



Im/Possible Prisons: News from the Future of Work

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Traditionally, utopian writing likes to envision a reorganization of work which goes along with its envisioned reorganization of society. In fact, work is generally assumed to be essential to the possibility or impossibility of any such reorganization. It seems relatively straightforward, after all, that even in an ideal society somebody will have to make sure that the necessary goods, services, infrastructure and logistics are there to serve the needs of that society, and that this will require work. Writers ranging from More over Fourier to Morris have therefore gone to some length in order to invent systems for the redistribution of work, including incentives for performing the less well-regarded and the downright unpleasant, but nonetheless necessary tasks.

However, this apparently consistent concern with work should not be allowed to gloss over a crucial difference between older and more recent accounts of the future of work. And that concerns the meanings attributed to work. Work is one of those categories which give a credible impression of having always been around in approximately the same form, but which have nonetheless been subject to significant historical change. Work is therefore not easily defined in the first place. Instead, the question of what counts as work has to be constantly renegotiated: only waged labor? Also childrearing and household work? Producing art? Thinking? Self-improvement? Self-care? 'Working' through grief, or on a relationship?¹ Issues of class and gender are clearly intertwined with these questions. And crucially the question of what constitutes work is so pertinent because in the present work has become an extremely meaningful and prestigious category. Historians have pointed out that, despite the fact that people have always worked, the concept of work has been subject to a profound redefinition in the nineteenth century. Only then (in conjunction with the rise of industrial capitalism) did work become a central category to the state and its citizens, and a potentially

¹ The inherent ambiguities of the concept of work, and consequently also of non-work, have been noted many times, and the definition of work itself has been subject to change in conjunction with the changing status of work in society (Kocka 2000; Lemke and Weinstock 2014). It has been observed that no definition of work can be neutral, since all knowledge about work is necessarily normative (Bröckling and Horn 2002).



prestigious activity rather than merely a necessity or a duty (Conrad, Madamo and Zimmermann 2000: 450-51; Osterhammel 2011: 959; Fludernik 2019: 405-406).

In the present, in the arts at least, the future of work seems to be the province of dystopian rather than utopian narratives. These contemporary dystopian stories of work, three examples of which I want to look at in this article, all conceive of work within the framework of a capitalism which has, if anything, become more unrestricted, and which disposes of people exclusively in their capacity as workers or, alternatively, as useless to the labor market. This diagnosis largely goes along with Mark Fisher's description of "capitalist realism" as "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it" (Fisher 2009: 2). However, Fisher concludes his reflections on capitalist realism with an invocation of "alternative political and economic possibilities" "even glimmers of" which "can have a disproportionately great effect", he claims (Fisher 2009: 80-81). The question that interests me in the following is a related one, namely whether even the dystopian visions of the future of work which I will be concerned with here can contain the suggestion of such alternative possibilities.

In the following, I will argue that representations of work in the future retain their critical potential, not by insisting on the possibility of a utopian future as an alternative to the dystopian scenario, but rather through the use they make of another convention of dystopian fiction: all these scenarios take perceived tendencies of the present to what appears to be their logical conclusion. The question these fictional dystopian scenarios are concerned with is, then, not so much what will be possible in the future, even in a not-too-distant future. Rather, their implicit question concerns the possibility of the present, in particular the creation of all-encompassing but unnecessary work for its own sake. The reader/audience is confronted with characters who accept living conditions which are marked as highly problematic, but which are at the same time clearly marked as only slightly aggravated versions of the present. Alternative outcomes are kept to a minimum in these scenarios, even as a merely theoretical possibility, but the disturbing character of the working environments that are presented indicates that there ought to be alternatives nonetheless.

Accordingly, in the following two sections of this paper, I want to trace how the future of work becomes dystopian in the first place. After that, I will look at three contemporary examples: two novels and one episode of *Black Mirror*. I will specifically look at what these dystopian visions of the future of work conceive of as possible and impossible, and what work they in their turn perform by doing that.



Utopia, Dystopia and Work

After all, what is thought of as possible and impossible with regard to work has been subject to historical change. Accordingly, work also changes its status in utopian writing. Around 1800, it is still understood as an irksome necessity: in the writings of William Godwin for instance, a just society is one in which everyone performs an equal share of labor, and only of that labor which is absolutely necessary “for the subsistence of the community,” (Godwin 1797: 162) which should be as little as possible. Instead of working long hours, in Godwin’s ideal community everyone would have a lot of free time to improve their mind, an activity he clearly does not regard as work, but which he understands as much more important than work for both individual and society (Godwin 1797: 164). By contrast, roughly a century later, in 1890, William Morris’s utopian novel *News from Nowhere* makes work central to the individual as well as society: in the communist society of the future described in this novel, everyone is intrinsically motivated to work, making beautiful and useful things; all work, manual as well as intellectual, is highly valued, and this is singled out as the “change which makes all the others possible” (Morris 2003 [1890]: 79). In short, in the 1790s, reduced working hours for everyone were still a staple of utopian thinking; a hundred years later, work had become such a prestigious category that even in an ideal society people were supposed to want to work. At the end of the century, only someone like Oscar Wilde, out to shock his fellow Victorians, would still propose, in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism”, that manual labor needed to be performed only by (collectively owned) machines as soon as possible because there could not be any dignity or joy in it (Wilde 1997 [1891]: 899-900). Like Paul Lafargue’s “right to be lazy,” this is a deliberate provocation directed against the high regard in which work was held in the late nineteenth century.

