The Cure for Death: Fantasies of Longevity and Immortality in Speculative Fiction

Teresa BOTELHO
Department of Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures, NOVA School of Social Sciences and Humanities, Lisbon, Portugal
Email: Tdbs@fcsh.unl.pt
ORCID: 0000 0003 12568771

Abstract
Anxiety about old age and mortality, a constant and cross-cultural reaction to the finitude of life and evanescence of youth, has fed multiple fantasies of immortality that frequently also incorporate the triumphant regeneration of the body. But while in the nineteenth century these fantasies, ungrounded on any scientific possibility, focused on the social and psychological disorientation and disruptions of the defeat of death and ageing, the late twentieth and twenty-first century fictions, invoking possible extrapolations of contemporary scientific and technological knowledge, have used the tropes of immortality and the rejuvenated body to serve either dystopian visions related with problematics of distribution of power, or to signify the utopian techno-optimist promises of trans-humanism.

This paper will discuss these creative imaginings of the defeat of embodied decay using three speculative novels that position themselves as signposts along this spectrum: Walter Bessant’s *The Inner House* (1888), a conservative anti-utopian reflection on the social and cultural costs of immortality; Bruce Sterling’s *Holy Fire* (1996), a cyberpunk novel where access to permanent health and youth acts as a social divider between deserving elites and the masses condemned to grow old; and Cory Doctorow’s *Down and out in the Magic Kingdom* (2003), a post-singularity satirical novel where in a post-scarcity future society all enjoy the possibilities of body and life plasticity.

**Keywords:** Immortality; Longevity; Speculative Fiction; Singularity; Dystopia