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Nostalgia and Fetish Amongst the Remains of the World in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*

ABSTRACT
The present paper deals with attitudes of nostalgia and fetishistic appropriation of objects in the context of post-apocalyptic landscapes, as described in *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood. We speak of "apocalyptic landscapes" referring to catastrophes revolving around extinction and abandonment, following the contemporary, ecologist myth of the endangered landscape.

KEYWORDS
Apocalypse; Ruin; Fetish; Collection; Objects; Commodity; Margaret Atwood; Space; Dystopia.

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In a letter to Witold vin Hulewicz, quoted by Giorgio Agamben in his essay on "Marx: or The Universal Exposition," Rainer Maria Rilke deploys the gapping attitude in approaching significant things: "Even for our grandparents, a house, a well, a familiar tower, their very clothes, their coat: were infinitely more, infinitely more intimate; almost everything a vessel in which they found the human and added to the store of the human. Now, from America, empty indifferent things are pouring across, sham things, dummy life… A house, in the American sense, an American apple or a grapevine over there, has nothing in common with the house, the fruit, the grape into which went the hopes and reflections of our forefathers… Live things, things lived and conscient of us, are running out and can no longer be replaced. We are perhaps the last to still have known such things."[1]

This quote is relevant when read in parallel with post-apocalyptic contemporary fiction. Here, places find themselves in a void of significance, resolved by a final event that, as Gerry Canavan writes in his paper concerning Margaret Atwood's dystopian novels, "seems to have the capacity to shake the foundations of the system and jumpstart a history that now seems completely moribund."[2] Apocalypse becomes the only possible "happy" ending to

capitalism, to the values of a system that altered the human species to its most despicable version, one that must surely be updated.

When we speak of "apocalyptic landscapes" we refer to catastrophes revolving around extinction and abandonment. The myth of the endangered landscape, experienced as apocalyptic and post-catastrophic concerns contemporary literature from the perspective of addressing a subtle political content that positions humans in relation to their environment. In *Oryx and Crake*, Margaret Atwood explores these themes in a close, engaged manner: she composes this landscape of the end of the world while approaching the tropes of consumerism and the failure of feeling in the context of a hyper-commodified society. Not only is she interested in the potential future of a world ending, but she also explores the feelings and attitudes of the remnants. The world inhibited by these "last humans" – Jimmy, Toby and Ren – is a world in ruins. They are exiled in a landscape of loss and solitude, exploring the realms of destruction while building a sense of nostalgia for what was lost: an otherwise despicable society, marked by an increasing, deplorable sense of possession. In this respect, even the formerly most despised commodities become objects of introspection and longing. We find ourselves in the unsettling presence of an unfinished world: a world that is to be appropriated in a fetishistic manner, cherished not because of what it used to represent, but for the fact that it still *is*, constant, *map-able*, as if capable of rebirth. Giorgio Agamben underlined the importance that this aesthetics of the unfinished played in the context of modern art: fragmentarism is a stylistic instrument that plays a part in rethinking landscapes. The fragments replace the destructed structure of the whole in the same logic of the fetish, where an object substitutes the absence of what is truly desired. Fetish and nostalgia are connected by their manner of investing objects with uses other than their practical ones. I use these two concepts in order to discuss the attitude towards objects left behind in the context of post-apocalyptic narratives written from the point of view of a sole survivor. Decontextualized, un-inhibited, entire cities and their whole sceneries become subjects to nostalgia (for a world that was and shall never come again), while the abandoned proof of a once sustained existence enters the fetishistic regime, being involved in the mental process of substituting the whole with a part.