In the present, such ideas have not lost their potential for provocation because work continues to be held in high regard. Comments on someone’s work ethic imply a judgment on their value as a human being. As Kathi Weeks points out, we live in a “work society”, in which waged work appears necessary and inevitable and remains a crucial category for social in- and exclusion (Weeks 2011: 58). Therefore, many writers who concern themselves with the future of work find it impossible to imagine that work will ever be abolished. Thus, Edward Granter, in *Critical Social Theory and the End of Work*, traces the utopian tradition as well as various sociological traditions of thinking about a possible future abolition of work, but concludes that work ethic will not disappear, and those theorists whom he deems worth taking seriously do not assume that it should, even when there is less actual work to do. He goes along with those writers who assume that there is an inherent human need to produce and create, claiming that it is because of this need that theories of the end of work as we know it generally advocate reorganizing rather than abolishing work (Granter 2009: 182-83). All this still sounds



very much like Morris's vision of a society in which everyone is willing to work even after the abolition of money and, consequently, wages – although the characters in *News from Nowhere* are somewhat more cautious about the idea of “human nature,” which, as one of the inhabitants of this future society explains to the bemused time-travelling narrator-observer, depends very much on the circumstances in which human beings find themselves (Morris 2003 [1890]: 75).

Consequently, the future of work is now the subject of much anxious consideration, and it has, in the process, largely migrated from utopia to dystopia, in the arts at least. If machines – nowadays robots or artificial intelligence rather than the steam engine – are imagined as taking over tasks that were previously performed by human beings, they are generally seen as taking something away from human beings, not (as Wilde imagined it) giving human beings the opportunity to achieve self-realization rather than being forced to do boring work. There are dissenting voices: for instance, Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams argue for a “post-work society on the basis of fully automating the economy, reducing the working week, implementing a universal basic income, and achieving a cultural shift in the understanding of work” (Srnicek and Williams 2015: 108). Kathi Weeks, too, argues against “work society” and for “postwork imaginaries” – like Srnicek and Williams, though, she argues that this requires a cultural shift away from the work-ethic of the present, as well as a return to utopian thinking in a political sense (Weeks 2011: 175-225). Such a return to utopian thinking requires conceiving of the future as open – which, however, also means that it cannot be properly represented (Weeks 2011: 197). Current cultural representations of the future of waged work certainly second the impression that a “postwork” world would require, not just an economic, but also a cultural transformation. Dystopian visions of a world without enough waged work abound, and so do dystopian texts which envision a world without any clear distinction between work and non-work, in which employees are subject to employer surveillance in every aspect of their lives.

In this article, I will look at examples for both versions of a possible future: Margaret Atwood's novel *The Heart Goes Last* describes a world in which there is hardly any work left for human beings, and in which much of the remaining work is artificially created by means of a prison. By contrast, David Eggers' *The Circle* depicts a social media company taking over the world as well as its employees' entire lives, so they are eventually forced to spend their every waking moment in the service of the company. And the *Fifteen Million Merits* episode in the BBC's *Black Mirror* series shows the inhabitants of another prison-like world devoting all their time to serving a digitized entertainment industry, as producers as well as consumers.



Work Society and its Discontents

Something more interesting becomes visible in these scenarios than simply the various dystopian working environments they evoke. After all, dystopian as well as utopian fictional worlds are always implicitly concerned with the possibility of the here and now rather than only the possibility of the fictional world they depict. To return to Wilde and Morris as examples for utopian writing one last time, this is for instance a crucial issue in Morris's *News From Nowhere*, when the narrator from the nineteenth century is confronted with the unpalatable realities of his own time in comparison with the reorganized society he encounters in the future. The inhabitants of this future world can hardly even grasp that a society with exploitation and private property ever existed. For didactic reasons, though, this future society also includes a character who is a bit of a historian, and who explains to the narrator the changes which have taken place since the nineteenth century. This character also explains why most of his contemporaries cannot understand how society could ever be organized the way it once was. The historian from the future himself is not too far removed from this lack of understanding when he observes of life in the Victorian age that "according to the old saw the beetle gets used to living in dung; and these people, whether they found the dung sweet or not, certainly lived in it" (Morris 2003 [1890]: 81). Wilde, too, contends in "The Soul of Man under Socialism" that it is "almost incredible" that someone "whose life is marred and made hideous by" the "laws that protect private property, and admit of its accumulation" will still accept such laws (Wilde 1997 [1891]: 899). Nonetheless, what is actually happening, even when it appears incredible on closer inspection, has to be possible and explicable. Wilde's attempt at an explanation is that "[m]isery and poverty are so absolutely degrading [...] that no class is ever really conscious of its own suffering" (Wilde 1997 [1891]: 900). Both writers contend that the utopian futures they imagine are possible: Wilde concedes that "such a scheme as is set forth here is quite unpractical and goes against human nature," but proposes that that is exactly "why it is worth carrying out," since only an unpractical scheme is able to question existing conditions, and as for human nature, the "only thing that one really knows about human nature is that it changes" (Wilde 1997 [1891], 918) Morris, with less of Wilde's predilection for paradox, has the historian from the future explain how the misery of life under capitalism finally produces the creation of a different economy and society as a reaction (Morris 2003 [1890]: 61-62). If a utopian society is a possibility, though, that leaves them with the problem of why it is not already a reality.

