The Entertainment is Terrorism: the Subversive Politics of Doing Anything at All

Joe Woods

Virginia Commonwealth University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd

Part of the Digital Humanities Commons

© The Author

Downloaded from https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/4222

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.
The Entertainment is Terrorism: the Subversive Politics of Doing Anything at All

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

Joseph Allen Woods
BA English, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2014

Director: Dr. Jennifer Rhee, Assistant Professor, Department of English

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
May, 2016
For M Hill. Thank you for everything.
# Table of Contents

Abstract iv  
Introduction 1  
Law, Technology, and the Body 19  
Weaponized Media 30  
The Subversive Politics of Doing Anything at All 43  
Works Cited 55  
Vita 59
Abstract

When the body is observed through a certain combination of technologies, there can be subversive politics to doing anything at all. The nature of media and biopolitics has permitted for a set of systems aimed at total control of the human body; a power which can permeate all facets of life. This thesis is a collection of essays which argues that speculative fiction contains multitudes of approaches to biopolitical discourse, permitting the reader of the text to approach politics from their own set of experiences, but not allowing the political to be ignored. These chapters contain three separate but interrelated arguments regarding the nature of power: “Law, Technology, and the Body,” “Weaponized Media,” and “The Subversive Politics of Doing Anything at All.” This thesis creates working definitions of critical or political concepts which the chapters engage, defining terms such as speculative fiction, formalism, and biopolitics. The texts which these chapters primarily rely upon to convey examples of the visibility of these concepts—the work of Margaret Atwood and David Foster Wallace—will also be explored in these pages, prescribing specific interpretations of their plots and suggesting possible readings of the way the narratives describe technologies.

The first chapter, “Law, Technology, and the Body,” posits that computational metaphors for humans are used to enforce power, particularly through the construction of law, which is prominent in works of speculative fiction. This chapter will use biopolitical theory as well as formalist readings to approach the texts: it begins by explaining the biopolitical approach to the texts which permits for such readings, then elaborates upon law, power structures, and technology which affect the body within Margaret Atwood’s MaddAddam trilogy. It ultimately concludes by suggesting that these structures will be visible within all narratives, but particularly
prominent in speculative fiction due to the way speculative fiction engages with and responds to the technologies of the real world.

The second chapter, “Weaponized Media,” shows that the trope of weaponized media is a compelling lens through which to approach text and an apt metaphor for the relationship between art and power, elucidating its prominence within speculative fiction. This argument relies primarily upon structuralism, linguistic theory, Russian formalism, and conflict theory to explain the highly-politicized use of weapons in these texts. Beginning with a survey of examples of this trope in speculative fiction, particularly within David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, the chapter concludes by reflecting upon the biopolitical structures which contribute to and are reflected by this trope.

The final chapter, “The Subversive Politics of Doing Anything at All,” is a culmination of the prior arguments. Supporting the chapter’s titular thesis, Russian formalism, media theory, and the surveillance and race theory of Simone Browne are used as central tenets to support this argument’s progression. This chapter argues that media propagates norms, that all things are now media. The consequences that follow from the nature of media entail that due to a hyper-connected world and the conflation of fear and terrorism, almost all things can be considered outside the norm—that doing almost anything at all is viewed as subversive by some, particularly by normative structures and governments. Speculative fiction questions these structures, specifically asking the reader to consider the political structures inherent in every action that they might commit to.
Introduction

When the body is observed through a certain combination of technologies, there can be subversive politics to doing anything at all. The nature of media and biopolitics has permitted for a set of systems aimed at total control of the human body; a power which can permeate all facets of life. This thesis is a collection of essays which argues that speculative fiction contains multitudes of approaches to biopolitical discourse, permitting the reader of the text to approach politics from their own set of experiences, but not allowing the political to be ignored. These chapters contain three separate but interrelated arguments regarding the nature of power: “Law, Technology, and the Body,” “Weaponized Media,” and “The Subversive Politics of Doing Anything at All.”¹ This introduction serves to create the working definitions of critical or political concepts which the chapters engage, defining terms such as speculative fiction, formalism, and biopolitics. The texts which these chapters primarily rely upon to convey examples of the visibility of these concepts—the work of Margaret Atwood and David Foster Wallace—will also be explored in these pages, prescribing specific interpretations of their plots and suggesting possible readings of the way the narratives describe technologies. Finally, this introduction will conclude with a description of the three proceeding chapters: their arguments and their frameworks for critical approach.

The overarching unifying element to the following chapters is an engagement with speculative fiction as a body of work which facilitates critical interpretations in the realm of the aesthetic, philosophical, sociological, and political. Though each of these chapters will suggest

¹ The structure of these arguments will be examined later in this introduction.
formalist or structuralist readings of specific speculative fiction texts, implicit in these readings is the belief that there is no fundamental moral or scientific formula with which these texts can be engaged, and that different readers will find different truths in the text. The arguments that follow assert that works of speculative fiction create metaphors, symbols, and aphorisms regarding biopolitics, governmental structures, and the control of populations. These symbolic structures ultimately define the inherently political nature of media: that no object can be divorced from the environment from which it was produced. The political contexts embodied by media are more thoroughly considered within the third chapter, “The Subversive Politics of Doing Anything at All.”

Speculative fiction, as a genre, can be considered a loose categorical container for various forms of literature, not excluding film or even music. Though implicitly fiction, speculative fiction, at its core, contains non-fictional elements. Speculative fiction is a form of science fiction; a subgenre which thoroughly engages with what could feasibly happen in the real world, therefore inspiring the ‘speculative’ moniker. Arthur C. Clarke, science fiction writer and co-writer of the screenplay for 2001: A Space Odyssey, defines science fiction as “something that could happen—but usually you wouldn’t want it to,” in the introduction to his Collected Stories, just after claiming that “Attempts to define it will continue as long as people write PhD theses.” Margaret Atwood, author of works such as the MaddAddam trilogy and The

---

2 This assumption that there is no one correct reading of a text is itself inherently an argument, in a similar vein as that of structuralism’s approach to texts (see Jonathan Culler’s The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction), but not, in the same vein as the argument itself, necessarily asserted to be the complete truth. It is feasible that a reading that asserts an absolute truth that speculative fiction texts are reaching toward could be either productive or entertaining. It is not necessary to consider the relativist system used to approach literature inherent in the structure of these essays valid to view the arguments themselves valid—they are all mutually exclusive.

3 This concept, loosely taken from the work of P. N. Medvedev and M. M. Bakhtin, will be argued later in this essay.

4 Clarke, p. ix.
Handmaid’s Tale, has defined speculative fiction as “stories set on Earth and employing elements that already exist in some form, like genetic engineering, as opposed to more wildly hypothetical science fiction ideas like time travel, faster-than-light drives, and transporters.”5 Due to the conjunction of science fiction themes and biopolitical discourse, works of speculative fiction are explicitly science fiction stories which contain metaphors for or are simple descriptions of acts of power that not only could happen but are already happening. Atwood has gone as far as to say that the term “science fiction” does not cover the scope of her work; in an interview with Geek’s Guide to the Galaxy, she stated, “I like there to be some resemblance between what is promised on the outside and what you get on the inside, and if it says ‘science fiction,’ I want there to be something that doesn’t already exist.”6 The following chapters in this thesis will argue that power structures are made visible by works of speculative fiction through the examination of three distinct structures: law, language, and media.

The premises of the proceeding chapters are predicated upon the perception of literature as a sort of tool. Language itself is, as argued by Walter J. Ong, a technology and tool: his work Orality and Literacy argues that the acts of speech and writing consist of two separate sets of processes within the human body. The physical elements of non-oral modes of communication, like the “use of tools and other equipment” for writing, are “completely artificial.”7 This artificiality permits for outside forces, beyond the user’s thoughts or biological processes, to manipulate them. “More than any other single invention,” Ong argues, “writing has transformed human consciousness”—creating a system in which memory exists both inside and outside of

---

5 Geek’s Guide, “Margaret Atwood.”
6 Ibid.
7 Ong, p. 80–1.
human beings.\textsuperscript{8} This externalization of consciousness means that literature exists as a device which controls aspects of human memory and consciousness when consumed—interestingly reflecting the way through which biopolitical processes exert control over the human body via specific approaches to biological processes.

This thesis will rely upon and respond to two schools of literary criticism: ‘Russian Formalism’ and reader-response theory. David Bleich, in his essay “The Subjective Character of Critical Interpretation,” responds to reader-response criticism—a branch of literary theory which has permeated the educational consciousness of the United States. Bleich agrees with the sentiment that “knowledge about literature is really knowledge and not merely a record of fleeting personal observations,”\textsuperscript{9} meaning that there is truth to be found in a text, but disagrees with the idea that these truths are necessarily universal or “hard facts”. Literature is, he argues, a community-based object, with a literal subjective character; different readers will come to different conclusions based upon their positions within interpretive communities. This is to say that this thesis will be relying upon a type of subjectivism which, in the words of Bleich, relies upon different levels of faith: “The truth of the Bible requires the faith of the reader; the truth of the acceleration of gravity does not. The truth about literature has no meaning independent of the truth about the reader.”\textsuperscript{10} It is always up to the reader of speculative fiction to parse out whether or not they are reading something which requires faith to believe. The following chapters also adhere to Bleich’s assertion that “the observer is always part of what is being observed,”\textsuperscript{11} particularly in regards to the process of reading: the reader of speculative fiction is

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid, p. 77.
\textsuperscript{9} Bleich, p. 739.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid, p. 745.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid, p. 743.
always “observing one’s own mind”¹² and establishing relationships between themselves and the text.

Wolfgang Iser, a notable proponent of reader-response criticism, argues that “every literary text invites some form of participation on the part of the reader. A text which lays things out before the reader in such a way he can accept or reject them will lessen the degree of participation as it allows him nothing but a yes or no.”¹³ For the purposes of this essay, this will be taken to mean that different readers will participate within the literary system in different ways through their particular readings of the text. This is the cornerstone of the arguments of these chapters: participation in literature is voluntary but participation in systems is not.

Speculative fiction, by the nature of its structures, questions the nature of political and biopolitical systems by spurring a type of conversation about them and allowing for the reader to become a more active participant in discourse regarding bodily control.

