these novels diagnose a bleak situation in which technologies that could change social and political relations might be envisaged, but these technologies will simply move into a pre-existing matrix of social and gender inequality, rendering them tools of oppression.
>
> McFarlane 2022: 39

Joanna Kavenna's *The Birth of Love* also deals with these issues, although in a way that foregrounds the experience of pregnancy and birth as philosophically and existentially important to a greater extent, placing a narrative about the deaths of women from childbed fever (because of the increasing medicalization of birth and the doctors' ignorance of germ theory) against a dystopian future in which the population is controlled as a response to climate change, and childbirth has been fully automated, severed from its affective ties. Jane Rogers's *The Testament of Jessie Lamb* (2011, another winner of the Clarke Award) follows in the footsteps of P.D. James's *Children of Men* (1992), in that a sickness is making it impossible for women to give birth without sacrificing their lives, and is related to Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* in its use of a personal testimony as a narrative device. Ken MacLeod's *Intrusion* (2012) shows the use of biopolitics via healthcare as a means of controlling the public and reveals the eugenicist assumptions underpinning such authoritarian intrusions into individual liberty, while Paul McAuley's *Austral* (2016) uses miscarriage as a metaphor for an uncertain future in the face of climate change. At first glance, these novels (particularly those authored by women) could be read alongside that tradition of the feminist dystopia coming from the US, but on closer examination there is a long tradition of eugenics discourse and the specific situation of NHS healthcare that gives them a particularly British outlook that is important to consider in their interpretation.

Infinite Detail and surveillance

This chapter has focused to a great extent on the political fractures that became impossible to ignore in the 2010s – between the rural and the metropole, the political polarizations of Brexit and austerity, and the effects of the American culture wars on UK sf culture. A driving factor that I have mentioned regularly, but never tackled directly, is the importance of the internet

and social media in finding expression for these divisions and in stoking their fires. Mark Fisher's description of the Vampires' Castle began to engage with social media and its problems as a political tool as it mobilized bourgeois identity categories, and the surveillance potential of communications technologies and the potential for abuse by nation states was revealed by Edward Snowden in 2013 when he showed the extent of the USA's National Security Agency's incursions into the private lives of American citizens. Critique of social media, the internet as a tool for political surveillance, and the danger of unexamined algorithms as drivers for shaping our spaces for communication have been the target of several significant British sf novels of the decade. Tim Maughan's *Infinite Detail* (2019) is an example that builds on the regionality of the British Boom and contemporary weird fiction, while also critiquing the internet and thinking about some utopian paths beyond the current difficulties of finding a commons beyond the attention economy and the polarization stoked by the micro-blogging format used in Facebook posts and tweets. *Infinite Detail* responds to this cultural milieu with a novel in the tradition of the British Boom that remixes those regional and musical tendencies for the occasion. *Infinite Detail* gives a near-future portrayal of a Bristol that has been torn apart by a cataclysmic event; the internet has shut down, leaving the UK as an unmapped terrain where people struggle to survive without the rule of law, basic utilities or supply chains. Bristol is a particularly evocative setting for the novel. Maughan's Bristol is multicultural and defined by cultural exchange and music as a zone of community. Bristol was a key site for the British Black Lives Matter protests that took place in June 2020 following the police murder in the USA of George Floyd. A controversial statue of a Bristolian slave trader, Edward Colston, who had gifted some of his riches to the city for philanthropic projects and given his name to a number of local roads and landmarks, was torn down and thrown into the harbour (Siddique and Skopeliti, 2020). Bristol was also home to the trip hop scene, including Tricky who grew up in the city's Knowle West council housing

estate and became emblematic of an alternative Britain in the writings of Mark Fisher. It is also known as the home of guerrilla artist, Banksy, who used the nearby lido at Weston-Super-Mare as the setting for his most significant artistic installation, Dismaland, in the summer of 2015. These radical artistic, cultural, and political roots are drawn upon in Maughan's rendering of a UK broken by infrastructural and political failure.

