



'Skin in the Game': Complicity and Queer Utopianism

CORNELIA WÄCHTER

Technische Universität Dresden

Introduction

Over the course of the fifteen years, from 2019 to 2034, which are depicted in Russell T. Davies' mini-series *Years and Years*, first broadcast in 2019 (BBC One/HBO), Donald Trump is re-elected and launches a nuclear missile at China; the EU falls apart; the banks collapse; in Ukraine, a Russian-backed military government introduces a de-facto death penalty for homosexuality; in the UK, Vivian Rook (played by Emma Thompson), a celebrity businesswoman-turned-fascist, becomes prime minister; the BBC is closed down; the bird population in Britain is reduced by 50%, the insect population by 80%; the country experiences eighty consecutive days of rainfall; numerous people lose their homes in consequence of the ensuing flooding; several dirty bombs explode across the country, leaving even more people homeless, as well as poisoned by radiation; and Rook's government establishes secret concentration camps for refugees and homeless people and deliberately contaminates them with viruses. These are only some of the disastrous events which Muriel Lyons, the matriarch of the Mancunian family at the heart of the series, refers to when she berates her family:

MURIEL: Every single thing that's gone wrong, it's your fault.

ROSIE: What did I do? Where does this come from?

STEPHEN: God knows I get blamed for an awful lot, but how am I responsible for the entire world?

MURIEL: Because we are, every single one of us. 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, you know, like they're out of our control. Like we're so helpless, and little, and small. *But it's still our fault.* (E1 00:08-00:09; emphases added)

Muriel's speech, like the entire series, is concerned with complicity – complicity with collective social, economic and ecological injustice and their complex entanglements; complicity with what Donna Haraway has described as “the horrors of the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene” (2016: 3). All the disastrous events Muriel refers to, as the series



emphasises via multiple sets of news broadcast compilations, are inextricably entwined as part of the same historical fold.

The series echoes accusations of complicity regarding individual lifestyle choices which are gaining prominence in both scope and volume, especially as far as their impact on the environment is concerned. As Una Chaudhuri points out, “[u]nlike earlier political mobilizations of personal experience [...], the collapsing together of private and public spheres is not, in the ecological context, a strategy of empowerment. On the contrary, it is the baneful burden of *knowing* you belong to a collectivity that you cannot control or direct” (2015: 13). Christopher Kutz, more generally, observes in his monograph *Complicity* that “[t]ry as we might to live well, we find ourselves connected to harms and wrongs, albeit by relations that fall outside the paradigm of individual, intentional wrongdoing” (2000: 1).

Siân Helen Adiseshiah and Rupert Hildyard assert that “now the non-human world is *forcing* us to look ahead, to look at the world we are making for ourselves” (2013: 11; emphasis added). Very frequently, if not most of the time, however, we are precisely not looking or not looking closely enough. In *Years and Years*, Edith Lyons observes in a television interview: “[T]he world keeps getting hotter, and faster and madder. *And we don't pause, we don't think, we don't learn. We just keep racing to the next disaster*” (E2 00:05; emphases added). All of this chimes in with Haraway's assertion that “[t]hese times called the Anthropocene are times [...] of refusing to be present in and to onrushing catastrophe in time; of unprecedented looking away” (2016: 35). Rosie Lyon's indignant response “What did I do?” and Stephen Lyon's “How am I responsible for the entire world?” both represent the general propensity to look away and thus the refusal to know. This emphasises the *active* dimension of *turning* away the gaze and hence the culpability of ignorance. *Years and Years* is a dystopian vision of the consequences of our collective and largely unacknowledged complicities – of our looking away.

A pertinent question in this regard is: Why this “unprecedented looking away”? Or, even if it is not unprecedented, and even if we do look, at least to a certain extent (considering recent climate events, it is well-nigh impossible not to look), why these pervasive and ongoing forms of complicity in spite of the fact that, for instance, climatologists have been issuing increasingly desperate warnings for decades? To return to the above example, Muriel's explanation is that “We can't resist it” – in this case, the paradigmatic cheap T-shirt. What she points to is that affective and embodied dimensions of complicity frequently run counter to our convictions. A much-discussed study by the German Aviation Association, for instance, found that of the 1032 interviewees, voters of the Green Party were those who used aeroplanes most frequently (cf. Rosa 2019: 1087). We may buy the cheap T-shirt or the new smartphone, take the car, or book the cheap flight to a holiday resort – *although* we may be convinced



that, morally, these are the wrong choices; *although* we may feel guilty pursuing them. I argue that, especially in what Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino describe as the “posttruth world in which emotional appeal, not reason, wins the day” (2018: 2), any attempt to counter complicity needs to take its affective and embodied components into consideration. I, moreover, maintain that it does not suffice to point to the truism that capitalism generates its own desires; to be able to offer resistance to complicity, we need the awareness that it is possible to find alternatives to TINA, “the coercive language that states baldly that “There Is No Alternative”” (Docherty 2016: 19), we need visions of alternative ways of being in the world, and we need the desire to implement them. But, first and foremost, we need to comprehend more fully how collective complicity with the “horrors of the Anthropocene and Capitalocene” is maintained.

