A history of our connected future: dystopia, telecommunication technology and space
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A History of Our Connected Future:
Dystopia, Telecommunication Technology and Space

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Introduction

Telecommunication technology has provided dystopian fiction with some of its most enduring symbols. The “cinematophote” in E.M. Forster’s “The Machine Stops” (1909), Big Brother and the “telescreen” in Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949), Clarke and Kubrick’s HAL 9000, cyberspace and the Matrix are all archetypal representations of dystopianess. While it would be an exaggeration to claim that the relationship between communication devices and dystopia is exclusive, there is a strong sense of the interplay between telecommunication technologies and such narratives.

The central concern of this study is the analysis of this intersection between a technology and a narrative tradition. Throughout this dissertation I argue that dystopian literature is characterized by a set of spatial attributes that overlap with the sense of space that the user perspectives of modern communication devices project. Because of these similarities, dystopian narrative has become strongly associated with communication devices and developed along with the subtly shifting user perspectives afforded by the telegraph, telephone, television and the Internet. I unpack these arguments over the course of five chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 explore the characteristics of dystopian narrative and show its relationship to emergent communication technologies. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 illustrate the historical development of this relationship and show how telecommunication technologies have informed different variations of dystopian narrative. Starting with the origins of the dystopian genre in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, these chapters show how communication technologies informed several variants of dystopian fiction throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Chapter 1 begins by exploring the notion that dystopian narrative is characterized by certain spatial poetics. As I point out, this hypothesis conflicts with current critical theory on utopian and dystopian narrative. Predominantly, utopia scholars conceptualize utopia and dystopia as narratives about imagined societies that are “good” and “bad” respectively. I argue that while this categorization seems ostensibly very reasonable, it fails to accurately describe both literary traditions. In fact, utopian texts cannot in general be said to be about “good” societies. Thomas More’s Utopia (1516), for example, relies on the forced relocation of citizens, the
banishment of dissidents and their subjection to hierarchical patriarchy—characteristics we normally associate with “bad” dystopian narratives—to maintain the “perfect” society. Indeed, both from the perspective of the author as well as that of the reader, it seems impossible to read Utopia, simply and unproblematically, as a text about a “good” imagined society. Similarly, dystopian narratives in the main cannot be said to be about “bad” societies. Certainly, films such as The Matrix (1999) seemingly “warn” about the dangers of technology by showing a post-apocalyptic future. However, this dystopian caution turns out to be only skin deep. While the movie warns against the dangers of computer technology, it presents itself as the most technologically advanced object of its time, citing computer-generated special effects as its main attraction. Arguably, then, the “bad” society of The Matrix only serves to provide the visual spectacle through which the power of computers and the Internet may be extolled.

This first chapter proposes that utopia and dystopia are better understood as forms of spatial poetics rather than as “good” and “bad” imagined societies. I refer to several textual and visual representations of what are commonly understood to be utopian societies in order to make the case that this narrative tradition is characterized by diegetic spaces that are isolated and uniform. These representations demonstrate that utopian spaces are islands, gardens, states, planets and cities that are separated from “normal” narrative and Euclidean space and whose isolation allows for ideological experimentation. Moreover, these utopian islands are characterized by a uniform topography that corresponds with the universal acceptance of this ideology. It is this isolated and uniform geography that is responsible for conveying a sense of utopianness rather than the “perfection” of utopian ideology. Concurrently, dystopian narrative is also characterized by specific representations of space. This form of narrative initially constructs a “utopian” space and subsequently disrupts its isolation and uniformity. This disruption takes shape as the physical compromise of Utopia’s outer border and inner structure. This chapter cites several examples of dystopian narrative in order to show how these texts make use of internal structural failure, external structural failure and leaking perimeters in the construction of dystopian spaces.

Chapter 2 explores the correlation between telecommunication technology on the one hand and utopian and dystopian discourse on the other. I begin by proposing
that the user perspectives of telecommunication devices suggest new spaces of information exchange. Technologies like the telegraph, telephone and the Internet rely on a communication medium that stretches between sender and receiver, rather than a “traditional” medium that embodies a message, which then has to be transported through space. Consequently, such devices imply that space no longer imposes a constraint on the availability of information. In terms of user perspective, this verisimilitude of spatial independence comes to the fore as an imaginary data realm with which the user of the technology interacts (i.e. cyberspace, the global village, the matrix, etc.), and what I shall refer to as nil-space.

Following on from these observations and the critical framework developed in chapter 1, I suggest that the characteristics of this nil-space are similar to those of utopian and dystopian space. First, telecommunication technologies suggest a data realm that is isolated from “normal”, Euclidian space. Because of the dislocation of knowledge from space promised by such technologies, nil-space emerges as a new and secluded dimension where ordinary rules of spatial orientation do not apply. Second, this same disassociation of knowledge and location also suggests the uniform topography of nil-space. As all information is immediately available to all receivers from all sources, nil-space materializes as a homogeneous sea of information. Accordingly, telecommunication devices present user perspectives that are “surfed” rather than navigated. Nil-space is therefore characterized by the same basic characteristics that inform dystopian and utopian spatial poetics: spatial isolation and a uniform topography.

This chapter refers to several examples from different discursive fields that help explore the relationship between communication technology and utopian and dystopian narrative, as well as demonstrate the pervasive nature of this association. By close reading several examples that deal with telecommunication devices from fiction, critical theory, public speeches and commercial advertisement, I show how nil-space emerges in a range of incarnations, such as “cyberspace” and “the global village”. I also show how these spatial representations of user perspective are mobilized to activate paradigms of utopian and dystopian discourse.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 use the ideas set out in the first two chapters to construct a history of telecommunication technology and dystopian narrative. As these chapters show, dystopian narrative and communication technology have developed side-by-
side through their shared spatial poetics. Through its interaction with communication technology, the dystopian tradition developed several variations that are now read as staple examples of dystopian narrative. In these three chapters, E.M. Forster’s “The Machine Stops” (1909), George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and William Gibson’s *Sprawl* trilogy (1984-1988) serve as examples of such communication-technology-inspired dystopian variations that engage with telegraph, television and Internet technologies respectively. I use these texts to provide historical cross-sections of the development of the dystopian genre in the twentieth century and show how communication technologies have not only become strongly associated with dystopianness, but have also begun to transform the notion of dystopian space. Throughout these chapters I show that the nature of this change is the contraction of dystopian space from the nineteenth-century concept of dystopian metropolitan space to phenomenological¹ space, the body and, finally, spatial singularity.

Chapter 3 begins this analysis of the historical relationship between dystopian narrative and communication devices by investigating E.M. Forster’s short story “The Machine Stops”. I start by providing a concise overview of the origins of dystopian narrative and its relationship to space. Dystopian narrative has its roots in the mid-to-late nineteenth century and was initially characterized by a fascination with the metropolis. I point towards texts such as Jules Verne’s *Paris in the Twentieth Century* (1863, 1994), Anna Bowman Dodd’s *The Republic of the Future* (1887) and Ignatius Donnelly’s *Caesar’s Column* (1890) to show how dystopian narrative initially took metropolitan Paris, London and New York for its settings. I link the predisposition for these urban backdrops with the central subject of neo-imperialism that informs these texts. Early dystopian narrative reveals a fascination with neo-colonial expansion as well as with the urban and transport technologies that support such projects. Consequently, these early examples of dystopian narrative are characterized by spatial configurations in which the metropolis functions as an isolated and architecturally uniform center of empire that gets set up for subversion. Through the introduction of sites of opposition into the city or through the physical destruction of its architecture, the metropolis is made fully dystopian in these narratives.

¹ I use “phenomenological” here—as well as in the rest of this dissertation—strictly as an adjective to denote a type of dystopian narrative that revolves around how and what characters in the narrative experience. It is not in any way intended to refer to Phenomenology, the philosophical school founded by Edmund Husserl.
Chapter 3 goes on to propose the notion that Forster’s short story “The Machine Stops” introduces an important variation to the metropolitan dystopian tradition. A precursor of *The Matrix*, Forster’s text broaches the notion of a machine world where technology users are unable to distinguish between what is “real” and what is mediated. While the narrative retains some of the spatial characteristics of earlier dystopian narrative (i.e. a focus on urban structures, the translation of ideological positions onto architecture and its destruction) it breaks with this tradition as well. Forster’s story is the first major example of the merger between dystopian narrative and communication devices. By extrapolating contemporary telegraph and telephone technology, it presents a dystopian space enabled by technology and characterized by the dislocation of knowledge from space that these communication devices suggest. In this way, Forster’s text isolates the dystopian space as a distinct set of machine-produced sense data that is uniformly distributed throughout the machine world to suggest a phenomenological dystopian space. Consequently, undermining this isolation and uniformity, and breaking the machine, entails exposure to sense data from the “natural” world. To support this argument I describe how “The Machine Stops” manages the dystopian space of the text by analyzing the characteristics of its boundary, its internal organization, structural failure and the mobility of its characters. I also propose that “The Machine Stops” suggests a smaller dystopian space than earlier examples of dystopian narrative, contracting dystopia’s borders from city limits to that which can be seen and heard.

Chapter 4 continues this historical analysis of dystopian spaces by focusing on Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as the next major stage in the development of the relationship between dystopian narrative and communication technology. Here I propose that Orwell’s classic novel represents a watershed event in the dystopian tradition because it introduces the idea that panoptic surveillance technology can be used to control ideological space. I argue that panoptic communication technology puts forward the body as the main site of ideological struggle, thus presenting dystopian narrative within a further contraction of dystopian space.

I begin this chapter by exploring how *Nineteen Eighty-Four* engages with television technology to construct a culture of constant and unverifiable surveillance. I refer to Jeremy Bentham’s and Michel Foucault’s notions of the Panopticon to explain the effects of unverifiable surveillance and show how this panoptic
observation is different from other forms of observation. I also refer to Bentham and Foucault to help show that panoptic surveillance makes the body the primary site of control.

Concurrently, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* panoptic surveillance comes to the fore as the desire to carefully control the human form in order to create what Foucault calls “docile bodies”. So, rather than control the geographical space of Oceania, Big Brother and the Party use the power of the “telescreen” to help enforce a state-sanctioned set of bodily postures and movements. It is this carefully constructed choreography of disciplined and practiced human forms that marks subordination to dominant ideology and vicariously allows for the control of ideological space in Orwell’s text. Furthermore, dystopian subversion is also expressed through the body and its movements in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Just as conformity with dominant ideology takes shape as a carefully constructed choreography of movements, resistance to Party doctrine is likewise expressed by body rituals. Characters in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* use unsanctioned forms of physical activity, such as writing and sexual intercourse, to subvert the dominant ideology. In this way, reading *Nineteen Eighty-Four* becomes an exercise in reading the body and recognizing the ritualized set of Party-approved movements—such as marching, physical exercise and labor—as well as the bodily performances of ideological dissent. In this chapter I also argue that by making the body and a panoptic-television analogue central to the construction of dystopian space, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* continues the contraction of dystopian space that Forster’s “The Machine Stops” initiated.

Chapter 5 looks towards the cyberpunk of the 1980s as the latest stage of this concentration of dystopian space. It uses William Gibson’s *Sprawl* trilogy as an example of dystopian fiction in which the dystopian space has contracted to the point of reaching singularity. In this chapter I suggest that this last stage in the development of the dystopian genre also represents a destabilization of dystopian spatial poetics. I argue that, in turn, this deterioration of the principles that inform dystopian narrative potentially undermines the concept of dystopia itself.

I begin my argument by investigating the idea of “technological singularity”. Cyberpunk fiction is generally informed by the idea of technological singularity, which entails the radical, technology-driven evolution of a greater-than-human intelligence. A recurrent idea in science fiction of the latter part of the twentieth
century as well as in popular futurology, technological singularity proposes an exponential increase in the speed of “evolution” and “progress”. Consequently, singularity pundits propose such an event to bring about a break with the “traditional”, historical progress of time. I argue that such developments would not just represent a temporal singularity, but stand for a spatial singularity as well. The idea of technological singularity is consistently envisioned as relying on communication technologies that ever more effectively suggest the dislocation of knowledge from space. As a result, technological singularity also comes to the fore as a spatial singularity where spatial coordinates no longer form a constraint on the propagation of knowledge.

This chapter mobilizes these ideas concerning technological singularity as a means of exploring William Gibson’s Sprawl trilogy and its effects on dystopian space. Gibson’s fiction engages with the idea of technological singularity by imagining greater-than-human intelligences living in computer networks. In the process it invokes the spatial transformations that go along with such developments in the construction of its dystopian space. By positioning computer and Internet technologies as radical agents of historical change, Gibson suggests a spatial singularity for a dystopian space in which space no longer functions as a stable referent. In this way, cyberspace on the one hand conforms to the conventional concept of dystopia as the thoroughgoing dislocation of knowledge presents a space that is isolated from “normal” space and is uniformly laid out. On the other hand, cyber“space” de-emphasizes the importance of space to the extent that all locations in cyberspace overlap, including sites that are ideologically significant. In this way, sites of opposition begin to converge with spaces that represent ideological conformity and start to erode the concept of dystopia. Gibson’s Sprawl trilogy reifies this erosion by citing other, older forms of dystopian space and subsequently deconstructing them, as this chapter shows. First, Gibson’s fiction deconstructs traditional metropolitan dystopia by replacing its Modernist architecture with Postmodern data structures. Second, it deconstructs phenomenological space (the type of dystopian space in Forster’s “The Machine Stops”) by suggesting a disorientating and synesthetic set of sense data. Finally, the Sprawl deconstructs the body as an object and as a site of ideological control (the dystopian method used by for example Nineteen Eighty-Four) by replacing it with posthuman cyborgs and cyberbodies. I end this final chapter by
placing these deconstructive narrative strategies in contemporary critical theory on dystopian narrative.

To help explore the relationship between dystopian fiction, telecommunication technology and space, I make use of the concept of dispositif throughout this dissertation. My thesis presents a correlation between three distinct elements (technology, space and dystopian narrative) that I put forward as a dispositif of telecommunication technology. Following Jean-Louis Baudry’s concept of dispositif as a kind of “apparatus”, I propose that this idea helps to deploy telecommunication’s heterogeneous discursive elements as a more or less coherent configuration.

Baudry first proposed the notion of the dispositif as a way to describe some of the effects of cinema. Strictly speaking, he used the term to refer to the viewing position occasioned by this technology:

> In a general way, we distinguish the technological base, which is concerned with combining the apparatus and the operations necessary for the production of a film and its projection; the dispositif, which only concerns the projection and which includes the subject at whom the projection is directed. (Baudry 31n, my translation)

In practice, however, Baudry uses the notion of dispositif to mean not just to the user’s viewing position, but to describe the whole complex of technology, viewing positions and surrounding discourse. In this way, he presents an “apparatus” of cinema that consists of a technological substrate (l’appareil base), the user’s perspective on the technology (dispositif, projection) and the institutionalized forms of address (effets ideologiques) with which they interact.²

In this dissertation I adopt this configuration of technology, projection and discursive elements that Baudry’s notion of dispositif makes available and use it to help understand the unique relationship between communication technology and dystopian fiction. In order to do so, I propose that the “apparatus” of telecommunication devices correlates to the three basic elements Baudry identified for the cinema. First, telecommunication’s “apparatus” is deployed by its material base (l’appareil de base): telegraph, telephone, television, and Internet technology

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² For Baudry, the specific dispositif of cinema consists of the technological base, i.e. the whole system of the camera, film, film development, editing and projection; the perspective in the form of the viewer’s relationship to the film screen; and Plato’s Allegory of the Cave as an institutionalized form of address that encodes the complex of originals and their copies that film technology invokes.
and hardware. Second, this technological substrate is accessed by users through a specific perspective (*dispositif, projection*). I argue that telecommunication devices are responsible for creating the conditions that determine users’ “viewing” positions. These positions, I show, take shape as spatial poetics that codify the users’ physical and spatial relationship to technology. Finally, dystopian literature coincides with the institutionalized forms of address that are part of telecommunication’s “apparatus” (*effets ideologiques*) as they share the spatial properties of telecommunication’s user perspectives.

The choice to make the notion of *dispositif* the conceptual linchpin of my dissertation was motivated by the term’s applicability to the research area. The relevance of *dispositif* lies primarily in its ability to identify a heterogeneous body of different statements working together as a system, while never losing sight of technological development as an important structuring element in this system. As a theoretical concept, *dispositif* emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s as a new way to think about technological change. It critiqued the notion of meaning in structuralist thinking by destabilizing the idea that the relationship between technological change and its cultural context resembled that of cause and effect. Instead of positing a technological determinism, it understands physical technologies, ideas and texts as having a reciprocal relationship that can, in spite of complex internal connections, still be characterized by some kind of organization. When asked to explain his use of *dispositif* in his *Histoire de la sexualité*, Michel Foucault explained the power *dispositif* as follows:

> What I try to pick out with this term is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements. Secondly, what I am trying to identify in this apparatus is precisely the nature of the connection that can exist between these heterogeneous elements. [...] Between these elements, whether discursive or non-discursive, there is a sort of interplay of shifts of position and modifications of function which can also vary very widely. Thirdly, I understand by the term “apparatus” a sort of—shall we say—formation which has as its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an urgent need. The apparatus thus has a dominant strategic function. (Foucault 1980: 194-95)
The main attraction of the dispositif, in other words, is its ability to help understand how a heterogeneous set of elements can form a system of relations, as well as how this system interacts with its historical context.

The dispositif, then, bears a strong resemblance to other poststructuralist concepts that seek to describe systems of heterogeneous elements. Foucault’s own “discursive formation”, for example, and also Deleuze’s notion of the “rhizome”, perform similar theoretical work as the dispositif: all of these concepts are engaged in identifying some kind of order in a diverse set of statements without resorting to rigid structures or simplistic cause and effect relationships. Yet, there are two reasons why the dispositif is still the more appropriate analytical tool in the case of telecommunication technology and dystopian literature.

First, the dispositif is a notion that is uniquely suited for considering the interplay between technology and text. The concept foregrounds the relationship between a technological substrate and the discursive statements with which it interacts. In this way, the concept is well suited to a project that attempts to interpret non-fiction and fiction side by side; a project that seeks to explore the relationship between telecommunication technology and dystopian fiction.

Second, the notion of the dispositif is more appropriate for the task at hand than the discursive formation or the rhizome structure because it identifies the crucial role of space when considering the technological apparatus. By foregrounding the importance of the perspective that the technology grants the user, Baudry’s notion of dispositif, by design, incorporates spatial relationships. This focal point is significant for my dissertation as it will be my contention that dystopian fiction shares many of the spatial characteristics that telecommunication technology presents. In contrast to discursive networks and rhizome structures, the dispositif is already concerned with projections, perspectives and spaces and so emerges as a convenient theoretical tool to help explore why HAL, the telescreen and the Matrix are such effective dystopian symbols.

Before I begin to explore the significance of space in utopian and dystopian fiction, however, I want to take a moment to explain my choice of objects for this task. For, while chapters 3, 4 and 5 sit fairly comfortably within the realm of literary studies, chapters 1 and 2 rely on a more mixed set of sources. In order to explain the concept of dystopia I refer to the Bible, a first-person shooter computer game, classic
Early Modern utopias, twentieth-century dystopian science fiction as well as contemporary film. The eclectic nature of this primary material is not intended to confuse or offend, but rather is the result of my desire to offer the best possible illustration to my argument. In order to emphasize certain characteristics of the dystopian narrative it was often beneficial to use an example from outside of the medium that we perhaps associate most closely with the genre, namely that of prose fiction. Moreover, as chapters 1 and 2 deal with concepts of space and aesthetics, it frequently made sense to provide visual as well as textual support, which informed my use of film and games for outlining the dystopian genre.

Implicit in my choice of research objects is the view that the notions of utopia and dystopia are larger than any medium. Although I do believe in medium specificity and the ability of media to be—part of—the “massage” as McLuhan proposed, I also think that certain narrative strategies are stronger than any medium. I hold, in other words, that dystopia is a narrative construct that can be “told” by prose text, film and games. This is of course not to say that medium is necessarily insignificant in light of an examination of dystopian discourse. It does mean, however, that there is a “critical mass” of principles at work around the idea of dystopia and that these principles can operate independently of a narrative medium. As such, I hope that the diverse nature of the primary material in the theoretical part of my dissertation is not viewed as a hindrance but seen as a useful addition to the exploration of key components of dystopian narratives, and how these components interact with different media, space, and communication technologies to form a dispositif.
Chapter 1: Defining Spaces

Introduction
This chapter begins the exploration of dystopia and its relationship with telecommunication technology by first asking the question what dystopian narrative is. If fictional communication devices such as the “cinematophote”, “telescreen” and HAL 9000 are representatives of a narrative tradition, how can this narrative practice be conceptualized and what are its characteristics?

In order to begin and formulate an answer to these questions I will look towards contemporary critical theory as well as juxtapose the dystopian tradition with utopian narrative in the section “Dystopia versus Utopia”. Established theory on utopia and dystopia conceptualizes these forms of discourse as imagined societies that are intended to be “better” or “worse” than contemporary reality by their authors. I will problematize these notions both in terms of their reliance on authorial intent and their dependence on subjective judgments. In the sections “Utopian Spatial Poetics” and “Dystopian Spatial Poetics” I will develop an alternative theory that positions utopia and dystopia as narrative traditions of space. Utopia, I will argue, is characterized by an isolation of diegetic space that allows for its ideological experimentation, and by a homogeneous topography that signals the uniform acceptance of this ideology. By extension, I will propose that dystopian narrative is concerned with interfering with such a homogeneous, isolated space and the destruction of its physical integrity. In the sections “Internal Structural Failure”, “External Structural Failure” and “Liquid Dystopia” I will flesh out these dystopian spatial poetics by showing the different ways in which dystopian narratives construct these spaces.

In terms of telecommunication’s dispositif, this chapter is concerned with the relationship between two of the dispositif’s parts, namely the discursive element in the form of narrative genres as well as their spatial representation. Throughout this chapter I will argue that this relationship is reciprocal; that utopian and dystopian discourse is characterized by certain spatial representations, and that certain spatial forms elicit what we understand to be utopian and dystopian responses. In the following chapters I will draw on these ideas to further describe the
telecommunication dispositif and the influence of its physical, material properties and user perspectives on utopian and dystopian discourse.

**Dystopia versus Utopia**

Any discussion of the dystopian genre and its development rests on the question of what makes a dystopian narrative dystopian. It begs the question: which textual characteristics lead us to read a text as a dystopian narrative, and how is dystopia different from utopian narratives? These questions are, of course, first and foremost an inquiry into the general nature of utopian literature because dystopian literature can only be defined in relation to its dialectical counterpart. Hence, both genres may be said to be similar to the extent that they share certain defining features. The familial ties between dystopian and utopian literature, in other words, imply that both genres revolve around the same core concept.

Utopian and dystopian literature are based on the core concept of imagined societies or places that deliberately contrast with the author’s contemporary life world in terms of their social, political, moral, economical, technological, sexual or legal practices and characteristics. Whether one looks at cyberpunk dystopias such as William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984), modernist feminist utopias such as *Herland* (1915) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, early modern utopias such as Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis* (1624), or even their biblical precedents, what ties these texts together is their capacity to project a fictional domain that is purposefully different from the organization of the author’s society. Utopian literature presents places where social interaction is consistently and coherently organized in a way that is socially, politically, economically or morally “un-real”.

This is also precisely what sets utopian and dystopian literature apart from other “highly imaginative” or “allegorical” genres such as, for example, fairy tales. Although the fictional worlds of fairy tales are obviously intentionally different from their contextual realities as well, their points of deviation are not to be found in social, moral or sexual values. Instead, fairy tales function precisely by reinforcing the social

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3 As a guide to what constitutes a fairy tale I will use Vladimir Propp’s definition of the “wondertale”, namely a subcategory of folktales that displays a predictable sequence of events, such as an exposition in which some harm or villainy is done to one of the characters; a subsequent encounter with a donor and magical agent; combat between hero and adversary; a return and pursuit. See Propp, Vladimir. *Theory and History of Folklore*. Trans. Ariadna Y. Martin and Richard P. Martin. Ed. Anatoly Liberman. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984. 102. Print.
values of their contemporary contexts. So, while its setting, characters and chain of events are often far-fetched, the fairy tale serves to underline preexisting morals, not invent new ones. A tale such as “Little Red Riding Hood”, for example, juxtaposes itself to reality through anthropomorphism, magic, myth and symbolism. At the same time it uses these devices of Verfremdung in order to pass on a system of social relationships that is already in place. As a cautionary, reactionary tale about talking to strangers, or as a parable of sexual maturity, “Little Red Riding Hood” underlines established notions concerning social and sexual interaction instead of exploring alternatives.\footnote{I am principally referring here to the version of the fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm. Many other versions of the tale exist that fit into contemporary social fabrics in different ways. For a history of the fairy tale’s different versions refer to Catherine Orenstein’s exposition entitled Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked: Sex, Morality and the Evolution of a Fairy Tale.} By contrast, texts like New Atlantis and Neuromancer investigate social fictions that are truly different from “reality”. While not necessarily advocating reform, these texts are progressive in the sense that their fictional societies actively displace aspects from their contemporaneous social contexts. Both the fairy tale and utopian literature, in short, are “different” from “reality”. However, utopian literature differentiates itself by introducing different codes of social conduct that contrast with the orthodoxy of other imaginative writings.

If “imagined society” is the core notion shared by both utopian and dystopian literature, the question remains as to what sets these genres apart. This issue tends to inspire the rather simplistic view that utopian literature is about “good” societies, while dystopian texts imagine societies that are “bad” in comparison to the author’s context. The editors of The Utopia Reader, for example, see these literatures as “the imaginative projection, positive or negative, of a society that is substantially different from the one in which the author lives” (Claeys and Sargent 1, my italics). Tom Moylan’s seminal study on dystopia posits that “[d]ystopia’s foremost truth lies in its ability to reflect upon the causes of social and ecological evil as systemic” (Moylan xii, my italics). Krishan Kumar claims that “[u]topia is a description of the best (or, in anti-utopia, the worst) society…” (Kumar 25). Edward Rothstein sees utopias as representing “an ideal toward which the mundane world must reach” (Rothstein, Muschamp and Marty 3, my italics). And, more recently, the editors of Dark Horizons contended that dystopia involves “the dark side of Utopia”, that it explores “accounts of places worse than the ones we live in” (Baccolini and Moylan 1, my italics). As
these definitional sound bites indicate, then, utopia and dystopia are commonly described with labels such as “good” and “bad”, “ideal” and “worse”, “perfect” and “evil” respectively.

Furthermore, this good-bad dichotomy is supported by an underlying notion that what is at stake in these discourses is the projection of fear and desire. Moylan, for example, suggests that what is “[c]rucial to dystopia’s vision in all its manifestations is this ability to register the impact of unseen and unexamined social systems on the everyday lives of everyday people” (Moylan xiii). Seen from this perspective, utopia, as the representation of “good” social systems, becomes the expression of hope, whereas, dystopia projects “a social ‘elsewhere’ that appears to be far worse than any in the ‘real’ world” (ibid.). According to this view, then, utopia and dystopia are discourses that are both occasioned by a desire for change, where one discourse uses persuasive, the other dissuasive arguments to make its point.

This view of the utopia-dystopia dichotomy is of course well understood from the perspective of the words’ etymologies. The idea that utopia and dystopia are about “good” and “bad” societies is bound to the words’ origins. Utopia’s Greek lineage reveals its combination of “ou” (not) and “eu” (good) with “topos” to denote the good place that does not exist. Dystopia, meanwhile, merges “topos” with “dys” (opposite, bad or harsh) to signify the place that is bad.\(^5\) As such, the combination of morphemes in “utopia” and “dystopia” clarifies the words’ functions as labels for expressing subjective sentiment towards specific kinds of societies, imagined or real.

There are, however, two problems associated with such a straightforward categorization of utopia and dystopia as being about “good” and “bad” societies. Firstly, if one considers the authorial point of view, is it safe to assume that the author’s mind was entirely made up that this imagined society was to be “better” or “worse”? More importantly, can we presume to have access to this intention? While Barthes’ diction that the author is dead has informed much of literary criticism since the 1960s and 70s, its value is generally underplayed in the field of utopian studies. Indeed, in the case of utopian literature, the temptation is strong to let go of Barthes’

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\(^5\) The OED defines dystopia as “[a]n imaginary place or condition in which everything is as bad as possible; opp. Utopia.” (dystopia.” Oxford English Dictionary. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/58909?redirectedFrom=dystopia#eid). As such, the “dys” prefix is a comment on dystopia’s negative relationship with utopia, as well as an expression of the common understanding of dystopia as a “bad” place. According to the OED, the first use of the word “dystopia” occurred in 1952 in Negley and Patrick’s study of imaginary societies entitled *Quest for Utopia*.
insight that the text is a “tissue of quotations” and resort to the idea that a text is “a line of words releasing a single theological meaning (the message of the Author-God)” (Barthes 146). Presumably, utopian texts’ juxtaposition of a social text and context inspires a desire to narrow the space between these two social matrices to a single source of interest: if the imagined society in this text is differently organized than its context, what could have been the author’s intent in making these changes?

What are the political or practical motivations of the person behind these fantasies? Yet, in light of Barthes’ insight that every text is “drawn from the innumerable centers of culture” (ibid.), can the utopian text ever be seen as the “truthful” representation of the author’s view of “good” and “bad”, and can we have unlimited and uncomplicated access to it?

In practical terms, this problem of authorial intent is perhaps best illustrated by Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516). Although the genre’s canonical example, the extent to which *Utopia* can be said to express More’s “ideal” society has proved a persistent problem for the text’s interpreters. Ostensibly, *Utopia* juxtaposes a critique of contemporary English society in Book 1 with an account of an island society in Book 2 in which the wrongs and ills of English society are rectified. As such, it feels natural to read the latter part of *Utopia* as the “better” alternative to More’s social reality. Yet, as Susan Bruce points out, *Utopia* is infamous for foiling any attempt to link its utopian descriptions with More’s authorial intent:

Like More’s life, *Utopia* itself is a tissue of paradox and contradiction, and since its first publication in 1516, More’s purpose in its creation has been a perennial problem for its readers. *Utopia* is the most slippery of texts: in no other literary work is the question of authorial intention at once more pressing and more unanswerable. Its playful juxtaposition of the real with the imaginary; the nature of Utopian society itself; the incongruence between “ideal” Utopian practices and what we know of More’s life and beliefs; the relation between Books 1 and 2 of the text: all of these things encourage *Utopia*’s readers to ask themselves what More meant by this text, and simultaneously preclude attempts to answer that question with any certainty. (Bruce xix)

Some of the “slipperiness” that Bruce is referring to here is the result of the incongruity between the ideals suggested by *Utopia* and More’s life. For example,
while More preaches religious freedom—though not religiousness—in *Utopia*, the bitterness of his attack on Lutheranism seriously calls into question both the strength and the genuineness of such convictions. Especially during his time as Lord Chancellor, More acquired a reputation for the cruel treatment of what he considered heretics. For refusing to recant, More ordered a total of six Protestants to be burned at the stake. Although this, in itself, was not necessarily considered harsh treatment of non-believers, More’s apparent delight in the matter signals a malice that is incompatible with the Utopians’ tolerant religious attitudes. For example, of one of the offenders, John Tewkesbury, More remarked: “he was delyuered at laste vnto the secular handes and burned, as there was neuer wretche I wene better worthy” (More 1973: 21). Moreover, More’s use of the label “worthy” here suggests a level of religious self-righteousness which stands in stark contrast to *Utopia*’s more “refined” and “principled” interpretation of God’s commandments. Consider, for example, the assessment by the text’s virtuous hero, Hythloday, of England’s use of the death penalty:

> God said, “Thou shalt not kill” – does the theft of a little money make it quite all right for us to do so? If it’s said that this commandment applies only to illegal killing, what’s to prevent human beings from similarly agreeing among themselves to legalize certain types of rape, adultery, or perjury? Considering that God has forbidden us even to kill ourselves, can we really believe that purely human arrangements for the regulation of mutual slaughter are enough, without any divine authority, to exempt executioners from the sixth commandment? Isn’t that rather like saying that this particular commandment has no more validity than human laws allow it? – in which case the principle can be extended indefinitely, until in all spheres of life human beings decide just how far God’s commandments may conveniently be observed. (More 2003: 28 - 29)

Here, Hythloday argues against the application of the death penalty as it conflicts with the sixth commandment: in Utopia no law of man may take precedence over divine laws. Yet, in his own religious practice, this is precisely what More permits. As part of his campaign against the Reformation, More professed no scruples against the murder of religious opponents, apparently feeling justified and exempt out of the

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6 More remarks of utopian religious practices: “There are several different religions on the island, and indeed in each town. There are sun-worshippers, moon-worshippers, and worshippers of various other planets. There are people who regard some great or good man of the past not merely as god but as the supreme god” (More 2003: 98).
bonds and danger of God’s commandment because protestants were “worthy” of such a fate. How does More’s religious practice then reflect on the utopian status of Utopia? Is it still safe to assume that his representation of religious freedom is sincere and “eutopic”? Certainly, as Utopia “includes a celebration of religious tolerance by a man who pursued heretics”, the text appears to be engendered at least in part by a narrative strategy that is not practical or programmatic in nature, or represents a “eutopic” agenda (Rothstein, Muschamp and Marty 58). Indeed, More’s religious polemics seriously question the extent to which Utopia may ever reveal an unequivocally ideal—religious—society, even if only in intent.

More appears to have been aware of this divide between his fictional and real world practices. Indeed, the very name of Utopia seems to be a playful reminder both of the fiction’s aspirations to “perfection” (eutopia), and its difficulty in connecting with the “real” world (outopia). Indeed, embedded in Utopia’s name is the realization that this fiction is inherently different from the author’s reality.

Even Utopia’s paratexts directly articulate the text’s ambiguous relationship to More’s daily life. Subtitled Libellus vere aureus, nec minus salutaris quam festivus, de optimo rei publicae statu deque nova insula, More’s text professes to contain not just practical (salutaris) elements, but also purports to entertain its reader (festivus). In this declaration of its function, then, Utopia combines aspects of both the guide or expository text and of fictional prose. As such, it allows for the merger of the sincere expression of convictions with the imaginative narrative strategies, irony, sarcasm and banter that typify both More’s naming conventions in Utopia, and the text’s sensitivity to multiple, ambiguous interpretations. Small wonder, then, that Utopia has been so successful at engendering contemporary scholarship’s opinion that the text constitutes “a tissue of paradox and contradiction” (Bruce xix). Certainly, the space between the text’s two distinct, stated discursive ambitions challenges its ability to express a single purpose and, perhaps even more importantly, our ability to have access to this goal.

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7 Besides freedom of religion, there are a number of other discrepancies between More’s and the Utopians’ religious practices. For example, the Utopians are revealed to be open to euthanasia and divorce under certain conditions (More 2003: 83, 85), notions that are highly polemical in relation to More’s zealous Catholicism.

8 A truly golden little book, no less beneficial than entertaining, on the highest state of the republic and on the new island of Utopia (my translation).
The problem of classifying utopia and dystopia as “good” and “bad” is further exacerbated by the subjectivity inherent in the creation of such labels. Hence, even Thomas More’s *Utopia* fails to unambiguously make true its authoritative status in utopian literature on the basis of these rudimentary categories of aesthetic and ethical appreciation. For example, More’s views on demographics and family life in Utopia seem no longer to deserve—or, indeed, never have deserved—the label “good”:

Each town consists of six thousand households, not counting the country ones, and to keep the population fairly steady there’s a law that no household shall contain less than ten or more than sixteen adults […] This law is observed by simply moving supernumerary adults to smaller households. If the town gets too full, the surplus population is transferred to a town that’s comparatively empty. If the whole island becomes over-populated, they tell off a certain number of people from each town to go and start a colony at the nearest point on the mainland […] If the natives won’t do what they’re told, they’re expelled from the area marked out for annexation. If they try to resist, the Utopians declare war […] Husbands are responsible for punishing their wives, and parents for punishing their children, unless the offense is so serious that it has to be dealt with by the authorities, in the interests of public morality. The normal penalty for any major crime is slavery. (More 2003: 60, 85)

More envisions life in Utopia to be regulated on three levels: on that of the patriarchal father, that of the local community, and on that of the national government. In each case, the discourse encodes the power relationships that force relocation, punishment and war on certain groups, especially on women, children and non-utopians. Certainly, these strict levels of control and their Othering of anyone who is not an adult male give one cause to consider under which conditions More’s Utopia can ever be read as utopian if such a reading would necessarily entail the “positive” projection of ideals.9 Indeed, if anything, More’s fantasy prefigures the social mechanisms of control and the encoding of normalcy that Foucault identifies as informing the reform of the modern, Western penal system.10 More’s proposed multi-tiered system of regulation suggests the presence of a state’s panoptic gaze to favor a particular contingent of Utopia’s citizenry while at the same time marginalizing those who do

9 Terry Eagleton has argued that all utopias are inherently incapable of presenting perfection: “[o]ne should think twice before expressing the apparent generous-hearted wish to live in a social order which has passed beyond tragedy. For it is by no means clear that you could root out tragedy without extirpating the sense of human value on which it depends” (Eagleton 35).

not conform to this narrow vision. This, then, is not a society in which individuals are free to pursue their ideals and desires. Instead, More’s insistence on control and conformity turns Utopia into a model incarceratorial society, making its claims to perfection dubious at best.

More’s *Utopia* is not alone in its “failure” to achieve “perfection” without the negative connotation of state-enforced conformity. Even the most—ostensibly—political utopias leave open the door to the suspicion that their “perfection” is balanced out by severe restrictive measures. For example, while Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* powerfully critiques twentieth century American gender roles and stereotypes, it manages to do so only by portraying its “perfect” female society as being as restrictive as it is liberating. *Herland* exists only by virtue of its ability to forcefully mold its society, going as far as to forbid its citizens to procreate or to care for their own children:

“We have, of course, made it our first business to train out, to breed out, when possible the lowest type.”

“Bread out?” I asked. “How could you— with parthenogenesis?”

“If the girl showing the bad qualities had still the power to appreciate social duty, we appealed to her, by that, to renounce motherhood. Some of the worst types were, fortunately, unable to reproduce.” (Perkins Gilman 83)

*Herland*’s “perfection”, in other words, is perfect only for the lucky few. Those unfit for society are rooted out and denied existence through strict forms of genetic control, or are simply made infertile by the narrative. As such, *Herland* invokes an unease about totalitarian control that, as Rothstein argues, underlies all forms of utopianism:

Look too closely at this utopia or any other, and one begins to shiver at the possibility. The last century’s worst horrors—including Nazi Germany, the Soviet regime, the Maoist Cultural Revolution—grew out of utopian visions. With such examples in mind, the philosopher Isaiah Berlin argued that utopianism leads not to freedom but to tyranny. (Rothstein, Muschamp and Marty 5)

Clearly, both *Utopia* and *Herland* have need of a degree of tyrannical oppression in order to make possible their social “realities”. As such, any interpretation of More’s and Perkins Gilman’s societies as “perfect” is difficult to maintain, as these fantasy worlds are also governed by restrictive measures.
This issue can be traced back to the religious paradigm that appears to underlie all Western utopian literature. In the main, utopian narratives subscribe to the Biblical notion that any state of perfection requires a level of ignorance on the part of its subjects in order to be successful. That is, the notion of utopia seems to be informed by the idea that a belief in divine perfection calls for the relinquishment of free will. In Genesis, for example, Adam and Eve are entitled to their place in the Garden of Eden, in proto-utopia, as long as they make no claims to the ability to judge their environment as perfect or imperfect:

And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. (King James, Gen. 2.16-17)

Utopia can only exist, in other words, when its subjects allow for their idea of “perfection” to be guided by utopia’s creator. How likely, however, is this consensus in the case of free will? In the Bible, this conundrum is solved in terms of faith. Being able to enjoy God’s perfection entails having faith in the creator’s own appraisal of creation without second-guessing or the need for clarification. Indeed, Adam and Eve’s initial conformity to God’s rules is built on the agreement that they will remain ignorant of the knowledge with which they might judge Eden’s characteristics for themselves. Concurrently, Adam and Eve’s awakening and their ambitions for autonomy are met with their expulsion from the utopian garden. Indeed, as soon as Eve has performed her act of “Promethean defiance”, what remains is for God to be “merciful” in the punishment of his children. What the allegory of the Tree of Knowledge illustrates, then, is that free will and conformity with the will of the utopia’s creator are mutually exclusive. Developing free will automatically entails expulsion from utopia into the “real” world. As a result, Utopia can never be “perfect”: in order for it to function, its inhabitants have to relinquish the agency required to independently appraise utopia’s perfection.

As such, defining utopia, and by extension dystopia, in terms of their roles as dream and nightmare societies is problematic both from the perspective of the author and of the reader. On the one hand, it seems impossible to pinpoint exactly what, for example, More’s intentions were with Utopia. Even if we brush aside major theoretical concerns, anything like a clear set of authorial intentions underlyi
text never emerges from behind the major incongruities between it and what is known of More’s life. On the other hand, taking the readerly perspective also foils an effective categorization. Indeed, as Rothstein points out, “one man’s utopia is another man’s dystopia” (Rothstein, Muschamp and Marty 4). Hence, while More’s Utopia, or Marx and Engels’ The Communist Manifesto (1848) or Gernsback’s Ralph 124C 41+ (1925), may represent an ideal for some, they may simultaneously represent imperfection for others. Certainly, the levels of social conformity required by the utopian construct seem to a priori defeat its purpose by denying utopia’s citizens the agency required to disagree with the dominant understanding of perfection. The good-bad dichotomy, in short, seems particularly inadequate to the task of describing what it is we mean by utopian and dystopian literature. Rather than accurately describe these cultural practices these terms present an array of theoretical and interpretative difficulties that remove the notions of utopia and dystopia ever further from their productive application to the study of literature.

Academia has responded to these manifold difficulties by suggesting ever more detailed taxonomies of utopian literature. Increasingly aware of the dangers of seeing any given text as simply “perfect” or “imperfect”, scholars have sought to invent more sophisticated and fruitful categories. In this way, the problems associated with determining authorial intentions or readerly interpretations have led to the proposal of increasingly detailed classifications. Sargent’s watershed articles “The Three Faces of Utopianism” and “The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited”, have led the charge in this respect. He proposes the following categories which continue to serve as the academic norms for utopian classification:

Utopia—a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space.

Eutopia or positive utopia—a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the society in which that reader lived.

Dystopia or negative utopia—a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived.
Utopian satire— a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as criticism of that contemporary society.

Anti-utopia— a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as criticism of utopianism or of some particular eutopia.

Critical utopia— a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as better than contemporary society but with difficult problems that the described society may or may not be able to solve and which takes a critical view of the utopian genre. (Sargent 1993: 9)

Recently, both Sargent and Moylan have seen the opportunity to extend this system even further with an additional lemma, the “critical dystopia”. In this model there exists an addition form of utopian literature, “a textual mutation that self-reflexively takes on the present system and offers not only astute critiques of the border of things but also explorations of the oppositional spaces and possibilities from which the next round of political activism can derive imaginative sustenance and inspiration” (Moylan xv).

To my mind, this taxonomy is problematic for three reasons. First, although it is finely grained, it still allows for a significant amount of overlap and ambiguity between categories to the extent that their usefulness becomes complicated. For example, if “utopian satire” is a form of criticism on contemporary society, how can this form of discourse be differentiated from dystopia? That is, assuming that dystopia is “worse” than the society of a contemporaneous reader in some way, this genre, through extrapolation, could convey a criticism of contemporary society by rendering utopian desire in a satirical light. As such, is *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) “simply” a “utopian satire”, or does it contain elements of dystopia—along the lines of Sargent’s description of this genre—as well? Similarly, as both “anti-utopia” and “critical utopia” are principally concerned with the critique of utopia, the question remains as to what degree these terms point to literary practices that are inherently different. Is

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Gulliver’s Travels, again, by virtue of being a “critical utopia”, not also “anti-utopian”? Certainly, there seems to be an inordinate amount of critical space in which to shift Sargent’s definitions. In this way, the terms’ boundaries blur to the extent that their usefulness for critical analysis becomes questionable. Rather than provide the tools for textual interpretation, these categories therefore run the risk of inspiring endless debates on texts’ precise classification.

Second, Sargent fails to establish a clear distinction between textual analysis on the one hand and political and social activism on the other. That is, for Sargent, utopian literature is part of the larger project of utopianism: “utopian literature should be treated as a subset of a broader phenomenon” (Sargent 1993: 3). In so doing, Sargent sees utopian texts as “social dreaming—the dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live” (ibid.). Sargent’s system of utopian literature, therefore, is informed by a notion of social agency. If utopian literature is part of utopianism, then it is actively concerned with how “groups of people arrange their lives” (ibid.). This leads Sargent to investigate fiction alongside with what he considers to be non-fictional categories of utopianism, such as “instructions to princes”, “political philosophy”, “urban planning” and “visionary architecture”, without considering how these forms of social dreaming might relate differently to social activism (Sargent 1993: 12). Sargent’s categorization of the utopia phenomenon, in other words, suggests a clear-cut political and practical component to utopian literature. It proposes literature’s role as blueprint, daydream, or thought experiment that uncomplicatedly reflects a desire for real change, and runs counter to the idea that literature is principally an imaginative and creative project. This is of course not to say literature, as an imaginative project, lacks a political dimension or indeed that any form of aesthetic representation is incompatible with political content. Clearly, this is not the case. Yet, Sargent’s taxonomy, over-emphasizes literature’s pragmatic political potential by mentioning it in the same breath as social activism. In this way, Sargent’s system is principally a structuralist tool of anthropology or sociology—in the same vein as, for instance, Lévi-Strauss’ system of mythemes—rather than an instrument of textual interpretation or interdisciplinary cultural analysis.
Third, and perhaps most significantly, Sargent’s approach confounds the problems that inform naive concepts about utopian literature rather than address them. In an effort to move beyond the unsophisticated idea that utopia and dystopia are about “perfect” and “bad” imagined societies, Sargent increasingly relies on the notions of authorial intent and subjective reader responses which inform them. Instead of trying to solve these issues, or bypass them altogether, Sargent’s taxonomy stresses precisely what the “author intended” and how a “contemporaneous reader” might view the text. In response to these problematic concepts, in other words, utopian studies have developed towards a toolset that deals in increasing detail with such difficulties, thereby escalating its dependency on these difficulties in this area of study (Sargent 1993: 9).

Interestingly, Sargent does acknowledge the problems linked to his approach. He begins his analysis with the following observation:

Many literary scholars in North America are particularly bothered by the use of intention because one of the dominant methodologies in the field in this part of the world says that authorial intent is unknowable. But since other methodologies in North America and dominant methodologies in other parts of the world and in other disciplines (utopian studies is, after all, an interdisciplinary field) accept that authorial intention is important if difficult, it is possible, and, I believe, essential to use it when and where it is possible. Utopias (and intentional communities) are historical artifacts that are brought into being at particular times and places and usually by identifiable people whose reasons for doing so are in principle knowable. (Sargent 1993: 6)

So, while Sargent is aware of potential objections to his method, he remains reluctant to engage with them. In essence, his response to the “dominant methodologies” (i.e. structural and post-structuralist criticism) that problematize his project consists of gesturing towards the possibility of alternative methodologies without actually engaging with them. For Sargent, authorial intent is troublesome in name, yet unproblematic in practice. As it is in principle knowable, Sargent allows authorial intent to continue to serve as the basis of his system of classification.

It is this search for a detailed specification of utopian texts that has informed much of recent utopian studies, rather than analyses of the actual discourse. The friction between the desire to move beyond authorial intent and a continued reliance on it has led to the search for ever more specific textual descriptors. In fact, the field’s self-appointed task to describe utopian discourse in exhaustive detail has at times
resulted in the creation of new literary categories, *ad nauseam* and *ad absurdum*. Moylan, for example, recently went so far as to suggest the existence of “anti-utopian dystopia” and “utopian dystopia” (Moylan xiii). Moylan’s combination of the taxonomy’s supposed opposites here illustrates that the limits of the system have been reached rather than providing a useful extension. In fact, Moylan’s suggestion seems to indicate that the system is starting to collapse under the weight of too many categories based on fickle methods of differentiation.