The novel's alternating chapters give us a 'before' and an 'after'. In the 'before' chapters we learn about the People's Republic of Stokes Croft, an area of Bristol where the internet has been jammed by cyberactivist and hacker Rushdi Manaan and replaced by a localized communitarian network, known as 'Flex', allowing artists to map the area using virtual graffiti and to live together experimentally. Characters wear 'spex', similar to Google Glasses, spectacles that allow them to access the internet and to see virtual reality mapped onto physical reality. In the aftermath, a young girl, Mary, moves through the rubble of Bristol, seeing the ghosts of those who died in the violence and sometimes bringing comfort and closure to their searching families. She draws the faces she sees, pinning them to the wall to make a memorial to the dead in an abandoned retail unit, surrounded by the 'kaleidoscopic mass of debris' (2019: 4) left to her by the believers – gifts from desperate people who have nothing of value to give. If someone recognizes a portrait, she gives it to them for free. It turns out that Mary is able to tap into the Flex network so that she can see those final moments before the network died, the technology haunting the area, the supernatural and the virtual laid over each other indistinguishably.

The before and the after have contrasting tones that align with their affective worlds. In the 'before' there is the rush of busy, multicultural urban living – perhaps more noticeable in a post-2020 reading when the excitement, anonymity, and closeness to strangers that the city can offer has been in short supply, or problematized, during the course of the pandemic. This is dramatized through the motif of hand-holding and of touching things with one's

hands. On the New York subway some commuters wear anti-bac gloves to avoid the germs – pointing out that 'you don't know who has been touching what, where their hands have been before' (40) – while Rush holds hands with a homeless man to pay for him to get through the subway barrier. 'The city recognises that they're together'. The 'before', in that rush of urbanism and the communitarian politics of the People's Republic of Stokes Croft, gives the sense of excitement that comes from criticality, the urge to tear down the power structures that restrict the possibilities (for the internet, for identity, for meaning making) and to make something new as a subversive supplement to the mainstream digital-capitalist hegemony. In the 'after', this excitement has abated and the people collectively take on the grim challenge of living onwards. The nostalgia for the 'before times', for the order of the connected world, is combined with solastalgia, a term coined by Glen Albrecht in 2007 to describe the mourning for a world unaffected by climate change and its associated environmental disruptions. This nostalgia and solastalgia are located in the debris of digital capitalism, the plastic throwaway objects brought in via global supply chains from the engine of production that is China. Once these supply chains are shut down, the disposable single-use objects will never be replaced, and they become vessels for longing, representations of a society that contained the seeds of its own destruction, but nonetheless was home.

As well as its evocative and detailed engagement with the city of Bristol as its setting, *Infinite Detail* draws on the British Boom's tradition of engaging with urban, DIY music and associated subcultures. Live music events and raves temporarily make spaces for alternative forms of community and connection. This is disrupted by the cataclysmic event. When we first see Mary walk through the wreckage of Stokes Croft with the grieving parents of a dead boy 'Airborne reggae vibes drift across the street from somewhere, pulses and tones, like the jungle tape stripped of its urgency' (16) – the music is a shadow of its former self, no longer pulsing with a beat that engages the body via vibration as much as the ear, no longer alive

with the urgency of counter-culture and community – drifting like the ghost of its former self in an echo of Mark Fisher's hauntologies.

