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« It's like we went too far, we imagined too much » : The Paradoxes of an Overtly Realistic Dystopia in *Years and Years (2019)*

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“It’s like we went too far, we imagined too much”: The Paradoxes of an Overtly Realistic Dystopia in *Years and Years* (2019)

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ABSTRACTS

The aim of this master's dissertation is to demonstrate that the choice made by *Years and Years*' creator to give rise to a very realistic family-friendly dystopia is not trivial. On the contrary its apparent paradoxes are pregnant with meaning when thinking about the latent purpose of the series. Indeed, the emphasis on the notion of family may be a very efficient means of arousing *pathos* among viewers by confronting them to a plausible and very concrete example of how the drifts of society may affect individuals. As such, *Years and Years* would serve as a very useful warning, which, by a process of analogy, is supposed to better raise the audience's awareness of the potential dark future that is looming over them, to try and lead them to take action. This should put an end to the prejudice according to which TV series are mere entertainments, highlighting the very useful impact they can have on society by influencing people's way of seeing the world for the better.

Keywords: speculative fiction, science fiction, dystopia, near future, cautionary tale, new technologies, progress, politics, Britain, realism, verisimilitude, family drama, diversity, inclusivity.

Le but de ce mémoire de fin d'étude est de démontrer que le choix fait par le créateur de *Years and Years* de donner naissance à une dystopie familiale très réaliste n'est pas anodin. Au contraire, les paradoxes frappants de cette série font sens lorsque l'on pense à son but latent. En effet, insister sur la notion de famille apparaît comme une manière efficace de faire appel à la pitié des téléspectateurs en les confrontant à un exemple plausible et très concret des conséquences que les dérives de la société peuvent avoir sur de simples individus. En ce sens, *Years and Years* serait porteuse d'un avertissement précieux qui, par analogie, permettrait aux spectateurs de prendre conscience du futur potentiellement sombre qui planerait au-dessus d'eux, afin d'éventuellement passer à l'action. Cette idée devrait mettre fin au préjugé qui consiste à croire que les séries télévisées ne sont que de purs divertissements, en soulignant l'impact nécessaire qu'elles peuvent avoir sur la société lorsqu'elles influencent positivement notre façon de voir le monde.

Mots-clés : fiction spéculative, science fiction, dystopie, futur proche, conte moral, nouvelles technologies, progrès, politique, Grande-Bretagne, réalisme, vraisemblance, drame familial, diversité, inclusivité.

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INTRODUCTION

In the dark times,
will there also be singing?
Yes, there will be singing
about the dark times.
Bertolt Brecht, "Motto"
Svendborg Poems (1939), translated by John Willett

In a controversial essay entitled "Against Identity Politics: The New Tribalism and the Crisis of Democracy," political theorist Francis Fukuyama writes that "fears about the future are often best expressed through fiction." He adds: "The good thing about dystopian fiction is that it almost never comes true. Imagining how current trends will play out in an ever more exaggerated fashion serves a useful warning" (ibid.) Fukuyama's argument will be the issue at stake in this master's dissertation which aims to enhance the potential socio-political role alarming TV shows like *Years and Years* may play in today's society. It should highlight the ability of these apparently dark narratives to influence people's minds so as to eventually change things for the better. In other words, it will show that dystopian series can be beneficial for the future thanks to their inherent didactic quality. As such, this work will also indirectly try to debunk the prejudice according to which this medium is a mere form of entertainment, so as to consider that it can actually have a useful impact on society.

This questioning is made even more relevant within the context of the New Golden Age of Television, also called the Peak TV era, which is currently occurring in the 21st century. This prolific period has already given birth to countless series or other television programs that are instructive for its viewers. Indeed, most contemporary TV shows appear to be increasingly related to the real world. As such, they tend to represent current society, in a more or less explicit way, as if they were ahead of their times. Through a process of analogy, the audience can thus learn more about their own environments: convincing fictional settings may lead them to reflect on their very own conditions before bringing them back to reality. Therefore, it seems that fiction can open up new avenues of reflection for the future. In addition, it appears that series convey a greater sense of intimacy than movies, as argued by Max Baldry, portraying Viktor Goraya, during an interview for *Years and Years*' première. According to him, "with cinema, you always go out to watch it and it's more of an event. This [(*Years and Years*)] is kind of

infiltrating your home, and when you watch TV at home, it kind of adds a different dynamic and a different perspective on the show, and I think it can be a little bit more emphatic and a little bit more powerful" ("Red Carpet News" [08:58]).

This study will focus on the example of British TV series *Years and Years*, a co-production by the BBC and HBO, which was released in spring 2019 in the United Kingdom – on BBC One – and during the summer in the United States of America, on HBO Prime. As a consequence, it was launched at an uncertain time, notably for British viewers, that is to say, during the Brexit imbroglio, which finds its way throughout the first and only season of the show. The six episodes of this mini-series were all written by Russel T Davies, a screenwriter renowned for his interest in science fiction and in issues related to representation and inclusivity. As such, he is particularly well-known for having written episodes for *Doctor Who* (BBC ONE, 1963-present) from 2005 to 2010, and for the creation of *Queer as Folk* (Channel 4, 1999-2000) or more recently for the tryptic *Cucumber*, *Banana*, and *Tofu* (Channel 4, 2015-2015), two realistic LGBTQ+ productions[1]. The first four episodes of *Years and Years* were directed by Simon Cellan Jones and the last two by Lisa Mulcahy. It stars – among others – Emma Thompson, Russel Tovey and Rory Kinnear, known for his interpretation of Prime Minister Michael Callow in *Black Mirror*'s first episode entitled "The National Anthem" (Channel 4-2011). *Years and Years*' numerous reviews were overall very good, but the series did not do as well as what was expected in terms of ratings, as it received a fairly limited number of viewers. This may be due to the fact that the show refuses escapism at a time when a lot of people might have been disinclined to watch the drifts of an endangered fictional society that could have reminded them of their already harsh and intricate reality.

Years and Years follows the peregrinations of the endearing Lyons family, a set of many and diverse characters of all ages, whose lives are constantly upset by an ever-changing world which seems to be degrading. The wide range of obstacles they have to try and overcome over the span of fifteen years – up to 2034 – reveals that *Years and Years* is filled with a sense of moral, social, political, technological and environmental decadence, which clearly impacts its

[1] Being himself a homosexual, Davies has always felt concerned by the issue of inclusivity. A journalist declared that "one of the things that are so often praised about [his work] is the way in which it not only entertains but it also explores complex social themes and pushes boundaries in terms of representation on television" [02:37]. This led Davies to answer the following: "I sure do take it as a responsibility to get formal about it […] The world is very diverse, and the world is changing rapidly and where is it on screen? I still watch television programs thinking 'Where are you? Where are all the different heights and shapes and sizes and sexes?' Hum, so, I take that humble job joyously. It's not my issue, it's not my politics to do that; it's my absolute joy." ("Red Carpet News" [02:54]).

society. This setting thus makes it appear as a dystopia. What adds to *Years and Years*' singularity is its peculiar narration which relies on ellipses. In the course of a single episode, the audience can be propelled years later into the show's timeline. This very fast pacing contributes the most to the tension that keeps on increasing throughout the series. In addition, the TV show truly insists on the idea that the macroscopic and the microscopic scales are intertwined. This is why the audience gets to witness the Lyonses' ability to adapt to bewildering events occurring in a not-too-distant future, resilience being one of their main strengths. The microcosm of the family serves as a metaphor for the macrocosm of society as a whole; viewers thus pass from abstraction to a concrete example of how world-scale politics may affect the lives of individuals. In other words, the Lyons family becomes "a magnifying glass for current events" (Miller).

As a result, one needs to bear in mind that *Years and Years* is a peculiar dystopian series. It is a dystopia which relentlessly moves forward, but it is also a family drama, or even primarily an "epic saga," as the creator of the show puts it ("TFCC"). Indeed, Davies heavily insists on the fact that *Years and Years* is first and foremost a melodrama, laying emphasis on the importance of family, which is definitely placed at the core of the TV series:

> This [family saga] goes in the future. It starts in 2019 and goes forward fifteen years so you see where we're heading on, you know. History and society seem to be mad at the moment; there seems to be quite a fevered time, so it's trying to capture that. It's trying to guess where we're going, but it's not about the accuracy of the guesses. It's about how we survive; it's about how we are all surviving now as people, as lovers, as families, as brothers and sisters and where we're going. So, it's got a lot to say about the world but it's also a family saga. I need to keep saying that. It's not great people to throw a diatribe. You will love these brothers and sisters and their grandmother […] you'll hope for them, you'll care for them, you'll cry for them, you'll laugh. ("Radio Times")

This statement gives the show a somewhat hybrid-quality, leading critics to define *Years and Years* as "a bold mashup of a least three different genres – kitchens sink drama, near future-sci-fi and state-of-the-nation polemic" (MacIness). It purposely blurs generic borders which enables to claim that "*Years and Years* is *Black Mirror* with a heart" thanks to "its strong character focus [which] gives it plenty of empathy" (Miller). A review available on the

YouTube Channel "Who Cares?" goes even further, arguing that *Years and Years* is even "beating shows like *Black Mirror* at their own game, handily" because "it doesn't just take glee in showing how society might degrade; it takes the effort to show the human cost and pain of that" ("Who Cares?" [15:14]). In short, it seems that the series manages to personify – or even to humanise – the tropes associated with the dystopian genre.

As a consequence, in spite of its dystopian background, the series feels extremely realistic, and its argument is undoubtedly compelling. This is mostly due to the fact that the setting truly resembles the audience's society as if every socio-political issue of the current world had been exacerbated. This is why one of the TV critics for *The Guardian* argues that "as ever, Davies seems to capture the *zeitgeist* effortlessly – fear and uncertainty hover over all the characters and you can sense their inner gimbals ceaselessly recalibrating, like ours, in search of a stability that never comes" (Mangan). This is also what Rory Kinnear, playing Stephen Lyons, recalls in an interview for the première of *Years and Years*: "At the moment in our life there is such uncertainty, both worldwide and nationally, that it's a time where we are all looking at what life might be like" ("Red Carpet News"). In this respect, *Years and Years* appears as a thought-provoking TV show that may have great influence over its viewers.

The study of this show is thus relevant to the extent that the series revolves around the paradoxes of a realistic dystopia. However, this apparent oxymoron may reveal to be pregnant with meaning, since such a strategy can actually enable people to feel closer to the characters while using the viewers' own fears to potentially make them react. One can thus claim that *Years and Years* serves as an analogy for the audience's presumable fate. This idea is made obvious throughout the six episodes of this mini-series on which this mémoire will focus to try and demonstrate how the choice of creating a dystopia with an emphasis on family may fully arouse viewers' interests.

Therefore, to what extent can the oxymoronic family-friendly nature of the dystopian series *Years and Years* better raise people's awareness of their potential dark future?
In other words, the fact that *Years and Years* stands at a crossroads between several genres – notably the dystopia and the family drama – combined with the paradoxes of being a very realistic fiction, would turn the show into a useful warning for its viewers, a way to sound the alarm about the potential drifts threatening current society.

The first part of this study is theoretical, so as to come back on the definition of speculative fiction, a genre that enables to reflect upon present times through futuristic narratives. Emphasis will be laid on the history of science fiction and dystopia to show their progressive rise in fictional productions. A first subpart shall underline how utopianism was initially part and parcel of science fiction, hence the representation of wonderful progress thanks to scientific advances, whereas the second subpart will remind the reader that later on, a progressive turning-point took place with the emergence of dystopian narratives. The third subpart will be dedicated to the representation of speculative fiction in movies and TV series, from its early examples to its climax in the era of pop culture. It will attempt to show that the history of utopian and dystopian TV followed the same path as literature, meaning that it first represented progress as something intrinsically positive before underlining its darker aspects, ultimately questioning this notion which can also be represented as detrimental to society if its tools are not handled carefully. This part will also put an end to the prejudice which claims that dystopian narratives are inherently pessimistic, to show that they may actually be infused with utopian thinking. These theoretical reminders should therefore insist on the topicality and thought-provoking quality of speculative fiction.

The second part will rely on a variety of micro-analyses to demonstrate how *Years and Years* makes its audience ponder over this very notion of progress, first of all through its general atmosphere which is that of a dystopian setting. Indeed, the dark aesthetics of the series already encapsulate the idea that in the future, the world as viewers know it may degenerate, which is a first hint at the show's examination of the pros and cons of progress. In this respect, another subpart will focus on this idea in relation to scientific advances and new technologies. It shall reveal that if *Years and Years* does not hesitate to call into question its potential dangers, it never falls into the trap of demonising it *per se*; technology is never represented as a pure evil. Instead, the series rather criticises people's excessive use of it in their daily life, showing that it may be a threat to human relations. In keeping with this idea, one will need to keep in mind that the show opts for extrapolation as a means of exacerbating current issues related to progress, even when it focuses on transhumanism. This is why everything related to new technologies remains highly believable for the audience, if not common or even trivial at times. Ultimately, one shall broach the issue of the representation of politics in a series that aims to make people understand that they should be concerned about the deteriorating state of the world. Realism will thus be the issue at stake in this last subpart, since *Years and Years* is characterised by its acute sense of analysis, the observations it delivers being reminiscent of

what is concurrently occurring in the audience's reality. Therefore, this part will hint at the fact that although it follows the main topoi associated with dystopian fiction, *Years and Years* also gets closer to realism by accurately referring to their influence over people's lives, underlining the repercussion macroscopic events can have on the microcosm of a small group of individuals, who are supposed to exemplify the interweaving between the collective and the personal in society.

The last part will keep probing *Years and Years* through micro-analyses which will focus on the specificities of a dystopia that decides to lay emphasis on the institution of the family. One will first need to come back on the importance granted to diversity in *Years and Years*, notably through the Lyonses, to recall that it is a very inclusive show which has understood that identity is a major issue in today's society. Its contemporariness, underlined by its timeline, may thus be another strategy for viewers to draw a parallel between the series and their own world. Then, it shall demonstrate that the choice of a family-friendly dystopia is not trivial because the events of the show are seen and experienced through a more intimate perspective. Such a device is very much present in British TV shows, which tend to place family at the centres of their universes. It will thus be necessary to enlighten the reader about the primacy given to the notion of family in this melodrama, so as to make them understand that it is actually an efficient means of arousing the audience's interests and their compassion. Indeed, the sympathy one feels for the Lyons family is enhanced by the countless tragic twists and turns inflicted upon their day-to-day lives. This appeal to *pathos* is supposed to increase affection for authentic characters, which, according to what Esquenazi argues in *La vérité de la fiction*, is the key to every fiction that wants to feel "true" (104). Finally, one should bear in mind that even though it remains a dystopia, *Years and Years* is optimistic about the future of mankind. The show is imbued with hope as it is also meant to highlight the values of human solidarity and of resilience. In other words, the series wants to prove that love shall win no matter what, which may ultimately inspirit its viewers, leading them to realise that it is never too late to take action. This should achieve to demonstrate that *Years and Years* delivers a tale on the future of real-world society, that may serve as a convincing warning for the audience. This could explain why when teasing the series, Russel T Davies declared that "A sentence that has sustained [him] through all [his] writing is: 'A moment's imagination is worth a lifetime's experience." ("Radio Times").

1. The Progressive Rise of Science Fiction and of Dystopia

"The one thing that science-fictioneers have in common is a genuine and deep desire to create a better world."
(John W. Campbell to Eric Frank Russell, qtd. in *The Cambridge Companionship to Science Fiction*, 222.)

1. The Emergence of Utopian SF

A. The Birth of Speculative Fiction

From its beginnings, science fiction has always appeared as a contentious "genre," if one is allowed to call it a genre, since to some it should rather be labelled as a mode. As Farah Mendlesohn writes in the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to SF*: "Science fiction is less a genre – a body of writing from which one can expect certain plot elements and specific tropes – than an ongoing discussion" (I). This idea already insists on the dynamism of a genre that refuses stasis and which has always been able to reinvent itself. It took some time for science fiction to become popular, at least among mainstream audiences, in part because it has always been the realm of its own fans, which is at the same time a strength and a weakness. Nonetheless, the genre eventually gained traction in literary criticism.

Its birth is related to the rise of science in the 17th century, but the genre really came into its own in the last third of the 19th century, through the rise of mass alphabetisation, urbanisation and the development of the popular press. The 19th century is also marked by the emergence of positivism, "the belief that knowledge comes from things that can be experienced with the senses or proved by logic" ("Positivism"), under the aegis of Auguste Comte. People believed that science was the ultimate solutions to all their problems, which is why, at first, science fiction mainly consisted in rather hopeful or enthusiastic narratives about the future. It often took the form of the imaginary voyage or the dream story and thus belonged to the utopian fantasy (Mendlesohn 15-16). Though most of the stories narrated were entirely optimistic, others were already quite pessimistic – and as such ahead of their times. Jonathan Swift's satirical account of life in *A Modest Proposal* (1729) is an example of the latest phenomenon. Generally speaking, space and the discovery of unknown lands was the main subject broached by these works of fiction. But by the 18th century, these narratives began to be criticised for not being plausible enough, as explained by Brian Stableford: "Throughout the eighteenth century, however, such fictions were handicapped by the lack of any plausible narrative devices capable of opening up the imaginative frontiers of space and time" (16). It already highlights the

importance of scientific verisimilitude – and in this specific case its lack thereof – which can actually turn into a handicap for science fiction.

In keeping with this idea, one cannot stress enough the importance of the "magazine era" which helped building science fiction into a coherent genre in the early 20th century. In this respect, Hugo Gernsback's impulsion is of great importance. Not only did he coin the term "scientifiction" in 1926 – which would be replaced by "science fiction" three years later – but to some extent, he was the first to consider that science fiction could have a didactic purpose. Gernsback "intended his first magazine not only to educate but also to convert his readers to the habit of thinking about the future" (Attebery 34) and thus helped give the genre its identity. This notion was taken up by John W. Campbell during the second era of SF magazines, from the late 1930s. He kept publishing "thought-variant stor[ies]" i.e., a "particular blend of philosophical speculation and fiction" (ibid. 37). However, this time he mostly required "competent stories with credible characters and detailed, 'lived-in' settings" (ibid. 99). Campbell emphasised scientific accuracy and credibility much more than Gernsback did. Yet they both continued to offer utopian, mostly positive depictions of the future and of scientific or social progress.

Indeed, as mentioned by Stableford, Gernsback's *Amazing Stories* was a means of putting forward "the exposition of extravagant ideas […] extravagant tall tales of scientific miracle-making" (31). Therefore, there was a prerequisite for the editor to accept the publication of any story; according to Attebery, its tone should be "properly reverential towards experimentation and technology" (35). This latest idea shows that science was regarded as the panacea for all the evils of the world, hence the fact that the vast majority of SF stories "revolved around solving a problem through scientific means" (ibid. 33). This also accounts for the fact that these stories tended to end with a happy ending (ibid. 36). In turn, Campbell started publishing *Astounding Stories* in 1937, marking the beginning of what is retrospectively called "the Golden Age of sf" (ibid. 37). Both their views had long-lasting impact on the way magazines dealt with science fiction up to the 1940s. Even though emphasis was now laid on social issues, publishers were still deeply convinced of the supremacy of science. As such, they believed that they ought to publish stories revolving around science as "the imagined application of experimental method and technological innovation not to physical problems but to fundamental questions about society and the mind" (ibid. 39). Therefore, to some extent, these magazines gave to science a more encompassing and loftier role, putting it on the highest

pedestal. This explains why Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) received some very harsh criticisms when it was released, leading people to consider Huxley a sceptic whose novel should not be accepted in the realm of science fiction literature:

> The bigger objection, however, was that 'Mr Huxley either dislikes science, particularly its possible future development, or that he does not believe in science.' It was not enough for Huxley to predict cloning, artificial wombs, recreational drugs and the social changes following on those innovations. Nor did his inventive style and daring characterization count for much. He was supposed to say something uplifting about science and to prove the emotional payoffs that come with adventure, mystery and romance. Otherwise, his novel might be literature, but it was not really sf. (Attebery 44-45)

Such apparently anecdotal review, dating back to 1932, shows that there was still a long way to go for the hegemony of science as a utopia to come to an end, since the notion of "technological marvel[2]" as a means of creating awe and wonder was still favoured (Achouche, *L'Utopisme technologique* 145).

However, as underlined by Marek Oziewicz in his article about "Speculative Fiction," science fiction progressively shifted focus. It would thus be more appropriate to use the word "speculative fiction" to refer to stories placing the human mind at their hearts. This umbrella term was coined in the 1940s by Robert A. Heilein to refer to stories "concerned not so much with science or technology as with human actions in response to a new situation created by science or technology," which implies that "speculative fiction highlights a human rather than technological problem" (Oziewizc). It apparently "arose in response to the need for a blanket term for a broad range of narrative forms that subvert the post-Enlightenment mindset" while it "embraced a different version of reality than the empirical-materialist one" (ibid.). Nonetheless, speculative fiction did not fully put an end to the sense of wonder. Oziewicz shows that it rather revealed a latent fraud: "Only in the 20th century did critical thought expose the realist fallacy: the fact that all literature constructs models of reality rather than transcriptions of actuality." In this respect, it would be precisely because speculative fiction "draws its creative sap from the non-mimetic impulse" that it is meant to be "a quest for the recovery of the sense

[2] In this mémoire, this and all subsequent translations from French to English are mine.

of wonder across its semantic spectrum, from the celebration of human creative power and absolute freedom" (ibid.).

The powers of speculative fiction were thus already well asserted throughout the 20th century which, for Oziewicz, is due to the expansion of the "extremely diverse forms of non-mimetic fiction operating across different media for the purpose of reflecting on their cultural role." Such a phenomenon allows to insist on the liberty of this plural genre while defining it as "a tool to dismantle the traditional Western cultural bias in favor of literature imitating reality, and as a quest for the recovery of the sense of awe and wonder" (ibid.) That being said, speculative fiction should not be regarded only as a means of expressing a form of liberty. It must also be looked at from its reflective point of view, as noted by Judith Merril in *SF: The Best of the Best*, that is to say, that it must be seen as "a special sort of contemporary writing which makes use of fantastic and inventive elements to comment on, or speculate about, society, humanity, life, the cosmos, reality [a]nd any other topic under the general heading of philosophy" (qtd. in Oziewicz).

B. In-Between Observations and Extrapolation

To quote Marek Oziewicz, "speculative fiction represents a global reaction of human creative imagination struggling to envision a possible future at the time of a major transition from local to global humanity." In the 1950s, magazines were supplanted by the rise of science fiction novels. These new narratives kept on tackling universal questions about human nature, man's role in the universe or intricate issues such as justice in different political regimes. But this time, each new story was also heavily influenced by its own socio-political atmosphere; science fiction narratives really became a mode of understanding the current world through the observations they delivered. The 1960s are emblematic of this phenomenon. Context played a huge role because it led to a sort of rejection of any political concern at the beginning of the decade – in part due to the Cuban crisis and to Kennedy's assassination on TV, as well as to the rise of the counterculture. However, people very soon went back to their political commitments:

> Despite repressed dread, the sixties would be a metaphor and icon for psychic unbuttoning, diverting potential political rage into self-indulgence. Obsessed with style, teens and twenties reached first for simple raunchy pleasure in popular music and other entertainment media – to the distress of an older generation – and then for complexity and engagement. (Broderick 48)

This period is of the utmost importance when it comes to the rise of science fiction because it is the time when science started to be increasingly criticised. Broderick notes that a lot of people felt doubtful about the so-called notion of progress, notably because of the atrocities they had undergone in the first half of the century:

> The 1960s – like the turn of the twentieth century, and the apocalyptic, futuristic millennial years 2000 and 2001 – carried a special freight of nervous expectation; While atomic weapons still had limited capabilities, public perception was of a world facing imminent destruction, and people daily suppressed their anticipation of radioactive doom from the skies. (48)

The trauma of the atomic bomb was thus largely responsible for the questioning of science's grandeur and achievements, which had been widely acclaimed until then.

A more critical look was thus taken on science at the time when "New Wave writers began to peel open the ideologic myth of supreme scientific competence and galactic manifest destiny" (Broderick 52). The "existential vertigo" (ibid. 56) at stake in the new type of science fiction written in the 1960s, often labelled "New Wave science fiction," enabled people to feel more concerned with contemporary situations and critics to gain a real interest in the genre. The rise of the environmental movement in the 1970s – after the first Earth Summit which took place in Stockholm in 1972 – also played a huge role in the increasing duality expressed about the idea of progress. As Joan Slonczewski and Michael Levy explain, "environmental concern has led to large-scale depictions of entire planets and multiple societies grappling with the problem of "terraforming", that is, of how much change, intended or otherwise, to inflict on a biosphere to bend it to human needs" (184).

However, environmental concerns were not the only modern subject the genre started dealing with. The turning point initiated after 1945 regarding the concept of progress was confirmed at the dawn of the 21st century when the genre clearly stopped fantasising about the future with bright eyes. Instead, science fiction adopted a more serious focus to acknowledge the troubles of the present:

> Its past was dead documents, dead magazines, dead authors, dead memories: living words. The past of sf was now unmistakably heavier in the mind's eye than its present. As the new century began, sf had clearly become something no longer

> "biological" in any sense; it had become something far more complexly integrated into the world than it had been. (Clute 65)

The reason for being of the genre shifted since what was represented started to be associated with wishful thinking. From rather idyllic perceptions of the future, it henceforth offered more gloomy and critical visions. Science fiction began self-reflecting on present times to try and dress a list of alarming observations, anchoring them in rather dystopian settings, to ultimately try and prevent them from happening. Indeed, the pattern changed, partly because of "a decreasing resemblance between the world we inhabit today and the future worlds advocated" (ibid. 66) as if science fiction had been wrong in dreaming – and writing – about what human beings could achieve in the future. It led to an assimilation of the genre to "historical fiction, a form of defensive nostalgia" (ibid.). However, the rise of cyberpunk in a new world of information technologies complied with "the great deal of catching up to do in order to describe a world which (shamingly) already existed" (ibid. 68).

This emphasis on the present became one of science fiction's modes, if not missions. It even led some authors to try and redefine the genre. For instance, Oziewicz writes that Margaret Atwood, the author of *The Handmaid's Tale*, decided to differentiate science fiction which "includes stories about events that cannot possibly happen" from speculative fiction, which, "instead, refers to narrative about things that can potentially take place, even though they have not yet happened at the time of the writing." Other authors even went as far as defending the use of another phrase, such as Kate MacDonald, who favours the term "political future fictions" to refer to this phenomenon: "Either set in the future or located in an alternate reality of timeless present, these diverse narratives are protracted engagements in political speculation" (Oziewicz). That said, this new purpose remains an issue nowadays, because in shifting focus to deal with present times, science fiction seems to have moved away from its original essence – mainly dreaming about the future – a divergence that has been criticised by some.

Nonetheless, these two ideas do not necessarily exclude one another. Indeed, interweaving past, present and future seems to be precisely the goal of extrapolation, given its definition; "To predict by projecting past experience or known date; to project, extend, or expand (known data or experience) into an area not known or experienced so as to arrive at a usually conjectural knowledge of the unknown" ("Extrapolation"). This is precisely how Darko Suvin describes the phenomenon revolving around his notion of *novum* in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction,* stressing the fact that extrapolation does not equal invention:

> SF does not posit another superordinated and "more real" reality but an alternative on the same ontological levels as the author's empirical reality – one should say that the necessary correlate of the novum is an alternate reality, one that possesses a different historical time corresponding to different human relationships and sociocultural norms actualized by the narration. This new reality overtly or tacitly presupposes the existence of the author's empirical reality, since it can be gauged and understood only as the empirical reality modified in such-and-such ways. (71)

The verb "to extrapolate" tends to appear as negatively connoted, mostly because it only relies on estimations – uncertain by nature – but it actually refers to a mere process of anticipation whose goal is to prevent any risks from occurring for real in the near future.

In keeping with this idea, science fiction would now be focusing on what is happening in the present, so as to try and forecast what could possibly happen in the future – and if needed, to avoid it. Speculative fiction could thus be defined with Oziewicz as "an imaginative necessity: a mode of critical inquiry that celebrates human creative power," which "offers no pretense of being factual or accurate" while remaining "a new mode of literature, at once indebted to the traditional scientific methods of hypothesis and extrapolation but freer than science in their use."

C. The "Cognitive Estrangement" of a "Science Fiction of Idea"

One should also bear in mind that as much scientific as the genre may appear, science fiction will never properly belong to the world of hard sciences. This leads Suvin to argue that "SF is, then, a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment" (7-8). In keeping with this definition, science fiction has rather much more to do with psychology and social sciences. Indeed, for a very long time, the genre was all about alienation. As Mendlesohn indicates, the sense of wonder is precisely "the emotional heart of sf" (3) which is why it has always been linked with the aesthetic of the sublime, which bears religious connotations and is supposed to provoke a feeling of awe mixed with fear[3].

[3] In *The Cambridge Companionship to Science Fiction*, Farah Mendlesohn gives the element tantamount to religious topoi that one can find in science fiction narratives: "The show of hubris; and the cold equations of the universe, the traditional sf substitute for divine punishment, halting human ingenuity in tracks" (4).

However, this feeling of estrangement from what one is familiar with can have the opposite effect from that intended especially when speculative fiction becomes "a mode of thought-experimenting" (Oziewicz). By insisting on this unfamiliarity, a psychological process takes place, and this is precisely how and when science fiction becomes thought-provoking: "The sense of wonder allowed one to admire the aesthetic of the mushroom cloud; the sense of the grotesque led the writer and reader to consider the fall-out[4]" (Mendlesohn 4). This allusion to "the grotesque" corresponds to Darko Suvin's *novum*[5]*;* the "what if" which implies an inevitable shift from purely imaginative visions of the future to "speculative fiction." In other words, for Mendlesohn "science fiction began to shift to the consideration of consequences in the late 1930s through 'thought experiment'" (4). Suvin describes in detail this psychological process, summed up by the expression "cognitive estrangement," going as far as claiming that science fiction is "the *literature of cognitive estrangement*" (4). According to him, "the look of estrangement is both cognitive and creative" (6) which means that science fiction possesses the power to influence, and if so, maybe to change one's understanding of the world[6]. He explains it as follows:

> SF is not – by definition cannot be – an orthodox allegory with any one-to-one correspondence of its elements to elements in the author's reality, its specific modality of existence is a feedback oscillation that moves from the author's and implied reader's norm or reality to the narratively actualized novum in order to understand the plot-events, and now back from those novelties to the author's reality, in order to see it afresh from the new perspective gained. (Suvin 71)

In short, for Suvin, the genre is aimed at making the unfamiliar recognizable, through a form of "reality displacement" (71). Cavalcanti and Jameson refer to the same idea, respectively naming this phenomenon "catachresis" and "world-reduction," though contrary to Suvin, they tend to qualify the efficiency of such a process when it comes to bringing the audience back to reality (Baccolini, Moylan 241).

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[4] The appearance of the "grotesque" would correspond to the moment when people started to reflect on the notion of consequences (Csicsery-Ronay, "Grotesque in SF" 71-79).

[5] In *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, Moylan explains that in creating this notion, Suvin was inspired by Ernst Bloch, "for whom the term refers to those concrete innovations in lived history that awaken human collective consciousness out of a static present to awareness that history can be changed. The *novum* thus inspires hope for positive historical transformations" (119).

[6] This "power" should be extended to all aspects of culture. In *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, Suvin quotes Brecht's comment on the fact that "one cannot simply exclaim that such an attitude pertains to science, but not to art. Why should not art, in its own way, try to serve the great social task of mastering Life?" (6).

On the contrary, for Robert Schole – who according to Oziewicz has written the most complete work on speculative fiction with *An Essay on the Fiction of the Future* (1975) – the aim of such stories is precisely to "help the readers 'break the circle of indifference and act in accordance with a structural perception of the universe'" (Schole qtd. in Oziewicz). Therefore, the genre would be able to go beyond its entertaining limits so as to reach a form of praxis that can have a true impact on the audience. Moylan refers to this idea when writing that "central to this tendency is the seriousness that Suvin sees producing the textual novum that takes sf out of the category of simply adventure story and into the realm of cognitively estranged critical fiction" (167). This is mainly due to the fact that science fiction is now considered to be a "literature of ideas" (Pearson 149) or a "science fiction of idea" (Amis qtd. in Moylan 167). Moylan insists on this idea in his monograph *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, whose aim is "the recognition […] of the particular capability of sf texts not only to delight but also to teach[7]" (xvi). Reflections on many and varied social issues like class, gender or race, can thus be found everywhere in science fiction, in a more or less explicit way as will be highlighted later on. Such concerns may be merged into the general atmosphere, but even when underlying, they remain thought-provoking, which is why science fiction appears modern and most of the time very topical. This is what Moylan underlines:

> Whatever its stance, target, or outcome, however, every dystopian narrative engages in an aesthetic/epistemological encounter with its historical conjuncture. Whether that encounter recast the present in mythic traps of consolation or takes the reader epically beyond the order of things is a question whose answers lies with readers as they confront each textual novum. (181)

As such, "the sf maps of hell constitute a distinct variety of popular fiction that offers realistically delineated cognitive maps that are textual products of their own time" (ibid. 169).

For Marek Oziewicz, speculative fiction is also very complete – and as such very effective – because it "combines sublimation, estrangement, and cognition." Therefore, if any science fiction production is first and foremost characterised by its inherent generic hybridity, the genre is definitely governed by the notion of diversity, hence its polymorphous quality. This heterogeneity, if handled properly, is a real strength of the genre, in the sense that it enables its

[7] Entertaining an audience while teaching them something has always been the aim of art according to Horace who argues in the preface to his *Ars Poetica* (19 BC) that poems should "*placere et docere,*" "to inform and delight."

audience to ponder at the same time over the past, the present and the future. This is one of the reasons why Donna Haraway declared in her 1985 *Cyborg Manifesto* that "the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion" (149).

2. Dystopian Narratives

A. Classical Dystopias

Dystopias are far more complex than what a widespread bias – according to which the genre is intrinsically pessimistic, as if it were no more than a mere "negative version" of the utopian genre – would lead one to believe. This clarification should explain how the dystopia, which was initially a subgenre of science fiction, has become an increasingly popular genre of its own.

Before the dystopia came the utopia, a term coined by Sir Thomas More in 1516 to refer to the eponymous island described in *Utopia*, which represents what he personally considered to be an ideal society. The etymology is useful here; "utopia" comes from the Greek "*topos*" or "place," the "U" standing for "not" or "nowhere," which means that there is no such place in the physical world. By the beginning of the 17th century, the word utopia had given birth to the eutopia, a derived term insisting on the idea of perfection while seeing progress as something intrinsically positive. This shift in meaning was reinforced, in contrast, by the emergence of the dystopia. Nonetheless, one needs to bear in mind that the genre of the utopia is already relative. It is an intersubjective notion since what one individual associates with utopia can be a dystopian topos for another, most of the time because of the stasis it implies. Hence the question raised by Edward James: "Would what human beings recognize as utopia a millennium from now be recognizable as utopia for us at all?" (227).