Such taxonomies, then, are balanced precariously on subjective labels of appreciation (“better”, “worse”), and a confident belief in the accessibility of both the author’s intentions and the reader’s perceptions. However, as such notions are already problematic for the genre’s eponymous text, it is uncertain to what degree they may be useful in supporting critical investigation. Given the inherent uncertainty of, for example, authorial intent, it remains doubtful how such increasingly detailed classifications can ever be productively employed to help understand utopian and dystopian discourse.

Thus the issues of intentionality and subjectivity ultimately lead to the question of wish and form. That is, in trying to identify what is utopian or dystopian, should we be attempting to outline the literary expression of desire and fear, or should we be trying to identify a method of literary expression? Are utopia and dystopia, in other words, defined by the intentions of their author, or by their poetics?

For most scholars, utopianism securely remains the domain of the expression of wish and non-wish. Moylan, for instance, sees E.M. Forster’s short story “The Machine Stops” (1909) as the straightforward expression of its author’s desires and fears: “Yet, even as he [Forster] foregrounds his apocalyptic horror at the unraveling of the world he knows, he clings, at least in his closing paragraphs, to the prophetic possibility that one day humanity will again prevail” (Moylan 111). To a large extent, this interpretation seems occasioned by genre’s association with science fiction. For example, Darko Suvin positions utopian discourse as a sub-branch of science fiction that complies with the aesthetic of “cognitive estrangement”: the empirical exploration of a contemporaneous context through *Verfremdung*.\(^\text{12}\) Suvin explains:

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Utopia operates by example and demonstration, deictically. At the basis of all utopian debates, in its open or hidden dialogues is a gesture of pointing, a wide-eyed glance from here to there, a “traveling shot” moving from the author’s everyday lookout to the wondrous panorama of a far-off land. (Suvin 37)

Seen in this light, utopia and dystopia are the expression of wishes and non-wishes that serve to present a condition that is different from, yet vitally related to, the author’s “real” circumstances. However, such an approach, for the reasons outlined earlier, seems to a certain degree reductive of the complexities of historiography and discursive formation. To what extent is it ever possible to reliably determine the trajectory of a “traveling shot” back to a single point of origin? And to what degree does such an approach ignore the ability of texts to shape their own literary tradition?

This thesis aims to circumvent the issues involved in such constricted personal wish-motivated models of utopia and dystopia by building on Fredric Jameson’s conception of utopian literature. For Jameson, utopian texts are a form of discourse that is rooted in both broad, historical contexts and in the formal conventions of its literary tradition. On the one hand, claims Jameson, utopias “seem to be the by-products of Western modernity”, and, as such, require us to “get some idea of the specific situations and circumstances under which their composition is possible” (Jameson 2007: 11). In this respect, Jameson’s approach pays tribute to Suvin’s concept of “cognitive estrangement” for providing the basic framework by which the historical contemporaneity of utopian discourse can be understood.13 Crucially, however, Jameson shifts this concept away from the limited boundaries of specific authors to the more generic, socio-economic and political contexts in which texts were written. While Jameson does not deny the significance of individual authors, he acknowledges the practical and theoretical difficulties involved in determining their thoughts and intentions. His solution to this problem involves the casting of a larger net to include not just author, but also the larger contours of the political, technological, social and economic realities in which the text occurs. In this way, he is able to retain the useful notion that utopian discourse is a specific sub-branch of the family of texts that conveys a Verfremdungs effect, while simultaneously proposing

that *Das Heimliche*, the subject of such exploration, is not the forthright corollary of authorial intent. For Jameson, utopia’s pointing action is not the result of logical operations on a singular point of departure, but is instead engendered by a broader cultural complex.

In this way, it becomes possible to see utopia and dystopia not as the expressions of an author’s wish or fear for “good” and “bad” respectively. Rather, by making the concept of cognitive estrangement productive through larger contexts, Jameson’s approach positions utopia and dystopia as forms of discourse that present themselves as both subjective and more generic articulations of fundamental social change within a contemporary discursive matrix. Seen from this perspective, understanding these genres becomes a matter of seeing them in relation to the broader conditions that have allowed for their possibility, and not just the laborious excavation of biographical data. As such, Jameson identifies the material of utopianism as an amalgam of individual perception and social reality:

> Laws, labor, marriage, industrial and institutional organization, trade and exchange, even subjective raw materials such as characterological organization, habits of practice, talents, gender attitudes: all become, at one point or another in the story of utopias, grist for the Utopian mill and substances out of which the Utopian construction can be fashioned. (Jameson 2007: 14)

Jameson, in other words, positions utopianism not as an illustration of a single person’s wishes or fears, but proposes the discourses to be a form of *collective* expression. What utopia and dystopia express, in short, is “*some* idea” of collective tendencies towards hope and despair within a specific historical context (Jameson 2007: 11, my italics).

On the other hand, Jameson notes that the form of utopianism is significant to its character as well. Alongside their ability to articulate broad-scale, collective dreams and nightmares, utopian texts are defined by their relationship to the literary tradition:

> It is not only the social and historical raw materials of the Utopian construct which are of interest from this perspective; but also the representational relations established between them—such as closure, narrative and exclusion or inversion. Here as elsewhere in narrative analysis what is most revealing is
not what is said, but what cannot be said, what does not register on the narrative apparatus. (Jameson 2007: xiii)

By highlighting the importance of what can and cannot be said of utopia’s representational relations, Jameson is of course invoking Foucault’s understanding of the discursive formation. In this light, one can see that what is involved in the establishment of these literary traditions is the interplay between discursive relations, which “offer it objects of which it can speak” and help “determine the group of relations that discourse must establish in order to speak of this or that object” (Foucault 1972: 46). In this way, utopian and dystopian texts can be said to be defined as much by their ability to interact with the long durée, diachronic representational relations within their respective traditions, as they are by specific synchronic, contextual circumstances. As such, what makes a text dystopian or not is to a large extent dependent on the ability of its representational form to “register on the [dystopian] narrative apparatus” (Jameson 2007: xiii).

I want to suggest that the representational relationship that has been most successful at differentiating utopia and dystopia from other genres is their projection of totality. In the case of utopia, the literary tradition is characterized by its ability to convey some kind of alternative to contemporary reality, in a completely unrestricted way. As Jameson indicates, it is this notion of totality that is so characteristic of utopian aesthetics:

…it is precisely this category of totality that presides over the forms of Utopian realization: the Utopian city, the Utopian revolution, the Utopian commune or village, and of course the Utopian text itself, in all its radical and unacceptable difference from the more lawful and aesthetically satisfying literary genres. (Jameson 2007: 5)

Momentarily setting aside Jameson’s low regard for the “beauty” of utopian literature, it is clear that the genre is indeed principally set apart from other discourses by its presentation of absolute totality. Indeed, as indicated earlier, it is in fact this aspect of totality that inspires the restrictive measures that make it so inherently difficult to label utopia as “perfect”.

This sense of totality is not necessarily limited to utopian literature but may be identified in the larger category of utopianism as well. That is, totality does not just characterize utopian fiction but also informs utopian social and political activism,
forms of discourse that openly proclaim their desire and intent to establish actual change. Žižek rightly identifies a belief in the possibility of universality as the cause of this phenomenon. In relation to socialism he explains:

…in the Marxian perspective, utopian socialism consists in the very belief that a society is possible in which the relations of exchange are universalized and production for the market predominates, but workers themselves none the less remain proprietors of their means of production and are therefore not exploited - in short, ‘utopian’ conveys a belief in the possibility of a universality without its symptom, without the point of exception functioning as its internal negation. (Žižek 2008: 18)

Totality, then, is fundamental to all utopian expressions. Whether in fiction or social-political treatise, the utopian idea is characterized by a societal organization that operates without a single exception to its system.

Dystopia, conversely, is characterized precisely by its making visible the exception, what Žižek calls the “symptom” of utopia (ibid.). Rather than project totality, dystopia is concerned with the subversion of totalitarianism. So, texts such as Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949) and Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451 (1953) are, in the main, distinguished as dystopian literature because they represent the subversion of imagined, totalitarian societies.

I want to propose that utopian and dystopian relationships with totality are predominantly brought to the fore by the discourses’ treatment of space. As already hinted at by Jameson, utopia’s totality is intricately linked to its spatial dimensions. Typically, utopia is comprised of gardens, cities, islands, communes, villages and planets. These localities bind utopian texts into a single discourse by offering objects through which utopias can speak of totality. By erecting barriers around utopia, the text is able to explore and suggest the “perfection” or, rather, totality of the utopian society by showing nothing other than the system at work. Dystopia, on the contrary, works through the subversion of such totalitarian, “utopian” spaces. Dystopia is a discourse that speaks of the disruption of totalitarian spaces, of cracks, seepage, hideouts, subversion, and the destruction of containment. This does not mean, however, that utopia and dystopia are each other’s binary opposites. Rather, utopia and dystopia are two variations of the same narrative strategy, namely the isolation of diegetic space. In the case of the former, the walls around the diegetic space work to
keep the rest of the world out. In the case of the dystopian variety, walls attempt to keep the diegetic space from falling apart.

The close link between utopia and spatial paradigms suggests the significance of poetics for our understanding of utopian literature. That is, utopia’s reliance on islands, planets and cities indicates that the discursive formation is not principally based upon problematic rules of aesthetic and moral appraisal (i.e. “perfect”, “good”, “better than”) that have their origins in authorial intent, but is rather characterized largely by its method of encoding spatial relationships. As such, the rules of the utopian genre are founded on spatial relationships, not authorial intent or reader response. Similarly, dystopian literature appears to be delineated primarily not in the author’s intention to imagine a society worse than that of the contemporary reader, but rather through its poetics of spatial subversion. This is of course not to say that the poetics of utopian and dystopian discourse are “just” spatial constructs and meaningless as literary devices, or that such texts cannot be made subject to hermeneutic disclosure. Rather, focusing on the treatment of space in utopian and dystopian texts allows their relationship to totalitarianism to be brought to the fore and made available for literary and cultural analysis. An examination of a text’s spatial poetics, in other words, can lead to a better understanding of its relationship to statements of totalitarianism and subversion in the matrix of surrounding contemporary discourses.

In accordance with Jameson’s approach to utopian literature, then, I intend to position utopian and dystopian texts as types of discourse that are, to a large extent, defined by their form. In the following two sections I will provide an outline of the spatial poetics of utopian and dystopian discourse respectively, and begin to investigate how these can be used to analyze texts in their cultural contexts.

**Utopian Spatial Poetics**

The central importance of spatial poetics to the utopian society is perhaps best indicated, again, by the genre’s eponymous text, *Utopia*. An island nation, Utopia stands comparatively isolated from the rest of the—non-utopian—world. It is striking to see how much of the narrative is spent in relating not Utopia’s economics, politics or art, but in the detailed description of the island’s circumference and topography. What is more, these two elements, the utopian space’s outer border and its internal
layout, seem much more effective at defining the utopian nation state than Hythloday’s often inconsistent descriptions of the Utopians and their social organization.\(^\text{14}\)

My formal analysis of utopian fiction, as well as that of dystopian fiction for that matter, might give the impression that I view such narratives as devoid of ideology; as empty diegetic spaces that are merely fulfilling some poetic expectation in the reader. However, this is not the case. In positioning utopia and dystopia as primarily spatial narrative constructs I favor the form of these narratives in my attempt to define them, but it is not my intention to suggest that we should therefore simply ignore their content. As pointed out earlier, there are numerous objections to be put forward against categorizing such narratives purely on the basis of their ideological content, both from the perspective of the author’s ideology as well as that of the reader. But this is of course not to say that ideology is therefore lacking from these narrative forms entirely, or even that form and function can be so easily separated. My point, merely is that interpretation of the ideology of these narratives is preceded by their adherence to certain spatial principles. In essence, my argument reflects the logic behind the spatial turn that took place in geography, social theory and philosophy in the late 1970s, 80s and 90s. Here, thinkers such as Henri Lefebvre and Edward W. Soja began to steer scholarly interest in modernity, urbanity and economy towards the notion of space. Their insightful analyses of space in for example *The Production of Space* (Lefebvre) and *Thirdspace* (Soja) focus attention on the social production of space. Rather than see space as a preexisting and purely physical condition that awaits social, political and economic content, Lefebvre and Soja propose that space is fundamentally constitutive of social life and that social life is fundamentally constitutive of space. In this way, the physical dimensions of spaces become intricately interlinked with the social conditions that have helped to shape them. My point in privileging the “physical” properties of utopian and dystopian spaces is not to deny the social and political forces with which they interact, but to

\(^{14}\) For example, as Stephen Greenblatt points out in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, while the Utopians’ workday ostensibly compares favorably to that of the English peasantry, if one adds all the hours that More allocates for work they are in fact the same: “The endless day prescribed by the Statute of Artificers is scarcely longer than envisaged here, though one should add that there is, after supper, an hour’s recreation, in the summer in the gardens, in the winter in the dining halls” (40). Such inconsistencies in the description of the “perfect” society question the extent to which Utopia is defined by its societal characteristics.
underline how important these dimensions have become in recognizing utopian and
dystopian content. So, while the interpretation of the ideological forces that give rise
to the notions of utopia and dystopia are subjective and fluid, their physical
representations have become so recognizable that these now form the litmus test.
Utopia and dystopia, in short, are spaces that are constructed by social and ideological
forces, but it is the result of these forces, their physical appearance, that has come to
precede their interpretation as such.

The authority of formal spatial properties to suggest utopianness, regardless of
ideological content, may for example be observed in Utopia’s borders. In Utopia, a
clearly defined perimeter provides the enclave in which the social fantasy can take
place. The second book, therefore, starts with an accurate description of the island’s
dimensions and its limits. Crucially, these borders are perceived to be hazards that
contribute to the island’s isolation and limit its contact with other societies:

The harbour mouth is alarmingly full of rocks and shoals. One of these rocks
presents no danger to shipping, for it rises high out of the water, almost in the
middle of the gap, and has a tower built on it, which is permanently
garrisoned. But the other rocks are deadly, because you can’t see them. Only
the Utopians know where the safe channels are, so without a Utopian pilot it’s
practically impossible for a foreign ship to enter the harbour. It would be risky
enough even for the local inhabitants, if it weren’t for certain landmarks
erected on the shore – and by simply shifting these landmarks they could lure
any number of enemy warships to destruction. Of course, there are plenty of
harbours on the other side of the island, but they are so well fortified, either
naturally or artificially, that a handful of men could easily prevent a huge
invading force from landing at any of them. (More 2003: 40)

Utopia, in other words, is impenetrable. Its shores are a maze of rock, shelves and
currents so formidable a defense that only a single garrison of men is required to
guard against invasion. In this way, Utopia is construed principally not as an “ideal”
society but as a fortress of ideological purity and experimentative gameplay: the
island’s defenses keep the neighbors out in order to provide the substrate for More’s
social extrapolation.

More’s Utopia makes the need for this fortification of ideological space
exceedingly explicit in its narrative. Although Hythloday’s rendition of the island’s
defenses may suggest Utopia to be a natural island with natural protection from the
sea, the protagonist goes on to reveal that Utopia, in fact, was at first not an island at all:

They say, though, and one can actually see for oneself, that Utopia was originally not an island but a peninsula. However, it was conquered by somebody called Utopos, who gave it its present name—it used to be called Sansculottia—and was also responsible for transforming a pack of ignorant savages into what is now, perhaps, the most civilized nation in the world. The moment he landed and got control of the country, he immediately had a channel cut through the fifteen-mile isthmus connecting Utopia with the mainland, so that the sea could flow all round it. (More 2003: 50)

Utopia, then, is artificial. More importantly, the text makes a point of showing Utopia to be an artificial rather than a natural island. As such, the textual real estate invested in detailing Utopia’s creation narrative emphasizes the importance of seeing Utopia as isolated from the “real” world, as well as the island’s subsequent ability to transform a nation of savages into “the most civilized nation in the world (ibid.)”. In other words, Utopia’s function as an imagined society and ideological experiment is preceded by its spatial properties, in particular its forceful separation from non-utopian space. And again, as with Utopia’s defenses of rocks, waterways and military garrisons, it seems to be the creation of this isolated space which primarily informs our understanding of Utopia as utopian rather than the precise ideological content of this space.

The significance of Utopia’s insular status is further underlined by Utopia’s paratext as well. Numerous editions of More’s text are embellished with illustrations. It is striking to see that these illustrations are predominantly of the island rather than any of the main characters or of the utopians and their society. This leads to the conclusion that what is important in the visual representation of More’s Utopia is not so much the qualities of the social, political or religious characteristics of the imagined society but simply the fact that Utopia is an island. Using bird’s-eye views, illustrators show Utopia in situ with some of its topography but with none of the particulars of its interior.
For example, Holbein’s woodcut for the 1524 edition of *Utopia* shows the island in the center of the frame, leaving an ample margin of water to help illustrate Utopia’s island status. And while some of the characters of the narrative are present in the scene, they take up only marginal positions in the lower left and lower right corners of the mise-en-scène.\(^{15}\) This has the effect of these characters simply framing the central object instead of forming an integral part of Utopia’s representation. Their function is merely to guide the gaze of the viewer towards the central object, namely the utopian space and the visual demarcation of its borders in the shape of coastline, ocean and

\(^{15}\) In the frame we can see Hythloday in the lower left corner, and, presumably, Peter Giles to his right, Amerigo Vespucci on the ship, and More himself in the lower right corner.
sailing vessels. In this way, Holbein’s woodcut emphasizes the importance of Utopia as an island, and offers the reader the vital paratextual clue that understanding a construct as utopian entails seeing it as a cut-off and isolated space.

I want to propose that this emphasis on Utopia’s spatial isolation through artificiality may be recognized in the text’s play with contemporary geographical knowledge as well. Throughout the text, More positions his social experiment in relation to far-off, exotic landmarks. For some scholars, Utopia’s relative—if still rather vague—position on the globe signals More’s desire to present the utopian space as plausible and authentic. Bruce, for example, argues:

The writers of such texts [early modern utopias] felt impelled to offer a plausible explanation for the fact that the imaginary lands they described were unknown to the audiences to whom they described them, and to posit an unknown nation in the middle of the Indian Ocean or off the coast of the Americas is self-evidently more credible than it would be to situate such a community in a village in the Alps, or an island in the middle of the Mediterranean sea. (Bruce ix-x)

Indeed, More positions Utopia somewhere along the east coast of South America. By detailing Hythloday’s encounter with Amerigo Vespucci and his southerly direction of travel, Utopia’s location can be approximately deduced (More 2003: 17). Yet rather than lend an air of “self-evident credibility”, I want to suggest that Utopia’s place in the new world in fact signals its status as fiction and artificial social experiment. For More, the new world would not have represented the opportunity to render Utopia in a credible light, but instead would have given him the greatest artistic and imaginative license possible. Freely mixing early modern travel narratives with classical Greek mythology, More sees South America as the place where “nothing is more easy to be found than be barking Scyllas, ravening Celaenos, and Laestrygons, devourers of people, and suchlike great and incredible monsters” (More 2008: 14).16 As a place where there be monsters, the Americas are precisely not a setting that allows Utopia to acquire “credibility” but rather allows the island to obtain

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16 I quote here from the Oxford collection of Early Modern utopias rather than the Penguin Classics edition I referred to earlier as this is one of the few translations that retains the collection of monsters of the original Latin. While I, overall, prefer Paul Turner’s translation, his version of More’s *Utopia* exchanges the specific mythical creatures of the original for “horrible creatures who pray on human beings, snatch away their food, or devour whole populations” (More 2003: 19). This abridged translation seems unfortunate in light of Utopia’s setting: More’s engagement with the horrors from Greek mythology is important in establishing the relationship between Utopia and the “real world”.

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the isolation from the known world that its existence requires. So, while the discovery of the Indies may have been the economic, technological and political inspiration for many early modern utopias, their location in the new world is not an argument for the fictions’ trustworthiness. Instead, utopias’ exotic locations underline the idea that “utopia” is dependent upon a separate, impenetrable space.

In fact, the argument might be made that the rise of the utopian genre in the Early Modern period is directly linked to the abundant, new source of texts in the form of the discourse of The Americas. For example, Kumar sees European colonial enterprises as activating certain paradigms of social self-reflection that are crucial to utopian literature:

…the encounter with exotic and even outlandish places and cultures was bound sooner or later to affect utopian conceptions. It had been standard literary practice since the time of Herodotus to use the customs and institutions of distant lands, real or invented, as a critical or satirical commentary on one’s own age and people. The European voyages revived this practice by adding immeasurably to the store of knowledge of strange worlds—not to mention the sense of possibility they opened up with their vistas of vast spaces still to be explored and perhaps settled. European ships returned regularly with colorful accounts of the ways of far-flung cultures, East and West. A vast new literature and culture of the voyages of discovery began to accumulate […] The alien forms of distant cultures enabled the utopian writer to establish the crucial “critical distance” from his own society, while often suggesting something of the constructive alternative that his utopia aimed to present. (Kumar 23)

As Kumar shows, then, the ready availability of the Other inspired a wave of seventeenth-century authors to speculate on the Self. Again, it is not so much the credibility of travel narratives that is of importance here. Rather, it is their capacity to present “exotic and even outlandish places” that serve the utopian author (ibid.). It is these qualities in particular that signal utopia’s nature as a non-ubiquitous, artificial construction.

This is of course not to say that this travel narrative trope is limited to early modern texts per se. In the main, literary utopias spend considerable resources on emphasizing their spatial isolation as a way to make their social experiment viable, not credible. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s experiment with an all-female society, for example, relies on geographical premises that are just as unlikely as those of More’s,
yet allow her to pursue feminist utopia nonetheless. In *Herland*, the utopian land is made possible by an event similar to Utopia’s forceful separation from the mainland:

…no nation can stand up against what steamship companies call “an act of God”. While the whole fighting force was doing its best to defend their mountain pathway, there occurred a volcanic outburst, with some local tremors, and the result was the complete filling up of the pass—their only outlet. (Perkins Gilman 56)

Again, as with More, Perkins Gilman’s purpose here appears to be not that of rendering a credible tale. Rather, Herland’s location in the Amazonian forests, its God-given isolation, and the text’s invocation of colonial methods of transportation signal Perkins Gilman’s desire for a free imaginative reign. It is the physical act of separation, then, which separates utopia from the “realistic” mainland and the orthodox social relations that it contains.

It is precisely these aspects of exploration and imagination that Foucault also identifies as some of the main characteristics of the heterotopias, of “places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society - which are something like counter-sites” (Foucault “Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias”). These counter-sites, claims Foucault, are made tangible particularly in modes of travel as these allow the heterotopia to be a separate space that retains a function to “ordinary” space, while simultaneously stirring the imagination that allows it to be separate from the world around it:

Brothels and colonies are two extreme types of heterotopia, and if we think, after all, that the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea and that, from port to port, from tack to tack, from brothel to brothel, it goes as far as the colonies in search of the most precious treasures they conceal in their gardens, you will understand why the boat has not only been for our civilization, from the sixteenth century until the present, the great instrument of economic development […], but has been simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination. The ship is the heterotopia par excellence. In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates. (ibid.)

Foucault’s interest in seafaring and colonization in the identification of heterotopias, then, underlines their significance in establishing utopia as counter-site, rather than as
a “credible” place. Utopia’s position on the globe, in other words, signifies the imaginative leap evoked by the journey to the West Indies and the possibilities of such a journey in creating a space that is related to, yet vitally excluded from, ordinary cultural spaces. So, while not an actual place, utopia shares with motel rooms, cemeteries, churches, brothels, museums, libraries, fairgrounds and gardens the isolation of a space “in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (ibid.).

Besides its outer borders, the utopian space is also defined by its internal consistency. As utopia proposes complete accord with its social organization, it ensures that its extrapolated collective is entirely homogeneous. This social invariance can be seen reflected in the topography of utopian space. Standardized and homogeneous, the utopian topography is the featureless representation of ideological strictness. In More’s *Utopia*, for example, it is made clear that, while the city of Amaurote serves as an example to Hythloday’s communication, Utopian cities are characterized principally by their similarities:

There are fifty-four splendid big towns on the island, all with the same language, laws, customs and institutions. They're all built on the same plan, and, as so far as the sites will allow, they all look exactly alike. The minimum distance between towns is twenty-four miles, and the maximum, no more than a day’s walk. (More 2003: 50)

Utopia, in other words, through its strict regulation of social interaction, projects uniformity on its internal space. As modes of communication, social decorum and laws have all been standardized in Utopia, the precise location of its cities has become irrelevant, rendering the island’s topography as a homogenized desert of uncritical, ideological conformity.

This uniform topography may be identified even in utopian spaces that are not described in such detail as More’s Utopia. Henry Neville’s *The Isle of Pines* (1668), for example, manages to conjure up images of homogenized space in spite of a general lack of topographic information. Neville’s utopian island serves principally as the site of a sublimated fantasy about class mobility. George Pine, the island’s patriarch, a bookkeeper, finds himself shipwrecked with his master’s fourteen-year-old daughter, his two maidservants, and his female African slave, all others in the
ship’s company having conveniently drowned. Sexually acquiring the most valuable
signs of his former master’s status, the middle class bookkeeper populates the island
with the products of his class and racial rebellion. In terms of spatial poetics, the Pine
island here is constructed precisely around the principles of spatial isolation: the
island’s remoteness allows for the sexual fantasy to be “fulfilled” and starts to play
with the idea of a society that consists just of the middle classes. In this way, the
text’s spatial isolation allows for the expression of a brief moment of personal anxiety
and social crisis that Jameson sees as the ideological content of all utopian texts:

There can be no escape from ideology, that is to say from our rationalization
of the blood guilt of our own positioning and class situation in this society; the
moment of truth is rare enough and fleeting—moments of personal anxiety
and of social crisis about which it must also be affirmed that they cannot be
retained or built on for any secure and durable kind of truth…(Jameson 1994: 77)

Alongside its spatial isolation, The Isle of Pines also manages to conform to
the homogenization of utopian spatial poetics, in spite of an overall lack of
topographic description. Neville presents the island as a *locus amoenus*, a place so
uniformly bounteous that its inhabitants are free to concern themselves only with
social—or, rather, sexual—interaction. Concurrently, the entire island becomes a
single space of homogeneous, Cokaygnesque abundant productivity and reproduction.
Along with the island’s fertility, exact spatial coordinates have become a moot point:
every place on the island is as bounteous as the next. While lacking the topographic
descriptions to help underline this spatial uniformity, Neville’s The Isle of Pines
conveys the same notion through its title. The Isle of Pines really is an island that is
unvaryingly full of pines. Filled to the brim with the inbred descendants of its
patriarch, the island’s uniform and prolific genetic stock represents the outcome of
Neville’s rudimentary social experiment. Also when considered anagrammatically
(pines = penis), the island’s name underscores its uniform topography. Neville’s
utopian space is covered with a forest of phallic symbols that reflects both the text’s
pedophilic and bigamous sexual fantasies, as well as their role in the fulfillment of
class envy through sexual gratification.

It is the combination of such spatial isolation and internal homogeneity which
defines the utopian poetic and distinguishes it from other forms of literary discourse.
Non-utopian genres encode their fictional worlds with different, non-utopian spatial characteristics. To again use the fairy tale by way of illustration-by-contrast, its standard invocation of “once upon a time in a land far, far away” mediates its imagined society differently from a utopian text in a number of ways. Firstly, the fairy tale isolates its fictional realm to the point of it having an ambiguous spatial relationship with the “real” world. The utopian construct signals its isolation by deliberately contrasting its position with known points on a map, thereby affirming the artificial status of its imagined society and its nature as an extrapolative thought experiment. The fairy tale, however, places itself in dimensional limbo, willing to neither occupy a clearly described spatial or temporal position. As a result, the fairy tale’s fictional realm is not isolated so much as it is of indistinct location. Fairy tales take place in a never-never land that is and was somewhere, just not here and now. This ambiguous spatial location appears to signify the desire to read fairy tales as universally applicable moral guidance. That is, the fairy tale’s reluctance to occupy a specific location suggests that its spatial dimensions should be seen as not inherently separate from the “real” world. Rather, its ambiguous isolation (far, far away) appears to be a function of the genre’s strong allegorical nature. A text such as “Little Red Riding Hood” makes an independent moral value the exponent of the text’s spatial dimensions. It takes the idea that it is bad to talk to strangers and raises it “exponentially” in space so that it becomes a universally applicable value. The fact that the space in which this lesson is learned is not defined in relation to the “real” world, then, signals the message’s significance regardless of space. The ambiguous position of the fairy tale’s fictional world, in short, mediates the universal applicability of the story’s moral values.

Second, in terms of internal make-up, the distinctiveness of utopian poetics can again be brought to the fore by contrasting it with the characteristics of the fairy tale. Whereas the utopian space is typified by a homogeneous lay-out, the fairy tale typically uses uniform spaces of mystery and moral threat that are pocked with enclaves of special significance in which the outside threat is allowed to culminate in action. In “Little Red Riding Hood”, for instance, the forest forms a background of permanent, ominous menace intent on subverting the moral standards of those who travel within. Crucially, in this respect, distance in the forest is, in essence, meaningless: travel takes as long as is required to expose a character to a test of moral
codes, rather than how long it would “actually” take to reach the destination. The purpose of taking a path in the forest is not to get somewhere but to weigh the consequences of taking one path rather than another, hence the fairy tale trope of getting lost and finding one’s way out. As with its ambiguous spatial position, then, the fairy tale transposes its system of moral codes unto the topography of its diegetic space.

Yet, the fairy tale’s homogeneous internal space is differentiated from utopia’s interior consistency by its inclusion of places that are “different”. Generally speaking, the fairy tale resolves the tension created in the forest or faerie land in one or more places that disrupt its otherwise homogeneous internal space of moral challenges. The house of Little Red Riding Hood’s grandmother, the gingerbread house in “Hansel and Gretel”, and the castle in “Sleeping Beauty”: these are the prototypical locations where threats to the social fabric are ultimately challenged and resolved. So, while these tales’ moral confrontations (in their most simplistic interpretations, respectively: do not speak to strangers; do not abandon your children in hardship; abide by rules of common courtesy) are generated in the ominous and oppressive outdoor environment, these conflicts are ultimately resolved indoors where the “correct” social behavior is allowed to emerge.\(^\text{17}\) The monotony of the universally morally decrepit forest, in other words, is interrupted by concrete locations where this decay can be challenged. In this way, the fairy tale manages its allegorical nature through its spatial poetics by projecting its moral content onto a uniform topography that is dotted with locations of condensed moral struggle.

It is striking to see then that, while utopia and the fairy tale are both highly allegorical narratives, they develop distinct forms of spatial poetics that can be seen as representative of their political and moral interests. In the case of utopia, this transposition involves spatial isolation and internal homogeneity. Spatial isolation is the projection of utopia’s nature as a social thought experiment, whereas its uniform topography reflects a universal conformity to its social rules.

\(^\text{17}\) In this respect, fairy tales reflect the medieval practice of dichotomizing spaces that protect against outside influence. As Foucault points out, “in the Middle Ages there was a hierarchic ensemble of places: sacred places and profane plates [sic]; protected places and open, exposed places; urban places and rural places...” (“Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias”). It is especially the juxtaposition of safe and urban on the one hand, rural and exposed on the other that is captured by the fairy tale.
Dystopian Spatial Poetics

If utopia and dystopia are literary constructs that both revolve around the notion of imagined society, it is in their spatial poetics that they can be differentiated. As with utopia, dystopian literature is characterized by its distinct use of space in order to reflect the social conditions of its world.

However, as with utopian literature, the urge to define dystopia in terms of authorial intent lurks enticingly beneath the surface. Raffaella Baccolini, for example, posits that the literature’s “function is to warn readers about the possible outcomes of our present world and entails an extrapolation of key features of contemporary society” (Baccolini 115). As such, she continues, dystopia “clearly appears as a critique of history—of the history shaping the society of the dystopian writer in particular” (ibid.). From the outset, then, Baccolini wants to place dystopia’s social experiment within the framework of the author’s personal history, and proposes the teleological movement from a single point of original discontent, towards the supposedly unambiguous warning of the literary text. Yet, as is the case with utopian literature, dystopian discourse resists explicit messages of authorial intent. Indeed, Baccolini’s object of research here, Le Guin’s novel *The Telling* (2000), is conspicuously difficult to pin down. While on the surface it contains the prototypical dystopian elements—evil corporation, repressive state capitalism—these features hardly seem to work towards a coherent, extrapolated warning that early twenty-first century American politics and economics may lead to plutocracy. Such a reading would oversimplify both the narrative itself and its relation to context. Concurrently, Baccolini gives a reading of Le Guin’s novel that complicates her earlier focus on the text as a statement in direct relation to Le Guin’s personal history, underlining instead *The Telling*’s open-endedness and ambiguous message. As Baccolini’s about-face illustrates, then, the process of interpreting dystopia involves more than the identification of a warning against a perceived, personally identified, threat.

The difficulties involved in the identification of dystopia in terms of authorial intent raise the issue of how the genre is culturally defined and perceived. Being of the same family of texts as utopia, dystopia can also to a great extent be identified as a particular type of literature through its use of space. That is, readers have come to identify dystopia not as a form of narrative that is about “bad” societies, but as a textual style that deals with space in specific ways. As I hinted at earlier, the spatial
attribute with which dystopia is principally associated is the disruption of spatial totality. In contrast to utopia, dystopia is concerned with rendering a space of totality that is unstable and forcefully threatened with collapse:

Whether dystopia is an Orwellian place of fear and deprivation or a Huxleyan one of vapid contentment and plenitude, the individual who would choose or act “otherwise”...will be reprogrammed, exiled, or killed, so that the social fabric may maintain its impenetrability. (Jacobs 92)

As Jacob indicates, then, dystopia is concerned with the threat of destruction to totalitarian spaces. That is, protagonists Bernard Marx and Winston Smith help to define *Brave New World* (1932) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) respectively as dystopian novels by providing the penetrative force with which to threaten the texts’ otherwise totalitarian spatial dimensions. The World State and Airstrip One are required to protect their ideological space against rebellion, and it is this act of protecting the uniformity of the text’s possible world that is so characteristic for dystopian fantasies.

This may suggest that the way in which dystopia treats space is hardly different from utopian spatial poetics. After all, is Utopia not also characterized by an effort to protect certain ideologies through spatial isolation? Do its walls not seek to shut out influences that could disrupt the uniform topography within? However, while dystopia’s and utopia’s spatial poetics may, on the surface, bear similarities, they are in fact inspired by entirely different sets of concerns. In the case of utopia, an imaginative space is created in which a social experiment can be performed unhindered. Utopia is required to safeguard its own isolation in order that its experiment may remain uncontaminated by outside influences and so protect the “validity” of its “results”. As such, even minor incursions such as Hythloday’s visit to the island of Utopia are never imagined in terms of insurgency or disruption of the utopian space. Rather, in More’s *Utopia* the outside visitor only serves to further underline the island’s geographical distinctiveness and coherency. As Hythloday relates his travels to More and Peter Giles, his status as a foreigner in Utopia does nothing to interfere with the utopian space but only enhances it further. Here, the travel narrative format helps to affirm Utopia’s position as a distant, different, and homogeneous spatial identity by using the foreigner to highlight Utopia’s experimentative dimensions.
By contrast, dystopia is characterized by spatial properties that, while they initially project coherency and uniformity, are either disrupted or about to be disrupted. For example, Winston Smith and Bernard Marx interrupt the totalitarianism of Airstrip One and The World State by constructing sites of opposition. These spaces—the savage reservation in Brave New World and Smith’s personal apartment and the room above the antique shop in Nineteen Eighty-Four—form pockets of resistance that inform the texts’ dystopian spatial poetics. It is in these spaces that the tension between the uniformity of totalitarianism on the one hand and the disruption of this uniformity on the other begins to emerge. As such, dystopia is typified by a homogeneous space that is similar to that of utopian constructs, but that, crucially, seems unable to contain the social experiment within. In the case of Huxley’s novel, for example, The World State constitutes a space that is as uniform as is, say, More’s Utopia. To be sure, the kernel of Huxley’s nation is the standardization of this imagined society through birth control, breeding programs, social classes, and state controlled work, “leisure” time and recreational activities. As such, The World State seems little different from More’s Utopia. However, what marks Brave New World as a dystopian novel is the failure of The World State to maintain the containment of its dominant ideology. In spatial terms, The World State is denied the status of utopian narrative because it harbors within its borders certain sites of opposition that contaminate its social “reality”. Specifically, the “savage reservations” in Brave New World break up The World State’s otherwise spatial and ideological uniformity. These reservations contain in them society’s outcasts and rejects, and in this way constitute resistance to mainstream beliefs. They pock and mark the nation’s homogeneous topography and, when Bernard Marx brings back two of the “savages” to “civilization”, they are permitted to pollute the state’s carefully controlled ideological landscape. Reversing the utopian travel narrative trope, then, Bernard Marx travels inward into seemingly uniform space to identify the flaws in its consistency. In doing so, he brings to the fore the spatial inconsistency that we identify with dystopian societies. Therefore, although dystopia’s spatial dimensions might resemble those of the utopian construct somewhat, the similarities are only skin deep. Unlike utopia, dystopia is concerned with communicating a sense of spatial disruption as it lacks the latter’s inbuilt stability. The uniform totality of the dystopian space, in short, is continually under threat of destruction, disruption and interference.
The examples I have referred to so far are canonical texts of utopian and dystopian discourse and sit quite comfortably within the framework of spatial poetics that I have sketched. The islands, cities and states of *Utopia*, *Herland*, *The Isle of Pines*, *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* consistently present isolated, uniform diegetic spaces and their subversion. In order to flesh out these dynamics further and also present some of the mechanics behind dystopian spatial construction I will now outline a number of different ways in which dystopian narratives manage their diegetic space. To support my theory of dystopian spatial poetics, I will show how dystopian narratives have different ways of causing damage to ideologically isolated and uniform spaces. In the sections “Internal Structural Failure”, “External Structural Failure” and “Liquid Dystopia” I will provide a general impression of these various methods of dystopian spatial subversion.

**Internal Structural Failure**

My first example of dystopian spatial subversion takes the form of internal structural failure. In this case, the totalitarian space of the dystopian ideology is under threat from corrosive forces within. The structural basis of such dystopias predominantly concurs with the spatial poetics sketched out earlier: the narrative is set in a space that is—initially, ostensibly—isolated and homogeneous. Isolation here is sometimes literal, as in for example David Pinner’s novel *Ritual* (1967), its movie adaptation *The Wicker Man* (1973) and its 2006 Hollywood remake. In this case, the dystopian text mirrors the travel narrative trope that so heavily informed Early Modern utopias, and makes the space in which the dominant segment of the narrative is set a destination, a space to be traveled into by protagonist and reader. In this way, dystopian ideology finds expression in the form of an enclave, an exotic space that stands in stark contrast to the point of departure and its ideological premises.

Alternatively, dystopian isolation is achieved by implication. In these cases, there is no travel narrative subtext to help establish dystopia’s insular quality. Instead, dystopia is experienced from within the dystopian construct: there is no outsider traveling inward; characters and reader are continually “present” in the dystopian realm and denied an outside perspective. Here, dystopia’s isolation is established by

18 In many ways, *Ritual* and *The Wicker Man* are the dystopian counterparts of Perkins Gilman’s *Herland*. By suggesting that ideology’s limits can act both as protection as well as prison walls, these narratives reverse the spatial representation of the matriarchal society in *Herland*.  

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implying the presence of its borders rather than by showing them. For example, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, totalitarian space is created through the suggesting of isolation instead of its explicit expression through borders, walls and limits. Of the isolation of Airstrip One, the narrator simply remarks:

> Everything had been different then. Even the names of countries, and their shapes on the map, had been different. Airstrip One, for instance, had not been so called in those days: it had been called England or Britain, though London, he felt fairly certain, had always been called London. (Orwell 1977: 32)

While the argument might be made that the insularity of Britain here already gestures towards the possibility of ideological isolation, it is in fact the narrator’s repetitive insistence on difference that primarily helps to set up the dystopian space. The text enforces the notion that Airstrip One’s shape and name on the map are different, and so marks the territory and its ideology as atypical and disconnected from the rest of the world. In this way, dystopia is able to manage its isolation without explicitly referring to borders.

In terms of isolation, in short, this first method of dystopian construction bears many resemblances to utopias. However, dystopian spatial poetics by internal structural failure begins to distinguish itself from utopian spatial paradigms as it disrupts its totalitarian space as well. It begins by suggesting a homogeneous space, and then allows this space to disperse into heterogeneity. Whereas utopia is characterized by a space that is isolated and homogeneous, this type of dystopian narrative provides isolation with only the suggestion of internal uniformity. That is, this type of narrative offers an intimation of social order, spatially expressed, in order to subsequently demonstrate the impurity of the construct. Earlier, *Brave New World* was used as a general example of dystopian spatial subversion: the uniformity of Airstrip One is challenged by the savage reservations that ultimately help to subvert the dystopian ideology. It is important to note, however, that this narrative serves not just as a general illustration of dystopian spatial poetics, but is an example of this particular type of spatial subversion as well. It shows how dystopian narratives manage to interrupt totalitarian ideology from within by projecting resistance to dominant ideology unto internal, spatial incoherence.

The upshot of such spatial poetics is the introduction of a level of contingency to ideology. That is, dystopian narratives of this first type suggest that the purity of
ideology is under threat not from outside criticism, but that belief systems are inherently unstable. It proposes that the very rules of society, imagined or real, necessitate the possibility of breaking those rules and, in this way, the text introduces an element of emergency to an otherwise stable entity. The inability of Airstrip One to maintain its internal space, for example, bespeaks this dialectical moment in ideological construction: the existence of the Oceania and its politics is affirmed not by the positive reinforcement of its rules but by the spaces where such rules can be broken. The savage reservations, in other words, are the spatial representation of a negative ideological image, which by extension and contrast also serve to illustrate the dominant ideology. As such, having rules that guarantee compliance, uniformity and stability necessarily entails the possibility of breaking those rules. Any attempt to increase compliance with regulatory concepts only produces an equally greater chance of subversion. In a sense, dystopia here works along the lines of what Žižek has called “positive codification” in relation to the Hollywood Production Code:

The infamous Hollywood Production Code of the 30s and 40s was not simply a negative censorship code, but also a positive (productive, as Michel Foucault would have put it) codification and regulation that generated the very excess whose direct depiction it hindered. The prohibition, in order to function properly, had to rely on a clear awareness about what really did happen at the level of the prohibited narrative line. The Production Code did not simply prohibit some contents, it rather codified their cyphered articulation… (Žižek, “How to Read Lacan”)

Dystopian spatial poetics of internal structural failure, then, might be interpreted as the spatial representation of the “positive codification” of an ideology’s enforcement of rules. By proposing internal sites of subversion in opposition to totalitarianism, these narratives demonstrate that any form of ideological control automatically entails the codification of the object that the control system seeks to exclude.

As a result of its spatial projection of ideological concerns, this type of dystopian poetic tends to engender readings that focus on the failure of specific ideologies. The spatial expression of positive codification brings to the fore specific points of failure in the dystopian regime that, in their specificity, encourage readings which match these particular concerns with aspects of the text’s contemporary context. In this way, reading *Nineteen Eighty-Four* becomes an exercise in identifying in it elements of, for example, Cold War rhetoric, or aspects of Second World War
fascism. The criticism of explicit ideological concerns through the savage reservations, in short, encourages us to seek the “real world” analogues to the text’s spaces. What are Oceania and Airstrip One “meant” to represent? Which function do we attribute to the savage reservations when placing the narrative in its contemporary context? Indeed, it is the suggestion of proximity between ideological spaces and specific contextual concerns which characterizes this type of dystopian dynamic.

It is this first form of spatial poetics that we appear to associate most powerfully with dystopian literature. The genre’s prototypical examples—Zamyatin’s We (1924), Huxley’s Brave New World (1932), Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451 (1953) and Orwell’s Animal Farm (1945) and Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949)—all display this particular type of interaction between ideology and space. Presumably, the canonical status of these texts in dystopian discourse is due precisely to their abilities to unambiguously render isolated, homogeneous spaces that represent particular ideologies, and the pockets of resistance which destabilize them. Due to their heavy allegorical nature, these texts invite readers to consider the connection between their “real-world” historical contexts and the construction of their diegetic spaces. So, We is read in relation to the Russian Revolution of 1917, Brave New World in combination with Futurism, and Animal Farm in relation to Stalinism. As an upshot of these readily available and straightforward correlations between space and ideology, such texts continue to inform our notion of what constitutes dystopian literature: their strong allegorical content makes them eminently suitable for high school and university curricula, and so ensures their continued position in the canon, while their sustained popularity maintains their spatial paradigms as the dystopian norm. In this way, internal structural failure has come to represent the “classic” form of dystopia.

**External Structural Failure**

My second example of dystopian subversion takes the form of external structural failure. Here, as with internal structural failure, the narrative suggests the existence of a utopian space only to expose its incapacity to maintain itself. In contrast to internal structural failure, however, external failure entails a disruption of the totalitarian space that emanates from outside of the construct. In these narratives, the pretense of uniformity is disrupted by ventilation shafts, secret doorways and cracks in the wall
that allow the system to become aware of and contaminated by the outside world. In this case, the exception which subverts uniformity originates not from within the system, as with internal structural failure, but enters the totalitarian space from the outside.

Unlike subversion through internal disruption, this second type of dystopian spatial poetic exists purely by virtue of its explicit—initial—isolation from the outside world. That is, in order for the subversive element to make its way into the totalitarian space, what is required is the explicit demarcation of the system’s limits. The subversion of dystopian space here is equal to the transgression of dystopia’s borders. Consequently, such narratives in the main make a point of emphasizing the physical representation of the dystopia’s limits. In fact, these texts essentially revolve around the demise of a clearly delineated space. For example, Forster’s short story “The Machine Stops” deals with the destruction of a dystopian space in this fashion. By permitting a character to leave its dystopian construct by means of an air vent, the text creates an element that has the potential to subvert and disrupt. Subsequent to the character’s transversal of the dystopian threshold, the machine controlled, subterranean space loses coherency and its walls begin to crumble:

“The disintegration went on, accompanied by horrible cracks and rumbling. The valves that restrained the Medical Apparatus must have weakened, for it ruptured and hung hideously from the ceiling. The floor heaved and fell and flung her [Vashti, one of the protagonists] from the chair. A tube oozed towards her serpent fashion. And at last the final horror approached - light began to ebb, and she knew that civilization's long day was closing […] The uproar outside was increasing, and even penetrated the wall. (Forster 110)

“The Machine Stops”, then, spends considerable narrative space on detailing dystopia’s outer wall by focusing on its transversal and disruption.

Similarly, The Truman Show (1998) directed by Peter Weir revolves around the explicit presence of dystopia’s outer limits. The protagonist’s quest to locate an exit from his dystopian environment originates from the failure of its external structure. As a piece of machinery breaks off dystopia’s dome, the character is made aware of his confinement and begins his search for the physical limits of the system.
Fig. 2: The protagonist of *The Truman Show* becomes aware of his confinement as the external structure of his dystopian prison begins to lose integrity. 

Fig. 3: As the narrative revolves around the breakdown of dystopia’s outer structure, *The Truman Show* is heavily invested in the literal, explicit representation of the limits of totalitarian space.

As a result, the action in *The Truman Show* is guided by the explicit representation of dystopia’s borders. Unlike internal structural failure, then, external structural failure involves the overt physical representation of dystopia’s isolation. As the breach of this
isolation is what informs these narratives, showing the walls that encompass the ideological space is of crucial importance.

The breaking through of dystopia’s outer limits in these narratives entails a disruption of both the isolation and uniformity of the initial totalitarian space. By breaking dystopia’s walls, such narratives allow the world outside of the ideological construct to come in, destroying dystopia’s segregation as well as its ability to project a belief system on a uniform space. Hence, this spatial paradigm entails reading strategies that are markedly different from other forms of dystopian spatial poetics. Whereas subversion by internal structural failure tends to guide readers to an understanding of the specific connections with narratives’ cultural contexts, external structural failure tends to inform readings which focus more generally on issues of epistemology. Indeed, it is striking to see that a trope that continually surfaces in narratives that focus on the failure of dystopia’s external structure is a severe form of epistemological anxiety: how do I know that what I know is real? “The Machine Stops”, for example, juxtaposes the technologically mediated transfer of knowledge with veridical perception outside of the machine controlled environment. In doing so, it allows the characters to reflect on the status of knowledge and the value of their various methods of knowledge acquisition. Similarly, The Truman Show is characterized by the search for “truth” in light of the discovery of dystopia’s walls. The passage through walls, vents and doorways, in other words, appears to be the physical representation of the investigation of what separates opinion, in the form of ideological suppression, from justified belief in the form of extra-ideological epiphany.

