"THERE IS NO ALTERNATIVE!"—THE CASE FOR A CO(N)TEMPORARY ENGLISH FICTION: IAN MCEWAN'S *MACHINES LIKE ME* AND JEANETTE WINTERSON'S *FRANKISSSTEIN*

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_Abstract

The future is the only form of temporal experience which requires us to use our speculative and imaginative capacities. However, due to the concurrent global challenges of the twenty-first century (COVID-19, populism and nationalism, climate crisis), imagining viable future scenarios for the human has become increasingly difficult. As a result, our Enlightenment conception of temporality as linear has become futile and requires an alternative approach. This article explores how two examples of contemporary English fiction, Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me* and Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein*, experiment with temporally marked forms to construct narratives in which the separation into past, present, and future becomes indistinguishable. The technological imagination of these narratives, in the shape of accelerated scientific progress in artificial intelligence and transcendent consciousness, produces alternative histories in the hopes of modeling a new sense of futurity. In doing so, McEwan's and Winterson's novels assimilate binaries such as *antiquitas* and *modernitas*, human and post-human, and ultimately past, present, and future to showcase the productive potential of speculative formalism (Eyers). I argue that such a modeling of 'co-temporality' (Ruffel) places the contemporary novel's capacity for cultural inquiry on the same epistemological level as that for scientific inquiry, enabling a conception of futurity detached from temporal linearity and the logic of progress.

I felt unmoored, drifting into the oceanic blue and black, moving in two directions at once—towards the uncontrollable future we were making for ourselves where we might finally dissolve our biological identities; at the same time, into the ancient past of an infant universe, where the common inheritance, in diminishing order, was rocks, gases, compounds, elements, forces, energy fields—for both of us, the seeding ground of consciousness in whatever form it took.[1]

[o]ur lives are ordered by the straight line of time, yet arrows fly in all direction. We move towards death, while things we have scarcely understood return and return, wounding us for our own good. My story is circular. It has a beginning. It has a middle. It has an end. Yet it does not run as a Roman road from a journey's start unto its destination. I am, at present, uncertain of the destination. I am sure that the meaning if there is one, lies in the centre.[2]

1_Introduction[3]

The year is 2019. Amongst heated discussions in the UK Parliament about how to administer a fair deal between the UK and the EU after the Brexit referendum vote in 2016, two of the largest literary voices of our times, Ian McEwan and Jeanette Winterson, publish their novels about post-human dreams and Other times, namely *Machines Like Me* and *Frankissstein: A Love Story*. Despite the novels' quasi-historical settings of Britain during the nineteenth century (in Winterson's case) and Margaret Thatcher's premiership (in McEwan's case) of the 1980s, it is clear that both novels speak to an issue of contemporary times; times in which the geopolitical situation of Britain has been thrown into complete uncertainty. Such contemporary uncertainty is, in 2023, largely fueled by global moments of crisis, with the increasing effects of global warming unfolding in meteorologically threatening ways, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic still felt by many, even now. In that respect, such large-scale uncertainty renders imagining a human future, regardless of whether be it good or bad, almost impossible. While critics have proclaimed this to be the case long before these societal conditions inhabited the public's mind (think of Francis Fukuyama's 'end of history' or hauntological approaches to the future by Jacques Derrida and Mark Fisher), there increasingly appear to be innovative literary attempts to cope with such a state of feeling.[4] Similar to how the preceding opening of this essay throws the reader into a temporal maelstrom, so do McEwan's and Winterson's novels. Rather than proposing alternative utopian or dystopian futures, the novels construct narrative worlds in which the contemporary moment of extratextual uncertainty is navigated through a strange entanglement of past, present, and futures in the novels' narrative and formal design. While at first, such writing may seem experimental and out of touch with the 'natural' course of history as a progressive force towards the future, a more recent popular culture example, namely the public perception of the UK's previous prime minister Liz Truss, points to a newfound tendency to look backwards and forwards concurrently.

On 21 May 1980, then Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher gave a speech at the Conservative Women's Conference in London. The speech outlined widely how her government would be tackling rates of inflation in the UK, which at the time sat at 17.9%.[5] One of Thatcher's main concerns, and part of her signature policies, was her commitment to the generation of wealth through upholding the self-

regulating functions of the market. As such, her government's focus on tackling the inflation rate had a temporal sphere, one in which the future of the UK's wealth lay in the hand of an increasingly less regulated market economy: "How can you provide *for the future* when you don't know what your savings or your occupational pension will be worth next year, let alone in five years time?"[6] Selling her economic policies of less public spending, Thatcher upheld that "[w]e have to get our production and our earnings into balance. There's no easy popularity in what we are proposing but it is fundamentally sound. Yet I believe people accept *there's no real alternative.*"[7]

Fast forward 50 years and the UK finds itself in a similar economic crisis. When in September 2022, the Conservative Party elected Liz Truss as their new leader, after Boris Johnson's resignation, Truss found herself confronted with a country whose economic future was unclear due to Britain's recent separation from the European market. Then, on 20 October 2022, after only 45 days in office, Truss became the shortest-serving Prime Minister in the history of the United Kingdom. The announcement of the government's planned mini-budget—a budget ostensibly driven by tax cuts across different groups of stakeholders, most notably high-income earners—caused a market reaction that triggered the value of the Pound Sterling to drop to a historically low level. With an impending economic crisis, critical voices against Truss's policies grew in the media. Alongside such political criticism, the public started to recognize peculiar similarities between Truss and Thatcher. Kneeling beside a calf, wearing an opulent fur coat or sporting a white blouse made of a large bow: the visual (media) presence that emerged of Truss was near-identical to that stored in our cultural memory of Thatcher.[8] Even more so, beyond popular imageries, Truss's political performance seemed to continuously be measured against that of Thatcher.[9] In a turn towards the country's political and economic past, in very different ways, both the Conservative Party and the public at large tried to find some certainty for the future of the UK.

The histories of Truss's and Thatcher's premierships are marked by economic miscalculation. Despite their radical approaches to further economic growth, there appeared to be no alternative to economic losses: a hopelessness that widely translates to other impending crises humanity is facing in the twenty-first century. Suddenly, the natural history of the coexistence between the human and our planet, which we have come to understand as a history of growth, expansion, and progress, shows its limita-

tions: the climate crisis and its devastating effects—which are most strongly felt by marginalized groups—open up a future of natural disasters and extinction. While times of crisis highlight such a change of perception, it is by no means produced by these events alone. Instead, Russel West-Pavlov describes how our linear conception of time is based on Western ideals and the blatant disregard for the existence of alternative temporalities: "The gradual streamlining of temporality down to universal linear time as the self-evident calibration of human existence has repressed and elided other possible temporal structurings of individual and global existence. It inherently claims, 'There is no alternative!'"[10] Such alternatives have recently been increasingly explored, for example, in queer or postcolonial contexts.[11] However, despite their concern with temporality, such studies have largely left modernity, as an aesthetic and temporal marker, untouched. Instead, these studies focus on the identity politics of different groups and creating a binary between a normative conceptualization of time and a different, lived experience of temporality and marginalization. With such an increasing awareness of alternative temporalities comes the alertness that the conception of temporality as governed by Western modernity's grand narrative of linearity and late-capitalism's story of growth might be what forecloses a vision of a sustainable and flourishing future for the human.