The adjectival form "dystopian" was coined by the philosopher and economist Sir John Stuart Mill in 1868, in opposition to utopian thinking. Years earlier, quite the same meaning had already been conveyed by another philosopher. Indeed, in 1818, in his "Plan for Parliamentary Reform," Jeremy Bentham coined the term "cacotopia" for "evil place," which leads to the idea that from the very beginning, this notion was fundamentally philosophical and deeply linked to politics. As such, Mill referred to Bentham's neologism when addressing the British House of Commons on the 12th of March 1868, notably to criticise their inactions

regarding the "Irish Question[8]." The dystopia is defined as "an imaginary place or society in which everything is bad" ("Dystopia" *COE Dictionary*) or even as "an imaginary place which is depressingly wretched and whose people lead a fearful existence" ("Dystopia" *M-W Dictionary*). In any case, it refers to an undesirable world. The etymology matters a great deal because the prefix "dys-" from the Greek "*dus*" usually refers to something "bad, abnormal," the term being also used to describe the "displacement of an organ" in the medical field. It is a first hint at the fact that in every dystopia, something has gone wrong or is not located where it should be.

In keeping with this idea, one could think that the dystopia was born against the utopia, that is to say, in reaction to it, and indeed, the doxa tends to consider that these terms are antinomies. But actually, the dystopia shares a lot with the utopia; both notions are deeply interwoven, if not inextricably embedded in one another. In *No Time to Spare: Thinking About What Matters* (2017) – whose excerpts are available on *electricliterature.com* – Ursula K. Le Guin writes that "every utopia since *Utopia* has also been, clearly or obscurely, actually or possibly, in the author's or in the readers' judgment, both a good place and a bad one. Every eutopia contains a dystopia, every dystopia contains a eutopia[9]." Edward James makes the same point when writing that "utopia has not disappeared; it has merely mutated, within the field of sf, into something very different from the classic utopia" (219). In other words, utopian narratives are not dead, but the dystopia, with its multi-faceted forms, seems to have taken over, as a proof of its increasing popularity.

Both the utopia and the dystopia would, in fact, be opposed to the Anti-Utopia, if one is to consider – as critics generally argue – that they all belong to a continuum spectrum. Indeed, "as an open form, [dystopia] always negotiates the continuum between the Party of Utopia and the Party of Anti-Utopia" (Moylan, xiii.). But it would be more logical to associate the dystopia with the utopia and to relegate the Anti-Utopia to the rank of nemesis since the latter is intrinsically critical of progress. Its main characteristic, which opposes it to dystopian

[8] Mill addressed the British Parliament as follows: "I may be permitted, as one who, in common with many of my betters, have been subjected to the charge of being Utopian, to congratulate the Government on having joined that goodly company. It is perhaps, too complimentary to call them Utopians, they ought rather to be called dys-topians, cacotopians. What is commonly called Utopian is something too good to be practicable; but what they appear favour is too bad to be practicable" ("Dystopia" *Online Etymology*).

[9] In her book, Le Guin calls for the development of the term "eudystopia" so as to insist on the importance of keeping a balance. She uses the analogy of the Yin and Yang: "In the yang-yin symbol each half contains within it a portion of the other, signifying their complete interdependence and continual intermutability. The figure is static, but each half contains the seed of transformation. The symbol represents not a stasis but a process" (Le Guin).

narratives, is that it never offers any alternative; it is radical and uncompromising. On the contrary, Moylan claims that "in some form, a utopian horizon, or at the very least a scrap of hope, appears within the militant dystopia" (xiii).

Within the genre of the dystopia itself, it is possible to establish a typology of dystopian narratives according to their contents[10] but more importantly, to their purposes, which speak volumes about their relevance. First of all, there is the so-called "classical dystopia" – also named "simple dystopia" by Darko Suvin (Baccolini, Moylan 189). It appeared at the beginning of the 20st century, with authors who are considered to be the first generation of dystopian writers, among whom one finds E.M. Forster with *The Machine Stops* (1909), Zamyatin's *We* (1920), Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) (Moylan, 121). Their "canonical form" developed as the "inverted subgenre of utopia" (ibid.). It has to be noted that these major figures were to some extent themselves announced by science fiction forefathers such as Mary Shelley, Mark Twain or Jack London (ibid. 132-133).

Even though this trend is mostly related to writers from the very beginning of the 20st century, classical dystopia did permeate future generations. It may be said to have paved the way for more recent writings that re-asserted this very prolific model. This is underlined by Baccolini and Moylan in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and Dystopian Imagination*, when they note that "in 1985, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* directly drew on the classical dystopian narrative even as it interrogated its limits and suggested new directions" (3). For them, it is no wonder that Atwood should publish her book at this specific date:

> By 1984, a more clearly dystopian turn began to emerge within the popular imagination of Anglo-American societies. The "anniversary" of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (with new editions, a new film version, commemorations, and conferences on his work) helped to spark a general interest in the creative possibilities of dystopian narratives. (Baccolini, Moylan 3)

Indeed, 1985 would mark a sort of regeneration of the genre. However, if Atwood knew that she had to move away from this original scheme, it may be because she was aware of its

[10] In *Dystopia: A Natural History*, Claeys refers to "three main, if often interrelated, forms of the concept: the political dystopia; the environmental dystopia; and finally, the technological dystopia" (5)

immanent weaknesses. In keeping with this idea, Baccolini and Moylan both agree on the fact "a primitivist nostalgia is a trap in which the classical dystopian narrative often falls[11]" (240).

Another danger surrounding the classical dystopian narratives is that such productions may sometimes evacuate all forms of hope, at the risk of regressing towards the Anti-Utopia, as stated earlier. It leads Baccolini to deplore that "too often dystopia is written off as the absence of hope and therefore antithetical to Utopia. […] this *may* be true for classical dystopias where hope is maintained outside the pages of the story" (Baccolini, Moylan 240). Moylan addresses these issues in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky,* showing how Margaret Atwood managed to get around the problem:

> Overall, therefore, in what might ultimately be seen as the stance of an engaged liberal who faces the evils of social reality and yet takes one considered step back from a radical political praxis, Atwood stretches the creative range of the classical dystopian form, working it in one direction toward anti-utopian closure, then turning it toward a utopian horizon, and then again leaving a space in between for her unresolved questions as they grow out of the accounts of the society's internal flaws, the opposition's vulnerability, and the clearly imperfect and perhaps always compromised "utopian" reality revealed in the symposium narrative. Although the *Tale* remains a "classical" dystopia in its overall structure and tone, its author has nevertheless taken the traditional dystopia to a historical limit, and in doing so she anticipates the moment of the critical dystopias that will soon occur in the popular realm of sf in the late 1980s. And yet as she pulls back from the degree of utopian engagement that will appear in the critical dystopias, she remains on the other side of the dividing line from these more radical texts that nevertheless benefit from her vision and craft. (166)

In doing so, Moylan thus goes as far as claiming that Margaret Atwood announced what would soon be known as the critical dystopia which emerged in the wake of the so-called "New Maps of Hell," thus paving the way for a more analytical examination of the notion of progress.

[11] However, Baccolini herself qualifies this assertion, recalling that nostalgia is not always intrinsically naive nor vain: "At the same time, a nostalgia for another world that is possible – one that is often found in feminist novels and not one of the real past because our present originates from that very past – is not necessarily a drawback." (Baccolini, Moylan 240).

B. "New Maps of Hell" in Times of Crisis

The ideas commonly associated with dystopian situations are ancient. To some extent, they have always existed[12], though as Gregory Claeys claims, "most of what we associate with "dystopia" is thus a modern phenomenon, wedded to secular pessimism" (4). It could be one of the reasons why the genre expanded so much during the 20th century, that is to say, within the age of anxiety, to eventually reach its climax in the 21st century. During this period, dystopian writers kept imagining societies even worse than the one they were living in, giving birth to what Kingsley Amis named "new maps of hell" focusing on the "forces of evil" in terms of politics, economics or technology (qtd. in Moylan 167). Moylan himself claims that

> Dystopian narrative is largely the product of the terrors of the twentieth century. A hundred years of exploitation, repression, state violence, war, genocide, disease, famine, ecocide, depression, debt, and the steady depletion of humanity through the buying and selling of everyday life provided more than enough fertile ground for this fictive underside of the utopian imagination. (11)

He recalls that Amis described these New Maps of Hell as "a new vantage point from which to survey 'our culture'" (Amis qtd. in Moylan 167). In other words, narratives began to be more contemporary, leading Amis to conduct a survey of the pre-existing dystopian works. As stressed by Moylan, Amis "examines sf that exposes the "forces of evil" in political, economic and technological terms" (ibid.). However, such stories were not born out of nothing either. For Moylan, they drew on previous models such as Forster's short story, *The Machine Stops* (1909), which can be considered as an "early example of the dystopian maps of social hells that have been with us ever since" (ibid. 112).

Therefore, it is not unfounded to say that the utopia might have started to vanish in the 20th century, to the advantage of dystopia and because of the horrors this period is filled with. Indeed, at the same time, anti-utopian texts were flourishing, attacking utopian thinking through an absolute rejection of all form of hope for humanity. This tendency seems to have been linked with the development of postmodernism, hence the similarities between the two movements noted by Andrew Butler in "Postmodernism and science fiction." Butler admits that "given that sf is notoriously difficult to define, and that postmodernism is (usually) resistant to any absolute

[12] In *Dystopia: A Natural History*, Claeys argues that "visions of the apocalypse are at least as old as 10000BC" and he assimilates them to an early form of dystopian thinking (4).

definition, any account of postmodernism and sf risks collapsing under the weight of its own hesitations" (138). However, he assumes that "it should perhaps be taken for granted that much postmodernism reads like sf" (ibid. 137). Not only did postmodernists share the same feeling of disorientation[13] as dystopian writers, but they also broached the same themes, which were mainly related to a decadent and ever-changing world governed by the collapse of tradition and a growing suspicion regarding the notion of progress.

Science fiction might moreover be linked to the "Lost Generation[14]" since these authors also expressed their pessimism regarding the future of the world, emphasising the absurdity of life. Because of their disillusionment, they became the embodiment of the existential crisis which hit the Western World throughout the 20th century, a state of mind that could also be assimilated to SF writers at that time. For both movements, it was impossible to write hopeful tales about the future – or to write about the future at all – under the uncertain conditions the present granted them. During this period, "classical dystopias" were still mistakenly assimilated to anti-utopia, because the genre was in lack of a clear classification, although the "new maps of hell" helped to specify the genre's identity. This is precisely what Moylan argues:

> The texts that redeployed a dystopian sensibility within the intertextual web of sf, especially in the years after World War II, followed a different strategy. No longer standing in abhorrence at the frontiers of twentieth-century modernity, the sf dystopias (Suvin's "simple dystopias") were expressions in and of the very social reality that the classical dystopias feared and reviled. (182)

That being said, the genre kept alternating between different phases; the emphasis could be laid on hope or on despair, depending on the socio-political context. This insistence on the concept of relativity is also underlined by Moylan:

> Compared to their classical cousins, the sf dystopias (like the jazz to which Amis compares them) tend to be less driven by extremes of celebration or despair, more open to complexities and ambiguities, and more encouraging of new riffs of

[13] Butler writes that "whereas other commentators revel in the postmodern confusion, Jameson fear that 'this latest mutation in space – postmodern hyperspace – has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world'" (142). Postmodernism is indeed often described as the realm of uncertainty, hence its association with the notion of relativity, subjectivity and fragmentation.

[14] This comes from a personal reflection derived from how this movement has often been described in classes of literature. However, from what is available online, it does not seem that anyone has ever written on this parallel.

> personal and political maneuvers. It is, then, within this science fictional variation that the new, critical dystopias emerge in the hard times of the 1980s and 1990s. (182)

In keeping with this idea, one may notice that the redirection of the dystopian impulse has always followed a logical path; it unfolded according to the sociohistorical context of the time. In a way, it is as if the content, the form and the very meaning of these dystopian narratives would hinge on the contemporary evolutions of society. This idea reaches its climax with the emergence of a more radical set of works gathered around a new name and a new leitmotiv, the critical dystopias.

C. The Climax of the Critical Dystopia

The genre of the dystopia kept on evolving, until, eventually, in 1970, Lyman Tower Sargent published his essay "Utopia – the Problem of Definition," in which he established major distinctions that at long last enabled scholars to tackle the question of dystopian narratives. He also drew more distinctly the divergence between the utopia, the anti-utopia and the dystopia, by highlighting their differences in terms of strategies and values in "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited," published in 1944. In doing so, Sargent paved the way for a more thorough analysis of these genres' structural principles, and he rendered their separated study more systematic. This is how finally, in the last decades of the 20th century, what Sargent named "the critical dystopia" started to appear within very dark times marked by a conservative austerity and several liberal failures. These works were first indebted to science fiction feminism and cyberpunk, but they eventually evolved towards more independence, ultimately differing greatly from them. This leads Moylan to define the birth of the critical dystopia as follows:

> A textual mutation that self-reflexively takes on the present system and offers not only astute critiques of the order of things but also explorations of the oppositional spaces and possibilities from which the next round of political activism can derive imaginative sustenance and aspiration. Challenging capitalist power and conservative rule […] the new dystopias have rekindled the cold critique and have thereby become a cultural manifestation of a broad-scale yet radically diverse alliance politics that is emerging as the twenty-first century commences. (xv)

In short, critical dystopias simply "revive the dystopian strategy to map, warn, and hope" (Moylan 196). They expressed the same ideas as the "classical dystopias" but more ardently. It seems to imply that the main difference between Anti-Utopia and dystopia lies in the degree of pessimism and how it is dealt with, which goes back to the opposition between what Soren Baggesen calls "resigned" and "militant pessimism" (ibid. 153). In the first case, the end of a story is linked to the idea of fatalism since it is "already decided", whereas, on the other case, there is a refusal of closure (ibid.). For Baccolini and Moylan, the distinction is thus simple; Anti-Utopias would favour the status quo – stasis – whereas in critical dystopias "hope remains within the pages for protagonists and readers alike" (240). It allows them to quote Isabel Allende who believes that the latter phenomenon is "an act of hope… to illuminate the dark corners. Only that, nothing more – a tiny beam of light to show some hidden aspect of reality, to help decipher and understand it and thus to initiate, if possible, a change in the conscience of some readers" (ibid.). This idea is also summed up by Cavalcanti, who sees critical dystopia as "not only a public affair, but also, one hopes, a shared political stance, and a Utopian statement in itself" (ibid.).

In other words, dystopian narratives are clearly indebted to Hegel's dialectics[15], which implies that they reject binarism – or Manicheanism – and as such, they are not intrinsically meant to convey the idea of a categorical refusal of modernity and progress; they only question it for the time being (Moylan, xii). As Maria Varsam explains, "the relationship that dystopian fiction has to reality is a dialectical one in which historical events provoke artistic expression that in turn may provoke historical change" (Baccolini, Moylan 210). Using Baggesen's opposition, Moylan can thus confirm that

> The distinction can be made between the limit case of an open (epical) dystopia that retains a utopian commitment at the core of its formally pessimistic presentation and a closed (mythic) one that abandons the textual ambiguity of dystopian narrative for the absolutism of an anti-utopian stance. (156)

[15] In *The Science of Logic* (1812) Hegel explained why he believed in the dialectical method, considering that everything in life is dynamic and keeps changing through a sort of endless cyclic process, which means that there is no such thing as a status quo. There is first the abstract phase which is soon followed by the dialectical phase made up of the negation of the negation or destruction of the destruction, which precedes the speculative moment which manages to overcome the alienation. In keeping with this idea, dystopia would ultimately be able to debunk the prejudice according to which it is doomed to reject any form of modernity. If it may question progress for some time, it can eventually turn out to be hopeful about the future after this phase of incertitude, before moving to new considerations, and so on and so forth, in a sort of never-ending circle.

Therefore, nihilism and cynicism are the risks, whereas as Baggesen claims, militant pessimism stands with "world-changing humanity in the front line of the historical process" (qtd. in Moylan 153). It leads to the creation of what Moylan calls a "space of possibilities" in which "movement can still occur" which shows that the genre's definition refuses stasis (153). Indeed, since the dystopia keeps evolving according to the socio-political context, it is always topical.

This idea allows to follow Moylan when he debunks the prejudice according to which science fiction works, including dystopias, would be a mere "debilitating escapism *from* reality" (xvii). For him, "it can also lead to an empowering escape *to* a very different way of thinking about, and possibly of being in, the world" (ibid.). Therefore, not only is the dystopia thought-provoking, but for Moylan, it can also deeply influence one's way of apprehending the world:

> In utopia-dystopian sf in particular, these readerly trips can lead to an involvement with the design, portrayal, and investigation of an imagined society that involves a provisionally totalizing grasp of an entire social logic and an entire way of life. The potential exists, therefore, for an enlightening triangulation between and individual reader's limited perspective, the estranged re-vision of the alternative world on the pages of a given text, and the actually existing society. (ibid.)

Sargent makes the same point when he considers that "many dystopias are self-consciously warnings. A warning implies that choice, and therefore hope, are still possible" (26). This warning may well concern something that has not yet happened, but it can also serve to prevent history from repeating itself. This phenomenon insists on the notion of praxis, implying that dystopia always possesses a transformative purpose and as such, it can potentially modify the course of history. This is what Darko Suvin argues, writing that "utopian reflections, in and out of fiction, have now to undertake openings that lead toward agency: action" (qtd. in Baccolini, Moylan 187). Following quite the same pattern as science fiction, dystopias were primarily broaching political issues, but they soon extended to a more comprehensive vision of the world. It truly became totalizing since today, "dystopia's foremost truth lies in its ability to reflect upon the causes of social and ecological evil as systemic" (Moylan, xii), not to mention its focus on economics (ibid.) Therefore, dystopian narratives are not always as futuristic as they used to be since they are now also aimed at dealing with present times.

Another parallel uniting science fiction and dystopia is their common generic hybridity, also called "genre blurring" by Raffaella Baccolini (147), who links it to this phenomenon:

> [The] attack, in recent years, against universalist assumptions, fixity and singularity, and pure, neutral and objective knowledge in favor of the recognition of differences, multiplicity, and complexity; partial and situated knowledges; as well as hybridity and fluidity has contributed, among other things, to the deconstruction of genre purity. (qtd. in Moylan, 189)

Jane Donawerth too writes that "dystopia as a genre is the ideal site for generic blends" (qtd. in Baccolini, Moylan 29).

As such, dystopian narratives seem to have come across postmodernism. Their common interest in fragmentation, subjectivity and relativeness manages to give dystopia a certain "hybrid" quality, recalling what Bould argues about the origins of science fiction on the small screen: "This range of shows and the kind of stories they told, which tended to subjugate science to a blend of adventure, soap opera, topicality (sometimes even seriousness) and moralizing, largely established the parameters of American TV sf" (89). Moylan and Baccolini both insist on this hybridity mentioning dystopian "innovations in formal flexibility and political manoeuvring" (3). The two concepts would thus go hand-in-hand to serve a common purpose (ibid.), that is to say, a politically committed mission, which often finds its way on our screens.

3. The Apex of Dystopian TV

A. From the Bright Side of Progress…

Nowadays, a lot of critics tend to consider that SF films portray quite a negative image of technology, Simon Spiegel going as far as to claim that in "film […] the positive utopia – the eutopia – is basically non-existent. There is wide agreement among scholars that a classic positive utopia lacks some of the basic elements required for a narrative film" (qtd. in Cziganyik 32-33). Indeed, as Mehdi Achouche notes, people seem to be absolutely fascinated by the "technological catastrophism[16]" which has now become a major futuristic trope (*L'Utopisme technologique* 152). However, this idea needs to be qualified, which is precisely what Achouche does. Robert Shelton also tries to debunk this prejudice in "The Utopian Film Genre: Putting Shadows on the Silver Screen." Shelton considers that utopian films have been neglected for

[16] M. Achouche here refers to Clute & Nicholls study (*The Multimedia Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, 1995), which concluded that SF movies were mostly "anti-science and anti-intellectual" (*L'Utopisme technologique* 152). He also mentions Goldman's survey which established that in 1989, up to 60% of SF films focused on a technological invention that had gone wrong, including productions made by directors whom Achouche describes as "notorious 'techno-enthusiasts'" (ibid.).

too long because the genre allegedly lacks a clear definition; an impediment which he blames on both utopian and films scholars:

> Utopian scholars have not done enough to remove from the term "utopian" its cliched, pejorative connotations. As long as "That's just utopian" is a dismissive sentence, its students and practitioners will stay at the margins […] Trying to find "Utopian Film" in the various indexes of film is worse than the proverbial search for the needle in the haystack, because, it turns out, no one seems to have bothered to put the needle in the haystack in the first place. (19-21)

If the category "Utopian Film" first seems to be non-existent, utopia still finds its way in many science fiction movies, more or less explicitly, allowing to allude to Ernst Bloch's "utopian impulse," which would govern "everything future-oriented in life and culture" (Jameson "Varieties of the Utopian.") People may be prejudiced towards utopian movies because science fiction TV followed quite the same path as in literature, which means that the relationship of the genre with progress drastically evolved from rather positive views of science to the questioning of its immanent limits.

One first needs to come back on the intricate relationship between SF and utopia on screen. At the beginning, technology was represented as something intrinsically good and beneficial – if not necessary – to human improvement, although it was already seen, also, as a powerful tool which *could* – but hopefully would *not* – turn against oneself. Mehdi Achouche shows that SF is deeply intertwined with the marvelous notably because such films are always suffused with a sense of wonder, which has on viewers much of the same effects that the sublime has on readers, meaning that it inspires both fear and admiration or awe (*L'Utopisme technologique* 145-146). Not only did the content of films like *2001, A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick, 1986) or *Mission to Mars* (De Palma, 2000) convey a very explicit sense of wonder, but according to Achouche, the form, that is to say, the very aesthetics of the movie, should do the same:

> La science-fiction hollywoodienne se distingue donc dès le départ de par son caractère éminemment spectaculaire, où l'intrigue et les situations qu'elle ménage (une discussion sur les ailes d'un aéronef en vol, le voyage dans une fusée spatiale,

> l'exploration de Mars), mais aussi les images (et les sons) doivent stupéfier, émerveiller le spectateur. Le *sense of wonder* traditionnel est donc à la fois similaire et différent dans un film SF hollywoodien. (155)

Furthermore, one cannot forget that the very technology used to give birth to these movies reduplicates, once again, this very wonder. This is why in his article, Robert Shelton quotes Paul Robert's "A Novel Form of Exhibition or Entertainment, Means for Presenting the Same," while delivering an enlightening retrospective account on the convergence of utopia and the birth of the cinema:

> The connection between film and utopian/dystopian discourses has run deep. In fact, their histories spliced, like a double helix, on October 24, 1895, when British inventor Robert W. Paul, working directly with H.G. Wells, took out patent number 19984 for "a novel form of exhibition whereby the spectators have presented to their views scenes which are supposed to occur in the future or past, while they are given the sensation of voyaging upon a machine through time" (153). Yes, Paul patented a machine, comprised of latterns, platforms, and screens, designed to simulate the effects of *The Time Machine*. As if this connection were not extraordinary enough, a portion of Robert Paul's machine soon made its way across the English Channel and became the mechanism used by a French magician named George Méliès. Since the Lumière brothers refused to sell him their device, Méliès was forced to modify Paul's machine, thereby creating an instrument for transforming illusion into cinematic illusion. (Shelton 22)

In the 1930s, at the time when Mehdi Achouche locates the first utopian movie – the musical *Just Imagine* (D. Butler, 1930) – cinema itself was thus an incredible source of wonder: "Hollywood cinema constantly tries to provoke in its audience a sense of wonder, or even a sense of the sublime which is linked as much, if not more, to its formal and aesthetic representation of technology than to the thematic or ethical content of the films in question"(*L'Utopisme technologique* 164). This utopian medium, of which the "first source of wonder precisely lies in the almost literal immersion in another world in the case of the cinema (notably with 3-D movies)" (ibid. 149) has never failed to astonish people ever since – as the tremendous success of the *Star Wars* saga (G. Lucas, 1977-present) illustrates – thanks to its capacity to move with the times. This is why one can safely claim with Achouche that "SF can

at the same time come under science and under the marvelous" without any form of contradiction, thus giving rise to a sort of "scientifical marvelous" or "speculative marvelous" (*L'Utopisme technologique* 146).

This phenomenon concerns primarily English-language films, and more particularly American SF movies which, from the 1930s onwards, have all been connected to the myth of the Frontier in one way or another, and more specifically to the New Frontier (Achouche, *L'Utopisme technologique* 155). This is why the question of the "technological challenge" is at the heart of most American films of this period, illustrating how technology is the pre-requisite to a potential conquest of new territory, while broaching more frontally social issues of the time (ibid. 158). However, Britain was not outdone in this process, as the 1936 release of *Things to Come* by William Cameron Menzies demonstrates; it would indeed soon dictate the model of any post-apocalyptic movie. One could even argue that this film truly marks the beginning of a shift in conception in people's minds (ibid. 157). If for Wells "modern utopia has to be technocratic and technological, to make progress and to constantly push back the boundaries of what is known in terms of science and of space" the adaptation of his book remains imbued with a sense of technophobia (ibid. 158). The movie is nonetheless more critical towards men's behaviour to technology than towards technology itself. Its form is dialectical, since it even ends with a happy ending in which men are finally able to overcome their fears and to realise the immense powers – as well as the major responsibility – that come with progress (ibid.).

However, as highlighted by Achouche, a shift occurred in the 1950s. Utopianism started to decline, possibly because of the American relationship to Communism. During the "Atomic Age" people grew deeply fascinated by this "new technological utopianism" (*L'Utopisme technologique* 159). Nonetheless, this was also a time of growing awareness: "But this technology is double-edged, and people may understand for the first time to what extent technological progress can as much improve the human condition as it can degrade it, how it can make men sublime or eliminate them" (ibid. 160). Technology was thus no longer considered as something good and benevolent *per se*. Such an ambiguity reflected in many films such as *Forbidden Planet* (Fred M. Wilcox, 1956), *Conquest of Space* (Byron Haskin, 1955) or *Red Planet Mars* (Harry Horner, 1952) (ibid. 162-163). For instance, *Forbidden Planet* refuses to take a radical stance on new technologies so as to emphasise men's actions regarding this challenge:

> La prise de position du film n'est ainsi ni pro- ni anti-technophile ou technophobe, ni anti- ou post-utopique. Le film cherche plutôt à représenter et à mettre en scène sa propre vision des dangers qu'encourt une civilisation hyper-technologique, sa propre interprétation du dilemme posé par la cohabitation ou même la fusion entre l'homme et ses machines, ainsi que sa propre résolution utopique, sa propre solution médiane. (Achouche, *L'Utopisme technologique* 162)

However, this awakening did not put an end to the representations of futuristic dreams; these dreams simply followed closely the progress of science and new technologies and they evolved accordingly.

Indeed, there is a form of heritage of this visual utopian impulse spreading on later in the 20th century which have had a huge impact on society up until today. It all started in the 1980s, the decade in which Mehdi Achouche points out "the progressive ascension of a new sort of technological utopianism in the United-States of America[17]," transhumanism (*L'Utopisme technologique*, 185). This very specific movement – which can even be assimilated to a form of philosophy, if not of religion – gathers people deeply convinced that progress is the key to their improvements. This improvement should be mental as much as physical, the two of them going hand-in-hand in transhumanists' views, hence the emphasis on the desire of improving the capacities of their bodies[18]. To put it simply, transhumanism corresponds to the belief in the extraordinary powers of technology, which is also a means of affirming the supremacy of science. Transhumanist fantasies thus revolve around the power of the "NBIC", an acronym standing for "Nanotechnology, Biotechnology, Information technology and Cognitive science" (ibid.). As Achouche writes "transhumanism puts its trust, or even its faith in Promethean machines and technologies, even more than its predecessors did" (ibid.). This phenomenon can explain the immense popularity of superhero movies such as *Robocop*, released in 1997 by Verhoeven or Favreau's *Iron Man* in 2008 (ibid. 199-200).

[17] Nonetheless, Achouche does note that this desire is timeless and has always existed, hence the reminiscences of such an impulse that can be traced back to the beginning of time: « Les rêves de transformation et de sublimation du corps humain peuvent nous faire remonter jusqu'aux diverses mythologies et religions de l'Antiquité, qui toutes regorgent de 'héros', de dieux ou de divers êtres anthropomorphes aux pouvoirs physiques ou cognitifs littéralement surhumains […] On peut lire dans tous ces textes le désir intemporel de l'homme de pouvoir échapper à ses limitations biologiques (dont la principale, la mortalité) ou d'obtenir la suprématie sur la matière » (188).

[18] A first and simple definition of transhumanism that can be given at this stage – as it will be specified later on – is the following: "The theory that science and technology can help human beings develop beyond what is physically and mentally possible at the present time" ("Transhumanism").

Utopia also finds its way in TV shows, although one should note that there are very few utopian series. The most important example is *Star Trek* for at least two reasons. According to Donna Spalding Andréolle, the show was first of all a means of re-enacting the myth of the Frontier while sharing around "the universal values of humanism." Contrary to the prevailing technophobia reigning at the times, *Star Trek* delivered moderate views of people's relationship to technology: "This kind of Manichean confrontation between man and machine is often nuanced in *Star Trek*" (ibid.). Andréolle also heavily insists on the multi-ethnicity of the crew, which grants importance to "the concept of multi-racialism." Nonetheless, she does recognise that this utopianism is also very much ambiguous when she claims that "In this [*Star Trek*] we witness the didactic purpose of utopian discourse, with the *Enterprise* as the place of exchange on American values, which we can view as criticism or as a reassertion of Manifest Destiny" (ibid.) – the spaceship being also a place of exchange *of* American values. Therefore, *Star Trek* is rather to be understood as "a point of mediation between the contested past and the imagined future through the science fictional tradition of the quest for new frontiers" (ibid.).

As one can see from the latter examples, progressively, a major shift in the conception of progress and science took place in the audiovisual industry. Utopian dreams about the future did not vanish all at once, but the evolution witnessed in this subpart clearly shows that most productions went another way when deciding to emphasise a new feature of SF movies, in which technology would get the upper hand over men. This is why one can agree with Mehdi Achouche when he writes the following about the end of the 1950s:

> Au premier sublime, celui qui trouve son origine devant la contemplation stupéfiée de l'incommensurable de la nature ou de l'univers, la culture moderne et le cinéma SF substitue un second sublime, celui des pouvoirs d'une technologie créée par l'homme mais qui à son tour semble mystérieusement inhumaine et incommensurable. A l'émerveillement et au sentiment de sublime qui ouvrent la voie au XVIIe siècle à la science-fiction, le XXe siècle propose l'alternative d'un sublime lié aux pouvoirs acquis par l'humanité, et qui en réalité définit la SF telle qu'elle se pratique à Hollywood. (*L'Utopisme technologique* 164)

The birth of this new form of sublime as well as the sociopolitical context of the time may be partly responsible for the emergence of gloomy scientific tales on screen that would soon follow.

B. …To its Darker Aspects

Even though in the 1930s Universal had already started to shoot movies in which human *hybris* was at stake, the increasing number of dystopian productions that emerged in the following years was heavily linked to the context. Indeed, counterculture had a very strong influence in this shift of portrayal, as Andréolle points out in her article: *"*The very nature of the American utopian dream in the context of the 1960s counterculture was one of rebellion and rejection of what, until then, had been fundamental values which had structured society." This idea has already been highlighted earlier when referring to the New Wave movement in the 1960s, which announced what was to occur in the 1970s. According to Achouche, this decade tackled the question of the "technological challenge" (*L'Utopisme technologi*que 158) more frontally than it had been ever done before: "On the contrary, in the 1970s, Hollywood cinema, deeply influenced by counterculture, will specifically broach the technological question explicitly and directly, making it one of its principal themes." (ibid. 165).

This "New Hollywood" was therefore defined by its subversiveness, in both content and style, thus giving rise to a revolutionary ethos which reflected in audio-visual production through "the release of a new sort of films, which were more violent, darker, more socially and politically committed than their predecessors, and which led to a form of 'rebirth' as well as to a profound renewal of Hollywood aesthetics and themes" (Achouche 165). Such a phenomenon corresponds to the so-called "new maps of hell" invented by Kingsley Amis. They were born in the second half of the 20th century, after World War II, mainly through literary works but also through the first dystopian movies. In other words, the dystopian genre was asserting itself more strongly. Moylan describes these productions as follows:

> Immersed in modernity's own mass culture, the new maps of hell did not look backward to a better time. Nor did they easily look ahead to a utopian future. At work in the belly of the beast, they focused more often on experience of everyday life in societies increasingly shaped by a refined imbrication of economy and culture. (182)

In other words, this era could be summed up by the term "suspicion," as people grew increasingly politically committed and aware of the dangers that could come with conferring power on a higher authority. This idea is emphasised by Achouche: "In the 1970s, SF cinema as a whole is characterised by its great distrust and by its criticism of authority, be it of

governments, of the military, or of multinational corporations, of the forces using 'technoscience' for their mercantile and deadly objectives" (*L'Utopisme technologique* 178). Achouche gives a very enlightening example of this reversal of order when explaining that the trope of the Alien arriving in a new world disappeared to be replaced by dreadful and harmful artificial intelligence, as a comprehensive metaphor for "the technological enemy" (ibid. 166).

This gave rise to two different trends characterising audiovisual productions – two possibilities that had already defined the literary world of the dystopia earlier in the century. According to Achouche, dystopian films could now be divided into two categories: the "technological counter-utopia" (*L'Utopisme technologique* 166) and the "post-apocalypse" (ibid. 172). The former could thus be associated with the "Anti-Utopia" – usually defined as rather pessimistic as it aims to preserve the status quo – whereas the latter is reminiscent of the "critical dystopia," which is more positive since it does contain hope, although this dichotomy can sound quite simplistic. In the first case, the audience would watch a movie typical of the "Manichean confrontation between man and machine" (Andréolle) which would lead to a regression of men's attitude towards progress and new technologies. Achouche explains that the same pattern is to be encountered in these movies. The plot always revolves around I.A. depriving men not only of their physical liberty, but also, and more importantly of their own free will, "protagonists discovering every time that the idyllic world they inhabit is a fraud […] an I.A. is ruling their world and every single one of their gestures, having reduced them to the status of slaves and objects without them knowing it" (*L'Utopisme technologique* 170). This would also account for the horrific drift taken by dystopian movies at the time, such as *The Stepford Wives* (Forbes, 1975) or *Demon Seed* (Cammell, 1977) (ibid. 171).