Thomas Docherty argues that promoting a sense of responsibility – as opposed to mere accountability, with the corresponding monetary connotations¹ – requires the awareness that people, often literally, have ‘skin in the game’: they have something to lose, they may be vulnerable to violence and their lives may even be at stake (2016: 54). I would like to add that, in order to comprehend complicity more fully, we need to take account of the fact that having ‘skin in the game’ – in various senses of this metaphor – may be the *reason* for becoming and remaining complicit. Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey maintain that “‘thinking through the skin’ [...] engenders a way of thinking that attends to the forms and folds of living skin at the same time as it takes the shape of such skin, as it forms and re-forms, *unfolds* and *refolds*” (2003: 1; emphases added). I follow Mark Sanders in drawing upon the etymological roots of complicity (*cum plectere* [Lat.]), reading it as “folded-together-ness” (2002: 5). This draws attention to how ways of thinking and ways of being in the world ‘enfold us’ – how TINA operates as a virtual blindfold – and how this enfolding is also a matter of ‘having skin in the game’.

Docherty distinguishes the morally neutral *compliance*, on which social groups rely to a certain extent, from *complicity* as the attribution of moral wrong (2016: 10). To cast complicity and compliance in Ahmed’s queer phenomenological terms, groups need a joint sense of direction (2006: 72). Bodies may follow the collective direction or be in line with this direction, and in doing so, they also perpetuate the line. What I am concerned with is, first of all, how individuals are induced to ‘stay in line’ by means of what Ahmed terms “straightening devices” (2006: 72), i.e. by what means they are encouraged or made to become and/or remain complicit, and how this line comes to be embodied or ‘inscribed into the skin’. In her call to ‘stay with the trouble’ of the Anthropocene and Capitalocene, rather than averting the gaze, Haraway purposely

¹ *Years and Years* makes a similar point regarding the moral implications of replacing responsibility with a logic of mere accountability. It does so mainly via Vivien Rook, the former businesswoman, who, once prime minister, introduces the secret concentration camps in a high-profile secret meeting of potential subcontractors in a spectacular manor house, in an obvious reference to the Wannsee Conference (E5 00:48-52).



speaks of “response-*ability*” – the willingness and the trained and practised ability to respond with a sense of responsibility (2016: 35; emphasis added).

The present article is concerned with ways in which response-ability is discouraged or even systematically untrained. It examines complicity as a matter of entrainment – an enfolding that becomes gradually embodied; and this article is concerned with queer desire (in the widest sense) as a means of what John Storey terms “a radical unfolding” (2019) out of complicity. I will discuss these issues paradigmatically through two texts: E.M. Forster’s dystopian science-fiction short story “The Machine Stops” (1909) and Russell T. Davies’ series *Years and Years*. Both texts illustrate that, as Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan argue, dystopian fiction can serve as a “prophetic vehicle, the canary in a cage, for writers with an ethical and political concern for warning us of terrible socio-political tendencies that could, if continued, turn our contemporary world into the iron cages portrayed in the realm of utopia’s underside” (2003: 1-2). They serve to assess collective orientation and thus where compliance turns into complicity.

Untraining Response-Ability: E.M. Forster’s “The Machine Stops” (1909)

In “The Machine Stops”, Forster narratively explores how embodiment can include the literal untraining of a body’s ability to respond – in resonance with its human and non-human environment and especially in resistance. He does so with a prominent focus on matters of the skin. To be more precise, “The Machine Stops” maps out the potential consequences of a cultural trajectory in which a crucial straightening device consists of ‘taking skin out of the game’. The narrative is set in a world in which, apparently following ecological disaster, humankind has been forced to live below ground. People now reside in isolation in their rooms – which entails the complete absence of skin touching skin, while they are almost perpetually connected to other people elsewhere via devices that seem similar to today’s smartphones, tablets or computers and the social media used on them. Vashti, one of the two focalisers, is continually contacted by friends, but “[t]o most of [their] questions she replied with irritation – a growing quality in that accelerated age” (7). She is a lecturer, and the depiction of her professional world evokes present-day images of video conferences: “The clumsy system of public gatherings had been long since abandoned; neither Vashti nor her audience stirred from their rooms” (7). As in today’s social media world, brevity has come to be of the essence. Her own lecture takes ten minutes, and then she moves on to someone else’s.

Forster’s depiction of what Vashti describes as “that accelerated age” of course expresses a typically modernist concern. At the same time, it forecasts the acceleration which sociologist Hartmut Rosa deems characteristic of the twenty-first century. Rosa defines *acceleration* as “an irrevocable tendency towards escalation” which “means that



modern capitalist society, in order to culturally and structurally reproduce itself, [...] must always be dynamically accelerating" (2019: 28). What is of greatest relevance to a reading of Forster's story in this light is that, according to Rosa, "[t]his systematic tendency toward escalation changes how people are situated in the world, the ways in which human beings relate to the world" (2019: 28). This way of being situated in the world can constitute an embodied variant of complicity, and I argue that it is precisely such changes in how people are situated in the world that Forster explores.

The world below ground is reduced to buttons and switches through which all that is supposedly necessary for life can be summoned – from bedding to medical assistance. These provisions are the same the world over (8), and "[f]ew travelled in these days, for, thanks to the advance of science, the earth was exactly alike all over" (13). By 'earth', however, the narrator focalising Vashti does not mean the surface which is still shaped by mountains, the sea, etc.; it is the homogenised lifeworld of the humans. Forster focuses heavily on the embodied and affective dimensions of complicity with this world. When Vashti finally gives in to her son's pleas to visit her and leaves her room for the first time in many years, she "was seized with the terrors of direct experience. She shrank back into the room, and the wall closed again" (11). Forster conceives of alienation from the human and non-human world as a matter of incremental withdrawal. This 'straightening device' ultimately produces affective resistance to autoptic experience and human touch. Vashti does eventually leave her quarters but to her,

[a]ll the old literature, with its praise of Nature and its fear of Nature, rang false as the prattle of a child.