By contrast, dystopian fictional worlds are related to the here and now in a different mode. They do not offer a fully-fledged positive alternative. Instead, they show tendencies worthy of critique which exist in the present, and blow them up to proportions in which the possibility of the present is once again in need of an explanation. Here, that is not because the present is unsatisfactory in comparison with



something better that is possible, but because it makes even more catastrophic developments potentially possible. The question dystopia implicitly asks its readers or audience would then be why they put up with the society they live in. In addition, dystopian writing has been described as by definition all about the possible with regard to the future, too: it has been argued that in the present, apocalyptic writing envisions a catastrophic future without alternatives for the fictional world, but that dystopian writing, by contrast, offers its catastrophic future as “only a possibility”, which is therefore also possible to avoid (Vieira 2010: 17). Dystopia can thus be read as having genuine critical potential precisely through its interest in the possible.

Clearly, what is conceived of as possible in (and beyond) dystopia is historically specific. The nineteenth-century authors quoted above wanted to square the obvious exploitation of workers with the high esteem in which work was held. Work is still widely held in high esteem in our society, and it is of course still necessary for most people to perform waged work in order to survive. But in today’s version of work society, the problematics connected with it take different, less easily discernible forms, making exploitation less visible. The type of unregulated hard physical work which the working class in the nineteenth century had to face, and which was of course widely discussed at the time, is not abolished, but it is now largely far removed from the experience of even the working poor in Western societies. Or at least, as Granter reminds us, “[i]n the largest European and American cities, day labourers wait at dawn to be offered illegal work” (Granter 2009: 175-176), but at the same time, unlike in the nineteenth century, unregulated hard labor in Western societies goes largely unacknowledged and seems to come as a complete surprise when it comes to the fore (in a German context most recently with agriculture’s and the meat industry’s reliance on migrant laborers who turned out to have to work under conditions which facilitated the spread of COVID-19).² All three dystopias I will look at below are concerned with protagonists who are clearly marked as belonging to the middle class in their respective societies: what is invisible to them is not just that others are exploited, but largely also that they, too, are. Nonetheless, these protagonists all face forms of deregulation and exploitation which are clearly marked as only slightly exaggerated versions of working conditions which already exist.

The prerequisite for these living and working conditions is a society in which work and the work ethic is held in high esteem. Indeed, in the present an individual’s options for participation in society are limited by lack of access to waged work, since work has become a coveted good (Weeks 2011). On the other hand, though, the individual is invoked in contradictory ways with regard to work in our society. These contradictions

² In a British context, two relatively recent novels come to mind which address both this shadow economy and its near-invisibility: Monica Ali’s *In the Kitchen* (2009) and Sunjeev Sahota’s *The Year of the Runaways* (2015).



have been captured in the concept of the “entrepreneurial self,” an idea explored by German sociologist Ulrich Bröckling (Bröckling 2007).³ This “entrepreneurial self” is one which is posited as responsible for its own success or failure, and which is at the same time flexibly working on various projects calling for various skills, which have to be constantly updated (Bröckling 2007: 248-282), rather than having the demands made on it as well as its rights clearly spelled out and guaranteed over a long period of time. This absence of stability and control is at odds with the demand that this subject be completely responsible for their own success, creating a double bind (Bröckling 2007: 71).

These contradictions, their origins and their implications have been picked up by other sociologists as well. Thus, Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello have named the “projective city” (a concept Bröckling also refers back to; Bröckling 2007: 260-266) as a new normative supporting structure of capitalism: a social and economic constellation that has already incorporated certain forms of the critique of capitalism (namely what Boltanski and Chiapello call the “artistic critique”) and which posits flexibility and networking abilities as a new norm and as a source of social status for the individual. Boltanski and Chiapello are interested in the way in which criteria for participation in the labor market are implemented in today’s society, and in particular in the ways in which capitalism responds to its critique by new criteria for participation, and invalidates it in the process (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007 [1999]). Their focus is thus on the “New Spirit of Capitalism” itself.

Other writers have focused on the consequences of the same changes for discourses of the self instead. In particular, French sociologist Alain Ehrenberg has described the demands made on the individual in terms of activity and self-realization, and a corresponding fear of inaction and passivity, which are now routinely pathologized (Ehrenberg 2010 [1998]). Ehrenberg’s work is concerned with the language of emotions which expresses the contradictory demands made on the individual. This language of emotions in its turn displaces economic and social issues to the individual, making them the individual’s responsibility (Ehrenberg 2010: 299-338). The appeal and problematic of the therapeutic discourse of the self as inherently deficient have also been explored by Eva Illouz, in her *Saving the Modern Soul*, including within the context of work: Illouz historicises the idea of the inherently deficient self in constant need of therapy, as well as the psychological foundations of the concept of a rational and calculating *homo economicus* (Illouz 2008: 59). Thus, both writers trace the intersections of contemporary discourses of the self and of the individual’s economic activities in ways which tie in with the problematic of the “entrepreneurial self.”

³ Bröckling’s book has also been published in English in 2015, as *The Entrepreneurial Self: Fabricating a New Type of Subject*.



In the next sections of this article, I want to look at the ways in which these concerns with work society and its implications for the self are reflected in dystopian scenarios of the future. These dystopian scenarios allow for some distance from the inherent contradictions of the entrepreneurial self, thereby making its concern with self-realization and with its own deficiencies visible. At the same time, as stated above, I assume that representations of an imagined future are always much more concerned with the here and now, than with the future: they explore what the present makes possible and which possibilities it might be closing off.