However, the post-apocalyptic model offers some alternatives, if not a glimmer of hope tantamount to utopian residue, notably through the permanency of a "bucolic escape" (Achouche, *L'Utopisme technologique* 170). It is particularly the case in "Western post-apocalypse" like *Planet of the Apes* (Schaffner, 1968) which favours the mythical representation of the past (ibid. 173). In other words, such productions also offer a regression, but a chosen regression to easier times thanks to "a certain pleasure in imagining a simpler and more moral world where his force is restored to the individual and where he can reconnect with a life closer from that of the Frontier's" (ibid. 174). This is why Achouche adds that they tend to be characterised by a happy ending: "In the 1970s, Hollywood productions generally preserve the final hope that the societies which start rebuilding themselves will be healthier than their

predecessors, more human, closer to nature and earth and maybe much less technological" (ibid. 173). Such a movement can only be analysed as a true reassessment of the notion of progress:

> C'est donc bien l'eutopie technologique elle-même qui semble remise en question par les productions des années soixante-dix, et l'idée pourtant fondamentale dans l'imaginaire américain selon laquelle la technologie peut sublimer la nation, le monde et la condition humaine. Si l'idéal eutopique se maintient dans ce cinéma, il le fait débarrassé de ses oripeaux technologiques, dans un versant édénique ou pastoral qui fait autant appel aux mythes bibliques qu'au mythe national de la Frontière et à la perception écologiste de la nature. (Achouche, *L'Utopisme technologique* 180)

One notices that the "utopian impulse" dear to Ernst Bloch has not disappeared *per se*, but it has evolved according to the general feeling of the era. This is why one can ultimately claim with Achouche that "the post-apocalyptic dystopia may hide a utopia that would not dare giving its name away" (ibid. 174), that is to say, a "utopia post-utopic" (ibid. 179). This would explain why, at first sight, it seems that "filmic dystopias have become […] prominent in the cinema production" while it is extremely difficult to find a corpus of utopian movies (Cziganyik 32). It is not so much that utopia has ceased to exist, but rather that it has merged into dystopian narratives.

Therefore, from this period onwards, one cannot ignore the major breakthrough of dystopian stories on screen, be it on both the small and the big screens. The film industry seems to have become aware of the popularity of such stories for quite some time now, that is to say, as early as the end of the 20th century, hence the adaptation of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty- Four* by Michael Radford in – precisely – 1984. This successful reappropriation of dystopian narratives led to many more dystopian movies being produced, such as Andrew Nicoll's *Gattaca*, released in theatres in 1997. This phenomenon is so prolific that it gave birth to entire dystopian sagas being adapted into films in the 2010s, like *Hunger Games* (Ross, Lawrence 2012-2015) or *Divergent* (Burger, Schwentke 2014-2016) which were both met with success.

This increasing popularity may in turn explain the boom in dystopian series too, at the age of Peak TV and in the streaming era. Many and diverse dystopian TV shows have emerged in less than a decade, starting with the British series *Utopi*a (Channel 4, 2013-2014) released in the 2010s to the very recent adaptation of H.G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* (Canal+ and Fox,

2019). Furthermore, this phenomenon no longer revolves around the Anglosphere, but finds echo in the whole world through productions promoted by streaming services, well aware of this trend, hence the success widely encountered by foreign TV shows such as the Brazilian series *3%* (Netflix, 2016-2020) or the Danish dystopia *The Rain* (Netflix, 2018-2020).

Dystopian TV is also pushing back generational boundaries, creating series for all ages. This is made blatant by the divergence between the complexity of a TV series such as Sam Esmail's *Mr Robot* (USA Network, 2015-2019) and the accessibility of teen-dramas like *The 100* (The CW, 2014-2020). Marek Oziewicz insists on this inclusiveness: "With works appealing to all age groups and across a range of subculture audiences; operating in printed, electronic, and hybrid formats; and available in all visual media, contemporary speculative fiction spans anything."

Indeed, this phenomenon also abolishes the generic frontier, which questions the relevance of the use of categories in audio-visual productions. Dystopia ultimately encompasses many genres, from the classical post-apocalyptical series *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010-2020) which relies on the zombie trope to the serious transhumanist questioning conveyed by *Westworld* (HBO, 2016-present), up to the fantasy atmosphere of the mysterious *Leftovers* (HBO, 2014-2017) or to the alt-history that is *The Man in the High Castle* (Prime Video, 2015-2019). All these examples show that the genre never ceases to reinvent itself, owing much to *Black Mirror* (Channel 4 and Netflix, 2011-present) an anthology largely acclaimed ever since 2011. In fact, this trend even finds its way where it would not really be expected at first, that is to say, in a specific genre to which rather comical series belong, the sitcom. As underlined by Evan Kindley in his article "TV's Dystopia Boom," many recent TV shows play with dystopic elements such as *The Good Place* (NBC, 2016-2020) or *The Last Man on Earth* (Fox, 2015-2018). This subversiveness highlights the flexibility and hybridity of a genre which has a great capacity for adapting itself, which could be another major reason for its ever-growing popularity.

In his article, Kindley makes another enlightening remark concerning the current supremacy of dystopian narratives. He refers to the British series *Utopia* (Channel 4, 2013-2014) to notes that in spite of its title, it is paradoxically mostly defined by its dystopian plot. Funnily enough, this comment shows very well how in any case, dystopia now seems to have taken the upper hand over utopia in the modern world, which may be a very logical, if not rational phenomenon.

C. Dystopian Narratives as Products of their Time

Nowadays, dystopian narratives are more popular than ever, and the genre is omnipresent in all aspects of culture, under the form of books, films, series, videogames and so on. The stories depicted seem to be related to the notion of *zeitgeist*[19], which means that dystopian narratives tend to be considered as real products of their time representing new preoccupations worrying humanity. This is why Achouche claims that contemporariness is one of the main features of dystopias (*L'Utopisme technologique* 159). Hollywood would now aim to dramatise the *hic et nunc*, leading him to state that the industry "prefers to focus on the present and to stage the trap of a nation by external threats such as aliens or giant monsters" (ibid.). As such, one could assume that dystopian productions raise ontological questions, thus standing as potential models of how things could go wrong or, on the contrary, of how they could be improved. Ultimately, they would try to provide "the answer, even partial, to the great questions that humanity is asking itself" (ibid. 147). This is why one can claim the following: « le cinema peut être considéré comme donnant à la science-fiction tout son sens, tout *ses* sens [20]» (ibid. 182), an idea which could now be extended to the small screen, the realm of TV series.

Hollywood having become by extension an allegory which also encompasses the studios producing TV series, one could argue that this medium is even more capable to represent modern concerns thanks to its very form. This is a rather recent idea, defended by Jean-Pierre Esquenazi in his books, notably in *Les séries TV*, in which he writes the following about TV shows:

> Un monde est mis en scène, à l'intérieur duquel des publics trouvent une figuration de leurs propres soucis, préoccupations, interrogations : ce mode de présentation est celui à travers lequel la réalité est figurée par la fiction (Esquenazi, 2009 : p. 155-164). Les séries télévisées sont conduites plus que d'autres genres fictionnels à présenter leurs mondes comme des paraphrases de la réalité : dépendantes du médium télévisuel, elles sont en effet condamnées à montrer une sensibilité aiguë vis-à-vis de la vie contemporaine. Pour dépasser la concurrence et obtenir le succès, les diffuseurs réclament qu'elles soient à la pointe de l'actualité, qu'elles participent

[19] The term *zeitgeist* is derived from the German philosophy and it is described as a noun referring to the encapsulation of "the defining spirit or mood of a particular period of history" ("*Zeitgeist*").
[20] This sentence has been kept in French since its ending makes much more sense in its original language.

> au goût télévisuel pour le présent. Ainsi n'est-il pas étonnant que les fictions proposées par les séries suivent la moindre des modulations de la réalité des publics. (190-191)

In doing so, Esquenazi lays emphasis on the fact that "the accuracy of the televisual point of view, which is by essence led to renewal, seems now more than ever to be perfectly appropriate to contemporary reflection" (ibid. 196-197).

When thinking about the representations of dystopian narratives, on the big screen or on the small screen, it is thus necessary to take into account the notion of popular imagination:

> La notion d' « imaginaire populaire » est utile, puisqu'elle permet de souligner à quel point les représentations culturelles de la technologie dépassent le seul cadre de la SF ou même de la fiction, et qu'elle souligne le lien existant entre ces représentations, ces mises en scène constamment répétées et reformulées, et la façon dont la société dans son ensemble se représente à elle-même. (Achouche, *L'Utopisme technologique* 183)

This idea is also part and parcel of the goal of science fiction. It thus appears that Achouche is right in affirming that "SF comes under a complicity and an established connivance between factual reality and a somewhat poetical reverie that is very often philosophical" (ibid. 150).

These remarks show that science fiction is always anchored in reality. Therefore, it possesses "the ability to tell new stories" (Mendlesohn 10). What is true of books can also be applied to films. From the 1960s, Anglophone movies emerged through productions which "resonated strongly with counter-cultural concerns" (Bould 90) that greatly varied depending on the historical context. It led to a "sense of contemporary relevance" (ibid.) that appears to have grown ever since. This is why science fiction is now closely associated with diverse fields of cultural studies. Not only does it possess the ability to reflect on environmentalism, but it is also connected to feminism or queer studies because of "its potential for imaginative representations of the gendered subject, for representations of difference and diversity" (Hollinger 127). That is why a lot of science fiction works focus on the figure of "the other/alien" to show that identities are always plural, fluid and never quite stable. This concept is part of a double process of de-familiarising and re-familiarising, aimed at increasing understanding and tolerance. This emphasis on fragmentation enables Linda Janes to claim that

> Science fiction has become perhaps the quintessential genre of postmodernity in its characteristic representations of futuristic 'tomorroworlds', inhabited by aliens, monsters and cyborgs which draw attention to artificiality, simulation and the constructed 'otherness' of identity. Through its focus on difference and its challenges to fixed categories of identity (which is a characteristic concern of postmodern theory), science fiction also offers potentially fertile ground for feminist analysis and practice. (Janes qtd. by Hollinger 134)

It could explain why this genre can be used as a critical lens to broach current sociopolitical issues belonging to the so-called "Post-Cultural Studies." Dystopia already played such a role in the 1960s and 1970s when radical feminists authors such as Ursula K. Le Guin or Octavia Butler decided that their writings should question or even threaten the issue of the so-called status quo – here, in terms of gender – much more frontally:

> To project speculative fiction as a new space for articulating feminist theory and praxis was, of course, a political move. It linked the cognitive estrangement effect of speculative fiction to priming the audience for questioning the dominant status quo and its androcentric biases. It also invested works of speculative fiction with the power, even responsibility, to voice alternative views that can move the world in the direction of gender equality. (Oziewizc)

This phenomenon kept on increasing, leading Oziewicz to assert that speculative fiction, notably dystopia here, "opens a new discursive space for the voice of minorities and ethnic others within non-mimetic narrative forms without relegating them to the ghetto of "ethnic" literatures." He shows that such narratives are a means of inversing the balance of power: "In other words, speculative fiction today refers to a global phenomenon of non-mimetic traditions from around the world, whose contemporary ethnic examples often articulate multicultural reality better than the historically white and predominantly Anglophone non-mimetic genres." (ibid.). Such stories would thus be empowering enough for minorities to seize the opportunity for a revised social representation, so as to better reassert their place in the cultural world, which can partly explain their increasing popularity.

But this boost of popularity also gives birth to a very paradoxical phenomenon. In an article for *The Guardian*, Fiona Sturges remarks that more and more experts are wondering why one would tend to "turn to dystopian dramas in a crisis" whereas people commonly claim that

they watch TV as a form of entertainment to escape from harsh reality (ibid.). Indeed, some programs are not really meant to be entertaining, but rather to make people reflect on situations not so different from theirs notably through the notion of "cognitive estrangement" mentioned earlier. In *The Seeds of Time*, Fredric Jameson does refer to Freud and Gilles Deleuze to allude to the sadomasochism that would be included in such an odd desire to penetrate a dystopian world, that is to say, a world first and foremost violent and dangerous (54-55). The answer seems to be psychological, at least for one specific group of viewers.[21] This is the assumption made by Esquenazi in *La vérité de la fiction*, in which he keeps referring to the subjective effect fiction has on the individual: "Fiction echoes our concerns; its meaning turns into sensations or emotions that touch or may touch a chord with intimate or public puzzlement" (56). Overall, Sturges argues that "in these troubled times, such visions of the future can provide catharsis of sorts" which is why she believes that this phenomenon is a clear demonstration of "the human capacity for compassion." In spite of this satisfying or even comforting explanation, one cannot forget that this dystopian impulse is also a way for individuals to come to terms with their own lot. It is as if, paradoxically enough, dystopian narrative had a soothing effect on the audience, enabling them to put their own reality into perspective – in other words, to say to themselves that things could always be worse than they already are.

Therefore, if TV series can now be considered as "an efficient mode for the understanding of our reality" (Esquenazi, *La vérité de la fiction* 11), and if this reality is increasingly anxiety-inducing and frightening, then this topicality can be another explanation for the tremendous popularity of dystopian narratives, allowing to speak of the heyday of dystopia, especially on the small screen, as the example of *Years and Years* shall demonstrate.

[21] In "Why is dystopia so appealing to young adults?" Moira Young's answer to this question appears mainly psychological. She claims that "books set in either chaotic or strictly controlled societies mirror a teenager's life; at school, at home, with their peers and in the wider world." Indeed, dystopia's primary focus is the individual and how he is to survive in his complex environment, which is why most of the time it only focuses on one specific hero with whom young teenagers can identify. (Young)

2. Questioning Progress in *Years and Years*

"It is a terrible, terrible world, and I want to see every second of it."
(Muriel Deacon, *Years and Years*, 1.05 [18:00])

1. Aesthetics and Narration

A. A Prophetic Paratext

At first sight, *Years and Years* seems to meticulously follow the codes of dystopian aesthetics. This effect is first achieved by the marketing paratext, which delivers the first hint at the dystopian genre. The audience is meant to experience the strained atmosphere of the show from the first images presented to them: the promotional posters and the opening credits.

This assumption is in keeping with Genette's idea of what constitutes the paratext[22]. Genette introduced this notion in *Palimpsestes* (1982), in which he writes that it is tantamount to "the privileged places of the pragmatic dimension of its action on the reader – particularly the place of what one gladly calls […] the generic *contract* (or *pact*)" (10). Although Genette expanded on it in relation to literary texts, this set of devices can be used when working on TV series[23]. As such, *Years and Years* must inform its viewers of what they are going to watch to respect the "generic contract" established between the two parties. Genette expands on this concept in *Seuils*[24] (1987):

> Plus que d'une limite ou d'une frontière étanche, il s'agit ici d'un seuil […] d'un "vestibule" qui offre à tout un chacun la possibilité d'entrer ou de rebrousser chemin : « zone indécise » entre le dedans et le dehors, elle-même si limite rigoureuse, ni vers l'intérieur (le texte) ni vers l'extérieur (le discours du monde sur le texte), lisière, ou, comme disait Philippe Lejeune, « frange du texte imprimé qui, en réalité, commande toute la lecture ». Cette frange, en effet, toujours porteuse d'un commentaire auctorial, ou plus ou moins légitimé par l'auteur, constitue, entre texte et hors-texte, une zone non seulement de transition, mais de transaction : lieu

[22] The paratext is the sum of the peritext and the epitext, that is to say, of what is an immanent part of the book and of the variety of texts surrounding this book. Genette sums it up as "paratext = peritext + epitext" (*Paratexts* 5). However, the paratext has come to be limited to the peritext in most cases. As such, this study will focus on it as a notion encompassing the elements which properly – physically – belongs to the object under scrutiny.
[23] Jonathan Gray published an essay entitled *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (2010) which aims to demonstrate that Genette's literary theory can perfectly apply to the film industry and, by extension, to TV shows.
[24] The English translation of Genette's essay from *Seuils* into *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* makes the author's metaphor even more vivid.

> privilégié d'une pragmatique et d'une stratégie, d'une action sur le public au service, bien ou mal compris et accompli, d'un meilleur accueil du texte et d'une lecture plus pertinente. (8)

The paratext comes with a form of in-betweenness which seems to be its primary characteristic. This in-betweenness affects the reader's reception, as the addressee is supposed to be both informed and charmed by what he is about to discover. These ideas allow to wonder if *Years and Years*' paratext manages to achieve the effect of becoming what Benoît Mitaine calls a "generic coding at the level of the surface image" in an article dedicated to this concept in comics (4). In other words, one shall try and see if its paratext is telling about the general aesthetics of the series, and therefore faithful to the generic contract.

The very marketing paratext for the British release of *Years and Years* seemed to be meant to convince the audience that the program belongs to the genre of science fiction, and more specifically of dystopia.

Figure 1

Figure 2

Because of the resemblance between their posters, one could think that the BBC was trying to benefit from the earlier success of *Black Mirror* (Channel 4, 2011-2014 / Netflix, 2019-present). Both shows refer to the "future," attributing different qualities to it. They make viewers believe that the poster is a screen, whether because the background is pixelated (fig. 1) or because it is cracked (fig. 2). However, the bitter irony in the paratext of *Black Mirror* is softened in *Years and Years*'. The latter conveys a more positive vision of the future with a rather neutral assertion

("THE FUTURE IS LOADING") – which is directly associated with technology because of the page load indicator in the middle – and through the use of high-key colours. This also accounts for the close-up on the "Hand Phones," (fig. 1) which reveals that one of the characters' hand has been implanted microchips to turn it into a phone. This makes the series fall in line with the Cyborg imagery, and more precisely, with the transhumanist desire to use science as a means of improving the capacities of the human body. The hand is stretched, as if it were both trying to greet the audience and to promote tolerance and open-mindedness. It may make viewers think of movie scenes when one encounters someone belonging to another world and make this gesture as a sign of respect and peace. It is welcoming, but it may also be tranquilising and deceptive. Therefore, because of the generic contract, one is allowed to expect that the show delivers a positive view of futuristic inventions, as it is usually the case in the SF tradition.

However, when going through the details, it appears that the blurred elements at the bottom of the BBC poster (fig. 1) may be ill-omens, an idea reinforced by the discrepancy of reactions between the characters, who interestingly enough seem to be watching the audience, as in a metafictional allusion. Almost all of their faces express surprise – which is to be linked with the "sense of wonder" that governs science fiction – but with variations. Some of them appear positively astonished at what they are watching, including Edith, Rosie and Stephen, the former controlling herself more than her siblings. Despite her smile, Edith seems to be at the same time bewildered by the situation, like Daniel and Ruby. Muriel and Celeste stand apart because they are absolutely dismayed by what is happening; one can truly feel their anxiety when noting the look on their faces. But the audience can also be intrigued by Bethany's behaviour. She is staring into space with a passive face, as if nothing could move or affect her. She seems to be living in her own world and this portrayal almost makes her look like a robot – which will, in a way, be confirmed by the rest of the show. Therefore, one could assume that the characters' wide variety of reactions aims to represent the divergence of opinions on science fiction and more specifically on futuristic inventions, as the tropes related to this genre have always created many controversies.

There are also revealing differences between the British and the American promotional posters. Contrary to the BBC poster (fig. 1), which, apparently, only lays emphasis on science fiction, one cannot but notice that the one for HBO (fig. 3) also conveys the idea that the series will broach political issues, hence its lower part.

Figure 3

The audience is faced with a woman politician dressed in red, a colour generally associated with the Conservative Party in the United States. People are standing behind her, wavering the Union Jack and holding placards which read "Four Star Party." This reference may make the audience think about Matteo Salvini's very controversial "Five Star Movement" in Italy. Therefore, not only do American viewers get the sense that this show will be political, but they may also become aware that it will focus on contemporary politics.

When it comes to *Years and Years*' opening credits, what first strikes the eye is the dark and gloomy atmosphere they help create, which, in turn, confirms to the audience that they are going to dive into a dystopia. It serves as a *mise en abyme*, supposed to introduce viewers to the show's dystopian setting. As part of the paratextual information, it is very immersive despite its shortness which forces them to pay close attention to it every time (fig. 4).

Figure 4

Within ten seconds, it manages to create a deep feeling of anxiety which already alludes to the general atmosphere of *Years and Years*. Colours matter greatly since it revolves around a chiaroscuro, which insists on the contrast between washed-out white letters – getting closer to beige or greyish tones – and darker elements, including the background. It is quite minimalistic since it consists in a sort of digital tear-off calendar which starts with the curious date "0900 2019" and then moves on to "0901 2019" and so on, conveying the impression of a reversed countdown that cannot help accelerating. It represents the frenetic passing of months and years, up to the point that viewers cannot follow the process anymore, which may give them vertigo. It is also a subtle zoom shot; the calendar is almost imperceptibly getting closer to the audience, reinforcing this sense of inexorability. Ultimately, the numbers are turned into letters revealing the name of the series. In addition, what can only be noticed through a detailed analysis is that the dates may not have been chosen at random. There is an emphasis on some significant events such as 1837, referring to the American Panic, which led to a financial crisis, or the French Revolution of 1848. Considering the topics broached by *Years and Years*, it is impossible not to think that these dates were carefully selected.

However, it is the soundtrack which has the most potential to catch the audience's attention. It seems to be played by a synthesizer – or at least a very modern instrument – which produces strident and stressful music with a sort of mechanic or even robotic undertone. Going crescendo, it keeps accelerating while following the tempo of the countdown. At some point, it brutally stops with a loud noise, as the last leaves of the numerical calendar fall, ending with a decisive echoing thump. Therefore, one could say that the audio and the visual elements of the opening credits work hand-in-hand to create a strained atmosphere that would be bewildering to anyone and which can arouse viewers' curiosity. As such, it shares the same aim as a literary incipit, that is, captivating the audience while delivering information about the genre – in this case, the dystopia – or the story to be unfolded.

Years and Years' paratext thus perfectly achieves its goals. It is informative, but at the same time, it manages to catch the audience's attention by hinting at what the show will be about, without delivering too many clues at once. It is then up to viewers – which already hold all the cards – to decide whether or not they want to immerse themselves in this show, whose dystopian setting is also conveyed by its general aesthetics.

B. Colorimetry, Rhythm, and Narration

Dystopias usually open *in medias res* (Baccolini, Moylan 5) which is the case in *Years and Years* since viewers are immerged into a dystopian setting from the very beginning, whether it is through allusions to frightening events or thanks to the general atmosphere. The overall aesthetics of the show are clearly meant to be reminiscent of dystopian narratives.

This can first be witnessed through the colorimetry. Most of the family scenes use rather high-key colours – often in contrasts with darker tones – but the public scenes mostly rely on the middle or low-key ranges to give the show a dramatic aspect. This phenomenon could be related to what Mehdi Achouche calls the aesthetic of entropy ("L'effet-réalité"). This effect would tend to give rise to shots in which "everything looks old, like it's been around for a while" (Sobchack qtd. in Achouche, ibid.). Such a statement can be applied to various scenes in *Years and Years*, such as the establishing shot of the refugee camp (fig. 5), even though this first seems paradoxical since refugees are being granted asylum in greenish boxes resembling old containers which have been build up in the blink of an eye.

Figure 5

According to the script of "Episode 1," this is precisely the effect the creators wanted to achieve; one can read that these "homes for refugees" are "made out of metal shipping containers […] wired up and plumbed with visible pipes and wires" thus hinting at the fact that they have been constructed to be "cheaper, rougher, more of an emergency" ("BBC Writersroom"). This feeling of urgency is reinforced by a comment on their expanding number. When asked how many "homes" are on site, Daniel's colleague answers "Sixty, so far. But expanding to 200 by the end of the week" [18:31]. Nevertheless, the audience can easily intuit that this aesthetic of entropy is meant to show that the migrant crisis is a recurrent and ever-lasting issue that will be

at the heart of the show. This may explain why this medium long shot is very immersive, as it seems that the camera is part of the mass of refugees wandering aimlessly in the camp. It also conveys an idea of standardisation and anonymity since every onlooker is dressed in the same dark clothes except one of them, and because the audience cannot make out any of their faces. Even the weather is greyish, giving to the scene an almost apocalyptical quality.

In keeping with the idea of something coming to an end, what is striking in terms of narration is the very fast pacing of *Years and Years*, which relies on the use of ellipses. It consists here in a large time-gap – commonly of a few years – enabling the story to be rapidly pushed forward. One element serves as a time-marker to bridge two periods so that viewers do not lose track of time; it is the role of Lincoln, whose birthday becomes the landmark as the show is unfolding. In "Episode 1," it gives way to one of the most worrisome sequences [9:54], which lasts almost three minutes. This montage keeps alternating between joyful events – Lee's birthdays, Daniel's proposal to Ralph and their wedding – and tough geopolitical occurrences such as Trump's second mandate, the death of the Queen, the coup of the Ukrainian army, the tensions with China or Rook's popularity gaining traction. The passing of time is being hammered into viewers' heads with the recurrence of key intradiegetic dates, whether it is on the birth cakes, the television news programs or the New Year celebrations. This is supposed to make the audience understand that the show has moved on from 2019 to 2024 in less than an episode, and up to 2034 at the end of the series, since this trying but intriguing device comes back in every episode.

These ambivalent sequences become truly anxiety-inducing thanks to the soundtrack composed by Murray Gold, also known for having composed *Doctor Who*'s. The music partakes in the duality because it is at once intense, impressive and overwhelming. The tempo is really quick and seems almost out of control so as to embody the inevitable acceleration of time while going hand-in-hand with a decisive beating rhythm thanks to the use of drums. This heavy sound is counterbalanced by lighter instruments – possibly a flute or a violin. The singing choir gives it a somewhat hopeful quality, but the general tone is tragic. This is why viewers may experience a mix of different confused feelings when hearing this goosebumps-provoking soundtrack. However, it is clearly less depressing than the closing credits and its artificial music, as if it had been remastered by a synthesizer. The staccato rhythm makes it sound chaotic and the choir's lyrics – still undecipherable – are uttered in a lower and more grave tone. It remains frenetic, but this time it is much darker and worrying. Because of this frenzy, it seems

that *Years and Years*' credits manage "to create a sense of dread; one that burrows its way under your skin and stays there, pulsing away day and night" (MacInness) – a description recalling the sensations one can get from a thriller.

This frantic rhythm is reinforced by the frightening refrain "What happens next?" screamed by Rosie at the camera (1.01 [54:55]) which keeps coming back with variations throughout the show, underlining the characters' sense of uncertainty (fig.6).

Figure 6

This close-up is zooming in on her face to express her fear of the future. This shot appears intimate, due to its low-key colours and because viewers become the witness of her loss of control. But at the same time, it is almost universalistic; Rosie embodies the dread of all the characters at what is coming. This way of doing is usually "the mark of a cliffhanger, of all serialized drama, what keeps us watching" (Nussbaum). However, in the case of *Years and Years*, this technique also serves to express "a modern state of overload" (ibid.). One thus needs to focus on narration, to see how the story unfolds and what effects it has on the audience. *Years and Years* adopts the model of the "serialised narration" in opposition to what was very popular at the beginning of TV series, the so-called "formula show" (Favard, 37, 55). This type of narrative is defined by Jean-Pierre Esquenazi as detailed below:

> Les séries feuilletonesques font déprendre plus étroitement chaque épisode du précédent. Ces séries peuvent cultiver le *cliffhanger* de fin d'épisode à l'image des *serials* traditionnels ; ils reposent sur la construction de l'attente d'un événement et la promesse faite au spectateur de poursuivre l'action au point où elle a été provisoirement arrêtée. (*Les séries télévisées* 121)

Achouche argues that this phenomenon also finds its way in science fiction: "Rather than overcoming a new obstacle every week as it once was the case, the new televisual science fiction focuses on plots that progressively interweave over the course of its many episodes or even of

its different seasons[25]" ("L'effet-réalité"). This is the case of *Years and Years*, whose episodes all follow a linear and logical pattern, as a means of underlining the way the characters reached their current situations. The first five episodes do not really end with a major cliffhanger, the main peripeteia being generally over before the end. However, there is always a form of anti-climax, leaving the audience to ponder over what will happen next in the near future. The continuity between the end of "Episode 4" and the plot in "Episode 5" illustrates this idea of logical consequences. Viktor is home again, but on his own. In shock, he calls Daniel's family to inform them of his death; they are horrified and cannot even believe it [53.04]. The next episode takes place a few days later, when they have finally processed the news. Stephen pays a visit to Viktor, who has been placed into a detention centre for refugees, but tension is rising until Stephen explodes, shouting at Viktor that he holds him responsible for his brother's death (1.05 [06.29]). Stephen then spends the entire episode planning his revenge, up to the final scene where he finally fulfils this dark desire – he virtually carries out Viktor's transfer from the detention centre to Erstwhile, with full knowledge of what this site embodies [54:01]. The consequences of this horrific action are at the heart of the final episode; the plot unfolds accordingly, underlining how logicality partakes in the strained narration of the series, which adds to *Years and Years*' fast pacing.

Therefore, one can use what Florent Favard writes in *La promesse d'un dénouement* about "narrative complexity" to refer to *Years and Years*. Favard says that the series characterised by the promise of an ending "are more 'daring' in the sense that they depart from the episodic, from the formula as the only narrative scheme, by using long-term narrative arcs, rediscovering the art of the cliffhanger inherited from the serial novel" (35). This is the case of *Years and Years*, although one needs to keep in mind that the series is only made of six episodes, which precisely plays a major part in its strained narration. However, Favard also adds that "these atypical works [with the promise of an ending] sought to imitate closed, planned and block-written narrative forms, such as novels or movies" (18), which perfectly applies to the reason of being of mini-series. This is why *Years and Years* could be defined by the notion of "regressive causality," just like *Los*t (ABC, 2004-2010), as in both cases, the end of the show was very much written in advance (Favard, 36-37). The former being a mini-series, its ending was even decided prior to its filming, adding to this idea of causality.

[25] However, this phenomenon supposedly gives rise to "a 'mythologie' built progressively by a series and its transmedia variations" (ibid.) which needs to be qualified for *Years and Years*, as in this specific case, the object of study remains a mini-series.

The general atmosphere and aesthetics of *Years and Years* as much as its strained narration – resting on a pattern of cause and effect – confirm that the series is dystopian. Therefore, content and form go once again hand-in-hand to create a fictional world in which everything that viewers are familiar with in their own reality is exacerbated and even brought to its very climax, potentially to serve as a frightening warning.

C. The Drifts of Society

Not only is *Years and Years*' form dystopian, but its content is also reminiscent of the genre since it underlines the drifts of society. It comes with a sense of decadence through the representation of tragic events as relentless obstacles the characters have to try and overcome.

Years and Years' main themes belong to the dystopian genre, shedding light on political decadence and tackling several issues such as the migrant crisis, the uberisation of the economy, the fragmentation of society, or global warming. As Maria Varsam notes, the "concrete dystopia expresses coercion (physical and psychological), fear, despair and alienation" (Baccolini, Moylan 209). The psychological coercion is present from the very first episode, but the feelings associated with it keep increasing throughout the show, for characters and viewers alike. The physical coercion focuses on Viktor. Not only does he mention having been tortured in Ukraine for being a homosexual, but he is also coerced into remaining in the refugee camp under terrible living conditions (fig. 7).

Figure 7

This high-angle shot enables the audience to get an idea of the large scale of the phenomenon with long rows of containers, the symmetry conveyed by straight lines reinforcing this idea of standardisation. The colorimetry as well as the cold weather are again pregnant with meaning; the mist could be a metaphor for the refugees' uncertain future, a condition or a state of mind which generally perfectly applies to dystopian characters.

In *Dystopia: A Natural History*, Claeys alludes to Goffman, Foucault and Bentham, that is to say, to authors who talked about the physical coercion of the so-called panoptical society – another characteristic of dystopian settings. This leads him to write that "prisons often feature in the popular association of dystopia with torture, forced labour, and the death camp" (13). This may account for the omnipresence of pictures mimicking CCTV footage throughout the show, leading viewers to understand that the world of *Years and Years* is that of constant surveillance forced over the characters. "Episode 5" depicts a scene reminiscent of this idea when Edith comes to see Viktor, who lives in a detention centre for refugees. Figure 8 and figure 9 are shots taken from two different CCTV's camera – "Camera 05" and "Camera 06" – an accumulation already alluding to the fact that such security devices are everywhere. The long shot (fig. 8) permits to observe the surrounding in which Viktor is currently evolving and to notice that it is a place where intimacy is not allowed. Indeed, not only are Viktor and Edith filmed by the cameras – even though they stand in the background, showing that they need a moment of privacy – but in the foreground, a guard is also keeping a close eye on them. In addition, a lot of windows create a mirroring effect which reinforces the idea that the characters are under relentless surveillance.

Figure 8

Figure 9

Figure 9 is at the same time a high-angle shot which insists on the notion of hierarchy, and a continuity shot, the script of which reads as follows: "Edith watches a CCTV CAMERA turn AWAY from them, and she's more conspiratorial" ("BBC Writersroom"). However, the final version also portrays Viktor giving a sidelong look to camera 05, which makes blatant the fact that they both know they are being observed while talking about "the Disappeared[26]". Therefore, the architecture presented in this scene could be a nod to Orwell's *1984* (1949), a re-enactment of Big Brother's protuberance through a more modern version of the metaphor.

In keeping with this idea, one cannot forget that in "Episode 5," Viktor is transferred from this refugee "shelter" into a government's secret camp – the site of the infamous "Erstwhile project." The audience may sense by intuition that something wrong is happening there, a foreboding that is confirmed in the final episode. Indeed, "Episode 6" clearly represents Erstwhile as a concentration camp, which Vivienne Rook does not hide when delivering a very provocative and offending speech. After having corrected one of her assistants, telling her to use the terms "facilities" because "camps have negative connotations" (1.05 [49:50]) she adds:

> Let's look at the words. Let's stare them down. The word concentration simply means a concentration of anything. If you filled a camp with oranges, it would be a concentration camp, by dint of the oranges being concentrated, simple as that. […] And the notion of a concentration camp goes way back to the nineteenth century. The Boer War. They were British inventions, built in South Africa to house the men, women and children made homeless by the conflict. Refugees! […] If you consider these Erstwhile Sites. And how to make them work. They will never stop filling up, never, absolutely never, these problems will never go away, believe me, I can see the vast migration of people stretching ahead for centuries. So, what if we look back? Through history. Because the British found a way to empty those camps

[26] Edith is leading her own inquiry regarding this dubious phenomenon. Viewers are also meant to have a bad feeling about it because of the very mysterious and troubling dialogue between the two characters.
"VIKTOR […] They say, people are definitely being moved. Off the record. At night.
EDITH I know, but moved to where?
VIKTOR That's what I don't understand. They say they've gone to Erstwhile.
EDITH Erstwhile?
VIKTOR That's what they say. Like, he's gone to Erstwhile, or the Erstwhiles. I don't know, what is it, is it a place, like a village?
EDITH No. Erstwhile's a word. It means... former. Or previously. Like, I'm an erstwhile campaigner. You're an erstwhile free man.
VIKTOR Okay. But that's what they say. People don't just disappear. They've gone Erstwhile" (1.05 [24:17]).