Yet as Vashti saw the vast flank of the ship, stained with exposure to the outer air, her *horror of direct experience* returned. It was not quite like the air-ship in the cinematophote. For one thing it smelt – not strongly or unpleasantly, but it did smell, and with her eyes shut she should have known that a new thing was close to her. (13-14; emphases added)

The non-human environment, with its smells and material presence, becomes intimate against her will; it gets 'in touch' in a way that has become alien to Vashti. As Alf Seegert observes, the story thus not only

embodies specifically modernist anxieties regarding the role of intuition versus rationality, sensation versus ideas, and the fleshy interface versus telecommunication [but it] is also distinctively modernist in its quirky attunement to the alienation of a technologically mediated subject so completely divorced from nature that it doesn't even realize that it is alienated anymore. (2010: 34)

I argue further that technological mediation serves as a virtual blindfold that renders anti-complicity not simply unthinkable but repulsive.



Like Vashti, the other passengers of the spaceship also 'keep affectively in line' in relation to human and non-human others; they "avoided one another with an almost physical repulsion and longing to be once more under the surface of the earth" (20). Instead of connection, repulsion reigns – complemented by irritation bred from perpetual virtual communication (7). Even when encountering her son, Vashti is not even tempted to touch him. Forster thus presents an extreme version of the loss of attachment – the loss of skin touching and being touched by skin – and thus a central means of experiencing what Sanders describes as a sense of "folded-together-ness of being, of human-being, of self and other" (2002: 11).

I read this sense of 'enfolding' by human touch, as well as the lack thereof, through the prism of Rosa's conception of *resonance*. He opens his monograph of the same title with the words: "If acceleration is the problem, then resonance may well be the solution" (2019: 27). He defines resonance as "a kind of relationship to the world, [...], in which subject and world are mutually affected and transformed" (2019: 174). According to Rosa, resonance is a matter of our embodied relation to the world, thus operating prominently via the skin (2019: 151ff), which he describes as "an organ of resonance" (2019: 149).

The skin may enfold us but, in its permeability and perpetual exchange with the outside, it also signifies that we are constituted of and in perpetual exchange with human and non-human others. Philosopher David Abram opens his preface to *The Spell of the Sensuous* with the much-quoted words:

Humans are tuned for relationship. The eyes, the skin, the tongue, ears, and nostrils – all are gates where our body receives the nourishment of otherness. [...] Direct sensuous reality, in all its more-than-human mystery, remains the sole solid touchstone for an experiential world now inundated with electronically-generated vistas and engineered pleasures; only in regular contact with the tangible ground and sky can we learn how to orient and to navigate in the multiple dimensions that now claim us. (1997: 9)

Whereas unmediated access to reality does not exist, mediation is a matter of degrees (cf. Seegert 2010: 42). In Forster's short story, the possibility of being touched by others and becoming aware of the bonds with the human and non-human world has been almost entirely dissolved, and with it a central means of orientation and of entering into a relation of resonance. In his article on "The Machine Stops", Seegert comments that Abram's "ecocritical viewpoint highlights how it is not just the earth that is threatened, but us: lacking a vital connection to wild nature, people are in danger of devolving into quasi-human simulacra" (2010: 48).

Apart from the facilitation of progressive alienation, humans in "The Machine Stops" are kept in line by the machine's precluding any ability for humans to orient themselves



in space. Their capability for orientation and re-orientation is systematically unlearned and, in those born into the system, prevented from the start. This is, first of all, achieved by rendering *all* places familiar. To quote Ahmed again, “phenomenology reminds us that spaces are not exterior to bodies; instead, spaces are like a second skin that unfolds in the folds of the body” (2006: 9). She, moreover, observes that “the skin that seems to contain the body is also where the atmosphere creates an impression” (2006: 9). Spaces become familiar. Entering new spaces requires reorientation, and the capacity to do so also depends upon the degree of familiarity of the new place. In the world of Forster’s short story, however, where a person arrives from appears to be the same as where they arrive at: “By a vestibule, by a lift, by a tubular railway, by a platform, by a sliding door – by reversing all the steps of her departure did Vashti arrive at her son’s room which exactly resembled her own” (21). If resonance is contingent upon both sides being able to ‘speak in their own voice’, these homogenised spaces have lost the ability to speak.

Early on in the story, the narrator remarks that “[m]en seldom moved their bodies; all unrest was concentrated in the soul” (13) – and this unrest is safely contained in a world of brief online exchanges that do not lead to action. People are not only discouraged from any form of physical exercise (everything moves towards them, even if a book drops, the floor picks it up [14]), infants who are too strong are even “destroyed” (24). Accordingly, space in Forster’s narrative shapes the body to such an extent as to let the muscles atrophy and the lungs become machine-dependent. As Seegert convincingly argues, “the presence of renegade humans on the surface suggests that rather than the surface lacking adequate oxygen, machine-dependent lungs have simply lost their capacity to breathe mechanically-unprocessed air” (2010: 37).