In its evocation of a Bristol painted and overlaid with virtual reality art the home of Banksy is dramatized as a space where the community is trying to take back some agency, although the enterprise of the hackers and art activists is also mooted as a kind of gentrification, causing barriers to local people. In a newspaper article about the People's Republic of Stokes Croft there are interviews with a local shopkeeper who has had to replace his surveillance equipment in order that it can function in the PRSC so that his insurance premiums will not be affected; a delivery driver complains about having to leave the area to pick up the day's jobs while her daughter, employed on a zero hours contract, also has to leave so that she can receive shifts via her mobile phone. The problems caused by the zone highlight the encroachment of digitalization into the working lives of the people in Stokes Croft, making visible the structural inequalities that force them to dance to the tune of the internet and the few giant corporations that occupy what was once vaunted as a commons. This is echoed in New York where the NYC app uses smart bins to return the deposit for a drinks can straight to the user, thereby taking away the livelihood of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of homeless and precarious people who rely on collecting cans for subsistence. Taxi driving jobs have already been taken away thanks to self-driving cars, making the gig economy an obsolescent model not long after its emergence – already the precarious jobs it provided are being colonized by digitization and automation.

Conclusion

Infinite Detail, alongside many other examples of 2010s British speculative fiction, works through the shocks of the last thirteen years, and the threat posed by the systems in which we

find ourselves entangled. Artificial intelligence, surveillance capitalism, and the unfettered growth of Silicon Valley monopolies that extend unprecedented influence over our quotidian activities and our political landscape are the subject of the speculative fantasy of conspiracy theory, as well as the critical utopias of sf writers. For example, Nick Harkaway's critique of state surveillance in 2017's *Gnomon* shows an interest in a sense of place, refiguring London as a place created around you as you move, a replica of the city filtered through digital logic. Harkaway's novel ranges over a number of locales, but perhaps most notably the financial markets in post-crash Greece, a country which suffered particular shocks in the crisis aftermath. The possibility that we might be living in a digital simulation is made more real by the mediation of our political and economic structures by internet intrusion and surveillance, and our personal relationships as social media shapes identity. Our behaviour is nudged and changed imperceptibly by the internet's need for clicks and advertising revenue, leading to a feeling that we are not in control of our collective direction. Material landscapes and the remnants of past cultures (industrial, musical), linger beneath the data, haunting contemporary science fiction with the loss of futures that never came to be, what Fisher describes, quoting Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, as 'the slow cancellation of the future' (Fisher 2014: 6). However, while Fisher bemoans the inertia of contemporary culture, British science fiction finds in these mournful hauntings a new style that combines the mulch of rural landscapes with post-industrial, post-Thatcher, post-austerity, post-Brexit politics.

From this negativity emerge utopian expectations in speculative fiction and concerted attempts to find ways to mitigate the power of Silicon Valley, to overcome the fractured politics of the decade and to find a new sense of community. Like Maughan's free internet zone in Bristol, Canadian-British author Cory Doctorow (based in London during the early 2010s) writes prolifically on the potential for freeing the commons of the internet from the private companies who have colonized it over the last decades, perhaps most notably in

2017's *Walkaway* which shows the potential for leaving behind the overdetermined spaces of mainstream digital society and making something new. In *Infinite Detail* the architect of the People's Republic of Stokes Croft, Rushdi Manaan, gives what could be a manifesto for this thread of speculative fiction in the 2010s:

> This is an experiment, a statement. People don't realise how reliant we are on the internet now. If it disappeared tomorrow there'd be chaos. It's not just that you wouldn't be able to Facebook your mates or read the news – everything is connected to it now. The markets would stop trading. The economy would collapse. There'd probably be no electricity, no food in the shops. Vital equipment in hospitals would stop working. It's not just your phone or your spex – cars, busses, trains – everything would grind to a halt. It'd feel like the end of the world. We're just trying to show people how dependent we've all become on something that we don't own, that isn't controlled by us. We're just trying to show people that there are alternatives, different ways of doing things.
>
> Maughan 2019: 84–85

Notes

1. The story was adapted for television by Mark Gatiss and screened over Christmas 2021; in terms of television culture, this English concept of the weird and the eerie is regularly engaged by Gatiss in his television work, and his *League of Gentlemen* collaborators Reece Shearsmith and Steve Pemberton in their anthology series *Inside No. 9* (2014–present).

2. For more on the Beeching Reports and their legacy, see Charles Loft's *Government, the Railways and the Modernization of Britain: Beeching's Last Trains* (2006).

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