> in South Africa. All those years ago. They simply let nature take its course. The camps were crowded, and pestilent, and noxious, they were rife with disease, which was, on the one hand, regrettable, and on the other hand, fitting. Because a natural selection process took place, and the population of the camps controlled itself. You might call it neglect. Or you might call it efficient. […] Some people called this policy genocide. But have you ever heard of it? The camps, the Boers, the result? Have you? Have you read about it? Were you taught it? Do we remember it? We forget it. Because it worked. [50:07]

Her description of the evil purpose of the camps and the way they are represented in "Episode 6" may create a parallel with the ones used by Nazis during World War II.

Figure 10

Figure 10 is an extreme long shot which serves as an establishing shot to hammer within viewers' minds the mental image of the way concentration camps are generally featured in Holocaust movies. The site stretches as far as the eye can see and is made up of multiples round shacks all lined up, into which a considerable number of refugees are crammed. Barbed wires have been installed everywhere to prevent people from trying to run away – an illusory project rendered impossible by the multiplicity of surveillance devices, notably the control tower in the background, said to cut off all communications with the external world[27]. Refugees are left on their own, unable to contact anyone to sound the alarm regarding their terrible situation.

[27] When his friend Debo arrives in Erstwhile, proud of having smuggled in a phone, Viktor says that it is pointless because they have been "seal[ed] off." He explains that the site relies on the "Blink technology," introduced by Rook as a device enabling to block all virtual transmission (1.02 [44:14]): "Everybody smuggles in a phone. They think it's so clever. But we can't get a signal, we're blocked, no 6G, nothing […] That's like a Blink signal. But on a massive scale. They've got a transmitter up there, covering the site with a two-kilometer circumference. Stops all phone lines and wifi and mercury links. We're offline, permanently." (1.06 [13.58])

If viewers already notice that many people are locked up here without their consent with the gathering of people one can see with the newly arrived on the right-hand side (fig. 10), it gets even worse with figure 11. The shot composition reveals how crowded the shacks are, with leftovers lying around on the table among disparate objects and clothing scattered across the floor or hanged to the lights. This layering of items recalls the overcrowding of men into such a small place.

Figure 11

Most people are just sitting wherever there is room for them to sit and stare into space, waiting to learn more about their fates. They are left to themselves while people infected by the monkey flu are being brought here – a sequence shows the arrival of "the infected" coughing their lungs out (1.05 [12:59]). This is reminiscent of Rook's discourse about the notion of "natural selection," which speaks volume about the way she wants to deal with the migrant crisis. Therefore, this topic is the theme helping the most the audience to understand that *Years and Years* possesses the clearly stated objective of falling in line with the dystopian genre.

Nonetheless, immigration policy is not the only issue *Years and Years* analyses from a dystopian perspective. To mention only a few others, the show also deals with populism, the fragmentation of society, the rise of tensions all over the world, a financial crisis, environmental problems, a pandemic, and more generally speaking, moral decay. However, the other main issue helping the series to fit into the dystopian genre is *Years and Years*' apprehension of the notion of progress. Indeed, the way the show portrays new technologies is at times ambiguous, if not always very ambivalent, as a means of raising viewers' awareness of its potential dangers.

2. The Representation of New Technologies

A. The Over-Reliance on Advanced Technology

Years and Years being a show about the future of humanity, it includes science fiction elements, but they are not really pushed to the forefront from the beginning. The series does allude to futuristic inventions, but it is not the main thing one may keep in mind at the end, in spite of the very last scene. However, technology pervades the series up to the point that the youngest characters are almost never seen without a device of some sort.

Sometimes technology is represented as something positive, enabling the family to keep in touch with all its members. This phenomenon is intergenerational, as illustrated in "Episode 1" by this medium close-up on Rosie – the young mother – Daniel who is middle-age, and Muriel, the grandmother to most of the characters, which enables to share their happiness (fig. 12). Each of them is holding their phones in front of their faces while smiling to it since they are on a video-talk with Edith, who is in Vietnam. In this example, technology appears as a useful tool to overcome long-distance and to unite people.

Figure 12

Figure 13

But it can also be negatively connoted, when it disconnects family members, putting them in situations where they are physically in the same room, without sharing anything together. Another medium close-up focuses on the youngest of the family, and serves as a counterexample to figure 12, showing Bethany, Lee and Lincoln all glued to their screens (fig.

13). The warm atmosphere of the house, conveyed by low-key colours, warm lights, old pictures and large velvet sofas, seems to contrast with the bright light of their devices, reflected on their dark clothes. Their faces appear neutral as if they were indifferent to what they are watching. The idea that youngest people are living in a digital realm is exacerbated in the series, but as these technologies are already omnipresent in the audience's world, it is not really surprising to witness that in the middle of the picture a young child, Lincoln, is in possession of such devices. Moreover, most of the technological devices in the show are not that unbelievable for a 21st-century audience. If phones, computers and tablets are thinner than ever, they mainly serve the same purpose as in the viewers' world.

However, one should mention the excessive reliance on "Signor," a home-assistant device resembling Amazon's Alexa, a phenomenon on which the series heavily insists, introducing it within the first minute of "Episode 1" [00:53]. Celeste is the first character casually using it, turning to it naturally to ask: "Signor, who is Vivienne Rook?" [00.50].

Figure 14

The shot composition of figure 14 underlines the ordinariness of this situation. Celeste and Stephen are unwinding in their living-room, watching TV or checking their smartphones in relaxed postures. This impression of a day-to-day ritual after work is highlighted by the low-key colours only counterbalanced by a few soft lights, except for Signor, to which the audience's attention is directly drawn because it radiates a violet luminescence while answering Celeste's request. This trivial overreliance on a machine to provide the characters with information conveys the idea that they cannot do without it – or rather that they have forgotten how to do without it, hence their behaviour towards it. They all use it more than frequently and for anything and everything. Nonetheless, in "Episode 1," Celeste also appears upset by Signor (fig. 15). Bethany just asked her mother what the word "lithe" means [7:34] but Celeste is not

able to give her a precise definition, leading Bethany to turn toward Signor, which answers very accurately. The medium close-up reveals Celeste's frustration at not being capable to fulfil her daughter's request. She purses her lips, expressing her disapproval at the fact that Bethany favours the help of a mechanical device over her own mother's, as if it were more trustworthy. However, it does not come as a surprise that Bethany should place her confidence in technological objects, as viewers can notice that she is very interested in scientific progress thanks to the blurred posters in the background.

Figure 15

This machine appears to be practically part of the family since the Lyonses all possess their own "Signor," using it on a daily basis. Nonetheless, this recurrent reliance is never demonised, which demonstrates that the show is not defiant to new technology *per se*. Even Muriel, the character who is the more defiant towards such devices – probably due to her age – gradually gets convinced by the benefits it offers. She used to be very sceptical about it, but in "Episode 5," she calls it "[her] little friend" [05:45] because Signor is the only one able to get her joke. Figure 16 shows Lincoln puzzled by his grandmother's use of this device, because as explained by Celeste, there is no need to have it outside anymore: "The signal's is in the air now, it's in the wires, it's in the walls, you can speak out loud anywhere" (1.05 [05:25]).

Figure 16

However, Muriel prefers "having something to look at" [05:31], expressing joy when Signor catches her reference; the mid-shot shows her turning towards the machine with a burst of laughter. The shot composition as well as Muriel's reaction thus insist on a sort of humanisation of the device, which has become a daily companion for the old lady, giving it another positive connotation. Muriel's evolution adds to the ambivalent representation of new technologies in *Years and Years*. If the exceeding role they play in people's lives is sometimes put into question, they are never regarded as entirely detrimental to society.

The triviality associated with technological devices does not prevent them from being very powerful, an idea underlined at the end of *Years and Years*. In "Episode 6," after having managed to get into Erstwhile with Fran, supposedly to save Viktor, Edith declares to him: "We didn't just come here to save you. We came here to start a war" [33:06]. What she means by this sentence is that they are going to unveil the truth by exposing this dark secret to the public, thanks to their phones. After having restored communications by destroying the watchtower, they start relying on these devices to warn the world about this situation. They precisely start tapping and live broadcasting when they are threatened by the guards (fig. 17).

Figure 17

This may explain why this mid-shot shows Viktor and Fran holding their mobile phones "like weapons" ("BBC Writersroom"). They stand erect in a defensive position, arms stretched in front of them as if they were pointing a gun at their adversaries. The scene moreover takes place at night, hence the surrounding darkness contrasting with the dazzling brightness of the lights, which could be another metaphor for the fight – a means of laying emphasis on the opposition between malevolence and goodness. In any case, it clearly adds to the tension of this climax. At the same time, phones are being handed around, people urging one another to join in and to start filming what is happening.

Figure 18

Figure 18 comes from a scene using a technique recalling multi-camera show. Viewers get to witness everything that is occurring through a profusion of images, the flashes showing that the event is being recorded by many people, holding a phone up in their hands to shoot from various angles. The guard becomes increasingly uneasy with the evolution of the situation, even though he still has no idea that this is being broadcast all over the UK. The intention was clearly to convey the impression that refugees are taking back control of the system, reversing the order, hence the "shacky-cam" technique which insists on their agency in informing the world of their conditions. In this example, new technologies are not seen as something that may withdraw people from one another, but on the contrary as something that can unite them in a common effort to call for solidarity and to escape oppression. Phones become the instrument of an information war, having the power to ultimately win back one's liberty.

Therefore, what remains with the audience at the end of *Years and Years* is the trivialisation of the powerful devices that new technologies are. This accounts for their ambiguous representation; they can appear to invest the daily life for the best *or* to take control of it. This duality encapsulates Davies's own ambivalence regarding new technology, a view he expresses claiming that technology is "like life; it's complicated" (Wood), hinting at the fact that it depends on how one uses it. Davies explains how it enables him to get closer to his own family to conclude that "there's good stuff in it. If you choose either good or the bad, you're not a very good writer. You've got to get both in there, because in the end, it's not the technology. It's the people" (ibid.). The main consequence of this ambiguity is that science fiction does not strike the audience immediately when entering the show, because it focuses on the people rather than on the objects *per se*, even though it is actually omnipresent. However, this omnipresence is again qualified by the fact that *Years and Years*' representation of new technologies remains anchored in reality, since the show first lays emphasis on extrapolation.

B. Extrapolating on Real-World Developments

The "sense of wonder" is one of the main elements in science fiction. But as human beings are making their way into the world, it becomes increasingly difficult to generate surprise and bewilderment among viewers. This is why Mendlesohn writes that "the sense of wonder is itself a fragile thing, made more difficult to achieve by familiarity" (4). Indeed, because of the relentless ever-changing world of the audience, "it seems as if almost every wild, innovative, sf plot device has been annexed by the everyday" (Jones 173). This is why *Years and Years* tries to push this sense of wonder further every time, not with incredible inventions, but by exacerbating the common and current use of devices viewers are familiar with.

It does so up to the point that it manages to create a feeling of deep unease over some embarrassing scenes. This is the case in "Episode 1," with a long awkward sequence which starts when Celeste and Stephen receive a notification on their phones, informing them that their daughter wants to make an appointment with them [14:22]. They first try to be understanding and to reason her, but Celeste is upset at the fact that Bethany is talking to them through the use of a device which applies a Snapchat filter on her face (fig. 19 and 20).

Figure 19

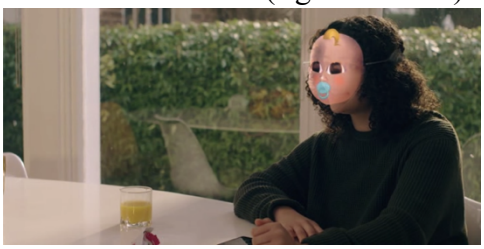

Figure 20

The close-up shows that it adapts to Bethany's face, deforming it to make her look like a puppy seeking attention (fig. 19), which is made possible by a sensor comprised in a sort of headset. Her eyes have been puffed up, while a dog snout and fallen ears have been added to her. This mask seems to be her main way of expressing emotions, as if she were unable to communicate without it. Celeste asks her "why don't you turn off that filter? So we can see you. Properly" [14:56], but the teenager refuses. The scene gets even more uncomfortable when Celeste agrees to the appointment: Bethany then puts on a baby-filter (fig. 20) which transforms her voice into that of a toddler. She bursts into high-pitched laughter for a few seconds, making her parents gnash their teethes while she is smiling behind her mask. Filters have pervaded social medias in current society, to the extent that some people cannot do without it, just like Bethany here. As such, this awkward scene is a clear example of the drifts that could be taken with a technology already existing in the viewers' world.

But *Years and Years* also refers to some great scientific and technological improvements, mostly related to the curing of diseases. Nonetheless, the series never falls in line with "Hard SF," which is "about the emotional experience of describing and confronting what is scientifically true" (Hartwell qtd. in Cramer 188). In other words, this subcategory gives importance to the analysis of a phenomenon. To belong to it, a production needs to grant time to scientific explanations, which can be rather abstruse. One of the most striking moments when the show *verges* on Hard SF occurs in "Episode 2" and relates to Rosie, the mother in a wheelchair, who is affected by spina bifida, a spine malformation appearing at birth. Years passing by, Rosie learns that scientists have invented a cure to prevent babies from coming to the world with this disability. She briefly and casually explains how it works to Edith [29:12] but she never gives complex details about the surgery. Instead, she starts pondering over the social reality behind such a medical advance, being fully aware that "the NHS can't afford stuff like that. So, who's gonna get fixed? Only the billionaires" [30:06]. In the real world, scientists have been working on this issue since 2002; several treatments to live more easily with this impairment already exist, and it has been announced that spina bifida could now be cured in the womb. Therefore, this example shows that although *Years and Years* is not a Hard SF series, it nonetheless deals with plausible scientific facts, the show conforming to the advances of science in the audience's world.

Even when such advances are not yet existing in reality, they are never far-fetched. In an article, Sam Wong dresses a list of the technological revolutions one can witness in *Years and Years* which have an equivalent in real life. He gives the example of synthetic alcohol – supposed to prevent the characters from having a hangover – that they get to experience for Muriel's birthday (1.02 [24:04]). Unfortunately for them, it is a failure, but this product does exist in the viewers' reality since psycho-pharmacologist David Nutt invented a drink that makes people tipsy without damaging their brains in the long run (Wong). Another example is the reference to "clean meat" (1.03 [14:07]). Wong writes that it is reminiscent of an experience realised at Maastricht University in 2013, leading to a very expansive product that is expected to be more accessible to people in the years to come. Two other nods to scientific evolutions are mentioned in "Episode 3" with "antibiotic resistance" seen through Vincent's death[28], the

[28] According to what Stephen explains to his siblings, their father died because of a sepsis after a bicycle accident: "The bike knocked him over. And he had a scratch on his hand. That was all. […] He was fine, he had a scratch, but that turned into blood poisoning. […] They tried all the antibiotics. But they don't work anymore. A scratch on his hand." (1.03 [30:52]).

absent father of the Lyonses, and "watery grave," the crematorium being replaced by an "aquatorium" (1.03 [39:13]). Researchers are currently pondering over the benefits of such a burial: "Alkaline hydrolysis was touted as an eco-friendly alternative to burial and cremation in *New Scientist* as far back as 2010" (Wong). Therefore, although such inventions are not well-known outside of the scientific sphere for now, they remain highly credible for the audience.

This is why considering the progress of science, one is not surprised either when in "Episode 5," Muriel's eyesight is fixed after having suffered from macular degeneration for years. In this example, the show also gets closer to Hard SF without reaching it: the audience is not given to see the intricate mechanisms of this surgery, which is never discussed at length. Instead, they are granted access to the characters' reactions at these scientific advances, what they think of it and how it could influence their future. Muriel exemplifies this idea, as viewers know that she has mixed feelings about progress and new technologies. This is what one can witness in figure 21 from "Episode 5," a medium shot revealing that she is again sceptical about the process. Contrary to Celeste, who is neutral, and Bethany who seem very concentrated, trying to explain to her grandmother that her laptop is about to find out what she has, Muriel does not hide that she is dubious. She is staring at it with a scowl on her face, reinforced by her frown of disapproval. The sequence is taking place in the kitchen with a frame composition that underlines the fact that such situation – undergoing a medical examination at home, thanks to the camera of a mechanical device that will, on its own, deliver a first diagnosis – has become trivial, if not the norm, something with which Muriel is still struggling.

Figure 21

This is why this shot can be compared with figure 22, which takes place a few minutes later (1.05 [35:44]). The scene is set is set in the exact same place – around the kitchen table – but now, the look on Muriel's face is that of excitement. She is no longer frowning upon the laptop, but instead, she is gladly smiling at it, like Celeste who seems happy for her mother-in-law.

Muriel is from now on "100% cured" [35:38] whereas a doctor previously explained to her that if it was not for science, she would have lost her eyesight: "Macular degeneration is a thing of the past, Mrs Deacon. Ten years ago, you'd have gone blind" (1.05 [17:16]). She is supposed to give her satisfactory feedback, grading it without any hesitation: "Oh I'd say 10! [the maximum] Definitely, great big 10! But don't tell the Council" [35:46].

Figure 22

Her excitement keeps on increasing, up to the point that she asks Signor to open "Family Message" to let everyone know that she is cured. Figure 23 shows her as being ecstatic. This individual shot focuses on her reaction to this change, leading the audience to understand that it has finally given her hope in the future. She is joining the palms of her hands as in a prayer, her look revealing her euphoria: this personal experience with medical care clearly gave her confidence in scientific progress and new technologies.

Figure 23

As it will be demonstrated later, *Years and Years* goes as far as to broach the ontological questioning of the afterlife, but again according to current scientific research on the subject. Their representation of a potential life after death is not far-fetched, but realistic enough to have been envisioned by contemporary scientists and big technological companies. This is what Joelle Renstrom explains in "What Would It Mean for Humans to Become Data?":

> Even though no one really knows how to map, store, or transfer someone's consciousness, a few companies have begun trying. A startup called Brain Backups wants to map the "connectome," or the "genome of the brain." Nectome is trying to find a chemical way to preserve one's memories beyond death. LifeNaut gathers people's data to create a mind backup as well as a robotic "mind clone."

Even when dealing with this highly metaphysical question, the show delivers hypothesis anchored in reality. In addition, primacy is again given to human emotions, at the expanse of a lengthy description of the process which could be difficult to fathom for viewers. This latest idea is underlined by Edith when she declares to the scientists in charge of her that

> Everything you've stored. All the downloads. Those bits of me that you've copied on to water, you've got no idea what they really are. I'm not a piece of code. I'm not information. All these memories, they're not just facts, they're so much more than that. They're my family. And my lover. They're my mum, and my brother who died years ago. They're love. That's what I'm becoming now. Love. I am love. (1.05 [54:55])

This close-up (fig. 24), slowly zooming in on her face, reveals that she is finally at peace, an impression reinforced by the awe-inspiring music announcing the end of the series.

Figure 24

Edith's wide eyes make the audience understand that she is experiencing an epiphany that transcends her soul and body. Her face conveys the idea that she is serene – a feeling that characterises the state of mind of people about to die in the general opinion. At the same time, a long shot shows the reaction of her entire family (fig. 25). Her relatives are gathered in Muriel's living room, waiting to know if the experience went well, which would mean that science would have been able to transfer Edith's soul into Signor. Their anxiety mixed with excitation is palpable, since they are all represented as staring at the device, expecting a sign

from her. They hold hands or embrace one another, which hints at their hope. They seem aware to be witnessing a crucial process, but what really matters for them is to know if they are going to be able to keep on communicating with Edith. Once again, a major scientific advance is seen from the perspective of individuals, to stress how it could change their lives forever.

Figure 25

One can thus argue that *Years and Years* focuses on the humanisation of new technology to prevent the reification of individuals to the advantage of objects. According to Achouche, this strategy is a means of avoiding one of the reproaches frequently addressed to science fiction productions, which would have been used in *Battlestar Galactica* (NBC, 2004-2009):

> Dans le même temps, la série se protège d'un des reproches les plus souvent adressés à la science-fiction – celui de s'intéresser plus aux gadgets qu'aux histoires et aux personnages – et se rapproche du réel grâce à des technologies qui existent ou ont bel et bien existé dans le quotidien du spectateur. Le « réalisme » consiste donc ici à esquiver le futurisme et les tropes qui tendent habituellement à définir et réifier un genre, afin de « naturaliser » celui-ci et le rendre plus immédiatement proche et accessible au téléspectateur. (« L'effet-réalité »)

Years and Years too grants more importance to human emotions rather than to the accomplishments brought by revolutionary objects. It does not spend time explaining how inventions work but emphasises how it affects the characters' lives. The series thus opts for extrapolation as a mode of representation that avoids moving too further away from the audience's reality. As a consequence, everything related to science and progress remains absolutely believable. However, one of the characters stands apart because of a desire to push back the frontiers of scientific knowledge and technological improvements. This ambition is embodied by Bethany and her adhesion to the transhumanist movement, helping the series to truly fit into the genre of science fiction, and to mention the potential drifts of progress.

C. Challenging the Limits: Transhumanism

"Science fiction's task, often, is to make visible to us the unthinking assumptions that limit human potentiality" (Pearson 159). This specific purpose appears in *Years and Years*, particularly through Bethany's character. She is directly associated with transhumanism, "a social movement predicated on the belief that we can and should leave behind our biological condition by merging with technology," which is "oriented toward the future" and "fuelled by excitable speculation about the implications of the latest science and technology" (O'Connell). This desire is at the core of the show, highlighting "the ways scientific innovations have transformed social life globally […] their potential to transform the means of production, and with them world models, cultural values and human bodies" (Csicsery-Ronay 122). Bethany truly encapsulates this state of mind, her desire growing stronger throughout the series while her evolution is made blatant by concrete representations of transhumanistic advances. However, when dealing with transhumanism, *Years and Years* is again permeated by a sense of duality; it can be portrayed very positively, but it is also represented as something dangerous.

Bethany's first apparition immediately conveys the idea of a shy and withdrawn teenager, uncomfortable with herself. She even shows the signs of depression, as made obvious by the camera tracking in around her face in "Episode 1," a close-up enabling to notice that she is staring into space (fig. 26). Very ill-at-ease with her body, Bethany only reveals her true self through technology, which is one of her main arguments to justify her wish to become transhuman. She declares to her parents: "I'm not comfortable with my body. So, I want to get rid of it. This thing, all the arms and legs and every single bit of it. I don't want to be flesh. I'm really sorry but I'm gonna escape this thing and become digital." (1.01 [26:06]).

Figure 26

Referring to Haraway, Csicsery-Ronay explains that "contemporary technoscience has decisively promoted the breakdown of categories previously thought to be natural and inviolable – such as those between the genders, between animals and humans and between humans and machines" (122). This captures the point of Bethany's speech when she explains

her desire: “I wanna life forever. As information. Because that’s what transhumans are mom. Not male, or female, better. Where I’m going there’s no life or death; there’s only data. I will be data.” (1.01 [26:47]). This time her face is expressing her thrill at this project; she seems to be filled with ecstasy.

Bethany is always represented as such when talking about transhumanism, but no one really seems to understand her, except for Lizzie – whom she meets in “Episode 3”– which is the reason why they get so close to one another. She soon becomes her absolute best friend because they are both passionate about transhumanism. Figure 27 comes from a sequence which demonstrates how fired up by enthusiasm they are when they realise that they believe in the same movement (1.03 [04:12]). This subjective over-the-shoulder shot is meant to represent Lizzie’s perspective. This enables the audience to focus on Bethany’s face lighting up when she notices that the palms of their hands are alike, which means that Lizzie has gone through the same operation that she has. They stretch their hands forwards, as in a token of recognition, or even a sign of belonging. It almost creates the impression of a reflection shot, an idea that alludes to the notion of “alignment” or “conformity” between members of the community that one may find in transhumanism.

Figure 27

As a consequence, the two young women always appear “at distance with the others” (“BBC Writersroom”) or even at odds with them. Figure 28, from “Episode 3,” highlights the idea that they stand apart. The scene takes places at Muriel’s, for Daniel’s birthday. Everyone is outside, partying, chatting, laughing or drinking a beer, except for the two girls who rapidly retreat into their bubbles. The frame composition encapsulates this notion of remoteness, with the windows appearing as a partition between two worlds – “real life,” and their own little world, where they can dream about their potential transhumanist transformation(s).

Figure 28

With this frame within the frame, they remain connected with the external world without truly belonging to it. They share a waking dream where they can exchange about transhumanism without the fear of being judged, hence their withdrawn behaviours with others. Indeed, they are often portrayed as standing in a "quiet spot," appearing very "secretive" ("BBC Writersroom"). Here, they stand in a dark corner, which conveys the impression that they aim to keep a low profile, as if they did not want other people to listen to their conversation. They both feel that they cannot be understood, even by their closest relatives, which reflects in their dialogue. Bethany declares with disgust that sometimes "[her] lungs fill up with air, it goes in and out like some sort of bellows, and it feels so… thick" adding that "[they] could be so much better than this," (1.03 [20.41]) to which her friend answers "we could be free" [20:51]. Lizzie also expresses her frustration "I tried telling my mum. She doesn't understand. I mean, she won't understand, she refuses" [20:17], Bethany alluding to the same disappointment: "My mum and dad, they're like, haven't you grown out of that yet? I said mum, you should look online" [20:23].

However, Bethany's parents do try to be receptive to her desire, although they never approve it. They always remain very dubious about transhumanism, viewers feeling that they cannot fully fathom everything that comes with it. In "Episode 5," a scene captures this discrepancy of feelings. Figure 29 rests on the opposition between Bethany's enthusiasm and her parents' reticence, who both appear disconcerted at her "evolution." Bethany has just been financed by the government for a brain surgical operation that should enable her to do anything and everything just by the power of thought; she has become a sort of omnipotent computer. A pan shot stresses the differences of reactions between the three characters; Bethany is again euphoric, whereas her parents are clearly unsettled by the situation.

Figure 29

On the left-hand corner, Stephen even seems mad at her daughter's decision; he is frowning and cannot understand what this operation implies for her. In front of him, Celeste is staring into space, unable to utter a word. She seems to have opted for passivity; she no longer wants to give her opinion on Bethany's choice. It appears that she has gradually become impervious to these changes, but the next scene shows that they are both still very concerned with this issue. Figure 30, also extracted from "Episode 5," is revelatory of their dreads. The straights symmetrical lines of the ceiling and the mirroring effect of the glasses convey an impression of conformity and therefore of a lack of individuality, reinforced by the two young girls – probably nurses – heading towards the camera.

Figure 30

The long shot enables to notice Celeste's look of disapproval while underlining the sterility characterising this clinic, in which whiteness prevails. The two women are worthy of attention, since in spite of their physical differences, they look very much alike. They have the same gaits, as if they had been programmed to walk like robots, arms and legs moving in symmetry, with a staccato rhythm. This scene thus relates to the idea that transhumanism may have something

to do with the robotisation of people. Such fears are quite common when it comes to transhumanism; it is even one of the topoi of the genre, hence Celeste and Stephen's fear. They associate this movement with a form of uniformization, believing that Bethany will ultimately lose her identity. Her parents' awkwardness to this evolution thus becomes a means of nuancing *Years and Years*' representation of transhumanistic issues.

Nonetheless, they have reasons to disagree with it, as Bethany's aspiration puts her life in jeopardy in "Episode 3". Bethany and Lizzie decide to go further in their desire to improve their bodies, spending £10, 000 for an eye surgery that is supposed to grant them revolutionary abilities. One really gets the feeling that they go on an adventure, as they embark on a shabby boat, for what seems to be an illegal mission [40:09]. Even the two girls appear suspicious at some point, but they go on board anyway, their dream prevailing over their fear. It gives way to a dreary scene after Lizzie's left eye has been taken off by the "surgeons" and replaced by some sort of fake eye that she cannot control. Figure 31 shows how horrific her situation is. The close-up zooming in on her face turns into an extreme close-up revealing that she has been crying for some time, while her eye cannot help rolling around aimlessly Such a sequence illustrates one of the dangers associated with transhumanism, ill-intentioned people having seized this opportunity to trick people into organ trafficking.

Figure 31

Therefore, the way Bethany's parents apprehend her choices and this latest example point out the fact that *Years and Years* qualifies its representation of transhumanism. It is first seen as something that needs to be carefully controlled, which is why the series also highlights the risks that could come with it in the near future.

If Bethany's parents as well as the audience may not be comfortable with this project – which relates to *hybris* – for Renstrom, Bethany's desire is rational, if not wise:

> Given [*Years and Years*'] backdrop, is it so illogical to decide that an earthly existence isn't the best idea? Bethany uses the word *escape* to describe her desire to shed her individual and species-level identity. Her focus on shedding the trappings of the human body eclipses any concerns about retaining some measure of humanity—and perhaps that's precisely the point. That humanity, after all, is the source of planetary (as well as human and animal) destruction.

It confirms that the show also assimilates transhumanism to something potentially reasonable. This may explain why the hazardous experience mentioned above is counterbalanced by other moments when transhumanism becomes a very useful and even lifesaving tool.

Transhumanism is also seen in its best light, notably when Bethany gets closer to a major figure in science fiction: the cyborg. In *A Cyborg Manifesto*, Haraway argues "for *pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and for *responsibility* in their construction" (7). This makes blatant the social necessity of her concept: "My cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities, which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work" (ibid. 14). Cyborgs are most of the time "an exploited class of beings that is capable of a form of class-consciousness, and hence subversive of and eventually capable of wresting control over the technoscientific network" (Csicsery-Ronay 122-123). These ideas may remind the audience of the moment when Edith and Bethany go on a mission to try and discover what the "Erstwhile project" consists in (1.05.) Bethany now possesses a brain implant which makes her body able to connect to everything and as such, to unlock all the security doors of the facility for her aunt to penetrate this official property. Figure 32 shows by a shoulder shot how powerful she has become; she can do anything just by moving her hands around in the air.

Figure 32

She keeps an eye on the guards thanks to a complete access to CCTV surveillance. But at the same time, she can also pay attention to Edith's racing heart and to her breathing, while looking at her medical records to try and see what is wrong with her. When the situation degenerates, she even manages to provoke a blackout for her aunt to get out of the building safe and sound. The multiplicity of windows on her screen is a means of alluding to her limitless potential in a scene which relates to Haraway's belief that a cyborg possesses the ability to become "the positive agent of historical transformation" (123).

Indeed, Bethany's subversive use of her new transhuman power becomes increasingly important for the unfolding of the story, up to the point that her evolution plays a crucial role in the denouement of the Erstwhile storyline in the finale:

> Toward the end, the series morphs from treating transhumanism as a destructive idea. Instead, it begins exploring the benefits of integrating with data […] While [Bethany] isn't data herself, she has access to limitless amounts of it; she is basically a superhero. The technical and practical benefits make up only part of the equation. After her surgery, Bethany describes the access to that information as "joy in [her] head." Even though technology can strip humanity away, it can also deliver the most sublime of human emotions. (Renstrom)

Such an evolution explains why in the finale, Bethany is described as looking "like a visionary" ("BBC Writersroom"). Renstrom goes as far as arguing that "in demonstrating omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience, she taps into the province of gods." Figure 33 encapsulates this idea, alluding to Bethany's almost demiurgic powers. The medium close-up shows that she is at the same time concentrating on what she is doing – passing on information about Erstwhile by sending out live videos – and delighted to be able to help achieve justice.

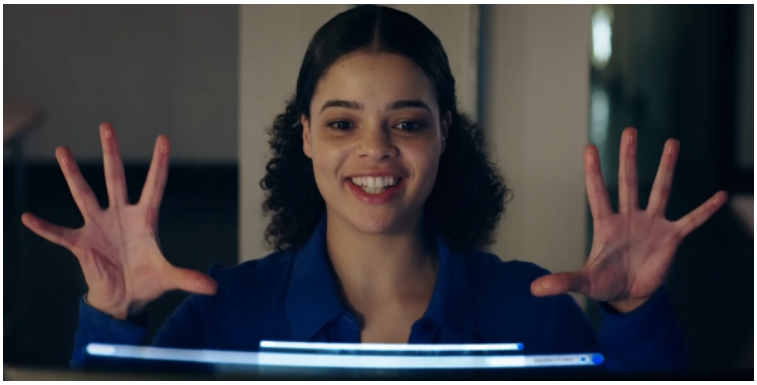

Figure 33

She is smiling from ear to ear at discovering all that she can do thanks to her transformation. Attention is also drawn to her stretched hands, with which she is in full control of the situation. She is using them to build a new and fairer world, which is in keeping with her God-like powers. Moreover, in the same sequence, a travelling shot reveals that Bethany has been able to gather an army of vigilantes, since her colleagues are helping her sharing videos around. It thus seems that *Years and Years* partakes in the reassessment of the Cyborg myth, shedding lights on the immense powers that can come with transhumanism.

At the very end of the series, *Years and Years* goes further in its exploration of transhumanist issues when it tackles the metaphysical question of the afterlife[29]. It relies on an assumption: the idea that the mind could be separated from the body to be encoded in a "cloud," so that people could live forever. As stated earlier, when dealing with this question, emphasis is laid on human emotions rather than on scientific discourses. However, the last ten minutes of "Episode 6" reach the climax of science fiction, figure 34 being reminiscent of many SF productions talking about eugenics. This very long shot becomes an establishing shot, allowing the audience to discover a very specific setting. The sequence takes place in a peculiar room that does not seem to have any walls nor any real ceiling – which may be a metaphor for the limitless capacity of the transhuman figure. The contrast between the brightness of the artificial light weighing above the characters and the darkness of their surrounding creates a chiaroscuro effect which calls attention to the two scientists, standing in front of Edith, who is calmly sitting on some sort of operating table.

Figure 34

[29] The afterlife is crucial for transhumanists as it would come with a restoration of faith – not in the Almighty God, but in progress: "While the notion of an afterlife might seem incompatible with science, achieving immortality as data is another form of the same idea. The only difference is that instead of God, technology facilitates that ascendance. As journalist Meghan O'Gieblyn puts it, "What makes the transhumanist movement so seductive is that it promises to restore, through science, the transcendent hopes that science itself has obliterated."" (Renstrom)

Viewers may notice the recurrence of blue, be it on the scientist's clothes, on their screens, all around the floor, or behind Edith, in larges tubes which seem to contain water with odd particles. This colour is generally associated with serenity, reinforcing the idea that Edith is at peace with her imminent departure from the physical world. She is about to lay on the table for her head to be connected to the tubes thanks to a cable which will enter her brain to record all her memories while she delivers her final testimony. This last sequence thus very much falls in line with the finality of transhumanism, which is again represented as something powerful and potentially beautiful. It confirms the idea that the show remains full of nuances in its analysis of technological wonders, praising some of its advances while never forgetting to refer to its risks.

