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ROUNDTABLE I: HEALTH HUMANITIES

Cognitive Augmentation in Speculative Writing

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Abstract

This article explores how predictions about future nanotechnological and neuropharmaceutical applications to medicine further anti-ageing discourse in the present. Products of both research areas enable physiological augmentation, with uses way beyond accepted traditional goals of medicine. But most "nanodreams" have not come to fruition, yet; as such, much popular scientific writing about nanotechnology is "thoroughly science-fictional" in how it imagines its future. Projections about these technologies contribute to devaluing the ageing experience and neglecting the need to address challenges of ageing in the present. To make these points, this article will read two speculative texts alongside one another: a piece of creative science fiction and a predictive popular science account. Ray Kurzweil's *How to Create a Mind* propagates brain–computer interfaces, and Jeffrey Moore's *The Memory Artists* deals with neuropharmaceuticals. Such parallel reading risks conflating different genres, narrative forms and contexts, obfuscating the purpose and possibilities of either genre. But it helps illustrate how ideas of an augmented human species have begun structuring social belief systems that shine through creative writing that joins in pitching, rather than effectively critiquing, these technologies as holding the fountain of youth.

Keywords: ageing; care; computer–brain interfaces; dementia; neuropharmaceuticals

The stories about ageing we listen to are essential to the decisions we make about older people. They have the power to help us see the connection between the general and the particular: how our experience of ageing (which happens in the present) relates to the stories told by scientists (which are about the future).[1] In this article, I will read two texts about cognitive augmentation alongside one another. Ray Kurzweil's *How to Create a Mind* (2012) propagates brain–computer interfaces, and Jeffrey Moore's *The Memory Artists* (2004) deals with neuropharmaceuticals.[2] I use these texts to show how predictions and projections about applications to medicine of cognitive augmentation in the future further negative valuations of ageing in the present.

Reading a piece of predictive popular science alongside creative science fiction risks conflating narrative forms and contexts, and it obfuscates the purpose and possibilities of either genre. But arguing with Americanist Roberta Maierhofer's reflections on an

[1] Dillon and Craig 2021, 49–50, 105.
[2] Butcher 2003, 132; Kass 2001, 30.

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"anthropological understanding of 'fiction' [that] includes also texts traditionally defined as non-fiction," their joint speculative perspectives bring the reader closer to the present-day reality—how believing in "nanodreams" already structures decisions about older people at the level of policy and practice.[3] Both pieces are creative in nature, and their speculative character places them on a continuum of form and contents. With Maierhofer, the move from science fiction to non-fiction is a move from "what if?" to "declarations of intentions."[4] Fiction is often described as a thinking laboratory or simulation instrument that enables experimenting with how specific choices or availability of tools may impact on the perceived value of human beings and related future choices.[5] Concurrently, the circumstances in which fiction is consumed contribute to the degree of social cognition that it may sharpen in the real world.[6] The truth value that Kurzweil's performance is able to achieve for the real-world reader contributes to beliefs in technological possibilities in the near future that Moore's fiction integrates rather than challenges. In other words, the precarious position of older people discovered in the subtext of Moore's speculative fiction becomes all the more urgent in the context of Kurzweil's agenda.

Next to cancer and cardiovascular conditions, neurodegenerative diseases are the most common conditions typical of older age. Alzheimer's disease represents the most prevalent form of dementia in older people and has turned into the ultimate threat of an ageing population, in particular, in performance and profit driven societies.[7] It represents most acutely notions of failed ageing: forms of ageing that do not retain independence and vitality, heightened in their perilous position by the absence of cure. In the absence of effective treatment, disease management remains the only intervention. But in capitalist contexts, this leads to "rationing care" for frail and incurable individuals, as they are on an inevitable path towards death.[8] Cognitive augmentation, so the implication of Moore's and Kurzweil's speculations, may address this problem.