This correlation between dystopian external structural failure and the quest for truth appears to have its precedent in proto-utopian discourse. Specifically, Plato’s Republic and the allegory of the cave effectively prefigure the concerns of later dystopian texts using this particular type of spatial dynamics. By projecting the search for true knowledge unto physical dimensions, Plato’s allegory anticipates the basic structure of narratives such as “The Machine Stops” and The Truman Show. Forster’s short story, especially, is exceedingly effective in reactivating Plato’s main concerns. The philosopher king, the ignorance of others, the hard, physical delineation of a deceptive knowledge structuring system, the liberation which looms outside of the ignorance in the cave: all these elements resurface in “The Machine Stops”.

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Forster’s short story, in fact, makes a number of explicit references to Plato’s text and establishes an intertextual link. For example, Forster’s text opens with the instruction to “[i]magine, if you can, a small room hexagonal in shape like the cell of a bee”, echoing Plato’s command at the start of the cave allegory to “[i]magine people living in a cavernous cell down under the ground” (Forster 87, Plato 64). This intertextual reference is perhaps somewhat tenuous and would be easily overlooked if not for the consistency with which the “The Machine Stops” draws attention to the parallels between the spaces that the reader is required to envision. The relationship between Plato’s cave and Forster’s underground beehive is brought to the reader’s attention through continual emphasis on the juxtaposition of light and dark, outside and underground, knowledge and ignorance, reality and illusion.

Any ambiguity as to the level with which Plato’s cave may be said to operate in Forster’s text is dispelled by the latter’s open admission of its debt to the former. During the “airship episode” in which one of the characters uses an airship to travel from one part of the world to the other (another instance in which the uniform topography of utopia is discontinued so as to allow for a breakdown of the system), Forster shows his allegiance. As the character flies over the Greek peninsula and islands, she exclaims: “‘[n]o ideas here’” (Forster 98). In this passage, then, Forster creates an ironic tension by suggesting that—classical—Greece has not been productive in the creation of ideas. The tongue-in-cheek comment, in other words, serves to illustrate the character’s folly in not recognizing Greece as the site of classical philosophy and the pertinence of this failure to her situation. In this way, Forster is not only able to subtly point out the text’s debt to classical philosophy, he also hints that this debt specifically concerns the “idea”. That is, the proposition that Greece is a place of ideas hints at Plato’s idealism, which the allegory explores through the interplay between veridical perception and true knowledge.

The central importance of Plato’s Allegory moreover, brings to the fore the concern with truth which informs dystopian narratives and external structural failure. The spatial poetics of such narratives articulate an epistemological crisis at the hand of an ideology that attempts to structure, homogenize and isolate. The disruption of dystopia’s borders and their subsequent crossing introduces into the system new ideas and a new form of knowledge acquisition. The second form of dystopian narrative construction, in short, focuses on the inability of belief systems to capture or express
“truth”. By allowing dystopia’s outer walls to fail, these narratives permit an influx of knowledge that questions the value of the beliefs maintained within.

**Liquid Dystopia**

My third example of dystopian spatial disruption takes the form of leakage. This paradigm is characterized by the interruption of totalitarian space through liquid exchange. In this scenario, dystopia’s outer border proves permeable and allows for fluid exchange with the outside world. Interestingly enough, this dystopian pattern seems to be a fairly recent element in the genre’s genealogy, and appears to be linked quite specifically to narratives that show an interest in contemporary technology. Notable examples include the Wachowski brothers’ *The Matrix* (1999) and in particular *BioShock* (2007) and *BioShock 2* (2010) by Irrational Games. What characterizes these narratives is their subversion of totalitarian space—the Matrix and the underwater city of Rapture respectively—by means of fluid exchange imagery.

In the case of *The Matrix*, the totalitarian space of the Machine World, and indeed of the Matrix itself, is simultaneously delimited by the rubble of mankind’s lost civilizations, and by the analogue-digital interface of the Matrix technology. It is striking to see that both these concrete and abstract barriers of the machines’ totalitarian space are subverted by images of fluidity. Through leaks in the system, *The Matrix* is able to signal the instability of its totalitarian space, both in its virtual and in its “real world” form. The confrontation with conformity is here made possible by literally flushing members of the resistance from the dystopian construct. As Neo swallows the red pill, his “real” body is ejected from the Machine World. In a scene that activates both a notion of labor and of excretion, Neo can be seen descending through a network of plumbing to emerge out of the dystopian environment into a water basin.
Therefore, the ultimate subversion of the machine’s dystopian space is a consequence of the system leaking fluid and thus allowing itself to become contaminated. Other examples of the interruption of totalitarian space by fluid in *The Matrix* include Neo’s real body bleeding as his virtual body sustains injury, and an artificially intelligent computer program expressing its disgust at human avatars’ sweat.
Fig. 6: Neo’s avatar can bleed.

Fig. 7: As Neo’s avatar bleeds, so does his real body. The movie “explains” this phenomenon by claiming that “the mind makes it real”, proposing levels of psychosomatic connections so strong that they can even lead to death. *The Matrix* has been derided for making such suggestions without providing “credible proof” along the lines of science fiction’s staple rationalizations. However, in light of the narrative’s interest in subversion of dystopian borders and liquidity, synchronized virtual and real-world bleeding—as opposed to, for example, more solid exchanges such as the synchronized movements of limbs—seems to make a lot of sense. The coincidence of Neo’s character bleeding in virtual and real-world settings functions as the physical representation of dystopia’s susceptibility to subversion by liquid.
Fig. 8: Another instance where *The Matrix* makes literal the permeability of dystopia’s borders: a computer program expresses his disgust with human sweat. The use of sweat to represent the exchange between the “real”, physical world and the dystopian virtual construct again serves to illustrate how dystopia here is able to block solid objects from entering its totalitarian space but has to permit fluid to trickle through.


By merging real-world and virtual-world body functions, these sequences demonstrate a weakening of the border between the dystopian Matrix construction and the outside world to the extent that fluid may pass between them.

This liquid trope emerges even stronger in the *BioShock* game series. Set in the dystopian underwater city of Rapture, *BioShock* allows the player to fight and puzzle his or her way towards safety. In essence a first-person action shooter, *BioShock* managed to stand out from the pack by providing a more-or-less compelling back-story by basing itself on the fictional work of Ayn Rand. Specifically, *BioShock* refers to Rand’s utopian novel *Atlas Shrugged* (1957). Rand’s magnum opus, the novel details many of the aspects of the author’s Objectivist philosophy, which holds that life’s moral purpose is the pursuit of one’s own happiness and rational self-interest. Both Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged* and Objectivism to a great extent inform *BioShock*’s dystopian construct. The game focuses especially on the hubris and narcissism that seem to exist at the philosophy’s core, and so turns Objectivism’s totalitarian propositions into a constrictive dystopian society. Moreover, the game engages with the close relationship between Objectivism and laissez-faire capitalism by demonstrating the failure of Rapture’s economy under the city’s—lack of—moral
guidelines. Mixing these narrative elements with a unique combination of science fiction and Art Deco visuals, *BioShock* offers a compelling gaming experience in a dystopian setting. However, alongside these narrative and cinematic qualities, it is primarily the game’s activation of spatial paradigms that effectively manages its dystopian qualities. That is, *BioShock*’s dystopian character is principally the result of the game’s invocation of dystopian spatial poetics.

My use of the word “setting” in relation to a computer game suggests the confusion of the notion of game space with that of diegetic space. So far, my examples of dystopian spatial poetics have been limited to diegetic space in fiction and film, and the switch now to the subject of game space insinuates an easy transfer from these properties from one distinctive medium to another. I wish to stress that, although my argument may appear to conflate the notions of game space and diegetic space, I understand fiction, film and video games to be highly different narrative media, each with its own relationship to space. However, in reference to my statement earlier on medium specificity, I maintain that the concepts of utopia and dystopia are more generic than any specific medium and can be expressed in computer games as well as in fiction.

This is of course not to say that *BioShock*’s game space is therefore the same as the diegetic space of fiction. Clearly, the diegesis of for instance *Brave New World* has radically different characteristics than the game space of *BioShock*. In terms of visual qualities, as well as player interaction, to name but two obvious aspects, *BioShock*’s Rapture does not bear a straightforward comparison with the World State of Huxley’s novel. While the latter functions as locale and narrative catalyst, *BioShock*’s game space serves principally as what Huizinga refers to as a “magic circle”, and acquires its possibilities for narrative only as a secondary function. As Huizinga explains in *Homo Ludens*, the rules that constitute a game often take shape literally in space—the scholar mentions a game of dice, the Mahãbhãrata, which involves the ceremonial drawing of a circle around the players and their game—so that the space in which a game is played becomes closely linked with the rules of the game (Huizinga 57). As such, game space constitutes a kind of “magic circle” in which the rules of the game are “real” and have “real” effects for the game’s progress.

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So, while drawing the ace of spades from a deck of cards or hitting a tennis ball on a white line has no significance outside of a casino or tennis court respectively, by stepping into such “magic circles” these actions have a significant impact. Indeed, playing a video game like *BioShock* also involves stepping into a magic circle. By using an avatar, players enter into the Rapture game space that “physically” encodes many of the rules of the game (i.e. which levels may be accessed and in what order, how far the player is from reaching the ultimate goal, how long it takes to move from one goal to the next, etc.). This game space, then, is significantly different from that of the diegetic space of film and fiction. It is first and foremost the spatial representation of the rules of play rather than a narrative locale.

In short, it is not my intention to imply that diegetic space and game are the same—for my part they appear to be quite different—by talking about video games in terms previously applied to fiction. Instead, it is my contention that both of these forms of spatial ideas meet the minimal requirements of utopian and dystopian spatial poetics, namely the representation of isolated and homogeneous spaces and their subversion. It is in this sense that I understand utopia and dystopia to be medium-neutral constructions: as long as the prerequisite conditions of spatial representations are met, any medium may activate the patterns of expectation that we associate with utopia and dystopia.

The ability of game spaces to attract such utopian and dystopian characteristics may be illustrated with an argument from game theory itself. In his seminal work *The Grasshopper, Games, Life and Utopia*, Bernard Suits explicitly links the existence of utopia with games. Bernard’s argument hinges on the understanding that games are games because they unite a lusory attitude, a prelusory goal, and rules that forbid the most efficient means of obtaining the goal. Suits links this model of game playing with the notion of utopia by claiming that work has no place there. As a result, utopians are only concerned with having “fun”, which, according to Suits, entails deliberately doing things by means that are not the most efficient. As such, claims Suits, playing games is the only possible occupation for the inhabitants of utopia. While it is somewhat outside of the scope of the present line of inquiry to consider the validity of Suits’ philosophical framework of game playing, it is interesting to see how he manages his argument by making a connection between game space and the idea of utopia. By positioning the utopians as the ultimate players
of games, Suits lays bare the ability of game spaces to express utopian poetics. These magic circles are relatively isolated and homogeneous under the influence of the game’s rules and so appear to have a somewhat natural ability to attract utopian—or, through subversion, dystopian—spatial character. In other words, stepping into the magic circle resembles joining Hythloday on his journey to Utopia, and the homogeneous topography of Utopia resembles the inflexible framework of a game’s rules. As is made clear by Suits’ theory of game playing, then, game spaces not only meet the minimum requirements of expressing utopian and dystopian poetics, they to a great extent inherently resemble classical utopian constructions.

Certainly, the dystopian character of *BioShock*’s game space is the result of its suggestion of dystopian spatial poetics. An underwater city, Rapture is both the site and physical manifestation of the subversion of Objectivism’s totalitarian guidelines: it supplies both the walls that the system needs in order to separate itself from the outside world, and with these walls it supplies the prerequisites for the city and system’s collapse as well. As with *The Matrix*, the narrative’s breach of totalitarian space is rendered with images of seepage. As Rapture’s experimentation with Objectivism and unrestrained market economics begins to collapse, the system’s breakdown is metaphorically expressed by the city springing leaks. *BioShock*’s status as dystopian narrative, in other words, is informed by its disruption of totalitarian space which it renders permeable, thus allowing the outside world to flow inwards.

This theme of liquidity is in fact so crucial in the expression of *BioShock*’s dystopian society that it formed a fundamental part in the game’s technical development. The first game of the *BioShock* series already utilized advanced technology in the form of the Unreal Engine 3 and Havok physics engine in order to allow for realistic visuals and physical behavior. However, Irrational Games deemed water to be such a key element in the game’s design that they hired a programmer and artist just to deal with this specific aspect:

…we want to make you feel like the ocean is about to drown you, it’s drowning Rapture and as you’ll see in the demo, water is just coming into this place so we’ve hired a water programmer and water artist, just for this game, and they’re kicking ass and you’ve never seen water like this. (Topf)
In *BioShock*, water has been made aesthetically pleasing, forms an intricate part of the game-mechanics, and through Rapture’s many windows, it takes up a central position in the *mise-en-scène* of the first person view.

![Image of BioShock gameplay](image)

**Fig. 9:** In *BioShock*, water is of central import. Not only is it one of the most demanding aspects of the game’s technical design, it also plays a central role in how the game is played. Players can make use of dystopia’s leakiness by, for example, electrocuting enemies who are standing in water. As such, water forms the backbone of both *BioShock*’s gameplay and its visualization of the permeability of ideological spaces.


By giving water such a central position, the game reminds the player of the continued threat of drowning, and so makes the player aware that Rapture and its ideologies have been breached and are failing. As water is “just coming into this place” it indicates the necessity for the player to escape the system while he or she can: the weight of the outside world will inevitably destroy the totalitarian space (ibid.). As such, Irrational Games’ focus on water in the game’s design betrays the element’s central role in establishing Rapture’s dystopian spatial poetics.

This liquid subversion in *The Matrix* and *BioShock* appears to arise out of the narratives’ concerns with contemporary technology. *The Matrix*’s focus on liquidity
in acts of ingestion, parturition, infection and excretion seems to reflect an increased sensitivity to the erosion of hardware and wetware barriers in modern technology. That is, *The Matrix* and its fascination with images of fluidity point towards a growing awareness of the proximity of technology and the human body. In *The Matrix*, technology serves less as an artificial prosthesis of the human body but increasingly acts as a natural, McLuhanesque type extension.\(^\text{20}\) That is, in *The Matrix*, the ability to interface with virtual worlds directly\(^\text{21}\) signifies the blurring boundaries between the biological body on the one hand, and technological extensions on the other. The repeated use of liquidity is an important factor in expressing this shifting frontier between the artificial and the natural. Neo’s liquid liberation from the Matrix, for example, starts to collapse the differences between natural and artificial birth. As such, the leaking Matrix appears to represent an awareness that the objects of the narrative’s dystopian fascination—computer technology, virtual worlds—are increasingly difficult to see as separate from human, biological agents.

*BioShock*’s dystopia, too, gestures along these lines of the posthuman. Enforcing its Objectivist’s theme of personal advancement, the game gives the player the option of changing the avatar’s “genes”. Besides a standard array of weapons, the player has the option to inject the avatar with “plasmids” that alter its physical and mental capabilities. As such, players can battle with traditional hardware extensions such as blunt weapons and guns, but also have the option to use wetware enhancements that give them the power of electricity, fire and telekinesis. What is interesting here is that the game does not attempt to explain the player’s newfound capabilities in terms of magic or the supernatural. Instead, *BioShock* engages with the discourse of the posthuman and proposes that the player’s range of abilities are the

\(^{20}\) I am referring here to McLuhan’s notion that the function gained by using any forms of technology involves an equal amount of atrophy somewhere in the “natural” body. This reciprocal relationship therefore positions technology as something equal to the human body, and not as the ersatz replacement required in the case of permanent damage. See McLuhan, Marshall and Quentin Fiore. *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects*. New York: Bantam Books, 1967. Print.

\(^{21}\) *The Matrix* proposes that immersion in a virtual world is facilitated by “jacking in”: the insertion of an interface in the form of a metal spike in the back of the skull. Both the spike’s shape and its length betray a belief in a Descartian dualism: its pointed end indicates that human awareness can be interfaced with at a single point and is thus located at a specific part of the brain; the spike’s length points towards a position in the brain which approximately coincides with the pineal gland. Both aspects suggest that mind and body can be separated at some critical junction and, by extension, that the mind can be interfaced with directly by either natural wetware or artificial hardware. It proposes, in other words, that the brain is simply the material substrate for the mind and that, by extension, the mind and its interfaces can be realized either in wetware or hardware.
result of the high technology that emerged out of Rapture’s dystopian space. In accordance with Objectivism, what the player’s body can do is not the product of nature or magic, but the direct consequence of the player’s self-interest at a particular point in the game: if there is ice blocking the door to the next level, melt it by injecting your avatar’s body with a “fire plasmid”. *BioShock*, in other words, revolves around water and technology mediated bodily extensions.

I want to propose that the coincidence between dystopia, liquidity and the posthuman in these narratives is an expression of what Zygmunt Bauman has referred to as “liquid modernity”. With his liquid series (*Liquid Modernity, Liquid Love, Liquid Life, Liquid Fear, Liquid Times*) Bauman suggests the development of modernity into the “postmodern” as a function of increasing fluidity. While this concept of “liquid modernity” bears many resemblances to, for example, Jameson’s concept of the postmodern as an expression of late capitalism, or Habermas’ notion of the postmodern as the loss of a desire for “beauty”, Bauman is able to usefully extend the discourse on the postmodern. He suggests that what follows in the wake of the destruction of grand narratives is the continuous movement of values and qualities. Using the metaphor of liquid, Bauman demonstrates that, with no stable referents to hold back the flow of time, there is no resistance left to guide the flow of ideas and cultural values towards specific objectives:

Unlike the preceding era of “solid” modernity that lived towards “eternity” (short hand for a state of perpetual monotonous and irrevocable sameness) – liquid modernity sets itself no objective and draws no finishing line; more precisely, it assigns the quality of permanence solely to the state of transience. Time flows – it no longer “marches on”. There is change, always change, ever new change, but no destination, no finishing point, and no anticipation of a mission accomplished. Each lived-through moment is pregnant with new beginning and the end: once sworn antagonists, now Siamese twins. (Bauman 2007: 66)

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22 I have used scare quotes around postmodern here to indicate that Bauman himself studiously avoids use of the term. It is obvious, however, that there is a significant degree of correlation between Bauman’s liquid terminology and what is generally understood by “postmodernism”.

According to Bauman, then, the weakening of modernity’s stabilities has resulted in the continuous free-flowing movement of ideas. Liquid modernity, in other words, contains the notion that postmodernity is characterized by an absence of containment.

This concept of liquid modernity appears to overlap to a great extent with dystopian spatial disruption. The breakdown of totalitarian spaces, and especially dystopia’s expression through permeability, seems to link particular dystopian narratives with Bauman’s liquid take on the postmodern condition. Certainly, in the case of The Matrix and BioShock, the failing of certain grand narratives (i.e. human subjectivity and agency, Descartian dualism, Objectivism and free market capitalism) at the hand of contemporary technology activates a sense of fluid modernity similar to that of Bauman’s. These narratives articulate both the anxieties and the sense of liberation that accompany the free-flow of possibilities which result from grand narrative deconstruction. More importantly, The Matrix and BioShock project this free-flow unto the spatial dimensions of their dystopian constructions. In The Matrix, the blurring divide between the natural human body and artificial intelligence finds expression directly in the permeability of the walls of the totalitarian space. “Real” and “virtual” bodies collide as dystopia’s wall is not watertight and allows for liquid exchange. Similarly, BioShock projects its concerns with the posthuman subject unto Rapture’s outer defenses. As the player is increasingly dependent upon technology that blurs the distinction between hardware and wetware, Rapture’s walls become ever more porous. Rapture’s leaking increases hand in hand with the player’s necessity to use wetware extensions. In this way, BioShock is able to encode the destabilization of the concept of the natural human body into the spatial properties of its dystopian construction.

In these narratives, then, the permeability of dystopia’s walls seems to articulate an awareness of the postmodern. And while both The Matrix and BioShock seem to be predominantly invested in exploring aspects of the posthuman through their spatial dimensions, “liquid dystopias” appear to be able to address any issue pertaining to the deconstruction of grand narratives and the void of uncertainty that is left in their wake. Yet, what characterizes these narratives is their interest not just in the destabilization of specific ideological premises. Rather, these narratives suggest the instability of all ideology, proposing only a single constant “rule” by assigning the “quality of permanence solely to the state of transience” (Bauman 2007: 66).
allowing the outside world to seep into their totalitarian spaces, in other words, liquid
dystopias are not just responsible for subverting a single ideological, totalitarian
space, but instead they question all notions stability and order.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have provided a preliminary sketch of dystopian poetics. In order to
describe the relationship between dystopian narratives and communication devices I
first asked the question how such narratives may be conceptualized. I questioned
contemporary theory on utopian and dystopian literature which relies on authorial
intent, subjective attributes and a tortuous system of categorization to provide
answers. I replaced these theories with the idea that utopian and dystopian literature
are principally characterized by their presentation of diegetic space. Utopia, I argued,
is characterized by isolated spaces with a homogeneous topography. Dystopian
narrative is characterized by the subversion and physical destruction of such spaces. I
then continued to flesh out these dynamics by showing the different ways in which
these spatial properties emerge.

In the next chapter I will suggest that these dynamics are part of a
telecommunication *dispositif*. In this “apparatus”, I will show, the material substrate
occasions user perspectives that have highly similar spatial poetics as those I have
outlined here, producing a close relationship between space, dystopian narrative, and
communication devices.
Chapter 2: The Spatial Poetics of Telecommunication Technology

Introduction
In the previous chapter I argued that utopian discourse is characterized by specific representations of space. I proposed that utopian and dystopian fiction are not depictions of “good” and “bad” societies, but narrative structures that adhere to certain spatial poetics of isolation, uniformity and, in the case of dystopia, the subversion of these spaces.

I now want to begin to expand on these observations, and to explore the overlap between the utopian spatial poetics that I have already described and the spatial language that has emerged alongside telecommunication technology. By doing so, I hope to elucidate not only the relationship between telecommunication technology and the spatial imagination, but also to begin exploring the connection between such technology and utopian discourse. I will forward the notion that telecommunication devices imply new spaces of information exchange whose properties resemble, to a great extent, the poetics of utopian and dystopian fiction. These similarities, I will argue, have engendered a powerful connection between modern communication technology and utopian discursive strategies. In this chapter, then, I focus on a new section of the dispositif of telecommunication technology. Here, I investigate the material substrate of the technologies (i.e. cabling and electrical signaling, the telephone, Ethernet, etc) while paying specific attention to its connection to the spatial poetics that help to define user interfaces and the narrative traditions that help support them.

In the section “Telecommunication and the Spatial Imagination: Nil-Space” I argue that communication technologies present a user interface whose properties resemble the spatial organization of utopian and dystopian narratives. I will further explore this idea in the sections “The Utopian and Dystopian Properties of Nil-Space: Isolation” and “The Utopian and Dystopian Properties of Nil-Space: Homogeneity” by showing how the user interface of telecommunication technology presents two of the main properties of utopian discourse. In the section “Narrating Nil-Space” I will then demonstrate how these user interfaces translate into narrative. Finally, I corroborate these claims in the sections “The Spatial Imagination in Theory: Marshall McLuhan and the Global Village”, “The Spatial Imagination of Public Addresses:
Bryant’s Telegraph” and “The Spatial Imagination in Advertising: Apple’s ‘1984’”. In these sections I demonstrate the strength of the relationship between telecommunication technology and utopian and dystopian discourse. By exploring defining moments in the development of communication technology from three different discursive fields, I show that the language in which these technologies are couched is frequently based on utopian and dystopian narrative traditions.

In chapters 3, 4 and 5 I will use the relationships established here to describe the effect that telecommunication technology has had on dystopian narrative. In these chapters I will outline the historical development of the dystopian genre and telecommunication dispositif by showing how telecommunication technology intervenes in dystopian space and causes it to contract, suggesting ever-smaller spaces and ultimately reaching singularity in 1980s cyberpunk.

Telecommunication and the Spatial Imagination: Nil-Space

The ability to easily and quickly communicate at a distance has had a significant influence on our perception of space and distance. Telecommunication is a form of information transmission that is characterized by a stretching of the medium that carries the message between sender and receiver. That is, whereas non-telecommunication encapsulates its message in a communication medium which has to be transported from a point of origin to its destination (e.g. the words of a letter in an envelope), telecommunication relies on a medium that extends all the way between origin and destination, and covers a significant distance (i.e. beyond earshot). As long as this medium is in place, then, there is neither necessity to contain the message in a physical body, nor the need to move this body between places. In this way, transmission speed, and by extension perceived distance, are dependent not on the speed with which the medium can be moved between A and B, but the propagation speed of the transmission medium itself.

Typically, telecommunication technology relies on either electrical signaling or electromagnetic radiation for its media. In the case of the former, electricity conducing wiring stretches between a point of origin and destination. Technologies like the electrical telegraph, early telephone, cable television and cat5 Ethernet cabling all use such electrical pathways in order to transmit information. In the case of the latter, a pathway for electromagnetic radiation exists to bridge the gap between
source and destination. Line-of-sight devices like the optical telegraph and most satellites use high frequency radiation (visible light and microwaves), whereas technologies like radio and cell-phones use low-frequency radio waves. As such, the theoretical transmission speed for such technologies varies between approximately 66% of the speed of light for electrical signaling in typical coaxial electrical cabling to 100% of the speed of light in the case of electromagnetic transmission.24

Of course, these theoretical transmission speeds do not translate directly into the speed by which messages are sent. These speeds reflect only the velocity of single photons and electromagnetic waves. Complete messages, however, require many photons and many waves. More importantly, all telecommunication technology requires messages to be encoded according to specific, pre-arranged transmission protocols before they can be sent, as well as the decoding of the information stream upon arrival. For some technologies, like the electrical telegraph, these processes are labor intensive and can take a considerable amount of time which lowers actual transmission speeds from fractions of a second to minutes. In spite of transmission protocols, message encoding and decoding, however, telecommunication technology still manages to send information in only a fraction of the time that it would take to physically move a message medium between two points. By expanding the body in which the message is contained between the origin and the destination rather than moving it, telecommunication technology drastically reduces the time it takes to communicate.

However, time reduction is not necessarily perceived to be the most important characteristic of the telegraph, television and the telephone, as their names already indicate. Instead, it is the effect of such near instantaneous modes of communication on our perception of space and distance that engender the “tele” prefix. So, these technologies are not described as forms of “chronocommunication”, but are instead understood in terms of the communication distance that they pragmatically unlock as a corollary of their speed. Thus, while any message sent by telegraph might just as well have been sent over the same distance by “conventional” modes of communication at a slower speed, time is not generally the dimension where the technology speaks to the imagination. Indeed, as Bauman’s vision of “modern

history” implies, changes to the perception and pragmatics of time tend to be imagined as changes in space.

In *Liquid Modernity*, for instance, Bauman speaks of technological innovation as a “watershed change in the modern history of time” and argues for “the impact it is beginning to make on the human existential condition” (Bauman 2010: 117). Interestingly, for Bauman, this change in temporality occurs primarily in the realm of space, not in the dimension of time:

The change in question is the irrelevance of space, masquerading as the annihilation of time. In the software universe of lightspeed travel, space may be traversed, literally, in no-time; the difference between “far way” and “down here” is canceled. Space no longer sets limits to actions and its effects, and counts little, or does not count at all. It has lost its “strategic value”...

(ibid.)

Here, Bauman imagines the speed with which contemporary communication devices operate to have an effect on space rather than on time. The “lightspeed travel” made possible by computers leads, according to Bauman, to a cancellation of space, not the reduction of transmission times. In fact, the spatial dimension impresses itself so firmly upon Bauman’s imagination that it even asserts itself as the true arena of communication technology’s authority. For Bauman, the need to understand the effects of telecommunication technology along spatial lines is so strong that he imagines space to be “masquerading as the annihilation of time” instead of the other way round.

In spite of the technology’s primary, temporal characteristic, then, telecommunication devices stir the spatial imagination. And while Bauman serves as an example from critical discourse, this effect can be seen in fiction as well. Already in Homer, early optical telecommunication activates the spatial rather than the temporal imagination, serving as an example of both the strength and endurance of the relationship between communication technology and spatial concepts. For instance, when in *The Iliad* Achilleus is portrayed as the rallying point of the Greek army, Homer creates a favorable comparison between fire beacons and Achilleus’ heroic aura in order to emphasize the latter’s ability to bridge distance:

So speaking swift-footed Iris left him, and Achilleus, loved of Zeus, rose up. And Athene wrapped the tasselled aegis about his powerful shoulders, and
close round his head the queen among goddesses set a golden cloud, and made
a flame burn from it gleaming bright. As when the smoke rises up from a city
to reach the sky, from an island in the distance, where enemies are attacking
and the inhabitants run the trial of hateful Ares all day long fighting from their
city: and then with the setting of the sun the light from the line of beacons
blazes out, and the glare shoots up high for the neighbouring islanders to see,
in the hope that they will come across in their ships to protect them from
disaster—such was the light that blazed from Achilleus’ head up into the sky.
(Homer 300)

Here, Homer draws a comparison between Achilleus and early optical
telecommunication technology in order to emphasize the hero’s ability to rally the
Greek in battle. The simile works by projecting some of the signaling capabilities of
fire beacons, as well as their significance in battle, onto The Iliad’s hero. In so doing,
Homer not only underscores the dependency of the Greek army on Achilleus—and by
extension Agamemnon’s mistake in denying Achilleus his prize—but also illustrates
the powerful effect of communication devices on the spatial imagination. Homer
understands telecommunication technology as a being of central import not only in
the course of the battle for Troy, but also in the realm of poetry. The technology
makes available figurative comparisons that allow the poet to condense the diegetic
space. In this instance, it serves to collapse the vicinity of Troy into a spatial
singularity in the shape of the hero’s personal aura.25

What Homer’s comparison of Achilleus and fire beacons makes clear, then, is
that telecommunication technology invokes new kinds of spatial imagination. It
allows for the implosion of the diegetic space by providing the attributes of
contemporary communication technology (i.e. speed, distance and clarity), making
available a new form of poetics. As Achilleus’ aura radiates outward into the
periphery as though it were a fire beacon, the precise location of the hero, or that of
the viewer-subject, is irrelevant: the beacon is visible to all receivers of the
communication, from great distances. In this way, Homer’s description begins to
imagine a space where both distance and location have become unimportant.

As such, this poetic use of primitive optical telegraphy proposes what might
be called a “telepistemology”: the idea that knowledge acquisition can be achieved
independently of location and at any distance through the use of telecommunication

25 I use the word “singularity” here not as a synonym for “unique” but to mean a location of high
spatial density, as in “gravitational singularity”.

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devices. And while *The Iliad*'s fire beacons provide an early illustration of telepistemology, more contemporary technological innovations have had similar effects for the contemporary imagination. Indeed, as Jeff Malpas points out, recent innovations such as the Internet have also strengthened the idea that location and distance are “contingent constraints on knowledge, rather than as having any essential connection in knowledge as such” (Malpas 109). Accordingly, while telecommunication technology does of course possess “real” spatial properties in the sense that it has a physical presence (fire beacons, telegraph poles, underground communication lines, communication satellites, etc.), its method of information propagation suggests a complete lack of the significance of spatial reference points. In this way, technologies such as the telegraph, television and the Internet are able to effectively nullify space. As knowledge is available regardless of the locations of source and receiver, the spatial dimensions onto which telecommunication technology projects itself are naught: a nil-space.

I wish to propose that this imaginary, telepistemological nil-space resembles to a considerable extent the spatial paradigms described in the previous chapter, which consist of the isolation and uniformity of utopian spaces and their dystopian subversion. I want to put forward the notion that the disassociation between knowledge and location occasioned by the speed of communication technology engenders a spatial imagination that is strongly reminiscent of these spatial properties that help to define utopian and dystopian discourse.

**The Utopian and Dystopian Properties of Nil-Space: Isolation**

In the previous chapter I presented a case for considering utopian and dystopian discourses not as narratives about “good” and “bad” societies, but as narrative strategies for representing diegetic space. Utopian discourse, I argued, is characterized by spaces that are isolated as well as geographically and politically homogeneous. Dystopian discourse, I proposed, undermines such “utopian” space by presenting sites of opposition. I now wish to explore the *dispositif* of telecommunication technology further by investigating the common ground between these utopian and dystopian discursive strategies, and the nil-space presented by telecommunication devices.

The properties of telecommunication’s nil-space coincide to a large degree with the poetics of utopian and dystopian narratives. Both the characteristics of
isolation and homogeneity that help to form the utopian topology, and by extension the dystopian subversion of such a spatial construct, can be seen reflected in the nil-space of communication devices. In the case of isolation, it may be observed that telecommunication’s nil-space suggests a similar type of seclusion from “normal” space, as does utopian fiction. Accordingly, the location of telecommunication’s nil-space is generally expressed in terms of its difference from known space, not its location in it. As such, the discourse that surrounds communication technology tends to express similar notions of spatial isolation such as, for example, Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516). So, just as More defines the location of Utopia against a backdrop of exotic exploration and tall-tale seafaring lore—thus emphasizing Utopia’s location outside of “ordinary” space—so does the discourse around telecommunication lean toward underlining the technology’s ability to create or unlock a new kind of dimensionality that is external to the spaces its users are already familiar with. Specifically, the divorce of knowledge and location that telecommunication technology affords engenders spatial concepts that resonate with the isolation of utopian and dystopian constructs.

Perhaps the most telling illustration of this phenomenon can be identified in nil-space’s visual representation, such as in maps. For example, maps of the Internet tend to illustrate the idea that the technology’s communicative space is isolated from “normal” space. It is interesting to see that such Internet maps generally bear no resemblance to traditional topographic images or known geography. Instead, such illustrations use particular rules for their spatial relationships (e.g. ping speed for location) and coloring (e.g. color according to domain or subnet) to produce an alien landscape of data connectivity.
The unconventional spatial representation of Internet maps is remarkable in light of the Internet’s actual, physical location. That is, the technological substrate that Internet maps represent has an “actual”, physical presence. Yet, in spite of the known locations of the Internet’s major routers, maps of the Internet generally do not show an overlay of switches and cables with known landmarks. Rather, they focus entirely on the new dimensionality of the medium. As with common visual representations of More’s Utopia, then, such maps do not position the technology’s dimensions in relation to “real space”. Instead, these maps suggest the alien nature of the technological space by proposing the need for a new set of measurement tools, parameters and skills to create diagrammatic representations.
A similar set of spatial concerns may be identified outside of the realm of map-making as well, and in technologies other than the Internet. Telecommunication technology in general is couched in visual language that emphasizes the isolation of the communication medium from the known world. This idea that communication technology creates a dimensionality of its own, which is external to ordinary space may, for instance, even be observed in such artifacts as symbols for technology or company logos. Consider for example the shares of the Marconi Wireless Telegraph Company and their visual representation of telegraphic networks.

Fig. 11: Share of the Macroni Wireless Telegraph Company

At the top of the share paper the Eastern and Western hemispheres are represented with two half globes, with Lady Justice presiding between them. The two globes are overlaid with a meridian grid and parallels—the traditional cartographic method of representing space—and thus show the limits of “ordinary”, known space. It is only outside of this “ordinary” space that the share depicts the technology that the company aims to sell. Rather than explicitly indicating the wireless stations that the Marconi Company intends to exploit for its business, then, the logo instead is
suggestive of financial spaces beyond the known world that its technology will purportedly unlock. The image here is of new “virgin” territory ready to be discovered and to be turned into profit, rather than of a technology that interconnects the known world or markets that have already been explored.26

The visual language of the Marconi Company stock seems especially pertinent as it is indeed the telegraph which played such an important role in the expansion of the stock markets. Near instantaneous communication made not only futures trading on commodity goods, stocks and bonds possible, it also connected the different national and international stock exchanges and gave a greater number of traders access to these markets (e.g. through “ticker tapes”). As a result, the telegraph expanded and accelerated stock trading, giving rise to the current system of financial markets. In a way, then, the trading of future value versus intrinsic value on the stock market coincides with the difference between “real” space and nil-space that communication technology entails. As the telegraph facilitated new ways of doing business that existed not in a “real” market, but rather took place in the abstract, ethereal qualities of speculation and futures trading, so did the technology suggest an intangible communicative space that existed outside of the “real” world.

The representation of space on the Marconi share, then, may be seen as facilitating the emergence of contemporary financial markets to a certain extent. Representing the medium’s power as existing outside of ordinary dimensions acts as a catalyst to financial speculation as it suggests entering a new monetary realm where different rules apply. Certainly, the representation of the company’s core business on the share is a form of visual shorthand for the separation of normal space, and the profitable, futures space suggested by communication technology.

The Utopian and Dystopian Properties of Nil-Space: Homogeneity

As with the sense of spatial isolation to which the technology contributes, communication devices present their users with an interface whose topography mirrors the uniformity that characterizes utopian discourse. Utopian spaces, through their social and political standardization, are characterized by a highly uniform layout. As universal concurrence with utopia’s ideology removes the need for sites of

26 The precise role of Lady Justice here, however, is somewhat mysterious. Her position between the two hemispheres is presumably meant to convey a sense of net neutrality that Marconi’s wireless technology might bring to the transatlantic telegraph market.
opposition, there appears to be no functional purpose to topographic variety of internal structures. Concurrently, utopian narrative can be distinguished by a diegetic space that is highly uniform in nature: the precise location of Hythloday on the island of Utopia is irrelevant to his perception of the entire island.

Telecommunication technology mirrors this spatial uniformity by disassociating information and location. Whereas non-telecommunication is characterized by the marriage of location and knowledge (e.g. the location of a book in a library; the words on a will in a safety deposit box), telecommunication technologies, like the telegraph and the Internet, remove the need to be in a specific location in order to perceive a piece of information. In this way, these technologies no longer favor specific locales for knowledge acquisition but instead begin to suggest an information realm where position is of no consequence. As such, in the same way that Hythloday’s viewing position remains the same regardless of his “actual”, relative location on the island of Utopia, the user of telecommunication devices is confronted with a communicative space where his or her physical location has no bearing on information access. As a result, this telepistemology presents the user with a featureless sea of free-flowing information, rather than a clearly defined internal layout where location can be considered meaningful.

Certainly, in terms of spatial imagination, this uniformity may commonly be seen reflected in narrative representations of communication technology. Typically, the homogenization entailed by the divorce of knowledge from location leads to representations of information realms that focus on spatial uniformity through disorientation. In the absence of any significant landmarks, these data realms appear as free-flowing seas of information that challenge the subject to find useful waypoints in such data realms. Emblematic of this narrative strategy, the cyberpunk movement imagined the featureless planes of digital information that etched themselves on the popular imagination in the 1980s and 90s. Narratives such as Neal Stephenson’s *Snow Crash* (1992), Bruce Bethke’s *Headcrash* (1995) and Disney’s *Tron* (1982) envisioned the digital badlands that seemed to capture both the audience’s Luddite fears while imparting a sense of spatial uniformity that contemporary communication technology invoked. In the face of information overload and the decentralization of information into parallel processes, a feeling of disorientation began to surface that
reflected the awe of witnessing the almost incomprehensible amounts of information that computers could process.

Fig. 12: Disney’s *Tron* was very successful at representing the sense of spatial and data uniformity that new computing technologies suggested. While there are unique locations within *Tron*’s imagined computer space, the film’s most memorable special effects depend on vast, uniform data grids, such as with the famous light-cycle sequences. 

*Source: Tron. Dir. Steven Lisberger. Walt Disney Productions, 1982. DVD.*

Planes of data stretched out menacingly before protagonists who, above all else, seem lost and without a clear sense of direction in the face such vast expanses of homogenized data representation.

Crucial in this respect was the intervention of William Gibson’s term “cyberspace”. Published in 1982, Gibson’s short story “Burning Chrome” for the first time supplied a name for the new dimensions suggested by video game consoles and computer modems. In giving cyberspace its name, Gibson not only made semiotically concrete the idea that the marriage of computer and communication technology gave rise to a separate and isolated information realm, he also invented a term that became synonymous with the sense of spatial disorientation that accompanied the dizzying amounts of data. Gibson manages this perspective on the information realm with language that is steeped in technical sublimity and explores cyberspace’s consistency:

The Matrix is an abstract representation of the relationships between data systems. Legitimate programmers jack into their employers’ sector of the matrix and find themselves surrounded by bright geometries representing the corporate data. Towers and fields of it ranged in the colorless nonspace of the simulation matrix, the electronic consensus hallucination that facilitates the handling and exchange of massive quantities of data […]. Bobby was a
cowboy. Bobby was a cracksman, a burglar, casing mankind’s extended electronic nervous system, rustling data and credit in the crowded matrix, monochrome nonspace where the only stars are dense concentrations of information, and high above it all burn corporate galaxies and the cold spiral arms of military systems. (Gibson 1995: 196-97)

This extract exposes the tension between a desire to represent a new, artificial spatial realm and the difficulties this presents due to a lack of topographical features. On the one hand, Gibson imagines cyberspace as a matrix that has “real” dimensions that contain geometries, towers, frontiers and fields. On the other hand, the author conceives this matrix as a non-space; a featureless plane that is monochromatic and hallucinatory. This apparent contradiction signals the desire to see cyberspace not just as a separate, “real” space, but also as a space that is quite featureless as a consequence of a standardized data-topography.

This homogeneity of Gibson’s concept of cyberspace is underlined by “Burning Chrome” in two ways. First, the text conveys a sense of disorientation that is congruent with cyberspace’s uniform internal layout. Certainly, while cyberspace contains navigational points in the form of towers and fields of corporate data, it is above all characterized by entire ranges of such structures. As such, the sheer vastness of this data sphere confuses the subject and makes it difficult to navigate the technological realm. At the same time, Gibson undermines traditional methods of navigation in “Burning Chrome”, in an effort to convey both the size of cyberspace and its regular structure as well as the sense of disorientation that is the result. For example, in the text celestial navigation is impeded by the high density of data in the matrix. The mass of data is such that, while cyberspace does contain stars in Gibson’s short story, navigation by data in the heavens appears to be ruled out due to its concentration into a “monochromatic” background of information galaxies. As a result, Gibson imagines that only the best of the best, information “cowboys” that “whip moves on those keyboards faster than you can follow” are able to beat the odds and find their way across the ubiquitous planes of data (Gibson 1995: 198).

Moreover, Gibson never writes his protagonists into any specific location while they are jacked in. Rather, he presents them as though in a continuous state of transit in cyberspace, always looking to go some place rather than actually being anywhere. Even the story’s structure reflects this disorientation: the narrative is divided into sections that are set in “virtual” space and “real” space, and accordingly
the characters alternate between being in transit in cyberspace and being grounded in specific, known locations while in the diegetic space proper. The navigational difficulties which characterize Gibson’s cyberspace, then, signal the uniformity of the dimension’s internal structure: as the characters find themselves among the ubiquitous towers of data, they experience increasing difficulties in gaining a sense of direction in this technological space.

Along with this disorientation, “Burning Chrome” stresses cyberspace’s uniformity by presenting it as having distinct liquid qualities. In the face of data uniformity and a lack of mappable dimensions, the text activates paradigms of data streaming and information flow. Indeed, as with so many diegetic constructs inspired by telecommunication, the telepistemological space that “Burning Chrome” creates seems far closer in its matter state to liquid than to solid. For example, Gibson proposes that traversing this data realm resembles surfing a wave or being washed down a corridor:

Bodiless, we swerve into Chrome’s castle of ice. And we’re fast, fast. It feels like we’re surfing the crest of the invading program, hanging ten [sic] above the seething glitch systems as they mutate. We’re sentient patches of oil swept along down corridors of shadow. (Gibson 1995: 200)

Gibson’s spatial imagination here takes on a distinctive viscosity that seems incompatible with “normal” space. Even when he posits a solid structure in cyberspace (i.e. Chrome’s castle), the author still attributes qualities to it that are fluid-like, such as coldness and slipperiness. Gibson’s insistence on the liquidity of cyberspace seems to be primarily motivated by his attempt to convey a contemporary, postmodern sense of constant change and instability of identity. In this respect, Gibson’s cyberspace closely resembles Bauman’s strategy for describing the structures and changes that characterize contemporary society. Mirroring Bauman’s use of liquid as a metaphor for modernity, Gibson positions his concept of cyberspace as a place with “no objective and [that] draws no finishing line”; as something that “assigns the quality of permanence solely to the state of transience” (Bauman 2007: 66). In the wake of information flows, in other words, cyberspace becomes a place where “[t]here is change, always change, ever new change, but no destination, no finishing point, and no anticipation of a mission accomplished” (ibid.).
However, together with this concern for transience, Gibson’s viscous cyberspace underlines the uniformity of the communication sphere. It has the effect of “mixing” different possible destinations into a single diegetic locale where positions continually shift and transform. In this way, events occur untethered from specific locations, while characters are swept along the sea of information. Accordingly, hackers in “Burning Chrome” find themselves continually surfing along data streams rather than in any specific place. In cyberspace, Jack and Bobby are not corporeal presences but are instead “patches of oil swept along down corridors of shadow” (Gibson 1995: 200). Gibson’s language here betrays the extent to which the liquidity of cyberspace can be seen as reflecting the uniformity of this spatial realm: the black of “patches of oil” mixes with the dark of “corridors of shadow”, thus eliminating difference and emphasizing the uniformity that underlies cyberspace.

**Narrating Nil-Space**

Telecommunication technology, then, reveals itself to its users through a dimension that resembles typical utopian discursive strategies. The main properties of the nil-space suggested by such devices coincide to a large degree with utopian topology. First, the idea that a communication device is able to project knowledge onto a zero spatial dimension mirrors utopia’s physically separate location. While nil-space is of course not really a space at all, the epistemological window offered by communication technology does suggest a dimension of information availability that is entirely distinct from non-utopian, Euclidean spatial “reality”. Communication technology’s nil-space, in other words, complies with the poetics of utopian discourse in the sense that it presents itself as an island of unique topography in a sea of “normal” spatial coordinates. Second, nil-space mirrors utopia’s homogeneous layout. As a result of the same separation of knowledge and location that gives rise to its isolation, nil-space is characterized by the utopian standardization of layout. As all information in the communication network is available from any node, communication technologies such as the Internet suggest a data realm whose internal layout is entirely homogenized. As such, the conceptual spaces of communication technology present themselves in a fashion similar to More’s utopian island.

The spatial distinctiveness of nil-space allows communication devices to be cast in a utopian light. This connection between a technological substrate and utopian
discourse can be seen, again, in the concept of cyberspace. The notion of cyberspace was conceived of in light of the Internet’s underlying broadcast technology, the Transmission Control Protocol. The possibility of sending any kind of information in data streams, from anywhere to anywhere, invoked the promise of a world of data at our fingertips. Concurrently, cyberspace, as John Perry Barlow’s infamous “Declaration of Independence” (1996) shows, had, in spite of its name, ostensibly no longer anything to do with the physical world:

Cyberspace consists of transactions, relationships, and thought itself, arrayed like a standing wave in the web of our communications. Ours is a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live […]. Our identities have no bodies, so, unlike you [the “Governments of the Industrial World”], we cannot obtain order by physical coercion. We believe that from ethics, enlightened self-interest, and the commonweal, our governance will emerge. Our identities may be distributed across many of your jurisdictions. (Barlow)

Barlow’s commitment to the independence of cyberspace makes it clear that the Internet, as was the case with the telegraph and other mass media that went before it, shows the capacity to conform to utopian poetics. Here, Barlow is not just proclaiming the independence of telecommunication users. Rather, he posits the existence of an environment that is the paradoxical amalgam of a space and a “nowhere” where users are free to engage in any activity they wish. The Internet’s apparent spatial distinctiveness, in other words, allows for the technology’s conception in utopian terms.

At this point it is worth noting that this renegotiation of spatial concepts is not necessarily related to “real” spatial properties. What is at stake here is not so much the practical execution of communication protocols across space. Indeed, as Malpas points out, it is these pragmatic concerns that often actually sharply contrast with the discourse that surrounds the tangible technologies:

So far as the actual technology is concerned, one of the first points that ought to be emphasized is that, for the most part, the Internet provides nothing of the sort of magical access to things across distance that it may at first seem to promise. For most of us, indeed, there is a sharp contrast between the reality of the Internet and the rhetoric that surrounds it. (Malpas 113)
As such, the spatial consequences of telecommunication technology may be said to occur primarily in the discursive practices that help to establish technologies such as telegraphy and the Internet. In other words, my aim here is not to imply the relative utopian-ness or dystopian-ness of devices such as the telephone or television. Instead, it is my object to study the discourse in which such technologies are couched. Specifically, I am interested in the way this language overlaps with and elicits comparison with the concepts of literary utopia and dystopia. I am, then, not trying to debunk popular discourse on the magical properties of the telegraph by pointing out its “real” spatial properties and demonstrating its practical shortcomings. Instead, I am trying to show how communication technology and utopian literature share certain notions of space and, for this reason, have become members of the same technological dispositif.