In the following, I argue that *Machines Like Me* and *Frankissstein* both represent examples of what I would like to term co(n)temporary English literature: a mode in contemporary writing that attempts to grapple with temporal experience outside of modernity's linear timeframe. This term is derived from Lionel Ruffel's ideas on the contemporary and its 'co-temporal' qualities (see section _2 for theoretical exposition). The novels do so by experimenting with the temporal organization of their narrative and the use of temporally-marked 'forms' that highlight the productive co-existence of past, present, and future knowledge. Both novels thus exhibit the potential of changing our understanding of literary formalism in that the distinctness of forms is put into question by their concurrent presence. As much as scholarly discourse has become increasingly interested in exploring alternative temporalities, contemporary English fiction has seen the publication of several novels that have at their heart a new-found readiness to reorganize their narratives in innovative ways.[12] While on the one hand, this shows in the organization of narrative events, it is also highlighted through the themes and ideas which they discuss. The contemporary English novel

has recently striven for "the development of a new set of cultural and technological protocols for the organisation of space and time," to be able to not only represent the "persistent fascination with the shifted temporality that characterizes the new century, with a time that passes in a way that we cannot quite capture, that eludes our narrative grasp,"[13] but to actively contribute to our sense of finding *orientation* in this temporal muddle. Recent examples of such fiction progressively reach out to alternative 'forms' to negotiate these most human concerns.

In an alternative past of the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher is the current prime minister and Alan Turing has not committed suicide in McEwan's novel. Thatcher's government is about to lose the Falkland Wars and Charlie Friend, the protagonist of the novel, finds himself in his kitchen with a humanoid robot named Adam. Soon enough, we learn about Miranda, Charlie's upstairs neighbor and his secret object of desire. When one day, a small child appears on Charlie's doorstep, Miranda and Charlie are faced with having to make some life-altering decisions in which Adam plays a bigger role than one would initially expect. Such a life-altering experience also emanates from Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein*. With its two plotlines—the first one set in 1816 and covering the get-together of Percy and Mary Shelley, Lord Byron and his physician John William Polidori, and Mary Shelley's stepsister Claire Clairmont; the other one portraying a technology convention in present-day Memphis which a young doctor called Ry (the short form of Mary, not Ryan!) is attending—the novel's events alternate between a nineteenth century and a twenty-first century setting.[14] Rosemary Booth describes in her review of the novel that it seems to be "a science-gone-amok thriller that takes place just ahead of the present,"[15] while Lisa Allardice refers to its portrayal of a "present day revolution of artificial intelligence."[16] With its close ties to Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, it is not clear whether the novel stages itself as a retelling, a rewriting, or an original story in and of itself.

Reaching back respectively to the historical context of a 1970s Thatcherite Britain[17] and the early nineteenth century with its early signs of the emergence of the science fiction genre, the two novels create a present tense that is marked by its synchronous attention to historical detail and futuristic speculation. The futuristic manifests itself in both novels through the appearance of post-human life forms: in *Machines Like Me*, through the humanoid Adams and Eves and in *Frankissstein* through

Dr Victor Stein's attempts to surpass the boundary of the human body into a transcendent, virtual consciousness. In their negotiation of post-human life forms as the next evolutionary step of humanity, both novelists unveil a concern with temporality at the center of their narratives. As part of the German podcast series *Alles Gesagt?* by ZEIT Online, McEwan was interviewed about his interest in artificial intelligence and compared its complexity to that of the human brain: "It has taken evolution 100,000 years to develop the machine called human. We have only been working on AI for 80 years."[18] Setting the sustained labor of nature against that of modern sciences, McEwan highlights how despite our understanding of artificial intelligence, this only represents the beginning to a much longer process, the outcome of which is most certainly uncertain. Similarly, Winterson claims in an interview that her inspiration for writing *Frankissstein* and basing it on Shelley's novel stems from the fact that *Frankenstein* "seems absolutely to be about the times we are living in."[19] Even more so, in her critical work on art objects, Winterson contends that her main aim in reworking well-known narratives is not to fully renounce the stories of the past: "I do not mean that in new work the past is repudiated; quite the opposite, the past is reclaimed. It is not lost to authority, it is not absorbed at a level of familiarity. It is restated and re-instated in its original vigour."[20] The tension between representations of the past, the present, and the future which emanate from these novels represents an innovative attempt at capturing (and, in fact, as I shall show in this _Article, (re-)producing) a sense of futurity which neither utopian nor dystopian imagination can envisage.

Caroline Edwards's study *Utopia and the Contemporary British Novel* presents a thought-provoking account of how contemporary British fictions exhibit alternative temporalities distant from the comfort of linearity, and which utilize these temporal arrangements to present utopian visions of the future beyond our classical conception based in utopia's optimism.[21] Even though such recent scholarship shows that the boundary between the two concepts of utopia and dystopia has become increasingly permeable in contemporary critical theory, such methodology still requires us to *identify* specific features in such writing that allow pinpointing utopian or dystopian moments (either in the text or in the reader's approach to the text). While it could be argued that such moments can be identified in *Machines Like Me* and *Frankissstein*, such an approach moves against the productivity of the temporal entanglement that

McEwan and Winterson attempt to construct in their respective novels. The commentary of both authors above testifies to a methodology which emphasizes the productive value of such temporal uncertainty. The lack of being able to precisely identify either utopian or dystopian elements is thus an integral driver in the construction of reader affect. Instead, the novels give in to a mode of speculation which leans into the boundaries of the texts' realism, yet which does not necessarily present either a utopian or dystopian vision of the future. Even though both novels briefly refer to the dream of the future, one in which artificial intelligence technologies and transcendent consciousness technology free us from the suffering to which we are subjected by our biological, human limits, at the center of their stories stand the emotional life-worlds of the coupled characters Charlie and Miranda, and Victor and Ry. How the relationships of each couple find themselves in permanent equilibrium, and in which such human complexity is acknowledged to be always messy and dynamic emulates the way in which the temporal organization of the novels does not allow for stasis or linearity. The scientific setting and context of these novels contribute to an open and experimental treatment of temporality which highlights the productivity of such writing. Thus, the article will in the following turn to an examination of how the notion of a linear temporality produced by conceptions of modernity is destabilized in *Machines Like Me* and *Frankissstein*. Particularly, section two will consider how the logic of scientific experimentation is used to question the seemingly stable truth of linear temporality. This experimental condition prepares the ground for the alternative historical scenarios which both novels construct and which will be investigated in section three. Ultimately, the article turns to a reading of the clash of temporal forms as represented by the natural cycle of human bodies and scientific truths to argue that *Machines Like Me* and *Frankissstein* try to make sense of a present moment that lacks the imaginative capabilities to conceive of the future.