Going Round in Circles

The here and now is clearly a central concern of all three dystopian worlds that will be discussed here. They are all set in the future, but in a future that is easily recognisable as an only slightly exaggerated version of the present. Dave Eggers's novel *The Circle* is an obvious case in point. It describes a fictional world completely in thrall to one big technology company, which takes over every aspect, first of its employees', and then of everyone else's lives. The company's technologies make constant demands on people's attention and subject them to surveillance, most of which is not top-down, but rather exercised between users of the company's services, resulting in an awareness of being watched by virtually the whole world, followed by self-surveillance. The novel clearly indicates that it is concerned with what might soon become of the present, by making none of these things appear too far-fetched, initially at least. Thus, the rhetoric employed by the company the Circle is very similar to that employed by well-known existing tech giants, including echoing phrases already familiar to the reader: "Sharing is caring" becomes one of the company's central slogans in a key passage (Eggers 2014 [2013]: 303), and the same slogan also exists in various contexts outside the world of the novel. In a similar vein, the technology which exists at the outset of the novel is only very slightly beyond the possibilities of technology in the present – the characters use computers and smartphones just like most readers will, except that the characters in the novel have only one mandatory account with the Circle for everything they do online, and some experimental technologies are hinted at (such as retinal implants), but not elaborated on. Science fiction is kept to a minimum. During the course of the novel, then, technology not too far removed from that which the reader already knows – cameras, sensors, social media – is used in ways which go far beyond what readers will have experienced. But the essential familiarity of the necessary technology ensures plausibility.

The apparent plausibility of these developments is further heightened by using a main protagonist, Mae Holland, who lets herself be slowly and naïvely drawn in by the company she works for. Mae, who functions as character-focalizer throughout the novel,



and thus forces the reader to share her experience, begins her career in awe of her new working environment, and is soon confronted with authoritative critical voices on the one hand, and with representatives of the company's official world view on the other hand. Since she is already biased in favour of the company, the contest between those men in her life who caution her about the new developments and those who advocate these developments, ends, rather foreseeably, with the company's complete victory. Mae is thus not a representative of the reader. She is far too naïve for that. At most, she functions as a representative of the reader's assumed contemporaries. She is that person who actually worries about the number of 'likes' (in the world of the novel: 'smiles') she gets and feels actively rejected by anyone who does not give her one (Eggers 2014 [2013]: 405). She is also someone who feels that she has done something momentous and brave simply in signing an online petition (Eggers 2014 [2013]: 409). And she is easily convinced that taking part in consumer satisfaction surveys means that her voice is being heard, and is thus essentially a democratic act (Eggers 2014 [2013]: 226-228). Such a character arguably invites the reader, not to identify with her, but to feel superior to her.

Mae and the men in her life, all of whom take sides in the conflict between the old and the new, also conduct endless debates within the novel, mostly about the uses and dangers of social media for society. What I want to focus on here, though, is something that is not explicitly discussed in the novel, namely the Circle as a working environment and its effects on the individual employee. Here, Mae serves as a useful example precisely because this issue, unlike the effect of social media, is never debated between her and her love interests and colleagues. The reader can easily feel superior to Mae's stance on social media, and has the opinions of other characters in the same fictional world on their side. Her stance on work, though, is uncomfortably close to that of today's society – that is, only a few steps removed from what is all-too-familiar to the reader. It belongs in a category that Mae thinks of, at one point, as "just a few inches from normal" (Eggers 2014 [2013]: 231). It does not invite the same explicit criticism as the use of technology that is thought of as normal in the world of the novel, and which would qualify as not quite normal in our world, though. If the reader and the reader's spokesmen (they really are all men) in the novel can relatively easily think of alternatives to Mae's perspective on social media, they are arguably not equally free to do the same for her perspective on work.

Work is a central concern of the novel from the beginning, when Mae starts her new job on the Circle's "campus". In an elaborate performance of a rite of passage from one working environment to the next, her friend Annie, who already works for the Circle, has a cubicle prepared for her which is just like the one at Mae's former hated job at a utility company. The grey, burlap-lined cubicle is brought forward to remind Mae of the difference between her old and new working environments. The utility company has



“[a]n actual water cooler. Actual punch cards. The actual *certificates of merit* when someone had done something deemed special. And the hours! Actually nine to five!” (Eggers 2014 [2013]: 11). The Circle immediately introduces itself as the opposite of all that, when Annie explains that the cubicle was meant to demonstrate to her (and by implication also to Mae herself) just how much Mae had hated her traditional office job, and proceeds to give Mae a tour of the campus. From that first tour on, it is obvious that nine to five is not happening at this company. To begin with, she is mainly shown around leisure facilities, including a nightclub that is used for “ecstatic dancing, a great workout” during the day. Employees’ use even of a nightclub is geared towards self-improvement. A party happening on campus in the evening is immediately made mandatory for Mae, too. Leisure and work are indistinguishable from the outset. During the tour, it is also evident and clearly regarded as normal that “everyone she met was busy, just short of overworked” (Eggers 2014 [2013]: 29), and that the campus has dorm rooms for employees who stay late or want to take a nap during the day. This working environment is Mae’s idea of the future and of “utopia” (Eggers 2014 [2013]: 30); the utility company is her idea of an outdated past.