Kuno, Vashti’s son, has realised how much this is a means of keeping people under control and how directly this is related to orientation. As noted above, the distinction between complicity and compliance lies in assessing the orientation of a group and, should that orientation be problematic, in the decision to orient oneself with or against that group. Here, even the capability for orientation is taken away, and moral agents are thus ‘straightened’ into complicity: “You know that we have lost the sense of space. We say ‘space is annihilated,’ but we have annihilated not space but the sense thereof” (24). Kuno, therefore, begins to cultivate a sense of space based on his own body, in spite of the fact that everything looks alike. Once he has realised that he can measure space and achieve orientation by reawakening his sense of embodiment, he can overcome the disorientation induced by all spaces looking exactly alike. Kuno follows a utopian desire (cf. Storey 2019: 107). He begins to pursue what Ahmed, drawing upon the terminology of landscape architecture, terms “desire lines” (2006: 19).

When Kuno tells his mother about his discoveries, “[s]he knew that he was fated. If he did not die to-day he would die tomorrow. There was not room for such a person in



the world. And with her pity *disgust* mingled. She was *ashamed* at having borne such a son, she who had always been so respectable and so full of ideas" (29; emphases added). Her affective responses are thus perfectly 'in line' with the collective orientation (or rather disorientation), whereas her son's are not, in two ways: "Such a person" can be read both in terms of Kuno's implied sexual orientation and his more general attempts at reclaiming his means of re-orientation, i.e. his ability to think and move beyond the 'straight line' – his resistance to complicity. Pointing out the closeted structure of the story itself, Ralph Pordzik speaks of "the importance of the protagonist as an individual desperately seeking an escape route, an insurgent prompted to make a choice between a life inside or outside the mechanism provided for him and his fellow beings" (2010: 56). Read through the prism of José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* (2009), Kuno's endeavours illustrate that "[q]ueerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there*" (Muñoz 2019: 1). More specifically, Kuno illustrates that "[q]ueerness is also performative because it is not simply a being but a *doing* for and toward the future" (Muñoz 2019: 1; emphasis added). Kuno's spatial explorations are performative practices of orienting towards a 'then and there'.

Whereas Kuno's mother, even when unwillingly contemplating the Himalayas from the aircraft, finds 'no ideas', the opposite happens to her son who has climbed up an old service shaft utilising the strength of his own body. He reports:

You [Vashti], who have just crossed the Roof of the World, will not want to hear an account of the little hills that I saw – low colourless hills. But to me they were living and the turf that covered them was a skin, under which their muscles rippled, and I felt that those hills had called with incalculable force to men in the past, and that men had loved them. Now they sleep – perhaps forever. (33)

Even though Kuno asserts that the hills are now asleep, they are still alive, and the sense that they are covered with skin, with rippling muscles underneath, suggests an experience of resonance, even if nature's 'call' has been muted.

Forster pushes the untraining of response-ability, with its potential for anti-complicity, so far as to render 'a radical unfolding' a lethal endeavour. In the end, when the Machine stops, the ground breaks up, and the humans below ground catch a glimpse of "the untainted sky" (56), "[s]uch radical un-enclosure, for all its sublimity, proves as lethal to their frail bodies as a killing jar" (Seegert 2010: 40). For nature, this ending may hold the potential for recovery. For the humans, the short story may not provide a happy ending, and yet, to return to Muñoz, "hope can be disappointed. But such disappointment needs to be risked if certain impasses are to be resisted. A certain affective reanimation needs to transpire if a disabling political pessimism is to be



displaced" (2019: 9). In Beatrice Battaglia's words about "The Machine Stops", "*the writing of nightmare* is at the same time an evocation of dream and desire and, as such, it is the writing of their absence, their lack, is indeed, *the writing of nostalgia*, taken in its original sense of a vital, symptomatic illness" (2000: 52). Kuno's hope may have been disappointed, but we can read the text as an attempt at affective reanimation, an invitation for queer utopian desire.

Beyond Forster's work, there are a plethora of literary examples in which queer (sexual and romantic) desire is integral to the vision of and call for anti-complicity or, to quote John Storey, "a radical unfolding" (2019). To name but three examples, Katherine Burdekin's *Swastika Night* (1935, as Murray Constantine) "explor[es] how sexual desire provides an opening out of the rigid structure of totalitarianism" (Horan 2018: 4). In *Swastika Night* as well as in Burdekin's *The End of This Day's Business* (1989), it is especially queer figures who are able to see through the social construction of reality, whose queer affects first alert them to this social construction because they are 'bad' in the sense of not fitting, and they are the ones who are able to envision an alternative future and to take the first steps towards anti-complicity. In Jeanette Winterson's novel *The Stone Gods* (2017), the one character that queers collective complicit desires is a queer character with 'inappropriate attachments' to the natural and the posthuman. Alexis Lothian would go so far as to argue that "science fiction is (and has been, can be, should be) queer theory, and that queer theory is (and has been, can be, should be) science fiction. From the multiple convergences of both diverse forms emerge new ways of critiquing, imagining, and creating the past, present, and future" (2012: xiii).

Years and Years: Desiring Towards a Radical Unfolding?