"The fetish confronts us with the paradox of an unattainable object that satisfies a human need precisely through it being unattainable. Insofar as it is a presence, the fetish object is in fact something concrete and tangible; but insofar as it is the presence of an absence, it is, at the same time, immaterial and intangible, because it alludes continuously beyond itself to something that can never really be possessed"[3] writes Giorgio Agamben, and we are inclined to see this type of attitude in Atwood's novels, where Jimmy's explorations of abandoned former Compounds are not only an action necessary for survival, but also a nostalgic exploration of a lost world, with its *facticus*, its artificial objects that are now useful for their reliquary potential. The first chapter in *Oryx and Crake* introduces Jimmy who, out of a useless habit, considering the context of the world having turned to a *zero hour*, "looks at his watch- stainless case, burnished aluminium band, still shiny although it no longer works. *He wears it now as his only talisman.*"[4] The gesture is merely symbolic: "It causes a jolt of terror to run through him, this absence of official time. Nobody nowhere knows what time it is."[5] Having lost its practical usage, the watch becomes an object of fetish, "both symbol of something and its negation."[6]

The chapters following Jimmy's trajectory through teenage describe him as a potential collector of lost words. He clings to dictionary terms that were useless and outdated in the manner a collector clings to objects that, having lost their very contexts, involve a feeling of the uncanny. His post-apocalyptic fetishism mirrors his collection of words because "what the collector seeks in the object is something absolutely impalpable to the noncollector, who only uses or possesses the object, just as the fetish does not coincide any way with the object in this material aspect."[7] Jimmy invests the relics of the past with the capacity of evoking everything that has been lost. He is equally satisfied by all the objects that present the characteristics of having survived the "plague," just as he did. They, as much as he does, negotiate the values of absence and substitution: exhausting the meaning of this "nothing" they attempt to replace.

Margaret Atwood's depictions of a world inhabited and observed by its "last humans" is an attempt of mapping landscapes of both hope, for a potential natural revival, and guilt, from the perspective of having the nature altered to the final, dramatic consequences of its destruction. Jimmy witnesses not only the dusk of the human race, but the dawn of a new race, artificially created by his best friend, Crake, not long before the mass destruction biological weapon killed almost the entire population of the Globe. The Crakers are humanoids of exquisite beauty and proverbial innocence, designed to perfect the flaws that lead to the human race's ultimate destruction. They, however, inhabit the world of this now extinct species and act like archaeologists in respect to the remains of their "ancestors". For them, Jimmy is an alien, curious version of themselves, but also a teacher, watching and taking care of them with a mix of "envy" and false "nostalgia"[8]: false, because they embody the childhood he longed for and never actually experienced, considering the fact that it took place in a time when nature had already been compromised. The children, the prototypes of the new species appropriate the world as if new and pure. They too explore the remains of society, but their attitude is one of mere innocence. "They lift out the objects, hold them up as if offering them for sale: a hubcap, a piano-key, a chunk of pale-green pop bottle smoothed by the ocean. A BlyssPluss container, empty, a Chickie Nobs Bucket O'Nubbins, ditto. A computer mouse, or the the busted remains of one, with a long wiry tail."[9] These objects have obviously lost their context and their utility: the "children" see them as the gifts of an absent God and cherish them as such. Jimmy sees in them as objects of mourning, "things from before," the products of a special type of nostalgia, where "nostalgia is memory with the pain removed. The pain is today. We shed tears for the landscape we find no longer what it was, what we thought it was, or what we hoped it would be."[10] Jimmy finds himself in the position of longing for a world he knew: the imposing efforts of civilization, concretized in architecture of the lost world meet a prominent process of destruction. He struggles to "hang on to words" (the odd, the rare, the dissolving words of past dictionaries) as a result of his need to make sense of the past.

> he could keep a diary. Set down his impressions. There must be lots of paper lying around, in unburned interior spaces that are still leak-free, and pens and pencils; he's seen them on his scavenging forays but he's never bothered taking any. He could emulate the captains of ships, in olden times – the ship going down in a storm, the captain in his cabin, doomed but intrepid, filling in the logbook. There were movies

like that. Or castaways on desert islands, keeping their journals day by tedious day. Lists of supplies, notations on the weather, small actions performed – the sewing on of a button, the devouring of a clam. He too is a castaway of sorts. He could make lists. It could give his life some structure. But even a castaway assumes a future reader, someone who'll come along later and find his bones and his ledger, and learn his fate. Snowman can make no such assumptions: he'll have no future reader, because the Crakers can't read. *Any reader he can possibly imagine is in the past.*"[11]

This fragment specifically depicts Jimmy's relation to the world: he feels like a new Robinson, lacking the optimism of rediscovering the lost values of humanity. He is no more than an observer, no longer feeling at home, haunted by memories he can no longer make sense of.