Throughout the novel, then, the company encroaches on the privacy and time of its employees, leaving next to nothing off-limits. Mae ends up wearing a camera around her neck during the day, which broadcasts her every move to a social media audience for which she serves as the Circle’s ambassador (she is instructed to switch the sound off in the bathroom). Social media use, and the use of evenings and weekends are all prescribed by the company almost from the beginning, until Mae lives exclusively on the campus, and has no social contacts outside the Circle. Whenever she does not comply with the company’s assumptions about the correct use of her leisure time – assumptions which she is not, initially, even aware of – she is disciplined by her superiors, who hint that being allowed to work at the Circle is a privilege she is abusing by non-compliance, and that could be taken away from her. Her transformation into the Circle’s model employee is transparent enough to the reader, but neither she herself nor any of the other characters ever comment on it explicitly.

Nor do they comment on Annie’s increasingly and visibly impossible workload, which in the end leads to her collapse at her desk, followed by a coma the company doctor says may have been caused by “stress, or shock or simple exhaustion” (Eggers 2014 [2013]: 489). No one in the novel is at all scandalized by this turn of events. It is an occasion for well-wishers to send their thoughts on social media, and it is an occasion for Mae to reflect on when it will finally be technically possible to get at the unconscious Annie’s thoughts. It is not an occasion for protest about highly problematic working conditions. It is not an occasion for a discussion of work-life balance either, even on a lip service level. Clearly, exploitation is invisible to the characters, even when it happens to themselves or directly under their noses. “Actually nine to five” is no longer the norm in



this world, and the new and widely accepted norm is dedicating one's whole life to one's employer.

Even more crucially, there is no way of doing enough even then. There is no enough when there is no binding agreement on what the employer can and cannot demand from the employee. An employee who believes her workplace to be "heaven" the moment she first sets eyes on it (Eggers 2014 [2013]: 1) would be in no position to refuse any demands, even if there were no power difference between her and her employer. And the employer makes far-reaching demands before Mae even starts working for the Circle: the day she first sees the campus, the tiles of walkway to the main hall are interspersed with "imploping messages of inspiration. 'Dream,' one said, the word laser-cut into the red stone. 'Participate,' said another. There were dozens: 'Find Community.' 'Innovate.' 'Imagine.' She just missed stepping on the hand of a young man in a grey jumpsuit; he was installing a new stone that said 'Breathe.'" (Eggers 2014 [2013]: 1-2). Such inspirational messages are quite commonplace, not just for the Circle's employees, but also for the reader. In the context of the novel, they also admit for no difference between work and other aspects of life: even those which, like "Innovate," are likely to refer to work, or those which, like "Participate," will turn out to do so during the course of the novel, could also refer to life outside the workplace. As for the injunction to "Breathe," this one clearly calls up self-help discourse, and techniques for managing stress in particular, if it is to mean anything. The circle clearly finds it necessary to induce its employees to continually make themselves better employees. The entrepreneurial subject can never be good enough.

On Being Replaceable: Of Machines, Men and Women

Like *The Circle*, Margaret Atwood's 2015 novel *The Heart Goes Last* is set in a world that is marked as uncomfortably close to our own, and which clearly exhibits dystopian traits. Here, too, the situation at the beginning of the novel is not far away from what appears possible in the real world: the novel begins after an economic crisis, as a result of which the characters have to deal with unemployment, a lack of social security, and high levels of violent crime. The novel's two main protagonists, a heterosexual married couple, have both tried to get the most useful qualifications they could in their earlier life, only to find themselves made redundant nonetheless. Before the crisis, the man, Stan, works in a factory that produces robots, while the woman, Charmaine, works in a retirement home. Interestingly, both jobs are all about empathy: Charmaine is said to possess it, and Stan's job is to make robot cashiers appear as though they also possessed it (Atwood 2015:7). The service industry wants control over employees' performance of their feelings, even when these employees are robots: here, too, the world of the novel is close to discourses familiar to the reader. After all, as Illouz points out, the workplace



has variously been described as an environment which requires “emotional work” in the interaction of employees with customers as well as colleagues (Illouz 2008: 61). It therefore makes sense to train robots to perform a semblance of such “emotional work” if they are to replace humans cashiers.

Readers, in their turn, are made to empathize with Stan and Charmaine, even though the characters’ views may well be at odds with opinions likely to be held by a regular reader of Atwood’s novels, in terms of gender politics at the very least. Stan sees himself as the provider of the family and is deeply hurt in his pride when he is unable to actually provide for Charmaine, and instead has to live off what she earns in a waitressing job. Charmaine on her part thinks of her husband as dependable, and of herself as easily startled (neither of which turns out to be exactly true as the plot unfolds), and rarely asserts herself, preferring to get what she wants through indirect means. She also sets great store by propriety: she is someone who thinks of the bathroom as the powder room. This preference for propriety and euphemism colors the language in those chapters in which she functions as character-focalizer. By contrast, the other chapters are focalized through Stan, and make free use of four-letter-words in direct as well as indirect discourse. Both characters are very clichéd. Nonetheless, the reader is by no means invited to see them as parodies in the way in which Mae in *The Circle* is unquestionably a parody of social media users. Stan and Charmaine are old-fashioned, certainly. They are also not very cultured. Both of them make ethically questionable choices, too: Charmaine lets herself be employed as an executioner (not that she would use the word), and Stan agrees (after a good deal of marital infidelity on both sides), when the opportunity presents itself, to have a neurological procedure performed on her that will make Charmaine fall in love with him again and love only him for ever after. But the reader is always also presented with both characters’ motivations and doubts, and the two of them reflect on each other, too, resulting in much more complex characters than Mae in *The Circle*. In addition to that, while the reader is unlikely to agree with the two characters’ actions, or their sexism, their analysis of the society they live in is frequently astute, and likely to reconcile the reader to them to an extent, whereas Mae has no redeeming features. Thus, the stakes are higher in *The Heart Goes Last*: the reader cannot feel quite so superior to Stan and Charmaine as they let themselves become a part of a questionable corporation.