P. N. Medvedev and M. M. Bakhtin, in their co-written¹⁴ work *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*, explore the situations from which literature is generated in their chapter “The Object, Tasks, and Methods of Literary History.” Medvedev and Bakhtin assert that it is impossible to separate the work of literature from the environment from which it was created:

From a strictly historical point of view the literary work is a dependent and therefore actually inseparable element of the literary environment. It occupies a definite place in this environment and is directly determined by its influences. It would be absurd to think —

---

¹² Ibid.
¹³ Iser, p. 198.
¹⁴ The actual status of authorship of this work is contested.
that a work which occupies a place in the literary environment could avoid its direct influences or be an exception to its unity and regularity.\textsuperscript{15}

This is another of the fundamental assumptions of the arguments in the following chapters: that the environment in which speculative fiction was written is something which the individual work responds to and comments upon.

Starting with observations from Michel Foucault’s foundational lectures, the subsequent chapters of this collection will approach biopolitics as the means through which government controls groups of people. This control is exerted by means of a process of controlling life referred to as biopower: a combination of regulations and technologies which view individuals as distinct populations. The proceeding chapters will focus mainly on the intersection of societal power and the body, and its subsequent effects upon humans and humanity. Michel Foucault’s series of lectures and books developed his theories over time, constructing the foundations of what this thesis will be considering biopolitics. In the chapter “Right of Death and Power over Life” from the collection \textit{The History of Sexuality}, Foucault explains the role of nations and national conflict as a desire for control situated in this era as the control over the right to live, resulting in “a power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death.”\textsuperscript{16} This means that the point of control of bodily regulation, according to Foucault, has shifted to a mindset where it is life itself that must be controlled, strictly in opposition to the “ancient right to \textit{take} life or \textit{let} live,” resulting in “the recent wane of the rituals that accompanied it.”\textsuperscript{17} A realm of political and physical structures, which Foucault refers to as bio-politics, has emerged from this shift in

\textsuperscript{15} Medvedev and Bakhtin, p. 10.
\textsuperscript{16} Foucault “Right,” p. 43.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
control, resulting in increase in a concern with “the body as a machine”\(^\text{18}\) to be controlled and disciplined. This concept of the mechanization of the body is further pursued in the third chapter of this text. Foucault’s bio-politics are explicitly situated in “techniques of power”\(^\text{19}\) as opposed those using said techniques—meaning that it is the specific actions, rather than the institutions which use them, which substantially impact the rituals, the process of making history, and politics of humanity.

Foucault’s work has been elaborated upon by many theorists. In particular, the following arguments will draw upon certain expansions of biopolitical theory into the realms of commerce, law, and disease. Melinda Cooper’s *Life as Surplus* examines the many ways in which industry and governments attempt to extract capital from the building blocks of life—endeavoring to draw as much money from their constituents as possible. Cooper argues that there is a bioeconomy created as a “result of a whole series of legislative and regulatory measures designed to relocate economic production at the genetic, microbial, and cellular level, so that life becomes, literally, annexed within capitalist processes of accumulation.”\(^{20}\) The control of bodies for commercial profit is, for Cooper, inherently tied to the political system, as “the emergence of the biotech industry is inseparable from the rise of neoliberalism as the dominant political philosophy of our time.”\(^{21}\) Underlying all arguments in this thesis is the important question of motivation: who is attempting this control and why? Though this argument will not speak to specific political events in the real world, commercial viability will be explored further as an aspect of agency for humans in these narratives, particularly within the first chapter. Another

\(^{18}\) Ibid p. 44.  
^{19}\) Ibid p. 55.  
\(^{20}\) Cooper, p. 19.  
\(^{21}\) Ibid.
notable mode for political control is that of the interpretation of law: Sora Y. Han’s article “Strict Scrutiny: The Tragedy of Constitutional Law” discusses modes of legislative interpretation designed to exert control over bodies through an examination of both the internment of Japanese Americans and the film *Snow Falling on Cedars*. Han’s article will be interpreted further in the first chapter, “Law, Technology, and the Body.”

The following arguments will also not adhere to the Foucaultian dichotomy of *life* and *not-life*; specifically meaning that there is more to governmental power over whether or not something or someone is ‘permitted’ to be alive or ‘protected’ from being dead. Lauren Berlant’s concept of *slow death* demonstrates the way in which transgressions upon bodily boundaries and viability are justified through their inability to be seen at first glance—the consequences of “small” controlling moments of bodies, rarely discussed, cause a type of slow death which literally slowly removes life from the body. Her essay, “Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)” states that “lives are not novels, and no critic has ever accounted for all the details in a novel either”⁰—ultimately arguing that there are different types of self-selected or imposed agency for human beings which have varying degrees of visibility and that sovereignty is used as a tool to qualify and quantify every action which humans take. All of these concepts, however, will be considered to have blurred boundaries, and to never be binaries—for the purposes of the arguments in the proceeding chapters, one chapter of a novel can be speculative fiction while the others are not, or a book can become more or less engaged with biopolitics as time passes and cultural connotations shift between any one reader.

---

²² Berlant, p. 758.
Speculative fiction plays an important role in the communication of the messages of biopolitical theory. As a genre, speculative fiction will attempt to deconstruct structures in the world, sometimes even suggesting ways to reconstruct it. The second chapter of this thesis, “Weaponized Media,” engages with one of the many ways in which speculative fiction explains the world: when objects used to inform or entertain are used as tools to kill or maim, any number of narrative threads can emerge which question the world and the way it is viewed. The genre of speculative fiction uniquely builds upon the expectations that the reader will have for political structures: it is necessary for the reader to be able to recognize and relate to the objects introduced in these narratives, though it is not necessary for the reader to interpret them in a specific way. By opening up multiple modes of engagement as a process of personal discovery for the reader while resonating with the urgency that can be found in the current political climate—regardless of the time in which the work is read—the work is able to make multiple layers or statements to entertain and inform.

The potentialities inherent in each work of speculative fiction are, perhaps, why this genre is gaining more traction in current pop culture: there are multiple recent (at time of writing) works emerging which are direct adaptations of these works: The End of the Tour, a film which predominantly features the life of David Foster Wallace as he tours the United States in support of Infinite Jest and a television series in development for Margaret Atwood’s MaddAddam trilogy, produced by the influential director Darren Aronofsky. Journalist and speculative fiction writer Cory Doctorow, in the introduction to his freely-distributed, “young adult” speculative fiction novel Little Brother, discusses his political philosophies which inspired him to write and release his writing under a Creative Commons license, as he does for all of his
books: “If you’re not making art with the intention of having it copied,” Doctorow argues, “you’re not really making art for the twenty-first century.” Doctorow asserts his work is “about the future (on a good day) or at least the present,” finally stating that “Art that’s not supposed to be copied is from the past.” Speculative fiction is art about the future, for the future.

The chapters that follow will draw from many works of speculative fiction as appropriate for the progression of the argument, but will rely most upon the works of David Foster Wallace and Margaret Atwood: *Infinite Jest*, and the MaddAddam trilogy, respectively. As previously explained, the structure of these arguments will assume that there are many possible meanings within literary texts, and that there is no one *true* message to draw from any one work; the interpretations within this thesis will, however, be arguments which are constructed by means of support from elements within or outside of each text. The following descriptions of the works of Wallace and Atwood are one of many possible readings of the text, yet these readings will comprise the context for the arguments in the proceeding chapters.

David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, released in 1996, has multiple groundbreaking elements, one of which is its physical form. The first edition is 25 centimetres thick and the body of the text is 1,079 pages long; a physicality further complicated by the tome’s 388 endnotes referenced throughout the volume, some of which span several pages and have endnotes of their own. Different readers have crafted their own approaches to tackling the

---

23 Doctorow, Loc. 146. Doctorow comments that, in early 2008, “the London police put up posters asking us all to turn in people who seem to be taking pictures of the ubiquitous CCTV spy-cameras because anyone who pays too much attention to the surveillance machine is probably a terrorist” (Loc. 72). It is this language that informed the author eight years ago, the novel’s clear allegory reflected in the title of this thesis.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 According to the VCU ALMA record.
27 In the copy used for reference in these chapters (see Works Cited page).
materiality of the text, including but not limited to physically deconstructing and reconstructing
the binding of the novel in order to literally split the text into “a few pieces.”

The plot of the text is non-linear, opening with a college application interview for Hal
Incandenza, whom one author argues “both is and is not, must be and cannot be” the narrator of
this novel.29 Within the first few pages, it becomes clear that something has happened to Hal.
His interaction with the interview board of a university is mediated by his uncle, Charles Travis
(C.T.); when C.T. is asked to leave so that Hal can speak for himself, Hal is immediately
restrained and sent off to a hospital, after having emitting “subanimalistic noises and sounds”
accompanied with gestures like “a writhing animal with a knife in its eye.”30 Hal is, however,
notably calm and collected throughout this whole ordeal, matter-of-factly relating the events
which will occur after his hospitalization to the reader with no sense of anxiety or dread about
them. The next chapter featuring Hal, however, is comparably frantic, as a ten-year-old Hal
converses with his father, who is disguised as a therapist.

The interpretation of the plot of Infinite Jest which underlies the arguments of this thesis
is largely based upon the work of the late writer, programmer, and activist Aaron Swartz in his
article “What Happens at the End of Infinite Jest? (or the Infinite Jest ending explained).”
Swartz opens his article with a quote from Wallace, given in a 1996 interview: “There is an
ending as far as I’m concerned. Certain kind of parallel lines are supposed to start converging in
such a way that an ‘end’ can be projected by the reader somewhere beyond the right frame. If no
such convergence or projection occurred to you, then the book’s failed for you.” The final pages

28 There are likely a multitude of conversations similar to this one online; see one example on Reddit:
https://www.reddit.com/r/books/comments/28toju/cutting_up_infinite_jest/
29 Oard.
of the novel do little to wrap up the plot: as some characters converge and diverge, this chapter can easily be read as as final as any of the others, as no big “mysteries” or other aspects of the plot are concluded. This lack of an immediately visible resolution to the plot has impacted both the tone of the novel and the critical response that it has received: *Infinite Jest* often has a daunting, pitiless aura, and critical response to this text must necessarily reflect what sort of reading of the novel it is responding to.