Therefore, *Years and Years* gradually gets closer to science fiction up to the climax in the finale. However, viewers only get a glimpse of this projection before an abrupt open ending that leaves room for interpretation. As such, despite this final paroxysm, the show has much more in common with soft science fiction, which applies to "sf that deals with the Soft Sciences or to sf that does not deal with recognizable science at all, but emphasizes human feelings" ("Soft SF"). *Years and Years*' science fiction is about analysing human dynamics, hence its emphasis on emotions and reactions to changes:

> The show illustrates technology's ultimate conundrum: Technology itself is neutral, as the aphorism goes, but in the hands of humans, it can become a vehicle for destruction or for deliverance. For a show that often represents technology negatively, the choice to cast it as an instrument of salvation is interesting, if not confusing. But perhaps that's the point: Depending on who wields it and how, technology can be or do just about anything. That also means that those who wield it can be or do just about anything. (Renstrom)

As a consequence, *Years and Years* does not appear as a "pure" SF show. Even though some tropes remain present, the series is not focused on the depiction of technological marvels. Instead, it hints at a potential dark future, showing the effects that new technologies may have on people as a means of telling the audience to be aware of the powers that come with progress, as they may be treacherous. In keeping with this idea, not only does the show give the primacy to people's experiences when it comes to scientific progress, but it does so again when dealing with politics, which results in another warning about the state of the real world.

3. Emphasis on Politics to Warn about the State of the World

A. Verisimilitude, Realism and Hyperrealism

According to Jones, "the feature that unites every kind of sf is the construction – in some sense – of a world other than our own" (163). The audience should notice this phenomenon because "the icons of sf are the signs which announce the genre, which warn the reader that this is a different world," which implies that "the reading of an sf story is always an active process of translation" (ibid.). In keeping with this definition, the imaginary setting seems to be the most important element in science fiction. But in *Years and Years*, this setting appears to be so realistic that it may be impossible for viewers not to identify this pseudo-imaginary world with their own society.

This impossibility not to recognise the real model behind the fictional world can be linked to the fact that according to Jean Baudrillard,

> Today we have entered into a new form of schizophrenia – with the emergence of an immanent promiscuity and the perpetual interconnection of all information and communication networks. No more hysteria, or projective paranoia as such, but a state of terror… an over-proximity of all things, a foul promiscuity of all things which beleaguer and penetrate him, and no halo, no aura, not even the aura of his own body protects him... [the individual is] open to everything. (qtd. in Butler 143)

To a certain extent, science fiction could feel "truer than life," since in this new world, "it is not a question of parallel universes, or double universes, nor real no unreal. It is *hyperreal*" (ibid.). The series seems to be precisely playing with this notion of hyperrealism.

With *Years and Years*, Davies wants to represent as faithfully as possible the audience's common experience of politics. This is why viewers mostly get to see Vivienne Rook through a screen, hence Stephen's surprise when he meets her by chance (1.05 [46:45]). Throughout the scene, he cannot help staring at her, wondering if he is not hallucinating, as it would be the case in the same context for anyone coming across a politician in the real world. Davies's choice was deliberate: "Part of the point is, you experience people through television; you experience [Rook's] public image and the lies she's telling you and the truth she's telling you. She lives in the media. […] She very much is a public figure, because that's how our life is: that's how

we're experiencing Trump or Brexit" (Turchiano). The series demonstrates that when politicians try to appear close to the people, it is part of a strategy that has to do with their election campaigns. The discrepancy between figure 35 and figure 36 – which both belong to "Episode 2" – insists on this idea. The medium close-up (fig. 35) focuses on Rosie taking a selfie with Rook during a political rally. The shot composition reveals the excitement of Rook's supporters, who are all taking photos and videos of her, a smile on their faces. This gives the candidate an opportunity to appear approachable and even cheerful to meet her future voters, hence the fact that she smiles from ear to ear while doing the symbol of her party with her hand.

Figure 35

Figure 36

But figure 36 gives the fraud of Rook's staging away. The long shot emphasises Rosie's smallness, both physically in opposition to Rook's huge portrait, and metaphorically as she only represents one faint voice in the mass of all the potential voters that her party tries to gather. Even though the bus honks to Rosie's support, it quickly drives past her, as another means of underlining her insignificance. It shows that the togetherness conveyed by figure 35 is but a mere illusion relying on appearances. In addition, this second shot may bring viewers back to their own political reality since these campaign buses truly exists in England.

This contemporariness has to do with the fact that Davies's source of inspiration is related to recent political events. He declared: "It was the night of Trump's election when I emailed Nicola Shindler [executive producer] and said: 'If he gets into power, I should write [*Years and Years*] now'" (Martin, "Davies's Terrifying New Dystopian Drama"). This is why

the series makes fun of the real political world by explicitly caricaturing contemporary politicians, hence the description of Rook as a "Farage-meets-Kathie-Hopkins figure" (Mangan). It also accounts for the parallel viewers may draw between her and far-right leaders, Emma Thompson herself declaring that her character was "a cross between Marine Le Pen and Boris Johnson, evil blondes with a close look and the words of another time" (La Rédaction France-soir). As a consequence, Rook is perceived as a populist figure who somehow manages to get elected precisely because she is unconventional. Her refusal of political correctness, her use of fearmongering and her anti-establishment rhetoric are the main elements bringing people to her. She knows how to use their emotions, notably anger, which is made obvious from her first apparition, *Years and Years* opening on her angry face (fig. 37).

Figure 37

The background of this shot may sound familiar, as Rook is shown in live broadcast on the set of "Question Time" for Channel 4, which partakes in the realism of the show. The close-up immediately draws attention to her, zooming in on her discontentment. Paradoxically enough, the audience may first relate to her words since her first sentence is "I just don't understand the world anymore. It all made sense up until a few years. […] I dread it now. Everyday. Dread" (1.01 [00:10]). The sequence then goes on with reaction shots revealing that thanks to her catchphrase, she has managed to arouse the curiosity of most of the characters. But she engages in a less moderate speech when she starts to express her sense of individualism, relying on people's anger to carry her message of hatred across. Not only does she deliver outrageous arguments to make her point, but she even goes as far as using the "F-word" on live TV:

> When it comes to Israel and Palestine… I don't give a fuck. […] Kiev, Yemen, Qatar, I simply do not give a f… […] I've literally had enough. I am bombarded with news, from every country, just headlines shouting at me. And all I want is for my bins to be collected once a week. I want the primary school two hundred yards from my house to pick up its own litter. […] So, ask me about Israel, ask me about

> Palestine, ask me, and I will tell you, I DO NOT GIVE A…Monkeys. But I've got you listening now, haven't I? [1:05]

The reactions she provokes among the characters accurately shows how populist rhetoric works in a divisive way, including in current society. Stephen and Daniel are horrified, declaring respectively "She can't say that!" [1:18] and "Oh my God, she's a monster," [2:38] whereas Celeste and Ralph consider that she is very bold, claiming "I like her" [0:30] and "I think she's brilliant" [2:40]. Therefore, this realistic political fiction relies on the use of satires, and most precisely of Juvenalian and Menippean satires[30]. In other words, *Years and Years* is at the same time attacking directly the flaws and vices of specific individuals without forgetting to bitterly blame society as a whole for the socio-political and moral decadence of the world.

The series goes further than the parody, inserting actual footages of news broadcasts to blur even more the boundary between the fictional and the real worlds. This is why "Episode 1" refers to Trump's potential second mandate thanks to a shot from his first actual election [10:09]. The show also uses several montages to transform the setting of real programs into decor for fictional news (fig. 38). This over-the-shoulder-shot from "Episode 1" deals with Daniel's reaction to Rook's latest scandal through a shallow focus directing attention to the television, which is clearly representing the set of BBC NEWS.

Figure 38

[30] For Luke Edley, there are three forms of satires: the Horatian satire whose main point is to make people laugh through farce and gentle caricature, which is not as pungent as the Juvenalian satire, which tries "to subvert the status quo and attack the venality of the political class or religious leader" in a much more committed way. Finally, the Menippean satire would "[attack] a specific human fault instead of a directly observable misdeed" (ibid.) The latter is "much less aggressive than Juvenalian satire, but notably more judgmental than its Horatian cousin" (ibid.) However, it remains political since it lays emphasis on social behaviour. It mostly represents human flaws as the cause of poor socio-political consequences, making it the most common type of satire in dystopian works. (ibid.)

The host presents a fictional news, but he is not entirely fictional either since in this sequence, Simon McCoy is actually playing himself, adding to the realism of the series. In addition, most of the time, viewers get to witness fictional news through a screen, just like the characters; here, Daniel is in the maternity ward of a hospital, a peaceful place where it is unlikely to get confronted to such pieces of information. Therefore, this shot demonstrates that characters and viewers alike are constantly bombarded with intrusive information. In keeping with this sense of topicality, one could also mention the allusion to Doris Day's death, added at the last moment thanks to quick editing so as to reinforce the general effort of contemporariness. A timeline of the show enables to point out the concordance between the fictional day of the first episode and the release date of the series: "Through a news broadcast acknowledging the death of Doris Day 'yesterday' (May 13th), the opening of Episode 1, which features the birth of Lincoln Lyons, places itself as occurring on May 14th of 2019, matching its real world airdate" ("Rookipedia").

Nonetheless, one should bear in mind that realism remains a mere impression that authors can try and convey to make their productions more convincing, as Roland Barthes explains when describing "the reality effect" in his 1968 essay. For him, this impression is conveyed by objects that are insignificant *per se*: if items are described in considerable details – or granting much time on one's screen – it is precisely because they are supposed to show that the narrative is anchored in reality. This leads Barthes to claim that Flaubert's long descriptions of apparently useless objects confirms that "realism exhibits the sign for what is it and not for what it conveys: the sign, the gratuitous descriptive detail (not motivated by the narrative) is only there to produce a reality effect […] an indication of plausibility" (84-89). Esquenazi also refers to this method:

> La narration n'a pas d'autre choix, faute de temps, que de faire seulement allusion à la base réelle du récit : quelques vues générales, la conformité à certaines habitudes vestimentaires ou autres, un vocabulaire adapté y suffisent le plus souvent. La connaissance qu'a le destinataire de ce monde, cadre des aventures inventées des héros, complète plus ou moins aisément les indications fournies par la narration. (*La vérité de la fiction* 73)

The audience's attention would be drawn to small details which are precisely supposed to serve as references bringing people back to the real world. But this ambition comes with great risks. Such a strategy can feel very artificial, thus having the opposite effect of what was intended:

> La réification d'une mise en scène qui aurait perdu sa spontanéité initiale, est utilisée comme un effet spécial et menace de se transformer en *gimmick* insignifiant, ou qui entretiendrait l'illusion d'une absence presque totale de médiation. Ici le réalisme correspond donc à un nouveau canon esthétique qui dicte les règles du nouvel effet-réalité, tout aussi conventionnel que le précédent. Il s'agit donc bien d'un réalisme de télévision, les images typiques du JT ou d'un CNN, exemple saisissant de télévision s'auto-phagocytant, où fiction et réalité s'entremêlent presque inextricablement, phénomène de fond mais frappant lorsqu'il s'agit du genre *escapist* par excellence qu'est supposé être la science-fiction. Le paradoxe est donc ici que cette esthétique représente peut-être l'aspect le plus artificiel du show, où l'effet réalité tend à se muer en effet spécial et en effet de manche. (Achouche, « L'effet-réalité »)

This reification is one of the pitfalls that science fiction productions should avoid at the risk of – paradoxically enough – sounding very unnatural if not completely fake.

For all these reasons, it seems that *Years and Years*, although it remains a science fiction TV series, refuses "escapism" (ibid.), probably because it belongs more specifically to the genre of the dystopia which makes it easier to broach contemporary issues:

> Le mode dystopique n'est pas nécessairement plus réaliste que le schéma précédent, il conduit néanmoins les nouvelles séries à abandonner l'idéologie propre au genre, à traiter de thématiques politiques et sociales inconnues à leurs prédécesseurs, et à resserrer les liens qui les unissent au monde « réel » et particulièrement à son actualité. La science-fiction […] est un genre tout entier axé sur l'Histoire, où le futur sert souvent à représenter et à problématiser l'Histoire passée et présente – l'Histoire en train de se nouer, la SF permettant d' « appréhender le présent en tant qu'histoire », comme l'écrit Fredric Jameson. (ibid.)

As such, one can argue with Achouche that *Years and Years* relies on a technique that already appears in *Battlestar Galactica* and *Babylon 5* (Syndicate-TNT, 1993-1998):

> Les deux séries utilisent donc leurs sociétés spéculaires du futur pour mettre en scène des questions politiques, éthiques et sociales pérennes et dans le même temps

> contemporaines. Elles font ainsi paradoxalement œuvres de science-fiction parmi les artefacts culturels les plus révélateurs de leurs époques respectives. […] dans une sorte d'univers parallèle au nôtre, un décalage finalement très léger dont la représentation formellement et thématiquement « réaliste » est censée être le marqueur explicite, soulignant au spectateur à quel point le monde représenté est proche du sien. […] manœuvrant habilement sur la frontière séparant le réel de son reflet imaginaire, déformant juste assez la réalité pour en donner un aperçu modifié mais intelligible, permettant sans grande difficulté de remonter jusqu'à la source référentielle. (ibid.)

This reference to Suvin's cognitive estrangement allows to claim that "the SF argument appears as a narrative strategy of circumvention allowing to broach the subject in a way that is not too frontal nor traumatic" (ibid.) However, this argument needs to be qualified when talking about *Years and Years*, since it tackles current political issues very frontally. This acute sense of the *zeitgeist* has even led the show to announce events which have afterwards taken place in the real world, which is why the series appears very much ahead of its time and could even be defined by its foreboding quality.

B. Second Sight and Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

In the podcast "Next Episode," Renan Cros declares that the technical mastery of *Years and Years* resides in the fact that "it depicts a future resembling today's world but with slight differences" (Roux [03:02]). He adds that its power is that it manages to present to its viewers their lives in a not so far away future (ibid.). Indeed, many of the ill-omens represented resemble events from the past and the present, or they come from a scary but credible vision of the future.

As such, in "Episode 1," the audience is given to see China's construction of a military base in claimed waters: the artificial island of Hong Sha Dao. This might remind them of a current geopolitical issue – the South China Sea dispute. The island bears an imaginary name, but in the real world, China has indeed been building artificial islands for the past few years, fuelling tensions with its neighbours. Another example is Ukraine's purge against homosexuality – Viktor being a victim of it – as it is the case nowadays in Chechnya. Overall, all the concerns of the series find their ways in real life; artificial intelligence is thriving, the environment is collapsing, and right-wing parties are on the rise, which are three common denominators among today's society. It shows that *Years and Years* plays with the notion of

verisimilitude; "the quality of seeming true or of having the appearance of being real" ("Verisimilitude"). This leads Esquenazi to argue that for a fictional story to be "acceptable," it needs to be plausible[31]: "The question of plausibility is first of all an 'internal' question: it depends on elements that are all proposed by the narrative, precisely on the adjusting between the real base and the salient structure" (*La vérité de la fiction* 113-125). To be plausible, *Years and Years* has to deal with real-world concerns.

The rise of conspiracy theories and fake news is a first example of the phenomenon, which could be linked to the growing popularity of the QAnon movement in reality. This topic is broached in "Episode 1." Daniel and Ralph are talking together while repairing Muriel's home when Daniel realises with horror that his husband is drawn to such theories. Ralph declares that he has discovered a website which "proves that germs don't exist […] Whole thing, faked by the pharmaceutical industry" [33:19] to which Daniel jokingly reply "Don't do that. You'll be joining the Flat Earth Society next" [33:32] without considering that his lover actually finds that "that stuff is fascinating" [33:34]. Tension quickly escalates; no one wants to let it go, which underlines the discrepancy of reasoning between those who are more inclined to believe in conspiracy theories, and those who reject it, figure 39 embodying this opposition.

Figure 39

The shallow focus of this mid-shot focuses on Daniel's reaction to his husband's objection to the form of the Earth. The conversation is getting on his nerves, his face revealing that he is truly taken aback by the news. He uses his hand to mimic the roundness of the planet, while uttering the world "global" very slowly, as if he were talking to a kid, which insists on his irritation. Ralph tries to remain calm by not paying attention to Daniel's explanations. But even if his face is blurry – which could be a metaphor for the shady ideas he adheres to – he appears ready to stand on his ground. Therefore, their credible argument may make sense for viewers who would have already been confronted to such a stalemate in reality.

[31] For him, "a real story can be unbelievable, but a fictional story must be plausible: the veracity of the former serves as a guarantee for its extravagance while the acceptability of the latter depends on its plausibility" (ibid.)

This absurd conversation may seem anecdotal, but these last few years, the idea that germs do not exist have emerged in some people's minds. In February 2019, Fox News host Pete Highest declared in live broadcast that washing one's hands was a waste of time since "germs are not a real thing […] I can't see them, therefore, they're not real" ("NewscastStudio" [0:25]), as if this false syllogism could make any sense. Such a behaviour is in keeping with the problem of disinformation, which seems to have a bright future ahead. In "Episode 4," the series gives an example of the consequences linked to the rise of this new evil: the deep fake. The "fictional" BBC reveals that Madeleine Barry, leader of the Conservatives, and Trevor Lyle, head of the Labour Party are victims of this phenomenon. Deep fakes have been used to make them "say" the most terrible things, having been converted into powerful political weapons. It shows Barry saying "there's one obvious solution to all the foreigners in this country. Arrest them. Throw them out. And if they resist. Execute them" [16:39] and Lyle declaring "ask me what to do with the rich and I'd say take their homes, burn them down, throw the bastards to the wolves" [16:53]. This relates to reality, as the same story happened to Nancy Pelosi; in June 2019, she was the victim of a deep fake representing her stuttering out of drunkenness during an interview. *Years and Years* thus insists on the viciousness of such new dangers for politics, in the fictional world as well as in the audience's reality.

The topics of fake news, conspiracy theories and disinformation give way to one of the most engaging dialogue between Daniel and Stephen when Daniel opens up to his brother as follows: "I swear to God, it's like intelligence is going backwards. We're in reverse. If it's not the moon landings, or 9/11, it's… I don't know, the Loch Ness monster! The human race is becoming more stupid. Right in front of our eyes. I mean, what do you do? […] it's not just Ralph, it's everywhere. […] Our brains are devolving" (1.01 [34:32]). Stephen cannot but agree with him. Unable to find ways to comfort him, he answers: "I know. Sometimes I think we went too far. Like we imagined too much. We sent those probes out into space, we went all the way to the edge of the solar system, and we built the Hadron Collider, and the internet, we painted all those paintings and wrote all those great songs and then… pop! Whatever we had, we punctured. Now it's all collapsing" [34:56]. The problem they point out may again echo concerns expressed by viewers towards their own world.

In addition to addressing real issues that may always be at the back of the audience's minds, *Years and Years* has also announced things that have come true ever since the release of the series. As such, there is only a short step to take to say that it may possess the gift of

second sight, which means that aspects of this fiction would eventually become true, as if it were filled with a sense of self-fulfilling prophecy[32]. Even Davies admits that in the making of the show, fiction had sometimes been overtaken by reality: "I've written stuff for this series […] which I've then watched come true," adding that they had to work fast "to get it finished because of the state of the world" (Martin, "Everything Davies Predicts"). This statement seems even more accurate now that the world is facing the Coronavirus crisis. *Years and Years*' second sight has proven very acute, as "Episode 6" opens on the "Monkey Flu." Figure 40 is another replica of a television studio set for a 24-hour news channel representing a journalist expanding on the outbreak, while banners are offering more information about the situation. What it reads is in keeping with what truly happened with the worldwide consequences of the Covid-2019 pandemic: the reduction of flights to slow the virus, the denial of some entities on its virulence, or the fact that it even affected the remotest parts of the world.

Figure 40

Scientists have been predicting for a long time that pandemics would strike societies in the years to come, which may have influenced the decision of the creators of the show to represent such a crisis. Nonetheless, they were obviously not aware that it would occur less than six months after the release of the series, which truly encapsulates the idea that *Years and Years* is filled with predictions that may be bound to come true sooner or later in the audience's future.

Therefore, not only are the events occurring in *Years and Years* plausible, but they also feel deeply familiar – if not even trivial – to viewers:

> What made *Years and Years* so unsettling in 2019, and what perhaps contributed to its lukewarm reviews in the U.S., was how nervily it replicated the feeling of being a ping-pong ball inside a contemporary news cycle, bouncing between various

[32] Laura Martin has established a list of examples of the show's events that could undoubtfully happen in a not-too-far future ("Everything Davies Predicts.")

> dangers and open Chrome tabs, never having a second to pause or to consider the path ahead. One world-shaking news event happens, and then another, and then another. (Gilbert)

This sense of realism could indeed be one of the reasons why *Years and Years* was not as successful as it could have been. Delaney's review serves as a first hint to try and see why people did not express much interest for the show; it appears that most viewers considered that reality was "getting a bit too close to *Years and Years*" (Delaney). This feeling recalls the very exhaustion experienced by the characters regarding politics, captured by a dialogue between the siblings in "Episode 4." Stephen brings the subject up for discussion, asking "Can you remember? Years ago? We used to think the news was boring" [06:04], Daniel replying "Oh my God. Golden days. The news would come on and we'd just yawn" [06:06]. Stephen concludes by saying "Now we hide! I have to hide my eyes. Literally" [06:10], figure 41 showing that they really cannot take it anymore.

Figure 41

The medium close-up enables to observe the siblings in a casual setting, drinking beers and eating Chinese food. They try to make small talk, but the conversation keeps coming back to serious socio-political issues. It gets on their nerves, hence the position of Rosie's body, who is provoking Daniel by mentioning Vivienne Rook. Daniel embodies the most the disillusionment caused by politics; he buries his head in his hands in a metaphorical gesture revealing that he cannot face reality anymore. Stephen appears open to debate, contrary to Edith, annoyed at the turn of the conversation. She is supposed to be the activist of the family, but she is sometimes portrayed as cynical and even nihilistic. It truly shows that they are all characterised by an acute feeling of lassitude regarding the state of the world which is getting increasingly difficult to bear. Therefore, since *Years and Years* is "treated on a pseudo-documentary mode […] one can only hope that its chilling plausibility will remain in the realm of the nightmare" (Machart).

But *Years and Years*' intention to convey an impression of realism is precisely pregnant with meaning: it should be taken into account when thinking about the latent purpose of the show. As Maria Varsam writes, in dystopian fiction, "the reader may see what elements of reality the writer deems significant enough to extrapolate from in order to warn the reader of future, potentially catastrophic developments" (Baccolini, Moylan 209). As an example, she quotes Atwood, who declared about *The Handmaid's Tale* that "there's nothing in it that we as a species haven't done, aren't doing now or don't have the technological capacity to do" (ibid). Therefore, this effect is meant to be experienced by the audience as one of the most concrete warnings they could get about their own socio-political conditions. This is why many critics have defined the show as "an alarmist series, in a literal sense" (Nussbaum). It seems that "[this] dystopian-realist series is meant to serve as an alarm, an alert to what's going on in front of our eyes and where it might lead" (ibid.), which allows to conclude that "if the worst does happen, *Years and Years* will have served as a good preparation" (MacInnes).

C. Individual Embedded in the Collective

However, this socio-geopolitical display is not supposed to be at the heart of *Years and Years*, as stated by Jean-Maxime Renault: "It is a TV series about politics, but without being a political TV series and without making it the core subject […] it simply shows how politics influence the lives of ordinary people" (Roux [05:44]). By highlighting the consequences of large-scale events on individuals, *Years and Years* offers a "standard alternate reality" in which everything "feels highly plausible," notably the characters' experiences (MacInnes).

It appears essential to come back on the notion of realism, but this time through a focus on the characters since they fully partake in it. As Achouche notes,

> L'effet-réalité consiste enfin à faire croire, non seulement à la possibilité de voir les événements ou phénomènes montrés à l'écran souvenir un jour dans *la* réalité, comme c'est le cas dans l'extrapolation, mais aussi de faire croire à *une* réalité, celle du monde mis en scène. L'effet-réalité consister alors à créer *un* monde, *une* réalité, à la fois autre et spéculaire. ("L'effet-réalité").

The reality effect is also conveyed by the authenticity of the characters and more precisely on how they experience the changes affecting them. This is why the series aims to convince

viewers that in society, the macroscopic and the microscopic scales are always deeply interwoven, if not absolutely interdependent. For instance, in "Episode 2," Daniel is taken aback when he realises that Rook is the board of his company now that Housing has been privatised, declaring to Vijay "oh my god, she's my boss" [07:55]. This interweaving between the personal and the collective is also related to a sort of snowball effect, meaning that everything that happens will have consequences over something or someone else – an assumption that can be verified through what occurs in the show.

Many events could illustrate the fact that *Years and Years* demonstrates that the individual is embedded in the collective, such as Edith's cancer due to her exposure to radiations after the explosion at Hong Sha Dao. Two of the most blatant examples of this phenomenon have been chosen to explain its mechanism. The first one is Stephen and Celeste's descent into hell after an event similar to the 2008 Financial Crisis. In "Episode 2," they are forced to sell their house in London to a Japanese businessman, due to Celeste's impending dismissal – although she is a bookkeeper, a job she chose because "when [she] went to university, they said accountancy was a job for life" (1.02 [10:16]). But the situation worsens when the couple is awakened in the middle of the nights by their phone notifications to learn that "the Japanese Exchange Group has issued a statement of no confidence in Foster-Foster Drake" [48:44]. This is going to be the beginning of the end for them since their money is blocked on an account that they cannot access. They try to convince themselves that everything will return to normal, but on their way to the bank, they become aware of the magnitude of the situation (fig. 42).

Figure 42

This very long shot represents a "bank run," when all the clients of a bank want to withdraw money at the same time. For now, it is still under control, but with this slightly high-angle shot, viewers can really sense the tumult of a situation that is about to turn chaotic, hence the endless

row of people, which other individuals keep joining. The roundness of the building symbolises this idea of a vicious circle. While the situation keeps on deteriorating. Stephen tries to lure a policeman into letting him enter the bank, claiming that he is "quite a special customer" [51:03]. He still appears self-confident, but he cannot help noticing that more and more people are clustering in front of the bank, simmering with anger and panic. Quickly enough, his fear prevails over reason (fig. 43).

Figure 43

This close-up shows that like everyone else around, Stephen is losing control. He is filmed from within the bank, that is to say, from within the place he cannot reach, hence his immense frustration. His face truly expresses despair; he starts yelling and hammering on the glass with his fist. Seeing himself in the reflection of the window only increases his rage and his shame.

The consequences of this event are made blatant in "Episode 3." Celeste and Stephen have lost everything they own, Stephen's nickname becoming "the man who lost a million quid." They are obliged to go and live with Muriel, which is experienced as a regression and even as a form of humiliation by the couple. This decline is completed by Stephen's dismissal, which leads him to turn to the gig economy in order to survive, as one can see in figure 44.

Figure 44

This mid-shot portrays Stephen as a victim of the uberisation of society[33]. He is wobbling on his bike, which metaphorically recalls how uncomfortable with his new situation he is. The fact that he is hanging his head to look down at his GPS also emphasises his embarrassing and delicate position. Although he is massively overqualified for this job – like one of his colleagues, who is an Oxford alumnus – Stephen has to transport heavy packages all day long, hence the enormous parcel he carries in his back. The audience later learns that it is only one of his many insecure jobs; in "Episode 4," Stephen admits that he holds eleven jobs concurrently, including one consisting in drug testing, which insists on the precarity of his new way of life. This example shows how a family living in prosperity can in no time encounter huge economic troubles, which, in turn, affect their relationships and their moral sense. It serves as a proof – and a warning – of the repercussions large-scale events may have on individuals.

The most striking example of the interweaving between the macroscopic and the microscopic scales revolves around Daniel's fight for Viktor's liberty. A terrible chain of events prevents them from being reunited, from Ukraine's decision to lynch homosexuals to the UK's strict immigration policies and Spain's drift towards the extreme. In "Episode 4," Viktor eventually manages to reach France, where Daniel awaits him to try and cross the border, first by bus, and then by the sea. After having been scammed by a people smuggler, the lovers decide to go all in, embarking on a makeshift steamboat with many other people (fig. 45).

Figure 45

This extreme long shot, which is also a high-angle shot, enables the audience to observe the characters from above in a God-like manner, while reinforcing the horror of the situation. In

[33] The job description made by his employer points out the drifts of this system: "It's standard rules, 50 pence per parcel, if any parcel takes longer than 60 minutes to deliver you will not be paid, no holiday, no sick pay, no argument, you have to pay Beckondoe £1.50 per day insurance if you're in the van, £1 if you're on the bike, and the £1 charge applies even on days off." (1.03 [13.05])

the background, the boat appears very small and already filled to the brim with people. But in the foreground, more people are running toward the embarkation, fighting their way through the waves. The sunlight is visible on the top left-hand corner, as a sort of metaphorical light at the end of the tunnel for the refugees, the glimmer of hope that reaching a new land symbolises. The next sequence alternates between several silence black cuts and the use of shacky-cam [50:29]. Each time the audience's screen is lit up again, it is accompanied by the sounds of big waves breaking against the boat, and by the screams of the group. Flashes reveal that the sea is raging, and that their lives are all threatened. The free camera technique is very immersive; viewers may thus feel as if they were on board with them. The quick tempo makes this scene hard to watch, but the next one is even more difficult to witness (fig. 46).

Figure 46

After and ellipsis, this travelling shot slowly fades in to reveal the tragedy. The sadness of the situation is reinforced by the greyish weather, contrasting with yellow and orange elements – ironically, the live and safety jackets whose fluorescence catch the eye. It is also a wide shot, which underlines the magnitude of the disaster, hence the several corpses dispersed on the beach. The camera moves around them, zooming in on a man lying on his stomach. It pulls in until the close-up makes it obvious that Daniel has drowned. Until then, the audience may not have assumed that his attempt to rescue Viktor could lead him to his death, notably because he is an educated white British man with a good financial situation. However, this tragic example is another means of reminding the audience that large-scale issues can have terrible personal consequences over individuals, even when they believe that they cannot be impacted by it.

The aim of such a strategy recalls again Achouche's words: "The reality effect and the notion of realism thus consists in creating and building a particular reality in a convincing manner, in this case a world, a parallel universe; this is literally what SF does, with a playful

quality, to which one can add a specular dimension of 'return' towards the real world, or even of criticisms of certain of its aspects" ("L'effet-réalité"). This assertion can be applied to *Years and Years*, whose maneuver is equally related to Suvin's cognitive estrangement with the idea that, by reflection, what viewers see on screen may influence their perception of reality:

> Le « réalisme » en science-fiction tend alors à recouper les notions de vraisemblance et de cohérence discursive d'un univers entièrement imaginaire, le résultat idéal étant d'emporter l'adhésion du téléspectateur quant au monde qu'il a sous les yeux et quant à la « vérité » profonde des personnages (l'effet-réalité est donc bien pensé comme un effet-vérité), ainsi que de l'inviter idéalement à la réflexion sur ses propres convictions politiques, sociales et religieuses et la façon dont le monde réel fonctionne. (ibid.)

Years and Years can then be apprehended as a warning, hence Davies's following comment: "I think a drama that doesn't set out to entertain is an odd thing. But entertaining doesn't mean being glib or daft. […] My stuff is full of warnings now" (Wood).

This is why in the end, although the general atmosphere of the series is dystopian, it also appears at a crossroads between realism and science fiction, the setting being meant to represent the audience's day-to-day lives or their near future. Although it may seem paradoxical, this statement is not self-contradictory at all. In fact, according to Achouche, science fiction main purpose is precisely to shed light on one's reality:

> L'aperçu globalisant offert au téléspectateur omniscient lui [permet] de donner du sens à une réalité et un présent souvent perçus de manière fragmentée et partielle. L'effet-réalité a donc toute sa place dans une science-fiction qui n'est jamais aussi signifiante que lorsque sa réalité est fermement établie et installée, quand on peut non seulement « suspendre son incrédulité » mais aussi adhérer au « réalisme » de ce monde secondaire. Le réalisme devient double, et répond à une dynamique entre l'effet-réalité et « l'effet d'altérité », qui fait tout l'attrait de la science-fiction. C'est pourquoi Isaac Asimov pouvait déjà écrire que « la science-fiction est une évasion dans la réalité » (« an escape into reality »). La science-fiction a tout à voir avec le réel – avec tous les réels. ("L'effet-réalité")

Years and Years thus becomes an analytic tool – a means of giving meaning to one's complex and uncomplete perception of reality through a personification or even a humanisation of macroscopic events via the microcosm of the Lyonses. This is through this emphasis on the notion of family that *Years and Years* drives away from the dystopia to get closer to a more intimate genre – the dramedy, or more precisely the tragicomedy – probably to better sensitise public opinion to current issues, enabling viewers to sympathise with the characters. In terms of representation, it gives way to a hegemony of the family as a means of making the audience experience the show much more intimately. *Years and Years* thus appears right in line with the essence of the critical dystopia, which is to "resist genre purity in favor of an impure or hybrid text that renovates dystopian sf by making it formally and politically oppositional," becoming "an *impure* genre, with permeable borders which allow contamination from other genres" (Baccolini, Moylan 7-9). Such a strategy can help provoke awareness within the viewers' minds which, in turn, may lead them to turn to praxis.

3. Uniqueness of a Family-Friendly Dystopia

"There's nothing special about our family. We just lived through it, that's all. Like anyone. Like everyone."
(Edith Lyons, *Years and Years*, 1.06 [46:39])

1. The Portrayal of a Diverse Society

A. A Microcosm for Society

According to Jones, "generations of sf readers have been introduced, sometimes without knowing it, to the fabulous diversity of their own planet, by the alchemy of sf" (170). This is also true when it comes to the fabulous diversity of their own society. As noted earlier, science fiction has always been a genre which grants importance to the notion of inclusivity. This leads Helen Merrick to write that "the 1950s marked an important period in sf's engagement with sociocultural concerns, including a more engaged awareness of contemporary issues around sex, gender roles, race and ecology" (245). This is why Oziewicz's article demonstrates "how well the term 'speculative fiction' has served the much-needed minority voices" since it "opens a new discursive space for the voice of minorities and ethnic others within non-mimetic narratives forms without relegating them to the ghetto of 'ethnic' literatures." The representation of diversity thus stands at the core of the genre, enabling authors to broach many issues related to it.