I want to suggest that the high level of commonality between utopian narrative strategies and communication technology’s nil-space has engendered a rich body of utopian and dystopian discourses around telecommunication devices. I want to propose that the spatial dimensions that telecommunication technology presents to its users, are strikingly similar to those of utopian and dystopian literature, which creates a considerable overlap between these two discourses. In order to disclose the pervasive nature of this phenomenon, I will investigate three typical responses to emerging communication technology from the realms of theory, public speeches and advertising. Taking a closer look at these disparate discursive fields will provide some indication as to the extent to which telecommunication technology is able to draw out either a utopian or dystopian response.

However, before I explore the utopian and dystopian discursive strategies of specific technological substrates, it is important to take a moment to consider the unique nature of telecommunication’s spatial renegotiation. At first glance, the development of telecommunication’s spatial concepts appears to bear striking similarities to that of other, comparable technological developments. In particular, it would seem that transportation technologies have had similar effects on the spatial imagination as telecommunication devices. After all, both information and transportation technologies are concerned with bringing the far-off within reach, the exportation of metropolitan culture and ideology to the periphery, the emergence of futures contracts and so on. So, how is the concept of space that is associated with the
electrical telegraph, telephone and the Internet specific to these technological artifacts and different from the spatial imagination inspired by, for example, railroad networks and highways? Is there, in other words, anything specific about the way in which communication technology has impacted on notions of space?

While the spatial imagination as engendered by telecommunication devices certainly resembles that of other technologies there is a vital point of distinction to be made. All of these technologies entail some sort of modification of the spatial imagination, in particular notions of scale. Yet the precise realization of this spatial operation can differ significantly between events and technologies. Indeed, as Augé points out, the scaling functions that are behind what he calls “supermodernity” are characterized by very distinct directions, semiotic fields and technological substrates:

The second accelerated transformation specific to the contemporary world, and the second figure of excess characteristic of supermodernity, concerns space. We could start by saying—again somewhat paradoxically—that the excess of space is correlative with the shrinking of the planet: with the distancing from ourselves embodied in the feats of our astronauts and the endless circling of our satellites. In a sense, our first steps in outer space reduce our own space to an infinitesimal point, of which satellite photographs appropriately give us the exact measure. But at the same time the world is becoming open to us. We are in an era characterized by changes of scale—of course in the context of space exploration, but also on earth: rapid means of transportation have brought any capital within a few hours’ travel of any other. And in the privacy of our home, finally, images of all sorts, relayed by satellites and caught by aerials that bristle on the roofs of our remotest hamlets, can give us an instant, sometimes simultaneous vision of an event taking place on the other side of the planet. (Augé 25-26)

While Augé’s project here, then, is to convince us of his vision of “supermodernity”, from the current context it is interesting to see his vision of technology as the catalyst of spatial renegotiation. Especially his identification of two separate scaling functions is significant for understanding the specific effects of different technologies on the concept of space.

First, from Augé’s analysis it would appear that transportation technology involves a movement outward from the center toward the periphery. Augé conceives of transportation technology as growing toward the perimeter, connecting to new centers and moving the border of normal space into outer space. Consequently, he associates such technology with the semiotic realm of journey making, and the words
Augé uses in conjunction with these technologies are “exploration” and “travel”. This choice of words, in turn, underlines the idea that contemporary transportation technology involves a scaling operation in which a frontier is moving out from the center into space. Second, Augé’s exploration of “super-modernity” lays bare the tendency to think of telecommunication and space in terms of an inward movement. As opposed to contemporary modes of transportation, Augé couches telecommunication technology in the language of the home. By using such words as “hamlet”, “privacy”, “home” and “roof” in relation to communication devices, Augé’s analysis betrays the scaling operations that underlie the spatial imagination from this technological perspective. Rather than a frontier that moves ever further outward, the spatial functions of the telegraph, telephone and the Internet are characterized by a frontier that moves inward to the center. The discourse here is of spatial contraction; of the outside world converging on the subject in the comfort of the home.

On the surface, then, both transportation and communication technology are characterized by a—perceived—reduction of spatial dimensions, by a virtual “shrinking of the planet” (ibid.). After all, both reduced transmission and transportation times are able to suggest a new nearness of objects that previously seemed far away. However, between these ostensibly similar renegotiations of scale, there is a marked difference. Whereas transportation technology is able the suggest scale reduction through, somewhat paradoxically, a frontier that moves further and further away, communication technology achieves a similar effect by suggesting a condensation of space into a spatial singularity: the nil-space. As such, while their general effect is comparable, the scaling functions of transportation and communication technologies are of an entirely different order. Whereas a centrifugal movement can be distinguished in contemporary transportation networks, modern communication technology is characterized by a centripetal reduction of spatial dimensions.

While the extract from Augé serves as a valuable illustration, it is important to note that these centrifugal and centripetal scaling functions can be identified more generally in the spatial imagination as well. Broadly speaking, these tendencies may also be observed in fiction that takes some interest in transportation and telecommunication technology. For example, one of the best-documented cases of the effects of transportation technology on the spatial imagination is George Eliot’s
Middlemarch (1874). Eliot’s invocation of the Victorian railway system has prompted critics to try and align the novel’s depiction of technology with its formal properties, such as narrative structure, characterization, and narrative space. For example, Jessie Givner identifies Middlemarch as an instance of historical realism by tracing the novel’s scenes, characters and dialogue back to contemporary technological change, in particular the expansion of the British railroad network. Within this exposition, the issue of space continues to resurface as one of the primarily affected constituents of the fiction. Consider, for example, Givner’s close reading of an extortion scene:

The train which runs through the center of Middlemarch is a quintessential Eliot figure in its tendency to suddenly switch from literal to figurative tracks. Some time after the unsavory Mr. Raffles takes his train, he meets up with Mr. Bulstrode and manages to extort money by threatening to expose the history of Bulstrode’s fraudulent business. Referring to the inexorable (figurative) train of events that hurtles Bulstrode toward his public humiliation, Eliot writes that “the train of causes in which he had locked himself went on” [...]. (Givner 225-26)

Givner’s analysis here is typical of Eliot scholars in that it indentifies Britain’s developing railroad system with a growing social and monetary network. Higher subject mobility and reduced travel times help to expand the diegetic space beyond the mere confines of local space and subsequently introduce greater social interaction. Givner’s reference to this specific scene is telling as it echoes some of the typical discourse associated with railroad expansion. As with the development of the real British railroad system, Eliot here imagines her trains as making available new economic markets and business opportunities that expand beyond the merely local. Indeed, as Stephen Kern has noted, the railroad “ended the sanctuary of remoteness” (Kern 2130). In Middlemarch, the image of the train thus unlocks new spaces for business and begins to allow speculation on future value. As a result, Mr. Raffles is able to export his extortion practices to new places as well as explore the future “value” of a financial rival’s history of deceit. At the same time, Mr. Bulstrode finds himself at the receiving end of the train’s development by remaining in place and keeping his “business” stagnant. As such, the train network in Middlemarch suggests the centrifugal expansion of diegetic space. Mirroring the economics of Victorian transportation technology, the rail network in Eliot’s novel presents an increasingly larger diegesis by taking characters and goods outward and away from the center of
the action, thus exploring new “tracks” of action and marrying the fictional representation of transportation networks with the structural components of the novel.

The converse of this outward movement may generally be observed in fiction that is heavily informed by contemporary communication technology. Rather than expand the local diegesis away from the geographical heart of the narrative, as does *Middlemarch*, such texts use centripetal forces to bring outside events ever closer to a central axis. Henry James’ *In the Cage* (1898) is such a narrative in which a preoccupation with communication technology appears to engender an imaginative space where all the action of the diegesis is condensed. James’ novella explores the voyeurism of its unnamed female protagonist, a telegraph operator. As the text’s title suggests, James’ protagonist not only finds herself caught in a web of intrigue, sexual innuendo and desire by living vicariously through her customers, it also intimates the close quarters in which the operator sifts through the telegraph messages in order to reconstruct the “reality” outside.

As Richard Menke explains, the operator’s reconstruction work inevitably “interposes a level of mediation, a layer that intermingles the materiality of communication, the content of her subjectivity, and the social structures of bureaucracy, class and gender” (Menke 192). However, besides this mediation of the text’s “verisimilitude”, the narratological effects of James’ telegraphic focalizer can also be seen in the representation of space. *In the Cage* generates a curious sense of spatial cohesion in which all locations that are relevant to the narrative converge in the operator’s telegraphic cage. Reflecting the text’s preoccupation with privacy and secrecy, the majority of the narrative is allowed to unfold only in this single space, pulling in all events and channeling them through the focalized telegraph operator. As a result of this centripetal contraction, the entire diegesis is mediated and experienced through the relatively small space of a branch post office. James’ interest in telegraph technology, in other words, appears to adjust the spatial imagination in a way similar to Augé’s vision of communication technology. By mediating the narrative through the eyes of the technologically adept, *In the Cage* suggests a collapse of space by condensing all outward events unto a small, wired singularity.27

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27 This spatial condensation is not just a feature of James’ *In the Cage*, but indeed occurs throughout fiction informed by tele-technology. Especially later science fiction, such as cyberpunk, concentrates large diegetic areas unto increasingly smaller focalized spaces. The work of William Gibson, for example, takes this tendency to the extreme. In *All Tomorrow’s Parties* (1999), Gibson imagines his
The type of adjustment of the spatial imagination required by James’ text, then, is of an entirely different nature than that of Eliot’s *Middlemarch*. Ostensibly, both texts are broad enough to include events from outside of the setting proper, echoing the discourse of growth and expansion that accompany the technologies which so heavily inform these narratives. Railroads and telegraph lines respectively, cast *Middlemarch* and *In the Cage* in the light of expanding social networks, financial markets and long-distance personal relationships. However, in Eliot’s novel, this extension of the narrative space is marked by the characters’ increased mobility and their journeying outward. In *Middlemarch*, the new sense of nearness of previously far-off objects is achieved by thrusting the characters and action away from the narrative’s eponymous center. In contrast, James’ *In the Cage* is characterized by an implosion of narrative space. Here, the intimacy of the narrative space is constructed by making all events internal to the telegraphic network and its operator.

In chapter 3 I will refer to these centrifugal and centripetal spatial operations as key elements in the development of the dystopian genre. As I will show, early, nineteenth-century dystopian space is characterized in part by the centrifugal forces of transportation devices while later dystopian fiction, inspired by communication devices, is built up around contracting, centripetal spaces. It is this development, I will demonstrate, that leads dystopian space towards singularity in the 1980s.

In the following section I will first explore the powerful relationship between telecommunication devices and utopian and dystopian texts by focusing on three different discursive fields in relation to communication technology: theory, public speeches and advertising, respectively. My point in focusing on these three distinct cultural objects is to demonstrate both the pervasive nature of utopian narrative strategies in relation to telecommunication technology, as well as the breadth of the discourse involved. Through close reading of three examples from different discursive domains, I aim to provide a compelling argument for considering the relationship between utopian narrative strategies and the technological substrate of communication devices, as well as their reliance on the spatial imagination.

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technologically expert protagonist to live in a cardboard box in Tokyo’s subway system. In so doing, Gibson assembles events from around the world within the space of a single box.
The Spatial Imagination in Theory: Marshall McLuhan and the Global Village

Theories of technology in the main presuppose the existence of principles that work to remove the human subject from its “natural” environment. Such models propose a pre-technological state to exist that is instinctive and physical, and conceptualize technological development as a separate, artificial force that distracts from this original state, for better or worse. These “estrangement” principles are primarily conceived in the form of a framing apparatus: technology as the object that enframes the “natural” world, thus standing between the subject and the “truth”. Heidegger, for example, theorizes that technology shrouds “truth” in this manner:

The essence of technology lies in enframing […] Enframing blocks the shining forth and holding sway of truth. The destining that sends into ordering is consequently the extreme danger. What is dangerous is not technology. Technology is not demonic; but its essence is mysterious. The essence of technology, as a destining of revealing, is the danger. (qtd in Goldberg 68)

In Heidegger’s view, in other words, technology is opaque: it does not reveal what it claims to represent. Instead, according to Heidegger, technology introduces an element of mystery that blocks veridical access and in this way presents a possible hazard.

Walter Benjamin has likewise observed the effects of technology on artful representation. In his watershed essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” Benjamin considers the consequences of the technological reproducibility of art for the attribution of value to such works, as well as the value of the emerging new art of film making that relies entirely on the intervention of a technological apparatus. Focusing on the notions of “authenticity” and “authority”, Benjamin posits that “[t]he whole sphere of authenticity eludes technological—and of course not only technological—reproduction” (Benjamin 21). Yet, Benjamin specifically considers technological reproduction to offer this illusion of authenticity for two reasons:

[…] whereas the authentic work retains its full authority in the face of a reproduction made by hand, which it generally brands a forgery, this is not the case with technological reproduction. The reason is twofold. First, technological reproduction is more independent of the original than is manual reproduction […]. Second, technological reproduction can place the copy of the original in situations which the original itself cannot attain […]. These
According to Benjamin, then, the “authenticity” of a cultural artifact is affected by its level of technological reproduction, not by its reproduction per se. The relationship of a manually reproduced painting to its original is that of a forgery: a state that reveals a false or negative authenticity, yet a particular mode of authenticity nonetheless. However, the intervention of a technological apparatus seems to preclude any level of authenticity according to Benjamin: it generates copies, not forgeries. According to Benjamin, the technology-mediated representation is, therefore, independent of the original and brings with it its own immediate context and viewer perspective. For Benjamin, then, technology radically changes the context or framing of the object represented, thus removing the object as well as the human observer from the “natural” moment of the “original” scene at which point the object becomes independent.

In light of Heidegger and Benjamin’s pessimistic tone in assessing the framing function of technology, it is interesting to see that, for media theorist Marshall McLuhan, contemporary communication technology does not entail the obfuscation of “truth” that Heidegger and Benjamin fear. Rather, McLuhan understands modern electronics, and especially television, as a return to the familiar sense of involvement that writing and Renaissance visual arts had disrupted. As he explains:

The viewer of Renaissance art is systematically placed outside the frame of experience. A piazza for everything and everything is a piazza. The instantaneous world of electrical information involves all of us, all at once. No detachment of frame is possible [...]. Television completes the cycle of the human sensorium. With the omnipresent ear and the moving eye, we have abolished writing, the specialized acoustic-visual metaphor that established the dynamics of Western civilization. (McLuhan 52-53, 125)

Again referring to the notion of the “frame”, McLuhan positions Renaissance art as the “technology” that conceals information from the subject by interjecting an artificial viewpoint that stands outside of the representation proper. So, contrary to Heidegger and Benjamin, McLuhan understands contemporary communication devices not as technology that amplifies this framing effect. Rather, he sees it as the re-introduction of a “natural” perspective that ensures the subject’s proximity to the
representation. This perspective, in turn, guarantees that the human subject is not merely a spectator but is at all times involved with and connected to the medium. For McLuhan, in other words, technologies such as the television do not conceal a “natural truth” that lies unreachable underneath technology’s layers of mediation. Instead, television removes the constraints imposed by writing and visual art and returns the subject to a more “natural perspective” in relation both to what is being communicated and to the participants in the communication. As such, McLuhan echoes the suspicions of Plato—vicariously through Socrates—about the merits of script technology as something which “is external and depends on signs that belong to others” (Plato 81). Yet, whereas Plato was faced with a technology that eroded the authority of the mnémotechnique which he taught, and upon which his philosophy—he felt—depended, McLuhan understands contemporary communication technology as something of a return to the oral culture that Plato covetously clings to.

Furthermore, McLuhan, claims that this return to a “natural” perspective or frame is constituted by the restoration of the senses that writing has pushed by the wayside:

In television there occurs an extension of the sense of active, exploratory touch which involves all the senses simultaneously, rather than that of sight alone. You have to be “with” it. But in all electric phenomena, the visual is only one component in a complex interplay. Since, in the age of information, most transactions are managed electrically, the electric technology has meant for Western man a considerable drop in the visual component, in his experience, and a corresponding increase in the activity of his other senses. (ibid.)

Television, then, is not a technological framing of the natural world for McLuhan. Rather, McLuhan posits that contemporary communication devices prosthetically expand the human sensorium to include several of the senses simultaneously, thus providing a much larger “frame” that filters out less of what is “there”.

My point here is not to explore the merits of McLuhan’s theoretical framework but to explore the importance of its use of spatial metaphors in relation to communication technology. Certainly, from the perspective of spatial poetics and utopian discourse, it is interesting to see that McLuhan couches his ideas about this technological expansion of the human sensorium around the notion of the “global village”. Concerning the relationship between contemporary communication devices
and the sense of community that he identifies with them, he notes that “[t]he new electronic interdependence recreates the world in the image of a global village” (McLuhan 66-67). In this way, McLuhan reaches for a spatial metaphor in order to understand the effects of technologies such as television. I want to argue that McLuhan’s choice of metaphor here is triggered not just because the notion of a global village aptly articulates his concerns with the characteristics of contemporary electronics, but is also provoked by the typical spatial poetics that we associate with communication devices. I will demonstrate that, alongside the characteristics of the mass media that concern McLuhan, it is a specific and established discursive practice that acts as a trigger to the theorist’s spatial metaphor and grants it its utopian flavor.

In trying to identify the reasons behind McLuhan’s choice for a spatial concept to help analyze the effects of contemporary media, it seems crucial that the scholar couches his ideas in this respect in a language that is evocative of oral culture, tribal existence, and a pre-technological state. In exploring the idea of a global communication village, McLuhan consistently connects notions of Western civilization, the cult of the individual, and Renaissance culture with ideas about tribal existence, small communities and oral culture. Even the visual design of The Medium is the Massage underlines this relationship between a contemporary communication “village” and prehistoric tribal communities in McLuhan’s theory. 28 True to its general interest in visual design, and as a case in point of its overall, eponymous argument, The Medium is the Massage introduces the idea of a global village not just textually but also visually through a background picture of a tribal scene.

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28 McLuhan famously spelled “Massage” in his title rather than “Message”. Originally, this was a misprint but the scholar decided to keep the title because he felt the misspelling illustrated the importance of medium, in this case the alphabet, in the transmission of messages.
The image shows members of what appears to be an African tribe seated indoors. The group seems to be engaged in story telling. A village elder is seated in the center of the mise-en-scène and is narrating. His apparent lively animation captivates and amuses his audience.

On the one hand, McLuhan’s metaphor functions by suggesting a communicative space where the technological apparatus does not interfere with the exchange of messages. The image of the tribal village is significant in this respect as it captures the properties of direct exchange in close-knit oral communities that McLuhan identifies with television. The idea of the global village, in other words, begins to remove the Heideggerian framing device in order to return an unmediated, oral form of communication.

On the other hand, the tribal aspect that informs McLuhan’s definition of the global village conveys a sense of spatial proximity that contemporary telecommunication technology brings to the fore. McLuhan’s oxymoronic term seems to be hardly accidental in this respect: the contrast between the smallness of the village and the global area that telecommunication devices unlock reflects the spatial
paradigm described earlier in relation to utopian structures. Both in terms of isolation and homogeneity of layout, McLuhan’s global village betrays its utopian pedigree through the conflict of scale between its constituent parts. First, the global village portends a sense of seclusion precisely because of its contradictory halves. The idea that a spatial structure can be simultaneously local and global suggests the existence of a special dimension where ordinary rules of spatial relationships need not apply, hence removing the global village from ordinary Euclidean space. Second, by translating the locality of the village into the global sphere, McLuhan renders the communication network largely homogeneous. The small variations of ideology, culture, etc. that are suggested under the label of “village” are mapped unto the global communication sphere. In this way, the global village can be associated with the—ostensible—ideological uniformity of a close-knit community.

Foregoing the obvious political incorrectness of the “global village”, McLuhan’s spatial metaphor suggests the “naturalness” of the technological frame that the scholar was attempting to describe. Alongside his possible concerns for technological intervention, I want to suggest that McLuhan’s choice may have emerged out of a long discursive tradition. This is to say that, the close relationship between telecommunication technology and utopian discourse turns a spatial construct into an “obvious” choice to help describe the new sense of community that McLuhan sees as arising from technological development. The term “global village”, in other words, appears to have been triggered by its ability to describe emergent media in terms of their effects on our imagination as well as their kinship with utopian discourse. It is facilitated by a rich history of linking communication networks to utopian and dystopian spaces and was in this way able to immediately enter the theoretical discourse.

The Spatial Imagination of Public Addresses: Bryant’s Telegraph
While the power of the telegraph to entertain the spatial imagination can be demonstrated by any number of examples, perhaps one of the most powerful illustrations is William Cullen Bryant’s 1868 public address. During a formal dinner held in honor of Samuel Morse, Bryant, poet and Editor-in-Chief of the New York Evening Post, made true his reputation for the use of superlative language and delivered the following speech:
My imagination goes down to the chambers of the middle sea, to those vast depths where repose the mystic wire on beds of coral, among forests of tangle, or on the bottom of the dim blue gulfs strewn with the bones of whales and sharks, skeletons of drowned men, and ribs and masts of foundered barks, laden with wedges of gold never to be coined and pipes of the choicest vintages of earth never to be tasted. Through these watery solitudes, among the fountains of the great deep, the abode of perpetual silence, never visited by living human presence and beyond the sight of human eye, there are gliding to and from by night and day, in light and darkness, in calm and tempest, currents of human thought borne by electric pulse which obeys the bidding of man. That slender wire thrills with hopes and fears of nations; it vibrates to every emotion that can be awakened by any event affecting the welfare of the human race. (Bryant 259)

Bryant’s speech here attempts to do honor to Morse’s “invention” by juxtaposing the old ways of crossing the Atlantic with the modern method of the transatlantic telegraph cable.²⁹ He contrasts the hardships and dangers of the seafaring (“…the dim blue gulfs strewn with the bones of whales and sharks, skeletons of drowned men, and ribs and masts of foundered barks…”) with the ease with which the telegraph can span the divide between the old and new worlds. Of course, Bryant’s interpretation here sharply contrasts with the realities of open-sea cable laying. While there was a transatlantic cable in 1868, its inception was accompanied by anything but the effortlessness which is suggested by Bryant’s speech. In fact, the laying of under-the-sea cable was considered to be such a dangerous investment and failure-prone undertaking that, just a few years earlier, Western Union felt that the construction of a landline from San Francisco to Moscow via Alaska was a more viable solution.³⁰ However, what is even more striking about Bryant’s speech and its exaggerated, baroque language of praise for the telegraph is the way in which it reaches, almost instinctively, for a spatial symbol. That is, Bryant invokes a spatial metaphor to help him eulogize the merits of modern telecommunication technology. He begins his speech by sketching the site of the greatest challenge faced in the expansion of the telegraph network, the Atlantic Ocean. In this way, Bryant’s speech

²⁹ Morse’s 1844 patent is heavily contested. Several other inventors were already working on electrical telegraphy before Morse. Most notably, Cooke and Wheatstone had already patented their system in 1837 in Britain. The first—successful— transatlantic telegraphic cable was laid in 1865.

³⁰ The telegraph lobby precipitated the 1867 Alaska Purchase: it was believed to be easier to have as much of the San Francisco-Moscow landline built on American rather than Russian soil. See Huurdeman, Anton A. The Worldwide History of Telecommunications. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2003. 130-35. Print.
from the outset identifies the success of the telegraph with a space, and mobilizes this spatial symbol in order to further extol the properties of the technology. Bryant’s choice for this particular metaphor is all the more remarkable because it stresses not the telegraph’s main innovation. After all, the telegraph did not make available new spaces but higher speeds: transatlantic messages could of course be sent before the telegraph was available, just not as quickly. And indeed, as Virginia Jackson points out, Bryant, in his role “[a]s a member of the press […] stressed the telegraph’s speed of transmission” (Jackson 157). As a poet, however, Bryant “transfigured electric cable into [a] lyric impulse” that sought to express the qualities of the electrical telegraph, including its higher rate of transmission, in spatial dimensions (ibid.). Bryant’s poetic notion of telegraphic technology, in short, turns its attention away from the technology’s higher transmission speeds to the space that is filled by its medium.

It is interesting to see that, in its effort to praise, Bryant’s expansive language begins to turn the Atlantic from a symbol of technology’s victory over nature into an imaginative space that represents the mystical and exotic, deep realm in which telecommunication is popularly conceived to take place. Bryant’s speech, other words, turns the Atlantic from a space that is to be conquered by technology into the ethereal space where the telegraph can work its wonders. He lets his imagination sink beneath the surface—ostensibly to illuminate what the telegraph has overcome—where it is seduced into dreaming up a fanciful and ornate setting that works to express the value of the telegraph. Here, the deep Atlantic Ocean is no longer an oppositional force that technology has to overcome. Instead, it lends its fantastical qualities so as to express technological “wonders”. This transformation of the Atlantic, from a symbol of technology’s triumph over nature into a magical realm where technology can work its wonders, has the effect of distancing the technology from its real, operational space. It takes the pragmatic qualities of the technological substrate and places it in a fairy tale land of gold, wrecked ships and skeletons strewn across the ocean’s floor.

In a way, Bryant’s use here of the depths of the ocean is strikingly similar to More’s enlistment of oceanic travel in order to construct utopian space. Just as More referred to the Atlantic as a place where “nothing is more easy to be found than be barking Scyllas, ravening Celaenos, and Laestrygons” (More 2008: 14), so does...
Bryant conceive this body of water as space “where repose the mystic wire on beds of coral” (Bryant 259). I want to suggest that Bryant’s invocation of the Atlantic as a space of mystery does indeed perform similar work as does More’s Atlantic setting. By creating a space that is mysterious and distant from the “real” space that the technology inhabits, Bryant gives himself the artistic license he needs in order to render the telegraph in a certain light.

Ultimately, Bryant’s perspective on the telegraph contains strong utopian indicators. The mysterious underwater realm that forms the setting of the telegraph’s triumph invokes the spatial paradigms set into motion by More. Isolated and exotic, the telegraphic space coincides with typical utopian constructs. Concurrently, its creation leads Bryant to the suggestion of what is traditionally understood to be the topic for utopianism, namely the “hopes and fears of nations” (ibid.). Alongside Bryant’s wish to pay tribute to Morse and telecommunication technology, then, the utopian tone of this speech appears to result from its activation of specific spatial paradigms.

The telegraph, then, can be said to do a significant amount of cultural work in Bryant’s speech: it invokes the speaker’s spatial imagination; summons a location that is isolated and exists outside of ordinary space; and finally hints at the typical adjectives appropriate for such utopian, spatial paradigms. It is, then, as if Bryant’s speech comes about mechanically, like a formula repeated unconsciously because it has been ingrained in cultural memory. It moves from communication technology, to the spatial imagination, to the activation of utopian spatial paradigms, to utopian stereotypes. Its intervention of a space sets in motion a powerful pattern of discursive responses that helps to shape the speaker’s as well as the audience’s imaginations. As such, Bryant’s speech emerges as an incantation of such discursive elements, as well as an indication of the strong link between telecommunication technology and utopian discourse.

**The Spatial Imagination in Advertising: Apple’s “1984”**

On January 22, 1984, in the break of the third quarter of the NFL’s seventeenth Super Bowl, Apple Computer Incorporated aired for the first time the now famous “1984”
commercial for its new, Macintosh computer. Needing a commercial winner and increasingly feeling the pressure of IBM, Apple banked its future on the success of Macintosh and the commercial that introduced it to the public. I want to argue that Apple’s choice to refer to Orwell’s dystopian novel Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949) in order to sell computers was informed by more than a lucky coincidence of dates. I want to propose that the “1984” commercial was to a large extent prompted by the poetics of dystopian discourse. By engaging with Orwell’s classic, I will argue, Apple’s advertisement is able to activate paradigms of spatial coherency and subversion that are associated with utopian and dystopian constructions, and so effectively managed the commercial space into which Macintosh could emerge. In this way, the commercial replaced the various domestic spaces that had previously informed Apple commercials with dystopia as a credible site for product placement.

Apple’s decision to quote what is perhaps the most canonical example of dystopian discourse appears to have been inspired by the company’s sales strategy for its new Macintosh computer. Macintosh, like so many of Apple’s subsequent products, relied to a large extent on the idea that it offered a unique sales alternative to the computing mainstream (i.e. the IBM PC) for sales. And certainly, this claim was to a degree justified in the case of the Macintosh. As with its upscale sister the Lisa, Apple’s Macintosh shipped with a mouse and the System 1.0 operating software, thus introducing pointing devices and graphical user interfaces to ordinary consumers and giving them an alternative to commandline-only microcomputers. However, alongside these innovations, Apple continued to use “off-the-shelf” parts for the Macintosh so that its “unique” design shared a large technical base with competing devices. For example, Macintosh was built up around Motorola’s 68000 processor architecture, which gave the machine a powerful family connection with, for example, the Commodore Amiga and Atari ST. In fact, as Brian Bagnall argues, it was Commodore, not Apple, that mostly led the technology race in the early days of the microcomputer (ix-x).

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31 At present, Apple is registered simply as Apple, Inc. The company dropped “Computer” from its name in 2007 to reflect their increasing portfolio of non-computer, consumer electronics and services (i.e. iPod, iTunes, iPhone and iPad).
32 More recently, Apple made “the switch” from the PowerPC architecture to X86 for all of its mini, desktop and portable computers. As such, since late 2005, there is no longer anything in terms of functional hardware that distinguishes an Apple from an IBM-PC clone.
In spite of the company’s modest technological innovation, Apple has been far more successful than Commodore—and IBM, Atari, Sinclair, etc—at projecting a sense of radical innovation and capitalizing on this message. Certainly, its marketing strategy for the Macintosh relied on stressing the machine’s exclusivity and “unique” design to such a degree that these became principal sales arguments in themselves. In this way, Macintosh, and Apple’s products in general, are, from the consumer’s point of view, not necessarily characterized by technical distinctiveness or superiority. Instead, Apple’s computing devices are associated with the idea of technical distinctiveness and superiority because these help to express the sales message of exclusivity and individuality. As indicated for example by Apple’s recent line of iDevices, it is not so much the tangible characteristics of the technological commodity itself that Apple uses as a sales argument. Instead, the company suggests that its products offer customers the tools to give voice to their individuality. Expressing yourself, the i-prefix proposes, is a simply a matter of deciding which iPod you are.33

Apple first explored this sales strategy with the Macintosh: buying a Mac was not only buying a computer, it also meant purchasing a piece of technology that functioned as a token of your individuality. In short, Macintosh and Apple’s later products are not so much computing commodities as they are the attempted commodification of the concept of “uniqueness”. This commodification of uniqueness, what I shall refer to as “iCommodification”, entails the creation of a commercial space where the social relationship between individual and—perceived—collective is established through the consumption of electronic goods and services.

From a Marxist perspective, then, iCommodification reveals itself as a form of commodity fetishism. As Marx explains in Capital, commodities can attract functions beyond simply the representation of use, labor and exchange value. In this way, commodities express something other than the sum of their raw materials or the labor required to make them. Rather, commodities contain value beyond the mere physical and represent social relations, as Marx explains:

There is a physical relation between physical things. But it is different with commodities. There, the existence of the things quâ commodities, and the value relation between the products of labour which stamps them as commodities, have absolutely no connection with their physical properties and

33 See for example http://www.apple.com/ipod/compare-ipod-models/
with the material relations arising therefrom. There it is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things. (Marx 43)

Macintosh, then, as a physical object, is transformed by its role as a commodity. It changes form from a collection of technological parts into a “fantastic form” (ibid.) where physical properties express social behavior. In the case of Apple’s products, this commodity fetishism encodes a negative social relationship, or anti-social behavior. That is, iCommodification entails the transformation of electronics devices into objects that bespeak an individual’s desire to reject the mainstream and instead express non-conformity.

Apple’s effort to commodify uniqueness was first made tangible by Macintosh, and specifically by the ad that introduced it to potential consumers. “1984” represents a watershed event in Apple’s history as it forms a considerable break with the company’s previous advertising strategies. It replaced an emphasis on the pragmatic, concrete virtues of computing products and presented a new approach to selling computers. Previously, Apple had competed in the marketplace primarily on features and price (i.e. on use-value). Before Macintosh, Apple’s advertisements generally showed products in the context of a use environment, and listed technical details in support of the computer’s usefulness. For example, the Apple II was introduced to the consumer by a full-page spread that focused on the practical application of the computing device.
Fig. 14: Left page of the introductory ad for the Apple II from 1977. Source: http://www.macmothership.com/gallery/gallery1.html
The home computer that's ready to work, play and grow with you.

Clear the kitchen table. Bring in the color TV. Plug in your new Apple II and connect any standard cassette recorder/player. Now you're ready for an evening of discovery in the new world of personal computers.

Only Apple II makes it that easy. It's a complete, ready-to-use computer—not a kit. At $429.9, it includes features you won't find on other personal computers costing twice as much.

Features such as video graphics in 15 colors, and a built-in memory capacity of 6K bytes ROM and 4K bytes RAM—with room for lots more. But you don't even need to know a RAM from a ROM to use and enjoy Apple II. It's the first personal computer with a fast version of BASIC—the English-like programming language—permanently built in. That means you can begin running your Apple II the first evening, entering your own instructions and watching them work, even if you've had no previous experience.

The familiar typewriter-style keyboard makes communication easy. And your programs and data can be saved permanently as retrieved from audio cassettes, using the built-in cassette interface, so you can swap with other Apple II users. This and other peripherals—optional equipment on most personal computers, at hundreds of dollars extra cost—are built into Apple II. And it's designed to keep up with changing technology, to expand easily whenever you need it.

As an educational tool, Apple II is a sound investment. You can program it to tutor your children in math, history or math. But the biggest benefit—it no matter how you use Apple II—is that you and your family increase your familiarity with the computer itself. The more you experiment with it, the more you discover about its potential.

Start by playing PONG. Then invent your own games using the input keyboard, joystick paddles and built-in speaker. As you experiment you'll acquire new programming skills which will open up new ways to use your Apple II. You'll learn to “print” dazzling color displays using the unique color graphics commands in Apple BASIC, and write programs to create beautiful kaleidoscope designs.

As you master Apple BASIC, you'll be able to organize, index and store data on household finances, income tax, recipes, and much more. You can learn to chart your bybirthdays, balance your checking account, even control your home environment. Apple II will go as far as your imagination can take it.

Best of all, Apple II is designed to grow with you. As your skill and experience with computing increase, you may want to add new Apple peripherals. For example, a refined, more sophisticated BASIC language is being developed for advanced scientific and mathematical applications. And in addition to the built-in audio, video and game interfaces, there's room for eight plug-in options such as a prototyping board for experimenting with interfaces to other equipment, a serial board for connecting teletype, printer and other terminals; a parallel interface for communicating with a printer or another computer; an EPROM board for storing programs permanently; and a modem board communications interface. A floppy disk interface with software and complete operating systems will be available at the end of 1977. And there are many more options to come, because Apple II was designed from the beginning to accommodate increased power and capability as your requirements change.

If you'd like to see for yourself how easy it is to use and enjoy Apple II, visit your local dealer for a demonstration and a copy of our

SPECIFICATIONS

- Microprocessor: 6502 (1 MHz)
- Video Display: Memory mapped, S modes—all Software selectable
- Text—46 characters/line, 24 lines upper case
- Color graphics—40 x 48, 15 colors
- High resolution graphics—280 x 192, black, white, green, red
- RAM minimum required
- Both graphics modes can be selected to include 4 lines of text at the bottom of the display area
- Completely transparent memory access
- All color generation done digitally
- Memory: up to 44K bytes on board
- RAM (4K supplied)
- I/O: 1500 type cassette interface
- 8-bit microphone
- Apple game I/O connector
- ASCII keyboard port
- Speaker
- Composite video output

Apple II is also available in board-only form for the do-it-yourself hobbyist. Has all of the features of the Apple II system, but does not include case, keyboard, power supply or game paddles. $398.

PONG is a trademark of Atari Inc.

Apple II plus has no standard TV. Using an inexpensive monitor (not supplied) and a detailed brochure. Write Apple Computer Inc., 11635 Stevens Creek Blvd., Cupertino, California 95014.
The left page featured a “realistic” kitchen scene: wife in the background preparing food; husband in the foreground working with an Apple II that displays a graph. While the specific usefulness of the Apple II within this domestic context is not immediately apparent, Apple’s literal product placement here does indicate their desire to present their product favorably in terms of utility. Specifically, the ad’s use of diagrams and confirmation of gender stereotyping underline the idea that the Apple II fits conventional, gender biased paradigms of usefulness, labor division and efficiency with a degree of mathematical precision. Moreover, the right page of the advertisement lists the machine’s technical details, as well as a number of suggestions about how it may be employed in the household. In its entirety, then, the advertisement which introduced the Apple II stressed utility above all else: it showed a tool with specific capabilities that could be used to perform tasks that were imagined to be compatible with a pre-existing social context. Apple II and its commercial discourse, in short, were technologies of conformity, or at least attempting to be so.

By contrast, “1984” presented a less utility driven and more abstract sales argument. The advertisement opens by showing gritty images of multitudes marching through corridors while the narrative voice-over can be heard exalting the merits of the “information purification age” (“1984”). The mise-en-scène is dominated by shades of grey. Almost no color is present in the picture. The marchers are men who share the same outfit of loosely fitting overalls and have shaved heads, giving the impression of a prison colony. The view then cuts to a scene revealing the destination of the marching men as an auditorium. At the front of the auditorium is a massive screen from which the source of the voice-over can be seen. An enormous, blurry and bespectacled talking head continues to pontificate about information, ideology and resolve over the captivated, attendant crowd. The uniformity of these scenes is interrupted by brief shots of a single figure running instead of marching. A women, athletic, dressed in red shorts and white top runs powerfully and elegantly holding a hammer, while being chased by what looks like riot police. Her movement, color and sexual appeal all disrupt the uniform monotony of the surrounding environment. The view of the running figure and that of the auditorium begin to coincide as the athlete can be seen coming up to the screen. She stops, swings around, and then throws the hammer. It flies through the auditorium and hits the screen. As the screen explodes,
its light illuminates the front row of onlookers to reveal their shock at its destruction. The screen then fades to show the final text message, which is also narrated: “On January 24th, Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And you’ll see why 1984 won’t be like ‘1984’” (ibid.).

Apple’s “1984” commercial, then, works not by focusing on the Macintosh’s technical merits and their ability to connect with convention, but instead draws parallels between Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the personal computer marketplace to suggest the resistance to convention. The ad’s success in this respect depends upon a number of thematic connections between the novel’s major concerns and the early 1980s computing landscape. This thematic overlap consists of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*’s dominant power structures and computer market leaders on the one hand, and Apple and dystopian resistance and the other. By quoting Orwell’s novel, “1984” suggests that social conformity involves the forceful compliance to imposed ideals and the restriction of free and creative thought. In this way, the ad paints Apple’s competitors—in particular market-leader IBM—as entities that inherently confine the individual consumer and inspire submission to generalized computing solutions. Alongside this analogy of market dominance and freedom restriction, “1984” places Macintosh in the position of the freedom fighter. Recalling *Nineteen Eighty-Four*’s protagonist, the ad associates Winston Smith’s heroic struggle for individual freedom and creativity with resistance to the existing state of affairs in the computer marketplace. In this way, Apple attempts to make its desire to commodify uniqueness concrete: by presenting its competitors in the shadow of the Ministry of Truth and “newspeak”, the company allows itself to assume the role of resistance fighter. As a result, an Apple computer becomes evocative of confronting conformity and questioning the status quo. In turn, this image suggests that buying an Apple involves an act of rebellion which, through its opposition to orthodoxy, is able to express individuality and uniqueness. As such, “1984” forms an early attempt on Apple’s part to commodify uniqueness rather than shift technological artifacts. Indeed, there is nothing in the ad to suggest that buying a Macintosh entails the acquisition of a technological commodity.
Unlike earlier advertisements, Apple no longer presented its customers with technical details or even showed its wares. In fact, there is nothing about “1984” that hints at the nature of the advertised product bar the final voice-over. Instead, Apple’s commercial “sells” dystopia. Source: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYecfV3ubP8

Instead, “1984” proposes that choosing to buy a Macintosh offers you a chance to stand out as an individual and be unique.

Of course, Apple’s brand of iCommodification and personal expression strongly conflicts with this idea of Macintosh as a product for popular, mainstream culture. Indeed, as with most luxury consumer goods, Macintosh’s function as a
commodity fetish is based on a paradox. Macintosh’s codification of social relationships, i.e. its representation of the relationship between individual and collective, is entirely at odds with Apple’s sales strategy. It requires consumers of Apple’s products to transform their allegiance to specifically branded commodities into a tool used for personal identity formation and social demarcation. Yet, Apple of course never intended to sell computers to a small number of consumers and to help along their identity construction. While Apple’s marketing campaign stressed individuality and uniqueness, its production lines were geared towards market penetration and mass production. Apple never intended Macintosh to be a niche product but instead aimed the device squarely at its main competitor, the IBM-PC clone. Accordingly, paradoxically, Apple’s success at marketing the Macintosh as the computer for individuals would ultimately result in its product turning into the status quo that it proposed to subvert. Macintosh’s success at commodifying uniqueness, then, would ultimately hurt its credibility in this respect. In becoming a popular object, Macintosh would no longer be a convincing token for individuality.

Apple solved this issue by invoking the paradigms which characterize dystopian fiction. These paradigms allow for a careful renegotiation of Apple’s projected self-image of the individual freedom fighter towards a more lenient image where resistance to the existing state of affairs can occur in several different places at the same time and is organized by several people. These pockets of resistance, then, begin to establish a balance between Macintosh’s iCommodification and Apple’s desire to sell as many machines as possible. Apple’s use of dystopian poetics, in other words, creates the commercial space into which Macintosh can emerge. As such, Apple’s choice to quote Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four is neither solely engendered by its thematic overlap with Apple’s plight in the computer marketplace, nor by a lucky coincidence of dates. Certainly, the relationship between “1984” and Nineteen Eighty-Four exists primarily in their portrayal of power structures and subversion. However, at the same time, “1984” activates certain dystopian spatial paradigms which ultimately allow Apple to position the Macintosh as a commodity fetish while simultaneously selling significant amounts of product. Apple’s “1984” commercial is heavily informed by dystopian narratives’ reliance on spaces that simultaneously subvert and establish new social relationships. The spatial poetics laid down by texts such as Nineteen Eighty-Four dictate that the dystopian landscape is characterized by
an initial social isolation and uniformity that is subsequently disrupted by sites of opposition. It is in this establishment of new social spaces, especially, that “1984” finds most of its persuasive force as well as a solution to the paradox that informs iCommodification.

Apple’s “1984” resolves the inconsistencies behind its commodification of uniqueness by borrowing the spatial organization of Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four. It starts by constructing a site of ideological conformity. The multitudes marching in unison, uniform clothing styles, riot police, as well as the pontificating head convey a strong sense of totalitarianism and forced submission to dominant belief. Moreover, this totalitarianism is signified spatially as well. As with prototypical dystopian texts, “1984” begins by constructing an isolated site of ideological uniformity and topography, and subsequently subverts and disrupts this space. In terms of isolation, the ad spends considerable real estate in rendering the limits of its diegesis in order to demonstrate its seclusion from normal space. The first shot, in fact, shows nothing but wall, indicating that the diegetic space should be seen as walled-off from normal space. This sense of isolation grows in later shots where the mise-en-scène is also dominated by barriers. Indeed, the commercial consistently and carefully frames the tight-spaced enclosures of the “garden of pure ideology” in order to give the impression of a site of incarceration. For instance, the low camera position, especially in the shots of the corridors, accentuates the narrowness of these inner spaces to further give the impression of imprisonment. The main auditorium, as well, is not so much spacious as it feels confining with its high walls and pillars restricting the viewer’s gaze. Here especially, the legacy of director Ridley Scott’s filmic interpretation of dystopian spaces may be easily identified. Specifically, the low camera position and obstruction of line of sight are devices that are characteristic for the visual representation of dystopia by the ad’s director Ridley Scott as can be seen in, for example, Alien (1979) and Bladerunner (1982). In this way, Scott’s experience in translating dystopia to the screen imbeds “1984” in typical dystopian filmic spaces of isolation. Dominated by thick, concrete walls, the frame of “1984” invokes the tradition of dystopian fiction to imagine isolated diegetic spaces in order contain its dominant ideology.

In terms of uniformity, “1984” conforms to the dystopian tradition as well. Initially, the isolated diegetic space is shown to be homogeneous and featureless. It
consists of a bland palette of walls, drones and omnipresent technological bits to create a space that is of a more or less uniform topography. The *mise-en-scène* of “1984” further underlines this dystopian uniformity through use of color. It consistently uses low-contrast, drab shades of grey and blue that work to make everything in the frame look similar. The use of sound, also, sets up the diegetic space of “1984” as a typical dystopian construct. The sound of marching as well as the ubiquitous background bleeps of technology—again a direct descendant of Scott’s work on *Alien* and *Bladerunner*—make a constant white noise that echoes the uniformity seen on the screen.

This isolated and uniform space that “1984” initially sets up is subverted by the character that Apple’s customers are supposed to identify with, namely the female runner. She subverts the dystopian space both in terms of uniformity and isolation. In the case of the former, the first four shots of the runner show how she disrupts the homogeneity of the corridors, hallways and auditorium. Her gender, bright clothing, blonde hair, athletic ability and sexual appeal all act to subvert the uniformity of both the screen space and of the diegetic space. The briefness of these shots, their apparent random distribution, and the lack of fade-in or overlay transitions ensure that the female runner sequences have a maximum disruptive effect in the camera’s space. As if to transmit a subliminal message, the *mise-en-scène*—suddenly, briefly—contains content that is oppositional to its otherwise uniformly a-sexual, rigid-limbed, grey and blue primary subject. Moreover, the runner disrupts the uniformity of the diegetic space as well. Leaving in her wake sprinting riot police, she manages to interrupt the orderly progression towards the auditorium and introduces chaos to a disciplined system.

The final three shots of the runner deal with disrupting the isolation of the ad’s dystopian space. Here we can see the runner come to a halt, rotate and swing her hammer. These actions lead to the primary subversive act in “1984”: the breaking of the screen in the auditorium and the destruction of the isolation of the diegesis. That is, not only does the runner’s hammer stop the transmission of the pontificating head, it also fracture’s dystopia’s barrier in order to subvert the ideological space. The ad signifies the screen’s function as dystopia’s barrier primarily through the use of color. The breaking of the screen is accompanied by a bright explosion of light that not only bathes the awe-struck drones but drowns out the previously bleak and dark dystopian
space as well. Air forcefully flows into the auditorium and moves down the ranks of attendants in order to expose them to what lies beyond the talking head and barriers of the system. What lies on the other side of the screen is then revealed by the voiceover and, perhaps more importantly, the final shot of the commercial. After dystopia’s barriers have been removed the screen fades to black and then displays the only substantial use of color: a bright Apple logo, rainbow-colored, sits at the center of the frame.\(^{34}\) This color intrusion, then, marks the final destruction of the dystopian space as its most pervasive filmic representation can be seen subverted. The breaking of the auditorium’s screen, in short, breaks the quarantine of dystopia and allows the outside world to usurp its ideological space.

I want to argue that the sales proposition of “1984” derives primarily from the ad’s subversion of dystopian space. Obviously, the Super Bowl audience was meant to identify with the runner and see themselves as individualistic rebels in an IBM-dominated world. Indeed, at the surface, this is the sales message of Apple’s advertisement. However, “1984” works better and is more cunning than this. Besides its straightforward appeal, the ad’s use of spatial paradigms allows it to carefully negotiate the tension between positioning Macintosh as a product for “rebels” while at the same time popularizing microcomputers in the mainstream market. Apple is able to solve this paradox which informs its iCommodification by relying on the ability of dystopian resistance to suggest the emergence of new social spaces. As may for instance be seen in Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, dystopian rebels seldom fight alone but find spaces (i.e. the room above the antiques shop) where rebellion can be staged collectively. Concurrently, in “1984” the shock of the drones as the bright light and air hits their faces suggests their—and the consumer’s—possible conversion and emergence out of dystopia beyond the wall of the screen, together. So, while the runner in “1984” acts purely as an individual, dystopian poetics suggest that this action does not preclude a form of collective rebellion. In fact, the commercial suggests that you, the viewer, can join this emblem of fitness, strength and sexuality in the space she just opened up, and not be any less of a rebel for it. In this way, Apple’s “1984” is able to sell Macintosh as a high-priced luxury piece of electronics intended for those who want to stand out of the pack, while at the same time building a large, mainstream base of like-minded and devoted Apple users.