The novel follows the lives of an ensemble cast of characters at different moments in its progression. It largely follows Hal Incandenza, however, who can argued to be the protagonist.\(^{31}\) The novel reflects Hal’s life at different stages, but he spends most of its progression as a seventeen-year-old tennis academy student. Hal’s father, James Orin Incandenza (often referred to as JOI or simply ‘himself’), having been a tennis player in his childhood, went on to become an ‘optical physicist’, developing this field of science and revolutionizing the way that the United States consumes energy. Later in his life, JOI turned to filmmaking, producing a variety of avant-garde films met with critical disdain. One of these films, Swartz argues, is the deadly Entertainment; a media object so entertaining that viewers die from being unable to do anything but watch it. JOI later violently kills himself, with Hal discovering the body; Swartz also argues that Hal’s father returns to earth as a ‘wraith’, who both drugs his son, causing him to be able to “feel and believe,”\(^{32}\) and possesses another student to be able to spend time with Hal by means of a tennis match. Other characters include Orin Incandenza, older brother to Hal and professional football player, whom Swartz perceives as the perpetrator of terroristic mailings of the Entertainment to unsuspecting victims. Another pivotal character is Joelle van Dyne: once

\(^{31}\) As does the *Cyclopedia of Literary Characters.*

\(^{32}\) Swartz.
referred to as the P.G.O.A.T. (Prettiest Girl Of All Time) by Orin, she later wears a veil to cover her face at all times after possibly having had acid thrown in her face by her mother.\textsuperscript{33} She plays the only character in the Entertainment. Joelle eventually becomes the radio DJ Madame Psychosis, who gains a cult following; she later attempts suicide and ends up a resident of the Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House. Mario Incandenza is the disfigured, filmmaking middle sibling of Hal and Orin; it is strongly suggested that he is the illegitimate child of Arvil, their temperamental Québécois mother, and CT, Avril’s adoptive brother. Don Gately is a recovering thief and drug addict, working as staff at Ennet House for much of the novel. There are several other minor characters who also play pivotal roles in the plot.

The novel follows events centered, largely, around two locations: Enfield Tennis Academy, an affluent and rigorous academy for high-schoolers founded by JOI, and the aforementioned Ennet House, a dilapidated home for the unwanted of this society. The prestigious academy sits at the top of a hill which the run-down home for the addicted sits at the foot of. Political tensions are high in this novel, as a rather large, thoroughly toxic portion of upper New England has been forcibly gifted to the Canadian government, referred to as either the Great Concavity or Great Convexity depending on the political affiliations of the speaker; this situation has caused multiple cells of Québécois separatist terrorist groups to emerge and gain traction with Canadian citizens. A main narrative thread in the novel describes the battle between Québécois terrorists and the U.S. government to find the Entertainment and its distributor.

\textsuperscript{33} The \textit{Cyclopedia of Literary Characters} states this as fact (Magill p. 1200). This is one of many mysteries of the novel; see footnote 92.
D. T. Max argues in an article in The New Yorker that Infinite Jest “is a novel about the narcotic power of language—a power so overwhelming that Wallace has to shed narrative into tiny strips to keep it under control.” This descriptor is especially apt for its reflection of the Entertainment itself, a media which literally possesses mortal power. The second chapter of this thesis, “Weaponized Media,” further engages this trope as a microcosm of biopolitics in speculative fiction.

This thesis will also analyze Margaret Atwood’s MaddAddam trilogy: Oryx and Crake (2003), The Year of the Flood (2009), and MaddAddam (2013). Margaret Atwood, as previously mentioned, is a prolific Canadian speculative fiction writer. Her trilogy is mostly based in a post-apocalyptic world, recently devastated by a genetically engineered virus which achieved the genocide of the vast majority of the human population. This virus was designed to kill off the human race to make way for a new, genetically modified human variant, known to the human characters of the novel as Crakers.

The first novel in the trilogy, Oryx and Crake, begins with the introduction of Snowman, whom the Craker children approach for information about objects belonging to the old humanity which they’ve found—things that are “from before.” It is slowly revealed that the population of Crakers, with their own sets of biologically and socially programmed customs, revere Snowman and hold him to be an authority on the workings of the world. The story of the novel is told through flashbacks: that the world before was one of hyper-capitalistic governance; where profiteering corporations hosted their employees and their families within safe, highly regulated and observed compounds; and that there is a world outside, referred to as the

---

34 Max.
35 Atwood “Oryx,” p. 7.
pleeblands, which is much more impoverished and dangerous. All aspects of this nation are monitored by the CorpSeCorps, a for-profit corporation which exists to provide security services for the other corporations and work to make sure that no profit is lost, often by extremely violent means. It is revealed that Snowman’s previous name was Jimmy—Snowman being a name chosen by Jimmy himself as a private joke in spite of Crake. Crake, Jimmy’s childhood friend, is extremely intelligent; the two play multiple games together, including Extinctathon, a computer game which requires encyclopedic knowledge of aspects of extinct animals; it is here that Crake draws his name, as his online username is chosen for the extinct Red-necked Crake. The two children also consume other media, including violent pornography, through which Jimmy and Crake first recognizes Oryx, a female child and sex trafficking victim who later, as an adult, plays a pivotal role in the story. Both the friendship and society gradually deteriorate as the two grow older and the CorpSeCorps employs more and more intrusive technology to quell the population; when both have graduated from college, Crake and Jimmy reunite as Crake hires Jimmy to work on a top-secret project: through the secret chatroom embedded in Extinctathon which provides a communication network for its environmental activist top players, Crake has constructed a team of scientists to build a genetically modified race of humans, who are socialized by Oryx, who introduces them to concepts that cannot be biologically programmed, like which animals to avoid to prevent themselves from coming into harm. These modified humans have ‘features’ such as green eyes; strict herbivore, recycled diets; pheromones to prevent predator attacks and to facilitate mating; programmed times of death; crippled facilities for abstract thought such as religion and writing; and many others. Crake decides to construct these beings due to his belief that humanity is a failed experiment which actively poisons the
earth; and thus he releases a virus which Jimmy believes to have killed everyone but him and the Crakers. This belief is shown to be false, however, as in the last moments of the novel: Jimmy prepares to confront three other humans, the last line reading “Zero hour, Snowman thinks. Time to go.”

*The Year of the Flood* arguably tells the same story from a different perspective: following the lives of two characters briefly introduced in *Oryx and Crake*, Ren and Toby, the reader is introduced to the pleeblands through the life stories of these two women, both having spent significant portions of their lives as members of the cult known as God’s Gardeners. This novel, like the first, is told through a series of flashbacks, this time told through the lens of another survivor of the genocide, Toby, a once high-ranking Eve in the God’s Gardeners. The God’s Gardeners are strict environmentalists and ethical vegetarians; they live in a compound consisting of several semi-abandoned buildings which they occupy, complete with rooftop gardens; their religion consists of Adams and Eves as figureheads, all of whom contain knowledge in specific fields. Adam One is the founder and father of the religion; throughout the novel, he preaches sermons which reflect the deteriorating state of the world and their religion’s place within it. Adam One anticipates a second Great Flood which will wash over humanity and cleanse it of its sins: he gets his wish near the end of the novel with the advance of Crake’s virus, which spares several members of the Gardeners, unbeknownst to Jimmy. Ren—a younger woman who grows up in the God’s Gardeners over the course of the novel as a sort of antithesis to Jimmy’s life in the compounds—is spared from the virus, as is her friend Amanda, but Amanda is later captured by two humans turned to lives of extreme violence from a form of

---

hybrid incarceration and entertainment for the masses, Painball, who brutally assault Amanda during her kidnapping. It is these two men, with Amanda, whom Jimmy finds at the end of the first novel.

The final novel, MaddAddam, loosely follows the life of Zeb, one of the high-ranking Adams from the God’s Gardeners before the apocalypse and Adam One’s brother. Toby is infatuated with Zeb, the latter of whom leads the survivors to attempt to rebuild society, culminating in an expedition which fails to rescue a dying Adam One and succeeds in killing the two men who had kidnapped Amanda. This story is also mostly told via the experiences of Toby, yet focused mainly on the life of Zeb, who explains multiple aspects of the naissance of the God’s Gardeners as well as the nature of their world. This novel also serves to show that the Crakers have fewer differences with humans than originally thought, as they begin to worship idols and are taught written language.

The proceeding chapters will apply the formal concepts outlined in this introduction in varying capacities to several works of speculative fiction in order to make specific arguments about the nature of writing and political systems in general. Though each of the chapters stand as separate arguments, there is a systemic progression through their development—each successive chapter argues for broader political ramifications from deeper readings of literature.

The first chapter, “Law, Technology, and the Body,” posits that computational metaphors for humans are used to enforce power, particularly through the construction of law, which is prominent in works of speculative fiction. This chapter will use biopolitical theory as well as formalist readings to approach the texts: it begins by explaining the biopolitical approach to the texts which permits for such readings, then elaborates upon law, power structures, and
technology which affect the body within Margaret Atwood’s MaddAddam trilogy. It ultimately concludes by suggesting that these structures will be visible within all narratives, but particularly prominent in speculative fiction due to the way speculative fiction engages with and responds to the technologies of the real world.

The second chapter, “Weaponized Media,” shows that the trope of weaponized media is a compelling lens through which to approach text and an apt metaphor for the relationship between art and power, elucidating its prominence within speculative fiction. This argument relies primarily upon structuralism, linguistic theory, Russian formalism, and conflict theory to explain the highly-politicized use of weapons in these texts. Beginning with a survey of examples of this trope in speculative fiction, particularly within David Foster Wallace’s Infinite Jest, the chapter concludes by reflecting upon the biopolitical structures which contribute to and are reflected by this trope.

The final chapter, “The Subversive Politics of Doing Anything at All,” is a cumulation of the prior arguments. Supporting the chapter’s titular thesis, Russian formalism, media theory, and the surveillance and race theory of Simone Browne are used as central tenets to support this argument’s progression. This chapter argues that media propagates norms, that all things are now media. The consequences that follow from the nature of media entail that due to a hyper-connected world and the conflation of fear and terrorism, almost all things can be considered outside the norm—that doing almost anything at all is viewed as subversive by some, particularly by normative structures and governments. Speculative fiction questions these structures, specifically asking the reader to consider the political structures inherent in every action that they might commit to.
Law, Technology, and the Body

The MaddAddam trilogy by Margaret Atwood crafts three separate narrative arcs, developed against the same speculative fiction background of a pre- and post-apocalyptic world, the lines between which are deliberately blurred.\textsuperscript{37} A central tenet of these novels is power over life: the ability to control, manipulate, subvert, and remove life from any number of individuals. This is closely related to the working definition of biopolitics outlined in the introduction of this thesis; that governments wield biopower—collections of technologies designed to exert power over life—to manipulate and amass groups of people for specific purposes. The lens of the MaddAddam trilogy provides a means through which to consider the ways in which an increasing faith in the capacities of technologies to prevent or deter crime has manipulated interpersonal relations in this novel to make biopower increasingly invisible, stratified, and stagnant—yet still discussed and questioned by some of the characters. This group control by the quantification of bodies is based upon systems of logic that are predicated upon an assumption that the metrics used are complete representations of the human body at question, which creates possibilities for speculative fiction narratives to question these assumptions.