At the same time, like *The Circle*, this novel, too, proceeds to turn its still relatively plausible⁴ initial situation into something that quickly becomes steadily less plausible. Stan and Charmaine are soon recruited to join the Positron Project, the basic idea of which is that order as well as jobs are best created with the help of a prison, surrounded

⁴ In fact, it has been argued that the situation in which Stan and Charmaine find themselves at the beginning of the novel is not dystopian because it is only a depiction of the real consequences of the 2008 financial crisis (Miceli 2019: 80).



by a gated community – gated not only in order to keep the disorderly outside world outside, but also in order to keep the inhabitants inside. The inhabitants of this gated community spend half their life as prison inmates, the other half outside the prison. In both parts of their lives, they have assigned jobs – jobs created, directly and indirectly, by the prison. They can see that some of these jobs are obviously “a make-work job” (Atwood 2016: 81): having any job at all is what counts, not the usefulness of the actual work. They are also continually under surveillance while they live their lives, in and outside the prison. This surveillance is not between equals, like much of the surveillance in *The Circle*; this is the more traditional dystopian or Panopticon variety, which suits the prison setting. The inhabitants generally accept surveillance as inevitable and adapt their behavior accordingly. They also accept as inevitable the conclusion that the creation of jobs is a valid justification for their more or less voluntary imprisonment.

Crucially, the creation and preservation of jobs does of course count as a value in itself in the world that the readers of the novel inhabit, too. The argument that something that would be the right thing to do in other ways cannot be done because it would cost jobs is eminently familiar (and has recently come to the fore in the ‘health vs. the economy’ dichotomy frequently invoked in the debate around COVID-19 containment measures); and politicians regularly use the creation of new jobs as an argument in favor of measures that are otherwise problematic. More than that: prisons are indeed inextricably bound up with work, in the real world as well as on a metaphorical level, on which, as Monika Fludernik has recently pointed out, prison and factory have been able to stand in for each other ever since the creation of the modern prison and the modern factory (Fludernik 2019: 400). It makes sense in this context that in the novel, as Eleanor March notes, “Charmaine and Stan’s induction into Consilience-Positron” happens “via PowerPoint presentation reminiscent of the introduction to a new job” (March 2018: 22). The conclusions that are drawn in this novel are clearly patently absurd and thus appear impossible, but all their premises are eminently familiar and well within the range of what is accepted as possible in the world inhabited by the novel’s readers. Its fictional world functions as dystopian precisely because of this tension between what appears possible and the seemingly impossible conclusions drawn from these possible premises.

What appears possible includes the fact that every employee can theoretically be replaced at any time, by machines or by another employee.⁵ Stan is aware of that, and not only because he programs such machines; he suspects that his prison job of supervising chickens is really done by a computer, so his own work is not needed. By

⁵ The trope that everyone’s job will be eventually be replaced by a machine is all over the media, often in an apocalyptic mode; witness for instance *The Guardian’s* 2016 video “The last job on Earth: imagining a fully automated world” (Riley et al. 2016). Meanwhile, as Granter notes, “[t]he new respectable classes live in an atmosphere of high anxiety, an anomic world of constant organizational restructuring, short term contracts, and uncertainty” (Granter 2009: 176)



contrast, Charmaine assumes for a time that she is irreplaceable in her own prison job as an executioner – after all, she gives the “special procedure” a personal touch. To her dismay, she finds that she can simply be assigned another job in towel folding, and not be missed by anyone either on account of her talent for “special procedures” or even in her knitting group. In the prison, then, the characters are continually reminded in one way or another that they are in fact replaceable, and that it is only by the grace of Positron that they are in employment at all. Which makes sense because unemployment was their motive for signing up in the first place.

In the outside world most characters are well aware from the beginning that they as well as other people are replaceable. The scenes set in the outside world feature for instance two prostitutes, whose jobs are in danger from the mass-production of sex robots, and of whom Charmaine suspects anyway that “one day they’ll just drop through a hole in space and no one will want to mention them, because they’ll be dead” (Atwood 2015: 19). These scenes also feature Stan and Charmaine living in their car because they cannot find proper work and have to live off Charmaine’s precarious earnings as a waitress in various bars. In addition to that, there is in this world a whole television show dedicated to interviews with people evicted from their homes, and who, when the journalist asks them what happened, “told about how hard-working they’d been, but then the plant closed, or the head office relocated, or whatever” (Atwood 2015:20). In fact, the only character who genuinely seems to be making good money with his work, and who is also in no danger of being replaced, is Stan’s brother, who is a moderately successful criminal. Within the confines of legal work, though, there is no way for the characters in this novel to avoid being replaceable, however much they try. Charmaine has “majored in Gerontology and Play Therapy, because [...] that way she’d covered both ends” (Atwood 2015: 16), but these qualifications do not prevent her from being made redundant in the economic crisis. Stan for his part is told in the employment office that he is overqualified for odd jobs – and “then the employment office itself closed down, because why keep it open if there was no employment?” (Atwood 2015: 9). Both characters, like the interviewees from the TV show, have made efforts to be good employees, but this gets them nowhere once the money moves on to “exotic countries where the concept of minimum wage had never existed” (Atwood 2015: 9). The rules for participation in work, and therefore in society, have suddenly changed, and people like Stan and Charmaine have no chance to adjust. What remains to them, despite their qualifications, is only Positron.