As we saw in our paper regarding location and dislocation in modern dystopias,[12] once the space one sees as "home" is emptied of those very attributes that built its significance as such, it is, instead, invested with the potential of becoming a "bad place," thus, a dystopian one. This place, destroyed by catastrophe, is not only bad or maladjusted to the subject's expectations of comfort and security, it also becomes the depositary of unsettling phantasms that threaten to become parts of reality. Both destructive and horrifying, the images of a defamiliarized place give birth to speculative questions concerning the dystopian path such a present might, eventually, follow, while consequently triggering a nostalgic perspective on the author's present, transformed, in the context of his narrative, into a remote and desired past. Moreover, since the 20th century's imaginary is to be held responsible for spatializing time, one may also comment on a transfer of phobias from their temporal register to a spatial approach. We thus have ruin and decay becoming part of the urban day to day development. Last human narratives document and interpret the ruins of civilization, while maintaining a tense relationship between the signifiers of this world and the language used in order to make sense of it. In other words, the surviving characters' need to describe a place no longer *seen* through collective, human eyes, a place lacking the receptors of its potential descriptions, questions the need for telling a story, per se, but also the manner in which a landscape that exists for one person solely may be distorted by sentimentality. *Oryx and Crake* emphasizes this inner tension between the reinvented nature, altered and corrupted for the benefits of a hyper-consumerist society that reached its final potential and has doomed itself to self-destruction and the memory of an idyllic nature, inhabiting nostalgic fantasies of the extreme ecologists. There is, however, a *vanitas vanitatum* feeling that grows on the structure of Jimmy's story, who depicts an obvious contrast between the obscene reality of the world before, built around symbols of abjection and jouissance, and the sterile, depressing landscape of the new beginning. The heart-breaking scenes questioning the validity of decontextualized objects in the reliquary hypostases they possess once the world has ended, while action rapidly moves to a past ignorant to the dangers already planting their seeds in its infertile ground maintains this effort of mapping a type of elegiac nostalgia. Jimmy mourns the loss of his world amongst the ruins of civilization. He recalls familiar landscapes that, to the reader, evoke dystopian spaces rather than luminous utopias. This incongruence, however, contributes to the feeling of alienation Atwood attempts to reflect throughout her novel. "When Jimmy was really