Specifically, biopolitics will be interpreted as the assumptions made about human bodies or emotions derived from the outright control over any of the body’s contingent processes. Foucault, in his foundational volume \textit{The Will to Knowledge}, defines a “bio-politics of the population,” one of the means through which organizations exert power over life.\textsuperscript{38} He

\textsuperscript{37} For the purposes of this argument, these three novels, \textit{Oryx and Crake}, \textit{The Year of the Flood}, and \textit{MaddAddam} will be considered part of the same narrative structure, the plot and characters of which will be referred to collectively as “the MaddAddam trilogy.”

\textsuperscript{38} p. 44.
continues: “The setting up, in the course of the classical age, of this great bipolar technology—anatomic and biological, individualizing and specifying, directed toward the performances of the body, with attention to the processes of life—characterized a power whose highest function was no longer to kill, but to invest life through and through.”39 This chapter will focus specifically upon utterances of biopolitics in the MaddAddam trilogy: the specific tool and its use, devised to exert control. The foremost of all of these tools is the law—explicitly, the codified, nebulous, yet hegemonic set of rules which comprises the legal system in the United States of America.40

Strict scrutiny is the process by which the court system of the United States adjudicates the legality of a law based upon a “compelling government interest”41—directly permitting the relative application of a law based upon the interests of those in power. Sora Y. Han further elaborates upon this process in her essay “Strict Scrutiny: The Tragedy of Constitutional Law.” Through the lens of the Korematsu v. United States case, in which the Supreme Court ruled that Japanese internment during World War II was legal and justified, and the film Snow Falling on Cedars, a World War II period drama released in 1999, Han argues that the racial animus intrinsic in this decision reflects an overall mindset of the United States court system, making a strict dichotomy between the nation and the bodies which the nation administers.42 Not all laws or rules, however, need to be written down: law can have varying degrees of codification. This is the path that the MaddAddam trilogy takes—there is no mention of a unified body of law, yet

39 Ibid.
41 “Strict Scrutiny,” Legal Information Institute.
42 See p. 106.
most characters in this book concern themselves with the manner in which the government or a particular corporation would enforce the character’s deviation from said law.

Zeb, a character who plays the most prominent role in the book MaddAddam, has built his entire life upon the ways in which he can skirt regulations set in place, including when he ultimately becomes the individual enforcing the laws. Prior to the “Flood,” the mass extermination event of the human race, Zeb had an important role as an “Adam,” or leader, of a radical environmentalist group known as the God’s Gardeners. This religion imposes strict rules upon its congregation, none of which are referenceable as a strict codified law to be interpreted, as one of said tenants of the religion is to leave no trace of writing and thus all laws are subject to memory and recall. The second chapter of The Year of the Flood opens: “Beware of words. Be careful what you write. Leave no trails. this is what the Gardeners taught us, when I was a child among them. They told us to depend on memory, because nothing written down could be relied on.” Later revelations in the story show that these rules were not necessarily followed by the leadership of the God’s Gardeners. Through the lens of the daughter of his partner during much of The Year of the Flood, it is revealed that Zeb especially flaunts many of the rules set up by the God’s Gardeners. He refuses many tenets of sustainability preached by the group: “No daily showers was one of the many Gardener rules Zeb ignored. Our shower water came down a garden hose out of a rain barrel and was gravity-fed, so no energy was used. That was Zeb’s reason for making an exception for himself.” He also dresses in varying fashions in order to better interact with the outside world, which contradicts the decrees to wear sustainable clothing and not interact with the “pleeblanders,” though this is often done for the explicit purpose of

43 P. 6.
44 P. 64.
gathering information for what the council of leaders believed to be the good of the group.45 Zeb’s role actively questions the power relationships visible in the MaddAddam trilogy: specifically, the motivations of each individual who has the capacity to exert power.

In the MaddAddam trilogy, law is always interpreted, almost always under the guise of legislative tendency toward strict interpretation: judiciaries are only concerned with the “correct” way to read the text of a law. One of the sermons from *The Year of the Flood* confirms that the God’s Gardners believe this to be true: “But Man alone seeks Vengefulness, / And writes his abstract Laws on stone; / For this false Justice he has made, / He tortues limb and crushes bone.”46 Here, it is shown that law is a literal tool to be used against other individuals in the MaddAddam trilogy—a weapon which contains a great deal of kinetic energy.47 Those who have power within the systems of control in the MaddAddam trilogy are able to circumvent the law; for example, the Rev, the father of Adam One and Zeb, is not punished for murder due to careful navigation of the punitive system set in place by the CorpSeCorps, the violent regulatory force in these novels.48 The Rev is even able to largely escape punishment after being publicly humiliated for his transgressions by the two brothers.49 The deployment of law, here, becomes a weapon: a tool to be used to pursue one’s own self interest. The rest of the individuals within this system are left to suffer the aftermath: Adam and Zeb’s characters are dramatically changed

---

45 See p. 106.
46 p. 426.
47 See chapter two, “Weaponized Media,” for a discussion regarding the destructive power of media in speculative fiction narratives.
48 Introduced on page 27 of *Oryx and Crake* as defenders of the stability of the compounds, examples of their violence are more visible throughout *The Year of the Flood* and *MaddAddam* (particularly the latter).
49 See *MaddAddam* p. 301–2. After a public apology, the Rev is allowed to continue to lead a relatively normal life (until murdered by Zeb and associates in pages 302–7.)
by their father’s manipulation of the law to the point in which most of their discussions
throughout their lives is about their father.

Crake attempted to circumnavigate this aspect of the control of populations by designing
a new species of humanity without power structures. His dangerous philosophy extended to
many aspects of what was considered human life to the other characters of the novel, including
the abstraction of thought into complex imagery. All of these aspects of imagination and tool
use were supposedly removed from this new species so that they were thought to be simply
biologically incapable of committing the actions that Crake viewed as worthy of punishment:
“Crake thought he’d done away with all of that, eliminated what he called the G-spot in the
brain. *God is a cluster of neurons*, he’d maintained.”50 It is later revealed through the plot of
*MaddAddam*, particularly its final chapter, that Crake’s efforts in this direction were ultimately
futile. From the outset, Crake uses Oryx to introduce concepts which are not biologically
“programmed” into the new population, effectively immediately introducing culture51 and a
power structure where Oryx is the authority who dictates the laws:

The lessons Oryx taught were short: one thing at a time was best, said Crake. The
Paradice models [Crakers] weren’t stupid, but they were starting more or less from
scratch, so they liked repetition. Another staff member, some specialist in the field,
would go over the day’s item with Oryx—the leaf, insect, mammal, or reptile she was
about to explain. […] When she was ready, she’d slip through a reconforming doorway

---

50 *Oryx and Crake* p. 157.
51 Culture, for the purposes of this essay, will be considered “the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and
behavior that depends upon the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations” *(Merriam-Webster Online).*
concealed behind dense foliage. That way she could appear and disappear in the homeland of the Crakers without raising awkward questions in their minds.\footnote{\textit{Oryx and Crake} p. 309.}

Jimmy, Crake’s childhood friend, survives the genocide of the human race and, believing himself to be the sole survivor of the extinction event, takes on Oryx’s role of caretaker and source of knowledge, donning the moniker ‘Snowman’. This sage-like role is passed on to other characters later in the narrative, including one of the Crakers—finally bridging the gap to a member of their own species. The MaddAddam trilogy’s penultimate chapter, in which the Craker named Blackbeard reveals that he has taken over the role of leader once assumed by Snowman, can be seen as arguing that the systems of bodily control demonstrated throughout these novels are inescapable, even after the genocide of almost all of the human race.

In the MaddAddam trilogy, individuals have varying degrees of access to technology. The pleeblanders, the common citizens of the MaddAddam trilogy prior to the Flood, have the same access to physical devices through which to consume media or employ near-instant communication; however, the degree to which these devices are observed or regulated by outside forces varies between those who live in the compounds—those who working for the corporations which rule the nation of this series—and those who live outside in the pleeblands. These technologies are observed in different ways, yet for two distinct purposes: those who live in the compounds are actively watched to make sure that no trade secrets are revealed,\footnote{See the execution of Crake’s father, the reason for which is revealed on \textit{Oryx and Crake} p. 212.} and those who live in the pleeblands are monitored to prevent any sort of fiscal insurrection or malfeasance.\footnote{“[W]e never said CorpSeCorps or helicopter on the phone, because they had robots listening in for special words like those.” (\textit{The Year of the Flood}, p. 56) This is also described by the brief story of Toby’s childhood told in chapter six of \textit{The Year of the Flood}, p. 24–29.}

This creates similar surveillance states, with the concern with protecting profit as opposed to
human lives: both those who live in the compounds and the pleeblanders are aware that they are constantly being surveilled, but the former is aware that their lives are considered valuable due to their generation of capital. Most corporal malintent is largely ignored by the government; the policing force of the CorpSeCorps often actively encourages violence for the benefit of capital gains: “The local pleebmobs paid the CorpSeCorpsMen to turn a blind eye. In return, the CorpSeCorps let the pleebmobs run the low-level kidnappings and assassinations, the skunkweed grow-ops, the crank labs and street-drug retailing, and the plank shops [brothels] that were their stock-in-trade.”

Nor does access to the means of production of media immediately elevate the station of individuals—it is only when the boundary between the compounds and the pleeblands is crossed when the body is regarded by the CorpSeCorps as something to be protected.