Years and Years is based on the same principle as one of its positive aspects comes from its representational value. Thanks to a set of diverse characters, be it in terms of genders, sexual orientations or skin colours, it partakes in a common effort among many recent series: giving voices to marginalised communities. This is in keeping with the primacy given to the value of "inter-racial unity" in most SF productions (Andréolle). In *Years and Years*, this idea of unity could be extended to all minorities since the show encourages the acceptance of "otherness." It thus provides the audience with an inclusive portrayal of modern society in the Western world, hence the fact that it condenses several characteristics in one small group, the Lyons family. For Russel T Davies, inclusivity has always been a crucial matter, which is made obvious in figure 47, excerpted from "Episode 1." One single shot manages to encapsulate the diversity of the Lyonses. This medium close-up pictures Rosie on the left, a young and disabled single mom, her brother Stephen who is married to Celeste Bisme-Lyon, the black woman in the middle, with whom he has two coloured daughters, Bethany – who defines herself as transhuman – and Ruby. Muriel Deacon is their great-grandmother and as such the grandmother of the siblings,

of whom viewers also get to see Daniel, next to Ralph, his husband. This sexual, ethnic, racial and generational diversity is a first hint at the inclusive ambition of the series.

Figure 47

The family is also characterised by their differences in terms of social classes. The siblings all come from the middle-class, but it appears that social mobility influenced their position in society. Stephen is the one who truly managed to climb the social ladder; at the beginning of the show, he is somewhere between the upper class and the upper middle class, which reflects in his lifestyle. He possesses a huge house in central London, a beautiful car, and a lot of money on his bank account. Daniel too has succeeded in life – viewers get the sense that he does not really need to monitor his spending, although he remains a representative of the upper middle class. Rosie has been less lucky; the vertical mobility led her to belong to the lower middle class. She lives in a very small appartement in one of the less attractive suburbs in Manchester and struggles to set money aside for her children. Edith remains hard to classify; she has a wonderful cultural capital, and it seems that her activism enabled her to spare a lot of money, but she does not care about it. However, all characters have a class consciousness, with which they are more or less comfortable. For instance, it is very easy for Rosie to make fun of their differences because she is defined by her sense of self-derision and because she is well-aware that she is the only one with difficulties to make ends meet. On the contrary, Stephen struggles to answer Daniel when he asks how much money he has lost at the end of "Episode 2" [54:16]. When he finally explains that despite the insurance, they have lost "one million one hundred and thirty-five thousand pounds" [54:43], Rosie has to repress her laughter. She declares to him "you still got eighty-five thousand though" [55:01] leading him to answer "to buy a house? Is that enough? With two kids, really?" [55:04], to which she retorts "Give it to me, I'll have a go!" [55:10]. Their differences of social classes and of status lead to socio-spatial

disparities which reflects in the way they speak, be it in terms of vocabulary or of accents; as such, contrary to her brothers, Rosie speaks a sort of Mancunian Cockney. The composition of the family is thus clearly permeated by a sense of diversity, a common trope in SF productions, which can serve as "a natural metaphor for a nation" (Nussbaum).

But *Years and Years* goes further than the celebration of diversity; there is a form of multifaceted approach to this notion. It soon becomes obvious that the characters' specificities are not what is at stake in the plot, which means that what makes them "different" or "special" no longer matters. This is called "incidental diversity." It corresponds to a situation "where a character's difference is mentioned but not highlighted[34]" as explained by Corinne Duyvis, a young sci-fi author with autism. This phenomenon "especially suits fantasy or science fiction settings where authors can build a world from the scratch" (Duyvis). It is as if the story were taking place in a world where differences are not important anymore; they are not concealed, but they are not put in the spotlight either. A striking example of it is that the series never alludes to any problematic issues related to the racial question in Britain. Celeste is a black woman and Lincoln is of Asian origins, but their integrity is never questioned. Racism does not seem to be an issue anymore, as if in the future imagined by Davies, the colour of the skin would no longer be used to discriminate ethnic minorities. The same thing could be argued about same-gender relationships – at least in Britain. Daniel first marries Ralph and after their divorce he starts living as a couple with Viktor which is never questioned by anyone. In much the same way, Edith progressively enters into a relationship with Fran – who embodies the notion of intersectionality as she is a gay woman of African origins – a relationship that is introduced very naturally to both her relatives and to the audience.

However, the series does allude to Lincoln's path towards transition. In "Episode 3," Edith dresses him up with a pink dress to pretend that she partakes in the "Bring Your Daughter to Work" day in a big society which she aims to hack. This medium close-up (fig. 48) focuses on Edith putting ribbons in Lincoln's hair. Her face reveals that she marvels at his beauty to give him confidence so that her plan will work. What she does not know is that this anecdotal

[34] Duyvis is not entirely convinced by this turnaround. On the one hand, this evolution seems "necessary […] because it's exhausting to only see [oneself] reflected in characters whose entire role is to be *different*." But on the other hand, she explains that "the solution is not to only write or applaud books that gloss over people's differences and different experiences entirely," since "it's a fact that ableism, homophobia, and racism influence countless aspects of people's everyday lives" with "micro-aggressions, stereotypes, internalized prejudice, flagrant bigotry, institutionalized discrimination" and so on. There would be a balance to reach between confining characters to their "differences" and entirely erasing these said differences. (Duyvis)

moment is a revelation for Lincoln: he realises that he is perfectly happy – even happier than usual – when dressed as a girl. From then on, he will never cease to wear ribbons or so-called feminine attributes.

Figure 48

His family pays little attention to his evolution – not that they do not care, but really because in Davies' futuristic vision of the world, transgenderism should not be an issue anymore. In "Episode 4," Daniel comments on the way his nephew is dressed, saying to Edith "Are we calling that a t-shirt or are we calling that a dress?" [13:50]. However, the rest of the dialogue really insists on the idea that these questions, which are still touchy in today's society, no longer need to be discussed in *Years and Years*. Edith answers "I don't think it matters," [13:52] to which Daniel replies, "No. He looks beautiful," [14:00] the conversation drifting on more important subjects. The subtle but acknowledged support Lincoln receives from his family fully enables to construct one's own identity. Figure 49 represents the Lyonses in the 2030s. This long shot emphasises again their diversity, but this time it shows that Lincoln seems to have fully completed her transitioning process. She is standing in the background, next to Daniel, her hair down on a red top.

Figure 49

This evolution is again presented very naturally to the audience; it is written in the script of the finale that "Bethany […] passes a beautiful 15 y/o Chinese Girl" to whom she declares "Hey Lincoln, come on, we're ready" [52:35] ("BBC Writersroom"). This shows that her transition has been perfectly assimilated by her family, who, apparently, did not raise any objection to it. In other words, in *Years and Years*' Britain, no one is questioning no one's identity.

The only form of identity ever questioned is Bethany's, as it is related to transhumanism, a movement which the other characters struggle to fathom. However, her relatives gradually become aware of the personal growth that comes with her evolution, ultimately accepting it. This confirms that transhumanism can be defined as "the technology represented as an instrument of emancipation for ethnic and sexual minorities" (Achouche, *L'Utopisme technologique* 197). As a consequence, "posthumanism can then be understood as a philosophy and an ethical code stemming from the SF imaginary and using this imaginary to deny the historical timelessness of the notion of 'human nature', making the apology of technology as a weapon of liberation of minorities" (ibid. 203). This allows to conclude that "posthumanism is a form of utopianism" (ibid. 204).

Years and Years' ethos thus relies on inclusivity, hence the show's representation and celebration of diversity. The microcosm of the family becomes a macrocosm for the heterogeneity of society as a whole, although differences between individuals are not emphasised anymore. This laudable effort is a means of showing that all identities matter, which can have an impact on viewer's open-mindedness, while partaking in a comprehensive process of characterisation.

B. The Complexity of the Human Mind

Years and Years' characterisation also points out the different sort of "emotional identities" associated with the characters, underlining their differences of personalities and behaviours. This enables the series to create "round characters," that is to say, authentic and complex characters who may evolve throughout the story. The fact that they are multifaceted faithfully represents the intricacies of the human mind, as argued by Esquenazi in *La vérité de la fiction*. In all convincing productions, viewers would notice "a role of almost-subject performed by the *authentic* fictional characters" (ibid. 128). When a character is compelling enough, he no longer remains an "object-character" but rather turns into a "subject-character"

which is supposed to strengthen the general impression of realism (ibid. 133). If in *Years and Years*, every character is very convincing, partaking in the sense of realism, it is precisely because the series represents all human emotions, including the most difficult to deal with. The emphasis laid on revenge is a good example of this phenomenon. The series does not mean to demonstrate that humans can be mean *per se*, but it shows how one comes to make terrible decisions cruelly affecting other people's lives, which already alludes to its dramatic aspect.

A first tragic example is Ralph's feeling of revenge after Daniel left him for Viktor. The two men appeared very much in love in the first minutes of "Episode 1," but viewers soon notice that their relationship is falling apart. The end of this episode is crucial; the Lyonses, gathered at Muriel's, are all panicking at the news that the United-States has launched a missile on Hong Sha Dao, dreading that there may be consequences over England as the four-minute warning siren can be heard, which leads them to believe they are at war. Daniel, who has always been a steady husband, loses control: without telling anyone, he leaves the family reunion in a rush to go and see Viktor, to whom he passionately makes love [54:43] as if they were on the verge of death. When Ralph understands what happens, he loses control too; a fire breaks out in the garden because he kicked the barbecue over, and he just stands there, doing nothing to stop it from spreading around, as figure 50 shows.

Figure 50

This medium close-up hints at Ralph's future revenge. He is staring into space, watching Muriel's marquee breaking apart because of the fire, as a symbol of his relationship with Daniel. The flames may be a metaphor for his feelings; a means of showing that he is going to let his rage spread around too, which is why this scene is foreshadowing what is going to happen in the next episode, when Ralph truly takes his revenge over Daniel. Even if they are separated, they apparently still get along rather well as a tragi-comic scene shows (1.02 [13:56]). They meet in Daniel's car so that he can return his watch to Ralph, giving one another updates on

their lives. The scene insists on their former intimacy, the two men joking around about very serious matters concerning their relationship. Daniel confides in Ralph the difficult situation Viktor is in, due to his illegal status in the UK. When telling his ex where Viktor works – not knowing that Ralph is still mad with rage – he makes a huge mistake that is going to be the starting point of their streak of bad luck, as shown by figure 51, from "Episode 2."

Figure 51

This subjective over-the-shoulder shot enables to see the scene from Ralph's perspective, as a means of entering his train of thought. The shallow focus makes the camera mode of his phone stands out in a sort of tragic chiaroscuro showing that Ralph is zooming in to take a picture of Viktor while the latter is working illegally. This shot is about denunciation, and therefore revolves around the notion of immorality. It encapsulates the dilemma Ralph may have experienced before finally deciding to avenge himself, yielding to his dark temptation. It is a sort of theatrical aside, since no character will ever know that Ralph is the one who turned Viktor up to the authorities as an illegal worker. Only viewers are aware of it, which again insists on this idea of complexity that makes the characters so believable.

Another complex evolution is that of Stephen, who becomes vengeful after his brother's death. One should bear in mind that when he finally fulfils his revenge in "Episode 5," Stephen has already lost everything – his dignity, his money, his house, his job and his wife and daughters. This is no excuse for what he does – sending Viktor to Erstwhile with full knowledge of what happens in these camps – but it does make it easier for the audience to understand how he comes to make such an awful decision. In other words, it adds some nuances to his characterisation; his evolution remains unacceptable, but the circumstances underline how he becomes prone to evil. Figure 52 is a close-up from "Episode 3" that already hints at the fact

that Stephen cannot take it anymore; he is on the verge of a nervous breakdown. The shot is zooming in on his distorted face to reveal that he is in tears and unable to control himself when announcing to his siblings that their father died.

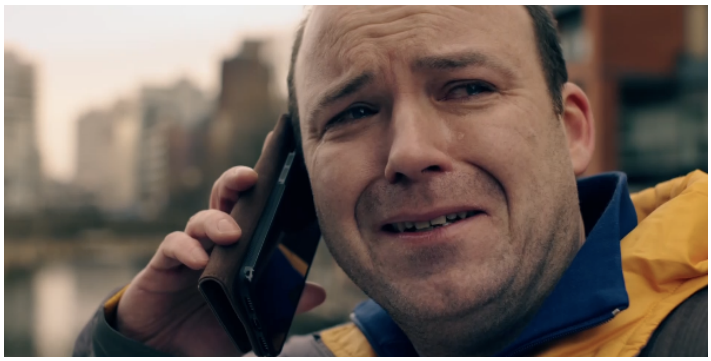

Figure 52

This shot plays with *pathos*, making clear for viewers that Stephen cannot process their father's death – even though they were not in good terms – and that he is the most affected by this loss among his family. This knowledge might qualify the audience's feelings towards Stephen's future action, but for him, the last straw occurs in "Episode 4" when Viktor announces to the Lyonses that Daniel is dead. "Episode 5" opens on a dialogue between Stephen and Viktor, a confrontation that quickly escalates. Viktor first believes that Stephen has come to pay him a friendly visit, but he soon realises that the latter is filled with hatred towards him, as figure 53 and figure 54 reveal.

Figure 53

Figure 54

These two close-ups come from a rather long take interrupted by a flashback which adds to the intensity of the sequence by focusing on Stephen's emotion when he went to Daniel's for the first time after his death. Figure 53 conveys the idea that the audience can read Stephen's mind as he is gazing into space for a wide variety of reasons – he is unable to watch Viktor in the eyes, cannot help replaying this traumatic scene in his head, and is lost in his gloomy thoughts. The flashback gives viewers substance to Stephen's remembering, as it is Daniel's fridge which, strangely enough, led him to understand that his brother was gone: "It's the fridge that killed me. I thought of Danny. In the shop. Choosing all those things. Paying at the till. Coming home. Putting them in the fridge. Little bit of cheese" [06:13]. What he says to Viktor is first very

touching, but after a pause he declares to him: “It is completely your fault […] it really is. I couldn’t let the year pass without saying it. I’ve thought about this a lot, and really, Viktor, you awful man” [06:28]. His face is now fully expressing his anger and disgust (fig. 54), this aggressivity reflecting in his speech. The scene is seen through Viktor’s point of view, so viewers are watching a character watching another character. As a consequence, they are placed in the same position as Viktor which is why the audience may try to be as understanding as him, although one can read on the script that “Viktor’s compassion is driving [Stephen] insane” (“BBC Writersroom”). Stephen finally lets it all go, saying the worst atrocities to truly make Viktor understand that he will never forgive him:

> When you were sent to Ukraine. And then Barcelona. And then Madrid. I was so bored. I was bored of you. Everything that Danny fancied in you was so boring […] So I know my sisters are doing everything to get you released. And there’s nothing I can do to stop them. But when Rosie sends those letters saying, love Rosie and Edith and Stephen, and an “x,” that’s not me, I need you to know. That’s not me. (pause) He drowned, for God’s sake. [06:54]

Interestingly enough, a line from the script was not retained. It should have been uttered just after the pause, reading “I hope they fail. And if they do. And you get sent home. And terrible things happen to you. Well. I can live with that” (“BBC Writersroom”). This sentence may have been erased to create more suspense regarding Stephen’s action, or maybe because it would have been too shocking for viewers to hear such a thing. The final version is already harsh enough to make them anticipate that the situation will degenerate due to Stephen’s impossible grief, without preventing them from feeling pity for him.

But “Episode 6” fully reveals Stephen’s evil aspiration: he has been planning his revenge for a while and is about to execute it. However, he still has some hesitations (fig. 55). The mid-shot represents Stephen in an apparently casual setting – he is at work, late in the night, holding a coffee in his hand as if he were going to spend the night there. But on the contrary, what he is about to do is unreal, and will lead to a major turning-point. This may be why figure 55 is also a reflection shot, in which the audience can see Stephen facing himself, both physically and metaphorically. The frame composition encapsulates the dilemma; will he be able to look himself in the face again if he proceeds with his vengeful desire?

Figure 55

Figure 56 stresses the same idea. This close-up shows Stephen literally hiding his eyes with his hands, as a metaphor for his inability to face up to reality. He just clicked "confirm," thus transferring Viktor to Erstwhile, and cannot process what he has done. As he is suddenly petrified and in awful doubts, viewers may imagine that he regrets his action and is about to cancel it, but figure 57 shows that he actually gave free rein to his dark side.

Figure 56

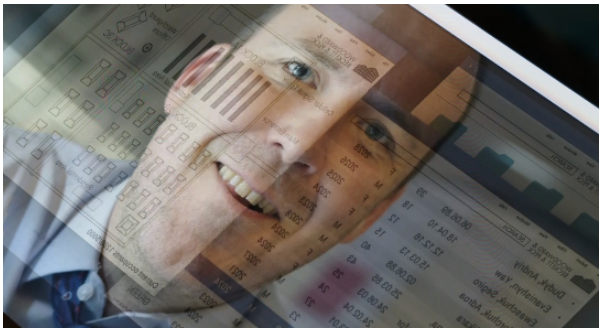

Figure 57

This close-up (fig. 57) is also a reflection shot making the audience see Stephen's screen while witnessing his awful action. The fact that he did not manage to refrain himself from seeing his action through to the end is made blatant by his face; a vicious grin of relief is slowly appearing on it. If a few minutes earlier, he had no idea how he would feel after wreaking vengeance on Viktor, it now seems that a weight has been lifted off his shoulders. He even appears proud of himself, not knowing yet that Bethany has already uncovered his gloomy secret. His evolution helps confirm that *Years and Years* grants much importance to psychology in its characters' developments as a means of making them very realistic, even when they act piteously.

Years and Years could thus be said to belong to "naturalist science fiction" – a paradoxical expression coined by Ronald D. Moore – since it decides "to focus on characters whose reality (that is, including their flaws and weaknesses, their lies and their trickery) would be faithfully rendered" (Achouche, "L'effet-réalité"). As a consequence, the series also broaches the philosophical topic of morality, which increases viewers' involvement in the show.

If men are hermeneutic beings and feel the need to interpret what they see, then flat characters are not compelling enough. It may be one of the reasons why the show portrays complex and multifaceted personalities worthy of attention for the audience to try and decipher their actions and behaviours in light of the circumstances surrounding them. Esquenazi considers that this "plurality of interpretations" accounts for the tremendous success of TV shows, as it is the most perfect form for multiperspectivity: "More than other narrative forms and because of the multiplicity of characters and perspectives, multifocal narratives are susceptible to diverse understandings, which are not always easy to reconcile" (*Les séries télévisées* 132). Therefore, *Years and Years*' *tour de force* also relies on its representation of the human mind(s), offering a variety of interpretations. This wide range of interpretations leads viewers to get increasingly involved in a method of characterisation that is generally intricate when it comes to the male protagonists, and much more assertive when it comes to women.

C. Insistence on Women's Power

Although the doxa would tend to think that science fiction was first and foremost a genre created by men and for men, women very soon took their place in speculative fiction. Even if "women really came into the genre in the 1970s with feminist science fiction," it appears that during the pulp era, "at least 15 percent of the science fiction community were women – producers – and reading polls suggest that 40 to 50 percent of the readers were women" (Yaszek qtd. in Kirtley, Adams). This process progressively took place as follows:

> Debates about the role of women and the representation of female characters in sf have been present from the genre's beginnings in the pulp magazines. Concerns about 'women in sf' developed from the 'sex in sf' question, which loomed large in the sf (un)consciousness from the late 1920s through the sexual liberation of the 1960s, to intersect with (and be partially absorbed by) feminist narratives from the 1970s to the present. (Merrick 242-243)

This evolution gradually granted more power to women, which is why to insist further on the modernity and diversity of science fiction's essence, Jones recalls that "one of the most striking developments in modern sf has been the emergence of the female hero icons" (172). In keeping with this idea, the vast majority of *Years and Years*' female protagonists are portrayed as strong and independent women.

Even though she is one of the main female heroes in the show, Bethany will not be mentioned here since her transhuman powers have already been discussed. Instead, one will focus on characters who are not intrinsically related to science fiction, but who appear very powerful nonetheless, according to the genre's standard. Edith is a case in point. In "Episode 1," wondering in which country she might be, Muriel declares "Indonesia, last I heard. They imprison children, she says. Apparently, if you haven't got a birth certificate, they determine your age by x-raying your wrist. And if your x-ray says you're sixteen, you're sixteen, even if you're twelve. So off goes Edith! Into battle" [8:55]. She immediately becomes the embodiment of the brave heroine standing up for her ideas, which is confirmed throughout the show. At first, viewers only get to see her through a screen since her activism leads her to travel the world (fig.58 1.02).

Figure 58

The shot and reverse shot technique shows that her family is watching her on an Indian channel. Next to her name, the banner reads "Campaigner & activist," an idea reinforced by the medium close-up of the news channel's camera. It insists on Edith's decisiveness – she is frowning as a means of underlining the gravity of the situation. She criticises the fact that people generally turn a blind eye to distressful world events: "Six months ago. We all thought we were gonna die. And then we realised the day after Hiroshima, what happened? The sun came up. People got out of bed. They went to work. A nuclear bomb exploded, and the west just carried on" [02:20]. This leads her to call for action, claiming: "We need these sanctions against America, they turned a trade war into an actual war" [02:41]. Her very serious attitude conveys the idea that she came here to sound the alarm as to the world-scale repercussions of this event, even though the journalist orients the questions towards the personal consequences Hong Sha Dao have had on her health. It is revealed that due to radiation Edith may have "limited [her] life span to another 20 years" [04:13] to which she answers "Never mind me. Hong Sha Dao will have consequences. For all of us. And it terrifies me. Cos the world keeps getting hotter. And

faster. And madder. And we don't pause, we don't think, we don't learn, we keep racing on to the next disaster" [05:00]. Her alarming tone shows that she is well aware of the state of the world, which is why she aims to raise people's awareness of the dangers of denial and passivity.

Although at some point in the series she decides to take time for herself and her family, returning to England to live with Rosie, Edith's political engagement never stops (fig. 59).

Figure 59

This shot from "Episode 4" is another example of her activism broadcast on TV – this time through footages of a demonstration in America, taking place because of "the suspension of same-sex marriage" and after "the Supreme Court has overturned Roe versus Wade" [05:11]. She thus went to Washington to fight for these rights; the shacky-cam of this medium close-up captures her at the heart of the action, yelling and pushing around the police. She will eventually be banned for life from the United States due to her act of defiance, which does not put an end to her political commitment either.

Not only is Edith concerned by what happens on the other side of the world, but she is also very much involved in what is going on near her, in the UK, as shown by figure 60 (1.03).

Figure 60

This mid-shot shows Edith casually walking on the street with Lincoln – except that she has dressed him up as a girl to infiltrate Wytel industry for the "Bring Your Daughter to Work" day, to eventually gather private data on this company. Zimona, the character on the left discreetly passes her a phone and a "bright yellow sticking plaster" ("BBC Writersroom") that enables her to enter Wytel's buildings with someone else's DNA. A few minutes later, after her mission has been completed, she hands over the phone back to Zimona who declares "just like the old days" [12:29] to which Edith retorts "this is the last time" [12:30], Zimona adding "see you next week" [12:34]. This scene, whose soundtrack is reminiscent of spy thrillers, appears very much in keeping with the cyberpunk imagery since the "cyberpunk ethos" is "almost a political movement," which mainly works from "data networks" ("Cyberpunk"). The very etymology of the term stresses "the rock'n'roll terminology of the 1970s, 'punk' meaning in this context young, streetwise, aggressive, alienated and offensive to the Establishment" (ibid.), hence Zimona's subversive look with her half-shaved head and her green hair dye. Everything in this sequence hints at the fact that Edith must have been an activist for some time, since she is still in touch with a network of hackers, trying to dismantle big and shady companies.

This is precisely thanks to this experience that Edith eventually manages to unveil the truth about the Erstwhile project, revealing its atrocities to the world, after a well-crafted plan extending over several years. In "Episode 5," she infiltrates a government building to steal classified documents thanks to Bethany's help. After understanding the extent of the situation, she decides to take action, hence the uprising she foments in the finale. During all this time, she puts her health aside, up to the point that she collapses just after the rebellion – a physical decline that leads her to spend months confined to bed. Even on the verge of death, she keeps thinking about what she has not been able to accomplish. This is why in "Episode 6," while scientists are trying to transfer her soul into a machine, she dreams that she is chasing Rook; she is obsessed by the fact that she apparently got away with her hideous crime. She declares: "I've still got stuff to do. […] Vivienne Rook. I'm not finished with her. Cos you heard the stories. She got away. […]. Wherever she is, I will find her. I'll enter that machine and I will become a spirit. An imp. A sprite. I will fly across oceans and I will hunt her down" [49:06]. Edith thus clearly appears as the character who cannot stand injustice and impunity. What reinforces her heroic qualities is that she always remains very humble about what she accomplished. When Bethany explains to the scientists that her father reduced his prison sentence by delivering pieces of evidence about Erstwhile to the authorities – which he gathered thanks to Edith – she says "but Beth, there was five hundred whistle-blowers […] I keep telling

her that there's nothing special about our family. We live through it, that's all. Like anyone. Like everyone" [46:32]. Her humility is another sign of her heroic behaviour, showing that her actions have always been selfless; Edith simply tried her best to make the world a fairer place.

Finally, not only does she play a major role in defending human rights, but Edith is also a more common figure of protection when it comes to her relatives. This idea is encapsulated by figure 61 from "Episode 4," which shows her holding a knife to Jonjo's throat.

Figure 61

Edith wants to frighten him to see if he is a good man that will take proper care of Rosie, her face revealing that she is really examining him with her eyes wide open. She says to him: "It looks like you're staying. And it strikes me. That when a man enters a family. With two kids. A family with two little boys right at the heart of it. Then I'd better be on the alert." [25:32]. Edith's reaction seems excessive considering that Jonjo is rather a flat character depicted as very nice but slightly simple-minded[35]. But because of the strained atmosphere, viewers get the idea that Edith has witnessed very dark things, which is confirmed by what she claims: "There are terrible men out there. But I'm watching" [25:48]. The scene takes place in a casual place, the kitchen, but it nonetheless gives Edith the appearance of a female vigilante, ready to take matters into her own hands if needed, be it for unknown people or for her own family.

Muriel also reinforces the idea that *Years and Years* is part of "a long tradition in sf where a certain 'female' character has had a central role – in stories where the traditional gendered hierarchies of society are overturned and where 'women rule'" (Merrick 243). In this very long shot from "Episode 1," which is also an establishing-shot, the grandmother is represented standing in the doorway of her enormous mansion which symbolises tradition. It

[35] As he says himself: "there's no side to me. My mother always says, you've got no layers." (1.04 [26.05]).

seems to be timeless – an impression reinforced by the colorimetry, as if a filter had been applied to the shot. As such, the ancestral house embodies stability, anchorage and therefore, power: it will become a shelter for some characters. This slight low-angle shot also serves to define hierarchy, placing Muriel at the top of the family.

Figure 62

She is the pillar of the Lyons family, possessing a sort of unifying force (fig. 63) precisely symbolised by her home, in which all the family reunions and celebrations are organised.

Figure 63

The composition of this slightly high-angle shot insists on the idea that Muriel is at the centre of her family; the fact that she stands at the head of the table metaphorically shows that she is the head of the Lyonses. It may explain why all the characters are turned towards her, paying attention to what she says. Her power has to do with her personality. She is defined as "sharp as a knife. Wise, but opinionated. Proud and independent and defying the passing of time […] a devoted (and critical) grandmother to her beloved Lyons clan" ("Rookipedia"). Being the most mature character, she does not hesitate to use her experience to lecture her relatives, which gives rise to impressive soliloquies, as in figures 64 and 65 from "Episode 6," in which she shares her clever thoughts.

Figure 64

Figure 65

The medium close-up (fig. 64) is zooming in on Muriel's face in the middle of her lecture. Her look of disapproval is made even more blatant by the close-up (fig. 65). It seems that she has come to accept reality as harsh and absurd as it may be, hence the resignation one can read on her, which does not prevent her from admonishing her descendants. She engages in one of the most compelling monologues of the series:

> It's all your fault. […] The banks. The government. The recession. America. Mrs Rook. Every single thing that's gone wrong, it's your fault. […] We can sit here, all day, blaming other people, we blame the economy, we blame Europe, the opposition, the weather, and then we blame these vast sweeping tides of history like they're out of our control, like we're so helpless and tiny and small. But it's still our fault! D'you know why? It's that one-pound t-shirt. A t-shirt that costs one pound. We can't resist it. Every single one of us, we see a t-shirt that costs one pound, and we think, oh that's a bargain, I'll have that. And we buy it. Not for best. Heaven forfends. But a nice little t-shirt for the winter, to go underneath, that'll do. So the shopkeeper gets five miserable pence for that t- shirt. And some little peasant in a field gets paid nought point nought one pence, and we think that's fine. All of us. We hand over our quid and we buy into that system, for life. I saw it all going wrong when it began. In supermarkets, when they replaced the women at the till with automated checkouts. […] But you didn't do anything, did you? […] No, you huffed and you puffed and you put up with it. […] So yes, it's *our* fault, this is the world that *we* built. Congratulations. Cheers, all! (09.13)

This purple patch – in which, according to the script, she appears "supreme, the family before her" ("BBC Writersroom") – points out Muriel's high awareness of the state of the world. The fact that she is so articulate and ready to speak her mind whenever it is needed added to her wisdom makes her another very strong female figure.

Celeste and Rosie also appear as powerful women. The former is first portrayed as a rather unlikeable character – "a marvelous snob" ("Rookipedia") – but viewers gradually grow attached to her. She turns out to be one of the most touching characters, notably because she manages to keep her composure in the face of every difficulty. As such, she shows much dignity when learning that her husband has been cheating on her for a long time after everything they went through together. This reflects in figure 66 (1.04) which takes place at a clinic in which she has been called to pick Stephen up after a drug-test. She drives there in a hurry to come face to face with Elaine, her husband's mistress for over a year. The close-up shows that in front of them, she is perfectly able to act as if she knew nothing of the situation, smiling very casually, thanking Elaine, and telling her that she will take over.

Figure 66

Figure 67

In reality, this was the last straw for her. She has been keeping this secret to herself for months, so she finally decides to turn the situation around by exposing Stephen in front of everyone while remaining "in complete control" ("BBC Writersroom"). This close-up (fig. 67) shows that Celeste is disgusted by Stephen's behaviour, scolding him as if he were a child – an impression reinforced by the fact that she appears taller than her husband who bends his head to avoid her look, ashamed of himself. The way she hid her pain for so long for the sake of her family makes Celeste one of the most powerful female characters. Rosie is also portrayed as a brave woman – notably a brave mother – because of all the things she has to handle on her own. She is very devoted to her relatives, and always cheerful in spite of her difficulties. Therefore, every single woman of the show embodies strength and independence, their qualities turning them into powerful feminine figures.

This overview serves as a proof of the importance given to women in *Years and Years*, which mostly emphasises their strengths, adding to the modern quality of this inclusive series. Merrick expands on the recurrence of strong woman figure within science fiction, explaining that "such role reversals [engage] with gender to the extent that they [parody] or [criticise] contemporary gendered norms through the familiar sf trope of 'defamiliarizing the familiar'"

(245). Indeed, *Years and Years*' women all have fundamental roles to play in the unfolding of the narrative. They help demonstrate, again, that the micro and the macro levels are interwoven in the series – and generally speaking in British TV shows – as they are in real life. They watch over the institution of the family, which appears as the most perfect model to show the influence of society on individuals while arousing sympathy, leading the Lyonses to humanise dystopia.

2. A Family Saga Appealing to Pathos

A. The Notion of Family in British TV

From its very beginning, British programs have tended to give greater importance to private values, depicting home as a shelter and the family as a comforting entity. For Mark Bould, this is mostly due to the general context in which British television emerged:

> In the UK, the birth of TV sf was intertwined with the birth of TV drama. Well into the 1950s, aesthetic debates at the BBC focused on the cosy address of the TV to the family audience gathered around a nine – or fifteen – inch screen in their own home with the lights down low, and on the intimacy that TV allowed. Unlike film, actors crafted a continuous live performance; unlike the stage, the camera enabled the audience to get up close. This resulted in a tendency to privilege close-ups of the actor and a more muted style of (nonetheless continuous) film-like performance. Writer Nigel Kneale and director/producer Rudolph Cartier sought ways to move away from the dominance of the intimate, to reduce the close-up to one stylistic choice among many. Their preference for fast-moving narratives in which people did things and things happened on a larger scale led them to sf. One of the contradictory impulses at the heart of the genre is the desire for stories to happen on a grand scale (planets in peril, invasions from other worlds) but also a need to follow individual actions, to humanize the events. […] The imaginative and technical dilemmas posed by this dynamic tension is, arguably, the defining characteristics of British TV sf. (89)

It seems to be a requirement for British series to represent society both as a macrocosm and as a microcosm. To do so, they usually picture a typical family which serves as an analogy, so that any other common British family can relate to them. Russel Tovey justifies this choice in *Years and Years*: "As a family, the way the show works is that you experience what is going on in the

world on such a huge scale but through the domesticity of a type family in Manchester. And as everybody is experiencing what occurs in the world, you experience it through you nearest and dearest" ("Red Carpet News," "Premiere" [04:24]).

This accounts for the fact that British shows are generally filled with scenes of the everyday life. In *Years and Years*, a wide variety of sequences represents family gatherings. Some of them are very trivial, stressing the fact that relatives need to catch up regularly, while other key moments are part of family traditions, taking place for special occasions. Figure 68, excerpted from "Episode 3," is an example of the former situation. This medium close-up depicts the four siblings gathered around a Chinese meal, drinking beers and talking about anything and everything, from personal concerns to political issues.

Figure 68

The triviality of the scene is highlighted by the warm colours which convey a feeling of intimacy. Their postures are relaxed, hinting at the fact that when they are together, they can ease off of themselves the pressure they feel every day: they act very naturally towards one another. The ordinariness of this reunion is underlined by a similar scene taking place in "Episode 4" [06:01], showing that such moments are part of their routines.

Other scenes from the everyday life are more festive while still underlining the importance of the family nest. Such sequences, which partake in the realism of the show, usually convey a spirit of celebration expressed by high-key colours, as one can see on figure 69.

Figure 69

The framing of this "feel-good" shot shows that the party revolves around Lincoln's first birthday. The general atmosphere of the scene is filled with joy, hence the decorations and the look on people's face. This is not an individual shot, but it nevertheless places Lincoln at the centre of everyone's attention, just as it is the case in *Years and Years*' narration. Indeed, the pacing of the series is guided by classical celebrations – birthdays, Christmas, New Year's Eve – or by more specific gatherings such as "the Winter Feast," a tradition invented by Muriel in "Episode 1." As alluded to earlier, these moments serve as time-markers for the audience not to lose track of time. These visual reminders often appear during ellipses: these sequences are made up of a profusion of shots in which viewers can get their bearings thanks to the candles on Lincoln's birthday cake or the New Year firework. They also have a soothing quality, proving that in the quick passing of years, family links remains immutable; "As *Years and Years* races unsettlingly through the future, family events stand as anchors, stabilizing and reassuringly constant when time itself feels distorted" (Gilbert). Therefore, the institution of the family is always both literally and metaphorically at the heart of British series.