Yet, both texts deal with applications that are currently far from coming to fruition. Writing about such "nanodreams" makes popular science "thoroughly science-fictional" in how it imagines its future.[9] Concurrently, the presence and investment in such technologies across genres highlights how ideas of an augmented human species reach ever-broader audiences so that believing in "nanodreams" becomes increasingly inevitable. As such, this paper argues, it is not surprising, how such ideas have begun structuring social belief systems that shine through creative writing, which joins in pitching, rather than effectively critiquing, these technologies as holding the fountain of youth. This is highly problematic because engaging with aspects of decline and physiological change that come with ageing is mandatory for developing appropriate institutional and policy responses to an increasingly ageing population.[10]

1. Predictive popular science

How to Create a Mind claims that reverse engineering of the human brain will create an "artificial neocortex that has the full range and flexibility of its human counterpart" but will

[3] Maierhofer 2023, 217, 218. I borrow the term "nanodreams" from Milburn 2002.
[4] Maierhofer 2023, 220.
[5] Mar and Oatley 2008; Oatley 2016.
[6] Barnes 2018.
[7] Alzheimer's Research UK 2023; Kessler et al. 2012; Prince et al. 2015.
[8] Robertson and Travaglia 2023, 137–38; Zimmermann 2025.
[9] Featherstone and Burrows 1995, 1; Milburn 2002, 266, 269, 285.
[10] Gilleard and Higgs 2023, 5.

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"only continue to increase in speed."[11] Many have challenged the feasibility of what Kurzweil claims.[12] My aim here is to probe the language and construction of *How to Create a Mind*, to demonstrate the power of predictive popular science to create a make-belief that fosters a problematic overvaluation of cognition and renders ageing invisible.

Popular science serves as a networking strategy with which investigators seek to "help in the sale … belief and spread" of their research.[13] Kurzweil is a master salesman, in how he aligns his mission with *doing* evolution. He first positions his field of expertise as the current end and high point of evolution, technology following in the wake of physics, chemistry, biology, and neurology.[14] Thereafter, he places himself in one line with Darwin and Einstein, presenting his own "thought experiments on thinking" as building on their "thought experiments on the world."[15] Connecting his argument to the brilliance of their past predictions is particularly effective, because he makes Einstein's theories sound extremely approachable—"a young man's idle thoughts," developed with "no equipment other than pen and paper."[16] How much more reliable must Kurzweil's predictions be, with all the technology available to the twenty-first-century scientist. In a second step, Kurzweil lifts the technological mind above the biological: two chapters on biological evolution and its product, the human neocortex, wrap around Kurzweil's predictions. Concurrently, the functioning of the biological neocortex is reduced to the work of "Lego blocks."[17]

Pitching himself as the driver of evolution is tightly entwined with the valuation of cognition in Kurzweil's project. This is reflected in two short cuts. First, Kurzweil dismisses specific capabilities of the brain because, he argues, from an evolutionary perspective, pleasure and fear are obsolete today: "If it is just human cognitive intelligence that we are after the neocortex is sufficient."[18] And second, Kurzweil conflates cognition with the capacity to memorize and store, working with the assumption that specific brain areas only deal with remembering and forgetting. Yet, attention, perception, and arousal are essential for learning, and these involve body processes in addition to brain processes.[19] As such, biologist Steven Rose vehemently opposes the idea that brains could be "constructed out of silicon chips," pointing to the complexity and dynamics between interconnecting nerve cells: "molecules, macromolecules, neuronal and synaptic architecture, ensembles, binding in space and time, population dynamics; all clearly contribute to the functioning of the perceiving, thinking brain."[20] Rose is not alone in his concerns.[21] Comparable criticism has been levelled at the Human Brain Project, funded by the European Union between 2013 and 2023. The project, led by Henry Markram, in Kurzweil's words in 2012, planned to "simulate the human brain, including the entire neocortex as well as the old-brain regions such as the hippocampus, amygdala, and cerebellum", by 2023.[22] The programme achieved three-dimensional maps of 200 brain regions, developed brain implants for cases of blindness, and led to the modelling of functions of memory to advance treatment of brain conditions.[23]

[11] Kurzweil 2014 [2012], 123.
[12] See e.g. Allen and Greaves 2011; Naddaf 2023; Yong 2019.
[13] Latour 1987, 164.
[14] Kurzweil 2014 [2012], 2–3.
[15] Kurzweil 2014 [2012], 25, 13.
[16] Kurzweil 2014 [2012], 24.
[17] Kurzweil 2014 [2012], 81.
[18] Kurzweil 2014 [2012], 108.
[19] Fuchs 2018.
[20] Rose 2005, 159, 248.
[21] Cobb 2020, 384; Olshansky, Hayflick, and Carnes 2002, B295.
[22] Kurzweil 2014 [2012], 126; Waldrop 2012.
[23] Naddaf 2023, 718.