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\(^{34}\) Before the Apple logo the color red can also be seen in the runner’s shorts.
Apple’s advertisement, in other words, successfully turns dystopia into the topos from which Macintosh can be understood by consumers. As a “marketplace”, dystopia pertains to precisely the right mix of social relationships that reflects Apple’s product placement with the Mac. On the one hand, dystopia stands for resistance and uniqueness, marking Macintosh as an emblematic form of iCommodification. On the other hand, dystopia is characterized by spatial poetics that suggest the emergence of new social collectives, and is steeped in mainstream, popular culture. This combination of individual appeal and mainstream conformity allows Apple to sell Macintosh as a commodity which expresses individuality while still building a substantial customer base in mainstream culture. Dystopia, in short, is the site where Apple is able to market Macintosh as well as make available microcomputers in popular culture.

Apple’s decision to try and make dystopia the site of the popularization of the microcomputer is all the more remarkable because of the aura of fear that still surrounded the technology in 1984. Strongly associated with amateur enthusiast culture, computers appeared as arcane machinery to a mainstream audience. Computers’ interfaces and functions resembled no preexisting paradigms and as such it was difficult for audiences to grasp why they needed these machines, what they bought exactly, and how computers could be made to do one’s bidding. As mysterious and highly technical devices, computers therefore inspired fear of use in potential new users. Moreover, popular culture had done an effective job of cashing in on people’s Luddite fears and had managed to demonize the technology. Most notably, Clarke and Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) made concrete consumers’ distrust of computers with the specter of HAL. Aloof and malicious, HAL embodied the fear that computer technology could not be controlled and that the “magic” of Integrated Circuits might give rise to unintended and entirely unwanted results. Certainly, the combination of HAL’s uncanny, unemotional voice and its murderous plots weighed so heavily on the popular imagination that, as Friedman points out, “the shadow of HAL hovered over early PC advertising” (Friedman 106). But HAL was not the only fictional creation that was giving computers a bad name. *Alien*’s Mother, for example, also reified consumers’ fears of computing devices. The main computer of the spaceship Nostromo, Mother, in spite of its name, showed anything but maternal compassion for the suffering of its crew. Coldly informing the human contingent that
their chances of survival did not compute, Mother shaped the popular imagination with the image of computers as apathetic to and incompatible with the human condition.

As such, computer manufactures faced similar issues as for instance producers of electrical equipment and services did in the late nineteenth century. As is pointed out by for example Graeme Gooday and David Nye, electricity faced an uphill battle in the late Victorian era as consumers struggled to understand both what they were supposed to buy exactly as well as the dangers involved.\(^{35}\) As opposed to coal-gas, whose quantities could be measured and whose dangers were known, electricity’s matter was difficult to fathom and, therefore, perceived as dangerous by the general public. Of course, as Gooday points out, this was an image of electricity that suppliers of coal-gas were only too happy to sustain (2007: 247-53). For manufacturers of electricity, the solution to improving electricity’s public image lay in finding sites where its virtues could be discussed with authority and enter the public mind. As the home was mostly dominated by gas, these sites were frequently construed as public spaces. The 1893 World Fair in Chicago, for example, served to extol electricity’s wonders and dispel the public’s fears. It provided manufacturers of electrical equipment with a space where they could establish a discourse of authority and back up their claims with extravagant displays of power.

As with electricity, computer manufacturers also had trouble making a case for themselves as their services were ethereal and highly suggestive of mystery and danger. As can be gauged by Apple’s “1984” commercial, the solution here also lay in finding the right space from which to begin to debunk the public’s fear. This space, as it turned out, was dystopia.

Apple’s success at using dystopia for this purpose stands in stark contrast to its earlier attempts. In trying to dispel fears about computers, Apple had resorted to kitchens, teenage-son bedrooms and office spaces, presumably under the assumption that these were typically considered to be safe havens and might therefore assuage the consumer’s doubts.\(^{36}\) However, as these sites were already pervaded with discourses

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\(^{36}\) Other manufacturers used a combination of settings and characters to try and exorcise HAL. IBM, for example, had an extensive run of commercials featuring Charlie Chaplin in office spaces. See
of other forms of technology, the invasion of the microcomputer into these scenes seemed to, if anything, confirm the idea that it had no place there to begin with and might introduce new dangers or undesirable elements. Apple’s use of “conventional” spaces, in short, seemed to be problematic for the same reason that early manufacturers of electrical equipment had such trouble finding their way into the home: the authoritative presence of other discourses resisted the newcomer and fueled questions about usefulness and potential dangers.

Again, Apple’s successful appropriation of dystopia and its conversion into the locus of the popularization and acceptance of microcomputers by mainstream culture comes down to dystopia’s ability to encode the correct social relationships. Apple’s earlier attempts to insert the microcomputer into mainstream culture were foiled by the stagnant discourses of the home with their powerfully established social relationships. So, while the kitchen may have appeared as an obvious site for mainstream intervention, its preexisting social significance resisted the inclusion of this new element. It immediately raised numerous important questions. Why would I want a computer in my kitchen, especially if this also involves moving my television there to use as a monitor?37 Does moving the television entail shifting the center or hearth of family life from the living room to the kitchen? Who is to use the computer? If dad uses the computer, does this make the kitchen a primarily male orientated space and what does that do to the distribution of gender throughout the house? Apple’s attempt to insert the computer in this domestic space, in short, was rife with contentious discourse on the social construction of space. Dystopia, however, was a space that came with an entirely different set of preexisting social relationships that were far more suited for Apple’s purposes. Especially from the perspective of the high-priced, luxury commodity Macintosh, dystopia could speak authoritatively about the social relationships that Macintosh was attempting to encode. Both subversive and popular, dystopia proved the ideal site from which Macintosh could sell in large quantities while retaining its appeal as a rebel’s machine, wherever it might be placed in the house or office.


37 Because computers displayed relatively low resolutions they often used televisions as their primary monitor. The Apple II ad indeed suggests that users move their televisions into the kitchen. See figure 15.
Conclusion
In this chapter I have demonstrated that the ability of telecommunication technology to speak to the spatial imagination leads to the creation of a conceptual space where users interface with the technological substrate. Cyberspace, the global village, and the information highway are examples of the spatial metaphors that help to visualize the relationship between the cables, satellites and microwaves that form the foundation of communication technology, and the user perspective to the information that such communication nets propagate. I have also shown that the properties of these conceptual spaces closely resemble structures that characterize utopian and dystopian discourse. I argued that because of the technology’s thoroughgoing dislocation of knowledge from location, the conceptual interface spaces of the telegraph, television and the Internet are imagined as isolated and homogeneous spaces. These nil-spaces are characterized by their dislocation from “normal” space in that they are perceived to be located in different dimensions and play host to movement, structures and materials that do not exist in the “real” world. Moreover, these spaces are imagined as homogeneous structures with a uniform data topography and free flow of information. In this way, the nil-spaces of telecommunication technology bear a striking resemblance to the spatial poetics of dystopian constructs.

I then argued that the overlap in spatial poetics between utopian discourse and the user perspective of communication technology come together in a dispositif. Concurrently, I claimed, developments in communication technology are couched in spatial language with a particular emphasis on the poetics of utopian and dystopian narrative traditions. I have corroborated these claims by close reading three seminal moments in the development of communication technologies and the discourse in which it is couched. By examining the theory of Marshall McLuhan, a public speech by William Cullen Bryant, and a commercial by Apple, I demonstrated some of the co-dependency of communication technology and utopian discourse across different discursive fields as a function of their shared spatial poetics.

In the next three chapters I will trace the historical development of the dystopian genre and its part in telecommunication’s dispositif. I will argue that through the intervention of communication technology in the genre, dystopian narrative became associated with smaller and smaller spaces, eventuality reaching singularity in the cyberpunk dystopias of the 1980s. In chapter 3 I will argue that this
process can first be observed in E.M. Forster’s “The Machine Stops” (1909). It is in this text, I will show, that telecommunication technology intervenes to suggest a dystopian space much smaller than traditional nineteenth-century metropolitan dystopias. In chapters 4 and 5 I will continue to explore this centripetal contraction of dystopian space by looking at Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and Gibson’s *Sprawl* (1984-1988) trilogy respectively.
Chapter 3: From Metropolis to Machine Dystopia

Introduction

In chapters 1 and 2 I proposed that telecommunication technology and dystopian fiction are intimately related. Both, I demonstrated, present spaces that are isolated from ordinary space and show great internal homogeneity. So, the picture I have painted of the dispositif of telecommunication technology to this point explains that utopian and dystopian visions are uniquely well-suited to represent contemporary communication devices: the spatial properties of the technological substrate as well as the user’s perspective on such technologies engender the creation of these specific diegetic spaces. Utopian or dystopian fantasy, in other words, comes to mind easily in relation to the telegraph, television or the Internet.

I now want to continue my analysis of the dispositif of telecommunication technology and show that this connection between communication devices and fiction is not unidirectional but a reciprocal relationship which also invests the notions of utopia and dystopia with some of the characteristics of communication devices. In Baudry’s terms, I will now demonstrate how the technological substrate and spatial perspective of the dispositif work alongside each other to give rise to institutionalized forms of address. Specifically, it is my contention that the telecommunication dispositif has introduced new spatial variations to the existing body of dystopian fiction. These variations, I will show, have over time subtly changed the notion of dystopia and have directed attention away from the “traditional” dystopian topic of Empire towards the representation of user perspective.

In the next three chapters I will propose that telecommunication technology influenced the dystopian genre by suggesting ever smaller dystopian user spaces, moving away from “traditional” nineteenth-century metropolitan spaces and ultimately reaching singularity in the cyberpunk of the 1980s. I will use three case studies in order to demonstrate how communication devices in dystopian literature intimate this spatial condensation. The present chapter focuses on E.M. Forster’s short story “The Machine Stops” (1909) as the first Matrix-style narrative and shows how it replaces the traditional metropolitan dystopia with a phenomenological dystopian
space and user perspective. In the sections “Dystopian Roots”, “Early Dystopia and the Metropolis”, “Early Dystopia and Transportation Technology” and “The Spatial Poetics of Early Dystopia” I describe the emergence of the dystopian genre and its related spatial concepts. In the section “The Intervention of Electrical Telecommunication Technology” I point towards Forster’s “The Machine Stops” as an important intervention in the dystopian genre and dystopian space. I propose that Forster’s short story and its reliance on communication technology introduced four structural changes to the concept of dystopian space that I will detail in the sections “Internal Organization”, “Diegetic Condensation and Character Immobility”, “Critical Boundaries” and “External Structural Failure”.

Dystopian Roots
Dystopian narrative has its roots in the mid and late nineteenth century. Beginning with fiction such as Verne’s *Paris in the Twentieth Century* (1863, 1994), Dodd’s *The Republic of the Future* and Donnelly’s *Caeser’s Column* (1890), there emerges a clear sense of a dystopian tradition as well as a dystopian spatial poetic that is related to, but separate from, utopian fiction. These early examples of dystopian fiction are characterized by their use of space and technology.

This early tradition of dystopian narrative is closely associated with nineteenth-century neo-imperialist projects and the technologies that made the expanding influence of the Occident possible, as well as their effects on the spatial imagination. Just as the utopian genre has its roots in early modern colonial exploration and shipping, dystopian fiction emerges as a distinct literary form alongside nineteenth-century neo-colonialism. As explained in chapter 1, the utopian tradition is strongly related to seventeenth-century European expansion in the Americas. More’s *Utopia* (1516), for example, uses the travels of Amerigo Vespucci to juxtapose Europe’s own sense of being at the center of the earth with Utopia’s alternative ideologies. More’s text, in other words, is intimately related to the Othering strategy that informs seventeenth-century European colonial enterprise. Yet, not only did the exotic nature of Europe’s colonial projects prompt reflection on

38 I use “phenomenological” here—as well as in the rest of this dissertation—strictly as an adjective to denote a type of dystopian narrative that revolves around how and what characters in the narrative experience. It is not in any way intended to refer to Phenomenology, the philosophical school founded by Edmund Husserl.
quotidian society “back home”, the travel narrative in itself formed an effective means of distancing the diegetic space from the “real” world in order to make possible the ideological experiments that took place within utopia’s borders.

Alongside More’s Utopia, other early modern narratives proceeded to solidify this connection between the notion of utopia and colonial exploration. For instance, Neville’s The Isle of Pines (1668) and Bacon’s New Atlantis (1624) also constructed utopian islands against a backdrop of European exploration and colonization. In this way, the emergence of utopia not only articulates a fascination with mysterious, foreign destinations, but also gives rise to the convention that “utopianness” entails an isolated setting outside of mundane socioeconomic reality.

Echoing utopia’s parallel development with colonial projects and discourse, the emergence of dystopia can be linked to nineteenth-century neo-imperialism. It is fascinating to see that here too, a fictional genre materializes in tandem with a period of powerful (neo-)colonial expansion and exploration. Indeed, classic dystopian texts such as Paris in the Twentieth Century and Caesar’s Column are principally concerned with Western empire building and the capitalism which it supports. Verne’s text, for example, considers the fate of the young poet Michel Dufrénoy in 1960s Paris. Here, the French capital acts as the heart of a society that privileges industry, wealth and economic growth above literature and the arts. Michel’s troublesome quest to find his place in this society is narrated against the backdrop of a Paris which is forever expanding into the periphery and annexing new territory in order to fuel the demands of its affluent citizenry. Similarly, Donnelly’s Caesar’s Column also employs one of society’s misfits in order to bring to the fore an expansive network of Occidental socioeconomic influence. In this case, New York forms a colonial center that extends to the far reaches of Africa and expresses the pursuit of overseas territorial acquisition in order to support the home economy.

These early dystopias articulate their concern for Western empire building prominently by foregrounding certain technologies. Just as early utopian fiction made use of contemporary colonization technologies and discourses (i.e. the sailing vessel and the travel narrative) to help give shape its utopian spaces, so too does early dystopian fiction use the technologies of neo-imperialism to construct its diegetic setting. In particular, the modern metropolis and transportation technologies may be
considered as technologies that played a vital role in nineteenth-century imperialism and as important determinants in early dystopian spatial poetics.

**Early Dystopia and the Metropolis**

In the case of the metropolis, early dystopia takes a great interest in urban agglomeration as both a consequence of and as a tool for neo-imperialism. Certainly, early forms of dystopian fiction tend to be concerned with this specific kind of space and its subversion: New York in *The Republic of the Future* and *Caesar’s Column*, Paris in *Paris in the Twentieth Century*, and London in *The Time Machine* (1895) and *The Sleeper Awakes* (1910) are initially the loci for dystopian subversion. Indeed, early dystopian fantasy is set almost exclusively in the metropolitan areas of imagined, future incarnations of North America and Europe. This fascination is presumably in part due to dystopia’s relationship with the utopian tradition and its frequent use of the city. Mirroring classic (proto-)utopian settings such as Plato’s city state in *The Republic* and More’s city of Amaurote in *Utopia*, early dystopian fiction copied the city as a setting and made use of its long ancestry in this particular mode of writing.

However, alongside its strong presence in the utopian tradition, the city also enunciated some of the major concerns of early dystopian fiction. As just noted, texts such as *Paris in the Twentieth Century* and *Caesar’s Column* are principally concerned with Western empire building and the capitalism which it supports. In these fictions, the modern metropolis becomes the focal point of the technological developments which allowed for nineteenth-century Occidental neo-imperialist projects as well as the urban area’s role as a “hub” of cultural, social and economic influence. For example, Donnelly’s *Caesar’s Column* (1890) is set in 1988 New York. In a highly contrived epistolary form the text details the collapse of civilization by fictionalizing New York as the epicenter of an apocalyptic social uprising. The letters describe the city’s burning tower blocks and how middle and upper-class characters flee from the multitudinous, exploited laborers who are out for revenge. However, within this class struggle, New York is more than just the gaudy and extravagant setting that is the result of the exploitation of the working class, awaiting its destruction. The metropolis also functions as the centre of Western world dominance, its sphere of influence extending around the globe.
More than anything, New York’s status as a symbol of Western imperialism is expressed in *Caesar’s Column* through the travels of the protagonist, Gabriel Weltstein. Gabriel, a farmer of Swiss descent who owns a sheep farm in Uganda, has come to New York to try and broker a deal with wool manufacturers just before the socioeconomic stability of the metropolis, and indeed the entire world, begins to collapse. This rather unlikely confluence of Swiss sheep farmers, African colonies and metropolitan New York, presented—ostensibly—in all seriousness by the narrative, appears to be the result of a subliminal understanding of New York’s central role in Western empire building. By connecting a European settler, the colonization of Africa, class struggle, and the trade of natural resources with New York, *Caesar’s Column* manages to give awkward expression to the significance of the metropolis for mid nineteenth-century neo-imperialism. Donnelly’s text places the metropolis at the center of the West’s economic and cultural authority, and so demonstrates its significance to “Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient” (Said 3). Other examples of early dystopian fiction share the convergence of the modern metropolis, Western empire and economics that are at the heart of Donnelly’s text. Dodd’s *The Republic of the Future*, for example, also uses the epistolary form and a European protagonist who travels to New York to consider the relationship between social class, urbanization and empire-building. More famously, Wells later continued this early dystopian device by using London to explore the effects of capitalism and Western imperialism in *The Time Machine* and *The Sleeper Awakes*.

Thus early dystopian narrative reads the city as an urban form that articulates the West’s preoccupation with the subjugation of the Orient’s rural spaces. This is of course not to say that these readings are all the same and that New York, Paris and London all perform identical cultural work in these texts. Certainly, Wells’ portrayal of London as urban form differs considerably from Donnelly’s New York and this diversity appears to reflect the different roles that Peter Brooker sees these cities as taking in *Modernity and Metropolis*. According to Brooker, London emerged after the mid nineteenth century ahead of traditional industrial cities such as Manchester as a “distinctly imperial capital” whose “pre-eminence was founded on a commanding economic and political position and depended on the mechanisms of military, ideological and administrative power” (Brooker 4-5). As Brooker demonstrates, New
York, by contrast, “was not a political but commercial capital, and was above all a
cultural city in which the famous symbolic verticality of its skyscrapers, the ambitious
iron work of its bridges and its elevated transport system conveyed a sense of the
modern as ‘newness’ in the here and now” (ibid.). Indeed, this distinction between old
and new world cities as the capitals of political and commercial globalization
respectively may be identified in their fictional representation. In Wells’ fiction
London takes on a form that conveys its status as the urban representation of political
power. *The Sleeper Awakes*, for example, is set predominantly in the spaces that deal
with the administration and dissemination of power. Although certainly not devoid of
commercial interest, the text favors the representation—and destruction—of
structures that deal chiefly with political power. By contrast, Donnelly’s
representation of New York focuses on the subversion of the vertical structures of
commercial enterprise. Donnelly’s text especially succeeds in painting the
commercial power that New York represents in the up-market hotel towers described
by the protagonist. Overlooking the city, these luxury residences seem to offer their
guests the world at their feet, at least as long as they are able to pay the price for such
an extravagant view. As a result, the architecture of New York in *Caesar’s Column*
articulates the financial power that informs America’s corporate neo-imperialism
rather than the old-world mix of financial interests and national political dominance
of London.

What I am arguing then is that while the different architectures in *Caesar’s
Column* and *The Sleeper Awakes* express subtle differences in the method by which
the Occident manages its power over the East, that the ability of these structures to
give shape to Western styles of dominance remains constant. In spite of the different
urban forms of London, Paris and New York then, these cities can be viewed as the
reliable incarnations neo-imperialism. Certainly, in early dystopian fiction the
metropolis can be understood both as a technology that allows for the West’s
acquisition of foreign territory and wealth, as well as the representation of this
dominance and its various guises.

**Early Dystopia and Transportation Technology**

Alongside the metropolis, early dystopia’s interest in neo-imperialism comes to the
fore in another form of technology as well. Transportation technology features
consistently in these texts as a means of linking the outer margins of empire with the colonial metropolitan centers. Steam driven contraptions (*The Time Machine*), pneumatic tubes and shipping canals (*Paris in the Twentieth Century*), as well as airships (*Caesar’s Column*) connect the urban centers of civilization with their rural peripheries. As with the figure of the metropolis, these transportation devices transmute objective space into containers of political, social and economic concerns. By mediating between the authority of the metropolitan center and the subjugation of the outlying areas, these devices acquire “emotional and even rational sense by a kind of poetic process, whereby vacant or anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning” (Said 55). In other words, these texts use airships and pneumatic tubes in order to transform the “anonymous reaches” between metropolitan centers and the margins of empire into meaningful spaces that communicate the power relations at play. It is through these transportation technologies that the metropolis is able to both extend its control and to absorb the valuable natural resources that add to its splendor. In this way, narratives such as *The Republic of the Future* and *Caesar’s Column* transform the distance between New York, on the one hand, and rural Sweden and Africa on the other, into meaningful spaces that act as the shifting horizon of empire and its influence, codifying as well as questioning the power relations these entail. Hence, as with the metropolis, transportation technology is used by early dystopian fiction as a means of enlisting space as a narrative agent.

**The Spatial Poetics of Early Dystopia**

As a result of the central role that the metropolis and transportation devices play in early dystopia and its diegetic construction, these fictions are characterized by a particular form of spatial poetics and a specific mode of subversiveness. Specifically, these technologies instill the early dystopian tradition with a specific kind of spatial border. This is not to say that early dystopian fiction does not agree with the basic dystopian spatial “conceit” that I have sketched in chapter 1. Indeed, these fictions can be understood as dystopian precisely because they are at the beginning of the tradition of subverting “utopian” spatial constructs. In *Caesar’s Column*, for instance, New York is initially set up as a utopian space, more or less isolated from the “real” and rural world of the protagonist and perfectly homogeneous in layout with its rigid streets and avenues. Moreover, the narrative then begins to disrupt this space by
introducing sites of subversion as resistance members begin to organize themselves in safe houses and hideouts. As such, Donnelly’s text plays a pivotal role in establishing the spatial dynamics that are echoed by later dystopian texts.

At the same time, it should be noted that the early concept of dystopian space does not seem to include a clearly defined outer limit. Again taking Donnelly’s rendition of New York as an example, it is clear that, while separated from its surroundings, New York’s comparative isolation as the heart of empire does not take shape as a formal frontier. In this way, New York, positioned as the preliminary “utopian” space ready to be subverted, distinguishes itself from classic utopian constructs. Unlike Herland, Utopia, or Anarres, Donnelly’s New York has no wall, fence or shoreline to protect its outer perimeter. Instead, its spatial isolation is expressed more implicitly by the text’s strong emphasis on travel. In Caesar’s Column, New York functions as an island of urbanity by virtue of the distance between it and other diegetic spaces (i.e. rural, colonial Africa). In this way, the text manages to isolate its primary setting not through a display of perimeter fences but rather it segregates New York vicariously by virtue of the text’s function as a travel narrative.

Similarly, other early dystopian texts likewise isolate their diegetic spaces primarily with distance rather than walls. For example, The Republic of the Future also isolates New York with extensive travel times, while Wells takes a more radical approach and separates his London setting through the use of time travel in both The Time Machine and The Sleeper Awakes. Early dystopia, in short, is isolated from “normal” space but not with the brick-and-mortar walls of the utopian tradition from which this narrative strand diverges. Instead, its outer limits are implicitly present in the recounting of protagonists’ travels from the colonial periphery into the metropolitan center.

As such, early dystopian narrative may be said to be characterized by a spatial poetic that foregrounds isolated metropolitan areas whose boundaries are defined by transportation technologies. It is this last property, especially, that is significant for understanding the development of the dystopian genre and the effects that telecommunication technology later had on the concept of dystopia. In connecting the centers of empire with their peripheries, the trains, airships and pneumatic tubes of early dystopian fiction presented readers with a concept of dystopia where the center
of empire moves out into the periphery. Acting as both the circumference of the metropolis as well as the promise of the metropolis’ expanding influence, these transportation devices suggested the absorption of rural peripheries into urban centers.

As explained in chapter 2, transportation technology adjusts the spatial imagination according to this centrifugal function: ships pragmatically make available new spaces that can extend existing financial markets and social networks. Indeed, as evidenced by for instance George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1869), this centrifugal expansion affected the spatial imagination. Eliot uses railroad networks to effectively construct a larger diegetic space that bespeaks greater social variety and mobility, as well as financial opportunity. In the case of dystopian fiction specifically, these centrifugal forces of transportation technology and their enclosure of the dystopian space creates a sense of the immanent diffusion of the dystopian ideology.

As a result of these abstract and shifting borders, early dystopia is also characterized by a specific kind of resistance to the homogeneity of the original “utopian” space. As explained in chapter 1, dystopia subverts utopian uniformity in one of three ways: internal structural failure, external structural failure and leakage. In each case, uniformity is undermined by a breach of ideology that is expressed in spatial terms. Foreign agents gain access to the ideological stronghold by finding interior sites of opposition, weaknesses in dystopia’s outer border, or permeable locations in this outer boundary, respectively.

In the case of early dystopia, resistance to the dystopian construct’s ideology seems to be transposed exclusively onto interior sites of opposition: the lack of concrete dystopian borders necessarily prompts dystopia’s internal structural failure. That is, as dystopia’s periphery is merely implied by the presence of transportation technologies rather than being corporeally “there”, there is no hard target available for the external pressure of deterioration of dystopia. As a result, the dystopian subversion in *Paris in the Twentieth Century*, *Caesar’s Column* and *The Republic of the Future* is wholly concerned with the creation of possible subversive sites within dystopia itself.

Traditionally, these sites take shape as structures that are perceived to be or presented as idealized pre-industrial and pre-neocolonial values. Libraries, bookstores and reading rooms, especially, are popular sites of opposition to the highly mechanized spaces of the metropolis and its transportation technologies in early
dystopian fiction. Verne’s hero Michel, for example, finds solace only in Paris’ few libraries, bookstores, and in his uncle’s study. It is in these spaces, also, that he meets his conspirators and is able to begin to resist the relentless, technology driven ideology of the French capital. *Caesar’s Column* also invests heavily in these quiet, non-industrial spaces in order to resist the intensely populated and mechanized primary dystopian space. In this way, early dystopian narrative is able to find sites of opposition within its primary diegetic construct rather than bringing in outside resistance in order to undermine the dominant ideology. Subversion, in short, is here achieved through the internal failure of the ideological space itself.

Moreover, this model of subversion by internal means seems to be consistent with early dystopia’s preoccupation with neo-imperialism. Concurrent with the expanding forces of colonial conquest and shifting imperial borders, early dystopia seeks to intervene in ideological homogeneity by placing the burden of political activism on the colonial center itself rather than on the colonized periphery. In a sense then, early dystopian narrative may be said to be complicit to neo-imperialism even if it seems, outwardly, to be critical of the Occident’s expansion. Certainly, a text such as *Caesar’s Column* positions Western imperial conquest in a critical light by questioning its moral underpinnings as well as the economic system it supports. Yet, at the same time, the text proposes that the only effective resistance that is brought to bear on this ideology of colonial expansion comes from within the colonial center itself. As with Verne’s *Paris in the Twentieth Century* and Dodd’s *The Republic of the Future*, Donnelly’s resistance consists exclusively of members of the imperial society whose ability to resist the ideology of the metropolis depends upon the advantages this society has given them. What is important here is not so much what is said, but what is not said: the idea that ideological reform might originate in the margins of empire is not once articulated. In this way, early dystopia attributes only the colonial center with the agency for ideological reform, thus marginalizing the colonial periphery that it ostensibly supports. Again, this interaction between imperial center and resistance to dominant ideology supports the image that early dystopian narrative is characterized by the internal structural failure of dystopian spaces. By privileging the metropolitan center itself as an effective site of opposition, and by presenting the colonial margin as the powerless and passive receptacle of ideology, these narratives
invest the notion of dystopia with a powerful sense of internal rebellion and the destruction of ideological spaces under their own weight.

It is important to point out that my exposition here of the genealogy of dystopian fiction appears—initially—to be at odds with the general consensus of most existing scholarship. Moylan, for example, understands the emergence of the dystopian genre as taking place much later when he claims that “[d]ystopian narrative is the product of the terrors of the twentieth century” (xi). Indeed, for Moylan it is not nineteenth-century empire building and the emergence of the modern metropolis that are linked with the genre’s roots. Instead, he associates the genre’s emergence with “[a] hundred years of exploitation, repression, state violence, war, genocide, disease, famine, ecocide, depression, debt, and the steady depletion of humanity through the buying and selling of everyday life” (ibid.). However, I find this view of the roots of dystopian fiction problematic. Not only does Moylan’s interpretation wrongfully monopolize the conditions of moral, economic and ecological deterioration that he considers necessary factors for dystopian inspiration to the twentieth century, he also denies the indebtedness of twentieth-century dystopias to their nineteenth-century forerunners. Moylan mediates this latter tension by looking towards Sargent’s taxonomy of utopian fiction for support. In this way, he positions nineteenth-century dystopias as “anti-utopian fiction” while he understands twentieth-century dystopias to be the “real” dystopian literature (xi).

As explained in chapter 1, my criticism of Sargent’s—and, by extension, Moylan’s—system of utopian and dystopian fiction is not a way of splitting theoretical hairs but rather the result of a fundamentally different approach towards utopian and dystopian fiction. Rather than understanding these textual forms as being inherently linked to authorial intent (i.e. according to Sargent “anti-utopian” fiction is intended by the author to be an explicit form of critique of the idea of utopia in general or of some specific utopian construct, while “dystopia” is intended by the author to be a society worse than that of contemporary readers (1994: 9)), I propose the significance of a texts’ formal properties in eliciting the interpretation “utopian” or “dystopia” in the reader. Moreover, I would suggest that Sargent’s fine-grained system of textual categories in effect impedes productive textual interpretation precisely because of the proximity between its textual groups. For example, there appears to be a considerable overlap between Sargent’s categories of “anti-utopian”
and “dystopian” (i.e. any critique of utopia is likely to be “worse” than “real” contemporary society at least in some aspects, and the dystopian fiction seems inherently critical of utopias) which signals the difficulties involved in effectively employing such finely delineated types in textual interpretation. Two categories, “utopia” and “dystopia”, I argued, are sufficient means to identify two distinct literary traditions, each with its own set of formal properties.

As such, my reading of dystopia’s history is not so much in disagreement with Sargent’s and Moylan’s as it is the result of a different understanding of the term “dystopia”. For Moylan, dystopia starts only in the twentieth century because his view of what constitutes this type of fiction simply is narrower than my own. However, were Moylan to combine some of his categories under a single header, his understanding of dystopian fiction, at least in terms of its timeline, does not differ that greatly from the tradition I have sketched out here.

Generally speaking, then, dystopian fiction emerged as a distinct literary tradition in the mid and late nineteenth century. This early form of dystopian literature was characterized by its interest in neo-imperialism. As a result of this interest, technologies such as the metropolis and communication devices proceeded to create a specific form of spatial poetics. While the metropolis formed the initial, isolated “utopian” center of empire that could be subverted, transportation technologies formed the abstract borders of this dystopian space. Both of these characteristics of early dystopia can be used distinguish this form of dystopian narrative from later incarnations that focus on the representation of communication technologies.

The Intervention of Electrical Telecommunication Technology

As evidenced by, for example, Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927), Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), Scott’s *Bladerunner* (1982), Ballard’s *Concrete Island* (1974) and Miller’s *Mad Max* (1979), the visual potential of the metropolis as well as the “nightmare marriage of sex and technology” hinted at by transportation devices continue to provide dystopian fiction with inspiration (Ballard 2008b: ii). As such, the spatial dynamics of early dystopia continue to be invoked. However, alongside these traditional dystopian themes, new spatial variations have begun to emerge as well. Specifically, the spatial poetic of the dystopian genre has been expanded beyond its original characteristics to contract and include new forms of dystopian borders and,
consequently, dystopian subversion. As I will demonstrate, these new spatial variations are intimately related to dystopian narratives shifting their interest away from transportation devices towards communication technologies. That is, whereas dystopian fiction was initially primarily concerned with the metropolis and transportation devices, later dystopian narratives also display a strong interest in telegraph and telephone technologies. As a result of this shift, dystopia became associated with different, smaller spaces and their subversion. In particular, the influence of communication technology resulted in the introduction of a new form of dystopia that depended for its spatial composition on the user perspective offered by the telegraph and telephone. Moreover, this new spatial variation made available new forms of dystopian borders and subversion. And, as the dystopian tradition is defined principally by its articulation of certain spatial principles, these new spatial variants have subtly adjusted several aspects of what the “dystopia” concept denotes.

Whereas mid and late nineteenth-century dystopia was exclusively informed by dystopian spaces that expanded and suffered from internal structural failure, later narratives began to explore new forms of dystopian subversion. Integral to these new forms is a shift in interest towards other forms of technology, in particular communication devices. Especially one text, E.M. Forster’s “The Machine Stops” (1909) left an inexorable impression on the dystopian genre with its heady mix of post-apocalyptic civilization, subterranean spaces and communication technologies.

This is, of course, not to say that telephones and telegraphs did not feature in earlier dystopian fiction. Indeed, Donnelly's *Caesar’s Column* already briefly “speculates” on the possible uses of “electric wires” to hotels and newspaper publishers (9-11). Similarly, Verne fantasizes about some of the practical ramifications of the electrical telegraph for an interlibrary loan system (Verne 38). Yet, these minor daydreams of technological progress serve no purpose in the progress of narratives themselves. Although they do articulate a naive form of fascination with these technologies, such fantasies cannot be construed as the significant outcome of the interaction between advances in technology and discursive patterns. So, while telegraph and telephone technologies make an appearance in early dystopian fiction, their presence can hardly be felt. Certainly, in contrast to the forces of urbanization and increasing mobility, communication technologies do nothing to
help facilitate the creation of ideologically uniform spaces and their subversion in these early dystopian fictions.

By contrast, E.M. Forster’s short story “The Machine Stops” foregrounds communication technology in such a way as might be said to be significant for the development of dystopian narrative as well as for the dispositif of the telegraph and telephone. Indeed, in this text telecommunication technology begins to take center stage in the construction of dystopian spaces. In doing so, Forster’s short story intervenes in the dystopian narrative tradition up until this point in two ways. Firstly, it marks a departure from the topic of empire in dystopian fiction. Unlike previous dystopian narratives, the text is no longer principally concerned with Western colonial expansion. Certainly, the text’s technology-ridden, post-apocalyptic world may be read as a critique of the Occident’s drive for colonial expansion and the technologies that make it available. However, the text offers nothing by way of support for such a reading, at best implicating empire in the otherwise unexplained apocalypse of the back-story. Indeed, unlike Paris in the Twentieth Century or Caesar’s Column, Forster’s short story displays no knowledge of Western “superiority”, Orientalism, or even the idea of colonization itself. As such, contrary to the explicit presence of empire of previous dystopian texts, “The Machine Stops” portrays a dystopian world that is no longer “about” neo-imperialism but that has altogether different preoccupations and marks a new stage in the development of dystopian narrative.

Secondly, and more importantly in terms of the development of the dystopian genre, “The Machine Stops” also no longer focuses on the topos of empire. Whereas earlier dystopian narratives took place within the neo-imperialist spaces offered by the metropolis, steam train and airship, Forster’s text begins to shift this focus towards other technologies and different kinds of spaces. Key to these new dystopian constructs is the presence of communication technology and its interaction with the diegetic space.

The absence of communication technology from dystopia’s neo-imperialist spaces does of course not imply that technologies such as the telegraph and telephone have remained “innocent” of Western empire building outside of these fictions. In fact, technologies such as the electrical telegraph were absolutely vital in making Western colonial expansion feasible, not just by providing the transmission speed necessary to communicate across the vast reaches of empire, but also by making
imperial transportation technologies more safe and effective. Indeed, as Richard Menke points out, “[b]y the mid-1840s the telegraph was on its way to becoming a critical part of the railway, a ‘nervous system’ by which the ‘whole line is kept throbbing with intelligence’” (Menke 69). In this way, railroad and telegraph networks could be conceptualized as the embodiment of empire, acting as musculature and nervous system of the nation state respectively. In effect, the idea that railroad and telegraph worked together as the “appendages” of empire provided some level of justification for the project of colonization. By allowing a comparison with the human body to be made, these technologies suggested that empire was “natural” and that the expansion of the nation state at the expense of other cultures was part of a healthy evolutionary development. As such, the electrical telegraph formed an intricate part of the dissemination of Western dominance as well the assumption of Western superiority.

Yet, while the telegraph’s significance in Occidental neo-imperialism is undeniable, the technology did not contribute to the construction of diegetic spaces in early dystopian fiction. In fact, only when the genre begins to lose interest in the topos of empire does the telegraph begin to play a significant role in the formal construction of dystopia.

It is difficult to speculate as to the reasons behind this comparatively late convergence of the user perspective of the modern electric telegraph—and, by extension, the telephone—and dystopian fiction into a dispositif of telecommunication technology. Both prerequisites emerged approximately at the same time, already containing in them the properties that enable “The Machine Stops” to inscribe itself in the dystopian tradition. The electric telegraph was “invented” more or less simultaneously by several inventors and increasingly competed with postal services from the 1850s onwards in Europe, the United States as well as the Russian Empire. At the same time, dystopian narrative emerged as a new style of fiction that was related to utopian narrative yet critically different in its formal properties. However, the convergence between these two elements into a dispositif of telecommunication technology did not occur until the beginning of the twentieth century with Forster’s text. In other words, it took approximately fifty years for the overlap between both

39 Most notably, the electrical telegraph was developed by Cook and Wheatstone in England, and by Morse in the United States in 1837.
“technologies” to result in the expansion of the dystopian genre with new spatial and subversive variations, and for dystopia to become a standard narrative response to telecommunication devices.

The reasons behind this apparent “delay” are difficult to grasp. On the one hand, it seems logical to locate the source of this protracted convergence of technology and user perspective with fictional spaces in the comparatively slow adoption of the technology by mainstream society. To be sure, while the electrical telegraph was invented—or at least patented—in 1837, the technology remained relatively esoteric and out of reach for the ordinary consumer until late in the nineteenth century. Indeed, as Richard Menke points out, telegraph companies initially had difficulties competing with traditional postal services, which slowed adoption of the telegraph by the mass markets:

While the principle of electric telegraphy was dramatic, the social impact of its advent was comparatively unobtrusive and slow. In contrast to the rapid enactment and popularity of the Penny Post, electric telegraphy would remain better known in outline than in ordinary life for many years […]. Telegrams would only become common in everyday private life, and in fiction, after the Post Office took over the British telegraph network in the 1870s in order to build a cheaper and more consistent system. (Menke 70)

The telegraph, then, was not immediately embraced throughout society. The technology suffered from technical difficulties and network incompatibilities as well as high price, which slowed its progress into the mainstream. Indeed, in Henry James’ In the Cage (1898), the telegraph is still presented as a highly technical and exotic piece of technology that caters primarily to the enactment of social intrigue by the upper classes. As such, the argument might be made that early dystopia’s lack of interest in communication devices is the result of the technology’s relatively modest function in ubiquitous society.

On the other hand, it seems reasonable to understand the comparatively late convergence of dystopia and communication devices in terms of tradition. Literary genres appear to exist by virtue of their ability to resist change to the degree that it is possible to discern them as separate genres. Such innate literary conventionalism, then, might be said to be instrumental to the development—or lack thereof—of early dystopian fiction. Certainly, early dystopias share tropes, situations and structural conventions to the extent that they appear to resist change and work against the
development of the genre. In other words, the absence of communication devices in nineteenth-century dystopian fiction may simply be due to an innate resistance to avant-garde experimentation that maintains the continuity of the genre.

Although it is difficult to explain the late entry of dystopian fiction into the dispositif of telecommunication technology, what is clear about the development of the dystopian genre is that once the link between dystopian space and communication devices was established, this connection could not be undone. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, dystopia had quickly cemented itself into the role of standard response in the dispositif of telecommunication technology. As a result, the dystopian genre has developed according to the trend established by Forster’s short story. Foster’s text introduces the dystopian tradition to the idea that, besides physical spaces such as the metropolis, virtual spaces such as the telegraph’s user perspective can be used for the construction of dystopian space and its subversion. Indeed, since “The Machine Stops”, dystopian space has become increasingly associated with communication technology and user perspective.

**Structural Changes: Internal Organization**

The main innovation of Forster’s short story lies in its use of telecommunication technology for the construction of dystopian space. This development comes to the fore in four ways. First, “The Machine Stops” constructs its diegetic space in the shape of telecommunication technology’s nil-space. As explained in chapter 2, telecommunication devices intimate a specific kind of data realm and user perspective; that is, a space that has been collapsed and rendered nil by the speed of telecommunication. As a corollary of their high transmission speeds, technologies such as the telegraph and telephone present their users with the suggestion of a separate data realm where all information within the network is available instantaneously. Contrary to embodied forms of communication (i.e. a book in a library, a letter in an envelope) telecommunication technologies extend their high-speed media between sender and receiver so that physical location is no longer—or, appears to be—a constraint upon knowledge. And because all information in the network appears to be immediately available from anywhere in the communication structure, location loses its significance. As a result, users are exposed to what might be called a “telepistemology”: a window of knowledge acquisition where information
can be accessed independently of location and distance through the use of telecommunication devices. In this way, the telegraph key and telephone mouthpiece become entry points to a separate realm, a nil-space of data structures without physical location that are always on call and waiting to be accessed.

Forster’s short story uses this idea of a data realm that is separate from “normal” space and where information is distributed homogeneously throughout the system for the construction of its dystopian space. In “The Machine Stops”, dystopian space is not constituted by the urban structures of the metropolis as with earlier dystopian narratives, but is instead built around the concept of nil-space. In Forster’s short story, the dystopian space, i.e. the initial “utopian”, isolated and homogeneous space that the narrative will subvert, is based on the characteristics of telecommunication’s nil-space. Specifically, the internal structure and architecture of the diegesis directly articulates the logic and spatial characteristics of nil-space.

Following an unexplained apocalyptic event that forced humanity to live underground, the main part of the narrative takes place in subterranean spaces that are divided into small individual cells and organized into a beehive-like structure. Each cell is home to one individual who never leaves his or her quarters but is rather devoted to the life-long enterprise of exchanging information with other members on a communicative grid. These exchanges are achieved by means of imaginary, future renditions of telecommunication devices. Consequently, the information contained by each node of the communication network (i.e. what each individual knows) can be propagated instantly throughout the system. As a result, Forster’s main diegetic space resembles the properties of nil-space: the hardware apparatus (communication lines, beehive cells and “memory storage” in the form of individual characters) is used to create a user perspective in the form of an epistemological “window” where information is unbound by location. As a result, characters perceive the diegesis to be a nil-space where there are no fixed reference points and where all information is homogeneously distributed.

The beehive structure of Forster’s underground world, in other words, may be construed along similar lines as Kevin Lynch’s concept of “cognitive mapping”. In *The Image of the City*, Lynch proposes a vital link between the physical structures of the city and its “public image”. Form and meaning, Lynch proposes, are intricately interwoven in the urban structure. Lynch identifies five such structures as informing
the city’s public image. Paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks are the physical structures that the scholar sees as shaping the contents of the city’s image. Interestingly, it seems to be precisely the lack of these elements that helps to define Forster’s underground urban realm. The Machine world consists predominantly of dwelling places and leaves no room for a transient observer or flâneur. Although there are some paths in place, their function in the narrative is limited to the subversion of the primary urban space, while edges, districts, nodes and landmarks appear to be entirely non-existent. Yet, it is precisely the lack of these “standard” city structures in this urban dystopia that is important here. Just as New York forms its public image through the establishment of Lynch’s structures, so the Machine city is defined by the complete removal of landmarks and pathways. Here, the reader “charts” the diegetic space by not perceiving conventional urban structures, forming a mental map without waypoints and directions. As such, Foster’s underground world is a cognitive map of the complete uniformity of nil-space. The inability to form a concrete mental map of the beehive topography of the diegetic bespeaks the dislocation of knowledge from space that characterizes nil-space.

This similarity between the diegetic “architecture” of “The Machine Stops” and information properties of nil-space is further made tangible primarily through the subversive acts of one of the protagonists, Kuno. Kuno and his mother Vashti have existed their entire lives in Forster’s imaginary subterranean world and their knowledge is based solely on the information they have gathered through the Machine’s communication devices. As a result, they have no real concept of space beyond the confines of their cells, nor have they any comprehension of “where” information comes from: it is simply “there” waiting to be accessed by them through communication technology. The stability of this world is undermined by Kuno who begins to resist its uniformity as well as the way in which it relies on connection speed and the dislocation of knowledge from space. In the process, the relationship between the diegesis and nil-space comes to the fore. For example, Kuno calls his mother in her private cell on the “cinematophote” and deliberately dawdles. 40 Aware that his act constitutes a breach of decorum and will cause serious irritation, Kuno

40 The “cinematophote” is described in the narrative as a blue plate on which one can view moving pictures and through which sound can be transmitted. To my knowledge it is the first mention of a television-like device in science fiction. In Forster’s story it functions both as a one-way television receiver as well as a video conferencing device.
makes Vashti wait “fully fifteen seconds before the round plate in her hands began to
 glow” and starts the connection (Forster 116). Kuno’s purposeful delay here signals
 not only his attempt at adolescent rebellion, it also exposes this imaginary society’s
 reliance on instant forms of communication and data availability. That is, Kuno’s
 “prank” call strikes at the core of society by challenging the need for high
 transmission speed and the structures that it supports.

 Moreover, Kuno questions the logic behind the beehive architecture of the
 Machine world by suggesting that there is a direct link between location and
 knowledge. Against custom, Kuno insists that his mother come see him in order to
 discuss something that is important to him. Vashti’s response is indignant, insisting
 that anything Kuno might want to express might just as well be sent by
 “cinematophone” or “pneumatic post” (ibid.). Yet, Kuno remains adamant that his
 mother travel thousands of miles to him in order to discuss some important issues.41
 As with his earlier wasting of time, Kuno’s insistence that his mother cross “real”
 diegetic space in order to confer a message, questions both dominant ideology and the
 spatial organization of the diegesis. That is, the suggestion that location is important
 for knowledge acquisition, criticizes prevailing beliefs as well as the uniform beehive
 layout of the Machine world.

 Kuno’s subversive acts, in other words, articulate the properties of the
dystopian space. By calling into question transmission speed and the dislocation of
knowledge from space, Kuno points out the properties of the dystopian construct that
he seeks to rebel against. Defined by low latency and homogeneous data distribution,
Forster’s underground dystopia borrows its primary spatial characteristics from the
communication technologies with which the text engages. In this way, “The Machine
Stops” builds its dystopian diegesis by carefully recreating the conditions offered by
the viewer perspective of telecommunication technology, replacing the solid
structures of the metropolis with virtual spaces for its dystopian construction.

**Structural Changes: Diegetic Condensation and Character Immobility**

The second way in which “The Machine Stops” intervenes in the dystopian tradition
is through its representation of spatial condensation in the diegesis. Directly related to

41 The narrative explains that Kuno’s cell is located somewhere beneath England, while Vashti lives
under Sumatra. The separation of mother and son emphasizes the insignificance of absolute location,
calling attention to the effects of nil-space’s logic on the internal layout of the diegesis.
its borrowing some of the properties of nil-space for the construction of dystopian space, “The Machine Stops” suggests the centripetal condensation of the diegesis. As explained in chapter 2, nil-space involves a projection of all system information onto a single point, namely the user’s perspective. As a result, the concept of nil-space entails a spatial operation where known space can be represented as singularity; an infinitely small point where all locations and knowledge converge. In “The Machine Stops”, the structuring of the diegesis according to the properties of nil-space also transfers this spatial operation to the story world. This condensation can be seen coming to the fore in two ways. Firstly, the two protagonists are shown to be immobile entities. Both Kuno and Vashti are presented as being accustomed to remain stationary. Sitting in their cells, they receive information from across the world via the “cinematophote”, thus relying on the concentration of world-wide knowledge onto a single, glowing blue plate. When they do venture out into the world, the text emphasizes the characters’ distress at not being connected and constantly receiving information from around the world. Character immobility, in other words, is indicative of the user perspective offered by communication technology as well as the spatial condensation such a perspective suggests. So, contrary to earlier dystopias where the protagonists move across and through the diegetic space, Forster’s “The Machine Stops” relies on characters who remain immobile.