This is why for someone familiar to the sphere of TV series, one of the most enlightening comments made about the show comes from Renan Cros, who draws an interesting parallel, claiming that *Years and Years* is tantamount to "*This Is Us* and *Black Mirror* reunited" (Roux [03:35]). In doing so, he already alludes to the main topic of the show, that is, the faculty of an endearing British family to adapt to an ever-changing world where their day-to-day lives are constantly upset by external factors. As such, one can argue the following:

> The show's focus on family, though, is what allows it to most accurately convey what life in an era of perpetual crisis is like. On *Years and Years*, the big existential dilemmas get mixed up with the personal ones, so that the emotional predicament of a troubled teenager bears as much weight as the failure of democracy, or the reining-in of the press. […] Everything becomes interwoven […] The macro events shaking the world are seen, first and foremost, as micro occurrences transforming the lives of everyday people. (Gilbert)

Russel T Davies himself explains why he wanted to narrate this story through the eyes of the Lyonses: "A family is a great arena for all the emotions and all the birth, deaths, marriages – all those stories. [*Years and Years*] is trying to tell stories of seismic changes in society, but actually the family is a constant" (Turchiano).

This interconnection of the microcosm of a common family and the macrocosm of society as a whole goes hand-in-hand with Levitas's idea, that is to say, that in the 21st century, "the personal is not political enough" although "we nonetheless cannot afford to lose the personal" (Baccolini, Moylan 235). It seems that Davies is well aware of this phenomenon – he is "a master of blending the personal and the political" (Gilbert) – hence the fact that he decided to place the family at the heart of his show, to represent their paths while the world is falling into pieces. The scenes laying emphasis on family links and human relationships in general thus serve a major purpose; they might not be as trivial as one can think at first sight. On the contrary, they enable viewers to release the accumulated tension as if they were meant to be experienced as a breath of fresh air, conveying a sense of solidarity and hope for the future. Furthermore, these touching scenes engage in a larger process of emotional attachment with the characters, a means of reinforcing the audience's sympathy towards them. Jean-Maxime Renault recalls that Davies is known for its ability to give life and authenticity to his set of characters (Roux [03:59]) and indeed, thanks to this conscientious process of characterisation, he enables viewers to truly understand his believable down-to-earth protagonists.

Therefore, another reason why the audience can relate to *Years and Years* lies in its narrative method. The series belongs to the category of what French theorist Jean-Pierre Esquenazi calls « séries chorales » in *Les séries télévisées: l'avenir du cinema?*. This term is an equivalent to Altman's "multiple-focus narrative" as he defines it on *A Theory of Narrative* (2008). Esquenazi refers to it to demonstrate that "multiple-focus narratives are clearly one of

the manifestations of the multifocal genre" (ibid. 131-132). TV shows increasingly rely on this technique as a means of offering viewers a variety of possible perspectives to adopt: "Current series […] often offer a multiplicity of developed characters and therefore a multiplicity of possible intermediaries for the addressee, who can possibly modify his choice along the way" (Esquenazi, *La vérité de la fiction* 128). In the case of *Years and Years*, not only can the audience observe the story through different points of view, but they are also faced with multiple plots. It can be difficult to follow[36] but it is never muddled at all; one just needs to pay close attention to what is happening. This is why Esquenazi argues that "penetrating the narrative organisation implies understanding how the diversity of narrative arcs is articulated to reach the inevitable unity that constitutes each episode, and how this articulation leads to a form of general coherence" (*Les séries télévisées* 131). In other words, *Years and Years*' narration is demanding but worthwhile. For Esquenazi, it is associated with a form of liberty: "The multiplication of presentation of real characters in a fictional narrative offers a greater diversity of ways to access the fictional universe for the addressee who can privilege one of them, combine several points of view or else refuse them all" (*La vérité de la fiction* 133).

Ultimately, *Years and Years* is not a formula show but a very special serialised show that enables its audience to follow a family over the course of fifteen years. Achouche argues that "serialised narration enables to focus on [a show's] characters, on their relationships and their evanescent alliances, and most of all on their weaknesses and on their evolutions throughout the seasons" ("L'effet-réalité"). Although their evolutions can only be witnessed within six episodes, the same effect is achieved very rapidly in *Years and Years* since the series does its best to favour affection for its characters, hence the choice to focus on a common family confronted to terrible things appealing to *pathos*. The Lyonses try and stay united until the end, which is why they prove that compassion lies at the heart of the series, leading the audience to feel sympathetic toward them, which is necessary for a family drama whose aim is also to be cathartic. This is what Max Baldry, portraying Viktor, sums up: "[*Years and Years*] is exploring these epic themes, but it is done in such a fragile way. It's all about human contact, and it can really relate to a lot of people because it's very cathartic and real" ("Red Carpet News," "Premiere" [07:15]).

[36] Esquenazi admits it in *Les séries télvisées*: « Les séries chorales possèdent (I) une multiplicité de personnages et donc une multiplicité de points de vue possibles. Elles tissent (II) un réseau complexe de récits fragmentés sur un ou plusieurs épisodes (arcs narratifs.) Leur développement implique (III) une extension continuelle de leur univers fictionnel : la myriade d'interactions entre les personnages et la multiplication d'arcs narratifs emplissent indéfiniment le monde des séries chorales ». (131)

B. The Epic Tonality of (Melo)drama

In *Film/Genre*, Altman states that melodrama is "the most popular theatrical mode of the nineteenth century and cinema's most important parent genre" (5). This genre would be derived from the birth of a so-called "serious genre" in the 18th century. The latter would have evolved into "the weepie genre," leading to "drama" and ultimately to "melodrama" (ibid.) which is at the same time a genre and a mode of expression[37] extremely present *in Years and Years*. Indeed, the series relies on family dynamics to make the audience sympathise with the characters and its stages home as the central value of the world depicted – a world that is sometimes very cruel and unfair towards them.

Drama often pictures Romanesque love-stories with obstacles to overcome (Achouche, "Representation of Progress"), as it is the case in *Years and Years*. In much the same way, in her enumeration of science fiction topoi, Jones alludes to the fact that "there are countless hero-tales in sf; and many permutations of the basic romance of the young male adventurer" (171). Most heroes put their lives on the line to rescue "damsels in distress" since "an examination of sf's icons would be incomplete without some reference to that fabled sf cliché, the diaphanously clad damsel on the cover" (ibid.). One can find a modern version of this trope through Daniel's character when focusing on his relationships with Viktor. They embody the cliché of the pair of "star-crossed lovers." They fell in love at first sight but due to external circumstances, their passionate love story seems to be doomed to failure. Figure 70 (1.03) encapsulates the uncertainty of their relationship and most specifically how they are always running out of time.

Figure 70

[37] According to Achouche, melodrama is at the same time a genre which mainly focus on private values, and a mode of expression which used to be laughed at, mostly because of the heart-rending stories depicted ("Representation of Progress").

This close-up is very poignant as it shows how Daniel and Viktor cannot even believe that they have been reunited. They literally hang on to one another, eyes closed so as to get absorbed in the moment and to truly realise that they were able to find each other after everything they have been through. Viktor has been deported back to Ukraine in which he was obliged to hide because his own family has reported him to the authorities for being homosexual. Daniel also went through one of the most worrisome moments of the series in "Episode 3," when he tries to video call Viktor and that a peculiar Ukrainian policeman – apparently searching the place – answers and starts threatening them [05:28]. Fortunately, Viktor had time to escape, which leads him to try everything to get his freedom back. Daniel narrates his epic journey to their family and friends which much emphasis – as shown by his short sentences and the multiplication of pauses – to underline the gravity of a situation in which everything could have gone wrong:

> He was trapped. In a country. That denies his existence (pause) Until Thursday night. Cos on Thursday night. Viktor left Odessa. And went to Ternopil. At midnight. He got into a lorry. Down through Germany. Still too dangerous. Stopped near Stuttgart. To get out from that lorry. Into another lorry. […] And from there. Through France […] Onwards. Down to Spain. […] And he crossed the border, he did it, he got there! (1.03 [22:57])

For the audience, Daniel's storytelling is complemented by a visual stimulus with a profusion of shacky cam shots showing Viktor in the middle of his dangerous gateway. The script insists on the fact that he left everything behind: "INTERCUT FAST GLIMPSES of VIKTOR with nothing more than a DUFFLE BAG" ("BBC Writersroom"). The risks they have both taken to meet again account for the intensity of their reunion, hence the overwhelming sense of relief in figure 70. What they do not know, and which adds to the tragic dimension of the scene, is that this sequence is only a short break before the situation gets worse, the calm before the storm. This topos already gets *Years and Years* closer to the category of the melodrama.

But more than a mere melodrama, for Davies, *Years and Years* is an "epic saga" ("TFCC"). This description links the series to tragedy, which means that in the end, a sacrifice is supposed to bring back order and peace. In this respect, one cannot but think about Daniel when reading Sargent's definition of utopian heroes in classical tragedies:

> In one of the fundamental elements of Greek tragedy, each individual is born into a specific role […] in a well-structured society. But through hubris or pride, individuals break through the boundaries containing them. These are the heroes and heroines, larger-than life figures who are unwilling to be limited to the normal, the acceptable, who challenge the given, the "way things are." Because of who they are and what they do, they are fated to meet their nemesis and are punished for their effrontery, their challenge to the established order. Utopians and the Utopias they create, on paper and in practice, are like these heroes and heroines. They challenge the normal and proclaim that people do not have to live lives of "quiet desperation." They say that life can be richly fulfilling, if only enough people insist that poverty, disease, and degradation are not the portion allotted to human beings. Utopians say that challenging the gods or the power structures is essential. (qtd. in Baccolini, Moylan 229-230)

The equivalent to this figure would thus be Daniel. In "Episode 1," he is already presented as a sort of "everyday hero" taking care of refugees. He shows the typical values associated with it, appearing bold enough to protect the weak and defenceless, and revolted by unfounded prejudices. This is why he does not hesitate to put a co-worker from Blackpool at her place when she proudly claims that she does not want to see refugees in her municipality [19:06]. Modestly describing himself as "just a housing-officer" [17:34], he quickly turns out to be so much more throughout the series, because of the impediments he encounters to try and save Viktor. In the face of all opposition, including his family's concerns, he challenges the socioeconomic and political order of the world. But according to what Sargent also explains, because he threatens the established order, Daniel shall be "punished for [its] effrontery" (ibid. 229), hence his tragic death that achieves to make a hero out of him at the end of "Episode 4." Figure 71 encapsulates the horrible outcome of Viktor and Daniel's story.

Figure 71

This mid-shot represents Viktor soon after the arrival of the police on the beach, wrapped in an emergency blanket, paralysed. A continuity-shot reveals that his eyes are directed towards Daniel's corpse. He is in a state of absolute shock and does not seem to see the policewoman, nor to the able to hear her. The background reinforces the atrocity of the situation with more corpses lying on the ground, authorities inspecting them. A few hours later, Viktor is still very shaken when announcing the news to Daniel's family, as his speech reflects:

> I'm at the house. And Daniel's dead. I'm sorry but he drowned. We thought we could get across the channel. But, on the news, it says, 17 bodies. That was Daniel. He's dead. Drowned. We got half a mile from the shore. But that's a very long way. […] I apologise to you all. But we got on a boat. And the boat sank. And he's dead. I came home. Is this home? [55:14]

Therefore, the plot revolving around Daniel and Viktor's impossible love story with its abrupt and lethal ending is the main reason why *Years and Years* is filled with a tragic undertone.

In addition, because of the importance his plot plays all along the series, Daniel could be considered as the main character; he is linked to everything, including to the unfolding of the story *after* he died. Furthermore, at various moments, he establishes the link with the audience, helping "the addressee adopts a point of view which is itself materialised inside the fiction" (Esquenazi, *La vérité de la fiction* 130). Such a connection seems necessary to create within viewers a strong emotional bond: "What appears fundamental and indispensable to a good reception of the fictional narrative is the establishment between the addressee and one of the characters of such a flow of contiguity" (ibid. 128). Esquenazi thus aims to demonstrate that what makes a story feel true is the audience's attachment to the characters and to their more or less relatable stories which should strike a chord with them:

> [Les spectateurs] verraient dans le mode de vie des personnages fictionnels une exacerbation de leur propre imagination mélodramatique. Dans une vie moderne très fragmentée, où ordonner nos formes variées d'expérience est souvent une entreprise difficile, l'imagination mélodramatique serait un instrument essentiel : elle permettrait de donner du sens à nos existences banales et aussi de les particulariser, de les rendre distinctes, personnelles. (ibid. 26)

As such, as in every tragedy, there would also be a cathartic quality to *Years and Years*, a means of ultimately relieving the audience of the strong emotions the show may have provoked within them. This is why at the end of the series, viewers finally regress to reality, but only after an experience that may not leave them and their visions of the world unchanged.

C. Sympathy and Analogy

Throughout the show, *Years and Years* appeals to the audience's emotions with heart-rending scenes or very moving speeches. Such occasions are meant to arouse sympathy for viewers to be able to truly understand what the characters are experiencing. This phenomenon seems to be part of a larger strategy. Indeed, if one is to believe Esquenazi, the degree of realism attributed to a story relies on the affection the addressee feels towards the fictional characters (*La vérité de la fiction*). In other words, for a fiction to sound true, the plot needs to echo real concerns that ultimately bring viewers back to their own reality, and to find a way to personalise and humanise these concerns, hence the role of the characters.

This can first explain why *Years and Years* is filled with thoughtful conversations between members of the family, which usually express their personal fear of the future, notably in relation to their relatives. These moving scenes are appealing to *pathos* because it shows that the characters always stick together while, "emotional involvements are necessary to the fictional immersion" (ibid. 107). Such scenes can enable the audience to feel closer to the characters since their involvement is precisely conveyed by the links established between them:

> L'appropriation du récit par le destinataire est donc liée à la relation privilégiée que ce dernier doit nouer avec l'un des personnages (ou parfois avec un ensemble de personnages) pour se sentir directement affecté par le récit, y être effectivement sensibilisé. […] il doit être ressenti comme familier du destinataire, proche en un certain sens, partageant avec lui valeurs ou sentiments, pour que le destinataire puisse adopter son point de vue. […] il suffit que le destinataire juge que le personnage partage avec lui un rôle ou un mode de personnification, en bref une posture, pour que cette familiarité soit éprouvée. (ibid.132-133)

For Esquenazi, viewers need to be able to relate to the characters' experiences and to benefit from them: "The addressee must get something out of this live between two worlds: the analogy

he discovers between them must concern his interests, emotions and attachments so that entering the fictional dynamism does not appear to him as a futile or a useless game" (ibid. 116). This is why these sequences usually voice real-world concerns, leading the audience to sympathise with the characters' worries. Muriel's soliloquy (1.06 [09.13]) has already been mentioned as an example of a powerful speech that relates to reality. But *Years and Years* engages in an alarmist rhetoric from its very beginning. In "Episode 1," Daniel's worrisome monologue exemplifies this phenomenon:

> Things were okay, a few years ago before 2008. D'you remember back then, we used to think politics was boring? […] But now. I worry about everything. I don't know what to worry about first. Never mind the government, it's the sodding banks, they terrify me and it's not even them, it's the companies, the brands, the corporations, they treat us like algorithms while they go round poising the air and the temperature and the rain and don't even start me on Isis. And now we've got America, never thought I'd be scared of America in a million years but we've got fake news and false facts and I don't even know what's true any more, what sort of world are we in? Cos if it's this bad now… (to the baby) What's it going to be like for you? In 30 years' time? 10 years? 5 years? [09.10]

His acute perception of the state of the world and the fact that he is very articulate makes him fall in line with dystopian heroes since according to Moylan, the storyline of a dystopia "develops around that alienated protagonist as she or he begins to recognize the situation for what it really is" (xiii). A continuity shot reveals that prior to his soliloquy, Daniel was staring at news broadcast, hence the reaction shot in which he raises his family's awareness of the future – as much as the viewers' – while holding Lincoln in his arm, an innocent newly born.

Figure 72

Figure 73

The mid-shot (fig. 72) shows that he is in the maternity ward of a hospital, in a supposedly quiet and soothing place symbolising life which contrasts with his dark thoughts. This explains why Vincent first looks at him with perplexity. It rapidly turns into an individual shot (fig. 73) slowly

zooming in on Daniel's face, expressing his fears. The close-up insists on the fact that he is experiencing something intense, his eyes staring into space, his heart beating faster and louder and his voice shaking with nervous laughter. It could be associated with an epiphany to the extent that it symbolises what Baccolini claims: "Journeying to the past through memory often coincides with the realisation that what is gone represented a better place and time" (qtd. in Moylan, 149). The editing increases these feelings of deep anxiety and dread, hence the script's indications "the sound of pressure slowly building… And the pressure BURST, the picture goes RIP - ! [..] rock[ing] forward" ("BBC Writersroom") with another profusion of images to process. Daniel's speech remains one of the most important moments in *Years and Years*, because of his extremely conscious assessment of the current situation in the fictional world, as an analogy of reality. His alarming stance may thus provoke a strong reaction within the audience's minds, confirming that in the dystopian genre, "it is the dignity, acuity, and agency of the character that stimulates and inspires" (Baccolini, Moylan 243).

This idea confirms that "the point of the show isn't prescience […] His intention, rather, seems to be to examine a populace too numbed and stressed to try to change the way the world is going" (Gilbert). However, viewers are not tempted to blame the family for their passivity. On the contrary, one tends to feel sympathetic towards them: "The thing that struck me most about the Lyonses wasn't that they sighed and did nothing while the world around them disintegrated into disease and disinformation. It was that—mostly—they survived" (ibid.) Therefore, it seems that Muriel's and Daniel's distressing soliloquies are not only meant to arouse the audience's sympathy for the characters' concerns, but precisely to make them understand that their very own situations are not that different from theirs. There would be a sort of metaphorical impulse to *Years and Years*, which could be defined as a show whose parallels aim to bring the audience back to reality. This seems to be one of the most important principles of the dystopian genre, the series carefully following "the dystopia's imperative to take the worst of the present day and amplify it" (Kindley). In this respect,

> L'une des raisons pour lesquelles nous apprécions les récits de fiction est que ceux-ci nous apparaissent parfois « vrais », c'est-à-dire qu'ils contiennent une « vérité » qui concerne, non le monde imaginaire proposé par la fiction ce qui serait évidemment absurde, mais le monde réel dans lequel vit le destinataire de la fiction. […] le récit de fiction constituerait un instrument dont nous disposons afin de mieux comprendre notre propre univers. (Esquenazi, *La vérité de la fiction* 17)

In *La vérité de la fiction* Esquenazi argues that viewers dive into a "state of fictional immersion" when "the fiction echoes our concerns" and that "its meaning turns into sensations or emotions that touch or may touch a chord with intimate or public puzzlement" (55-56). Such an immersion is not "a state of no-mind" but rather "a state of intellectual absorption" (ibid. 58). To prove that "a fiction can manage to represent reality 'historically'" (ibid. 70), Esquenazi relies on one of Pavel's essays:

> Dans son livre *Univers de la fiction*, Thomas Pavel (1988) donne chair théorique à ce sentiment à partir d'une étude de la composition des modes fictionnels. Il propose de les concevoir comme des structures duelles : selon l'auteur, chacune d'entre elles résulte de l'assemblage entre un monde réel – ce que Pavel appelle sa *base* – et un univers secondaire « existentiellement novateur [qui] contient des entités et des états de choses sans correspondant dans le premier univers » (p. 76). Ce second univers comprend les éléments *saillant*s du récit fictionnel qui sont l'objet explicite de l'avancée de la narration. (ibid. 66)

In *Years and Years*, the fictional world is indeed built from an assemblage between the audience's real world – its base – and a secondary universe with its prominent elements relying on extrapolation but remaining believable. For Esquenazi, "in this perspective, one could speak of a potential 'illustrative' truth of the fictional narrative" notably because "when the latter succeeds in correctly exemplifying the kind of life led in its real base, without the even narrated claiming to be in the least accurate, it can be considered as a fair illustration of its real base" (ibid. 94). In other words, Esquenazi considers that:

> Il y a appropriation d'un univers fictionnel quand un destinataire appréhendant ce dernier à la lumière de certains aspects de sa propre réalité juge qu'il existe une correspondance ou une analogie entre son monde et celui de la fiction, et que cette correspondance ou cette analogie le guide dans son interprétation du monde fictionnel. Cette appropriation sera d'autant plus prégnante que l'investissement affectif du destinataire est fort. C'est à partir d'une telle appropriation que celui-ci peut juger que l'univers fictionnel est « vrai » c'est-à-dire […] que ce dernier lui semble une juste paraphrase de sa propre réalité. (ibid. 119)

If he refuses to talk about "identification," which he deems to be a poor notion, Esquenazi does show that a fiction "can be understood as a global or general exemplification of the addressee's fragment of live" when it is "*paraphrasing*" reality (ibid. 150-155). In the show, the aim of such a technique would be to raise awareness of the state of the world and thus to call for action, hence Molénat's comment: "*Years and Years* depicts an unbearable world. However, it is more or less the one in which we already live. Is there a more effective way to awake everyone's conscience?" Nevertheless, if *Years and Years*' world is unbearable, it is not devoid of hope, conveying the idea that with common effort, the future of humanity can still be changed.

3. Solidarity, Resilience and Hope for the Future

A. Touches of Humour

In an interview, T'Nia Miller – portraying Celeste – declares about *Years and Years* that "because it's shot through the eyes of the Lyons family, what holds it together is hope, is love, is relationships" (Martin, "T'Nia Miller"). She adds that "it's actually a really hopeful, positive show, and Russell writes it with such humour and gentle touches" (ibid.) Indeed, the series does not entirely belong to the so-called "tear genre" that melodrama is. It is actually filled with humorous elements, serving as comic relief to try and decrease the tension – a technique dating back to Shakespeare, as demonstrated by Nason in "Shakespeare's Use of Comedy in Tragedy." As such, the show encapsulates what Altman calls "the ultimate generic crossbreed: tragicomedy," which was first very unpopular, but which gained traction over the years[38] (*Film/Genre* 4). Because *Years and Years* is a tragicomedy, with a primacy given to dramatic moments interspersed with touches of humour, it partakes in a romantic move, as the 19th century Romantics were the first to declare themselves "in support of [the] genre mixing aesthetic" (ibid. 5). It is a strategy with manyfold effects upon the addressee.

Slight touches of humour are omnipresent in *Years and Years*, even in dramatic situation, which means that the show is not merely a melodrama but that it enters the tragicomic genre. According to Nason, the effects of these humorous passages in Shakespeare's plays can be classified into three categories: "(I) Comic passages that in effect are comic; (II) Comic passages that, through contrast with their tragic setting, are, in effect, tragic or pathetic; and

[38] Altman claims that tragicomedy is very important for genre theory criticism: "the rise of tragicomedy demonstrates the possibility of generating new genres through the monstrous mating of already existing genres. For the first time, genre theory must accommodate itself to genre history, rather than vice versa" (ibid. 5)

(III) Comic passages that, by relieving the tension, contribute to the tragic effect of the passages that follow" (30). This typology can be applied to *Years in Years*, since the wit of the show also depends on these humorous elements.

In *Years and Years*, viewers encounter some situation comedy corresponding to Nason's first category – for instance when Jonjo sprays Rosie with water to make her laugh and fall in love with him (1.04 [09:14]) – but the series mostly relies on dark humour. It means that the show is able to wittingly deal with very serious matters in a humorous tone. Humour comes with a form of bitterness delivered by satiric characters relying on sarcasm to make their points – a characteristics shared by all the Lyonses. As such, there are hints of irony hidden everywhere in the dialogues, as when after having learned that Vincent's remains are made of water, Muriel flushes the toilet declaring "Goodbye Vince!" (1.03 [41:36]). The comical effect also relies on self-derision – a value which is given much importance – primarily embodied by Rosie. In "Episode 1," when asked about her job by one of her conquests, she answers that she is "a championship wrestler" [31:17] although she suffers from spina bifida which obliges her to be in a wheelchair, showing that she is able to laugh at her physical impairment. In this set of examples, humour is used to try and look at things from different angles, putting them into perspective which may be a way for the characters to come to terms with tough situations.

In this respect, humour is most of the time used to decrease tension, thus really serving as comic relief, falling in Nason's third category. This is the case in "Episode 3," in a scene taking place in the pub after Vincent's funeral [41:42]. The sequence keeps alternating between seriousness and relieving mirth. Viewers first learn that Vincent left absolutely nothing to the siblings, but at the same time, they learn that their father had another son, whom he also called Steven – "Steven with a V" for the Lyonses. This gives way to an absurd and funny dialogue between Steven and Stephen, relying on a comic of repetition due to the immense similarity between their names, which eases this first tension away. The former offers them little boxes containing small tubes filled with water; they suddenly realise that these are their father's remains. Their shock is counterbalanced by humorous comments such as Daniel's "he looks like tea. Weak tea. Is that what we are in the end? Tea?" [43:24] or by Edith's unexpected gesture. She suddenly raises her tube as to drink to her father, but she swallows it up, adding that he tastes like "soap […] like antiseptic gel" [43:40]. They all burst into laughter, but a few seconds later, the situation takes another turn when Rosie asks her sister why she was not present at their mother's funeral [43:55]. Figures 74 embodies the turnaround.

Figure 74

The siblings were all joking around a minute ago, but now the medium close-up shows that their eyes are filled with tears, Rosie starting crying. The low-key colours of the shot add to the intimacy of a scene in which the conversation gets increasingly serious – they are all confessing their most private thoughts regarding their mother, notably the fear that she may not have been proud of them were she still alive. The intensity of their emotions is reinforced by the fact that they all try to mutually console themselves, Edith taking her sister into her arms, and Daniel clapping on his brother's knee, trying to contain his sadness. This scene truly reveals how emotions may mingle in dramatic moments, laughter being a means of alleviating pain. However, "by relieving the tension" this sequence does "contribute to the tragic effect of the passages that follow" (Nason 30). Indeed, at the end of the episode, while they are driving back home, Stephen starts following a courier on his bike, which reminds him of how his father died. He appears on the brink of madness, an idea confirmed by the fact that while the courier is delivering his parcel, Stephen drives back and forth over the bike as to avenge his father. Such a desperate move recalls that for the Lyonses, the general tonality of the day – in spite of their occasional guffaws – is that of grief, underlining again the complexity of the human mind. Is it therefore a sequence that fully captures the mix of feelings characterising tragicomedy.

Humour also comes from the discrepancy of understanding between several characters which gives way to situation comedy. For instance, when Bethany tells her parents that she is "trans" (1.01 [25:00]), they immediately assume that she means "transgender," whereas she feels transhuman, which leads to a huge misunderstanding. Her parents want to show that they are supportive of her and open-minded, Celeste claiming "we love you, darling, we absolutely love you, we always will" [25:32] and Stephen declaring "and if it turns out we've got a lovely son instead of a lovely daughter, we'll be happy" [25:45] which adds to the comical aspect of a very serious scene. Figure 75 manages to encapsulate this misunderstanding.

Figure 75

The medium close-up focuses on Bethany's face; she is getting increasingly puzzled at her parents' reaction because she is starting to understand that they can hardly imagine what she is going through. Her perplexity contrasts with Stephen's comfort gesture as he is embracing her to show his support. Even when she exclaims that she is "transhuman," they still do not get it, Celeste answering "oh, I'm sorry, they keep changing the words" [26:00]. When Bethany tries to clarify the situation, saying that she does not want to change sex, Stephen declares in an understanding tone "no, sure; we say 'gender' now. Sorry" [26:05], reinforcing again this impression of a dialogue of the deaf. As with satire, in this specific case, the sense of humour is related to a situation that could be defined as dramatic. It hints at the fact that *Years and Years* also relies on comedy as a means of putting things into perspective and to show that even the most serious topics can be gently laughed at. It also adds to the characters' authenticity, leading the audience to look at them from all angles and, according to Russel Tovey, to feel that "you absolutely know *exactly* who that character is" ("Red Carpet News," "Premiere" [05:04]).

The tragicomic aspect of *Years and Years* thus partakes in the sharpness of the series. Almost all these touches of humour can fall in Nason's second category; they are to be analysed as dark humour in contrast with the tragic background of the show that can never be forgotten. Humour becomes a means of qualifying what is being assessed, that is to say, of broaching very serious matters from a new perspective. This leads T'Nia Miller to praise Davies for his versatility, declaring that "he will have you laughing one minute and the next minute you're in fits of tears" ("Red Carpet News," "Premiere" [09:55]). Russel Tovey agrees: "[Davies's] talent lies in his ability to create relationships, to flip on its head a scene, when in one scene you're like funny-laughing, and then you're crying […] the nuance and the layering of all of his scripts are incomparable" (ibid. [4:50]). Tragicomedy thus helps underline the importance given to nuances in *Years and Years*. The show does not see everything in black and white; it is rather very subtle, delivering a flicker of hope for the future in spite of the dark times it represents.

B. Love and Hope Prevailing

Years and Years is not merely a bleak dystopia – one that would be called an "Anti-Utopia" by some. Instead, the series does contain what Bloch calls "a utopian impulse" and Calvino "a utopian charge," because despite all the things they are faced with, the characters never lose their sense of solidarity or their power of resilience. On the contrary, they show that love and hope will always prevail as long as men work together to achieve something greater. In other words, the more obstacles they have to overcome, the strongest they will get out of it.

As alluded to earlier, in the first ten minutes of the series, viewers are already confronted to a profusion of images representing a wide variety of events. Some of them are personal, intermingling with political ones (1.01 [09:54]). The audience gets to witness Lincoln's first birthday followed by Trump's reelection and New Year 2021, Daniel and Ralph's engagement and wedding, the increasing tensions between China and the United States, the death of Elizabeth II, Rook's attempt to become MP and so on. Such sequences come back in every episode with an instrumental soundtrack pointing out the fact that tragic large-scale events become the backdrop of the Lyonses' joyful private celebrations. This is why Sophie Gilbert writes that the show is all about "the (timely) idea of human resilience in the face of constant crisis," demonstrating "how simply existing can become its own kind of resistance." She explains this phenomenon as follows:

> *Things go on*. Facing the unimaginable, people still get married. They get divorced. They fall in love. Babies are born, and people die. After a while, the nuclear strike is rarely mentioned. The refugee crisis becomes just another peripheral catastrophe. The pandemic is alarming for a while—especially for the elderly, who greet their grandchildren by asking nervously if anyone has a cold or a cough—but eventually becomes background noise. The stubborn impulse to keep going, not to cede to despair, is just too strong. […] The more things happened to them, the harder they clung to life and to one another. (ibid.)

It also justifies Mangan's comment about *Years and Years*, the TV critic writing that "the day-to-day minutia of life go on as [the characters] must – and [Davies] aerates the heaviest, most fraught issues […] with wit and optimism, so that they are no longer a burden, to us or the narrative, but grist to the mental and dramatic mill." The point of the show is precisely to show

the audience that life goes on no matter what. As Russel Tovey rightly explains: "even when stuff is getting horrific around you, you still get up, you still go to work, you still make love, you still laugh […] you get on with your life" ("Red Carpet News," "Premiere" [04:08]).

Gilbert also claims that "for the family members to function each day, they have to distance themselves from the human tragedy all over the world. It's impossible to process so much pain, so many heartbreaking news stories" adding that "resilience requires rationing your emotional capacity, your capacity to feel." It is true that the characters sometimes need to step back and that their political commitments can be tamed by the awfulness of what is occurring in the world. This is what happens to Edith in "Episode 1" when she engages in a speech that makes her sound cynical. When Viktor says to her "The North Pole melted, like, it's gone. You should tell people about that" [22:34], she answers

> I could, but I did. There's not much point anymore […] You know we keep saying, you've got 10 more years to sort out climate change? You've got 10 more years to sort out flooding? You've got 10 more years to sort out the rainforest? We've been saying that for 30 years it's too late, we've run out of time, everyone knows it. You can recycle and campaign and go on marches. We *are* going to flood, and burn, and starve. And we won't die, I'm not saying that, the human race will carry on, living on plateaus. Like shepherds. Little villages. Maybe with a computer in a hut that you can visit once a week. Then go back to growing your little patch of corn. [22:39]

Her speech recalls that the series "shows how the alienation and paralysis sparked by a decade-plus of constant calamity are also symptoms of a kind of resilience. Human nature is to panic, to agonize, to fret and lose sleep and weep. Inevitably, though, it's also to adapt" (Gilbert). Rosie embodies this idea, being depicted as a resilient character, always able to bounce back. As such, in "Episode 3," when she gets fired from her job as manager in a school kitchen [15:30] to be "replaced by a bolt of vegan meat" [16:01] she decides to pursue her dream of running a food truck; she acquires it in the next episode (1.04 [10:20]), which fills her with joy.

The characters also demonstrate resilience in the face of more tragic events such as death. In this respect, the loss of Daniel is very traumatic for all the family members, but after months of mourning, they decide to restore family traditions in his memory. In "Episode 6",

the Lyonses are having lunch altogether at Muriel's, and although emotions run high, they can talk about Daniel without bursting into tears (fig. 76).

Figure 76

This medium close-up is very intimate, hence the warm colours and the use of natural lighting coming from the outside which gives the scene a serene atmosphere. Even though all their faces cannot be seen, it seems that the characters are all happy to be reunited, which has not been the case for a while until then. They seem to have moved on, since they are finally capable of making small talks, Ruby taking up the matter of food for conversation [05:50]. More serious issues are mentioned – notably Viktor's disappearance – but it does not prevent the family from having a good time together, which cheers them up while giving them hope for the future, since they know they can still count on one another.

Therefore, in spite of its dystopian background, *Years and Years* is filled with a hopeful message of human solidarity. As a result, the series tends to preserve meaningful human rituals to show that they are a means of keeping faith in the future.

Figure 77

This long high-angle shot focusing on a gathering in the refugee camp is an example of that phenomenon (fig. 77). In "Episode 1," Daniel calls upon Fran, her neighbour, who is also a storyteller, to entertain the refugees, after she reminded him of the importance of storytelling

[16:30]. During the sequence, there are screams of surprise or dread, bursts of laughter and large smiles on everyone's faces, as a way to explore the range of human emotions. Since it takes place at night, the shot is dark, but it remains positive because people are gathered in a circle around a fire, captivated by a story which is precisely about human resilience, serving as a metaphor for their own lives. It thus seems to be a clear demonstration of what Gregory Claeys class "a collectivist ethos[39]" (8). This is confirmed by other moments of the series that grant much importance to solidarity. "Episode 3" is reminiscent of this idea; Daniel seizes the occasion of his birthday to throw a party in which he takes time to thank his guests for the energy they devoted to helping Viktor. His speech insists on his relatives' involvement: "I know it's been months of worry. And petitions. And you've all written letters and things, you've been amazing" [22:55]. Their concerns are underlined by figure 78.