2_Temporality in the Laboratory: Enlightenment, Science, and the Linearity of Time

Both *Machines Like Me* and *Frankissstein* use the logic of scientific experimentation in their stories to signal the drive to explore new temporal arrangements. McEwan's humanoid androids and Winterson's post-human life forms (be they in the form of Shelley's monster or Dr Victor Stein's experiment with consciousness) represent the embodiment of the advent of a new modernity, one in which even the structure of his-

torical knowledge, despite the novels' biggest attempts, cannot provide any certainty for the unfolding of the future. This is, amongst other ways, captured through the organization of narrative, experimenting with our contingent sense of temporality.[22] A particular point of friction here is that the novel form is often considered a historicizing one. In 1969, Jan Miel argued that "[t]he function of the novel *as a form* is not to tell us things about life, about social or psychological realities, although of course novels may also do this; their main function, however, is the function of stories in general: to sing us into historical reality, into process and growth."[23] As Miel's choice of words reflects, such a conception of the novel relies heavily on the logics of progress and might not be able to capture the contingent lack of being able to imagine a future to our capitalist times.[24] In place of such 'process and growth,' the novels investigated in this _Article suggest that through the alternative arrangement and reconfiguration of events, they can capture the dawn of the future already today without necessarily prescribing a good or a bad outcome for humanity.

This becomes particularly apparent through the novels' experiments with our understanding of the relationship between the contemporary, modernity, and the future. *Machines Like Me* demonstrates this when early in the novel, McEwan writes: "Electronics and anthropology—distant cousins whom late modernity has drawn together and bound in marriage. The child of that coupling was Adam."[25] The temporal marker of 'late modernity' creates the assumption that before a specific point in time, this coupling would have been thought impossible. Fredric Jameson asserts that

> [w]hat 'late' generally conveys is rather the sense that something has changed, that things are different, that we have gone through a transformation of the life world which is somehow decisive but incomparable with the older convulsions of modernization and industrialization, less perceptible and dramatic, somehow, but more permanent precisely because more thoroughgoing and all-pervasive.[26]

The relationship between the old and the new is also what marks discourse on how we come to define the contemporary. Susan Stanford Friedman, for example, takes a step back from asking questions about temporality to ask what the label 'contemporary' entails. She extends her analysis by posing the question: "What notion of temporality does it [the contemporary] embed? Is it the historical period that follows the 'modern'?"[27] In a similar vein, Theodore Martin asks the question: "[w]hat period are we in? What defines our immediate present?"[28] In the scholarly debate about the contemporary in its various forms, it appears that it often finds expression through its

concomitant Other, namely modernity.[29] Measured against the stagnancy of the past, the modern, or modernity, becomes the expression of progress; a future which, if only we could reach it, enables the optimization of the human species and the fulfilment of our desires. The relationship between modernity and the future is thus, at least from a historicizing perspective, one of cohabitation. This is also underlined in Jürgen Habermas's statement that "the secular concept of modernity expresses the conviction that the future has already begun: It is the epoch that lives for the future, that opens itself up to the novelty of the future."[30]

We can also understand this in opposition to the relationship between late-capitalist logic and a lack of futurity: such a plethoric understanding of modernity's futures as expressed by Habermas complementarily co-exists with the idea that the late-capitalist and neoliberalist impetus of the twenty-first century does not allow for a progressive future. Mark Schmitt critiques the forms of temporality expressed in post-capitalist discourse and shows that time is framed as "profoundly unsettled, and that ideas of progress have given way to stasis and decline."[31] Providing such a clearcut distinction, framing modernity as the only way to open up the future in light of our late-capitalist and neoliberalist world, bases this relationship primarily on what Ruffel identifies as the distinction into antiquitas and modernitas:

> Modernity—whether we call it modern times, the age of Enlightenment, or the age of modernity—[...] creates a linearity, where before, *antiquitas* and *modernitas* could coexist on a continuum, the first forming the horizon of the second, bringing it back to life, resubstantiating it.[32]

Instead of such a distinct separation, Ruffel suggests that the label of the 'co-temporal' can become an expression of anti-linearity through its concomitant accommodation of past, present, and future temporalities at the same *time*.[33] The notion of the 'co-temporal' thus periodizes without periodizing. It categorizes without categorizing. By and large, it reimagines how we can think of a diverse set of temporalities rather than the linearity to which clocks and calendars subject us. However, rather than identifying that the quality of contemporaneity is to be 'co-temporal,' I would go a step further and argue that the idea of the 'co-temporary' can be used to describe a set of recent fiction novels which expressly emphasize their 'co-temporal' quality through narrative organisation and temporally-marked motifs. While these novels are 'contemporary' novels, moving from the 'n' in 'contemporary' to a dash more accurately represents that these novels are not solely 'with' time, but make use of 'joint'

time. This is certainly work in which this special issue on 'Present Futures' partakes. This curiously ambiguous temporal construction lends itself well to observing recent trends in British literary fiction. The concomitant meaning of 'present' as a temporally marked noun but also a verb represents appropriately how the language of such novels puts the productivity of antinomical meaning to work: present futures (noun and noun), present futures (verb and noun); the different possibilities of interpretation accurately represent the labor expected of readers. I would like to suggest a third reading which relies on conceiving of 'futures' as a verb; an action that speculates, imagines, however without sacrificing substance. The novels examined in this _Article, in my understanding, radically 'future' the present in an experimental attempt to make sense of the collectively felt lack of future potential for the twenty-first century.

The embodiment of such a co-temporal moment in *Machines Like Me* is the character of Alan Turing. While the point of societal change, namely the integration of Adams and Eves into societal everyday practices, precedes the narrative in *Machines Like Me*, the novel personifies its modernizing moment through Turing. Turing was a twentieth-century British mathematician and computer scientist (arguably one of the first) who became famous for his work on decrypting enemy messages during the Second World War. To this day, Turing's work on computing and machine intelligence is considered to have changed the course of history, but particularly the speed of technological development. In his seminal paper "Computing Machinery and Intelligence,"[34] he asked the question of "Can machines think?" thus paving the way for what came to be known as the 'Turing Test.' Turing proposes an experiment that seeks to consider whether a machine—or, as Turing terms it later in the paper, a digital computer—can trick a human into convincing them of its capacity to think. The test became formative for further research into artificial intelligence and is nowadays regarded as the springboard for conceptualizations of artificial intelligence. The research paradigm evolving from this is governed by the ultimate dichotomy of 'human-machine.' This dichotomy is mirrored in *Machines Like Me* where the overarching conflict that governs the rest of the novel is already alluded to in the title. When the narrator elaborates that "Alan Turing himself had often said and written in his youth that the moment we couldn't tell the difference in behaviours between machine and person was when we must confer humanity on the machine,"[35] it signifies the paramount role that the Turing Test, and ultimately Turing as a person, have in the

construction of the fictional world of the novel. To emphasize Turing's role in the development of the novel's fictional world is to emphasize the role that scientific inquiry plays in the attempt to construct an alternative future (and consequently our sense of it).