The second way in which the narrative expresses the centripetal contraction of the diegesis is through the interplay between narrative perspective and focalization. The text’s third-person narrator frequently focalizes Kuno and Vashti so that knowledge at these points in the narrative is limited to what they know. Crucially, this internal focalization frequently occurs at moments when the characters interact with the “cinematophote”. As a consequence, narrator and reader are exposed to the device’s information flow. Here, in quick succession, the text instructs the reader on a range of subjects such as music during the “Australian period”, music in the “pre-Mongolian epoch”, the “Chinese conquest”, “I-San-So” and the “Brisbane School” (Foster 116-17). So, by focalizing the “cinematophote”, the narrative conveys the ability of the Machine to transpose a wild variety of information from different cultural and geographical backgrounds to a single point of interaction. The “noise” of these diverse tidbits of information, in other words, helps to express the geographical
convergence of information under the influence of communication technology and grants the illusion of the centripetal contraction of the diegesis.

**Structural Changes: Critical Boundaries**

The third way in which “The Machine Stops” affects the development of the dystopian genre is through its engagement with the idea of a dystopian wall. While early dystopian fiction relied on transportation technology to provide limits to its imagined societies, Forster’s short story introduces the notion of a distinct, concrete frontier to the dystopian genre. For example, the dystopian status of narratives such as *Paris in the Twentieth Century* and *Caesar’s Column* depends in part on the ability of trains and airships to suggest the distance between metropolitan center and colonial periphery, spatially defining centers of power and thus making them susceptible to corrupting influences. In “The Machine Stops”, however, dystopia has a “tangible” and clearly delimited perimeter. The barrier is not insinuated but takes shape as the concrete lined walls, air vents and “pneumatic stoppers” that separate the Machine world from the world outside on the surface. Here, these physical limits of the underground realm in which Kuno and Vashti reside are what gives substance to the dystopian construct and allows for the possibility of its subversion.

As with the internal layout of the diegesis, the narrative’s use of a clearly delimited, physical frontier to dystopian space appears to be intimately related to its interest in communication technology. Of course, “The Machine Stops” does not employ a technological substrate in same manner as nineteenth-century dystopian narratives do for the construction of dystopian space. That is, in *Caesar’s Column* and *The Republic of the Future* the technological substrate is what actually constitutes the limits of dystopia, whereas in Forster’s text the dystopian wall is not constructed out of telegraph wires or switching equipment. However, the dichotomy between the subterranean Machine world and the rural world topside is the direct result of the text’s engagement with communication technology. On the other hand, Kuno and Vashti’s underground urban existence is entirely defined by and structured around the “freedom” granted by the Machine’s communication appendages. Indeed, their reliance on this technology is directly reflected in the world’s modular design and uniform internal topography as they help to articulate information and location independence.
On the other hand, the “natural” world beyond the limits of the Machine’s communicative grid contrasts sharply with this artificial and homogeneous design of the subterranean world. As Kuno becomes more successful in making good on his threats for youthful dissent, we learn that there is a world beyond the Machine world. Kuno’s exploration beyond the communication limits of the Machine world reveals a rural setting that is chaotic and multiform. Outside, Kuno cannot see beyond the ridge of a hollow and learns almost nothing about the world external to the Machine, even though he is present in it. So, just as the internal architecture of the Machine world is the urban equivalent of the uniformity offered by communication devices, so the external natural world represents the heterogeneous properties of a system where location is significant for the availability of knowledge.

The existence of a physical and clearly delimited wall in “The Machine Stops”, in other words, is not the straightforward product of the interference of communication technology. Rather, it comes to the fore as the byproduct of the narrative’s focus on user perspective: the idea elicits a juxtaposition between the architecture, which acts as the cognitive mapping of user perspective, with the “real” physical world outside of this technological viewpoint. The on-off, within-without characteristic of this technological presence suggests a critical divide between these two modes of existence that invokes the hard-edged walls of the machine world. Moving between the Machine-internal communicative web and outside world is, in other words, characterized by radical shifts in diegetic representation that go from underground beehive structures with no geographic specificity to a rural setting with unique topographies. The presence of communication technology in “The Machine Stops”, in short, elicits a critical boundary between inclusion and exclusion from the communicative grids, turning dystopia into a hard-edged space.

**Structural Changes: External Structural Failure**

The fourth way in which “The Machine Stops” develops the notion of dystopia concerns its method of subversion. As with earlier dystopian narratives, Forster’s short story uses its isolated and homogeneous ideological space as a target for subversion. However, whereas in nineteenth-century fiction subversion of the dystopian space was initiated predominantly from within the diegesis itself, “The Machine Stops” introduces the idea that the dystopian wall can be breached in order
to invalidate the ideological space. So, while Verne’s Michel and Donnelly’s Gabriel personify internal disruption in *Paris in the Twentieth Century* and *Caesar’s Column* respectively, “The Machine Stops” establishes a novel method of dystopian subversion. Certainly, the text retains the idea of internal structural failure from earlier dystopian narratives. As the title suggests, the Machine is literally in the process of breaking down and losing the integrity of its mechanical and communicative functions. And, as with earlier forms of dystopia, the text puts forward a radical hero to personify the system’s decline. Kuno, like Michel and Gabriel, stages a seditious rebellion that aims to disrupt the stability of the system.

However, alongside these traditional methods of dystopian subversion, “The Machine Stops” introduces the idea that the dystopian ideological space can also be invalidated through the incursion of outside elements. By using the clearly defined outer limits of the Machine world, the text suggests the ways in which the uniformity of the dystopian system can be destabilized through contact with the outside world. Kuno explores the subterranean world and discovers the outer wall. Making use of a neglected airshaft he finds his way out of the Machine-controlled world by unlocking one of the “stoppers” that separate the inside and outside atmospheres. Conveying a sense of contamination, the Machine world first violently expels its atmosphere into the outside world, ejecting Kuno into the non-dystopian space along with it. Air continues to rush out of the dystopian space, intimating the extent of the breach of the dystopian construct. Then, as the two systems are finding an equilibrium, the outward rush begins to slow and air starts to penetrate the dystopian system until the Machine manages to provisionally mend itself and forces Kuno to return to the communication grid. This breach of the system and its subsequent contamination with outside air, mark the beginning of the Machine’s final decline. From here on in, the Machine begins to malfunction more and more frequently until finally even its communication network fails, thus terminating the dystopian space:

The Machine still linked them. Under the seas, beneath the roots of the mountains, ran the wires through which they saw and heard, the enormous eyes and ears that were their heritage, and the hum of many workings clothed their thoughts in one garment of subserviency […]. But there came a day when, without the slightest warning, without any previous hint of feebleness, the entire communication-system broke down, all over the world, and the world, as they understood it, ended. (Foster 153-54)
The Machine’s slow, malignant decrepitude and ultimate failure, then, are directly linked with the disruption of dystopian space by external forces. By staging the Machine’s final decline as directly following the system’s contamination with outside air, the text suggests that the uniformity of the dystopian system can be critically compromised by external pollution. As such, “The Machine Stops” expands the dystopian genre with the idea of external structural failure. By linking the destruction of ideological systems with the failure of the external protection, the narrative introduces a new method of subversion to the language of the dystopian tradition.

Conclusion

Overall, then, “The Machine Stops” marks a shift in dystopian spatial construction away from the topos of empire towards the representation of user perspective. Whereas earlier forms of dystopian narrative constructed their targets for dystopian subversion with the aid of technologies that facilitated imperial space (i.e. the metropolis and transportation devices), Forster’s short story introduced the notion that the user’s spatial relationship to certain technologies can, in itself, yield a dystopian construct. The narrative does so by engaging with the user perspective offered by electrical telecommunication technologies and uses the spatial properties of this viewpoint to construct its dystopian space. And while the basic “rules” for dystopian subversion remain in tact, “The Machine Stops” transforms their specific realization through this use of viewer perspective: the isolation and uniformity of the dystopian space are a representation of the dislocation of knowledge that can be identified in telecommunication’s nil-space.

As a corollary to this representation, diegetic space is condensed; the dystopian construct is delimited by a critical boundary that signifies inclusion in or exclusion from the communication grid; and finally this critical boundary makes possible the sudden, external structural failure of the dystopian construct. In other words, Forster’s short story does not engage with “real” spaces like the metropolis, but instead borrows some of the properties of the viewing position offered by the telegraph and telephone to help organize its diegesis.

By representing user perspective in this way, “The Machine Stops” begins to inscribe itself, and indeed dystopian narrative generally, into a dispositif of communication technology. As explained in the previous chapters, dystopian
narrative and communication devices are uniquely suited to enter into a discursive contract as they express similar spatial poetics. Here, this convergence of technological substrate, user perspective and forms of address can be seen coming together for the first time into a dispositif of telecommunication devices that identifies seemingly heterogeneous, technological and discursive elements into a consistent tradition. Indeed, following on from “The Machine Stops”, dystopian narrative has frequently requisitioned the user perspective of telecommunication technology to help inform its spatial dynamics. Narratives such as Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949), Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451 (1953), and most of the cyberpunk of the 1980s and 90s all make use of the spatial characteristics of communication technology to set up their diegetic space, thus reinforcing the notion that dystopia is a standard narrative response to the possibilities of new communication devices. Moreover, this narrative tradition has served to associate the idea of dystopia closely with these forms of technology and the type of subversion that it entails, moving the concept of dystopia further and further away from its original “meaning” as the locus for imperial subversion.

In the following two chapters I will continue to track the trajectory of the dystopian genre and its role in the dispositif of communication technology. In chapter 4 I will look closely at Orwell’s dystopian classic Nineteen Eighty-Four in order to show that the advent of television entailed a further development of the concept of dystopia and its engagement with communication technology by making the body complicit in ideological control. In chapter 5 I will look towards William Gibson’s Sprawl trilogy as an indication of the effects of computer and Internet technologies on the dystopian tradition. Both of these developments, I will show, continue the direction taken by Forster’s “The Machine Stops” and suggest dystopian spaces that are ever more dependent upon the dislocation of knowledge, the inward movement of information, and the critical boundary of interaction entailed by communication systems.
Chapter 4: Dystopian Bodies

Introduction
George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) is generally read in terms of its ability to interrogate totalitarianism, bureaucracy, “freedom” and the increasingly panoptic characteristics of contemporary society. For example, David Dwan’s 2010 article “Truth and Freedom in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*” investigates notions of truth and freedom in the text in light of Orwell’s political opinions and surroundings. Or, consider Fusco’s monograph *Our Orwell, Right or Left: The Continued Importance of One Writer to the World of Western Politics* which takes stock of the long-lasting influence of Orwellian symbols, such as Big Brother, in contemporary political rhetoric. In this chapter I will present an unconventional approach to Orwell’s dystopian classic. While I do not deny the importance of interpreting *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in terms of totalitarianism and bureaucracy, I propose reading Orwell’s text as a choreography of bodies. By foregrounding the importance of “telescreens”, I will show that the text can be interpreted as a narrative of bodily postures, rituals and performances that prepare the foundations for the narrative’s social spaces. Reading *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in this way reveals that the text is neither “simply” using communication technology as a way to question political systems and systems of government, nor offering naïve criticism of television. Instead, reading *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as an account of body rituals reveals the power of communication devices to construct social spaces—potentially to be used for political gain—as well as the power to intimate the secret pleasure of watching others. In other words, in this chapter I argue that Orwell’s text serves not just as a “warning” against totalitarianism or television but betrays a deep-seated fascination with communication technology and its ability to affect social spaces and the body.

Along the way I will also argue that Orwell’s “body dystopia” is a continuation of the development that began with Forster’s short story “The Machine Stops” (1909), which used telecommunication technologies to suggest a condensation of dystopian space. I propose that following on from Forster’s innovative variation on the genre, dystopian space has continued to contract further as part of the dispositif of communication technology. Especially the emergence of new communication technologies marks an additional reduction of dystopian space. George Orwell’s
classic Nineteen Eighty-Four serves as a watershed event in this respect because of its use of television technology in order to relocate the limits of dystopian space in and around the human body. In this way, Orwell’s text continues the concentration of dystopian space from the traditional cityscape and the phenomenological space in “The Machine Stops” by introducing the even smaller and more intimate space of the body upon which to project ideological compliance and subversion.

In the next section I relate how this new form of dystopia compares to traditional metropolitan dystopian spaces. Further, in the section entitled “Panoptic Surveillance and Control” I explore how Nineteen Eighty-Four makes use of television technology to construct a culture of constant and unverifiable surveillance. Here, I also show how this method of observation makes the body and its performance in space the central object of ideological control in Nineteen Eighty-Four, thus additionally concentrating dystopian space. I corroborate this argument further in the sections “Docile Bodies”, “Resisting Bodies” and “The Body as Spectacle”, by demonstrating how all aspects of the text collectively work to manage characters’ bodies in order to construct “utopian” uniformity and, ultimately, dystopian subversion. Finally, I reflect on Orwell’s intervention in the telecommunication dispositif in the section “Panoptic Surveillance and the Telecommunication Dispositif”, in order to demonstrate the text’s effect on user perspective and dystopian spaces.

Cities and Telescreens

The effect of communication technology on the construction of dystopian space in Nineteen Eighty-Four is perhaps best illustrated by contrasting Orwell’s novel with Zamyatin’s dystopian classic We. Serving as an inspiration for Nineteen Eighty-Four, We lent much its narrative structure, characters and basic plot to Orwell’s later novel. Yet, in spite of the many similarities between the two texts, they render entirely different dystopian spaces in narrative prose. Whereas Zamyatin’s We (1924) uses the long-established method of building dystopia using cityscapes, Nineteen Eighty-Four predominantly structures its diegetic space by carefully controlling characters’ bodies. Key to this methodological difference, however, is the texts’ engagement with technology.
At first glance, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *We* tell the same story. Written in 1921 and first published in English in 1924, Zamyatin’s text serves as a classic example of dystopian literature and inspiration for later dystopian narratives. And indeed, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* takes many of its cues from *We*. Orwell reviewed Zamyatin’s text in 1946 in *Tribune* (Orwell “Freedom and Happiness”), demonstrating the author’s knowledge of the source text. Moreover, the similarities between the two texts are such that there can be little doubt as to Orwell’s inspiration, as Paul Owen has pointed out:

It is a book in which one man, living in a totalitarian society a number of years in the future, gradually finds himself rebelling against the dehumanising forces of an omnipotent, omniscient dictator. Encouraged by a woman who seems to represent the political and sexual freedom of the pre-revolutionary era (and with whom he sleeps in an ancient house that is one of the few manifestations of a former world), he writes down his thoughts of rebellion—perhaps rather imprudently—as a 24-hour clock ticks in his grim, lonely flat. In the end, the system discovers both the man and the woman, and after a period of physical and mental trauma the protagonist discovers he loves the state that has oppressed him throughout, and betrays his fellow rebels. The story is intended as a warning against and a prediction of the natural conclusions of totalitarianism. This is a description of George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which was first published 60 years ago on Monday. But it is also the plot of Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, a Russian novel originally published in English in 1924. (Owen)

In spite of such obvious similarities, however, *We* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* manage to convey entirely different forms of dystopian space. Zamyatin’s *We* clings to traditional dystopian space as the text details a city-state of ideological purity and with colonial aspirations. *We*’s “One State” is described as a completely urban society that seeks to export its logic and ideology by building a spacecraft, the Integral, in a bid to colonize the solar system. The narrative landscape is filled with rigid, rectilinear architecture that expresses the oppressive uniformity of the dominant belief system. Significantly, resistance to this ideology emerges from the fringes of the One State’s empire, from the rural margins of dystopian space. A giant green wall separates the One State from the wilderness and organized resistance outside and it is through devices such as these that Zamyatin’s text mirrors the traditional dystopian narrative of the nineteenth century. Hence, while it is centered on colonization,
urbanity and transportation technology, *We* activates conventional dystopian narrative strategies and subjects.

By way of contrast, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* constructs its dystopian space according to the spatial poetics of contemporary communication devices. Using the futuristic TV-analogous telescreen that occupies entire walls as its omnipresent and primary method of ideological conformity, the text creates a dystopian space that is characterized by the bodily performance of submission to the dominant regime. As a result, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not so much concerned with the preservation and expansion of its urban space as it is with the precise control of the human body in space. So, while *We* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* share characters, settings and devices, Orwell’s novel presents an entirely different kind of dystopian space and, by extension, a different concept of dystopia. This is to say that in Orwell, dystopia is characterized by the increasingly contracting borders of the diegetic space and the projection of ideological submission onto the human form. In the section below I will use Foucault’s theory of panoptic surveillance to help explain how *Nineteen Eighty-Four* manages to embody ideological uniformity and subversion in this manner.

**Panoptic Surveillance and Control**

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Michel Foucault details the emergence of a form of discipline that he identifies as characteristic of Western modernity, which is instrumental to the construction of dystopian space in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. According to Foucault, Western society has, since the Enlightenment, developed a logic of discipline that is structured around notions of observation and internalization. Within this system, claims Foucault, ideology is distributed as a function of surveillance where both the person(s) being watched as well as those watching have unconsciously assimilated these principles. Foucault explains this theory by exploring the prison designs of English jurist and philosopher Jeremy Bentham. Using Bentham’s panoptic prison design as one of many models of post-Enlightenment thinking presented in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault shows how society has become increasingly organized around the idea that one is constantly being observed, and this idea then has proved highly efficient in facilitating the internalization of ideology.
Foucault illustrated his point through Bentham’s prison design which architecturally embodies the major elements of Foucault’s argument, namely observation and internalized discipline. Working from the tenets of utilitarianism, Bentham endeavored to design a prison according to this philosophy’s “fundamental axiom [namely that] it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong” (Bentham 1931: 93). Having theorized the greatest happiness principle in economic terms, Bentham then extended his model for the regulation of monetary flows to prison design. The result was a building design whereby those who were not “beneficial” to society could be incarcerated at the smallest cost, ostensibly securing the happiness of the greatest number in the general populace. This in turn meant that prisons would have to lock up a great number of convicts efficiently without requiring extensive supervision. Bentham’s solution was the panopticon prison: an institution where a single guard could observe (opticon) all (pan) of the inmates incarcerated at any given time without being observed himself. The design consisted of a circular structure which housed the inmates and a central inspection tower for the observer.

Crucial to Bentham’s design was the fact that, while the inmates could at all times be seen, they, in turn, could never be sure if they were being observed. Foucault explains the effect of panoptic architecture in terms of visibility and (un)verifiability:

It is at once too much and too little that the prisoner should be constantly observed by an inspector: too little, for what matters is that he knows himself to be observed; too much, because he has no need in fact of being so. In view of this Bentham laid down the principle that power should be visible and unverifiable. Visible: the inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon. Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at any moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so. (Foucault 1991: 201)

This imbalance of authority concerning the power of observation then, is the key to the panopticon’s “efficient” operation. It ensures that inmates have to assume that they are constantly being watched even if in reality they are not, thus enabling a single guard to maintain discipline. In other words, inmates housed in such a structure must necessarily assume that any digression may be observed and met with retribution. In this way, being observed and following discipline become internalized as second nature because the constant threat of observation undermines any resistance
and establishes the existing power structures as unvarying so that compliance with them becomes instinctive and natural.

Both Bentham and Foucault have pointed out that it is this ability to internalize power relations that is the most important attribute of panoptic architecture. Indeed, Bentham already promoted his prison design with the astute observation that this type of penal complex introduces “a new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind, in a quantity hitherto without example” (Bentham 1995: 29). Foucault expanded on Bentham’s observation by pointing out that the panopticon’s ability to obtain and maintain power is what leads to the automatic functioning of power:

Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates would themselves be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. (Foucault 1991: 201)

Bentham’s panopticon, in short, is the structural representation of the power of observation. It demonstrates that being observed without the ability to verify observation makes possible the internalization of ideology and the “automatic functioning of power” (ibid.).

For Foucault, Bentham’s panopticon served as an illustration of a much larger issue than simply the incarceration of prisoners. Already, Bentham thought of his design outside of the confines of the penal system and envisioned panoptical schools, hospitals and madhouses. Foucault, however, sees in the panopticon much more than efficient, utilitarian architecture and understands Bentham’s design as endemic to post-Enlightenment thinking. Indeed, according to Foucault, contemporary Western society is generally characterized by the logic that informs the functioning of Bentham’s prison. He identifies the emergence of a culture of discipline that underlies and is facilitated by the operation of the central institutions of Western modernity. For example, Foucault extends Bentham’s list of panoptical structures to include factories and buildings designed to house the operations of governmental bureaucracy. In this
way, Foucault proposes the existence of a network of institutions that prescribe rules and appear as “a general horizon of truth” (Foucault 1991: 256). Moreover, these institutions are entrusted with the observation of the individuals and their compliance with these regulations. As a result of this institutional surveillance, claims Foucault, citizens internalize regulations so that discipline is no longer experienced consciously but occurs “naturally”.

In order to emphasize the significance of this shift, Foucault juxtaposes this system of internalized discipline from earlier, medieval practices of discipline. As he shows, the culture of internalized discipline that characterizes Western modernity was preceded by an entirely different set of disciplinary practices. Foucault demonstrates that discipline in the Middle Ages was achieved through sovereignty and the sovereign’s prerogative to inflict corporeal punishment. Public executions, for example, theatrically expressed the sovereign’s power and the individual’s duty to comply or suffer the consequences. This set of punishments, then, is entirely different from the punishment suffered by the prisoner of Bentham’s panopticon. Here, the medieval subject’s punishment is intended to be observed by all so that it can be seen as the exposition of sovereign power, whereas the suffering of the post-Enlightenment prisoner is to be observed from a concealed position in order to facilitate the internalization of ideology. According to Foucault, therefore, the panopticon represents a general move away from earlier, medieval models of sovereign discipline towards a post-Enlightenment culture of observation, internalized ideology and observation.

**Panopticism in Nineteen Eighty-Four**

Although Foucault’s observations on contemporary surveillance culture are substantiated as a theme in modern society by the consistent interest of dystopian narrative in institutionalized observation and discipline. Indeed, dystopian literature has a powerful if not prescient connection with the culture of discipline as described by Foucault. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, given the genre’s interest in ideology and ideological control, the institutionalized discipline that Foucault sees as endemic to post-Enlightenment society frequently also informs dystopian texts. For example, science fiction classics such as *Paris in the Twentieth Century* (1863, 1994), *Caesar’s Column* (1890) and *We* (1924) revolve around the tension between the individual’s
freedoms, and the institutions that seek to motivate their citizens to internalize certain ideologies.

Of course, as previously noted in chapter 1, this theme is not necessarily restricted to dystopian discourse. Indeed, utopian narratives from as far back as More’s *Utopia* (1516) also center on state organizations and their efforts to steer citizens’ behavior. In fact, it is precisely in such utopian narratives that the internalization of ideology and citizens’ unconscious compliance with power structures comes to the fore most dramatically. Nevertheless, dystopian narrative appears to be unique in its representation of panopticism because of its ability to communicate the importance of surveillance in helping to institute discipline while foregrounding the insidious nature of the technologies that make this possible.

Within this tradition of dystopian surveillance narrative, Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* stands as one of the most enduring examples. The text’s omnipresent telescreens and the concept of “Big Brother” have inscribed themselves on the popular imagination, making the narrative synonymous with the notion of persistent and unverifiable technological surveillance and control. Primarily, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* relies on an extrapolation of television technology and culture in order to create its panoptic society. Hence, as Emmanuel Goldstein, the novel’s supposed leader of the resistance movement featured in the text, television acts as a two-way system of communication that simultaneously articulates dominant ideology and monitors citizens’ obedience:

> The invention of print [...] made it easier to manipulate public opinion, and the film and the radio carried the process further. With the development of television, and the technical advance which made it possible to receive and transmit simultaneously on the same instrument, private life came to an end. Every citizen, or at least every citizen important enough to be worth watching, could be kept for twenty-four hours a day under the eyes of the police and in the sound of official propaganda, with all other channels of communication closed. The possibility of enforcing not only complete obedience to the will of the State, but complete uniformity of opinion on all subjects, now existed for the first time. (Orwell 1961: 206)

Moreover, as a result of the observatory power of these telescreens, several objects besides television are presented by *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as components of Big Brother’s panopticon. Concurrent with Foucault’s understanding of panoptic societies, observation becomes all-pervasive again, precisely because it is
unverifiable. So, within this culture of surveillance, even items like coins or posters are imagined to be part of Big Brother’s surreptitious supervision:

He took twenty-five-cent piece out of his pocket. There, too, in tiny clear lettering, the same slogans were inscribed, and on the other face of the coin the head of Big Brother. Even from the coin the eyes pursued you. On coins, on stamps, on the cover of books, on banners, on posters, and on the wrapping of a cigarette packet—everywhere. Always the eyes watching you and the voice enveloping you. Asleep or awake, working or eating, indoors or out of doors, in the bath or in bed—no escape. Nothing was your own except the few cubic centimeters inside your skull. (Orwell 1961: 27)

Orwell’s text, in other words, takes a very literal approach towards representing panoptic control. It enlists several devices that constantly observe characters but since this surveillance is never entirely verifiable the state ideology is forcefully internalized.

Besides this transparent textual puppeteering of surveillance culture anxiety, Orwell’s text also manages to describe panoptic mechanisms in far more interesting and profound ways. Specifically, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* uses panoptic surveillance technologies to help structure its dystopian space in a way that is new to the genre and that further contracts the account of dystopian space initiated by Forster’s “The Machine Stops”. Here, rather than being constructed directly in the narrative through architecture, landscaping, and so on, diegetic space begins to project ideological control unto the human body. By using panoptic surveillance devices, Big Brother carefully controls the human bodies represented in the text and their positions and attitudes in space. In this way, the surveillance potential of the telescreen is mobilized to control dystopian space and to maintain ideological control. Moreover, this vicarious manipulation of dystopian space through the human body further promotes the concentration of ideological projection into smaller spaces. In the sections below then (“Docile Bodies”, “Resisting Bodies” and “Bodies as Spectacle”), I will make a case for reading *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as part of the development of the dystopian genre and the telecommunication dispositif by showing how the text’s engagement with television technology affects dystopian space by manipulating the body.
**Docile Bodies**

First and foremost, the effects of panoptic telecommunication devices in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* on dystopian space can be observed in the bodily control exerted by Big Brother and the Oceania oligarchy. Rather than controlling the geographical limits of its ideological space, and policing its inner consistency, Oceania seeks to affect the dystopian space of the possible world of the text by controlling the human body.

In contrast to traditional dystopian states of nineteenth-century fiction, Oceania does not appear to be concerned with controlling the “physical” ideological space. Both its outer limits as well as its internal geography appear to be unimportant for the maintenance of ideological control. In the case of its outer limits, Oceania does not possess a clearly defined border, but is delineated by its ever-changing relationships to Eastasia and Eurasia. Under the threat of constant war and shifting alliances, these perimeters are presented as being exceedingly fluid. Therefore, vast territories such as Northern Africa may at any one time be part of Oceania, Eastasia or Eurasia, conveying the sense that, for these dystopian states, outer borders are not what help to facilitate ideological control. In fact, it is unclear whether Oceania’s territorial conflicts with Eastasia and Eurasia are “real” or staged and, subsequently, any possible loss or gain of landmass seems to be unimportant for the way in which Oceania is managed. Indeed, Oceania’s wars appear to exist solely as an excuse for the real objective of Big Brother and The Party, namely the complete control of human subjects.

The reticence to employ obvious borders to influence ideological that characterizes the space *Nineteen Eighty-Four*’s possible world, stands in stark contrast to the traditional dystopian form. Exemplary of a narrative that conforms to conventional dystopian devices is Zamyatin’s *We*, which uses a wall to help enforce compliance. Invoking the utopian tradition, the text specifies a solid structure that separates the One State and its ideological experiment from “normal” space. Moreover, in Zamyatin’s One State this wall also serves to reify the state’s power to subject and control those living within the limits of dystopian space. Conformity, in other words, is achieved here partially by structuring dystopia as a place of incarceration from which no escape is possible. So, unlike to Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *We* manages its dystopian space first and foremost by detaining its subjects.
In conjunction with its narrative dissolution of dystopian borders, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* also forsakes, to a substantial degree, the geographical uniformity which characterizes earlier examples of dystopian narrative. Indeed, Orwell’s London and Airstrip One do not seem to conform to the rigid architectural homogeneity that characterizes the cityscapes of *We* and *Caesar’s Column*. Whereas the One State and New York are presented as unyielding vertical structures laid out in grid formation in these latter texts, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*’s dystopian space shows considerably more diversity of land and cityscape. Certainly, Orwell’s London is home to large-scale, drab housing estates that are reminiscent of the cityscapes of early dystopian narratives. However, at the same time, dystopian space in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* consists of several varieties of city and landscapes that help to upset the uniformity found in the orthodox, nineteenth-century dystopian cityscapes. For instance, along with standardized housing flats, Airstrip One also contains war-torn urban ruins, Dickensian proletarian slums, the dazzlingly white pyramids of Minitrue, Minpax, Miniplenty and Minilove, as well as the countryside that serves as recreational space for Party members. As such, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* seems to be far less concerned with projecting ideological uniformity onto geographical features which is, of course, not to say that the diegetic space in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is no longer uniform, but rather that it remains a dystopian space nonetheless.

Orwell does, however, achieve the uniformity typical of dystopian narrative in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, not as a geographical effect but rather by mobilizing a different set of narrative markers to achieve a similar effect. The surrender of immediate control over ideological space that characterizes *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, both in terms of its outer borders as well as of its internal layout, signals how the text is informed by the use of a different method of spatial management. In Orwell’s text, dystopian ideology no longer directly affects the dystopian space but is instead projected onto the human body and its position in space. Here, control does not take shape in incarceration and physical structures that enforce compliance given that ideological space is controlled vicariously through carefully orchestrated bodily performances that facilitate ideological control.

Throughout *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the human body is subjected to forces that aim to create what Foucault has described as the docile body: a disciplined and practiced human form that serves as the physical expression of subjection and
conformity (Foucault 1991: 138). In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault posits that such control over the human form developed as a disciplinary method and substitute to spatial control. That is, Foucault claims that as an alternative to the medieval jurisdictional practices of banishment and quarantine, the body was later also used as a means to express power and control. As Foucault argues, it is not so much the body of the powerful whose representation benefits from this paradigm, but rather the anatomy of the subjected that has to undergo the physical expression of subservience.

Foucault identifies the emergence of such physical discipline and signs of power relations as a gradual process in which practice and utility of the subjected body became evermore interdependent:

> The historical moment of the disciplines was the moment when an art of the human body was born, which was directed not only at the growth of skills, nor at the intensification of its subjection, but at the formation of a relation that in the mechanism itself makes it more obedient as it becomes more useful, and conversely. What was then being formed was a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behaviour. The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and arranges it. A political anatomy, which was also a mechanism of power, was being born; it defined how one may have hold over others’ bodies, not only so that they may do as one whishes, but so that they may operate as one whishes, with the techniques, the speed and efficiency that one determines. (Foucault 1991: 137-38)

The disciplines discussed by Foucault here are those of the military, educational, medical and judicial systems and involve the coordination of bodily submission and physical skill. Power, in this paradigm, is no longer expressed through the inclusion or exclusion of the body from certain physical spaces, but rather through the control exercised over the body and the management of the body’s anatomy in space, and especially through observation. For example, this paradigm coincides with the emergence of modern forms of military training where a soldier’s body was not just required to occupy the field of battle, but also to express allegiance by performing a set of ritualized exercises that required skills other than those needed in battle. Standing at attention, marching and saluting are physical skills that help to codify the soldier’s submission to military doctrine and his or her willingness to fight, rather than postures necessary to commanding forces. Moreover, these performances are be observed by soldiers’ superiors, thus facilitating and insuring the internalization of
The creation of docile bodies, in short, serves to indoctrinate the postures and attitudes of submission and helps to codify power relations.

The management of dystopian space in Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* echoes Foucault’s notion of the “docile body”, in that space is not so much organized directly within borders and architecture as it is managed through the careful control of bodies. Indeed, the life of protagonist Winston Smith in Oceania can be seen as a chain of physical performances that comply with approved state protocols, hence throughout the text, Winston can be seen assuming a set of bodily postures that express his subservience to Oceania. In fact, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* presents *dressage*—i.e. the complete breakdown of natural physical behavior in order to reconstruct and retrain the body in a way that underlines obedience—as the foremost method of ideological control. For example, Winston, like all Party members, is required to perform physical exercises that display not so much his (lack of) physical prowess, but help to signal his submission to Oceania’s government:

“Smith!” screamed the shrewish voice from the telescreen. “6079 Smith W! Yes, you! Bend lower please! You can do better than that! You’re not trying. Lower, please! That’s better, comrade. Now stand at ease, the whole squad, and watch me.” A sudden hot sweat had broken out all over Winston’s body. His face remained completely inscrutable. Never show dismay! Never show resentment! A single flicker of the eye could give you away. He stood watching while the instructress raised her arms above her head and—one could not say gracefully, but with remarkable neatness and efficiency—bent over and tucked the first joint of her fingers under her toes. (Orwell 1961: 36)

Clearly, Winston’s physical performance here is not so much concerned with improving his physical condition as it is with his submission to totalitarianism. Just as soldiers do not benefit from their knowledge of the *Drill and Ceremonies Manual*, so Winston’s early morning physical exercises do not aid him in his duties as a civil servant. Rather, reverberating with both the discourse of military and penitentiary compliance (the calling out of Winston’s number, and the use of words such as “squad” and “instructress”) as well as the modality of their physical expression (assuming poses, standing “at ease”, a neatness and efficiency that bespeak endless drilling), the exercise is meant turn Winston into a docile body. It creates complete ideological control by continuously repeating comparatively simple tasks such as bending and stretching, and requiring subjects to maintain control over their bodies.
right down to their facial expressions. In this way, the exercise helps Oceania’s
government to maintain its grip over the ideological space: the repetition and
enforcement of arbitrary physical exercises creates a “political anatomy” that codifies
the power relations in this particular dystopian space (Foucault 1991: 137-38).

As the above quotation from Nineteen Eighty-Four suggests, the telescreen
plays a pivotal role in establishing this political anatomy. Indeed, Winston’s
performance of physical tasks is continually monitored by the One State through
televisions in order to ensure and enforce his compliance. No matter where Winston
is located in the dystopian space, the unverifiable observation of a telescreen
necessitates his continuous and comprehensive physical performance of submission.
Indeed, as Winston is aware, even a “single flicker of the eye could give you away”
(Orwell 1961: 36). The televisions’s role as a panoptic device is so fundamental, in
fact, that it is mentioned on almost every other page in the novel, conveying the level
of scrutiny that this technology makes available.\textsuperscript{42} The telescreen in Nineteen Eighty-
Four, in other words, facilitates the projection of ideology onto the human form,
while both its omnipresence and system of two-way communication make possible
the ideological control of the dystopian space by turning subjects into docile bodies.
In short, the central issue in Nineteen Eighty-Four is still the construction of
dystopian space, however, rather than managing this space through architecture as
traditional dystopian narratives, Orwell manages the dystopian space in his text
through fictional communication technologies that transfer spatial control and
organization directly to the human body.

\textbf{Resisting Bodies}

In tandem with its use of panoptic telecommunication devices and the management of
bodies to help structure dystopian space, human anatomy and the observation of
anatomy are also portrayed in Nineteen Eighty-Four as a means of undermining the
uniformity of the ideological experiment recounted in the text. That is, just as
Oceania’s government attempts to exert its control by minutely controlling the bodies
of its subjects in dystopian space, so likewise its subjects attempt to offer resistance
through their bodies.

\textsuperscript{42} More precisely, the telescreen is mentioned 108 times in the novel.
Consistent with the general plot devices of dystopian literature, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* presents a number of spaces from which the dominant ideology narrated in the text can be questioned and subverted. The alcove in Winston’s apartment, for example, serves as a small safe haven just out of reach from the watchful eye of the telescreen—or so Winston believes. It is here that Winston first begins to act on his desire to resist Big Brother by writing a diary, to which end he hires the room above the antique shop owned by Mr. Charrington. Supposing that there is no telescreen in his secluded hired room, Winston uses this space to act out his rebellion.

Interestingly, Winston’s mutiny from the oppressive surveillance of Big Brother consists primarily of physical resistance. That is, Winston does not plan to overtake Oceania’s government, or to kill Big Brother in an act of vengeance, but rather, he uses his supposedly safe spaces to perform physical acts that are prohibited by Ingsoc. Predominantly, this entails Winston expressing his sexuality, in part because Oceania’s government views sex as a physical act that is too entangled with desire for it to be controllable and useful in maintaining the ideological space it seeks to manage. As a result, the oligarchy strives to corrupt “natural” sexual desires, turning sex and sexuality into perverted activities that can only be excused under certain conditions. Mobilizing the Junior Anti-Sex League and reinforcing a-sexual activities, Big Brother stamps out sex entirely from Oceania except as an unfortunate and perverse activity that is to be performed only as a “duty to the Party”, that is, for procreational purposes (Orwell 1961: 67). Consequently, once freed from the panoptic surveillance of the telescreen, Winston and Julia lose no time in performing their main act of rebellion, namely sexual intercourse. For them, sex becomes a political act and their main resource for resistance against Ingsoc:

In the old days, he thought, a man looked at a girl’s body and saw that it was desirable, and that was the end of the story. But you could not have pure love or lust nowadays. No emotion was pure, because everything was mixed up with fear and hatred. Their embrace had been a battle, the climax a victory. It was a blow struck against the Party. It was a political act. […] The sexual act, successfully performed, was rebellion. (Orwell 1961: 68, 126)

Reaching sexual climax for recreational purposes, in other words, is Winston and Julia’s rebellion. It constitutes not simply pleasure but also defiance of some of the core principles of Ingsoc, and is therefore a political act. More importantly, sex also
allows Winston and Julia to resist dystopian uniformity. By allowing their bodies to be guided by sexual impulses rather than ideological conformity, Winston and Julia use lovemaking as a means to subvert the ideological space.

In fact, sex is presented as such an important form of resistance Nineteen Eighty-Four, that even sexual disease is conceived as containing liberating potential. Indeed, Winston and Julia celebrate promiscuity and the transmission of sexual disease as acts of rebellion:

His heart leapt. Scores of times she had done it; he wished it had been hundreds—thousands. Anything that hinted at corruption always filled him with a wild hope. Who knew? Perhaps the Party was rotten under the surface, its cult of strenuousness and self-denial simply a sham concealing iniquity. If he could have infected the whole lot of them with leprosy and syphilis, how gladly he would have done so. Anything to rot, weaken, undermine! He pulled her down so that they were kneeling face to face. (Orwell 1961: 125)

Far from being a private, monogamous relationship built on the familiar structures of more pedestrian heterosexual fantasy, Winston and Julia’s affair attains much of its attraction precisely because of its clandestine subordination to Big Brother, and Julia’s sexually indiscriminate relationships that subvert the paradigm of regulation in place in the text. For these characters, the idea that they might attract and or spread a sexually transmittable disease represents the pinnacle of sexual excitement. Again, the rationale behind this sexual “disorder” seems to be that sexuality, as well as proof of that sexuality, concretizes one form of resistance to the uniformity that Oceania demands and dictates. By connecting the prominence of anatomy in Nineteen Eighty-Four’s dystopian space with the idea of spreading corruption, sexual disease is represented as a form of resistance. Moreover, not only does attracting a sexually transmittable disease constitute a tangible breach of Oceania’s bodily discipline, its diffusion also reveals the existence of other resisting bodies. As such, sexual disease holds considerable promise for Winston and Julia: the corruption of theirs and others’ bodies expresses dissent and, through infection, the promise of future rebellious successes against the oligarchy.

Winston also uses his body in other ways to resist the dominant ideology of Oceania which are perhaps less obvious or striking than his sexual exploits. In particular, Winston’s efforts to write contradict the teachings of Big Brother and allow him to assume a physical posture that is not in line with dystopian uniformity.
By day a clerk at the Ministry of Truth who is entrusted with the task of (re)writing history in light of Oceania’s current needs and viewpoints, Winston writes in his diary at night as a form of resistance. He expresses his rebellious thoughts in the small alcove in his apartment that he believes to be unobserved by the telescreen. It is important to note that here again, the act of rebellion is constituted by Winston’s subversion of the regulations for bodily control. Certainly, the nature of what Winston writes is not as important as the fact that he is writing at all, nor is it as important as how this act contradicts his physical conditioning. After all, Winston’s diary does not appear to be a consistent writing effort or an attempt at composing a convincing argument for an audience. Instead, Winston’s diary takes the form of a relatively incoherent stream-of-conscious narrative—and even automatic writing—combined with personal anecdotes and notes on Oceania’s politics and daily running. Moreover, Winston has only a vague notion that he has an audience and is writing “[f]or the future […] for the unborn”, but undertakes no action to ensure the dissemination of his text for future generations (Orwell 1961: 7). Winston’s writing can therefore have no immediate or future political impact, yet at the same time he is acutely aware that, if discovered, possession of the notebook “would be punished by death, or at least by twenty-five years in a forced-labor camp” (Orwell 1961: 6). In short, while the writing in Winston’s diary is in itself insignificant as a form of resistance and lacks rebellious potential, Winston’s actions are still important enough to be subject to severe punishment, signaling the danger that the notebook holds in spite of its innocuous content.

The threat of Winston’s notebook for Big Brother lies in its ability to disrupt the carefully organized choreography of docile bodies. Although relatively harmless in content, the notebook represents the danger of Winston carrying out an action that is not sanctioned under the Party’s regulations of bodily performances. As is the case with sex, writing has been outlawed and perverted by Big Brother as an activity that is harmful to the state. Like sex, writing presents itself as a pursuit that is too entangled with private emotions and can, therefore, potentially undermine the controlled uniformity of Oceania. Moreover, the artisanship involved in writing, along with the hunched posture of writers suggest spurious movement and sleight of hand that bespeak forms creativity capable of exceeding the limits state control. Indeed, unlike the telescreen, writing is an unsupervised medium that presents Big Brother with a
potential breach in uniformity as well as the ability to slip under the radar of state surveillance technologies.

Interestingly, Orwell replaced all writing in Oceania, besides Winston’s rebellious dairy, with substitutes that are less dependent on artistic and secretive bodily performances. For instance, while Winston’s job in Minitrue entails the rewriting of historical records, pen and paper have been replaced with the so-called speakwrite. Resembling an air speaking tube, the device functions as an enigmatic dictation machine, which seemingly transcribes Winston’s speech into print somewhere in the bowels of the Ministry of Truth. As a sanctioned form of “writing”, the speakwrite ensures the uniformity of bodily performance. With this form of writing, row upon row of clerks can be seen dictating the history of the nation in the same manner, and in the same pose. In this way, writing begins to resemble either a form of synchronized sport or dance, or assembly line factory labor. Either way, each movement—unpacking an order from pneumatic post, holding the speakwrite’s mouthpiece—is part of a larger organization of movements that work in unison to form a collective performance. As such, the speakwrite transforms writing from a private enterprise where the individual body performs in isolation and in an unsystematic manner, to a collective and choreographed performance on an industrial scale. In the Ministry of Truth, each action by each clerk emerges as part of a larger performance of uniformity where not just the content of what is written concurs with the teachings of Ingsoc, but also the act itself falls in with Big Brother’s aim to control his subjects’ bodies. At the same time, the speakwrite enables the verification of the content of the text written. And, as the transformation from spoken text to written word is entirely enigmatic, all clerks have to assume that their “creative” output is monitored, adding to the general panoptic surveillance and, ultimately, to the continuous coercion of their bodies in the dystopian space this fictional world.

Julia’s profession, too, entails the corruption of the creativity and artisanship of writing. Julia is employed, ironically enough, in Minitrue’s fiction department. However, rather than actually writing novels or television programs, she merely operates the machine that is used to write fiction. Again, the image that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* projects of Julia’s writing job is one of conveyer belt production and its associated monotonous physical performance. For example, after seeing Julia with her
arm in a sling, Winston immediately deduces that she must have had an accident on the work floor:

As she came nearer he saw that her right arm was in a sling, not noticeable at a distance, because it was the same color as her overalls. Probably she had crushed her hand while swinging round one of the big kaleidoscopes on which plots of novels were “roughed in”. It was a common accident in the Fiction Department. (Orwell 1961: 105)

Here, the mention of drab overalls, machines capable of crushing limbs and large fiction-writing contraptions invoke the idea of a factory floor with poor working conditions. More importantly, these features of the text suggest the collective performance of factory “hands”, working as single body towards the production of ideological conformity and propaganda. Certainly, it seems to be no accident that the literature that serves to instruct Oceania’s citizens is not produced by individuals but has been produced by mechanical means and processes whereby the individual acts as a cog in a wheel. Again, the idea here is to make the creative process subordinant to the state’s need to control ideological space and human anatomy. As a result, writing has been turned into a process that revolves first and foremost around the physical performance of the individual in a larger choreography of bodies and a state technology for monitoring that performance.

As a narrative entity and fictional possible world then, Nineteen Eighty-Four presents readers with a dystopian space wherein bodies not only serve to express uniformity, but where resistance to this uniformity also takes form through human anatomy. Just as dystopia’s characteristics are expressed in the docile bodies of the Party members, so too Winston and Julia’s acts of rebellion find expression in their physical performances. Predominantly, this resistance takes the form of sexual intercourse and indeed, rather than planning an uprising against Big Brother or seeking to escape from Oceania, Winston and Julia have intercourse as a way to “cheat” the system and to escape the relentless bodily control demanded by the dystopian environment. Equally, however, smaller bodily actions may be interpreted as resistance to Oceania’s attempt to create docile bodies. Winston’s writing by hand, for instance, undermines the factory-style writing that state demands. In this way, Winston’s body subverts the mass-produced, mass-synchronized choreography that writing has become due to Oceania’s drive to control and uniformity, producing
instead a performance that is unique, private and which does not conform to Ingsoc rigid and dogmatic standards. Resistance in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, in short, entails breaking with Oceania’s enforcement of bodily control in order to create resisting bodies.

**The Body as Spectacle**

While the telescreen forms the primary means of controlling the body and, by extension, the dystopian space of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the telescreen is not the sole form of ideological control in Airstrip One. Oceania’s government also maintains its iron grip by threatening its subjects with bodily harm. Forced labor and execution are mentioned at various times as “solutions” to dissent against the Party and its Ingsoc ideology. For example, Winston is reminded of the necessity to maintain his perfect composure in an encounter with his neighbors’ children so that he may avoid such “solutions”:

> Winston raised his hands above his head, but with an uneasy feeling, so vicious was the boy’s demeanor, that it was not altogether a game. “You’re a traitor!” yelled the boy. “You’re a thought-criminal! You’re a Eurasian spy! I’ll shoot you, I’ll vaporize you, I’ll send you to the salt mines!” (Orwell 1961: 23)

Here, the boy’s “game” details Oceania’s additional method of ensuring ideological uniformity, namely the threat of bodily harm. Of course, this is precisely what later transpires as Winston is arrested and sent to the Ministry of Love to be extensively tortured for his physical transgressions. Winston’s neighbor, too, is later incarcerated and tortured in Minilove after having been denounced by his own children as a thought-criminal. As well as precisely controlling the body’s position in space, in short, Oceania also manages the ideological space by threatening to harm the body should its compliance to the dominant order be anything less than perfect.

Initially, this aspect of Oceania’s rule appears to be at odds with the careful training of docile bodies that forms the mainstay the state’s ideological control. After all, whereas the subdued performance of carefully designed physical exercises provides the primary means of controlling the ideological space, Oceania’s punishment for failing to comply with this political system appears to use the body as a site of exclusion. In other words, failure to perform correctly under the watchful eye
of the telescreen results in exclusion from the social body through banishment or torture. In this way, the text simultaneously proposes two different modalities of power to deal with the human body. On the one hand, Oceania relies on the body to be compliant and to assume positions which make it part of a collective political identity allowing for the internalization of ideology. On the other hand, Oceania seems to denounce the body by excommunicating it or putting it up for spectacular destruction.