Returning to *Years and Years* as another such example leads me to the second sense of 'having skin in the game' – namely, literalising the metaphor, as a marker of precariousness. Docherty observes that "[w]hen skin touches skin, it forms a bond; but the nature of that bond is not determined by the simple fact of interaction. It can form a bond that secures complicity in acts of love, or acts that lead to death" (2016: 54). Skin can provide a membrane of resonance but it can also be the site of violence. Davies' 2015 series *Cucumber* had not only emphasised that, even in present-day Britain, homophobia, in the form of internalisation, is often still 'inscribed in the skin'; but by way of a homophobic murder, the series had placed equally heavy emphasis on the fact that, in this case, gay men, still very literally have skin in the game. Contrary to the de facto situation at present, *Years and Years* depicts the entire LGBTQ community as fully accepted. Instead, queer temporalities in the sense of potentially curtailed life trajectories are transposed to society at large. In the first episode, Daniel Lyons holds his



sister's newborn in his arms and, upon being asked whether he and his husband are planning to have children as well, retorts emphatically:

No chance. No way. [...] I don't know if I could have a kid in a world like this. [...] Things were okay a few years ago, before 2008. [...] 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 poisoning the air and the temperature and the rain. [...] 'Cause if it's this bad now, what's it going to be like for you [*turning to the baby*]? (E1 00:09).

In the context of a TV series written by a renowned queer screenwriter and director, and considering that this is uttered by a queer character, the scene may evoke the child as the universal figure of political futurity in Lee Edelman's *No Future* (2004) and especially the queer rejection of this figure. Here, however, it is not the utilisation of the child as a means of normalisation which is rejected; it is the perceived responsibility towards the child, in protection from a harmful future, that necessitates its rejection in Daniel's estimation. This assessment will later be echoed by his heterosexual-identified brother Stephen Lyons – himself a father: "Some species don't survive. Actually, all species don't survive, in the end" (E1 00:34-35).

As opposed to a UK committed to celebrating diversity, the homophobic threat comes from the east. In the first episode, news broadcasts report that the Ukrainian army has seized control of the government and "invited the soviet army into Kiew to maintain stability" (E1 00:11). In consequence, so many Ukrainian refugees enter the UK as to necessitate the building of "little towns" (E1 00:17). When Daniel, who works at a site providing temporary housing for 60,000 (soon to be 200,000) Ukrainians, asks a visiting colleague whether they have one of these sites in Blackpool, she replies: "Oh god no! We're trying to stop them. We don't want this. It's a nightmare. [...] I voted leave" (E1 00:18), thus evoking the anti-immigration and anti-refugee rhetoric so prominent in the context of the Brexit referendum and beyond. This is reinforced by news images resembling UKIP's infamous "Breaking Point" poster. Daniel, however, responds by asking whether his colleague understands the difference between immigrants and refugees, and, in painful foreshadowing of current actual events, he goes on to explain that Ukraine, in all likelihood, is under Russian occupation rather than having invited the army in, and that Russia conducts a purge of all those who offer resistance. Consequently, the Ukrainians entering the UK are refugees, not immigrants (E1 00:19).

As in my previous example, the driving forces in the transition from complicity to responsibility in *Years and Years* are figures whose desires are queer – both in terms of their sexual orientation and in terms of their deviation from the collective line of being-in-the-world. And again, to refer back to Muñoz, queerness is a performative "doing for and toward the future" (2019: 1). Firstly, Edith, whose activism had been watched from



afar by her family in the first part of the series, returns to Manchester, once she has been contaminated by an atomic bomb and finds a female-identified lover who shares her activist dedication. Secondly, it is Daniel's queer desire that very directly fuels the development. Daniel leaves his increasingly complicit husband – suddenly prone to conspiracy theories – when he falls in love with Ukrainian refugee Viktor Goraya, who is granted asylum in the UK because he was reported to the police by his own parents and subsequently tortured. In jealous revenge, Daniel's estranged husband reports Viktor to the police for secretly working at a petrol station. It is repeatedly emphasised that Daniel used to be timid and 'boring', but seeing his partner's life in danger, he pursues even illegal ways of getting him to safety.

After all other attempts have failed, both see no other option than to pay smugglers to take them into the UK by boat. This boat turns out to be a hopelessly overcrowded rubber raft – an all-too-familiar media image. At this point in the series, it has become absolutely clear that Viktor's life is very literally at stake and that the obvious risk to both their lives on the raft still presents more of a chance of survival than Viktor would otherwise have. Accompanied by dramatic music, we see the boat filling up, panicking faces, and we hear Daniel shouting repeatedly: "There is no room!" (E4 00:49) Then the screen goes black and the music ends. Blackness and silence are interrupted by three very short – flash-like – shots showing snippets of screaming people on a boat in heavy nightly rain. In the final black frame, which lasts several seconds, seagulls' cries are faded in. A beach fades into view, strewn with bodies that are being marked by the police. Then the camera zooms in on Daniel's face: Refugees have skin in the game. The scene is geared towards empathetic identification with, not only Daniel and Viktor, but all of the refugees, while refusing to render their suffering in pornographic terms.

Judith Butler argues that an awareness of the fact that all our lives are ultimately precarious and the fact that we all know what it is like to have lost somebody have the potential to generate a tenuous sense of 'we' across lines of identification (2004: 20). To relate this to television, S. Elisabeth Bird maintains that "[media] images and messages wash over us, but most leave little trace, unless they *resonate*, even for a moment, with something in our personal or cultural experience" (2003: 2; emphasis added). In this episode, *Years and Years* very obviously relates the precariousness of the bodies of one group (refugees from other countries) to the precariousness of a body that belongs to a figure of viewer identification: a member of the family at the heart of the narrative.