Similarly, *Frankissstein* evokes such a scientific context through its relationship to Shelley's monster and the novel's context of Victor Stein's experiment. However, whereas *Machines Like Me* pins the possibility for an accelerated technological development onto a revisionist history of Turing's work, Winterson's novel emphasizes the boundary between scientifically ethical and unethical practices as a way forward. When Victor reveals to Ry that he has a secret underground laboratory, a *different* one to the one in which they usually hold their conversations, he criticizes that "[t]hings are so scrutinized, monitored, peer-reviewed, collaborated on, so many forms to fill in, grants awarded, progress reports, overseers, evaluators, assessors, committees, audits, plus public interest, not to mention the press. Sometimes things need to be done a little more circumspectly."[36] The necessity to construct an alternative scientific space, and thereby an alternative scientific approach, highlights the extent to which even the sciences have given in to the logic of late capitalism. Instead, Victor's experiment of creating a transcended consciousness, one that does not rely on the material form of the human body, becomes representative of how the institution of normative and standardized sciences is no longer able to accommodate the accelerating progress of humanity. In an even earlier conversation between Ry and Victor, the scientist explains why the logic of the Cartesian mind-body dualism has endured despite the advent of scientific discovery: "[Ry] We are bodies, I said. [Victor] Every religion disagrees with you. Certainly, since the Enlightenment, science has disagreed with religion but now we are returning, or arriving, at a deeper insight into what it means to be human by which I mean it is a stage on the way to being transhuman."[37] The oxymoronic confrontation of the temporal markers 'returning' and 'arriving,' one signifying a past relationship seeping into the present and the other a predictive future relationship, accentuate the entangled relationship between past, present, and future which Victor's scientific exploration creates. In both novels, the idea of scientific experimentation thus becomes symbolic of an openness towards a coupled understanding of temporality. Instead of the certainty that Enlightenment linearity provides, McEwan and Winterson embrace the uncertainty of their scientific experiments with

time. Taking such experimentation even further, the novels reach far back to histori-cal and biblical narratives. By transporting forms of cultural history (i.e., the past) into the present of the fictional worlds of the novels, the future of technological de-velopment is staged in the comfort of a historical context that provides points of refer-ence to the general reader.

3_Alternative Histories: From Adam and Eve to Speculating about Tomorrow

Both novels make use of Western religious references to represent how the temporal-ity of their respective fictional worlds can be interpreted as a new beginning. While Caroline Edwards observes that narrative tropes of extra-human agencies in contem-porary British fiction stand in opposition to a cultural approximation to secularism and the sanctity of narrative, the two novels forcefully integrate post-secular imagery with secular thought.[38] This is nowhere more obvious than in the novels' treatment of post-human life forms and the subsequent suspension of mortality. Biblical reference is used to conceptualize the event of the post-human as a creation story of its own; a new beginning that spurs hopes as much as it sparks anxieties. In *Frankissstein*, it is mostly Mary Shelley's plotline that alludes to such biblical reference, for example in the form of the story of Noah's Ark. The image of the Ark is transported to the present of Mary Shelley and Byron, embedding their processes of writing within the larger context of human creation: "This is our Ark, I said, peopled here, afloat, wait-ing for the waters to abate. What do you imagine they talked about, on the Ark, said Byron [...] And so we are back to our floated Ark. God had the right idea. Begin again."[39] Their conversation emerges from the act of writing, respectively creating new ghost stories to be shared with one another. In as much as Shelley's writing of her novel signals a departure from the human form, it represents a post-human begin-ning. This is also developed in the second plotline of the novel in which Stein's inter-est in transcending the boundaries of the human body comes to represent a new be-ginning, as well as the eradication of the 'issue' of mortality. Like Noah's Ark, the characters of *Frankissstein* find themselves sailing into a future full of uncertainty. *Machines Like Me* similarly channels the Book of Genesis through its characters' namesakes, Adam and Eve.[40] Throughout human history, the origin story of Adam and Eve's fall from grace has been a constitutive narrative by which much of our so-cial experience has been structured.[41] As much as the naming of the humanoid ma-

chines as 'Adam' and 'Eve' in the novel represents a new origin story for the development of humanity as a species, they concurrently represent its potential end. Early in the novel, it is established that the realization of the Adams and Eves was "the first step towards the fulfilment of an ancient dream, the beginning of the long lesson we would teach ourselves."[42] Reading the dream not as a vision of slumber but one of future ambitions, the juxtaposition of 'ancient' and 'dream' represents the temporal spectrum within which the idea of Adam and Eve is cast as relevant. While the naming of the androids thus stands for the idea of the origin of the human, it also carries with it a larger temporal baggage. Unlike in *Frankissstein*, however, where the outcome to Victor's experiment is ambiguous, in *Machines Like Me* the experiment of the Adams and Eves fails. While they show practical and logical superiority compared to the humans of the novel, their configuration fails to cope with the larger moral issues of human experience. This is nowhere better represented than in Turing's statement that "there's nothing in all their beautiful code that could prepare Adam and Eve for Auschwitz."[43] When some of the Adams and Eves start destroying their own minds, committing artificial suicide, the knowledge that even androids cannot deal with the complexity of human existence returns the story to an origin the text does not share with us: namely a society in which the future of the co-existence of human and post-human forms is uncertain. As such, biblical narrative and the idea of the post-human are paralleled in that both enable the perception of a new beginning.

One of the more overt details through which *Machines Like Me* and *Frankissstein* construct an alternative sense of temporality is the seamless integration of historically real events and people and fictional creation. This way, they construct an alternative historical setting. Historically, the form of the 'alternative history' constitutes a sub-genre of the science fiction genre. In 1983, Darko Suvin describes the sub-genre as

> that form of SF in which an alternative locus (in space, time, etc.) that shares the material and causal verisimilitude of the writer's world is used to articulate different possible solutions of societal problems, those problems being of sufficient importance to require an alteration in the overall history of the narrated world.[44]

In their playful conglomeration of realism and speculation, narratives of alternative history, Suvin writes, become "analogous to (and midway between) a formal game like chess and a military general staff's 'playing through' of realistic alternatives for future campaigns."[45] As such, the speculative capabilities that such writing offers to its readers encourages a different form of temporality beyond the separation into his-

torical knowledge and futuristic speculation. McEwan's re-envisioning of the historical figures of Margaret Thatcher and Alan Turing becomes emblematic of how the future of artificial intelligence reaches back to essential questions about the meaning of being human, as well as about the future of humanity. It is in light of McEwan's reworking of the Thatcher era of politics that the novel imagines a society in which "[s]cience is a modern form of authority, *par excellence*,"[46] and where Thatcher's political impact is used to underline the temporal conundrum of either adhering to past traditions or embracing future potentials.[47] When Caroline Levine writes about literary forms that "[t]hey can be picked up and moved to new contexts,"[48] she underlines in how far these forms of social organization underlie the logics of precursory eras. *Machines Like Me* replicates this understanding of the political sphere by actively addressing such parallelisms. For example, when Thatcher must defend her political choices in Prime Minister's Question Time, the novel asserts that "[o]ne commentator invoked the gladiatorial combats of the Late Roman Republic."[49] Paralleling the event of the spectator in both ancient history and Thatcher's performance in the House of Commons creates a temporal atmosphere which seeks to underline the concurrent availability of such temporal forms. The tracing of historical precedents pervades the narrative of *Machines Like Me*. In the first instance, conceiving of Thatcher's presence as a form that moves across times helps understand the temporal conglomerate that the novel is creating. Yet, rather than conceptualizing this as a 'movement,' I argue that the novel emphasizes the concurrent availability of such temporally distinct forms at all times.