The blurring of the boundaries of the body and technology permits for even further influence over all aspects of life by the CorpSeCorps. In the MaddAddam trilogy, functional vegetarianism is nearly impossible; it is seen as both culturally impermissible and virtually impossible to pursue without removing oneself from culture entirely and joining a cult-like religion, the God’s Gardeners, who produce vegetables on secluded rooftop gardens. Biological technologies blur the line between animal and other material, with the production of ChickieNobs, laboratory-grown meat which one character claims “were really vegetables

---

55 *The Year of the Flood*, p. 33.
56 “The street kids—the pleebrats—were hardly rich, but they were glittery. I envied the shiny things, the shimmering things, like the TV camera phones, pink and purple and silver, that flashed in and out of their hands like magician’s cards, or the Sea/H/Ear Candies they stuck into their ears to hear music. I wanted their gaudy freedom” (Ibid., p. 66).
57 See Amanda’s inclusion in the CorpSeCorps system on page 33 of *The Year of the Flood* and Ren’s return to the life of the compounds, which begins on page 205.
because they grew on stems and didn’t have faces.”58 However, it is revealed that there is the capacity for vegetarianism within the compounds, though each product is given a brand-name and shown to be mass-produced.59 Though the MaddAddam trilogy expressly raises questions of animal welfare and food politics, undeniably prescribing judgements regarding the increasing abstraction of animal life to unemotional and unfeeling machinery, the type of abstraction of bodies which is affected upon animals is dissimilar from that which is used to control humans. Alexander G. Weheliye notes that animal politics and approaches to biopolitical structures are often harmfully equated: “This sleight of hand comes easy to those critics attempting to achieve animal rights and is frequently articulated comparatively vis-à-vis black subjects’ enslavement in the Americas—’the moral and intellectual jujitsu that yielded the catachresis, person-as-property.’”50 It is important to note, however, that the human body and any other animal bodies both experience the abstraction of the whole of the body into contingent, quantifiable, and controllable parts; the latter of which being done in the service of the former. This serves to prevent any sort of consumer choice from substantially impacting the corporate processes in MaddAddam, as all food purchased by specific individuals is equally damaging to the body or environment—the only way to escape this seems to be by way of the God’s Gardeners, who attempt to completely exclude themselves from the world outside of them.

The way in which characters in the novels interact with each other dramatically changes when robotic bees are introduced, which permits the government to be able to listen in on any and all conversations.61 This effectively stunts all productive dialogue for the members of the

58 The Year of the Flood, p. 129
59 See MaddAddam p. 233.
60 Weheliye, p. 10.
61 See The Year of the Flood p. 277.
God’s Gardeners by implementing psychological fear of committing any crimes and thus being labeled as criminal or even dangerous; thus marking the moment within the narrative in which the role of the group is greatly diminished and their members become all but invisible to each other and to the rest of society.

In a world where microscopic computational judgements regarding the human body can happen frequently with little input from human parties, through technologies such as facial and voice recognition, elements of the body must be parsed into discrete computational units. There is an abstraction between human emotion and the boolean language of computers; as the biopolitics of any one government attempt to use tools to deconstruct the thoughts and feelings of its constituents, computers must make numeric metaphors for the decisions made within human biology. Metaphors for these assumptions made from data compiled from observations of bodies are inherent in art and technology, as governments have responded in kind to the multiple modes of communication which have become ubiquitous. In *Oryx and Crake*, Jimmy is questioned multiple times by the CorpSeCorps regarding his mother’s actions protesting their organization, necessitating a large data center of all communication and surveillance which would permit for single individuals to be able to be detected at will.62 Because of the ability for the CorpSeCorps to use this information accurately, it can be assumed that they stockpile vast stores of metadata regarding the human body, including past conversations assumed to be private, images of bodies when in public (or potentially private), and potentially other approaches to quantifying trends in the composition of other parts of the body—all with the assumption of complete accuracy. This government sufficiently relies on the population’s

---

62 *Oryx and Crake*, p. 256.
inability to refuse surveillance in order to come to conclusions derived from computational
metaphors for the human body. The abstraction of the human body into numbers and figures is
inherently a form of control—these numbers and figures exist for the explicit purpose of being
added and subtracted, multiplied and divided. These figures are always imperfect, as there is
always a degree of translation between the number and the body, otherwise such transformations
would be deemed unnecessary.

Calina Ciobanu’s article “Rewriting the Human at the End of the Anthropocene in
Margaret Atwood’s MaddAddam Trilogy” argues that the end of the human world within the
MaddAddam trilogy necessitates a revisioning of the dichotomy between male and female.63
Ciobanu notes the mindsets which prevail in these novels before and after the flood: that even
after the flood, the “disposability” of women is still pervasive due to “a ’male’ paradigm
grounded in a biopolitical accounting of the people who remain.”64 It is the female paradigm, in
which Toby and Ren save Amanda’s life without adhering to a logic created by the counting of
bodies, which forefronts this binary. Ciobanu’s argument asserts that:

we cannot do away with biopolitics any more than we can do away with men—nor is this
something to aspire toward. Instead, the end of Year suggests that imagining a
fundamentally different kind of future for humanity will require destabilizing the
dominant biopolitical order by injecting into it a female ethics of incommensurability.65

This gendered binary, in which there is a refusal to compare bodies which is directly associated
with the female characters, is one of many contemplations of biopolitical structures offered by

---

63 See p. 154.
64 p. 155.
65 p. 156.
Margaret Atwood’s works. These formal readings\textsuperscript{66} of speculative fiction narratives reveals how they often question these sorts of biopolitical relationships through metaphor, setting, character, and plot. Speculative fiction, in this way, can impact the reader by demonstrating the ways in which the computational metaphors for human bodies made in the real world impact real lives.

\textsuperscript{66} In the same vein as the Formalism of P. N. Medvedev and M. M. Bakhtin described in the introduction to this thesis.
Weaponized Media

In the Star Wars film series, there is a mythic Force which permeates all beings, uniting them. The Force exists as a sort of religion for some and a tool for yet others: it permits for certain characters to exert a silent, invisible control over and comprehension of the elements which compose the universe. The first of these films to be released, Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope, exposes this power early in its story arc: using the Force, the character Obi-Wan Kenobi famously convinces an enemy stormtrooper, who seeks Kenobi, Skywalker, and the androids they have in tow, that “these aren’t the droids [he’s] looking for.” Many speculative fiction narratives—be they in the form of novels, films, or even music—introduce a form of communication to the plot which also possesses a literal destructive capacity: words as weapons. In a literal sense, this trope exists at any point where words have seemingly magical, fantastic properties. In some instances, these words enact violence by killing or maiming; in others, exerting a more subtle kind of control over other humans or the environment around them. In some works, weaponized words are an overt element of the plot, where the main object of the hero’s quest is to uncover a sacred word or words which will be able to imbue some sort of greater power; in others, these words take the form of magic or other forms of incantations which assist the characters; and in still others, it can be subtle elements which comprise the fantastical world of the narrative, hardly impacting the characters at all.

---

67 At time of writing, a series in seven installments, with two more in production; not to mention a multimedia franchise with an expansive, expanded multimedia universe (novels, comics, video games), all featuring the Force in some capacity.
68 Retroactively titled to match the proceeding films; originally Star Wars.
This chapter will explore weaponized media as a form and function of literature. Briefly examining its potential histories, this chapter will focus primarily upon readings of this trope—words used as weapons—in specific speculative fiction narratives, ultimately arguing that weaponized media is so prominent in speculative fiction in particular due to its close relationship with the examination of biopolitical structures.

The term ‘trope’ has evolved over time to take on a plethora of possible meanings. For some, a trope is roughly equivalent to a figure of speech, and according to the *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*, “especially [a figure of speech] that uses words in senses beyond their literal meanings.”69 Another definition has arisen, however, in which a trope is “a common or overused theme or device.”70 This is the definition that is used by the online wiki TV Tropes, which attempts to catalog as many tropes and examples of them as possible:

On this wiki, "trope" has the even more general meaning of a pattern in storytelling, not only within the media works themselves, but also in related aspects such as the behind-the-scenes aspects of creation, the technical features of a medium, and the fan experience. The idea being that storytelling is not just writing, it is the whole process of creating and telling/showing a story. [...] The intent being to set Noah Webster71 spinning in his grave as quickly as possible.72

TV Tropes often uses humorous names for its entries for particular tropes; for example, the narrative device of words or media being used as weaponry in any media is cataloged under

---

69 Baldick, p. 264. This edition boasts that the text is “[f]ully updated to include terms that have become prominent in the last few years, from cyberpunk to hypertext,” but does not include the definition of trope which this text will be using.
70 *Merriam-Webster Online*.
71 Lexicographer whose name is loaned to Merriam-Webster, Incorporated.
72 “Trope,” TV Tropes.
“Words Can Break My Bones” for spoken words and “Brown Note” for all media. This chapter will consider this as one unified trope and as part of the same formal structure, focusing primarily upon the methodology and message of the weapon, as opposed to the medium itself.\textsuperscript{73}

Many speculative fiction narratives—that is, media with future-fantasy elements which can be claimed and are written under the guise of being a potential future for the real world\textsuperscript{74}—contain this trope as a major or minor element to the plot. This is likely due to speculative fiction’s constant engagement with biopolitics, as any assumption about the future of the planet must consider the ways in which power structures are used to exert control over populations.\textsuperscript{75}

To make metaphors for these means of control, language or art is often considered a device which exerts literal control, as opposed to the subtle control which it can exert on humans due to the propagation of norms: that media is sometimes used to tell other humans how they should behave, be it in big or small ways\textsuperscript{76}—thus language has very serious power in the real world as well.

Languages evolve over time, largely based upon popular use, though sometimes due to the efforts of particular cultural or governing bodies.\textsuperscript{77} Sumerian, a language predominantly featured as a plot device in Neal Stephenson’s novel \textit{Snow Crash}, existed in a specialized form due to its complex cultural relationship with Akkadian, spawning a high degree of

\textsuperscript{73} The third chapter of this thesis will discuss the way in which different mediums convey different tones and social norms; this chapter will largely group all media, including the spoken and written word, together.

\textsuperscript{74} For a more in-depth definition, see the introduction to this thesis.

\textsuperscript{75} Biopolitics, in this thesis, is the means through which government or other groups control groups of bodies. See the introduction for an explanation of this text’s working definition of biopolitics, as well a more developed argument as to the relationship between biopolitics and speculative fiction.

\textsuperscript{76} The third chapter of this text, “The Subversive Politics of Doing Anything at All,” argues that this normalizing power inherent in media often creates difficult situations for its users.

\textsuperscript{77} See “Government Control of Language and Other Protocols,” a Cato Institute article which draws connections between the literal policing of the French language by the Académie française and regulation efforts of communication protocols undertaken by the United States. This is also evident in the Charter of the French Language, which regulates the volume of non-French words to be used by civil entities in Quebec.
anthropological intrigue: Guy Deutscher’s complete text on the syntactic evolution of Akkadian states that “during the third millennium, there developed a very intimate cultural symbiosis between the Sumerians and the Akkadians, which included widespread bilingualism. […] Centuries after it ceased to be spoken, Sumerian continued to be used as a literary and scholarly language.” Writing and language are imbued with power in both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament; from the writing on the wall at Belshazzar’s feast in Daniel 5 to John 1:1, “In the beginning was the Word….” This trope cannot be viewed as a strict timeline, however, as there is likely no direct hierarchy to pursue for its development, especially considering the potential for multiple discoveries.