In this way, the text simultaneously presents the body as something to be trained (i.e. the perfection of meaningless bodily performances that can be observed and which help to internalize ideology) and something to be amputated from the social body (i.e. through banishment or public execution). As Foucault pointed out, these are two different modalities which have been frequently mobilized as a method for dealing with the human form, and as such, these modalities represent two different logical conceptions of power relations. The later modality expresses a medieval concept of sovereign power that targets the body specifically for penal repression and makes it a projection screen for public spectacle and a means of demonstrating force. In the former, post-Enlightenment mode, however, punishment was the hidden part of the penal process in which the body acts merely as instrument to deprive the individual of rights (Foucault 1991: 10-11). The difference between pre and post-Enlightenment punitive practices then, is that one practice sees the body as the receptor of the punishment, whereas the other understands the body as the medium for a punishment that ultimately targets the mind. Interestingly enough, Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four appears to make use of these somewhat contradictory logics simultaneously. In its guise as panoptic power Oceania controls bodies in order to control minds, whereas its reliance on banishment and torture give the government its sovereign aspect.

I want to suggest that this apparent friction in Oceania’s different uses of the human body can be resolved by understanding their common goal. I propose that in all of these cases, what is at stake is always the precise control of the human body and the internalization of the ideology that it facilitates. So, even in the case of public executions, Big Brother’s cause is served not because the spectacle ceremonially articulates the power of the oligarchy by hurting and destroying. Although the spectacular, cautionary display of power certainly seems in general to be the principle
that informs ceremonial, corporeal punishment, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* uses such authoritative retribution instead as an extension of its surveillance culture. Here, public execution and banishment are conceived as part the Big Brother’s continuous and unverifiable observation of the human form. Their function is, therefore, not to make pain and suffering visible, but to establish extreme forms of control over the body that help to maintain the structure of dystopian space as represented in the text.

So, although the depiction of Oceania’s public executions is, on the surface, presented as popular entertainment, the real purpose of such punishment comes to the fore in the text’s representation of its immediate, physical effects. At stake in these descriptions is, again, the performance of the convict’s body, its ability to act as prescribed, as well as the close observation of this performance. For example, Winston’s colleague at Minitrue Syme describes a public execution he has witnessed in terms of body of the condemned and its “performance” of death:

“It was a good hanging,” said Syme reminiscently. “I think it spoils it when they tie their feet together. I like to see them kicking. And above all, at the end, the tongue sticking right out, and blue—a quite bright blue. That’s the detail that appeals to me.” (Orwell 1961: 49-50)

Syme’s “aesthetic” appreciation of the condemned’s body and its physical performance during execution signals the true “intent” of public, punitive spectacle in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Clearly, these executions are not simply there to express the sovereign power of the oligarchy. Rather, they also serve as an extension of Oceania’s panoptic surveillance culture. Here, Oceania’s power to influence the body can be seen to extend into the moment of death by offering up a subject’s body as a component in a carefully orchestrated ritual, ready to be observed.

Even “private” moments of such corporal suffering are imagined as extensions of Oceania’s surveillance culture in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Winston’s extensive torture in the Ministry of Love, for example, is also part of the complex of observation and bodily performance that Big Brother uses to structure dystopian space. Although Winston’s torture initially appears a rare moment of private anguish, his responses to physical abuse are in fact closely monitored by telescreen. Indeed, his transgressions are closely observed and immediately corrected in order to ensure that he responds “correctly” to physical abuse and that his body adopts/assumes the correct pose:
Winston covered his face with his hands. “Smith!” yelled the voice from the telescreen. “6079 Smith W!” Uncover your face. No faces covered in the cells.” Winston uncovered his face. (Orwell 1961: 234)

As with the spectacle of public executions, then, individual torture also functions as an extension of Oceania’s cult of bodily control. All eyes are continually on the human form and monitor its performance in preordained but otherwise meaningless rituals that symbolize power and make it appear as instinctive.

In this way, these performances are not incongruent with the dominant panoptic culture in Nineteen Eighty-Four. Although public execution, torture and banishment appear to contradict the quiet compliance imposed by the culture of surreptitious surveillance, these different modes of observing the body all work towards the body’s compliance with preordained poses and movements. Oceania, in short, manages to extend its control of the dystopian body to the limits of its existence so that, even in death, the body is still observed and continues to perform in accordance with the discipline of dystopian ideology.

Panoptic Surveillance and the Telecommunication Dispositif
Orwell’s intervention in dystopian narrative has had a lasting influence on the telecommunication dispositif and on the concept of dystopian space. Not only did Nineteen Eighty-Four popularize the idea that telecommunication devices could be used to control dystopian spaces, the novel also continued the logic of “The Machine Stops” by suggesting a much smaller object of ideological control, and by contracting the limits of dystopia. Certainly, the quotidian quality of Big Brother and the telescreen are testaments to the enduring qualities of Orwell’s dystopian ideas.

The effects of Orwell’s panoptic communication devices on dystopian space are all the more remarkable in light of the genre’s history. Indeed, observation was an important theme in this type of literature right from its beginnings. Certainly, the idea of forceful uniformity always elicited a sense of malevolent, watchful forces, especially at times when this uniformity came under threat. In fact, Orwell’s direct inspiration for Nineteen Eighty-Four already articulates this obsession with observation and surveillance. For example, in Zamyatin’s We the walls of buildings are transparent so that the people inside can be watched at all times.
Yet, in spite of these similarities, *We* presents an entirely different dystopian space than Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. This difference resides at least in part in the consideration that while *We* is also concerned with observation, its surveillance methods at no point become panoptic, in the sense that they do not rely upon the unverifiability of observation. That is, while the characters in *We* are observed all the time, they can draw the blinds on their transparent walls and be confident of their privacy. Moreover, the glass walls of the One State allow citizens to gaze back at their observers. Consequently, although surveillance is pervasive in *We* and creates an uncomfortable, oppressive atmosphere, it is also verifiable and, therefore, can be circumvented. As a result, *We* is able to continue to project ideological conformity as well as subversion onto the traditional cityscape. So, just as glass walls are the architectural equivalent of the One State’s attempt to control its citizens through observation, the city’s high rise structures and grid layout effectively articulate the rigidness and uniformity of its ideology. Moreover, dystopian subversion also continues to find architectural outlets in *We* as the text presents non-transparent buildings and cracks in the One State’s outer wall as sites of opposition.

Contrary to the example of *We* just outlined, the surveillance technology of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* demands an entirely different projection of state forces and structures of power. Although the text continues to make some use of the architecture trope to manage its dystopian space, the presence of the telescreen necessitates a different strategy as well. The reason behind this need is the panoptic aspect of the technology given that the telescreen is not simply a means of observation, it is a means of observation that is *unverifiable*. So, whereas the glass walls in *We* allow for the observer to verify observation, the glare of the telescreen in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* denies such knowledge. And, as Foucault pointed out and Bentham before him claimed, it is precisely the impossibility of verifying an observing presence that makes panoptic structures so very effective in promoting the internalization of ideology rather than its enforcement. In this way, maintaining a dystopian space is no longer a function of architectural conformity, but rather, it becomes an effort to orchestrate that which best betrays any failure of the internalization of ideology: the body. Consequently, Orwell’s telescreen intervenes in the dystopian tradition by putting forward the body and its performance as a structural element of dystopian space.
The effect of Orwell’s intervention on the dystopian genre is perhaps best gauged by the popularity of this notion of unverifiable observation in popular. Indeed, the telescreen and Big Brother have become synonymous with the idea of malevolent surveillance technologies and the guilty pleasure of secretively and voyeuristically watching others. For example, “reality” television shows capitalize on common knowledge of Orwell’s text and its particular brand of dystopia by using the technology that inspired it to provide the panoptic pleasure of watching others while they cannot see their observers. In doing so, such entertainment not only provides proof of the lasting influence of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* on the notion of dystopia and television technology, it also extends the novel’s focus on the body and its performativity as integral elements in panoptic surveillance.

Similarly, as David Lyon points out, Orwell’s dystopia also has had a lasting influence on academia. In fact, early surveillance studies, “dating from the 1970s and 1980s, used not Foucault but Orwell as its model” (Lyon 11-12). Indeed, as Lyon explains, “[w]ork done in political and sociological analysis was frequently framed with the idea of a ‘total surveillance’ state or society derived from the *Nineteen Eighty-Four* scenario” (ibid.). In this way, Orwell’s text can be understood not just as a narrative about surveillance technology, but is also mobilized as a model for exploring contemporary surveillance culture. Certainly, in conjunction with Foucault’s concept of the panoptic surveillance, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has been instrumental in describing and understanding the pervasive nature of modern surveillance methods, the logic of “total surveillance” that underlies such technologies, as well as the internalization of surveillance culture.

Orwell’s dystopian classic, in short, not only articulates some of the fears that television technology has inspired. Although it certainly is very adept at showing the anxiety of seeing and not seeing that the television screen invokes, it has also inscribed itself into the telecommunication dispositif. In this way, the panoptic qualities that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* ascribes to the television have become part of telecommunication’s dispositif. Moreover, the narrative, as a result of these developments, provides a new perspective on dystopian spaces, positioning the body as the projection of ideological control. In doing so it also further develops the dystopian genre itself. By introducing the body as a credible site for ideological
control and subversion, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* continues the trend of constructing smaller dystopian spaces under the influence of communication technologies.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have continued to track the development of the dystopian genre and the telecommunication *dispositif*. In previous chapters I argued that dystopia is a literary genre that revolves around spatial concepts of isolation and uniformity and their subversion, and that these spatial poetics overlap to a considerable extent with the user perspective of telecommunication devices. I also demonstrated that E.M. Forster’s short story “The Machine Stops” for the first time mixed the spatial concepts of dystopian literature with the spatial concerns activated by developments in telecommunication. The result of this combination, I argued, was a condensation of dystopian space that concentrated wide-ranging cityscapes to narrow phenomenological spaces that extend no further than what can be seen and heard.

In the present chapter I proposed that George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* continues this development by introducing the theme of panoptic surveillance technology. Through the text’s engagement with television technology, I argued, the body emerged as a reliable site for ideological control and its subversion. I used several examples to show how Orwell’s text mobilizes panoptic surveillance to force citizens’ bodies to perform a set of postures and positions in space that articulate submission to dominant ideology. In this way, I argued, dystopianism is expressed not as a set of architectural guidelines or as a phenomenological space, but as a choreography of bodies that obey a collection of arbitrary rules of movement. I also showed how resistance to prevailing beliefs in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is acted out by allowing the body to assume positions and poses in space that are ordinarily prohibited. The result of these choreographies, I argued, is the centripetal contraction of the notion of dystopia, shrinking dystopian space further to the space the body occupies.
Chapter 5: Dystopian Singularities

Introduction
The present chapter continues the analysis of the dystopian genre, its relationship to communication devices, and its historical development. Here I argue that the centripetal contraction of dystopian space that was begun by E.M. Forster’s “The Machine Stops” (1909) and continued by Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949), reaches spatial singularity in the cyberpunk fiction of the 1980s. Through a close reading of William Gibson’s Sprawl trilogy (i.e. Neuromancer (1984), Count Zero (1986), Mona Lisa Overdrive (1988)), I demonstrate that the thoroughgoing dislocation of knowledge from space, as promised by computer systems and Internet switching technologies, creates the dystopian space of infinite density and smallness represented in Gibson’s fiction. Moreover, I show that this implosion of dystopian space has important repercussions for the concept of dystopia itself.

It is customary in critical literature on Gibson’s Sprawl trilogy, and especially on Neuromancer, to approach this form of dystopian space from the perspective of the posthuman and the postmodern. For example, in “Space Construction as Cultural Practice: Reading William Gibson’s Neuromancer with Respect to Postmodern Concepts of Space” Doreen Hartmann has recently argued in favor of using postmodern concepts of space to make sense of Gibson’s aesthetic representation of virtual spaces. Similarly, William S. Haney uses Neuromancer to investigate some of the possible dangers of posthuman body/machine symbiosis in Cyberculture, Cyborgs and Science Fiction: Consciousness and the Posthuman. In this chapter I make use of the possibilities offered by such postmodern/posthuman readings to show the importance of Gibson’s work in the development of the dystopian genre and telecommunication dispositif. However, I also extend these readings by showing how the postmodern and posthuman characteristics of Gibson’s fiction directly interrogate earlier forms of dystopian space and replaces these with a spatial singularity.

I begin my analysis of this latest stage in the development of the dystopian genre by examining the idea of “technological singularity”. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, the implosion of dystopian space is intimately related to a recurrent idea in science fiction of the latter half of the twentieth century, namely technological singularity. This concept entails the radical acceleration of evolution by technological
means and is represented as an “event horizon” in historical processes. In connection with these observations, I forward the idea that this concept of technological singularity does not just represent a singular moment in time but also a singular space. The idea of technological singularity is dependent on computer and Internet technologies and I argue that the thoroughgoing sense of knowledge dislocation associated with these technologies makes the idea of technological singularity also a spatially transformative processes that gives rise to spatial singularity in cyberpunk fiction.

Moreover, I demonstrate that, in effect, this spatial singularity represents an implosion of dystopian space and begins to deconstruct the concept of dystopia itself. I show how cyberspace interacts with and deconstructs earlier forms of dystopian space—i.e. the metropolis, phenomenological space and the body—and begins to dismantle the notion of dystopia itself. By dismantling technological singularity as a narrative trope, spatial representation and a dystopian flavor in this way, I will complete my exposition of the dystopian genre as a tradition of narrative spatial representation and of the role dystopian narrative plays in the telecommunication dispositif.

In the sections “Technological Singularity” and “Technological Singularity as Spatial Singularity”, I first explore the idea of technological singularity as well as its effect on notions of space. In “Cyberspace as Singularity”, I will then mobilize these concepts to show how cyberspace emerges as a spatial singularity and a particular kind of dystopia using Gibson’s Sprawl Trilogy as an example. In the sections “The Postmodern Architecture of Cyberspace”, “Jacking in” and “Posthuman Bodies”, I explore how cyberspace reifies its implosion of dystopian space by deconstructing earlier forms of dystopia. Finally, I will reflect on the significance of these new spatial paradigms for the dystopian genre in the section “Critical Dystopias?”.

Technological Singularity

It is not my objective to provide an accurate description of the concept of singularity as it is used in some of the natural sciences. Rather, it is my aim to explore the concept of singularity as it emerges in, for example, science fiction and futurology.

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43 For example, in Mathematics, “singularity” can be used to refer to an object that cannot be defined accurately, such as an infinite quantity.
namely as the idea that humanity is progressing technologically at an exponential rate and that this progress will, at some point in time, become overwhelming. It is also not my intention to argue for or against the plausibility of technological singularity. While pundits like Vernor Vinge and Ray Kurzweil are enamored with the idea of exponential and runaway human evolution, philosophers like Daniel Dennett maintain a more critical perspective. Here again, however, it is not my intention to speak out either in favor of or against the idea of technological progress.

For my part, the notion of technological singularity presents itself as an instance of future gazing that articulates how technological development is interpreted. Certainly, regardless of its scientific merits and prescient accuracy, the idea of singularity is an interesting object for cultural analysis. For, not only does it express a firm belief in the Enlightenment ideal of progress through science, it also gives rise to a whole new body of dystopian fictional worlds that attempt to reconcile the possibilities of the posthuman and postmodern with a sense of loss of humanity and certainty. This friction between technological singularity as a plausible, desirable, and even inevitable trajectory on the one hand, and singularity as a fanciful and unwelcome daydream on the other, presents a range of possible responses to technological innovation and the difficulties of coming to terms with such developments. For the present purpose, then, singularity is not a useful concept because it can be supported or critiqued, but rather because it acts as a litmus test of technological change and the narrative responses it provokes.

This idea of exponential growth in human development is fundamentally linked to the emergence of computer networks. Indeed, concepts of singularity and the posthuman are generally fueled by a faith in Internet switching technologies and Moore’s Law, making technological singularity an important consideration in relation to the study of the emergent communication technologies in the mid and late twentieth century. Indeed, technological singularity appears to be one of the narrative responses to this material substrate and its associated user perspectives in a telecommunication dispositif. It is my argument, however, that technological singularity is actually part of a larger set of narrative responses, rather than one particular instance of one specific dispositif, and instead falls under the same family of dystopian responses that I have described in chapters 3 and 4. However, before I explore the relationship between technological singularity and dystopian narrative I
will, in this section, first explore the relationship between networking technology and technological singularity. In “Spatial Singularity” I will then use the exposition of this relationship to show that technological singularity does not just entail radical shifts in temporal paradigms, but also performs spatial functions that are in line with dystopian narrative strategies.

In his 1993 paper “What is a Singularity?”, Vernor Vinge provides a comprehensive overview of the idea of singularity and its relationship to communication devices. Although Vinge was by no means the first to articulate the notion of exponential growth of human intelligence and physical capabilities,44 his background as science fiction author, computer scientist and emeritus professor of Mathematics gave him a broad overview of the subject, and his paper still counts as a standard point of departure for any discussion on technological singularity. It is important to note that Vinge is a firm believer in the coming of the singularity, and that he understands this moment to be a predominantly good thing and, therefore, couches his investigation of technological singularity in rather favorable language. Nevertheless, Vinge’s article provides a good overview of the rationale behind a belief in technological singularity, as well as the specific technologies that are envisaged as setting about such radical change.

Vinge begins his argument by proposing that singularity is inevitable and corollary to an increased rate of technological development. Echoing Darwinian logic and Enlightenment notions of progress, Vinge proposes that advances in technology will lead to a greater-than-human intelligence that presents a radical break with “normal” evolutionary timescales:

Within thirty years, we will have the technological means to create superhuman intelligence. Shortly after, the human era will be ended. […] The acceleration of technological progress has been the central feature of this century. I argue in this paper that we are on the edge of change comparable to the rise of human life on Earth. The precise cause of this change is the imminent creation by technology of entities with greater than human intelligence. (Vinge)

44 For example, Alan Turing already voiced his concern for smarter-than-man thinking machines in a way that seems concurrent with later singularity discourse, although certainly less optimistic. See http://philmat.oxfordjournals.org/content/4/3/256.full.pdf. However, to my knowledge, Vernor Vinge is the first to coin the term “singularity” in reference to such notions of radical and machine-mediated forms of extreme and posthuman intelligence.
The basic premises of Vinge’s argument, then, are a belief in evolutionary theory and a conviction that technology is able to intervene in and accelerate processes that are normally understood to be hereditary and require eons to take effect. The outcome of this development, according to Vinge, is a singular moment when a greater-than-human intelligence emerges that brings about the end of the “human era” (ibid.).

Singularity proponent Ray Kurzweil takes Vinge’s logic one step further and proposes that all evolution is in fact progressing along an exponential time scale. Referring to, for example, Carl Sagan’s various histories of the cosmos, Kurzweil identifies a number of what he calls “key events” (e.g. the Big Bang, the formation of the Earth, the formation of life of Earth, etc.) and shows how these events occur at increasingly shorter intervals from previous events.

Kurzweil then, believes that all “evolution”, including genetic evolution, but also the physical origins of the universe, are “progressing” along a logarithmic scale. Moreover, for Kurzweil, technology is simply a “continuation of evolution by other
means” that fits in “naturally” with his view of evolution as a universal force (Kurzweil 1999: 16). Thus, Kurzweil identifies technology as an extension of the same exponential forces of change as genetic evolution. In this way, Kurzweil not only understands the passing of time and the occurrence of “major events” as occurring exponentially, but also sees technology, and especially computer and communication technology, as both part and proof of this concept.

Fig. 19: Kurzweil represents technological progress against a background of cosmological time and natural evolution.


The idea of technological singularity, in short, presupposes that technological “progress” exists and presumes this progress occurs at an exponential rate. Whether
this “progress” is chiefly envisioned as an aspect of the development of technology as with Vinge, or understood as informing the passing of time in general as with Kurzweil, the outcome of this development is universally conceived to be a singularity: the birth of greater-than-human intelligence and a radically new, key event.

Vinge continues his exposition of the singularity by identifying the technologies that are commonly envisioned to be the catalyst of such radical evolutionary paradigm shifts. As being capable of bringing about singularity, Vinge lists four distinct developments:

There are several means by which science may achieve this breakthrough (and this is another reason for having confidence that the event will occur):

- There may be developed computers that are “awake” and superhumanly intelligent. (To date, there has been much controversy as to whether we can create human equivalence in a machine. But if the answer is “yes, we can”, then there is little doubt that beings more intelligent can be constructed shortly thereafter.)
- Large computer networks (and their associated users) may “wake up” as a superhumanly intelligent entity.
- Computer/human interfaces may become so intimate that users may reasonably be considered superhumanly intelligent.
- Biological science may provide means to improve natural human intellect. (Vinge)

As Vinge’s list indicates, computer communication technologies are seen as major facilitators in the realization of singularity. Certainly, biology is granted some agency in bringing about the posthuman era, but even here the ability of biology to affect change is conceptualized predominantly as the result of the body’s ability to interact with computational devices. The idea of singularity, then, is intricately interwoven with the rise of computers and computer networks.

It is important to recognize the ideas that help facilitate Vinge’s postulate that computers act as catalysts of singularity. According to Vinge, posthumanity may be achieved as computer communication networks—or intra-computer communication networks—become so powerful that they simply “wake up” (Vinge). Indeed, Vinge identifies networked communication as both the cause and central characteristic of the posthuman era:
If networking is widespread enough (into ubiquitous embedded systems), it may seem as if our artifacts as a whole had suddenly wakened. […] The post-Singularity world will involve extremely high-bandwidth networking. A central feature of strongly superhuman entities will likely be their ability to communicate at variable bandwidths, including ones far higher than speech or written messages. What happens when pieces of ego can be copied and merged, when the size of a selfawareness can grow or shrink to fit the nature of the problems under consideration? These are essential features of strong superhumanity and the Singularity. Thinking about them, one begins to feel how essentially strange and different the Post-Human era will be. (Vinge)

Of course, there is nothing about computing and communications devices to suggest that massive quantities of such hardware will indeed spontaneously give rise to consciousness, much less a consciousness with greater-than-human intelligence, as even hard-core materialist philosopher Daniel Dennett has pointed out (Dennett 27-33). Although in theory it is possible to simulate the behavior of neurons using computers, such a simulation would always require the intervention of a programmer to give instructions. Certainly, computer CPUs and memory, as well as Internet switches could, even if they were functionally similar to brain matter—which they are not—never run a “mind program” unless they were preprogrammed to do so, or given a similar set of evolutionary stimuli as protein-based brains that would “urge” them to evolve such an algorithm (Dennett 209-26). It seems impossible, in short, for mind-stuff, to materialize spontaneously out of networked hardware without additional incentives.

Nevertheless, the idea that computer and communications hardware may spontaneously, “magically” awaken and cause a revolution is clearly alluring to those theorizing technological development and singularity. Indeed, for Vinge, the spontaneous emergence of a technological consciousness through networked computers is the main reason for stipulating the possibility of singularity in the first place. Presumably, this promise of computer networks stems from the seeming, superficial similarities between computer hardware and brain matter. Apparently, it is the idea of massively networked transistors and microchips that is reminiscent of neurons and the brain, and compels Vinge and others to make this analogy. In this way, the idea of the Internet’s electrically interconnected nodes, as well as their immense quantity, suggests the concept of emergent intelligence.

Regardless of the (im)possibility of technological singularity, however, it is clear that the idea of exponential technological development and the emergence of
greater-than-human intelligence are dependent on very specific types of technology. Computers and Internet communication technologies are consistently identified as the primary catalysts of such development. In the next section I will show that, because of this dependency on telecommunication devices, technological singularity does not just represent an event horizon in historical progress but that it also performs spatial transformations. Understanding this spatial function of technological singularity will bring to light the relationship between singularity fiction and the dystopian genre.

**Technological Singularity as Spatial Singularity**

At first glance, singularity is solely concerned with the flow of time, and especially with the arrest of the “natural” progress of historical time because of the emergence of greater-than-human intelligence. Space, in other words, initially does not seem to play a part in the formulation of the singularity idea. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that technological singularity equally constitutes a shift in spatial paradigm, as this allows for a better understanding of the concept, as well as more insight into the close relationship between singularity and dystopian, posthuman and postmodern discourses.

It is the dependency of the singularity concept on telecommunication technologies that makes it a spatial concept as well as a temporal one. As already mentioned in chapter 2, Jeff Malpas has pointed out that telecommunications technologies, such as the telegraph and the Internet, in general suggest the idea that location and distance are “contingent constraints on knowledge, rather than as having any essential connection in knowledge as such” (Malpas 109). Therefore, the interaction of singularity discourse with telecommunication technology in general, already suggests the presence of a communicative nil-space where information is available irrespective of the location of both source and destination. In this sense, technological singularity is, a priori, a spatial concept as well.

More importantly, however, the specific relationship between technological singularity and computer and Internet technologies suggests a *radical* dislocation of knowledge from space that removes all spatially “contingent constraints” from knowledge (ibid.). Built on the Transmission Control Protocol and Internet Protocol, nearly all forms of computer network communication, such as the World Wide Web, email and transfer of files, make use of technologies that work to make space as
redundant as possible in both data storage and delivery. For example, the TCP and IP communication protocols prescribe that all data in a computer network must be sent in small, individual packets. Each packet begins with a header that contains the information needed for the data to be delivered correctly. In this way, all TCP/IP packets “know” where they are from, where they are going, and in which order they should be assembled upon delivery to form an exact copy of the original message. Consequently, TCP/IP ensures that data packets can travel completely different routes to their destination and arrive at different times. Packets can even be lost due to the sudden failure of a communication node and can be resent by the source at the request of the receiving node. So, by rerouting data and storing it at multiple locations, Internet technologies are built for spatial redundancy.

Computer networks, then, are less restrained by “real” space than earlier forms of telecommunication, such as the telegraph, telephone and television. In telegraphic networks, for instance, messages are still, to some extent, affected by physical space. For example, the failure of one telegraph line meant that a node in the network was unavailable, which would entail rerouting the message, or possibly render the information unavailable. The notorious fragility of the transatlantic telegraph cable serves as illustration of how physical breakdowns still able disrupted the illusion of the technology’s sovereignty over space in the past. But less critical problems also demonstrate the inability of earlier telecommunication technologies to supply the semblance of complete independence from physical space. Noise in analogue television and landline-telephone communication, for example, rises proportionately with distance, disrupting the illusion that these technologies are able to overcome physical space.

This is, of course, not to say that Internet technologies are entirely immune to such communication failures. Clearly, if enough critical nodes fail, computer networks are still unable to transmit information in spite of their digital, packaged distribution method. Generally speaking, however, TCP/IP is far more capable than the telegraph and the telephone in offering the verisimilitude of an information realm

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45 Some forms of Internet connectivity rely on different protocols such as UDP, which has greater speed than TCP/IP but offers no redundancy. Typically, protocols such as UDP are favored in low-latency applications like streaming or voice applications.

that is entirely independent of “real” space. As a digital, noiseless technology that is able to reroute, restore, resend, and reorder information, computer networks are far more robust and capable of creating the illusion that knowledge is unbound by location.

Technological singularity, then, is not just a concept that describes a temporal event horizon of asymptotic technological progress. It is also a spatial singularity. As the idea of technological singularity depends on computers and communication networks to bootstrap human consciousness and physical capabilities to radical new heights, it relies on the user perspective that such telecommunication technologies put forward to provide the spaces in which these developments can be imagined. Computer networks suggest the radical dislocation of knowledge from space, and thus present an extreme form of nil-space where information is available entirely irrespective of location. In this way, technological singularity also becomes a spatial singularity: a realm that is characterized by an infinite density of information and zero access latency.

It is my contention that the spatial function of technological singularity plays an important role in the dystopian fiction of the latter half of the twentieth century. As I will argue, the user perspective of technological singularity and computer networks allow for the continuation of the contraction of dystopian space that was begun early in the twentieth century. While there are several different fictional renditions of this user perspective, “cyberspace” has become the staple spatial representation of this user perspective. In the following section I will study the cyberpunk fiction of William Gibson as a means of exploring cyberspace as a dystopian space. At the same time I will examine the role of cyberspace in the telecommunication dispositif that I have been charting throughout this thesis.

**Cyberspace as Singularity**

William Gibson’s 1980s cyberpunk marks the first sustained narrative effort to come to terms with the reification of Moore’s Law, the growth of computer networks, and the changing spatial paradigms that these entail. Gibson has, moreover, also provided the dystopian genre with one of its most memorable spaces, cyberspace, which has received both popular and critical acclaim. Gibson’s *Sprawl* trilogy, in particular, has
become ingrained in cultural memory as a standard reference point in relation to dystopia, space and contemporary communication technology. \footnote{Gibson actually introduced the term “cyberspace” in his 1982 short story “Burning Chrome”. It is the 
*Sprawl* trilogy however, and especially *Neuromancer*, that introduced the concept to a larger audience.}

At its core, the *Sprawl* is about technological singularity: the trilogy details the emergence of two great-than-human artificial intelligences, Neuromancer and Wintermute, living in computer networks and who combine to form one far-greater-than-human-intelligence. However, through its exploration of technological singularity, Gibson’s fiction also investigates the spatial function that goes along with such technological evolution, and asserts dystopia as a spatial singularity.

As a consequence of its interest in technological singularity, Gibson’s fiction employs the user perspective of computer and Internet technology to create a fictional space where the emergence of greater-than-human intelligences can be imagined. Consequently, cyberspace is characterized as a function of the thoroughgoing sense of dislocation that comes with TCP/IP technologies. Indeed, the data structures that inhabit cyberspace, while “there”, seem neither to have any real substance or any definite position. Instead, cyberspace is characterized by structures that seem fluid rather than solid, and whose position is never presented as fixed. So, while cyberspace is envisioned as being an information “grid”, characters are never given the coordinates to their destination, having instead to “surf” their way through cyberspace while relying on their “console cowboy” intuition for guidance. Just as in the short story “Burning Chrome” (1982), the dense data constellations of cyberspace represented in the *Sprawl* trilogy actually obfuscate directional cues rather than provide a reliable means of navigation (Gibson 1995: 196-97).

In an interview—tellingly entitled “No Maps for These Territories” (2000)—Gibson explained how he initially had difficulties getting the characters to go from one place to the next in *Neuromancer*. And while Gibson partially attributes his difficulty in this respect to his inexperience as a writer, his solution seems to indicate that some of his difficulties are related to the technology that he attempts to describe as well as to the fluidity that he ascribes to cyberspace. Gibson claims that he moved characters between “locations” by imagining Virtual Reality technology as affording perspectives in cyberspace. This device, claims Gibson, “opened up interesting territory”, but it equally seems to articulate the difficulties inherent to the fictional
navigation of cyberspace (Gibson 2003). Certainly, the need for imaginary computer peripherals to help envision how characters can move about in cyberspace appears to be a clear indication of the amount of effort needed to decode the disorientation associated with cyberspace, and to re-encode it as words on the page. Concurrently, Gibson expends a considerable amount of textual real estate in conveying the sense of disorientation that these user perspectives entail, and in providing clues as to how these console cowboys are able to find their way.

In the same interview, Gibson somewhat apologetically explains that this disorientating aspect of cyberspace could be related to his exposure to computer arcades, and especially to his very limited understanding of what actually occurs on the computer screen (Gibson 2003). Typing away on a traditional typewriter, Gibson had no practical experience with computers and their functions while writing the trilogy, and instead relied on his observations of the local arcade as well as his own children interacting with video game consoles in order to imagine what cyberspace was, and what it looked like. Consequently, it seems reasonable to attribute some of the characteristics of Gibson’s cyberspace to the author’s lack of familiarity with the technology. After all, how should one conceptualize the inside of computers and communication networks without any practical experience? In other words, could the sense of disorientation that cyberspace projects in Gibson’s *Neuromancer* be the result of his lack of technological acumen?

Yet, besides such mundane concerns, Gibson’s notion of cyberspace also seems to be informed by his perception of computers and communication technology. That is, Gibson’s vision is not simply an uninformed fantasy of what computers and computer networks “look like”, but also offers an insightful understanding of the new user perspectives that accompany such technologies and how these might be conceptualized. In particular, Gibson’s cyberspace architecture provides a vivid image of computer networks and their ability to “hide” where information is stored. As TCP/IP technology works to make location redundant, information seems to be divorced from space, making the structures that inhibit cyberspace appear devoid of location: they are libraries of information that is transient, forever deferring the moment when information can be pinned down to one specific location in space. Indeed, in the same interview, Gibson hints at this paradox when he comments that cyberspace “was suggestive of something, but it had no semantive [*sic*] content”
Gibson’s representation of cyberspace, in other words, effectively captures the ability of computer technologies to create the illusion of the disintegration of spatial coordinate systems.

From the perspective of the dystopian genre, cyberspace and its representation of the dislocation of knowledge from space is an important intervention. As with earlier forms of communication technology, the Internet suggests a user perspective that overlaps to a considerable degree with the spatial poetics that characterize utopian and dystopian fiction. Isolated from ordinary Euclidean space and characterized by a homogeneous topography because of the uniform availability of information, the spatial attributes of cyberspace correspond to the two main constituents of utopian and dystopian poetics.

However, cyberspace also expands on the notion of dystopia. Although earlier forms of dystopian space were already concerned with the disorientating user perspectives of telecommunication technologies, cyberspace is able to project a sense of disorientation at a much more fundamental level and to generate a different kind of dystopian space. As already explained, TCP/IP technology is highly effective at suggesting the successful erasure of space as a limiting factor to knowledge. This removal of space as a concern turns cyberspace into a spatial singularity: a point of information of infinite density and compactness. In effect, cyberspace is so dense and so uniform, that it constitutes an implosion of space and a suspension of Euclidean geometry. Cyber “space”, in other words, no longer functions as space, but rather as a spatial singularity of infinite density.

Cyberspace’s singular nature and the accompanying suspension of Euclidian geometry both supports and undermines traditional dystopian narrative strategies. On the one hand, cyberspace appears to operate as an ordinary dystopian construct. It proposes a “utopian” opening diegesis which is isolated and uniform, and which is then subverted through the introduction of sites of opposition. On the other hand, the implosion of the Euclidian space that cyberspace represents obstructs this traditional dystopian device to some extent. As all positions are in the same place at the same time in cyberspace, sites of opposition begin to overlap with sites of ideological conformity. In this way, the implosion of Euclidian space in cyberspace produces the implosion of the concept of dystopia, as structures of ideological conformity and contention occupy the same space.
Gibson’s fiction directly articulates this intrusion of singularity into the dystopian genre. It engages with earlier forms of dystopian space and deconstructs them, while simultaneously citing the dystopian tradition and questioning its system of—spatial—narrative strategies. In the sections “The Postmodern Architecture of Cyberspace”, “Jacking in” and “Posthuman Bodies”, I will explore how cyberspace deconstructs traditional dystopian spaces, namely the metropolis, phenomenological space and the body, respectively. Following on from these observations, I will argue in the section “Critical Dystopia?” that this deconstruction of dystopian spaces, through singularity, results in the deconstruction of traditional notions of dystopia.

The Postmodern Architecture of Cyberspace

The first spatial construct that Gibson’s cyberspace engages with is the conventional metropolitan dystopia. As explained in chapter 3, the metropolis emerged in nineteenth-century fiction as the first dystopian space. Set almost exclusively in New York, Paris and London, early dystopian fiction established the metropolis as a standard dystopian construct. This is, of course, not to suggest that urban areas have no currency in later dystopian narrative. Indeed, as filmic narratives such as Ridley Scott’s Bladerunner (1982), demonstrate that the visual potential of the city continues to elicit dystopian responses in more contemporary contexts, alongside newer dystopian constructs. In spite of these developments, however, the metropolis remains a conventional dystopian space because of its strong association with the emergence of the genre. It is with this conventional dystopia that Gibson’s cyberspace engages by citing some of the urban characteristics of these early dystopian constructs and replacing them with a spatial singularity.

Predominantly, Gibson’s deconstruction of metropolitan dystopia takes place in the realm of architecture. The traditional dystopian metropolis mobilizes modernist architecture to articulate a grand scheme to co-opt space, and to make it part of ideology, using, for example, the verticality of the metropolis to help encode power struggle. Cyberspace cites some of this architectural language by constructing large towers of corporate data as well as by representing extensive, suburban-like grids of information.

Crucially, however, cyberspace’s quotation of modernist architecture is a form of pastiche that is part of its use of postmodern design logic. Cyberspace lets go of
space as something that can be controlled from the top down, or indeed controlled at all. Instead, postmodern cyberpunk dystopias revel in the chaos of the information realm and its dislocation of knowledge from space. This delight can be seen reflected in an architectural language that combines modernist design cues with mathematical grids, video game graphics, MTV music videos and commercials to construct an architecture that is liquid, on the move, transparent, luminous and shadow-like all at the same time. In this way, cyberspace suspends the traditional Euclidean geometries which characterize traditional dystopian space to represent the spatial singularity of the user perspective of Internet technologies. In what follows I will first discuss the importance of modernist architecture in traditional dystopian narrative and then move on to show how cyberpunk comments on this tradition by inserting a particular variety of fictional postmodern architecture into the dystopian genre, in order to create a spatial singularity.

Traditional dystopian narrative is informed by the metropolis. Most of the city’s potential as a dystopian construct, whether in nineteenth-century or more contemporary fiction, appears to be due to its architecture. With its skyscrapers, infrastructure, grid patterns and sprawling urbanity, the metropolis presents itself as the ultimate form of the subjection of space. It is this molding of physical space to help create and articulate social relationships that is useful in the expression of dystopian sentiment. Certainly, as a system of representation, the metropolis’ high-rise structures symbolize power, while the ant-like movements of the pedestrians below bespeak the insignificance of the individual. Because of its domestication of space, then, the metropolis is ideally suited as a setting in which to act out the ideological experiments of dystopian fiction as power and the subversion of power are easily translated into towering urban structures and their spectacular destruction respectively.

Given this straightforward translation of plot devices into architecture and its narrative and architectural functionalism, the metropolis in its role as dystopian space might be labeled a “modernist” device. Here, the shape of the diegetic space is subservient to its narrative function, just as, for example, the Rockefeller center uses “every modernist trick in the book to continue that practice of building monuments that soared ever higher as symbols of corporate power” (Harvey 71). By extension, the descriptions of these dystopian spaces articulate the architectural language of
Modernism *avant la lettre*. These texts portray highly practical spaces with few design cues and in which the only forms of ornamentation turn out to be functional objects such as speaking tubes, food dispensers or restaurant menus, as in Donnelly’s description of a hotel dining room in *Caesar’s Column* (1890):

But as I found myself growing hungry I descended to the dining-room. It is three hundred feet long: a vast multitude were there eating in perfect silence. It is considered bad form to interrupt digestion with speech, as such a practice tends to draw the vital powers, it is said, away from the stomach to the head. Our forefathers were expected to shine in conversation, and be wise and witty while gulping their food between brilliant passages. I sat down at a table to which I was marshaled by a grave and reverend seignior in an imposing uniform. As I took my seat my weight set some machinery in motion. A few feet in front of me suddenly rose out of the table a large upright mirror, or such I took it to be; but instantly there appeared on its surface a grand bill of fare, each article being numbered. (Donnelly)

Here, Donnelly’s text puts great emphasis on the functionality that informs the architecture of a hotel in downtown Manhattan. The imposing space of the dining room is characterized by a design that allows no distractions from the business at hand. Any ornamentation (i.e. the mirror) is quickly revealed to have a functional purpose or efficiently folds away so as to not upset the space’s quiet functionality. Running counter to the stylistic excesses of Victorian and Edwardian architecture, then, these fictional, dystopian architectures avoid all ornamentation in order to focus on function and clarity of form. As such, in both its actual, narrative function, as well as in its imagined architecture, the dystopian metropolis concurs with the modernist design aesthetic that accompanied the emergence of the metropolitan areas that form much of the inspiration for science fiction of that earlier period.

Gibson’s dystopian cyberspace, by contrast, is structured around a postmodern architectural aesthetic. Although its towers of corporate data intime a similar sense of power and monumentalism as the vertical structures of Donnelly’s imaginary New York, their (lack of) orientation in space, as well as their extravagant appearance, create an entirely different kind of dystopian space and aesthetic appeal. Rather than using the “function over form” approach, Gibson creates a diegetic space in the *Sprawl* trilogy which is mostly functionless. That is, while individual structures still perform a representational task (“towers” of data that represent corporate wealth or “ice castles” that symbolize the defenses around these data), these buildings cannot be
seen as “doing” anything as such. So, while the hotel in Donnelly’s New York still performs the actual function of accommodating guests, the towers of data in Gibson’s cyberspace cannot be seen to perform any function whatsoever. They simply “are” as representations of data.

Concurrently, the architecture of Gibson’s cyberspace is characterized by the appearance of rather than by the buildings’ actual functionality. Indeed, most of the narrative real estate in the Sprawl trilogy is invested in the creation of outlandish ornamentation and visual construction for these structures as Gibson characterizes cyberspace by an ostentatious display of colors, shapes and movement:

Case punched for the Swiss banking sector, feeling a wave of exhilaration as cyberspace shivered, blurred, gelled. The Eastern Seaboard Fission Authority was gone, replaced by the cool geometric intricacy of Zurich commercial banking. He punched again for Berne. […] They ascended through lattices of light, levels strobing, a blue flicker. […] Wintermute was a simple cube of white light, that very simplicity suggesting extreme complexity. […] Case punched within four grid points of the cube. Its blank face, towering above him now, began to seethe with faint internal shadows, as though a thousand dancers whirled behind a vast sheet of frosted glass. […] A stippled gray circle formed on the face of the cube. […] The gray area bulged smoothly, became a sphere, and detached itself from the cube. Case felt the edge of the deck sting his palm as he slapped MAX REVERSE. The matrix blurred backwards; they plunged down a twilit shaft of Swiss banks. (Gibson 1986b: 115-16)

Here, Gibson mixes modernist architecture (imposing Swiss banks) and mathematical shapes with a rococo display of data couched in the visual language of video games (strobing levels) and MTV music videos (blurring, gelled, seething shadows like a thousand dancers), thus removing dystopian space ever further from the dark, grey functionalism that informs fictional nineteenth-century metropolitan dystopias.

Perhaps even more importantly, the various architectural design styles of cyberspace bespeak an interest in the eclecticism that underlies postmodern culture. As Lyotard has claimed, “[e]clecticism is the degree zero of contemporary general culture”, and Gibson’s cyberspace can be seen to be built up around a similar desire to combine multiple, disparate design languages into a single artifact (Lyotard 76). Part nineteenth-century metropolitan pastiche, part advertisement, part music video, part video game, part fractal landscape and part mathematical grid, cyberspace mixes several design strategies from “high” and “low” culture to arrive at a diverse selection
of styles whose main function appears to be to comment on traditional notions of aesthetic, rather than to create a new kind of “beauty”. Indeed, Gibson’s cyberspace and its citation of various design styles concurs with David Harvey’s conceptualization of postmodern architecture:

In the field of architecture and urban design, I take postmodernism broadly to signify a break with the modernist idea that planning and development should focus on large-scale, metropolitan-wide technologically rational and efficient urban plans, backed by absolutely no-frills architecture (the austere “functionalist” surfaces of “international style” modernism). Postmodernism cultivates, instead, a conception of the urban fabric as necessarily fragmented, a “palimpsest” of past forms superimposed upon each other, and a “collage” of current uses, many of which may be ephemeral. (Harvey 66)

Through its use of postmodern architecture, in short, Gibson’s cyberspace presents a space that is fragmented and disorientating because several superimposed design languages hide the function of its data structures.

It is important to note that, in spite of Gibson’s successful mobilization of postmodern architecture to represent cyberspace, computer and Internet technologies have, at times, also been seen as articulations of some of the principles behind modernist architecture and art. Scott Bukatman, for instance, points towards a 1990 exhibition in the Museum of Modern Art called “Information Art: Diagramming Microchips” which linked contemporary communication technology with modernist aesthetics. In this exhibition, the purely functional design of microprocessors could be seen to echo some of the design principles of modernism, as Bukatman explains:

Sponsored by INTEL, the show presented enlargements of computer-produced diagrams of an aerial view of urban sprawl (this resemblance is no coincidence—the chip, like the city, is designed for ease of circulation, constant flow, and a dense maximization of available space). At the same time their positioning on MOMA’s walls inevitably suggested the modernist patterns of Piet Mondrian and others. (Bukatman 110)

At least within the context of MOMA, then, the ideas of simplification of form and emphasis on function that are behind the design of computer chips, can be seen to resemble the characteristics of modernist art and architecture. In this way, the grid-like patterns and understated intricacies of the microprocessor diagrams can be interpreted as particularly modernist visions of the spaces of computer technology.
This modernist interpretation of the spaces of contemporary communication technology stands in stark contrast to, for example, the postmodern architectures that inhabit Gibson’s cyberspace. That is, the notion that microprocessor designs resemble maps of modernist architecture, with clear, logical and functional coordinate systems, seems incongruent with the sense of displacement and vertigo that cyberspace more generally articulates. As an attempt to envision the space of the computer, then, the “Information Art” exhibition appears to contradict some of the observations that I have made in relation to the imaginative spaces of telecommunication technology.

For Bukatman, writing about the virtual subject in postmodernity, the solution to these conflicting visions of communication technology lies in the denial of the effective aestheticization of the object by the modernist view. By denying that placing enlargements of microprocessor designs in MOMA makes these chips any more accessible or meaningful, Bukatman attempts to trivialize both this particular exposition as well as the more general vision of technological space that it presents:
Within the context of industrial design, the exhibition made perfect sense as an extension of the Bauhausian ideal of form following function, but it was still unsettling to see well-heeled patrons of the arts scrutinizing these complex surfaces for hidden meanings, as though the chip, now susceptible to vision, was somehow also susceptible to knowledge. […] But the enlargement and aestheticization of the chip does not render it more accessible. (Bukatman 110-11)

For my part, the tension between these two conflicting visions of technological space is resolved if one takes into account the referents of these visions. It is here that the notion of dispositif can be made productive and can help to understand the differences behind these different spatial visions. In the case of the MOMA exhibition, what is displayed is the technological substrate itself, revealed in a way in which it can ordinarily not be seen. By making microprocessor design visible in this way, the exhibition not only calls attention to the microprocessor as “one of the most sophisticated products of our technological society”, but also the artisanship involved in the creation of this object (“Exhibition Fact Sheet”). By extension, the exhibition questions the relationship between craftsmanship and Art, as well as the MOMA’s own authority in establishing the public perception of this relationship. In other words, behind the façade of images of microchips that suggest modernist aesthetics, the “Information Art” exhibition is not so much concerned with finding meaning in microprocessor design as it is with “simply” displaying technological artifacts and raising questions about their status as art.

By way of contrast, the concept of cyberspace pertains not to the “real” technological substrate, but to the user perspective offered by these communication devices. Gibson’s vision of a data realm with an eclectic set of architectural styles and shapes, where forms are spectacularly ornamental, refers not to microprocessor blueprints, but amounts to the author’s interpretation of video arcades and the implications of early computer networks. Rather than a vision of computer processors or Internet switches, then, Gibson’s cyberspace is an interpretation of the user perspective that these technologies suggest. “Information Art” and cyberspace, in short, respond to different aspects of the same dispositif. This understanding not only removes the contradiction that the modernist images of microprocessors appear to pose to the postmodern architecture of cyberspace, it also highlights the specific nature of the technologies themselves and the user perspectives that these technologies present.
I want to suggest that by incorporating postmodern architecture into the fictional worlds of his writing, Gibson’s cyberspace makes an important intervention into the dystopian genre. Its citation of modernist metropolitan spaces echoes the origins of the dystopian genre, while its eclectic selection of functionless, ornamental features from various “low” cultural origins helps to create a sense of dislocation and erasure of space that continues the contraction of dystopian space that has occurred over the course of the twentieth century. Cyberspace, in other words, deconstructs traditional metropolitan dystopian space by using some of its design logic (i.e. the use of architecture to represent ideological struggle) but then subverts this logic by stripping its structures of their spatial integrity and function. So whereas in nineteenth-century dystopia the metropolis served the function of structurally representing specific ideologies and their subversion, urban symbols in cyberpunk represent the loss of meaning of space and the function that the dystopian genre customarily attaches to it.