Arguing that the Falklands crisis is "a crisis of 'antiquated character', oddly untimely and echoing the grandeur of the Empire to which the left could only react,"[50] Stuart Hall emphasizes how this crisis ultimately addressed both old problems as well as new challenges. In *Machines Like Me*, this historical moment inhabits a similar place in that it is introduced early in the novel and reappears every now and then. Toward the end of the novel, ultimately the narrator remarks that "[t]he Falklands Catastrophe, as it was now called, came back to destroy her [Thatcher]. This time, no popular inclination to forgiveness in the cause of national unity."[51] Even more so, the narrative comes to the conclusion that Thatcher's politics, with its lack of solving existential issues such as housing, healthcare, crime rates, climate challenges, and global poverty, remains intact.[52] Thus, even in its alternative fictional world, with the rise of

artificial intelligence as arguably the missing piece to solving every human problem, the novel fails to present solutions to these ancient problems.[53] The temporal form of the Falkland crisis as both a crisis of antique and modern character comes to symbolize the way in which the novel presents a temporality that no longer relies on the logics of distinction. With its alternating representation of the two plotlines, *Frankissstein*'s narrative organization also signposts the reader to structural similarities between the nineteenth century and twenty-first century. Such an arrangement allows for what Susan Stanford Friedman calls "[s]uch recycled forms of representation [which] can pressure the contemporary political and social order by exposing its histories and imagining alternative futures that do not repeat the evils of the past."[54] In her monograph on the works of Jeanette Winterson, Susana Onega asserts that Winterson's *oeuvre* is marked by "its stress upon instability of natural forms, expressive of its rejection of the notion of the self as a coherent, indivisible and continuous whole, a basic tenet of realist fiction."[55] Winterson's novel relies much more on the blurring of the relationship between form and time. Like *Machines Like Me*, her writing fully trusts in the convergence of idea and form. The statement "I sense what I cannot say, except in the form of a story,"[56] uttered by Mary Shelley, comes to be representative of the correlation between idea and form. Winterson's language game invites the reader to think outside of discernible categories before they can settle on one interpretation, for example, when Ry remarks that "[i]t's why we are here today. ... I don't mean existentially Why We Are Here Today I mean why the Tec-X-Po is here. In Memphis. It's the kind of thing organisers like; a tie-in between a city and an idea. Memphis and *Frankenstein* are both two hundred years old."[57] Therefore, the relationship between temporal forms, ideas, and the way in which the two novels functionalize these needs heavier theoretical groundwork.

4_Temporal Forms: Bodies, Death, Reproduction, and P vs. NP

Claiming that "literary forms offer us an especially vivid demonstration of the productive character of antinomies, indeed of the attempt to push oneself beyond such antinomies' limits in the search of pastures new,"[58] Lionel Ruffel acknowledges the productive force within literary forms. In his definition of form, which is always "conflicted, multiply distributed, and [a] plastic site where truths specific to literature are rendered contingent but also given their only opening to the world,"[59] he fore-

grounds that forms are not merely inherent in texts but are also always 'speculative.'
Such recent moves towards a new formalism (as it is represented here by the work of
Caroline Levine, Lionel Ruffel, and Tom Eyers) re-configure formalism from a static
conception of forms to one of dynamicity and plurality. Rather than a formalism that
seeks to identify neatly separable units that can be logically sorted into different cate-
gories, their formalism uses the logics of forms not to argue for distinction, but rather
for nondistinction. As was previously established, "the new century has witnessed a
collective failure of our temporal and spatial sense, a confusion about where and
when we are."[60] Rather than turning towards the idea of regaining a sense of a linear
or cyclical temporal organization, it is currently a sense of the temporal convergence
of past, present, and future that lies at the heart of our sociocultural constitution.
Jameson argues that such forms represent temporality based on the societal and his-
torical contexts in which we live and therefore temporality finds expression through
our cultural production.[61] However, this undermines the productive character of tem-
poral forms in literary fiction, an argument that has also been investigated by Tom
Eyers in his study on *Speculative Formalism*. Here, Eyers argues that "[t]o write of a
'speculative' formalism is simply to acknowledge that literature, far from being only
a mimetic vehicle or a site of endless interiority, is a peculiar site of *production* in its
own right, one whose peculiarities are what allow it an awkward connection to its
various others."[62] The speculative drive of forms is a particularly productive way of
dissecting how temporality, and particularly futurity, is produced by the two novels as
they radiate an overt awareness of the relevance of temporal forms. For example, this
is reflected in a conversation between Ry and Ron (the designer of the sex dolls sold
at the Memphis convention mentioned earlier), when Ry asserts that "Plato's theory
in *Republic* is that somewhere else there is a world of Ideal Forms. Our world is a
poor and smudged copy of the perfect forms. Instinctively we know this—and we
know there is nothing we can do about it."[63] Picking up on the fact that Percy Shelley
reads about Plato in the first plotline, the novel underlines how a concern about form
seems to be transcending time. From Plato to Percy Shelley, to the designer of 21st-
century sex dolls, the fragility of the human form seems to be a transhistorical phe-
nomenon with which notions of the posthuman are negotiated in the novel. This be-
comes nowhere clearer than in Victor's obsession with the idea of a transcendent con-
sciousness and the striving for a disconnect between the human and its bodily habitat:

> Once out of the body you will be able to choose any form you like, and change is as often as you like. Animal, vegetable, mineral. The gods appeared in human form and animal form, and they changed others into tress or birds. Those were stories about the future. We have always known that we are not limited to the shape we inhabit.[64]

The novel takes its inspiration from Shelley's monster here: Shelley's *Frankenstein* has often been read in regard to its depiction of the unnaturalness of the monster's form as sewn together from various parts of dead people. Sak Zitter connects this understanding of unnaturalness to the theme of organicity and argues that the stitching together of body parts, and the substantial intervention in the human timeline, represents a mechanical and inorganic development through which the monster sets itself apart from the human.[65] The human form of the body as a vessel necessarily bound to time therefore is configured as an insufficient prerequisite for the coming of the future.