Work Society Revisited from the Future

Creating work for its own sake within a prison-like environment is also the premise of the *Black Mirror* episode *15 Million Merits* (2011). There, the protagonist, Bing, spends



his time on a stationary exercise bike, not in order to keep fit, but as his job, ostensibly in order to produce energy which in its turn sustains an enormous entertainment industry, the products of which the characters on the bikes are constantly required to consume. They are surrounded by screens, and these screens can sense whether or not someone is watching. If a character still has “merits” (the currency of this world), they get to choose the program they want, and are allowed to skip ads. When they have not produced enough “merits”, they have to watch what is on offer, including advertisements, mainly for more entertainment. The characters live in cells whose walls are screens they cannot switch off, so there is no way in which they can escape watching the shows. The entertainment industry is also a coveted employer, which attracts the exercise bike workers as a way out of their daily routine, and which then uses them to its, not their, best advantage. Thus, Abi, Bing’s love interest, is a good singer and enters a talent show, only to end up being enlisted as a porn actress instead of a singer, because more singers are not needed at that moment. Bing himself tries to resist the system by staging a one-man protest in the talent show, only to find even his protest coopted as a form of entertainment. He is given his own show, in which he gets the chance to voice his criticism, but which achieves nothing except a bigger and better cell for him. It is a self-perpetuating system, which creates employment for its own sake, and from which there is no escape for anyone.

Even those who are neither fit enough for the exercise bikes nor talented or attractive enough for the shows have a crucial place in it. Their existence upholds the social order of that world because it reminds those who have to work on the bikes that there are people below them on the social ladder. It is symbolically appropriate that these people have to work as cleaners, literally upholding order as part of their jobs. The cleaners also appear in shows and computer games, where they are routinely dehumanized and depicted as people who can be mocked with impunity or, conversely, as an amorphous mass which threatens the player and has to be killed off for the player to survive. Their despised status motivates the others to keep cycling, since they know they will end up as cleaners themselves if they do not fulfill their quota.

Like the Positron project in *The Heart Goes Last*, this world is at the same time far removed from our own but still not too far removed not to evoke echoes of the world that is familiar to the audience. On the level of the show’s criticism of the entertainment industry, which is intimately connected with its depiction of work, the element of the familiar is rather obvious. Talent shows exist in the real world, and every other type of entertainment referenced in the show has familiar real-world equivalents, as Mark Johnson has noted (Johnson 2019: 33). Johnson also notes that the episode recalls real-world trends of intertwining work and entertainment: the characters’ work on the bikes is subject to gamification, and the entertainment industry that is depicted is reminiscent, not just of television, but also of the creation of “digital celebrity” through online



streaming, an activity which is work but not fully acknowledged as such (Johnson 2019: 35-39; quotation 37). In this respect, *15 Million Merits* appears much closer to our own world than *Black Mirror's* preceding first episode, *The National Anthem*, in which the fictional world is apparently not too far removed from Britain in the real world, but in which the media is rather improbably made to show the prime minister having sex with a pig on live television. Something improbable is thus made to happen in a fictional world that apart from that seems like a realistically conceived one. In *15 Million Merits*, on the other hand, television and other forms of digitized entertainment clearly violate ethical standards, but not in an improbable manner. The cleaners are dehumanized and denigrated, but in a manner that is reminiscent of real-world Reality TV shows. Abi is made to become a pornography actress by means of emotional blackmail and possibly a drug called "Cuppliance"; what is done to her is clearly marked as morally wrong and appears so even to several other characters, including, apparently, one of the talent show's judges. But it does not appear completely improbable that similar things might happen to an attractive young woman in the real world. After all, attractive young women have been depicted as the target of sinister machinations and sexual exploitation so often that Abi's fate is at the very least familiar as an entrenched trope in our culture. What appears more absurd is the world in front of the screens in *15 Million Merits*. Specifically, the characters accept living conditions which the audience is clearly meant to judge unacceptable. Nonetheless, there are parallels in the real world: being exposed to advertisements that cannot easily be avoided can happen in public spaces as well as online; the only feature of this fictional world which has no parallel in the real world is having these advertisements invade private space without allowing the viewer to switch the screen off. In a similar vein, competition, fear of a loss of status, and boring, repetitive, self-perpetuating work, are all quite familiar to the audience, and this familiarity is still discernible even in the more unfamiliar setting of a roomful of exercise bikes as a working environment. The image of people busy cycling without getting anywhere works as a recognizable metaphor for work society, as well as conflating features of the workplace and the gym.

What is also familiar is the way in which the characters adapt to and negotiate their environment. They do their best to become and remain good workers, that is. This involves keeping physically fit in order to be able to compete with the others on the exercise bikes. Thus, Bing commends Abi's choice of an apple as a snack during her break, because, he says, the "cheap lardy stuff" that is otherwise on offer only makes the cyclists have to "pedal it off", and "then you want more sugar, then you're playing catch-up". Abi responds by recommending a CBT app, which, she says, conveniently "realigns your thinking to pick healthy food" while the user is asleep. This is casual small talk between characters who have met only recently and who are, on the level of their gestures and facial expressions, busy flirting with each other throughout this scene: clearly what both are saying here simply counts as common sense for them. Self-



improvement is deeply ingrained in the inhabitants of this fictional world, and they see therapy as a useful tool in overcoming common human behaviors, such as a craving for energy-rich food. This is in an environment in which predominantly unhealthy snacks are being marketed to them along with ways of avoiding them.