The work of Ursula K. Le Guin is an important pillar in the development and use of words and weapons within literature. In A Wizard of Earthsea, the 1968 fantasy novel and first novel in the Earthsea Cycle, a young mage seeks to learn the magic of controlling elements of nature, including humans, by knowing their ‘names.’ These names are verbal incantations which imply true comprehension of the object to be controlled. This concept has permeated fantasy, directly inspiring the work of Patrick Rothfuss, and likely other popular children’s fantasy series. Le Guin is a self-proclaimed activist, expressing support for social movements such as Occupy Wall Street as recently as 2012, in an interview with Wired. In this same interview, Le Guin relates her discontent with pressure from publishing houses to be more ‘generic,’ to be more accessible to audiences by adhering to tropes in the genre that she herself largely created with her seminal work. The latest novel in the Earthsea Cycle, The Other Wind,

---

78 p. 20–21.
79 See Scott Timberg’s 2009 article for The Guardian, aptly titled “How Ursula K Le Guin led a generation away from realism.”
80 Geek’s, “Ursula K. Le Guin: Still Battling the Powers That Be”
released in 2001, continues the themes of the five-part series in examining race and gender in her universe by stressing power and personal relationships. Though not strictly speculative fiction, as the universe of Earthsea does not claim any connection to the real world, it is inherently connected to many influential speculative fiction works through its influence. Margaret Atwood, having picked *A Wizard of Earthsea* for the *Wall Street Journal* Bookclub, was once ‘called out’ by Le Guin for rejecting the label ‘science fiction’ for her work, preferring speculative fiction instead; Atwood responded to the *Wall Street Journal* that this is because she likes “to hold truth in labeling,” believing that there is power in a name.\(^{81}\)

The history of stories which include weaponized words is likely as long as the history of written words. *Snow Crash*, by Neal Stephenson, is a 1992 novel set in an absurdist, cyberpunk, dystopian future where the government has lost control over the United States, becoming one of many corporate entities which rule a patchwork quilt of developments in a massively-suburban Los Angeles. Hiro Protagonist, a world-class hacker, must overcome an international plot to subvert the power of the flow of information, initially introduced to Hiro in the form of “Snow Crash,” which refers to both a computer program and a new club drug, both of which deteriorate the consciousness of its victims. Snow Crash, in the form of a program, displays a black-and-white static image, overwriting the brains of programmers to put them into a vegetative state. In the form of a drug, Snow Crash causes fervor disguised as ‘speaking in tongues.’ It is later revealed that these people are uttering actual phrases in the Sumerian language, which, in this universe, exists as a language which must be strictly interpreted by the human brain, with no room for metaphor: a programming language for the brain.

\(^{81}\) Russell, “Margaret Atwood Chooses ‘A Wizard of Earthsea’”
*Snow Crash* uses elements of Sumerian culture, particularly surviving writings and lore, merged with Biblical writings, as the basis for its mythos. The mythos of *Snow Crash* involves a ‘Babel event’ in which all humans lose the capacity to communicate with the same language: for this novel, the incident is designed by one individual in order to replace humankind’s common tongue which could directly control human consciousness. The universe of *Snow Crash* explains that this event is the “nam-shub” created by the Sumerian god Enki. Author Michael Chorost states that Stephenson “obtained” the mythology and English translations of Sumerian texts that he appropriates from Samuel Noah Kramer and John R. Maier’s *Myths of Enki, the Crafty God*, which Stephenson quotes from: “Then the lord defiant, the prince defiant, the king defiant, / Enki, the lord of abundance […] / Changed the speech in their mouths, put contention into it, / Into the speech of man that had been one.”82 Chorost writes that the Nam-Shub is both the fable and the “incantation which supposedly causes linguistic disintegration” in Stephenson’s text.83 Much of the plot of this story revolves around a search for an antidote to this virus, as the villains of the text slowly amass an army controlled by this “nam-shub.”

*Snow Crash* makes multiple metaphors for American imperialism through its selection of weaponry: the most destructive of which are digital or atomic, but there is also a copious amount of gun violence and swordfighting. Hiro Protagonist, the protagonist, is half black and half Korean; he always carries around “a long sword known in Nippon as a *katana* and a short sword known as a wakizashi—Hiro’s father looted these from Japan after World War II went atomic—and a computer.”84 He initially does more sword fighting in the ‘Metaverse’ as opposed to the real world. The Metaverse is this universe’s version of the internet, a three dimensional

---

82 Chorost.
83 Ibid.
84 Stephenson, p. 21.
spatial representation of user-driven avatars where online communication and transactions take place. In the Metaverse, being killed causes one to be “disconnected from the global network that is the Metaverse. He gets chucked right out of the system. It is the closest simulation of death that the Metaverse can offer, but all it really does is cause the user a lot of annoyance.”

Weapons in this novel become more destructive as the story progresses, including a machine gun powered by a nuclear reactor, and the revelation that the main villain cannot be killed without setting off an atomic bomb. There are many cinematic scenes of gun violence interspersed throughout the novel. These weapons, from the atomic bomb, Japanese swords stolen from Japan, and cinematically employed automatic guns, all come imbued with very specific imperialistic messages: these are all symbols, in some way, for the violence enacted by the United States as an entity. Snow Crash, the weapon, comes with an obscuring screen of nationality by being attached to the people of Sumer; yet, in this narrative, it is a wealthy Texan magnate L. Bob Rife who wishes to employ the virus to control his employees and the world. Thus, the weaponized word can easily be seen as an imperialist device in Snow Crash.

In the MaddAddam trilogy by Margaret Atwood, the trope of media as a physical weapon is severely downplayed through the existence of extremely dangerous forms of communication. This trilogy takes place in a world faced with the aftermath of a genetically engineered virus, created by one of the characters for the explicit purpose of committing a global genocide to make room for a new, genetically modified species of human. Each of the three books center, roughly, around different characters to provide different perspectives on this world before and after the near-extinction event. Oryx and Crake follows Jimmy and Crake, inhabitants of the

---

85 Ibid. p. 88.
86 “Rife was on the second-string Texas all-state team in his senior year” (p. 111).
87 A more complete description of the plot of these books can be found in the introduction to this thesis.
affluent compounds for those who work for corporations and their families, the latter of whom crafts a virus to kill all humans. *The Year of the Flood* follows two women, Toby and Ren, who grow up outside of these compounds in the violent pleeblands. These women from two different generations both inhabit a commune for an environmentalist cult, along with Ren’s friend, Amanda. *MaddAddam* follows the lives of Toby and Zeb after the events of the frame narrative that encompasses the first two novels; the latter of whom was a high ranking member of this cult and the brother of its creator. This final novel reveals multiple facets of this world through Zeb’s telling of his life’s story to Toby, encompassing a longer history than the previous novels had provided. These stories are told through a frame narrative, wherein each takes place in the world post-apocalypse, but much of the content (for the first two, most) is derived from pre-apocalyptic flashbacks.

There are multiple instances of extremely violent video games, television shows, and websites which help to desensitize the population to the ills of the world, permitting the normalization of the hyper-violent means of social control exerted by the CorpSeCorps. Other games that Jimmy and Crake play call into question the typical narratives of society: for example, they play *Barbarian Stomp*, in which the genocide of various populations is used as a game dynamic as historical invasions are played out, or Blood and Roses, in which works of art are used as a sort of currency against the ills of humanity, like genocide. Most importantly, however, the plot of *Oryx and Crake* is moved forward through Extinctathon, a trivia game solely regarding extinct animals; the elite players, or ‘grandmasters,’ able to access a chat room devoted to the ‘MaddAddamites,’ a slightly more violent offshoot of the Green activist God’s Gardeners.
All control of populations and systems in the first two novels of the series are completely contextualized through media: when Jimmy’s mother leaves to join a Green activist group, he is interviewed multiple times by CorpSeCorps agents, being shown videos designed specifically to manipulate his emotions. Ren and Amanda find solace in their teenage years through communication mediums, like their cell phones; Amanda creates art out of carrion, to spell out particular words. Commercial propaganda permits widespread disinformation and the normalization of biopolitical extensions into control of the building blocks of life itself: many characters believe that ChickieNobs, chickens genetically modified to grow as bulbous orbs for their flesh to be harvested, are the same as vegetables. This is likely one of the reasons that the God’s Gardeners believe that no words should be written down by their members: to both prevent a trail to endanger their group, but to also prevent the control which media is able to exert.

This metaphor that is crafted through imbuing the tools of communication with intrinsic powers, as opposed to locating said power in those who craft or wield the tools, only becomes further complicated as speculative fiction responds to technology which more readily enters our lives and bodies. The ability for media to contain more manipulative properties over time is the result of the conjunction of two human developments: an increase in the volume of options for media, and the ever-widening breadth of biopolitics.

The foci of media’s power is readily demonstrated within David Foster Wallace’s novel *Infinite Jest*. *Infinite Jest* is a sprawling, multifaceted tome which follows the lives of an ensemble cast, loosely grouped into inhabitants of the Enfield Tennis Academy and of the Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House. The characters within overlap in often subtle ways,
drawing a vast network of intrigue and plot.\textsuperscript{88} Multiple forms of media, from speech and written words to music and film, demonstrate this ability to captivate and potentially harm in \textit{Infinite Jest}, regardless of each medium’s message. For example, much of the novel centers around the adherence of several characters to the message of Alcoholics Anonymous. Many chapters in this novel devote time to examining the efficacy of AA, as opposed to the group’s tenants or literature. Though AA produces literature in both this universe and the universe of the novel, one character, Don Gately—recovering convict and drug addict and employee of Ennet House—argues that the transmission of information provided by the organization is primarily oral. Several characters outright do not believe in the effects of the group, which then, Gately explains, would prevent the service from being truly effective for them. Geoffrey Day explains ‘after the Brookline Young People’s AA mtng [sic] up to about 2329H.\textsuperscript{89} ‘Mr. Gately Sir, I found myself sitting tonight in yet another Alcoholics Anonymous Meeting the central Message of which was the importance of going to still more Alcoholics Anonymous Meetings. This infuriating carrot-and-donkey aspect of trudging to Meetings only to be told to trudge to still more Meetings.’ To which Gately is only able to respond, ‘I hear you.’\textsuperscript{90} Ultimately, the locus of transmission for AA’s power comes from interpersonal, anecdotal relations of the way the program has affected its members. Put simply, the novel demonstrates on multiple occasions that the most powerful aspect of AA is when its members go to meetings and tell their own stories of their engagement with AA: the novel clearly demonstrates through multiple examples

\textsuperscript{88} A more in-depth description of this plot can be found in the introduction to this text. \textsuperscript{89} Wallace, p. 539. \textsuperscript{90} p. 1001.
that there is a “conviction common to all who Hang In with AA, after a while, and abstracted in
the slogan ‘My Best Thinking Got Me Here.’”