The representations of death and reproduction, in the context of the post-human progress in these novels emphasize the temporal relevance such human processes have for the human form. As much as a new-found temporal organization initiated by technological progress alters our perception of time, fiction suggests that there are natural forms of temporal experience by which such experience is measured. Levine, for example, identifies this to be the 'tempos of nature': "shifts in seasons, patterns of breathing and heart rates, the body's frequent need for food and sleep, and the reproductive body continue to structure temporal experience even when these have been mechanized and manipulated."[66] Both the Adams and Eves of *Machines Like Me* and the sex-robots in *Frankissstein* represent the stagnation of the future through their lack of reproductive functions. The future of humanity, as it is envisaged through these humanoid beings, becomes unsustainable. Reconfiguring the story of the human from one of reproduction towards a perspective of ideal design, a vision "where man is seen intent in re-creating life, in re-producing a more perfect image of himself,"[67] Winterson's inception of a transcendent consciousness, based on Shelley's undead monster, represents a disruption of the natural human life cycles as a representation of a future that has arrived. We can also see such an intervention in McEwan's novel where the irony of human intervention into reproductive systems is conveyed through the punitive measures against Turing because of his homosexuality. Turing explains to Charlie:

> [i]t was explained to me that if I pleaded or was found guilty, I could choose to be treated rather than punished. Regular injections of oestrogen. Chemical castration, so-called. I knew I wasn't ill, but I decided to go for it. Not simply to stay out of prison. I was curious. I could rise above the whole business by regarding it as an experiment.[68]

Turing's chemical castration, configured as an intervention into human reproductive functions, becomes emblematic of the temporal disruption of the human life cycle constructed by the post-human in the novel. Here is where historical reality and futuristic speculation clash most overtly: even though Turing's subjection to chemical castration is a historical fact, this historical fact speaks to futuristic concerns about disrupting the natural cycles of human reproduction in the context of the novel's concern with the post-human. In *Machines Like Me*, historical reality can thus function as a meaning-making tool to speculative futures which need yet to manifest. Such an approach of negotiating future concerns about the disruption of natural human cycles by signposting to historical moments where such disruptions already exist, becomes even more powerful when taken to the level of existential time.[69]

Another form through which our human existence is marked is that of the linear relationship between birth and death. Whereas naturally we think of life as clearly marked by its beginning through the process of birth and its end through the process of death, *Machines Like Me* and *Frankissstein* destabilize such temporal markers by deconstructing their meaning. In *Frankissstein* we see this most clearly through the nineteenth-century plotline of the inception of Shelley's original novel. As a creature brought to life from death, the temporal cycle of the natural world, governed by the linearity from birth to death, is forcefully disrupted. However, the novel establishes that this does not have to go as far as the active manipulation of human life forms: It is "the reality of death"[70] with which Mary Shelley is faced when she recollects her memories about giving birth to a still-born child. In its merging of both, birth and death, the theme of infant death necessitates the loss of temporal orientation in that a shared future is prohibited in as much as a potential past is denied. A similar subversion of linearity can be found in *Machines Like Me*. The Adams and Eves are not conceived through reproductive functions but rather designed. When Adam's moral betrayal of Miranda becomes unbearable for Charlie, he decides to destroy Adam by slamming a hammer into Adam's head. After a moment of uncertainty, the narrative remarks: "Then his head dropped sideways and his shoulders slumped, though he re-

mained in a sitting position. As I walked round the table to look at his face, we heard a continuous high-pitched sound coming from his chest […] He was still alive."[71] After Adam backs up the files stored in his 'mind,' it becomes clear that while Charlie and Miranda can destroy his 'body,' they will not be able to keep Adam from pursuing any of the plans he had shared with them before Charlie's attack. Adam's capability to transcend the boundary of his mechanical body represents a significant rupture in the human temporal cycle. Additionally, the ability to recall the past at any given time takes the humanoid entities in McEwan's novel right to the cusp of the future.

In a final turn, *Machines Like Me* and *Frankissstein*, through their staging of a future that has already arrived, consider whether thinking about the future through the present might offer a more viable episteme. In McEwan's novel, the mathematical problem of 'P vs. NP' becomes the playground for such a negotiation. Within the boundaries of a simplified explanation, the P vs. NP problem addresses the question of how efficiently a machine can compute certain problems.[72] By the term 'efficiently,' the problem refers to the processing time that a computer uses to come up with a correct solution to a problem which has been fed into the machine. Dividing two different sets of problems (P being problems for which a simple solution exists, and NP being complex problems for which an immense, unsustainable time of computation is needed), the efficiency of these two classes is divided into P = polynomial time (tractable) and NP = non-deterministic (or exponential) polynomial time (nontractable).[73] For the purpose of my argument here, it suffices to know that polynomial time corresponds to an easy solution within a realistic amount of time, whereas nondeterministic time corresponds to an unrealistic (and probably incomputable) amount of time. The problem advised by the Clay Mathematics Institute can be broken down to the basic assumption that if there was theoretical proof of the condition that P=NP, it would mean that all complex problems are essentially easily solvable. In the novel, staging a reality in which Alan Turing has proven that P=NP introduces a guiding principle: the novel is thus able to use both its form as an alternative history as well as its embeddedness in the extratextual present to showcase that the present (P) and the non-present (NP) are mutually constitutive of the narrative at hand (Present=Non-Present). It is here that McEwan's novel showcases its capability to invent and speculate most strongly. As a novel of ideas, *Machines Like Me* showcases that literature's capacity to invent has not been replaced by our increased trust in the sciences.[74] The

novel symbolizes such a conception of time through its ruminations on chess: arguably a game in which recent discourse on artificial intelligence has sparked controversial debates about the accelerating progress of the post-human. How chess becomes representative of concerns about temporality becomes clear in the following passage:

> In the mid-fifties, a computer the size of this room beat an American and then a Russian grandmaster at chess. I was closely involved. It was a number-crunching set-up, very inelegant in *retrospect*. It was fed thousands of games. At every move, it ran through all the possibilities at speed. [...] The long history of brilliant manoeuvres by the great masters were now irrelevant to the programming. Here are the rules, we said. Just win in your own sweet way. Immediately, the game was redefined and moved into areas beyond human comprehension. […] Between breakfast and lunch the computer quietly outclassed centuries of human chess.[75]

What is emphasized here is that the retrospective input was not sufficient for the computer to win the game. Instead, the computer relied on the pure logics of the game, thus factoring out the set of human experience(s) which had previously informed its opponent's and its own game. Both historical hindsight and futurist speculation fail as separate epistemes that lead to the computer's victory. Instead, the computer becomes representative of the highest order by which the P vs. NP problem informs the novel, namely the question of whether the only way to reach the ever-distancing future is through coming to terms with the fact that the present is co-temporal. Thus, the institution of contemporary English fiction, as it is practiced by McEwan and Winterson, can help provide orientation in a world in which directionality has become a scarce resource.

5_Conclusion

Machines Like Me and *Frankissstein* create alternative historical settings and use temporally marked forms, such as historical figures, the post-human, and ideas about computed time, to experiment with new ways of constructing a sense of futurity. The novels deconstruct the epistemological status of science to showcase the powerful forces of literary speculation: the modelling of an alternative temporality—one in which the progressive and linear idea of the future is destabilized by making us aware of our embeddedness in past forms—allows contemporary fiction to experiment with future scenarios despite our apparent lack of a sense of futurity. Under the umbrella category of 'co(n)temporary' fiction, such writing which explicitly engages with its