In this way, the postmodern architecture of cyberspace not only subverts the traditional conceit of dystopian narrative, it also begins to question its assumption of the stability of space as a concept. Seeing the various postmodern design cues of cyberspace as part of the contraction of dystopian space that potentially leads toward singularity, involves understanding the spatial function that postmodern architecture and culture perform. That is, postmodernism’s use of collage and quotation are not simply “gimmicks” that upset the status quo and the stern functionalism of modernist design. Rather, this architectural style also articulates an underlying logic about what space is. As Bukatman explains, postmodernism entails calling into question the traditional notion of space as stable, measurable and understandable:

Invisible spaces now dominate, as the city of the modernist era is replaced by the non-place urban realm and outer space is superseded by cyberspace. According to Jameson, the postmodern era is marked by, among other things, a fundamental sense of disorientation within “the bewildering world space of late multinational capital.” The works of postmodernism either emphasize that sense of dislocation or produce some form of cognitive mapping so that the subject can comprehend the new terms of existence. (Bukatman 6)

The eclectic nature and ornate style of postmodern architecture, then, can be seen to express such a notion of space. As a design language that focuses on playfulness, pastiche, collage and ornamentation, postmodernism does not generate a sense of
space as “truth”, but foregrounds that space is inherently fabricated and depends for its meaning on contextual design languages. Ultimately, this brings about a sense of disorientation, as previously stable points of reference are voided of meaning and replaced with the relative truths of multiple design languages.

Dystopia, then, emerges as the “cognitive mapping” that Bukatman refers to in the sense that it provides a consistent, narrative effort to imagine the consequences of postmodern cultural developments and technological change (ibid.). Certainly, dystopian narrative in its role as part of the telecommunication dispositif provides a “map” that can be used to “decode” some the effects of Internet technology on space, as well as the new user perspectives that contemporary communication devices bring with them. Moreover, the dislocating and disorientating aspect of postmodern architecture effectively deconstructs the traditional notions of dystopian space that relied on the straightforward transposition of ideological concerns onto architecture. In this way, cyberspace as singularity also begins to “map” the deconstruction of the dystopian genre.

Jacking in

The second way in which cyberspace intervenes in the dystopian genre is through its engagement with the concept of dystopia as a phenomenological space. In chapter 3 I argued that the dystopian genre developed from a type of literature that initially used the city exclusively as diegetic space, to a genre that employed a number of spaces to help encode power and the subversion of power. The first of these spaces, I demonstrated, was introduced by the fiction of E.M. Forster. First published in 1909, Forster’s short story “The Machine Stops” introduced the idea that not just a city and its architecture can be used to construct a utopian space and show its subversion, I argued that a phenomenological space can be used to achieve a similar effect. I also showed that this narrative invention is intimately related to dystopia’s entry as an institutionalized response into the telecommunication dispositif and constituted a contraction of the concept of dystopian space.

Forster’s short story narrates a world wherein machines and telecommunication technology have taken over. Forster imagines a future, subterranean world where each human lives alone in a hexagonal cell where their needs are catered for by an omnipresent Machine. Moreover, all communication
occurs by “cinematophote”: an extrapolation of telegraph and telephone technology by Forster that resembles the television. This world is initially displayed as utopian, in the sense that the diegetic space is represented as isolated and homogenous. Within this “utopian” construct dissent begins to spread as one of the characters decides to leave the Machine-controlled world to explore the space beyond.

Forster’s short story expands on traditional metropolitan dystopias by proposing the notion that ideology and the subversion of ideology can be narratively expressed through more than just urban structures. Indeed, in “The Machine Stops”, conformity with and the subversion of ideology are articulated not in architecture, but are rather expressed in exposure to and exclusion from the Machine and cinematophote’s stream of information. Within this system, conformity entails watching and listening to the cinematophote, while dissent involves stepping outside of the blue glow of the cinematophote’s sphere of influence. In this way, the narrative proposes that subverting the initial utopian construct also no longer has to do with breaking down the physical structures that represent it. So, whereas Donnelly’s New York has to burn down as a means of communicating the subversion of the dominant ideology, Forster’s machine world begins to crumble as one of its citizens steps outside the influence of the “cinematophote” and begins to see, hear and feel for himself. Forster’s narrative, in short, suggests that, alongside urban space, phenomenological space can also be used to encode conformity and dissent.

In the same way that cyberspace uses and abuses the urban spaces of nineteenth-century metropolitan dystopias, it also engages with the phenomenological space that Forster’s fiction proposes. That is, just as cyberspace cites the modernist architecture which characterizes traditional dystopian narrative in order to deconstruct it, so does it make use of Forster’s phenomenological space. On the one hand, Gibson’s narrative echoes the extrapolation of contemporary telecommunication technology in Forster’s short story and its ability to articulate the user perspectives that accompany such technologies and which suggest verisimilitude. Just as Forster’s “cinematophote” allows characters to remain in their cells and still access a world of information, so does the “Ono Sendai deck” provide Gibson’s characters with access to all of the information stored in cyberspace. In fact, Gibson’s concept of cyberspace, as well as other popular conceptions of computers and user perspectives such as the idea of the matrix, are obviously much indebted to Forster’s fiction. Indeed, the idea
of a Machine city and the notion of humankind’s dependency on computers to provide sense data have become staple features of science fiction. Certainly, the images of communication interfaces that Gibson and Forster create initially appear to be very similar, as both texts show technology users as seated and reclining in comfort while information from around the globe takes shape before their eyes.

On the other hand, Gibson’s cyberspace also deconstructs the dystopian, phenomenological space that Forster first suggested. While both texts show concepts of user perspective that are ostensibly similar, Gibson’s cyberspace no longer makes use of the clear-cut spatial representation that characterizes Forster’s cyberspace antecedent. So just as postmodern architecture questions the spatial certainties of the modernist metropolis, so too does cyberspace interrogate the easy, straightforward translation of ideology into user perspective that informs “The Machine Stops”. In Forster’s text, for example, all coordinates in the technological space of the text equally conform to the “bad” dominant ideology, while all locations outside of this space represent subversive beliefs. In effect, Forster creates a dystopian technological realm and a utopian pastoral counterpart.

By contrast, Gibson’s cyberspace deconstructs this easy distribution of ideological concerns. Indeed, the Sprawl trilogy proposes that cyberspace is a spatial singularity of infinite density that represents both dominant and subversive ideologies at the same time. In this way, the user perspective of communication technologies is no longer associated with just conformity with dominant ideology, but it also allows for the spatial representation of subversion. In fact, a considerable portion of Gibson’s fiction is concerned with rendering the phenomenology of cyberspace as a site of contestation. Without a doubt, the console cowboys that make up the bulk of Gibson’s characters are low-life, high-technology adepts who subvert the status quo of corporate data entities from hijacked servers. In this way, Gibson’s fiction represents the user perspective that characterizes communication technologies bring along not simply as conformity to a dominant paradigm of technocracy that effaces individuality, but as a space of opportunity that can foster new forms of agency and resistance in an increasingly corporatized and globalized setting. Unlike Forster’s Machine world, the phenomenology of cyberspace is, therefore, no longer just the representation of conformity but also allows for the mediation of both conformity and subversion.
Gibson’s fiction encodes this erosion of the straightforward spatial distribution of ideology by providing a user perspective that disorients and confuses, rather than supply a consistent phenomenological experience. Indeed, unlike Forster’s “cinematophote”, the “Ono Sendai deck” gives rise to a sensory experience that seems inherently incompatible with the human sensorium. For example, in Count Zero, a trip through cyberspace is described as a collection of sensory data inputs that are unsuited for its human user:

Ten seconds later, his eyes were open. He clutched the green foam and fought his nausea. Again, he closed his eyes...It came on, again, gradually, a flickering, nonlinear flood of fact and sensory data, a kind of narrative conveyed in surreal jump cuts and juxtapositions. It was vaguely like riding a roller coaster that phased in and out of existence at random, impossibly rapid intervals, changing altitude, attack, and direction with each pulse of nothingness, except that the shifts had nothing to do with any physical orientation but rather with lightning alternations in paradigm and symbol system. The data had never been intended for human input. (Gibson 1986a: 23-24)

Here, data is imagined as a combination of sight, balance, acceleration and kinesthetic senses that confuses its user to the point of him becoming physically ill. Unlike Forster’s technology where users can expect a comfortable phenomenological and spatial experience, cyberspace confounds its users with a synesthetia of sense data that seems inherently “unnatural”. Resembling motion sickness, the experience articulates the extent to which the phenomenology of cyberspace is unable to provide stable reference points or straightforward ideological positions.

Gibson’s fiction, then, exploits the idea of phenomenological dystopia to arrive at its concept of a dystopian singularity. On the one hand, Gibson’s fiction echoes Forster’s idea of a machine-driven, technocratic space where user perspective coincides with ideological position-taking. On the other hand, cyberspace questions much of the ideological and spatial certainties of Forster’s phenomenological dystopia. Whereas in Forster’s fiction user perspectives consistently correlate with ideological positions in, cyberspace offers no such certainties. Instead, cyberspace condenses all manner of ideologies to the extent that they begin to overlap spatially. In this way, it is no longer possible to easily separate conformity and dissent and identify allegiance by locating characters in the diegetic space. Concurrently,
cyberspace provides its users with a confusing, synesthetic array of sense data that confuse and disorient the characters represented in these texts.

**Posthuman Bodies**

Finally, cyberspace also engages with dystopian, panoptic literature and the idea that the body can act as an effective site of ideological control. As with its interaction with other forms of dystopian narrative, cyberspace quotes this particular form of dystopia by foregrounding an interest in the body and its observation, while simultaneously deconstructing this narrative strategy through a problematization of the status of the body.

In chapter 4, I tracked the development of the dystopian genre and telecommunication *dispositif*, and argued that the panoptic characteristics of television technology enabling the body to become productive in the control of ideological space. For example, narratives such as Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are not structurally informed by architecture or sense data as is the case with earlier dystopias, but instead this text relies on the body to express the exertion and subversion of power. In Orwell’s text, ideological control is maintained through the panoptic surveillance of the body, which carefully manages submission to the dominant regime by making bodies perform otherwise meaningless ritualistic exercises. In this way, physical exercise, marching, singing and working become part of a carefully constructed choreography of compliance. Similarly, dissent and resistance to dominant ideology are also expressed through the body. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, resistance takes the form of physical activities, such as writing and sexual intercourse, which activities place the body in positions that are not state-sanctioned and are not part of the legal corpus of physical movement.

Cyberspace inherits some of this fascination with panoptic surveillance technology and the body that informs texts such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Indeed, as with Orwell’s dystopian classic, texts such as Gibson’s *Sprawl* trilogy express a similar interest in the surveillance capabilities of communication hardware, and especially an awareness of the extent to which technology allows for this observation to remain undetected. So just as the “telescreen” in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* allows Big Brother and the Party to observe without being observed themselves, cyberspace makes possible the furtive observation of digital agents. Concurrently, much of
Gibson’s text revolves around characters attempting to find their way through cyberspace undetected, even if no obvious form of observation is immediately apparent. Indeed, it is the mere possibility of unverifiable observation that lends these texts their Chandleresque, hard-boiled-detective-fiction quality as characters continually seek to take furtive action unseen by unnamed, undetected observers.

Unlike Nineteen Eighty-Four, however, Gibson’s Sprawl trilogy does not use the body as a target for ideological control. In spite of its interest in panoptic surveillance, Gibson’s fiction does not direct its representation of ideological control to the observation of the body and its position in space. Instead, bodies in cyberspace, while under the constant threat of unverifiable observation, seem to afford characters a sense of freedom as they fly and surf the data realm. Indeed, there is no systemic effort exerted to control these bodies or to have them perform the kind of regimented movements dictated by a governing body as in Orwell’s dystopia. Importantly moreover, the panoptic capabilities of cyberspace and its subsequent failure to reify surveillance in forms of physical control are related to the nature of the bodies involved in this type of fiction. Unlike Winston and Julia in Nineteen Eighty-Four, Case, Wintermute and Neuromancer have no “physical” presence in the dystopian space of the Sprawl trilogy with which to conform to a dominant ideology. Instead, their bodies are avatars that represent their mental presence.

While these cyberbodies ostensibly offer their users considerable freedoms, they also erode traditional notions of the body itself along with a set of associated “stable” concepts such as agency, subjectivity and individuality. Initially, the notion of the embodied computer user betrays a “series of cultural assumptions about computers and human bodies” (Lupton 99). As with, for example, the idea of computer viruses and infections, the avatar is a popular and technical representation which draws on “discourses that assume that computers themselves are humanoid and embodied”, as well as the idea that consciousness should “materialize” as a body inside computer networks (ibid.).

Ironically, this tendency to understand new technologies along the lines of bodies and bodily functions interferes with the notion of a stable, physical form and the conventional mind-body dualism that informs it. Certainly, in the case of Gibson’s cyberbodies, the physical “freedom” bought by transferring consciousness to an avatar comes at the cost of a loss of coherency of the individual as characters lose
pieces of themselves, both of their minds and their bodies, in the complexities of computer networks. For example, Case, the protagonist of *Neuromancer*, pays dearly for his prowess as a console cowboy when he is caught stealing from his employer. As punishment for his betrayal, Case’s real, “wetware” central nervous system is damaged by a myotoxin that affects his mind and personality that prevents him from interfacing with cyberspace. In other words, Case’s virtual corporate infidelity has real-world consequences which, in turn, affect cyberspace. In this way, the distinction between body, mind, and cyberspace representation begins to collapse. Similarly, Wintermute, an artificial intelligence in *Neuromancer*, controls a human agent to help it influence the physical world outside of cyberspace. Assuming the role of psychiatrist, the computer program brings about insanity and multiple personality disorder in its human agent to effectively control its worldly assets. Again, the seamless interaction between technology, bodies and the mind results in the deconstruction of the vestigial space of the body, challenging its autonomy as well as the concepts of agency and subjective coherency that go along with it.

Concurrently, the *Sprawl* trilogy is also concerned with the posthuman more generally. That is, besides cyberbodies, the augmentation and adaptation of “real” bodies is also an important factor in Gibson’s oeuvre. Indeed, outside of cyberspace, characters can be seen to augment their bodies with technology, ranging from prosthetic limbs and sexual implants to computational devices. As with cyberbodies, these posthuman cyborgs at some level grant new, previously unexperienced bodily freedoms. Just as Donna Haraway uses the notion of the cyborg to renegotiate gender stereotypes in “A Cyborg Manifesto”, so too Gibson challenges traditional categories of male, female, human and machine so as to allow his characters to be whatever they may choose to be. The posthuman cyborg form, in other words, allows for the body to be recast from conventional cultural molds into whatever form the user chooses—at least apparently.

As with cyberbodies, however, the cyborg also entails a loss of the body as a stable and reliable category. Even Haraway, for all her enthusiasm in exploring the possibilities of the cyborg and its deconstruction of gender roles, also conveys a sense of bereavement as she describes the effects of machine-human interfaces:

Late 20th-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally
designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert. (Haraway 152)

Here, Haraway’s use of “disturbingly” and “frighteningly” signals the idea that something “natural” is lost through the body of the cyborg, even if machine-human interfaces hold considerable promise. Indeed, as Haraway explains, the cyborg makes the body permeable to the effects of technology and so erodes the comfortable idea of the natural body, turning it into a machine and tool instead. In the interview “No Maps for These Territories”, Gibson also bemoans to some extent the influence of technology on the “natural”, “unmediated” human:

I think we have been growing a sort of prosthetic, extended nervous system for the last hundred years or so and it’s really starting to take, you know. It’s really, really starting to grow now. We are dealing with something that has penetrated virtually every corner of the human universe now. It is increasingly difficult to find people who have not been affected by media. It is very difficult to find non-mediated human beings, whereas in the 1920s you could get back in the Appalachians and record musicians who had never heard recorded music. And I think those early recording sound fundamentally different. Something very different was going on then and something changed. (Gibson 2003)

These McLuhanesque observations by Gibson and Haraway, then, conceptualize the posthuman body as both promise and as the decline of a “natural” state.

As such, the cyberbody and cyborg reveal themselves as the potent fusion of technology and the body, as well as a transgression of the borders of the natural by the artificial. Indeed, the posthuman form blurs the distinction between body and tool, thus eroding the concept of the secure, stable, discrete body, as well as agency, identity and subjectivity. The posthuman, in other words, dissolves the category of the body into a range of ontological question marks about the nature of what is “human”, as Bukatman explains:

So far, the body has remained largely protected, a boundary that might be transgressed, but a boundary and limit point nevertheless. Yet, within these discourses, the body is hardly inviolate—it is instead a site of almost endless dissolution. From here the language of terminal identity becomes increasingly de-formed of the human, as the subject is simulated, morphed, modified, retooled, genetically engineered, and even dissolved. (Bukatman 244)
Unlike narratives such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, then, Gibson’s *Sprawl* trilogy does not presuppose the stability of the body in its representation of ideological control. Rather, cyberspace raises the question of what the body is and what it represents. Whereas in Orwell’s classic novel the body is “simply” the seat of consciousness, the last hurdle in the unmediated punishment of “thoughtcrime”, the *Sprawl* trilogy makes the body simultaneously primitive, biological wetware, hardware tool, seat of consciousness, representation of consciousness and consciousness itself. Here, the panoptic surveillance of Internet technologies acts as a witness to the dissolution of the body as a distinct ontological category, rather than the means to precisely control its orientation in ideological space.

From the perspective of the dystopian genre, cyberspace’s engagement with these posthuman forms signals both its compliance with earlier forms of this narrative tradition as well as its deconstruction of standard, dystopian spatial poetics. On the one hand, Gibson’s cyberspace quotes the standard tropes of telecommunication technology and panoptic surveillance. In fact, the idea of panoptic communication devices forms the backbone of much of the narrative, providing both cops-and-robbers narrative content as well as its tech-noir, detective-novel style. On the other hand, cyberspace deconstructs this dystopian tradition by calling into question the stability of its main ingredient. As the primary objects of observation, cyberbodies do not represent stable physical forms that can be punished and disciplined to produce “practiced, docile bodies” (Foucault 1991: 138), nor do they represent a stable sense of identity and agency that can be aligned with an ideological position in a straightforward manner.

As a result of this deconstruction of dystopian, bodily space, cyberspace continues the contraction of dystopian space as part of its role in the communication dispositif. As with its quotation of dystopian metropolitan and phenomenological spaces, cyberspace nullifies much of the spatial poetics that informed earlier forms of dystopia to construct a spatial singularity. That is, cyberspace’s reliance on posthuman bodies and technological singularity performs a spatial function that is similar to its use of postmodern architectural styles and synesthetic sense data. Here, posthuman bodies function to question the vestigial space of the body. As both minds and external technologies begin to encroach on form to create cyberbodies and cyborgs, the meaning of the body itself begins to dissolve. Indeed, the “finishing line”
that indicates where the body begins and ends recedes as technology and minds advance to co-opt its wetware.

In terms of dystopia, what cyberspace offers in return for the loss of the body as a stable category and site of ideological control is the nil-space of cyberspace itself. By condensing all manner of ideological positions as well as different natural and technological routines onto the body, cyberspace turns the human form into a dense network of functions. In this way, it is no longer possible to easily separate conformity and dissent and identify allegiance by locating characters in the diegetic space. Physical posturing can no longer be said to express relationships to dominant ideology. Instead, the panoptic machinery of cyberspace allows readers to become witness to the infinite density of functions that the cyberbody represents. As a result, the constant surveillance of the avatar form reveals “a body grown in on itself, a Gothic folly” (Gibson 1986b: 172). Moreover, this condensation of functions onto posthuman bodies mirrors the concentration of data that informs cyberspace more generally. Just as Internet technologies suggest infinite density of data realms by dislocating information, the disruption of the “traditional” role of the body also creates cyberbodies that can perform an endless number of functions in the same “space”.

As with cyberspace’s engagement with architecture and phenomenology, then, the posthuman element of cyberspace can be seen to perform a spatial function and to construct a spatial singularity. By quoting traditional dystopian narrative strategies and then deconstructing these spatial poetics, cyberspace suggests that dystopia is beginning to lose much of its coherency. As a result, cyberspace is characterized not just by the technology that is commonly associated with technological singularity, but also by a spatial singularity. Indeed, as with its architecture and sense data, cyberspace’s restructuring of human definition contributes to the density and simultaneity of its data structures.

**Critical Dystopia?**

The implosion of Euclidian space in cyberspace to some extent also produces the implosion of the concept of dystopia, as structures of ideological conformity and contention occupy the same diegetic space. Indeed, when metropolitan dystopia, phenomenological space and panoptic dystopia get subverted by cyberspace and
spatial singularity, the spatial poetics that inform the concept of dystopia are themselves destabilized: sites of opposition now overlap with spaces of ideological conformity. Within the singularity of cyberspace, then, the poetics of spatial isolation, uniformity and subversion that characterize dystopian constructs are made problematic. As such, cyberspace’s deconstruction of traditional dystopian spaces is not just a development in the dystopian genre, but even constitutes something of an emergency to the idea of dystopia itself.

There has been an effort in utopian studies to explain these complexities in cyberspace fiction under the rubric of “critical dystopia”, which is described as a hybrid textual form that combines dystopian and utopian influences. In this way, scholars such as Tom Moylan identify the “bleak energy of cyberpunk” as “a textual mutation that self-reflexively takes on the present system and offers not only astute critiques of the order of things but also explorations of the oppositional spaces and possibilities from which the next round of political activism can derive imaginative sustenance and inspiration” (Moylan 2000: xv). As can be seen, Moylan makes use of notions of authorial intent to describe the effects of cyberpunk dystopias. Referring to self-reflexivity, critique and activism, he understands such narratives as the result of political, authorial choices that make these texts ideologically ambivalent. Moreover, Moylan sees these “critical dystopias” as mixing, what he considers to be, dystopian traditions of social critique with utopian traditions of imaginative inspiration. According to Moylan, in other words, the ambivalent nature of cyber narratives comes to the fore as the convergence of dystopian warnings and utopian visions.

For my part, discussing cyberpunk such as the Sprawl trilogy in terms of Gibson’s desire to take on “the present system” and to start “the next round of political activism” is not only reductive of the complexities of textual construction and transmission, it also ignores the relationship between these “critical dystopias”, the dystopian narrative tradition, and the technologies with which these narratives engage (ibid.). I would argue rather, that the idea that cyberspace is a form of dystopian narrative that reinserts utopian content is ineffective for two reasons.

First, texts like Gibson’s Neuromancer and their ambivalent ideological content are the result of the implosion of dystopian space rather than the convergence of utopian and dystopian discourse into “critical dystopia”. It seems to me that Moylan’s idea that cyberpunk mixes utopian and dystopian discourse is based on the
misunderstanding that such literary traditions are about “good” and “bad” imagined societies respectively. Indeed, like all dystopias, cyber narratives like *Neuromancer* and *The Matrix* (1999) can never be said to represent a “nightmare” society that “warns” against a terrible future, extrapolated from contemporary reality. Certainly, these narratives bear the superficial emblems of a “warning” (i.e. seedy characters, questionable ethics, and a noir aesthetic) but it is important to realize that these indicators are really only skin-deep. Beneath their veneer of sordid tech crime, *Neuromancer* and *The Matrix* articulate a fascination with the technology for which they “warn”. Indeed, seeing *Neuromancer* and *The Matrix* as inherently “worse” imagined societies that contain some utopian content fails to take into account the inherent “coolness” of these narratives and their ability to commodify what they ostensibly “warn” against. Certainly, while cyberspace shows “nightmarish” futures of post-singularity humanity, cyber narratives have proven to be very effective in supporting the sale of all kinds of high-tech gadget merchandise and have played an important role in the popularization of personal computers, the Internet, and wireless communication. For example, besides the obvious *Neuromancer* wallpapers and *The Matrix* screensavers, companies like Nokia capitalized on cyberspace “dystopia” by product-placing their 8110 phone in the original *Matrix* movie. In fact, the entire *Matrix* franchise is pervaded with this kind of—seemingly—contradictory logic. On the one hand, *The Matrix* “forewarns” the viewer of the consequences of technological development, while it promotes itself as one of the most technologically advanced cultural objects of its time. Certainly, the movie’s focus on technologically advanced and computer-generated special effects seems to clash with the idea that the narrative is a warning against the new medium of cyberspace. *The Matrix*, then, only appears to “warns” against the consequences of computer technology, but ultimately facilitates the adoption of technology by showing cyberspace and its disorientating user perspective in the comfortable setting of a Hollywood blockbuster.

The idea of “critical dystopia” as put forward by Moylan seems unable to effectively capture such ambivalent positions. Certainly, *Neuromancer* and *The Matrix* can in no way be said to really ever offer a “critique” of contemporary fascination with technology, nor do these narratives constitute acts of utopian, political activism. More importantly, these texts cannot be said to contain clear ideological positions to begin with. According to Moylan, “critical dystopia”
functions as a dystopian text that reinserts utopian content so that dystopian and utopian ideological positions exist side by side. However, what is actually at stake in these cyber narratives is the simultaneous transmission of different ideological positions. Indeed, cyberspace represents the thoroughgoing dislocation of knowledge from space and, concurrently, concepts of utopianness and dystopianness also show signs of slippage and a loss of definition. As a result, dystopia and utopia do not exist side by side in these narratives, as Moylan suggests, but occur at the same time.

Second, the concept of “critical dystopia” fails to see cyberspace as an essential part of the dystopian tradition. For Moylan, cyberspace is a “textual mutation” which does not really belong to either dystopian or utopian narrative. By conceptualizing cyber narratives as the “bastard” offspring of two distinct literary traditions, Moylan not only passes something of a value judgment, he also fails to see that cyberspace is really just the last stage of a development in dystopian narrative that has been ongoing for over a century. As I have demonstrated, the concept of dystopia has, since the beginning of the twentieth century, become associated with smaller and smaller spaces as part of its role in the telecommunication dispositif. The ongoing sense of dislocation by technologies such as the telegraph, telephone, television and the Internet also entailed an erosion of the spatial certainties by which the traditional dystopian narrative was defined. In this way, dystopian narrative based on communication technology moved away from the genre’s roots in the metropolis and used extrapolations of telegraphs and televisions to create smaller dystopian constructs. Seen from this perspective, cyberspace comes to the fore as the final step of this development: a space so small and dense that it becomes a singularity. As such, cyberspace is not so much a “critical dystopia” and “textual mutation” as it is the completion of the contraction of dystopian space.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I continued my analysis of the development of the dystopian genre and its relationship with communication technology. I demonstrated that cyberpunk fiction and its invocation of Internet technologies results in an intervention in the dystopian genre whereby earlier forms of dystopian space are replaced with a spatial singularity.
I began my argument by focusing on the notion of “technological singularity”. As I explained, the idea that humanity and technology are “progressing” exponentially towards a radical paradigm shift is prevalent not just in popular science and futurology, but also in cyberspace fiction. I also argued that technological singularity, that is the radical acceleration of “progress” through technology, represents not just a break with “normal”, historical progress, but that it constitutes a spatial paradigm shift as well. Cyberspace, I showed, is the narrative “result” of this shift and constitutes a new type of dystopian space where “normal”, Euclidian rules are suspended and replaced by a spatial singularity.

I then moved on to demonstrating how cyberspace engages with earlier dystopian spaces and deconstructs them, replacing their spatial forms with representations of spatial singularity. As demonstrated, cyberspace engages with metropolitan, phenomenological and panoptic dystopian narratives and deconstructs their methods of ideological, spatial control. In the case of the metropolitan dystopia, cyberspace replaces the modernist textual architecture that encodes dominant ideology and the subversion of ideology with a postmodern mix of traditional design languages, mathematical grids, fractal landscapes, video games and the rococo visual style of MTV. In the case of phenomenological dystopia, cyberspace subverts the straightforward translation of sense environments as in, for example, “The Machine Stops”, with a confusion of synesthetic sense data. Lastly, in the case of panoptic dystopia, cyberspace undermines the stability of the primary object of panoptic surveillance. Because of its invocation of the post-singularity, posthuman form, both through cyberbodies and cyborgs, cyberspace fiction undermines the idea that the body can serve as the object of ideological repression. Cyberbodies and cyborgs dissolve of the category of the body, as well as subjectivity and agency, so that it can no longer be punished and disciplined to conform to dominant ideology. All of these cases, I argued, constitute a representation of the spatial singularity of cyberspace by underlining the sense of spatial “slippage” that singularity entails.

Finally, I showed that efforts in dystopian studies to describe the effects of cyberspace resulted in the creation of the textual category of “critical dystopia”, which tries to conceptualize cyberspace as the bastard offspring of distinct, utopian and dystopian traditions. However, I argued that the idea that cyberspace is a form of dystopian narrative that reinserts utopian content is ineffective for two reasons. First,
cyberspace functions as the implosion dystopian space and, subsequently, the implosion of the concept of dystopia. What is at stake here is the suspension of “normal” rules of space and dystopian narrative. So, just as Internet technologies suggest the radical dislocation of knowledge from space, so cyberspace fiction disconnects notions of utopianness and dystopianness from their comfortable, spatial reference points.

Second, the concept of “critical dystopia” fails to acknowledge cyberspace’s role in the development of dystopian literature. It conceptualizes this form of fiction as a “textual mutation” that is separate from other dystopian texts. Yet, as I have shown, it is more productive to think of cyberspace as the continuation of a development that began much earlier. This development entails the centrifugal contraction of dystopian space as part of its role in the dispositif of communication technology. I demonstrated that, in this way, cyberspace can be seen as the continuation of a development that began with E.M. Forster’s “The Machine Stops”, which saw the persistent contraction of dystopian space as new communication technologies suggested ever more effectively their conquest of space.
Conclusion

During a 2001 keynote address for TechLive, Microsoft Chairman and former CEO Bill Gates announced the end of the MS-DOS era. Microsoft’s new product, Windows XP, finally rendered obsolete the, by then, decades old MS-DOS code that the company had continued to ship with newer installments of its operating system so as to maintain backwards compatibility. At last, Windows XP was at last to usher in a new era without such legacy programming. As Bill Gates got ready to theatrically “type exit for the last time”, a disembodied and deep, soft, male voice spoke out in the auditorium and asked: “Excuse me, Bill?” (“Windows XP: The End of the MS-DOS ERA”). Mirroring Clarke and Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968), “DOS” continued to calmly enumerate its importance and efficiency while Gates hunted and pecked for the keys to shut it down. And just like HAL right before its permanent shutdown, DOS still managed to ask: “You aren’t going to do this, are you Bill?” (ibid.).

This rare instance of Bill Gates and Microsoft demonstrating effective presentation skills depends on the specific relationship between telecommunication technologies and the dystopian narrative tradition. Gates’ use of an iconic moment from dystopian narrative to introduce new software serves as a significant indication of the close relationship between dystopia and communication technology. Indeed, as Gate’s amusing allusion makes clear, communication devices such as the computer have provided dystopian narrative with some of its most enduring symbols. HAL 9000, Alien’s Mother, Big Brother and the “telescreen”, E.M. Forster’s “cinematophote”, the Matrix and cyberspace all have the power to immediately invoke a sense of dystopianness. Remarkably, even a single sentence in the context of a communications technology keynote address is able to instantaneously activate the cultural memory of one of dystopia’s most memorable computer villains.

What is also striking is that the emotions that HAL evokes appear to be something akin to fondness. Although Gates’ allusion to 2001: A Space Odyssey primarily works as a joke—as a way to make an otherwise dreary presentation a little more entertaining—it also betrays an affection for the history of communication technologies and the general cultural perception of such innovations. Indeed, the HAL-like voice of DOS offers Gates and the audience an occasion to reminisce and
reflect on the age of the command line interface that now, unfortunately, must come to an end. In fact, Gates’ presentation was tainted by a touch of melancholia as the good old days of computing were at last put to rest by their dystopian fictional representation. Gates’ presentation, then, not only articulates the strength of the connection between communication technologies and dystopian narrative, it also demonstrates that dystopian narrative is not necessarily best understood as being about “bad things”. Certainly, while HAL 9000 is a chilling representation of the dehumanizing aspects of computer technologies, it supplies Gates’ presentation with a sense of humor and articulates a fondness for the technologies it represents. Gates’ keynote address, then, not only indicates that dystopian narrative is strongly linked with telecommunication devices, but also questions to what extent dystopian narrative should be read as nightmare visions of the future and as a genre that expresses fear.

In this dissertation I have shown why communication technologies work so well as dystopian symbols, as well as why these symbols never simply represent fear. Working from the theoretical concept of the dispositif, I have connected the technologies behind the telegraph, television and the Internet with dystopian narrative traditions through the notion of space. I have shown that telecommunication devices bring along certain user perspectives with spatial properties that closely resemble the characteristics of dystopian narratives. Over the course of five chapters, I have elucidated both the unique relationship between dystopian narrative and communication devices, and I have offered an alternative to the standard critical theory on dystopian and utopian narrative that sees these literatures as expressions of fear and hope respectively.

In chapter 1, I began my investigation of this telecommunication dispositif by closely examining the dystopian narrative tradition. Although dystopia is commonly conceptualized as a “bad” imagined society and the polar opposite of utopian “perfection”, I showed that these ideas fail to accurately describe dystopian texts. By citing several examples, I demonstrated that utopian texts often rely on notions that we associate with dystopian narrative, such as the forced relocation of dissidents, government-enforced reproductive programs and genetic selection. At the same time, dystopian narratives frequently only offer the verisimilitude of a “nightmare” vision while actually laying bare a deep fascination with the things that are supposedly fear-inspiring. I likewise noted several examples from fiction that help to problematize
current critical theory on utopian and dystopian narrative, while showing that these models are too reliant on authorial intent and are naïve readings along the “good” versus “bad” dichotomy.

Following on from the observation that utopian and dystopian narratives cannot simply be said to be about “good” and “bad” societies, I suggested that these forms of narrative may be better understood as types of narrative space. Utopian texts, I argued, are characterized by isolated islands, cities, planets and nations whose uniform topography reflect the uniform acceptance of the ideology within, whereas dystopian narratives are concerned with the physical destruction of this isolation and homogeneity. I corroborated these claims by looking at several ways in which dystopian narrative reifies these spatial poetics. Dystopian narrative sometimes takes a very literal approach to spatial subversion through internal structural failure but I also pointed out examples that make use of external structural failure and leakage to construct a fictional dystopian space.

The spatial poetics of utopian and dystopian discourse show a considerable overlap with the user perspectives that modern communication devices suggest. Technologies such as the telegraph, television and the Internet present an interface that is generally interpreted as an information space. In chapter 2, I argued that these different spaces (i.e. cyberspace, the global village) might be generally conceptualized as “nil-space”: the abstract, spatial representation of the user perspectives of telecommunication devices that portrays the dislocation of knowledge from the space that these technologies “occupy”. The demotion of space as a restriction on knowledge to an—at most—contingent constraint suggests an information realm which is both isolated and uniform: isolated, as nil-space operates independently of “normal” Euclidian space; and uniform, as the dislocation of knowledge from space distributes information evenly throughout the communication network. In this way, communication devices and dystopian narrative converge onto a single dispositif as both “technologies” are dependent on similar notions of space. I supported this theory by pointing out several examples from different discursive fields in which telecommunication devices are conceptualized as separate spaces of uniform layout. These spaces, I showed, set up telecommunication technologies for comparison with utopian and dystopian space, and help to explain the importance of communication technologies as signs of dystopianness.
In chapters 3, 4 and 5, I used these concepts of communication devices, space and narrative to describe the historical development of the dystopian genre and telecommunication dispositif. I argued that, because of its role in the telecommunication dispositif, the dystopian tradition developed several textual variations. These variations, I showed, entailed contracting dystopian spaces that are congruent with developments in telecommunication technologies and the ways in which these technologies question the importance of space.

Dystopian narrative and dystopian space have their roots in the nineteenth-century metropolis and, in chapter 3, I showed how this literary tradition projects a reverse mirror image of the colony in seventeenth-century of utopias such as Utopia (1516) and The Isle of Pines (1668). This is to say that the nineteenth-century dystopian metropolis developed alongside the neo-colonial projects of the nineteenth century, and carries with it a distorted version of the seventeenth-century utopian style. As a result, early dystopia is characterized by a fascination with the technocratic metropolis whose vertical structures stand as symbols of colonial might but also allow for the spectacular subversion of such power. Here I showed that within this discourse of future New Yorks, Londons and Parises, E.M. Forster’s 1909 short story “The Machine Stops” intervenes to suggest a new type of dystopian space. The first Matrix-style narrative, Forster’s short story presents a Machine World and dystopian space that is structured around communication technologies rather than around the architecture and transportation technology of the metropolis. I argued that this new dystopian variation can be best characterized as a “phenomenological dystopia”, as the isolation, uniformity and subversion of this dystopian space revolves around the differences between “natural” sense data and the mediated information stream of technology. I also argued that this shift represents a contraction of dystopian space, pushing back the boundaries of the dystopian from metropolitan city limits, to what can be seen and heard.

I continued to track this condensation of dystopian space through the genre’s interaction with television technology. In chapter 4, I positioned Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949) as a new dystopian textual variation and a continuation of the condensation of dystopian space. Orwell’s dystopian classic engages with emergent television technologies to construct a panoptic dystopian space. Big Brother and the telescreen construct a world where someone may always be watching in order to
enforce total compliance with Party rule. In the novel this constant, unverifiable panoptic surveillance is used to structure dystopian space in a new way. Rather than using architecture like traditional dystopia, or sense data as with “The Machine Stops”, Nineteen Eighty-Four manages the dystopian space through the human body. By means of panoptic telescreen, Big Brother imposes a stringent choreography of movements that mark allegiance to Party ideology while providing the dystopian space with its isolation and uniformity. In this way, work, exercise and recreation become otherwise meaningless ritualistic performances of bodily compliance that are constantly watched for the smallest deviation from the norm. Similarly, dystopian subversion also operates along these lines in Orwell’s novel. Rather than destroy dystopia’s architecture or seek non-machine mediated information, dissidents in Nineteen Eighty-Four secretly perform non-sanctioned movements such as writing and engaging in sexual intercourse. This provides dystopian narrative with a yet smaller space, retracting dystopian limits from what can be seen and heard to the limits of the body.

In chapter 5, I argued that this development reached its most recent stage with the cyberpunk of the 1980s. I looked towards William Gibson’s Sprawl trilogy (1984-1988) in order to advance the argument that under the influence of computer and Internet technologies, dystopia became condensed to the extent that it reached singularity with the concept of cyberspace. I proposed that cyberspace constitutes both a technological, temporal singularity as well as a spatial singularity. This is to say that Gibson’s texts and their invocation of technological singularity rely on computer technologies that suggest a spatial singularity for a user interface. I attributed these qualities to the effectiveness of computer and TCP/IP technologies in intimating their dominance over space. Consequently, cyberspace, Gibson’s personal variety of nil-space, is characterized by its thoroughgoing dislocation from “normal”, Euclidian space, as well as by the simultaneity of data availability that translates into its uniform data topography.

I then argued that as singularity dystopia interferes with spatial rules and dimensions, it also disrupts to some extent traditional dystopian poetics. I developed this argument by showing how cyberspace both cites and deconstructs earlier dystopian traditions. For example, Gibson’s cyberspace cites the modernist architecture of the traditional, metropolitan dystopian and replaces it with an eclectic,
postmodern mix of classical architecture and mathematical grids rendered textually in the style of MTV music videos. Gibson’s cyberspace also engages with phenomenological dystopia but disrupts this method of dystopian construction through synesthesia, denying the possibility of unambiguous and stable sense data. Finally, cyberspace also deconstructs panoptic dystopian narrative. While its technologies do nurture a panoptic desire, the narrative destabilizes the body so that it can no longer function effectively as the recipient of this surveillance interest. In the Sprawl, cyberbodies and cyberborgs call into question the vestigial space of the body and undermine its potential as an instrument of ideological control. I concluded this final chapter by placing these observations in the context of contemporary critical theories of dystopian narrative.

The ideas that I explored over the course of these five chapters are important because they help us to better understand the effects of technological development and the ambiguous nature of dystopian narrative. The notion that dystopia is a genre that answers to certain spatial poetics allows us to avoid the trap of thinking about dystopian narratives as warnings and expressions of fear, while making it possible to read these texts equally as articulations of desire. In the case of communication technologies, the telegraph, television and the Internet inform dystopian variations that express a deep fascination with, and not just fear of, the possibilities of the shifting paradigms of space entailed by these technologies. In this way, “The Machine Stops” (1909), Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949), Neuromancer (1984) and The Matrix (1999) reveal a progression from Modern, stable concepts of Euclidian space to Postmodern spatial instability, the relationship of this development to communication technology, as well as the potential appeal of these shifts.

But the idea that dystopian narrative is not a genre of warnings and nightmare visions has currency beyond the subject of communication technologies as well. Also outside the limits of cyber visions, dystopian narrative continues to give vital clues about subliminal desire alongside its more obvious “critical” content. For example, transportation technology, another staple subject of dystopian narrative, likewise tends to inspire dystopian fiction that combines fear and desire. Indeed, J.G. Ballard’s Crash (1973) and George Miller’s Mad Max (1979) can most obviously be read as expressions of the anxieties associated with the automobile and as warnings inspired by the 1973 oil crisis. However, beyond these narratives’ critiques of the car, their
aestheticization of car crashes presents a heady mixture of destruction and sexuality. This potentially perverse automotive pleasure again raises an important question: is the main attraction of these dystopias their ability to warn against impending disaster or do they provide a form of pornographic pleasure that centers on the technological extension of the human body?

Similar questions might for instance also be raised about dystopian narratives that “warn” against ecological catastrophe. A recent example of this process at work, James Cameron’s Avatar (2009), is, at the narrative level, a transparent piece of eco-criticism that raises questions about sustainability and the use of natural resources. However, the film frames these Luddite fears exclusively in high technology. Promotion for the film relies solely on its use of “breakthrough” stereoscopic film techniques, advanced motion capture, high resolution computer rendering, as well as the high production values that are associated with special-effects centered Hollywood films. Avatar’s “critical” pastoral images, then, are couched in the language of Silicon Valley and viewed from the comfortable perspective of a Hollywood blockbuster that seems to convey the “real” ideological content of the film, namely that technology is a highly attractive consumer good.

There seems to be the potential, then, to apply some of the findings of this study to dystopian narrative more broadly. While telecommunication technology provides the dystopian genre with some of its main corpus, the same ambiguous relationship between overt fear and subliminal desire for technological development also surfaces in other dystopian forms. There is a distinct, general need, then, to move away from the standard interpretative scheme which entails reading dystopian narratives as being intended by their authors to create a possible world that is somehow “worse” than “reality”. Without a doubt, dystopian narrative is representative of more emotions than fear and this should be reflected in our reading methods. Indeed, as new technologies come online, it will be especially important to remain sensitive to the “subconscious” of dystopian narrative, and to resist buying into their textual and visual shorthand of nightmare futures and post-apocalyptic landscapes to the exclusion of alternative readings. New technologies such as video games, genetic engineering and mobile phones have already found their way into dystopian narrative (see for example David Cronenberg’s eXistenZ (1999), Margaret Atwood’s Oryx and Crake (2003) and Stephen King’s Cell (2006),
respectively). As GPS-equipped smart phones, touch devices and augmented reality applications find their way into the media landscape, dystopian narrative will continue to provide vital clues about users’ fears as well as their subliminal desires, and this thesis has been an attempt to provide a model for reading these narratives as they expand with new technologies.
Summary

The subject of this dissertation is the relationship between dystopian narrative and telecommunication technology. Communication devices, such as the telegraph, television and the Internet often serve as inspiration for literature and movies that seem to present a diegetic world that is “worse” than contemporary reality. For example, television informs George Orwell’s dystopian classic *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). The dystopian qualities of this novel are to a great extent the direct consequence of the so-called “telescreen”: a television that is not just watched by citizens of Oceania but that also allows Big Brother to constantly observe his subjects. In dystopian film, communication devices also often create such—seemingly—nightmarish environments. For example, *The Matrix* (1999) refers to the Internet to create a fictional world in which users are no longer able to separate “natural reality” from technological mediation.

This dissertation is principally concerned with the question of why telecommunication devices can so effectively call to mind “dystopianness”. Why are such technologies so characteristic for this genre, and how did the “cinematophote” in E.M. Forster’s “The Machine Stops” (1909), the “telescreen” from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, HAL 9000 from *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1969) and cyberspace become dystopian symbols?

To answer these questions it is first necessary to reevaluate what dystopian narrative entails exactly. Both popular culture and critical literature tend to describe utopian literature exclusively in terms of desire and aspiration, while dystopian narrative is almost entirely seen as the representation of fear. However, it is difficult to maintain these notions in light of, for example, dystopian movies like *The Matrix* (1999) and *Avatar* (2009), which frame their apparent Luddite fears in high-technology special effects. To what extent can *The Matrix*’s warning about computers and the Internet be understood as sincere if the movie is primarily concerned with demonstrating the power of these technologies?

Utopian and dystopian narratives are better understood as representations of space than as narratives that articulate either hope or fear. Utopian narratives are typically set on remote islands and planets, or in similarly remote cities and countries. Such isolated spaces allow for the ideological experimentation with which utopian
narrative is generally concerned. Moreover, these spaces are characterized by a homogenous topography which reflects the unanimous acceptance of utopian ideology. By contrast, dystopian narrative is concerned with the disruption of such isolated, homogeneous spaces. The dystopian urge is characterized by the destruction of walls and barriers, which demonstrates the subversion of dominant ideology.

By looking at utopian and dystopian literature as spatial structures rather than as narratives about “good” and “bad” societies, the relationship between these narrative traditions and telecommunication technologies becomes clear. Devices such as the telegraph and the Internet are subject to spatial transformations that are analogous to the spatial strategies of utopian and dystopian discourse. The dislocation of knowledge from space that these technologies suggest present themselves as user-spaces which are isolated from “normal” space and have a homogenous data topography. Concepts such as “The Global Village” and “cyberspace” are therefore characterized by similar spatial properties as utopian and dystopian narrative. As a result, these spaces, as well as the technologies with which they are associated, have proven to be such effective dystopian symbols. Seen from this perspective, dystopian narrative cannot be read exclusive in terms of its ability to represent fear. Dystopian symbols such as the telescreen, Big Brother and cyberspace also express admiration and desire for the development of telecommunication technologies, and especially for their effects on our concepts of space.
Nederlandse Samenvatting


Utopische en dystopische verhalen kunnen beter worden begrepen als specifieke representaties van ruimte, dan als verhalen die uitsluitend verlangen and angst weergeven. Utopische verhalen spelen zich doorgaans af op afgelegen eilanden,
planeten, steden en landen. Deze afgezonderde ruimtes maken ideologische experimenten mogelijk waarin utopieën kunnen gedijen. Bovendien wordt dit soort ruimtes gekenmerkt door een eenvormige geografie die de algemene acceptatie van utopische ideologie weergeeft. Dystopische verhalen, daarentegen, draaien om het beschadigen van dergelijke afgezonderde en eenvormige ruimtes. Het afbreken van muren en barrières is kenmerkend voor de dystopie en laat de afwijzing zien van de in het verhaal dominante ideologie.

Door utopische en dystopische literatuur te zien als ruimtelijke structuren in plaats van verhalen over “goede” en “slechte” samenlevingen, wordt duidelijk welke relatie er bestaat tussen deze narratieve tradities and telecommunicatietechnologieën, en wat deze relatie dan behelst. Communicatiemiddelen zoals de telegraaf en het internet zijn onderhevig aan ruimtelijke en veranderende processen die sterk lijken op de ruimtelijke strategieën van utopisch en dystopisch discours. De ontkoppeling van kennis en ruimte die gesuggereerd wordt door deze technologieën, presenteert zich namelijk aan de gebruiker als een bibliotheek van informatie die losstaat van de ruimtelijkheid en die daarnaast ook een homogeen karakter heeft. Ruimtes als “The Global Village” en “cyberspace” worden dus gekenmerkt door gelijksoortige ruimtelijke eigenschappen als de utopie en dystopie. Hierdoor zijn zij, en de technieken waar ze mee verbonden zijn, zo toont dit proefschrift aan, zo effectief gebleken als utopische en dystopische symbolen.

Door op deze manier naar dystopische verhalen te kijken, blijkt dat dit genre en de symbolen waarvan het zich bedient, niet exclusief kunnen worden gelezen als de verwoordingen van angst. Voor dystopische symbolen als het “telescreen”, Big Brother en cyberspace geldt dat deze ook verwondering over en het verlangen naar ontwikkelingen in telecommunicatie uitdrukken, en niet in de minste plaats het effect weergeven van deze technologieën op ons concept van ruimte.
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