little they'd lived in a Cape Cod–style frame house in one of the Modules" we read and envisage an aseptic environment that automatically assumes a more dangerous spatial reality, a world already destroyed due to greed and destructive efforts of so-called progress. The Compounds are closed societies, citadels preserving an already extinct lifestyle, hyperreal cities where everything is a reproduction of a lost model, glorifying the realm of the simulacra, in Baudrillardian terms. "The furniture in it was called reproduction. Jimmy was quite old before he realized what this word meant – that for each reproduction item, there was supposed to be an original somewhere. Or there had been once. Or something. The house, the pool, the furniture – all belonged to the OrganInc Compound, where the top people lived."[13] . In the world-before, landscapes had been compromised: there were secluded, elitist Compounds and Pleeblands: "endless billboards and neon signs and stretches of buildings, tall and short; endless dingy-looking streets, countless vehicles of all kinds, some of them with clouds of smoke coming out the back; thousands of people, hurrying, cheering, rioting," places "outside the OrganInc walls and gates and searchlights" where public security was faulty and "things were unpredictable." These places are invested with attributes of bad, dystopian spaces. We have discussed in the afore mention study on dystopian space the fact that an important number of studies concerning recent geographies focused on the subject of the post World War II massive building boom specifically reacted to the increasing speed of emergence of such placeless places, describing the psychological effects their impersonality might have had upon their inhabitants. Edward Relph placed these spaces under the umbrella-term of placelessness, and we see in Atwood's novel a similar development as concerning the artificially created, septic environments and the former cities. Relph described the relationship new American landscapes imply, suggesting that "placelessness is not only a psychological condition but also a political phenomenon" whose effects "are not only individual or collective alienation but also may be the diminishment of political engagement and efficacy" because "landscapes – shared spaces, recognizable boundaries, identifiable landmarks, common sites of remembrance – help to establish relationships between people."[14] In these contexts of space-creation, nostalgia comes as a key concept in investing places with a type of inherited meaning. Compounds and Pleeblands are built on a basically amnesic structure. "Other companies, other countries, various factions and plotters. There was too much hardware around, said Jimmy's father. Too much hardware, too much software, too many hostile bioforms, too many weapons of every kind. And too much envy and fanaticism and bad faith. Long ago, in the days of knights and dragons, the kings and dukes had lived in castles, with high walls and drawbridges and slots on the ramparts so you could pour hot pitch on your enemies, said Jimmy's father, and the Compounds were the same idea. Castles were for keeping you and your buddies nice and safe inside, and for keeping everybody else outside."[15] These urban settings reflect the terror of living in a lobotomized society, placelessness being a central quality in dystopian spaces. It is the ultimate proof that memory and meaningful relationships have been cancelled in order to favour uniformity and the dissolution of all individual features.

Throughout Jimmy's recollections of the world before the plague, Atwood depicts a constant apprehension before the change in the status of space. This cry for a self-destructing world is, in my opinion, similar to Rainer Maria Rilke's pessimistic view over the loss of significance things and

possessions were confronted with. The overall view of the novel is that this destructured society was already doomed to destruction. Jimmy's survival is seen as abnormal accident, an event that should not have occurred, but also a chance to revival the language of a creative lost species. Jimmy is, after all, described as a man of words, a reader, a poet, an abomination in itself. His survival is, perhaps, an ironic reminder of those elegiac cries of castaways that fill the world literature. There have been researchers who mirrored Atwood's dystopia and the old English ruins, but I believe this perspective to be an over interpretation. What I do find of doubtless relevance is the manner in which the perspective of a last human involves in depicting the last things. The situation is different from that we explored in analysing Paul Auster's Country of Last Things because there is no struggle in recovering the remains of the past. Jimmy, as opposed to Auster's Anna Blume, collects memories, deconstructs them and, then, he lets go of them. Everything lasts in a state of decomposition, everything is simultaneous and already lost.

The ecologist underlayer in Atwood's novel, however, further explored in its sequel, The Year of the Flood, claims that there is hope beneath destruction and that nature prevails over the dystopian urban landscapes of ruin and abandon.

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Notes

[1] Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas. Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. 36.
[2] Gerry Canavan, "Hope, But Not For Us: Ecological Science Fiction and the End of the World in Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake and The Year of the Flood," *Literature Interpretation Theory* 23.2, 2012, pp. 138-159.
[3] Giorgio Agamben, *op. cit.*, p. 33.
[4] Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 11.
[5] *Idem.*
[6] Giorgio Agamben, *op. cit.*, p. 31.
[7] *Idem.*
[8] Margaret Atwood, *op. cit.*, p. 15.
[9] *Idem.*
[10] David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, Cambridge, 1985, p. 4.
[11] Margaret Atwood, *op. cit.*, p. 40.
[12] Olga Ştefan, "Countries of Last Things. Location and Dislocation in Modern Dystopias," *Studia Universitatis, Studia Philologia*, Issue no.4 / 2012.
[13] Margaret Atwood, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
[14] Margaret E. Farrar, "Amnesia, Nostalgia, and the Politics of Place Memory", *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 64, No. 4, December 2011.
[15] Margaret Atwood, *op. cit.*, p.37.