own 'co-temporality' can thus be understood as a distinct form of contemporary fiction writing. Winterson's fiction asserts that "[t]he brain is a pattern-making machine. What I hope to do today is to retrieve some of those patterns,"[76] to show that the logics of modernity are wholly artificial and should no longer answer to a system of distinction based on past, present, and future. In the apt words of Lionel Ruffel: "[T]he modern framework is flooded by a multiplicity that it cannot contain and that shows it up for what it really is—an imaginary, an illusion, an imaginary of distinction and of separation."[77] Through their generic amalgamation of aspects of the science novel, speculative fiction, and the novel of ideas, *Machines Like Me* and *Frankissstein* create a world in which nothing is certain and everything goes. The idea of technological, post-human development is negotiated through an intense engagement with science as a fallible epistemology. Nevertheless, retaining an inquisitive nature which always mechanically buzzes in the background of these novels, the form of these novels becomes the playground for an exploration towards a new temporal arrangement of human experience. Ruffel's notion of co-temporality is thus as much a symptom of our experience of the contemporary age as it presents a method which puts the speculative capabilities of fiction to work as both state and action. The literary experiments of McEwan and Winterson, while not ultimately presenting us with a definitively new-found sense of futurity, show how we can think the future beyond the logic of progress and growth. This speculative and imaginative force, beyond the distinct positive or negative value that either a utopian or dystopian reading would prescribe, embraces the semantic subtlety of the statement 'there is no alternative.' It openly emphasizes the productivity of human curiosity over wishful thinking and dreadful concern. It dissuades from assuming an exclusive duality—that of approaching the future of the twenty-first century by either looking to our shared past or to our shared future—and favours embracing the productive co-existence of all temporal forms of experience at all times ('there is no *one* alternative'). It can therefore contribute to making meaning out of nothing. The lack of a definitive sense of futurity, created by our current global conditions and experienced by so many, is therefore configured by these novels as an opportunity which allows humanity to grow beyond its past mistakes, present anxieties, and future imaginations.

_Endnotes

1   Ian McEwan, *Machines Like Me and People Like You* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2019), 129.

2   Jeanette Winterson, *Frankissstein: A Love Story* (London: Vintage, 2019), 140.

3   Many thanks to Heinz Antor, Roman Bartosch, and Sarah Youssef who have helped me shape the idea for this research.

4   For a current and thought-provoking interpretation of these proclamations, see Mark Schmitt, *Spectres of Pessimism: A Cultural Logic of the Worst* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 8–10.

5   "Inflation Rates in the United Kingdom," WorldData.info, accessed February 8, 2023, <https://www.worlddata.info/europe/united-kingdom/inflation-rates.php#:~:text=During%20the%20observation%20period%20from,year%20inflation%20rate%20was%208.8%25>.

6   Margaret Thatcher, "Speech to Conservative Women's Conference," (1980), Margaret Thatcher Foundation, accessed February 8, 2023, <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104368>, emphasis added.

7   Thatcher, "Speech to Conservative Women's Conference."

8   Cf. Colin Drury, "How Similar Is Liz Truss to Margaret Thatcher," in *The Independent*, September 3, 2022, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/liz-truss-margaret-thatcher-similarities-b2159085.html>.

9   Cf. Robert Ralston, "Liz Truss Is Trying to Channel Margaret Thatcher: Why It's Not Working," in *The Washington Post*, October 17, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/made-by-history/2022/10/17/truss-thatcher-britain-decline-conservatives/>; Daniel Finkelstein, "Liz Truss Has Learnt the Wrong Lessons From Thatcher," in *The Times*, October 11, 2022, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/truss-has-learnt-wrong-lessons-from-thatcher-cwmhgzxf6>.

10 Russell West-Pavlov, *Temporalities* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 6.

11 Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: NYU, 2005); Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York: NYU Press, 2019).

12 For a helpful and recent overview of such works, see Caroline Edwards, *Utopia and the Contemporary British Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019). While Edwards examines a range of works that reflects the literary and cultural diversity of the British Isles (therefore referring to the 'British' novel), I have chosen to label the novels investigated in this essay as 'English.' It needs to be acknowledged that the literary works of two decidedly English authors, McEwan and Winterson, do not necessarily represent Northern Irish, Welsh, or Scottish voices. This holds particularly true as both novels can also be read as critiques of the resurgence of nationalist discourse in reaction to Brexit—a political condition arguably caused by English voters rather than Northern Irish, Welsh, and Scottish voters. Additionally, the increasing socio-political discourse on Scottish and Northern Irish independence also contribute to a taxonomy whereby 'British' might soon become a label from which some citizens want to distance themselves.

13 Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 8–9.

14 The descriptor 'two plotlines' to some extent does not do justice to the entangled nature of the two plots. An alternative would be 'two timelines,' however this is equally counter-constructive to the argument of this article.

15 Rosemary Booth, "Mary Shelley in the Age of A.I," *The Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide* 2, no. 2 (2020), <https://glreview.org/article/mary-shelley-in-the-age-of-a-i/>.

16 Lisa Allardice, "Jeanette Winterson: 'I Did Worry about Looking at Sex Bots'," in *The Guardian*, May 18, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/may/18/jeanette-winterson-frankisstein-ai>.

17 See Matthew Worley, *No Future: Punk, Politics and British Youth Culture, 1976–1984* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 216.

18 Ian McEwan, "'Why Do You Want to Live Forever?'," *Zeit Online*, Podcast: Alles Gesagt?, December 28, 2019, <https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/2019-12/ian-mcewan-interviewpodcast-alles-gesagt?utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F>.

19 Jeanette Winterson, "The Waterstone's Interview," Waterstones on YouTube, May 28, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E6W9OhGNcKY>, here: 00:00:40.

20 Jeanette Winterson, *Art Object: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* (London: Vintage, 1996), 12.

21 Edwards, *Utopia and the Contemporary British Novel*. When speaking here of 'optimism,' I mean the theoretical and conceptual political idea of optimism rather than the affective or emotional component, similarly to how Mark Schmitt separates these two spheres in his analysis of 'pessimism'; Schmitt, *Spectres of Pessimism*, 6.

22 The 'novel of idea,' as a critical and generic label, is a fragile concept in that every novel, in one way or another, is concerned with ideas. However, as I shall show later in the _Article, the close relationship between idea and historical form in McEwan's and Winterson's writing necessitates a way to express such a relationship not only in its linguistic instance but also on a more global level, namely genre. Additionally, neither McEwan nor Winterson appear to believe that fragility is necessarily negatively connotated and, as such, can turn such fragility into a site of productivity.

23 Jan Miel, "Temporal Form in the Novel," *MLN* 68, no. 6 (1969): 916–930, here: 930.

24 Cf. Edwards' argument that "[t]he desuturing of absolute time offered by *fictions of the not* yet thus represents a shared critique of capitalist modernity, with its violent exploitation of the world's natural resources, non-human subjects, postcolonial and feminist 'others', and human potential or flourishing," *Utopia and the Contemporary British Novel*, 68.

25 McEwan, *Machines Like Me,* 13.

26 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2007), xxi.

27 Susan Stanford Friedman, "'Introduction: The Past in the Present – Temporalities of the Contemporary'," in *Contemporary Revolutions: Turning Back to the Future in 21st-Century Literature and Art*, ed. Susan Stanford Friedman (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 3–20, here: 5–6.

28 Theodore Martin, "The Currency of the Contemporary," in *Postmodern | Postwar – And After: Rethinking American Literature*, eds. Jason Gladstone, Andrew Hoberek, and Daniel Worden (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016), 227–239, here: 230.

29 The question of the 'contemporary' as a structuring principle finds expression in various different linguistic forms. Giorgio Agamben refers to it as 'contemporariness,' whereas Theodore Martin, for example, refers to it as 'contemporaneity,' cf. Giorgio Agamben, "What is the Contemporary?," in *What Is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, ed. Giorgio Agamben, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), 39–54; Theodore Martin, "The Currency of the Contemporary."