This sense of precariousness, of having skin in the game, as a facilitator of a sense of foldedness-in-human-being, is further amplified when Viktor is detained and finally sent to one of the Erstwhile sites – the secret concentration camps deliberately contaminated with viruses to decimate the population. The Erstwhile sites contain not only refugees from other countries, but more and more of the British people rendered homeless by



dirty bombs and by flooding also 'vanish' into those sites. It is in those sites that the series conjoins the victims of political and ecological disasters. Edith Lyons and her girlfriend enter one such concentration camp in a food truck, not only to save Viktor but to "start a war" (E6 00:33) on behalf of all those confined. At the same time, Rosie Lyons is separated from her son because the Estate on which she lives has been declared a crime zone and fenced in. Her son missed the curfew and is thus locked out, and she uses her truck to smash through the gates. From the outset, these two narrative strands are – not least of all visually, by way of parallel images of, e.g., vans in front of gates, confronted by security personnel – 'folded together'. This parallel construction links the refugees, as well as the victims of ecological disaster, even more strongly to the Lyons family. Moreover, via Rosie, those ostracised on the basis of class are equally enfolded.

Upon deciding to offer resistance, Rosie explicitly refers back to the dinner conversation I discussed at the beginning of this article, when she phones her grandmother to tell her: "I just wanted to say that you're right. What happens next is absolutely my fault. Thank you" (E6 30:01). Since she cannot use her own legs due to her disability, her second child lends her theirs. Meanwhile, Edith's allies have disabled the signal-blocking towers that had disturbed communication between the Erstwhile sites and the outside. Both groups defiantly take video evidence. Bethany, one of Muriel's great-granddaughters, whose brain has been fitted with government hard- and software, unites with colleagues to overthrow the system, and they broadcast both groups' video evidence on all channels in Britain.

Years and Years thus shifts from an exploration of collective complicities to a utopian vision of collective resistance. The beginning of the series had pointed to the potentially 'queer' temporality of society at large – both in suggesting a voluntary turn away from procreation and in terms of everyone having skin in the game. The final episode, by contrast, comes much closer to Muñoz's conception of *queer futurity* in the sense of "activat[ing] queer and minoritarian ways of being in the world and being-together. We do so to *survive* the shattering experience of living within an impossible present, while charting the course for a new and different future" (2019: 14). It is a mode of being-in-the-world, represented most clearly by Edith, which is characterised by deep resonance with human and non-human others – or, in Sanders' terms, a sense of foldedness-in-being.

At the very centre of the action, in their mother's lap, assisting her in driving, is the gender-queer child whose birth had been the occasion of Daniel's musings about the future of children in the first episode. For all of the controversies surrounding Edelman's *No Future*, when we speak of the future of 'our children', the question needs to be: What is saved for whose children? The vulnerability of 'our children' is all-too-often protected at the expense of other children's health and safety as well at the expense of the non-



human world. In this narrative, it is queer figures who have decided against the heteronormative imperative for procreation, or “reproductive futurism” (Edelman 2004: 1), who are the driving forces in promoting change and generating a kernel of utopian hope. Much of the activist impetus is propelled not by “fighting for the children” (Edelman 2004: 3) but by fighting for a queer refugee, originally fuelled by queer desire. This figure, however, is a figure of departure only for a gradually more expansive awareness of others having ‘skin in the game’. In *Years and Years*, the queer thus does not, as in Edelman’s work, “[come] to figure the bar to every realization of futurity, the resistance, internal to the social, to every social structure or form” (2004: 4). Instead, the series is in line with Muñoz’s criticism of the antisocial turn in queer theory and similarly promotes a sense of queer collectivity and utopian hope.

Rosa argues that “[a]lienation manifests in the environmental crisis and in our constitutive inability to live sustainably with respect not only to nature but also to the resonant sphere of history” (2019: 1079). Despite increasing demands to ‘save the future for our children’, far too little actually happens. Rosa explains this with a lack of resonance, which we might also read as a lacking sense of foldedness-in-being: “A person who feels [themselves] cut off in [their] existence from past and future generations has little reason to allow [themselves] to be influenced by such abstract principles of justice” (2019: 1079).

In order to achieve what Storey calls “a radical unfolding”, we need to “be realistic” and “demand the impossible” (2019: 119). This is precisely what Edith, Rosie, Bethany and their allies do in the final episode. By implication, it is not only the family members that have been called to overcome complicity and assume responsibility, but also the audience. Rachel Aroesti maintains that by means of this series “Davies *attempts to counteract the apathy* that can grow out of relentless dismay. He does this not through shock value, but by creating rounded characters that draw empathy, outrage and horror from our increasingly *hardened hearts*” (2019: n.p.; emphases added). These “hardened hearts” can be read in terms of what Nicole Merola describes as *Anthropocene anxiety* – “an affect specifically concerned with inaction in the face of and worry about global socioecological change” (2018: 27). More generally, they can be read in terms of lacking resonance. When it comes to apathy in the face of incipient disaster and the sense that resistance is unrealistic, what is necessary is not just a *vision* of alternatives but also the *desire* to enact these alternatives. Storey speaks of “utopian desire as a radical unfolding of our complicity with power” (2019: 108). Bladow and Ladino, more specifically, argue that “both climate and social justice activists require *altruistic emotions* as a foundation for action” (2018: 3). The series seems to attempt to arouse precisely such altruistic emotions – a sense of foldedness-in-being or a resonant way of being in the world – in countering the pervasive apathy as a form of complicity. And it presents anti-complicity as *performative* re-orientation inspired by queer utopian desire.