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But overall, reports published in high-impact scientific journals, the popular scientific press, and other media pronounced the programme failed at worst, and of limited use at best.[24]

Concerns about ageing and older age are near absent from *How to Create a Mind.* This is in keeping with Kurzweil's convictions that "immortality is within our grasp," since immortality discourse is always about health and youth.[25] The invisibility of the ageing body is not new to neurotechnology discourse. As early as 1995, Mike Featherstone observed that descriptions of virtual reality and its opportunities did not include older people. Concurrently, the sociologist argued, the core merit of virtual reality could be to keep the old body invisible—think, for example, of setups that help overcome mobility issues.[26] Similarly, where fiction represents digital disembodiment (as death approaches) as somatic enhancement, it recurs to the characters' younger avatars in the virtual reality, not their failing physical bodies.[27]

More significant, the principle of wear and tear, a chief mechanistic hypothesis of ageing, remains unacknowledged for the technologies hailed by Kurzweil. Neurotechnologies have contributed to the idea of human organs, including the brain, as machines that can be replaced when dysfunctional.[28] Kurzweil enthuses that prospective systems will have "the ability to be copied, backed up, and re-created" but ignores that prosthetic technologies carry anxieties about their potential disappointment, failure, and the risk of getting out of control.[29] Most of all, there is no critique of how the blurring of human biology with categories of the technological increasingly challenges definitions of the normal.[30] Kurzweil's world has no space for diversity, neither physiological nor cognitive. To discuss the implications of this further, I will first turn to Jeffrey Moore's *Memory Artists.*

2. Creative science fiction

Moore's narrative can be read as a fictionalized popular science account by imaginary "Professor Emeritus" Émil Vorta.[31] The novel in hand figures as Vorta's "memoirs", written by a "professional writer-translator," who has "combined 'dramatic reconstructions' with interviews, laboratory notes and diary entries."[32] The novel also features letters, newspaper clippings, pencil drawings, and chemical formulae. A "Notes" section additionally conveys scientific exactitude, all the while furthering the reader's uncertainty, since these endnotes are Vorta's annotations to the ghostwriter's version of events.[33] Such aesthetic strategies challenge the unequivocal authority of the scientific viewpoint and underpin Moore's take on neurodiversity.

Moore's "memory artists" are Vorta's clinical cases: five individuals with diverse cognitive capabilities. A synaesthete, Noel features as "a psychomnemonic wonder, with almost unhuman eidetic powers."[34] At the other end of the spectrum, his mother Stella lives with

[24] For a review, see Yong 2019.
[25] Kurzweil 2005 [2004], iv.
[26] Featherstone 1995, 229, 230–31.
[27] Ureczky 2023, 179.
[28] Cobb 2020, 261–91; Keller 1995, 87.
[29] Kurzweil 2014 [2012], 247; Wilson 1995, 242.
[30] Landsberg 1995.
[31] Moore 2005 [2004], 2.
[32] Moore 2005 [2004], 220, 1.
[33] Moore 2005 [2004], 299–315.
[34] Moore 2005 [2004], 91.

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early-onset Alzheimer's disease, while the attitudes, beliefs, and capabilities of Noel's friends bring out different valuations of memory. Norval tries to reach a stage of synaesthesia with experimental neuropharmaceuticals; Samira experiences amnesia after involuntary drug intake; and Jean-Jacques' interest in "organic alternative mood elevators" is aligned with quick-witted creativity.[35]

Moore's novel serves as a fictional response to memory discourses of the 1990s, when first memory enhancing drugs had been licensed for Alzheimer's disease. These improved symptomatology only modestly, and, within less than a decade, they were used for cognitive enhancement in healthy subjects.[36] Alongside pharmaceutical manipulation, data obtained in an engineered mouse led to claims that "cognitive attributes such as intelligence and memory" can be genetically enhanced in mammals.[37] These memory discourses aligned mechanisms of remembering with computerized processes of "encoding," "storing," and "retrieving" information.[38]