Figure 78

This mid-shot is telling about human solidarity as it portrays all the persons who contributed to Viktor's escape. The audience can recognise most of the characters – such as Yvonne, who is Viktor's lawyer – but there are also protagonists engaged in the cause whom they have never seen before. This shows how the situation has taken on much greater proportion. People's faces express their interests, be it through anxiousness or excitement, as they are all waiting to know more about Viktor. When Daniel tells them that he has reached Barcelona, they all burst into cries of joy, relieved that their common effort paid off.

Therefore, the notions of solidarity and love qualify the idea that "the cost of getting through crisis after crisis […] is numbness" (Gilbert). But what truly manages to show that this statement is incorrect is *Years and Years*' finale, since Davies wanted the show to end on a glimmer of hope:

[39] Claeys mentions Leszek Kolakowski, who goes as far as talking about this phenomenon as a sign of "compulsory solidarity," as if it were part of the constraints of the dystopian world. (ibid.)

> It would be terrible just to write just to say that human nature is going into the bin. It does have hope in the end; it does have resolution. It is not full happy ending, but I think I always have to write for hope, and I always have to find a positive spin on stuff. They do go through the mill, this family, terrible things happen, shocking things happen; it's a proper drama in that sense. But surviving, in the end, is the key to all things. ("Red Carpet News," "Davies Interview" [01:18]).

As he explained in an interview, "happy endings are tough to find, and miserable endings are easy. So, I try to look for hope in it, and I do have hope in people — we are great survivors and great thinkers. […] I have to hope that our niceness prevails" (Wood), hence the denouement of the series, which is a happy one because people proved able to join forces.

C. Empowerment and Reversal of Order

Years and Years also features hope in regard to common people's empowerment. The idea of a form of human resistance to oppression is introduced from the beginning of the show, notably through brave characters such as Edith or Daniel, who fight for what they believe in. Their unifying power is their most important asset: "At a visceral level the success of failure almost doesn't matter, for it is the dignity, acuity, and agency of the character that stimulates and inspires" (Baccolini, Moylan 243). Such a power is first conveyed by their words, hence the epic speech delivered by Daniel about Viktor's journey (1.03 [22:55]). His monologue is reminiscent of Baccolini's theory since she considers that a dystopia is "build around the construction of a narrative [of the hegemonic order] and a counter-narrative [of resistance]" (qtd. in Moylan 148). This underlines the importance of language and of its control/power in dystopias. Moylan adds that:

> The counter-narrative develops as the "dystopian citizen" moves from apparent contentment into an experience of alienation that is followed by growing awareness and then action that leads to a *climatic* event that does or does not challenge or change the society […] the dystopia generates its own didactic account in the critical encounter that ensues as the citizen confronts, or is confronted by, the contradictions of the society. (148)

As such, powerful speeches calling for action may raise people's awareness, leading them to realise that the status quo can be reversed.

MacLeod arguably writes that "there are no politics in Utopia; as in its neighbour Dystopia, the government of people has been replaced by the administration of things" (230). He insists on the qualities of politics – mainly compromise – which for him are opposed to science fiction's in the sense that "the characteristic sf cast of mind is inclined to the logical and uncompromising" (ibid.). But Macleod also explains that in SF productions, people usually try to get back their political power. They sometimes achieve to do so, through the creation of informal forums – internet becoming a useful place for such goal – or through insurrection. This is why ultimately, even the most depressing dystopias are hopeful since, "they suggest that collective disagreements can be debated, and that political engagement can exist, without public or private coercion. In doing so they ably carry forward the most subversive message in sf: that humanity or its successors may yet outlive the state" (ibid.239-240). This is precisely what happens at the very end of *Years and Years*, the finale enabling the series to end on an unexpected glimmer of hope which almost makes it appear at odds with the general atmosphere.

"Episode 6" is an example of revolt against the established order. Civil disobedience is taking place at different levels, showing that ordinary people are able to upset the status quo with acts of rebellion. The first one takes place in Rosie's neighbourhood. As Jonjo sums up, they are being "zoned out of existence" (1.06 [07:10]) because of a new system restricting the access to certain areas of Manchester. As such, when Rosie's son gets locked out of their own suburb because guards have closed the gate until next morning, she decides to put an end to the flagrant injustice that she and her neighbours have been tolerating for the past few weeks. She threatens the head of security, saying that they will "tear the bloody fence down" [29:20] before calling her grandmother. What she says to her confirms that she is about to move into action: "Gran. I just wanted to let you know. That thing you said. About everything being our fault. […] I'm phoning to say, you're right. What happens next. Is absolutely my fault. Thank you" [30:09]. She then comes back with her food truck, gathers speed and charges at the gate. In doing so, she manages to foment a small-scale riot, people supporting her (fig. 79). According to the script, this medium close-up shows Rosie "framed in the open driver's door […] filmed on dozens of phones. Her finest hour" ("BBC Writersroom"). Her courage and her determination paid off, leading people to join her in this act of defiance against the authorities. Her neighbours start filming the scene to protect her while she explains the situation in live

broadcast. These flashlights make her feel invincible which is why she declares to the guard: “Go on then! Arrest me! On camera! A woman and her two little kids, you’re gonna look pathetic!” [34:23]. She becomes the hero of the day, ready to expose injustice.

Figure 79

At the very same moment, another rebellion is being led by Edith at Erstwhile. Rosie’s sister is also calling for justice by exposing what is happening in these camps. She is ready to blow the system up, an idea encapsulated by figure 80.

Figure 80

This long shot represents the watchtower destroyed by fire, the dark colours creating a contrast with the glowing flames, which makes it stand out in a sort of chiaroscuro. Fran is standing next to it, contemplating what they accomplished, while Edith turns her back to the tower, as if she were already moving on to another mission. To achieve “smash[ing] the system,” as claimed by Rosie in “Episode 4” [06:00], Edith is helped by Bethany and her colleagues who relay videos of information – another act of rebellion against the system (fig. 81).

Figure 81

This scene symbolises unity in the face of adversity, since Bethany's co-workers are all partaking in the same quest for liberty, exposing villainy to the whole world. In the middle of the picture, her boss is trying to stop them, but the long shot shows that they are all doing the same gestures, this synchronisation underlining their efficiency. Their faces reveal that they are fully focused on their task. On the left, Bethany is also very concentrated, but she is almost in a frenzy, feeling very proud of herself for her participation in this mission for the greater good.

In spite of this inspiring sequence of empowerment, "Episode 6" is tinged with a bittersweet quality since directly after the rebellion, Edith collapses from exhaustion. The joy of the characters' success in exposing the truth is thus of short duration. It is in keeping with the idea that dystopian narratives should resist the temptation of a "mythological/ideological closure" – a clear-cut ending – to favour a "more mature polyphony envisaging different possibilities for different agents and circumstances […] leaving formal closure cognitively open-ended, regardless of whether at the end […] the positive values be victorious or defeated" (Suvin qtd. in Moylan, 151). Viewers do not really know what will happen to Edith, nor if their heroic actions have had long-lasting impact upon society. Because of this ambiguity, which leaves room for hope without answering some very concrete questions, *Years and Years*' ending remains open, or "epical" (ibid. 152). However, "the dystopia that works with an open, epical strategy maintains a possibility for change or identifies a site for an alternative position in some enclave or other marker of difference" (ibid. 157). Moylan argues the following:

> Thus, as the critical dystopias give voice and space to such dispossessed and denied subjects […] they go on to explore ways to change the present system so that such culturally and economically marginalized peoples not only survive but also try to

> move toward creating a social reality that is shaped by an impulse to human self-determination and ecological health rather than one constricted by the narrow and destructive logic of a system intent only on enhancing competition in order to gain more profit for a select few. (ibid. 189)

Open endings can thus be a factor of change for the better, but the protagonists do have to remain united, as Donawerth recalls: "Society, value, hope must be constantly rebuilt by individuals out of the rubble of the present" (Baccolini, Moylan 42). This means that *Years and Years*' characters would have to keep on fighting to reverse order for good.

Therefore, because it rejects closure in refusing the world as it is, *Years and Years* is intrinsically utopian behind its dystopian aspect. It confirms that "all manifestations of culture, even artistically worthless escapist formulas, include some utopian aspect, if only because they deny conditions as they are and activate wishes to make life manageable and pleasurable" (Csicsery-Ronay 119); *Years and Years* is filled with Calvino's "utopian charge." This notion can be defined as "a powerful, unformed desire to rid the world of poverty, racism, sexual repression and economic exploitations" (ibid. 115-116). It also explains why Russel T Davies – who calls himself "a big believer in happy endings" (Turchiano) – consider that "you have to be rewarded for watching something for six hours" (ibid.) hence the choice of a surprising finale. For Davies, this optimism was much needed, which is also what TV critic Sarah Brown argues in "Building a better utopia." It seems that "when our reality begins to resemble a dystopian landscape, it's clear many of us need a different type of escape when we turn to fiction. That's why it's time to inject a shot of good old-fashioned, pure utopianism right into genre fiction's bloodstream" (Brown). In other words,

> Utopian worlds give us the ability to imagine a happy ending and an optimistic future for humanity in a time when it may seem childish or even impossible. At the heart of any utopia is the idea that humanity can come together to create something *more* than what we have now, possibly even something amazing. And while it may seem like a fairy tale, having more utopias in genre gives us something to hope for and work towards. A utopia worth striving for. […] After all, if we aren't able to craft and imagine a better fictional future, how can we be expected to create a real one. (ibid.)

If it can be jarring for some viewers, *Years and Years*' final episode seemingly possesses a reflective purpose – in both senses of the words – making the audience think about the characters' conditions before ultimately bringing them back to their own reality, and thus possibly to action. This is why "turned over, this moral lesson nonetheless reveals a hopeful message: what the ordinary citizens have let happen – because of their apathy or because of their naivety – can be undone by these ordinary citizens and their commitments" (Molénat). As argued by Miller, "the series suggests that change is only possible when people take conscious, decisive action – even if only by making sure they're paying attention to what's going on without them." Therefore, if dystopias are "a species of morality play, which means that sooner or later they need to deliver a moral" (Kindley), in *Years and Years*, it seems that this moral is delivered to viewers all along the series, up to a climax that shows that hope is the key to a better world.

CONCLUSION

At first sight, *Years and Years* appears as a pure dystopia following the main topoi of the genre, that is to say, the depiction of a very undesirable society which, by a process of extrapolation, becomes a warning for the audience as to what their potential future may look like. However, because it accurately broaches real-world concerns, the series soon falls into the category of realism, hence the apparent paradoxes of an overtly realistic dystopia. But in stressing how new technologies already pervade everything, or in underlining the current corruption of the political world, it focuses on how the drifts of society affect the characters, rather than on these drifts *per se*. This is why *Years and Years* excels in "personalizing a global sense of doom" as Hank Stuever puts it in his review for *The Washington Post*. Throughout the show, this general sense of decadence is never abstract. On the contrary, viewers are granted access to very concrete representation of how large-scale events can have immense repercussions on the lives of individuals. Therefore, *Years and Years* fully catches its audience's attention by portraying the macrocosm of society as a humanised microcosm. In other words, the fact that people matter more than their environments – although they are necessarily embedded within it – is what makes *Years and Years* such a peculiar dystopia.

As a result, human relationships are at the core of *Years and Years*; this is truly what is at stake in the show, hence its emphasis on the notion of family. The Lyonses thus symbolise Britain as a whole with its diverse, complex, and ever-changing society, all the while offering a closer and more intimate perspective on things. This particularity allows to claim that *Years and Years* is not a mere dystopia, in spite of its general atmosphere – be it in terms of narration or of aesthetics. One could even argue that it is primarily a very modern family drama, due to all the tragic events the Lyonses are going through and to all the contemporary issues they are confronted with. The importance given to *pathos* and to the process of characterisation enables viewers to grow attached to a set of characters for which they can express compassion. So much time is granted to the exploration of their inner emotions that the audience is fully able to understand their experiences, if not deeply relate to it, even when they make the worst choices possible. This sense of great intimacy with the characters partakes in the thought-provoking quality of the show, not to mention the fact that at the same time it offers a wide variety of points of view to follow. As such, it seems that the emphasis laid by Davies on family relationships proves able to overcome the pervading atmosphere of anguish that radiates from

the show, for the audience to feel closer to the plot. By mixing all these elements together, *Years and Years* can touch a lot of people since they will surely find something that they can understand or relate to in the characters' varied stories. In addition, it seems that the medium of the TV series – even of a miniseries – implies a rather high degree of commitment. Indeed, viewers embark on a six-hour journey towards a parallel universe that spans over fifteen years. This journey clearly serves as an analogy for their own reality: science fiction mingles with realism to give birth to a not-so-fictional world that may exist in a not-so-distant future.

Merging speculative fiction with real-world concerns necessarily gives way to an overtly realistic dystopia. As a consequence, the hybridity of *Years and Years* becomes a true asset. This cross-genre series manages to catch the essence of current society by playing with two apparently contradictory – if not opposite – notions. This strategy, relying on contemporariness, serves as a warning to better raise people's awareness of the potential drifts their very own world could be subjected to in the near future. This may ultimately convince them that the least that they can do is to be conscious of what surrounds them, or even fully aware of how they could improve things. This phenomenon takes place in a comprehensive process of catharsis, which means that the series can also turn into an instructive experience, debunking the general opinion according to which watching TV would be an activity characterised by passivity. Therefore, not only is *Years and Years* a purely enjoyable entertainment for 21st-century viewers – which is not deprived of humour at all, as dark as it may be – but it is didactic, since this dystopia is meant to convey alarming observations about present times. This idea allows Gwyneth Jones to claim that "if sf were an education scheme, the report card for the human race would always read 'could do better'. But the sf audience will go on coming back for more, as long as the stubbornly aspirational message is wrapped in such an envelope of wonder, delight and playful invention" (170). This is why *Years and Years* can be considered as a sort of useful exercise, a practical application of a prevention principle that manages to both divert and instruct people by ultimately bringing them back to reality. This is precisely what Jean-Pierre Esquenazi aims to demonstrate in *La vérité de la fiction*:

> Pour le dire simplement, la vérité d'une fiction touche à l'éclairage que cette fiction propose sur notre monde réel. Nous arrivons finalement, semble-il, à « découvrir » ce que chaque amateur de fiction sait depuis toujours : la liberté offerte au récit fictionnel lui permet de parcourir notre monde avec une franchise et une hardiesse souvent impossibles à d'autres genres discursifs. (183)

For Esquenazi, a fiction feels true as a result of the affection the addressee is meant to experience for the protagonists, in the sense that the characters' story is "exemplified" since it supposedly serves as a "case in point" reflecting a specific aspect of reality (ibid. 185):

> À travers l'exemplification d'un cas remarquable présenté depuis une perspective ou un ensemble de perspectives critique(s), le récit fictionnel devient capable d'éprouver notre pratique ou notre compréhension ordinaire. Tout se passe comme si nous découvrions un monde parallèle au nôtre, identique et pourtant irréel, capable de faire ressortir certaines couleurs de notre monde ou de faire apparaître de nouvelles nuances, parfois de modifier le rapport du fond et de la forme comme l'on dirait s'il s'agissait d'un tableau. (ibid. 185-186)

Therefore, the power of fiction lies in its ability to get the audience to realise that the world they witness stands as a metaphor for their own reality, which is an efficient means of influencing them to move into action for the better. Because it is precisely its main objective, and because it is full of nuances, *Years and Years* can be considered as a cautionary tale; the oxymoron of a "realistic dystopia" ultimately makes perfect sense.

In this respect, *Years and Years* becomes a critical dystopia, and as such, it should always try and catalyse hope for change. Isabel Allende argues that this category goes hand-in-hand with "an act of hope… to illuminate the dark corners. Only that, nothing more – a tiny beam of light to show some hidden aspect of reality, to help decipher and understand it and thus to initiate, if possible, a change in the conscience of some" (qtd. in Baccolini, Moylan 240). This is why for Moylan, dystopias may – or even *must* – have a major impact on society "in teaching us that choices have consequences, in helping us to see why and how things are as they are, and, perhaps, in showing how we can act to change the conditions around us: not simply to do no harm but utterly to transform reality in favor of all" (ibid. 241). It may explain why throughout its episodes, *Years and Years* grants much importance to the values of hope, of resilience and of human solidarity, a phenomenon that reaches its climax in the rather hopeful denouement. It moreover reveals that people have the collective power to change things by fighting for what they believe in, which may ultimately reverse order so as to reach a fairer world. This confirms what Marge Piercy claims, that is, that "what we imagine we are working toward does a lot to define what we will consider double action aimed at producing the future we want and preventing the future we fear" (qtd. in ibid. 239). In keeping with this idea, it

seems that *Years and Years* possesses both a very persuasive form and a praxis purpose which, when combined, are supposed to better convince its viewers to take action.

However, as much as *Years and Years*' strategy is powerful, its *tour de force* may not reach the expected effect since it always relies on the audience's sensibility. A work of art is immanently pregnant with a multiplicity of interpretations, which leads Altman to argue that "once the magic word 'reader' is pronounced, there might be no controlling the ultimate effect" (*Film/Genre* 11) or Esquenazi to declare that "the fictional immersion does not need the guardianship of the author" (*La vérité de la fiction* 172). This means that ultimately, viewers can see whatever they want to see in a production; *Years and Years* can be apprehended as a dystopia sounding the alarm about a potential dark future to call for action, as much as it could be experienced as a mere entertaining family drama. In much the same way, its ambivalent ending may depend on the addressee, as argued by Moylan in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*:

> Some texts intended (and internally marked) as utopian or dystopian (or perhaps not written within a utopian/dystopian strategy at all) can be received by readers as utopian or dystopian according to their own aesthetic and political judgments […] [which] explicitly leaves the judgment of utopian or dystopian quality up to a reader or critic who undoubtedly works from a particular standpoint (with particular affiliations and principles). (155)

This may account for the divergence of opinions on *Years and Years* among its audience. If a vast majority of viewers seem to have been fascinated by a series that they consider to be absolutely compelling, others have turned a blind eye to it, as if they were not ready to face a work that may directly confront them to their own paradoxes. Indeed, figure 82 illustrates through dark humour that *Years and Years* may well become reality in the years to come, or rather, that reality could turn out to be even worse than what this fiction predicted.

Figure 82

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CORPUS

PRIMARY SOURCE

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FIGURES

The vast majority of the figures used in this dissertation are screen shots taken from the six episodes of *Years and Years* (2019).

The **front-page illustration**, **figure 1** (BBC poster for the release of the first episode of *Years and Years* on May 14th), **2** (Netflix poster for the third season of *Black Mirror*), **3** (HBO poster for the release of *Years and Years* in the USA on June 24th) and **4** (the opening credits) all come from paratextual information.

Figure 5 (17:48), **6** (54:55), **7** (18:43), **12** (46:30), **13** (45:45), **14** (00:53), **15** (7:47), **19** (14:37), **20** (15:25), **26** (15:00), **37** (00 :16), **38** (09 :07), **39** (34 :12), **50** (53:11), **62** (06:45), **69** (10:00), **72** (09:13), **73** (09:52), **75** (25:48), **77** (27:43) all come from *Years and Years*' "Episode 1."

Figure 35 (47:03), **36** (38 :40), **42** (50:23), **43** (53:46), **51** (17:15), **58** (02:14), **63** (22:23) all come from *Years and Years*' "Episode 2."

Figure 27 (04:18), **28** (20:21), **31** (48:19), **44** (14:02), **48** (10:25), **52** (32:32), **60** (10:49), **68** (03:38), **70** (25:51), **74** (45:16), **78** (23:17) all come from *Years and Years*' "Episode 3."

Figure 41 (06:01), **45** (49:19), **46** (50:07), **47** (48:21), **59** (05:29), **61** (26:11), **66** (29:43), **67** (34:32), **71** (51:49) all come from *Years and Years*' "Episode 4."

Figure 8 (23:10), **9** (24:13), **21** (16:48), **22** (35:44), **23** (36:21), **29** (29:46), **30** (31:18), **32** (43:00), **53** (05:21), **54** (06:29), **55** (53:25), **56** (54:05), **57** (59:57) all come from *Years and Years*' "Episode 5."

Figure 10 (12:53), **11** (13:08), **16** (05:45), **17** (34:29), **18** (34:23), **24** (57:00), **25** (56:02), **33** (35:08), **34** (45:17), **40** (01:28), **49** (54:48), **64** (09:21), **65** (11:36), **76** (06:11), **79** (34:26), **80** (43:27), **81** (34:26) all come from *Years and Years*' "Episode 6."

Figure 82: @Aegist. "2019: "Years and Years" (BBC and HBO) is a UK drama series which presents a nihilistic projection of a dystopian future as a warning to change our trajectory. 2020: "Years and Years" was an optimistic view of the future that imagines 10 years of relative normalcy." Twitter, 21 March 2020, 3:24 PM; https://twitter.com/Aegist/status/1241370078412595200.

ANNEXES

Storyline

This storyline has been excerpted from IMDB.

"This audacious drama follows an ordinary Manchester family and catapults them through the next 15 years. As the Britain of this imaginary drama is rocked by political, economic and technological advances, the family experiences everything hoped for in the future, and everything that is feared."

Summary

These summaries have been excerpted from IMDB.

Episode 1.1 "One night in 2019, politician Vivienne Rook causes a scandal on live TV. At the same time, the Lyons family is united, as Rosie gives birth to a son."

Episode 1.2 "As the world recovers, Stephen and Celeste face a very modern nightmare, Daniel fights to keep hold of Viktor, and Edith finally returns home, carrying a terrible secret with her."

Episode 1.3 "Daniel uses his birthday party to reveal a dangerous plan. And as Viv Rook rises to power, the Lyons gather for a funeral. But Celeste is left to fight alone Bethany's obsession."

Episode 1.4 "Daniel embarks on a dangerous quest to bring Viktor home, while Celeste takes a terrible revenge on Stephen. Viv sets her sights on the ultimate prize: 10 Downing Street."

Episode 1.5 "With Viv Rook as Prime Minister, a new Britain takes shape, and Edith tries to investigate mysterious stories about The Disappeared."

Episode 1.6 "As Viv Rook's regime tightens its grip, the entire Lyon's family is forced to take action. Spurred on by both Muriel and Daniel, Rosie faces up to the troops surrounding her home."

Detailed plot

The detailed plots of each episode have been excerpted from Wikipedia, after carefully checking their accuracy.

Episode 1.1 "On 14 May 2019, businesswoman Vivienne "Viv" Rook causes controversy by saying she "doesn't give a fuck" about the Israel-Palestine conflict on an evening talk show. Meanwhile, Rosie Lyons gives birth to a son, Lincoln. Daniel Lyons, her brother, worries about the state of the world and what Lincoln's future will be. The timeline skips forwards to 2024; in the meantime, Donald Trump wins a second term as president, and China constructs an artificial island and a military base named Hong Sha Dao in disputed waters. Daniel marries Ralph, Queen Elizabeth dies, Viv tries and fails to be elected as an independent candidate in the 2022 general election, and a Russian-backed military government takes over in Ukraine. Daniel manages a local council-run refugee camp, where he makes a connection with Viktor, who fled Ukraine after he was tortured for being gay. Teenage Bethany tells her parents Stephen Lyons and Celeste that she is transhuman, to her mother's horror and disapproval. Cracks begin to form in Daniel and Ralph's marriage, as Daniel's feelings for Viktor cause him to detach from his husband. Viv starts a political party, calling it The Four Star Party, the stars representing the asterisks that were used to censor her unapologetic use of the "F-bomb" on TV. Rosie goes on a date with Tony, but leaves in disgust after she discovers he has sex with his house robot. At a party for grandmother Muriel Lyons' 92nd birthday, the family get a video call from long-absent Edith Lyons, who has travelled to Vietnam, close to Hong Sha Dao. As air raid sirens sound in the UK, news comes that Trump has fired a nuclear missile at Hong Sha Dao. In the ensuing uproar, Celeste tells Bethany that she can be whatever she wants to be, reversing her earlier opposition to Bethany's transhuman ambitions, and Daniel flees Ralph and his family for Viktor, and they have sex for the first time."

Episode 1.2 "In 2025, Edith has survived the Hong Sha Dao nuclear strike, but she was exposed to the nuclear fallout. She returns to live in the UK. Bethany, who has calculated radiation patterns from Hong Sha Dao, realises that Edith's life expectancy is ten years, but Edith chooses to keep this from the rest of the family. Celeste loses her job to artificial intelligence, and she and Stephen must sell their house in London. Bethany, who has turned 18, has cybernetic implants surgically installed in her hand, a step to becoming transhuman, and gets her first job as a data miner. Daniel is in the process of divorcing Ralph, and he and Viktor are living together as a couple. Though Ralph pretends to accept the split-up, he spitefully has Viktor deported to Ukraine by informing the Home Office of Viktor's job at a petrol station, illegal for an asylum seeker. Rosie and Edith attend an election debate in which Viv Rook unexpectedly electrifies the crowd. To Daniel's dismay, Rosie becomes a Rook supporter. Stephen and Celeste sell their house leaving them with a little more than £1.2 million after settling the mortgage. The proceeds are deposited in a single bank account on the night of the sale. Overnight, their money is wiped out in a banking crisis triggered by the collapse of an American investment bank. With nowhere else to go, Stephen, Celeste, and their daughters move into Muriel's large but decaying house in Manchester. Viv Rook is elected MP in a Manchester by-election as Rosie cheers her on."

Episode 1.3 "In 2026, the banking crisis has led to a recession. Viv Rook proposes a national IQ test, with anybody with an IQ of less than 70 being barred from voting. In Ukraine, the police come to arrest Viktor, but he narrowly escapes. Ukraine has now criminalised homosexuality, so Viktor decides to illegally enter Spain and claim asylum. He escapes to

Madrid, and Daniel visits him, planning to apply for Spanish citizenship and marry him. Edith returns to activism, infiltrating the offices of a corporation with links to the Syrian dictatorship. The information she steals is released, causing a scandal that shuts down the corporation. Bethany makes friends with Lizzie, another "transhuman" teen at her workplace. The availability of self-heating ready meals makes Rosie's job redundant. Stephen now works many low-paid jobs and begins an affair with co-worker Elaine. Celeste finds out, but does not confront him. The Lyons siblings' estranged father dies from antibiotic-resistant sepsis after being struck by a courier's bicycle. The siblings attend his water burial to support Stephen, who is the only one emotionally affected. There they meet with "Steven with a V", their father's son by his second wife. Rosie tells Edith she has always believed her father left the family because he couldn't deal with a child in a wheelchair. Bethany and Lizzie secretly travel to Liverpool for black-market cybernetic surgery, using £10,000 Stephen gave her for her 18th birthday. Bethany calls her mother in hysterics; Lizzie has been given a bogus, malfunctioning eye implant, but Bethany escapes unharmed. At first Celeste is glad Bethany is safe, but later she is furious that Bethany wasted money when the family is in financial crisis. A general election gives The Four Star Party fifteen seats in a hung parliament, allowing Viv Rook to determine the balance of power between a minority government and the opposition. Hearing the election results, Stephen uses his rental car to run over a fellow courier's bicycle in a fit of frustrated rage, while his siblings watch."

Episode 1.4 "In 2027, voting is made universally mandatory, the coalition government collapses, and another general election is called. Countries become unstable: Greece leaves the EU, Italy's government resigns, Hungary declares bankruptcy, and the United States leaves the United Nations in response to extreme nationalism. Spain's government is overthrown by a far-left revolution and Viktor will soon be deported. Meanwhile, Stephen has a bad reaction to a paid drug experiment. He calls Elaine to pick him up, but the clinic accidentally calls Celeste too, and the three have an awkward meeting at his bedside. Arriving home, Celeste coldly confronts Stephen about the affair on a conference call with the whole family. Muriel angrily demands that he leave her house and Stephen moves in with Elaine. Rosie begins a mobile catering business with her new boyfriend, Jonjo. Edith warns him that she is suspicious of his intentions toward Rosie's young sons and will be watchful. With Viktor soon to be repatriated to Ukraine, Daniel decides he has no choice but to illegally get him into the UK. Their trip is unsuccessful: they are unable to sneak across the border and their money and passports are stolen while attempting to buy forged documents. Finally they try sailing in an overcrowded boat from France. Half a mile off the British coast, the boat sinks. Daniel Lyons, along with most of the other passengers, drowns. Viktor survives and returns to Daniel's apartment in Manchester alone. The family rushes to the house, but Viktor won't answer the door. Viv Rook becomes the Prime Minister."

Episode 1.5 "In 2028, Viv Rook promises freedom to her supporters but begins arresting her opponents. Catastrophic flooding and two dirty bombs result in huge numbers of displaced residents in the UK, prompting a new law that requires people with extra space in their homes to take in the victims. Edith works with relocation authorities and becomes suspicious that the poor are becoming "erstwhile", a new euphemism for being "disappeared" which she hears about from Viktor, who is in custody in the UK. Stephen visits Viktor to tell him that, unlike the rest of the family, he still blames him for Daniel's death. Checkpoints are erected around Rosie's neighbourhood in Manchester in response to criminal activity in the area, and she loses her license to operate her catering van. Bethany is fitted with a brain implant which enables her to interact directly with the Internet, but also to spy on her family. Stephen is depressed that he could not pay for the surgery, which leaves Bethany a virtual indentured worker to the

government, which paid for it. Muriel is diagnosed with macular degeneration and uses the last of her savings to pay £10,000 for fast-track NHS surgery, which reverses the condition. Celeste gets along better with Muriel but bristles at being treated like an unpaid servant. Rosie and Jonjo become engaged and Edith moves in with her new girlfriend. Stephen degrades himself to get a new high-paying job as a yes-man to Woody, an old acquaintance who calls him his "monkey". Bethany uses her vast new cyber powers to help Edith break into a facility that keeps records of the Erstwhiles and witnesses her aunt's near collapse from radiation sickness. At a business auction held at Chequers, Stephen unexpectedly encounters Viv Rook, who reveals herself to be a slick fascistic monster (while she also makes a comment that hints at her being controlled by someone behind the curtains). Woody's company wins the contract to maintain two of the new "Erstwhile" concentration camps, intended as Darwinian death camps. Stephen uses the company's computer system to send Viktor to the camp, which Bethany sees. At a memorial service to Daniel, Bethany alone knows that her father has betrayed Viktor and sent him to his likely death."

Episode 1.6 "As 2029 begins in the midst of a monkey flu pandemic, Bethany grudgingly tells Edith that her father sent Viktor to the death camp, fearful that she will be implicated in illegal activity and lose her implants. As attacks on journalists increase, the BBC shuts down. Muriel blames the family and humanity at large for the various problems in the world, saying that the cumulative effect of many small acts of indifference has created the toxic environment they now live in. Stephen breaks up with Elaine, buys an illegal gun, and puts it in his desk at work. Viktor wants to contact the family with a smuggled cell phone, but towers at the camp block all signals. By manipulating Stephen, Celeste gets a job at Woody's company to try to get information about the Erstwhile camps. Soon after, Rosie and her neighbours are outraged when her son and his friends are locked out of their apartment complex from an early lock-down due to an incident elsewhere. Meanwhile, Edith and her activist friends take steps to free Viktor and blow up the signal-blocking towers, causing the camp inmates to rush the gates, while armed guards threaten them. At the same time, Stephen confronts Celeste while she is helping Edith using the company's computers, revealing that he had intended to broadcast incriminating evidence against Viv Rook's death camps and then kill himself. Woody charges into the office and Stephen shoots him in the leg. With the signals unblocked, Bethany and her friends at work broadcast footage from the camp to the whole country. Rosie breaks through the curfew fence around her estate with her catering van, to the cheers of her neighbours, and this act of civil disobedience is also broadcast nationally. With the camp liberated, Edith collapses to the ground. Later, Viv Rook is charged with murder relating to the Erstwhile sites, though it's unclear who financed and backed her, and the BBC is reopened. Stephen goes to jail for three years for shooting Woody, but emerges with a new lease of life. Though Stephen and Celeste don't get back together, their family is again happy. Rosie and Jonjo get married and have a son together, named after Daniel. The timeline skips to 2034, where it is revealed that the events of the series were the retellings of Edith's memories, as she is in the process of uploading her mind to a new water molecule-based database, with Bethany watching from Muriel's home as a hologram. As Edith's body dies, she tells the technicians that she doesn't believe her consciousness can really be encoded because the human spirit is more than just information. The series ends with the whole Lyons clan gathered with Muriel, unsure if Edith's consciousness was uploaded to the cloud."

Cast and Crew

The cast by order of apparition. Names in bold letters singularise the main actor for the role.

Emma Thompson: **Vivienne Rook**. Soon to become MP and then PM. Populist figure.

Russel Tovey: **Daniel Lyons**. A housing officer in Manchester. Third child among the siblings.

Dino Fetscher: **Ralph Cousins**. Primary school teacher. Used to be married to Daniel.

Rory Kinnear: **Stephen Lyons**. A financial advisor in London. Married to Celeste. The eldest among the siblings.

T'Nia Miller: **Celeste Bisme-Lyons**. an accountant. Married to Stephen.

Lara Amanda Guimaraes Norton, **Lydia West**: **Bethany Bisme-Lyons**. Stephen and Celeste's eldest daughter. Defines herself as transhuman.

Ruth Madeley: **Rosie Lyons**. Single mother of two sons. Suffers from spina bifida. The youngest among the siblings.

Noah Wride, Blake Woods, Callum Woolfrod, **Adam Little**: Lee Lyons. Rosie's first son. Lincoln's half-brother.

Anna Reid: **Muriel Deacon**. The siblings' grandmother and the show's oldest woman.

Jett Moises, **Aaron Ansari**, Aiden Li: **Lincoln Lyons**. Rosie's second son. Lee's half-brother. Born in "Episode 1."

Marylin Lucas-Thorpe, **Jade Alleyne**: **Ruby Bisme-Lyons**. Stephen and Celeste's younger daughter. College student.

Sharon Duncan-Brewster: **Fran Baxter**. Musician, storyteller and activist. Enters into a relationship with Edith.

Maxim Baldry: **Viktor Goraya**. Ukrainian refugee. Falls in love with Daniel.

Jessica Hynes: **Edith Lyons**. Political activist. Second child among siblings.

Zita Sattar: **Yvonne Bukhary**. Viktor's lawyer.

Rachel Logan: **Elaine Parris**. Stephen's mistress.

George Bukhari: **Jonjo Aleef**. Rosie's lover and future husband.

The crew by alphabetical order.

Cellan Jones Simon: executive producer

Davies Russel T: executive producer

Fereday Michaela: executive producer

Gold Murray: music

Gordon Anna-Louise: visual effects producer

Leather Jonathan: line producer

Lewis Karen: producer

Lucas Jonathan: film editing

Ling Slater Tony: cinematography

Murphy Stephen: cinematography

Pryor Andy: casting

Richer Lucie: executive producer

Shindler Nicola: executive producer

Sneddon Billy: film editing

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