30 Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (Cambridge, MA.: Polity, 2007), 5.

31   Mark Schmitt, "Beyond the Future: Crisis and Precarious Temporality in Post-Capitalist Discourse," *Journal for the Study of British Culture* 24, no. 2 (2017): 189–203, here: 189.

32   Lionel Ruffel, *Brouhaha: Worlds of the Contemporary*, trans. Raymond MacKenzie, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 20.

33   An alternative framework with which to read this temporal coexistence here would be Mark Fisher's ideas on hauntology and temporality. Fisher argues that "[t]he future is always experienced as a haunting: a virtuality that already impinges on the present, conditioning expectations and motivating cultural production." However, hauntological approaches, in my understanding, uphold a distinctness between past, present, and future, whereby the present's 'hauntedness' by the past and the future privileges an understanding of the present rather as a stitched-up, Frankensteinian construct of past, present, and future. See Mark Fisher, "What Is Hauntology?," *Film Quarterly* 66, no.1 (2012): 16–24, here: 16. For an excellent theorization of how hauntology figures in contemporary English writing, see Katy Shaw, *Hauntology: The Presence of the Past in Twenty-First Century English Literature* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

34   Alan Turing, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," *Mind* 94, (1950), 433–460.

35   McEwan, *Machines Like Me*, 84.

36   Winterson, *Frankissstein*, 163.

37   Winterson, *Frankissstein*, 148.

38   Edwards, *Utopia and the Contemporary British Novel*, 65–66.

39   Winterson, *Frankissstein*, 7–10.

40   Cf. Daniela Carpi, "Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me and People Like You*: Can a Machine Be 'Killed'?," in *Law and Culture in the Age of Technology*, ed. Daniela Carpi (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2022), 77–90, here: 78.

41   Cf. Stephen Greenblatt, *The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve: The Story that Created Us* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018).

42   McEwan, *Machines Like Me*, 1.

43   McEwan, *Machines Like Me*, 181.

44   Darko Suvin, "Victorian Science Fiction, 1871–85: The Rise of the Alternative History Sub-Genre" *Science Fiction Studies* 10, no. 2 (1983): 148–169, here: 149.

45   Suvin, "The Rise of the Alternative History Sub-Genre," 150.

46   Jon Agar, *Science Policy under Thatcher* (London: UCL Press, 2019), 262.

47   This engagement with Thatcherite policy also highlights a substantial exploration of nationalist tendencies which come to be paralleled with political attitudes found as part of the Brexit referendum. Cf. Will Slocombe, "Post-National Futures in National Contexts: Reading 'British' Fictions of Artificial Intelligence," in *New Approaches to the Twenty-First Century Anglophone Novel*, eds. Sibylle Baumbach and Birgit Neumann (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 195–215.

48   Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 25.

49   McEwan, *Machines Like Me*, 112.

50   Stuart Hall, "The Empire Strikes Back," in *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left,* ed. Stuart Hall (London/New York: Verso, 1988), 68–74, here: 70.

51   McEwan, *Machines Like Me*, 256.

52   McEwan, *Machines Like Me*, 297.

53 I would like to thank the peer reviewer for pointing out that such a negative outcome in the two novels investigated here appears to be aligning well with pessimist philosophy, especially as conceptualized by Joshua Foa Dienstag. While I agree that on the surface of it, the lack of a positive outcome in these novels could be interpreted as pessimist, I hesitate to label them as such, as the interpersonal relationships between the two main protagonists (Charlie and Miranda, and Ry and Victor) appears to be the center of the story at the end of the novels. Even though those relationships also do not appear to have a conventional happy end *per se*, both Charlie and Ry (the characters through which most of the narrative is focalized) seem to value the time they were able to spend with each other. Thus, rather than framing any societal or interpersonal complexities in the novel as either optimistic or pessimistic, it is from the unresolved and uncertain future potentialities that the narrative draws its imaginative power.

54 Friedman, "Introduction: The Past in the Present – Temporalities of the Contemporary," 10.

55 Susana Onega, *Jeanette Winterson* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 2.

56 Winterson, *Frankissstein*, 67.

57 Winterson, *Frankissstein*, 27.

58 Ruffel, *Brouhaha*, 3.

59 Ruffel, *Brouhaha*, 6.

60 Boxall, *Twenty-First Century Fiction*, 21.

61 Fredric Jameson, "The End of Temporality," *Critical Inquiry* 29, no. 4 (2003): 695–718, here: 718.

62 Tom Eyers, *Speculative Formalism: Literature, Theory, and the Critical Present* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2017), 4.

63 Winterson, *Frankissstein*, 295.

64 Winterson, *Frankissstein*, 115.

65 See Zak Sitter, "Inorganic Intentions: Organizing Form from *Frankenstein* to de Man," *Literature Compass* 13, no. 10 (2016): 655–662. Doi: 10.1111/lic3.12351.

66 Levine, *Forms*, 50–51.

67 Carpi, "Can a Machine Be 'Killed'?," 77.

68 McEwan, *Machines Like Me*, 300.

69 Ry's transgender body can also be read as manifestation of an orientation towards futurity, which becomes obvious when Victor and Ry decide to sleep with each other for the first time and Victor remarks: "[w]eren't we just saying that in the future we will be able to choose our bodies? And to change them? Think of yourself as future-early," Winterson, *Frankissstein*, 65. In framing the temporality of transness as the future of the form of the human body, Winterson positions herself against critical voices which correlate such a queer temporality with the end of the human race. Abigail Rine, for example, notices regarding Winterson's earlier fiction that "[t]he queer, in fact, is society's death drive, always signifying the undoing and destruction of heteronormativity" and in claiming this picks up on the main idea in Lee Edelman's seminal book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. In *Frankissstein,* Winterson revisits this conceptualization of queer temporality and shows how Ry's transness is a legible way to make tangible our contemporary sense of past, present, and future: Ry's body is marked in its doubleness of past and present, yet concomitantly signifies the future of the human form as unbound from the body we inhabit. Abigail Rine, "Jeanette Winterson's Love Intervention: Rethinking the Future," in *Sex, Gender, and Time*

in Fiction and Culture, eds. Ben Davies and Jana Funke (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 70–86, here: 71.

[70] Winterson, *Frankissstein*, 115.

[71] McEwan, *Machines Like Me*, 278.

[72] For a comprehensive yet highly technical and theoretical description of the problem, see Stephen Cook, "The P versus NP Problem," Clay Mathematics Institute.com, accessed August 29, 2023, <https://www.claymath.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/pvsnp.pdf>.

[73] William P. Hosch, "P versus NP Problem," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, March 4, 2023, <https://www-britannica-com.ezproxy.st-andrews.ac.uk/science/P-versus-NP-problem>.

[74] See Michael LeMahieu, "The Novel of Ideas," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ian McEwan*, ed. Dominic Head (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 60–74, here: 72.

[75] McEwan, *Machines Like Me*, 177–178.

[76] Winterson, *Frankissstein*, 268.

[77] Ruffel, *Brouhaha*, 175.