To be sure, the cyclists do that in a quest to get a competitive edge on their fellow workers. After all, what marks the underclass of cleaners out as different is first of all their bodies: whoever cannot compete to the required standard has to become a cleaner, and the cleaners are depicted as grotesquely fat and greedy in a game show specifically designed to humiliate them. It therefore makes sense for Abi and Bing to snack on an apple rather than a candy bar: their social status depends on their slimness. In this sense, they embody (literally) some of the contradictions inherent in the entrepreneurial subject, in a simplified form because the task they are required to perform needs no skills beyond physical fitness. Still, responsibility for remaining healthy in an environment which only offers them snacks from a vending machine as a means of keeping up their energy for what is, after all, physical work, is entirely transferred to the workers themselves, and choosing the candy bars rather than the apple too often may result in becoming part of the despised underclass. This happens to one of Bing's colleagues at the beginning of the episode. The solution Abi and Bing find for their conundrum is to identify any illicit craving as a problem which needs to be overcome by means of strict discipline, achieved with the help of therapy, the latter delivered in the form of an app which sounds, in Abi's description, more like hypnosis than serious cognitive behavioral therapy. But what matters may be that the characters think of such apps as a form of therapy, and that they think of therapy as necessary – that the self appears potentially deficient if the subject is in danger of not being able to compete any longer, and therefore requires correcting. This inherently deficient subject is very familiar to the audience. It ties in with Illouz's analysis of the alliance of therapeutic and self-help discourse in the present (Illouz 2008), as well as with Ehrenberg's analysis of the conjunction of the discourses of work and mental health. Ehrenberg in particular notes "the increased amount of involvement demanded by workplaces from the 1980s" along with "a clear decrease in the degree of stability" (Ehrenberg 2010 [1998]: 184) as a context which invokes the individual as flexible, active and capable, while it results in "individuals who feel chronically inadequate" (Ehrenberg 2010 [1998]: 200). The contradictions Abi and Bing are trying to negotiate tie in with discourses which belong to the present, that is.

The same is even true of the (half-ironic) pathos accorded to the only way in which the cycling middle class of the society depicted in *15 Million Merits* can rise to fame and get a bigger cell, namely the talent show. This show is of course a version of existing talent shows, but within the very limited possibilities of the world the characters inhabit, it is also much more important than any talent show in the real world can ever



be. It is framed as a locus of judgment, where only a few will be deemed worthy of ascending to a higher social status. The idea of judgment and its religious connotations are underlined by a more explicit, if mediated reference which comes in the ads for the talent show: the striking and dramatic music which opens these clips is the opening of the “Dies irae” section of Giuseppe Verdi’s *Requiem*. The day of wrath announced in this section is of course the Last Judgment. The decisions of the talent show’s judges are generally not quite as final, but they do deliver judgment, on the basis of criteria not transparent to the participants, and with life-changing consequences. The religious framework is, however, no complete match in other respects, and the difference is crucial. The candidates are, after all, not judged for the morality of their actions or the correctness of their beliefs, but only for the usefulness of their talents to the entertainment industry. The individual who is able or unable to perform has indeed and quite literally replaced the conflicted and guilt-ridden subject here, like Ehrenberg has observed it of the present, which he describes as “as society whose norm is no longer based on guilt and discipline but on responsibility and initiative” (Ehrenberg 2010 [1998]: 9). This goes along with the show’s and the candidates’ priorities: a talent show is, after all, only an audition for a more prestigious job, not for a place in heaven. Nonetheless, it is framed as though it were about salvation. And since it takes place in a world in which the characters’ work completely defines their status in society, it is at least the only way in which they can rise to a higher social status, and a better cell.

The Im/Possibility of the Present

All three fictional future worlds are really concerned with the present and with what appears possible now; in fact, any discussion of the future of work is concerned with that. When academics and journalists in the present think about a future world with less work, in a positive or in a negative sense, they, too, are concerned with what is possible to think and do now; the future is a means of thinking about the present, that is. In the three dystopian worlds discussed above, what is at issue is the meaning of the power the company has over the employee, the formation of the entrepreneurial self, the meaning of a scarcity of waged work, and the implications of workplace surveillance. All these issues only function the way they do in these fictional worlds within the context of a work society, which all three fictional worlds project into a technologically updated future. Technology is ubiquitous in all three worlds, that is, but it is not crucial even to the Circle as a working environment, and even less to the other two fictional universes. What is at issue are technologies of power, not the power of technology.

Nonetheless, the implication that work society functions as a sort of prison, which unites all three dystopias, may itself be a way of thinking outside the confines of this prison. After all, all three dystopias make use of familiar and possible-seeming premises



in order to arrive at outrageous consequences of these premises. If, however, in dystopian writing, a catastrophic future generally appears as “only a possibility” (Vieira 2010: 17), and one that the reader can be taught to try and avoid, then exploring the possible and the impossible becomes a way of formulating a critique that may not be as easily co-opted as Bing’s efforts in *15 Million Merits*.

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