The scenes I have just described, however, are not how the series ends. The remaining thirteen minutes return me to the question of 'having skin in the game' in the sense of a resonating relation to the world and the deleterious impact of digital technology on this relation. As a teenager, Bethany begins to interpose 'filters' – holographic screens, inspired by present-day social media options – between her face and the people she communicates with. As it turns out, Bethany conceives of herself as transhuman. Especially via the scene in which she comes out to her parents, referring to herself as "trans", Davies establishes an explicit link to queer identification – in this case queering the line between humans and technology. Bethany first has her skin as an 'organ of resonance' modified by cybernetic implants and finally, her brain and eyes fitted with implants granting her access to the entire digital realm, including the means to spy on her family (E5 00:28). Her parents are horrified by her wish to abandon her biological body, but Celeste, Bethany's mother, also acknowledges the couple's complicity in this: "We've surrounded her with screens from the moment she was born. We did this" (00:31). Accordingly, the series delineates Bethany's incremental enfolding into and increasing complicity with accelerating and more and more all-encompassing digitalisation and technologisation.

Whereas Forster conceives of technical domination – especially where it replaces autoptic experience and human touch – as a source of alienation, *Years and Years* adopts a much more ambivalent stance on the subject. When Bethany explains to her parents why the brain implant is far superior to using a computer in a conventional way, her example is that, while talking to her parents, she was thinking about the 80 days of rain and, for instance, able to view new satellite images and read pressure sensors across the world, to the effect that, as Bethany phrases it: "If I put all of that together, I'm there. I'm inside it. The tide, the depth of the sea and the curl of the sea inside me" (E5 00:29). To her, this is "absolute joy" (E5 00:30). Climate change becomes a source of excitement, entertainment, and the ultimate expansion of reach. Tellingly, Bethany next remarks that she is enjoying a song a young girl has just put online. The relationship, however, is precisely not a resonant one since, in a resonant relationship, "subject and world are mutually affected and transformed" (Rosa 2019: 174). What Seegert observes about Forster's Vashti, holds equally true for Bethany: She is "a technologically mediated subject so completely divorced from nature that it doesn't even realize that it is alienated anymore" (2010: 34). What is more, Bethany's musings about the causes of the 80 days of rain stand in stark contrast to the absence of any consideration of the environmental costs of her entertaining expansion of reach.

Bethany's dream, from an early age, had been to go even further and expand her temporal reach beyond a human lifespan by having her brain downloaded, abandoning her biological body and fully entering the digital realm. Instead, it is Edith whose brain is first to be preserved in this way, and the series ends at the point where the family is



waiting to find out whether the endeavour has been successful. This reading of the digitalisation of human minds as a form of (literal and metaphorical) 'queer' futurity beyond human biological propagation, however, stands in stark contrast to Daniel's – and, by and large, the series' – criticism of capitalism's ruthless exploitation of natural resources; of "the companies, the brands, the corporations [...] treat[ing] us like algorithms while they go round poisoning the air and the temperature and the rain" (E1 00:09). Edith's utopian vision may be of an all-encompassing foldedness-in-being that allows her to be everywhere at the same time. However, both on the diegetic and the extradiegetic level, by presenting a digital future as somehow magically outside of environmental realities, this vision is representative of an all-too-pervasive utopianism that, in fact, veils the dystopian environmental costs of digitalisation (cf., e.g., Belkhir/Elmeligi 2018).

Edith hopes to be able to be everywhere at the same time, to access all information and spy on everyone – notably on Rook. Bethany can 'only' spy on people on her list of contacts. The fact that this includes her family is briefly questioned by Stephen, but his wife and daughter promptly read his resistance in relation to his having been unfaithful to his wife and, more generally, as indicative of having moral wrong to hide (E5 00:29). All criticism of Bethany's virtually limitless expansion of digital reach is effectively countered when she not only helps Edith in her activist endeavours trying to unmask the Erstwhile sites (E5 00:39) but also, by spying on her father, finds out that he was the one who had Viktor moved to one of the Erstwhile sites (E5 00:56). Moreover, it is these cyborg features and the almost limitless expansion of her reach which will ultimately enable her to broadcast the activists' actions at the Erstwhile sites and the cordoned-off areas in Manchester all across the UK. This lends an ambivalent narrative to what Shoshana Zuboff (2019) has termed *surveillance capitalism*.

To conclude, *Years and Years*, like "The Machine Stops", on the one hand serves as an epistemological tool facilitating a more comprehensive understanding of ways in which we can become affectively enfolded into complicity with the perpetuation of the 'horrors of the Anthropocene and Capitalocene', notably in consequence of contemporary surveillance capitalism. To quote Muriel again, both narratives explore how we can come to "buy into that system for life" (E6 00:10). In particular, both narratives illustrate that complicity can be a matter of affective entrainment and the simultaneous untraining of response-ability. Both narratives, moreover, offer visions of retraining the ability to respond as a queer "doing for and towards the future" (Muñoz 2019: 1). At the same time, however, *Years and Years* is illustrative of the power of the affective blindfold. Given the series' severe criticism of our collective orientation, this inconsistency also serves to elucidate that our complicities are often precisely not aligned with our convictions.