The popular fascination with a memory of total recall sits squarely within such discourses, whose values Moore interrogates, but not effectively rejects. He suggests that there are always two sides to a condition or capability, as with Noel's ability for total recall. Those around Noel believe that "with a brain like yours, you'll go far", but they also see "something completely shattered, crushed" in him.[39] In reverse, Moore creates connections between synaesthesia and dementia, where Noel's experiences are conveyed in terminology that the cultural discourse aligns with Alzheimer's: "vacant spells and fog" when his mind is overwhelmed, a "tendency to brood, emotional numbness, general confusion."[40]

Yet, Moore's eventual world is one without Alzheimer's, if not ageing. It is Noel's memory capacity that enables him to come up with a drug that "fights ageing and wakes up the mind."[41] This is relevant because the novel treats dementia as the conceptual proxy of old age and Alzheimer's as the ultimate spectre of an ageing population. This has huge implications for care policy:

> With all the boomers going into retirement, the state is not going to be able to pay these people to hang around doing bugger all, apart from pumping iron and prancing around the gyms so we'll need fleets of vans that cruise around all day picking up joggers and taking them home—they'll be in great shape but won't remember where they live.[42]

In the face of such considerations, Noel's "memory pill" conceptually devalues Jean-Jacques' and Samira's strategies of care for Noel's mother.[43] His pharmaceutical experimentations permeate the entire book; their art therapy appears like an afterthought in one of the novel's news items.[44] Such textual imbalance chimes with the "gender division" in discussions of posthumanist technologies: public and academic debates are dominated by men, while most

[35] Moore 2005 [2004], 121.
[36] Grön et al. 2005.
[37] Tang et al. 1999, 64.
[38] Brockmeier 2015, 46–47.
[39] Moore 2005 [2004], 8, 93.
[40] Moore 2005 [2004], 4, 183.
[41] Moore 2005 [2004], 133.
[42] Moore 2005 [2004], 262.
[43] Moore 2005 [2004], 291.
[44] Moore 2005 [2004], 288.

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critical writers about the topic are women.[45] In addition, this imbalance captures the invisibility and disregard for informal care in cure-seeking contexts: It is Jean-Jacques' and Samira's dedication to Noel's mother in the now that enables Noel to focus all his time and energy on research for a cure.

3. From imaginings to policy

What is the benefit of reading a creative text like Moore's alongside Kurzweil's predictions? Aesthetically, the boundary is thin, especially when conceiving of a popular science text, like a novel, as "a literary performance displaying aesthetically significant form."[46] Moore's fiction plays with expectations readers have of popular science. As such, Vorta's exaggerated scientific precision highlights how much Kurzweil sacrifices fact for speculation. Additionally, the "technique of fictionalizing the reader contributes to the similarities between popular science and fiction."[47] Fictional Vorta's desire to control what is published about him makes Kurzweil's aesthetic performance in literary form look comical because exaggerated.

My main concern is that the societal beliefs that inform Moore's account are shaped by promises like Kurzweil's. "To build a better future," a recent policy manifesto by think tank United for All Ages asserts, "we must imagine ourselves there."[48] But what if our imaginings devalue what it means to be human? Complicit in nourishing "nanodreams," Moore (like Kurzweil) omits how one's personality and mind are occasioned by lifelong development, way beyond the neuronal level.[49] Instead, both texts convey "a future vision of technological and medical intervention—not social transformation or political action—as the only proper response to disability."[50] In this sense, they deny a policy imperative for creating opportunities for people along a lifetime continuum of development. Although *The Memory Artists* explores aspects of the cultural construction of memory, it tends to underwrite a "rhetoric of crisis" about old age that is knitted to masculinist ideals like performance, gain, and marketization.[51] These are the values that are encapsulated in Kurzweil's world, present and predicted. The curative position of neurotechnologies discussed makes accepting that ageing comes with material changes to the body seem meaningless at best.

Martina Zimmermann is a Reader in Health Humanities and Health Sciences at King's College London. With a long-term background in neuropharmacology and a second PhD in the health humanities, she has written two monographs on cultural and scientific dementia narratives. She currently runs a research programme on ageing, The Sciences of Ageing and the Culture of Youth, funded by a UK Research and Innovation Future Leaders Fellowship.

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[45] Murray 2020, 78–79.
[46] O'Connor 2017, 41.
[37] Pilkington 2019, 155.
[48] Burke 2025, 2.
[49] Cohen 2005; Waddell 2002.
[50] Kafer 2013, 22; Sellwood et al. 2024.
[51] Burke 2017, 7.

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