Further in the systemic progression of media lies the truly captivating nature of Joelle van
Dyne’s radio program, “Sixty Minutes More or Less with Madame Psychosis.” Joelle’s
character goes through many transformations: at once the girlfriend of Orin Incandenza, she
becomes involved with his father, who puts her in the deadly Entertainment as the primary
character; she later is attacked by acid and wears a veil at all times;92 she creates her radio
program, which gains fans in the brothers of Orin and residents of the tennis academy, Hal and
Mario; she latter attempts suicide with freebased cocaine and becomes a resident of Ennet
house.93 Though the radio show itself is not a tool used to enact any sort of injury, its captivating
nature is worth noting: Hal and Mario are both fans of the program, though their knowledge or
opinion of van Dyne and her involvement with both Orin and James Incandenza is not made
clear. Mario especially goes to great pains to make sure that he listens to her daily broadcast,
turning the radio down and placing his deformed body in such a position that his use of the
family’s radio will not be inconvenient. The show has a cult following, as people will go to great
lengths to catalog it and discover more about the music that is played on the program: “Some
M.I.T.s are compulsive about taping the shows and then listening to the musics again and trying
to track them down in stores and college archives, not unlike the way some of their parents had
killed whole evenings trying to parse out the lyrics on R.E.M. and Pearl Jam tapes, etc.”94 The

91 p. 1026.
92 The novel is unclear as to whether or not this actually happens; Joelle refuses to tell anyone the truth of what lies
underneath the veil.
93 Please see the introduction for more clarifying descriptions of this relationship; alternately, Infinite Summer’s list
of characters.
94 p. 997.
show’s power may be a consequence of Joelle’s affect and aura: she wears a veil due to either a physical deformity or due to being too beautiful, both scenarios given equal weight and credence in the narrative of the novel, creating a duplicity of meaning.

She is also the main character in the deadly Entertainment, a film which is so captivating that its viewers die from being unable to look away. Joelle’s involvement is a crucial part of its conception; she is the object of fantasy for both Orin and James, and after the termination of both relationships, is mandated to reside in the Ennet House Drug and Recovery House due to an attempted overdose. The power of the Entertainment is also a consequence of the nature of media in this universe. Wallace’s narrator explains the history and distribution system of the InterLace entertainment system, which holds a complete monopoly over the way that people in this world engage with media, from communication and education to sheer entertainment.\(^95\) The devotion of the populace to this technology must be an aspect of its unstoppable energy. Yet, the Entertainment has been reviewed by some film critics as “‘extraordinary’ and ‘far and away [James O. Incandenza’s] most entertaining and compelling work’” though the film remains a “Thorny problem for archivists.”\(^96\) This suggests that the film’s destructive power may or may not be limited, creating another duality of possible interpretations.

The ability for groups to exert power over individuals is unavoidable, as demonstrated by the extinction event in Atwood’s MaddAddam trilogy as well. Biopolitics will always exist in some form, even as the relationship between bodies and governments shifts. The ease of the exertion of this power increases as the scale of control increases; the correlation between the comparable power of technology and the potential for biopolitical control is direct. The

\(^95\) p. 1003.
\(^96\) p. 993.
conjunction of these two factors lies in the role of literature itself. It is impossible to have utterances of speech without context; as each word, image, and trope comes with a cultural connotation which imbues specific emotions and directions. There is no such thing as an apolitical text. Speculative fiction provides a medium for exploration of these aspects of media.
The Subversive Politics of Doing Anything at All

Though a seemingly strong proposition, there is a subversive politics to doing anything at all. Any action seen as outside the norm by those with power is seen as subversive, which is inherently problematic if these norms are ever self-contradictory. This essay will argue this point by asserting that media plays a key role in the propagation of norms and language by constructing an argument about the nature of media itself. This chapter will demonstrate that media is the means for transmission for normative behavior and that all things are now media in order to contextualize the power of surveillance; it will subsequently follow that the hyper-connected world now conflates the concepts of fear and terrorism, and that all things outside of the norm are viewed with fear while almost all things are outside of the norm—and thus doing anything at all can be viewed as subversive.

Though all media transmits norms, these norms are often difficult to follow due to their rapidly changing structures or their seemingly contradictory natures.97 Some of these normative structures can be argued to apply to a large portion of the population of the world, like the contradictory expectations inherent in the relationship between the employer and employee, as the needs of the employee are constantly weighed against the need for profit maximization.98 Others include structures of gender which apply to almost all women in society, as norms for “appropriate behavior […] in a domestic situation” directly combat “ideologies of what are appropriate means in U.S. society of achieving self-esteem[.]”99 Normalized masculinity is

97 The following examples are necessarily vast oversimplifications of extremely nuanced subjects.
sometimes contradictory as well. These contradictory norms are often highly racialized, as what aspects of the human form and psychological state is parsed by society into what “‘can be seen’ versus ‘what cannot be seen’”\textsuperscript{101}.

This inherently conflicting nature of normative action is displayed prominently in the different eras of literature from hyper-connected societies. Hans Robert Jauss argues that literature must be seen in the context of the time in which it was written, specifically through the lens of the way in which an author’s contemporary writers and theorists respond to their work as phenomenon, stating that “‘the way in which a literary work at the historical moment of its appearance, satisfies, surpasses, disappoints, or refutes the expectations of its first audience obviously provides a criterion for the determination of its aesthetic value.’”\textsuperscript{102} The importance of the environments in which the author writes creates a larger emphasis on the study of the language and forms of the inherently political genre of speculative fiction: media responds to the political situations which inhibit mobility and freedom by instilling fear. It can therefore be argued that speculative fiction can serve as a pillar of representation in this contentious, rapidly-evolving time in the world.

I will be using the term ‘hyper-connected’ to refer to the conjunction of hypertext and connectivity. For the purposes of this argument, hypertext will be considered any material “in which information related to [the object] can be accessed directly[].”\textsuperscript{103} Connectivity will refer to “‘the ability to connect to or communicate with another computer or computer system.’”\textsuperscript{104}

\textsuperscript{100} See Phoenix, Ann, Stephen Frosh, and Rob Pattman. “Producing Contradictory Masculine Subject Positions: Narratives of Threat, Homophobia and Bullying in 11-14 Year Old Boys.”
\textsuperscript{101} See Rottenberg, Catherine, “‘Passing’: Race, Identification, and Desire.”
\textsuperscript{102} Jauss, p. 192.
\textsuperscript{103} Merriam-Webster Online.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.
conjunction of these two concepts here assumes that there are massively-connected systems, like social media systems\textsuperscript{105} which allow for “readings” in the same way that literary theory is applied to literature. It is necessary for this argument to consider that the function and utility of literature, as defined by Walter Ong and elaborated upon in the introduction of this thesis, are even further imbued with social force when ‘always-on’ and reflexively referential to any other literature produced by any other human being. This is to say that literature can exist simultaneously as a tool and art object; being used for a specific function (like making a political argument) while still being able to be consumed for its aesthetic value. Lisa Gitelman states in her book Always Already New that there is a “heuristic that has emerged from the histories of reading practices to distinguish modern and premodern literacies. Simply put, either readers consume a lot of material, moving quickly from one text to another, or they consume a little material repeatedly and with greater intensity.” She continues, “Modern mass culture involves consumption extensive in this sense. Many different media bombard audiences while commodities jostle and vie for their attention.”\textsuperscript{106} In short, there are multiple layers of expectations of ‘depth’ to any particular type of media, from the phonograph to the tweet, embedded in the media itself—expectations for each media object. For example, ‘social media’ consists of a varying cluster of communication services, asserting that there is media to being social through its very definition.

An exact definition of media is hard to pin down because many individuals will have different definitions of what they believe entails ‘media’. There are multiple schools of thought regarding comparative media studies, mass media, and digital humanities, including ‘new

\textsuperscript{105} Including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YikYak, Tumblr, Reddit, etc.
\textsuperscript{106} p. 63.
media,’ ‘cyberstudies,’ and ‘emerging media.’ The introduction to Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Thomas Keenan’s *New Media, Old Media: A History and Theory Reader* divides the investigation of media studies into four themes: “Archaeology of Multi-Media, Power-Code, Network Events and Theorizing ‘New’ Media[.]” Their work notes the position of several theorists: Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey B. Pingree argue a common thread in media objects due to their novelty at time of creation: “all media were once ‘new media’”; Lev Manovich approaches media theory from the formal process required to create or display the media object. Chun and Keenan note that Michel Foucault asserts that the kind of discourse which occurs in media is contingent upon its environment: “Nothing, Foucault argues, can appear as knowledge if it does not conform to the rules and the constraints of a given discourse in a given epoch; and nothing functions as power unless its exertion complies with the procedures, instruments, or means or objectives valid in more or less coherent systems of knowledge.”

They also note that N. Katherine Hayles demonstrates that information is no longer tied to a specific medium or media object, that “‘information lost its body’—it became ‘extractable’ from actual things.”

An exact definition of media for the purposes of this chapter may necessarily be ostensive. A 1988 article in the magazine *Advertising Age* attempts to answer the question posed by its title, “What is Media?” stating: “Is packaging a medium? Are the number of retail shelf facings of a given product for which a marketer may or may not have paid? What about a

---

107 p. 2.
108 p. 3.
109 p. 2.
110 Ibid.
111 p. 5.
112 p. 6.
promotional concert? Not yet.” The article ends, “The definition of media is continually being rewritten—by skywriting over crowded beaches, movie previews in videocassette rentals and TV-equipped grocery carts.” This essay assumes that the not yet has come to pass, and that the answer is now yes. This essay will be considering all forms of transmission of information, even the forms less often considered media—like informal modes of digital conversation—as media, for reasons of genre and aesthetic. In brief, transmittable information, in its many forms, will be what the term ‘media’ refers to here.