Works Cited

- Abram, David (1996). *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*. New York: Pantheon.
- Adishesiah, Siân Helen, and Rupert Hildyard (2013). "Introduction: What Happens Now." *Twenty-First Century Fiction: What Happens Now*. Ed. Siân Helen Adishesiah and Rupert Hildyard. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1-14.
- Ahmed, Sara (2006). *Queer Phenomenology*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Ahmed, Sara, and Jackie Stacey (2003). "Introduction: Dermographies." *Thinking Through the Skin*. Ed. Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey. London and New York: Routledge, 1-17.
- Aroesti, Rachel (2019). "The 50 best TV shows of 2019: No 4 – Years and Years." *The Guardian* 16 Dec. <<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/dec/16/best-tv-shows-2019-no-4-years-and-years>>. [accessed 11 Jan. 2020]
- Baccolini, Raffaella, and Tom Moylan (2003). "Introduction: Dystopia and Histories." *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*. Ed. Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan. New York: Routledge, 1-12.
- Battaglia, Beatrice (2000). "Losing the Sense of Space: Forster's 'The Machine Stops' and Jameson's 'Third Machine Age'." *Histories of the Future: Studies in Fact, Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Ed. Alan Sandison and Robert Dingley. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 51-71.
- Belkhir, Lotfi, and Ahmed Elmeligi (2018). "Assessing ICT Global Emissions Footprint: Trends to 2040 & Recommendations." *Journal of Cleaner Production* 177: 448-63.
- Bird, S. Elizabeth (2003). *The Audience in Everyday Life: Living in a Media World*. New York: Routledge.
- Bladow, Kyle A., and Jennifer K. Ladino (2018). "Toward an Affective Ecocriticism: Placing Feeling in the Anthropocene." *Affective Ecocriticism: Emotion, Embodiment, Environment*. Ed. Kyle A. Bladow and Jennifer K. Ladino. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1-22.
- Burdekin, Katharine (1989). *The End of This Day's Business*. New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York.
- Butler, Judith (2004). *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London and New York: Verso.
- Chaudhuri, Una (2015). "Anthropo-Scenes: Theater and Climate Change." *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English* 3.1: 12-27.
- Constantine, Murray (2016). *Swastika Night*. 1937. SF Masterworks. London: Gollancz.
- Docherty, Thomas (2016). *Complicity: Criticism Between Collaboration and Commitment*. London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Edelman, Lee (2004). *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Series Q. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Forster, E.M. (2011). *The Machine Stops*. 1909. London: Penguin.



- Haraway, Donna Jeanne (2016). *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Horan, Thomas (2018). *Desire and Empathy in Twentieth-Century Dystopian Fiction*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jones, Simon Cellan, and Lisa Mulcahy (2019). *Years and Years*. Dir. Russell T. Davies. BBC, HBO.
- Kutz, Christopher (2000). *Complicity: Ethics and Law for a Collective Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lothian, Alexis (2012). "Deviant Futures: Queer Temporality and the Cultural Politics of Science Fiction." Los Angeles: University of Southern California. <<http://digitallibrary.usc.edu/cdm/ref/collection/p15799coll3/id/13788>>. [accessed 8 May 2020]
- March-Russell, Paul (2005). "'IMAGINE, IF YOU CAN': Love, Time and the Impossibility of Utopia in E. M. Forster's 'The Machine Stops'." *Critical Survey* 17.1: 56-71.
- Merola, Nicole M. (2018). "'what do we do but keep breathing as best we can this / minute atmosphere': Juliana Spahr and Anthropocene Anxiety." *Affective Ecocriticism: Emotion, Embodiment, Environment*. Ed. Kyle A. Bladow and Jennifer K. Ladino. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 25-49.
- Muñoz, José Esteban (2019). *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. 2009. 10th Anniversary Edition. Sexual Cultures. New York: New York University Press.
- Pordzik, Ralph (2010). "Closet Fantasies and the Future of Desire in E. M. Forster's 'The Machine Stops'." *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 53.1: 54-74.
- Rosa, Hartmut (2019). *Resonance: A Sociology of the Relationship to the World*. 2016. Medford: Polity Press.
- Sanders, Mark (2002). *Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid*. Philosophy and Postcoloniality. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Seegert, Alf (2010). "Technology and the Fleshly Interface in Forster's 'The Machine Stops': An Ecocritical Appraisal of a One-Hundred Year Old Future." *Journal of Ecocriticism* 2.1: 33-54.
- Seymour, Nicole (2018). "The Queerness of Environmental Affect." *Affective Ecocriticism: Emotion, Embodiment, Environment*. Ed. Kyle A. Bladow and Jennifer K. Ladino. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 235-56.
- Storey, John (2019). "A Radical Unfolding: Utopianism against Complicity." *Complicity and the Politics of Representation*. Ed. Cornelia Wächter and Robert Wirth. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield International, 107-20.
- Winterson, Jeanette (2008). *The Stone Gods*. London: Penguin Books.
- Zuboff, Shoshana (2019). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. New York: Public Affairs.