A central tenet to this argument is the belief that media inherently always propagates norms. This means, in essence, that media is inherently political. Norms are, according to Razmig Keucheyan, described by Ludwig Wittgenstein and Émile Durkheim as, loosely, a broad set of “restraints [imposed] on mental processes,”113 with varying degrees of totality. Keucheyan states that, “For Wittgenstein, it is society that determines the correct or incorrect uses of a rule.”114 He continues by observing philosophical contradictions in the concepts of the ‘norm’ in general and the paradoxes that arise from their categorization; extrapolating from his work, it can be argued that there is no one totalizing power which is contributing to the normalization of any given individual, and that an individual or group via culture will have any shifting number of norms that cannot simply be parsed to philosophical formula. These norms are not necessarily large, sweeping morals, but often subtle nuances of power. Lauren Berlant, in her article “Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency),” introduces the concept of slow death: put simply, the under-communicated and often invisible oppressions of the ordinary. Berlant writes: “It is as though the very out-of-scaleness of the sensationalist rhetoric around

113 p. 65.
114 p. 68.
crisis ordinariness measures the structural intractability of a problem whose world can live with, which just looks like crisis and catastrophe when attached to freshly exemplary bodies.” This is to say that many of the oppressions of the world are simply normalized and not considered in day to day life, particularly when actions of power are enacted on ‘someone else,’ like a member of a minority group. When these oppressions are invisible, the discussion of their effects is sometimes out of the norm. It is particularly difficult to discuss oppressions which are not explicitly overtly visible or being enacted upon a majority of individuals with agency: the means through which individuals are permitted to communicate any aspect of this power relationship is mediated. As the locus of a large amount of human communication and entertainment, media is one of the means through which the ideas of what is ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ in society are transmitted between humans, but these ideas are very rarely directly explained, especially in ‘black and white’ terms. This means that the ‘grey’ often goes unnoticed.

It is very likely that almost everything has become media, in that all communication and entertainment is increasingly over channels with their own sets of social norms. For example, José Van Dijck’s *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* discusses the differing approaches to privacy on social networks, causing one individual’s concern with their privacy while using Facebook to be met with disdain amongst his peers, as the norms inherent in this network enforce the use of all of its elements, while opting out “would mean opting out of sociality altogether.” Even face-to-face conversations once thought to be private have the potential to be media, as public surveillance continues to become more available and readily used, and private devices can and often do process captured audio and video to provide various

---

115 p. 762.
116 p. 173.
services while retaining the data. Specifically, most mobile devices now feature opt-in always-on audio and location tracking,\(^{117}\) and once less-connected objects like watches, cars, and even refrigerators are becoming part of the ‘internet of things’ and used specifically for targeted advertising.\(^{118}\) Each of these technologies now comes with their own set of norms, with varying levels of adherence and opinion, regarding their utility and integrity.

These properties are also true of social media, technologies which consist of multiple modes of near-instantaneous communication that come imbued with their own aesthetic values.\(^{119}\) The name itself implies one of its several purposes: that social media is media that can be used for socializing. In a reflection of other attempts to assign numeric value to aspects of humanity, Md. Nazmus Sadat, Shibbir Ahmed, and Muhammad Tasnim Mohiuddin note that Twitter, specifically, is consistently used as a means for discussion of “society related topics,” and that the data generated by social media websites like Twitter and Facebook encapsulate “the premise of our society, its attitudes and ideologies.”\(^{120}\) Because socializing and the consumption of media now both exist as a conglomeration of technologies—for example, an individual can use SMS messaging for instant communication with a specific person while using Twitter to convey their thoughts to their group of ‘followers’—these services are often hard to separate from each other and often invisible to the general public. It is extremely difficult to discern when anything is neither media nor social—see, for example, news broadcasts which actively reference social media services like Twitter and Facebook for real-time information. There is a

---

\(^{117}\) See “4 ways your Android device is tracking you (and how to stop it),” PC World: http://www.pcworld.com/article/2907061/4-ways-your-android-device-is-tracking-you-and-how-to-stop-it.html

\(^{118}\) See “How the Internet of Things is already the future of advertising,” Marketing Magazine: http://www.marketingmagazine.co.uk/article/1352048/internet-things-already-future-advertising

\(^{119}\) The medium is the message. This essay will be considering ‘aesthetics’ to mean specific values of what is beautiful or enjoyable.

\(^{120}\) p. 6.
blurring of lines of when the varying norms and aesthetic values that are represented in any specific media object are or are not being actively conveyed and enforced.

The normalizing effects of media further assists the control and quantization of human bodies encompassed by biopolitics. Allan Sekula, filmmaker, critic, and theorist, elaborates further upon the physical utterances of bodily quantification that are inherent in media in his article “The Body and the Archive.” A part of Sekula’s nuanced argument asserts that the birth and proliferation of photography marked an important moment for the proliferation of the quantization of human bodies—that photography “is modernity run riot.” Sekula notes that “Only the photograph could begin to claim the legal status of a visual document of ownership.” He notes that Alphonse Bertillon was the creator of the typification of the human body by applying categorical metrics to photographs—in other words, Bertillon applied assumptions based upon correlations he saw between certain types of criminals (like the shape of certain facial features) to create profiles of criminals and criminality. Sekula argues that Bertillon’s attempts to create metrics for the human form are still used today: “Bertillon survives in the operations of the national security state, in the condition of intensive and extensive surveillance that characterizes both the everyday life and the geological sphere.” This is to say that the technologies of photography, from its capture to its presentation, even when extended to the moving picture properties of video capture and presentation, are rooted in and exemplify a type of control over the body. It is an extension of Sekula’s argument to note that video surveillance in its many forms make many assumptions about the validity of

---

121 The justification of this definition is further provided by the introduction to this text.
122 p. 4.
123 p. 6.
124 p. 62.
permission to make approximations of any one person’s form. These images are often captured
without the express knowledge of the subject and can be used as the basis for any number of
arguments regarding that individual’s actions.

Similarly, Simone Browne, surveillance, culture, and bioethics theorist and currently
associate professor at University of Texas at Austin, links the modes of surveillance applied
during transatlantic slavery to modern technologies used to racialize and surveil blackness in her
article “Everybody’s Got a Little Light Under the Sun.” Browne frames this conversation about
race through two media objects. The first is an episode\textsuperscript{125} of the Canadian television series
\textit{Mantracker}, a ‘reality television’ series which generally features one ‘Mantracker’ tracking two
‘Prey,’ the latter of which must reach a specified location within a designated period of time.
This particular episode creates notable racial tension between the two black ‘Prey’ and white
‘Mantracker,’ with the two black men, Al and Garfield, commenting on the racial tension: once
mentioning the Underground Railroad, with voiceover commentary stating that “The prey draw
on the past for inspiration”; at another time, singing ‘Go Down Moses’ together. Browne
continues by noting that “Although this television programme’s website states that ‘the irony is
not lost on these “two black guys running from a white guy on a horse”’ this particular episode
of \textit{Mantracker} speaks to the historical presence of the surveillance technologies of organized
slave patrols and bounty hunters for runaways.”\textsuperscript{126}

Browne connects this television series to a different sort of media: documents used for
control over movement for black slaves in the United States and Canada, specifically
exemplified through the \textit{Book of Negroes}. This document captured “crude inscriptions such as

\textsuperscript{125} Season three, episode one.
\textsuperscript{126} p. 545.
‘scar in his forehead’ and ‘stout with 3 scars in each cheek’ as descriptors for a specific set of slaves granted ‘free passage’, which inherently consists of a set of assumptions regarding the assessment of an individual’s explicit validity—their right to exist in any one space being defined by external descriptors. Browne then elaborates upon Richard Iton’s conceptions of performance, stating that “we come to internalize an expectation of the potential of being watched and with this emerges a certain ‘performative sensibility’. Coupled with this awareness of an overseeing surveillance apparatus was ‘the conscious effort to always give one’s best performance and encourage others to do the same, and indeed to perform even if one is not sure of one’s audience (or whether there is in fact an audience)’. For any man or woman to refuse be surveilled in the United States is often viewed as against the norm and wrong and therefore met with fear or violence.

The conjunction of these arguments demonstrates that the object of surveillance is constantly shifting as the the specific group of bodies or attribute of bodies to measure is redefined, dependent on context, convenience, and perceived or subconscious desire for increased control. In short, the process of determining criminality by applying computational metrics could be viewed as an attempt to apply rationality or quantification to what is unable to be accurately represented by numbers and figures, like the attempts to create a comprehensive document to allow for the right of a specific individual to travel based upon subjective observations from their body, as evinced in Browne’s discussion of the Book of Negroes. As these quantification efforts are constantly shift, new technologies are developed and expected to be performed to so as to avoid suspicion. The patchwork of technologies used to communicate

---

127 p. 547.
128 p. 551.
or observe shifts its degrees of application at any given moment: for example, a video camera in
a public place can be used to detect the presence of any specific person; record video for later use
as evidence; or simply project the idea of being surveilled by its presence, regardless of whether
or not the camera is actually functioning or real. If any one of these circumstances can have
conflicting normative assumptions—like the differences in what is deemed suspicious behavior
when one is actively being monitored, as opposed to passive surveillance.129 If the aspects of
normative behavior ever overlap in such a way that simply existing within a certain space can be
considered outside of the norm, then doing anything would be outside of the norm and
considered impermissible or subversive.

Because of these aspects of the norms conveyed by media, works within the genre of
speculative fiction will ultimately be viewed as an important device to raise these concerns
through their text, much in the same way that other novels are read at least on some level for
their cultural contexts in multiple schools of literary theory, like Historicist, Post-Marxist, or
Feminist readings. As argued in the previous chapters, the Jaussian phenomenology of these
texts, as viewed in the future, will be and already are enlightening and important for historical
and political studies of specific phenomenon regarding technology and language. The first
chapter of this thesis discusses the role which interpretations of law play in the scope of
biopolitics, and the literary, interpretive properties of legislation. This chapter combines these
concepts with concerns that Margaret Atwood raises regarding biopolitical control within
societies to demonstrate how speculative fiction acts as interpretive agent for the examination of
power relationships. The second chapter of this thesis pursues a specific utterance of literary

metaphors for power: the word as the weapon. By tracing some instances of this trope in speculative fiction, wherein incantations of spoken word or media objects physically manipulate the human body and the world, the reader is able to explore the ways in which media actually manipulates the world around them. These arguments demonstrate why science fiction and speculative fiction are important and are the object of literary analysis: they are now cultural artifacts, doomed to be canonized, here to carry on the conversations that we must now have regarding the role of media in our lives.
Works Cited


Vita

Joseph Allen Woods, born 1992 in Virginia, is Digital Specialist at Virginia Commonwealth University Libraries. He received his master’s in English, focusing in digital publishing, in May 2016. He has previously worked as Lead Developer and Associate Editor at *Blackbird: an online journal of literature and the arts*. He is also currently a co-organizer of PyRVA, the Richmond Python Usergroup, and the Richmond Go Club. His ORCID is 0000-0001-7038-3818.