



Andrei Simuț

Dystopian Geographies in *The Year of the Flood* and *Hunger Games*

ABSTRACT

In this article I shall focus especially on the dialectic between the dystopian city and the post-apocalyptic landscape, on the means of transgressing the imposed boundaries (social, biological, and religious) as they are staged in Margaret Atwood's dystopia, *The Year of the Flood* and Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games*. I shall also compare it with the dystopian turn in the contemporary imagination, both visible in a large amount of dystopian movies and in popular novels such as *Hunger Games* or *Divergent* trilogies.

KEYWORDS

Heterotopia of Deviation; Survival; Pastoral; Dystopian Boundaries; Transgression; Geocriticism.

ANDREI SIMUȚ

Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca,
Romania
andrei.simut@gmail.com

Any observer of the contemporary trends in film and literature can notice that we are witnessing a striking revival of the dystopian imagination, which discloses a certain concern with the ongoing crisis of the present/ future order of things (the spreading of the policies of surveillance, the widening gap between social strata, the environmental problem), a concern manifested both by the intellectuals, artists or filmmakers, and by the public.¹ To put it differently, the age of divisions, inequalities and depression proves highly inspirational for dystopias. The temptation to transgress these imposed boundaries fuels their narratives. The last six years has revived the dystopian (sub)genre both in science fiction mainstream production, but also in canonical literature and popular novels. Novels such as *The Giver*, *Hunger Games*, and *Divergent* have all already turned into successful movies. The allegorical dimension is present in all these examples which tend to formulate "inverted analogies" with present aspects of the social realm. Fredric Jameson has considered allegory to be a feature of postmodern paradigm, a displacement of the Modernist aesthetic of the Symbol (Jameson, 1991, 115), although, in my opinion, the postmodern dominant has ended, and this return of the dystopian imaginary in all forms of the cultural production is also a proof for this change.



Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy (completed in 2013) is also significant,

since it implies a conceptual tension between dystopia, anti-utopian criticism, apocalyptic and eco-utopian promise. *The Year of the Flood* (2009) operates a shift of perspective when compared with the first novel of the trilogy, *Oryx and Crake* (2003), and I shall examine the significant differences. All these recent dystopias seem to suggest the idea that certain aspects of our reality and social system resemble more and more to the dystopian fears. Even though *Divergent* and *Hunger Games* trilogies are set in the far future, they tend to refer precisely to the present realities and employ the allegorical form. Atwood's novels, more complex both in their subject matter and in their discourse, are increasingly ambiguous in their formulated dilemmas. The overt criticism of the scientific utopia in *Oryx and Crake* and its dire dystopian consequences acquire new meanings in *The Year of the Flood*, where the apocalyptic dimension restores hope especially with the story of God's Gardeners, told from the perspective of two feminine narrators, Toby and Ren. The end of the human race (the dissolution of its human features and the literal extinction of the human species through the pandemic) is rendered almost as a necessary event by Jimmy's narration and Glenn (alias Crake)'s ideas. Those two characters are almost absent in the *Year of the Flood*, where their cynical approach towards the ends of man is compensated by Adam One's messianic and pacifist eco-pedagogy, restoring the biblical hermetic.

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Dystopian boundaries and transgressions

These recent dystopias can be fruitfully analysed with a few important concepts formulated by geocriticism (from Lefebvre to Westphal), since they stage complex relationships between imposed boundaries and the (im)/possibility of their transgression, and because every transgressed boundary triggers virtually limitless consequences upon their characters and their fictional world (this is especially the case with Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy). In fact, dystopian fiction has always been inspired by this tension between polis and nature, between the space of individual freedom and the space of control, between striated, homogenous space and "smooth" space (in Deleuze and Guattari's terms). The proliferation of these dystopian scenarios signals an increased awareness of the fact that the smooth space finds itself threatened by the striated space of control (Westphal, 2011, 40).

MaddAddam trilogy stages a complex system of transgressions: spatial (Compounds and pleeblands vs the margins), temporal (the advanced techno-scientific elite vs the technophobic Gardeners, before and after the "Waterless Flood" – pre-apocalyptic dystopian world vs post-apocalyptic landscape), biologic (human vs sub-human vs post-human; genetic engineered species vs natural ones). In stylistic terms, the first two novels of the trilogy stage a dialogue between the pre-apocalyptic dystopian world set in the near future and the post-apocalyptic world when humanity has been extinguished by the virus devised by Crake, and the author manages to convey this sharp contrast using the character's memories and flashbacks: Jimmy and Toby through free indirect discourse and Ren through first person narrative. The post-apocalyptic present is rendered through the present tense verbs, thus acquiring a filmic immediacy



and strangeness, and the lost world in past tense, being subject to various retrospectives and subjective versions.

In terms of spatial representation of the pre-apocalyptic world, Atwood's trilogy can be termed as heterotopia, since it perfectly fits the well-known Foucaultian description: it is a "kind of effectively enacted utopia in which all the real sites are simultaneously represented, contested, inverted", being at the same time "absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect" (Foucault, 1986, 22-27). Our present-day scientific developments and realities are present, may be recognized, but at the same time their description renders them uncanny. Atwood has underscored the difference between her fictions (the concept is "speculative fiction") and the typical science fictional novel, and emphasizing in her afterword to *MaddAddam* that:

it does not include any technologies or biobeings that do not already exist, are not under construction, or are not possible in theory. (Atwood, 2013)

The same can be stated about the organization of the social system and its reflection in the space geography of the novels. "The pre-plague life" is dominated by a techno-scientific elite inhabiting the Compounds, a sort of gated communities, fortified Corporations where the access is strictly controlled and the territory outside the walls, the chaotic "Exfernal world" of the pleeblands, under the strict surveillance of the CorpSe Corps. At the periphery of this corporatist metropolis lies an undefined territory of ruined, abandoned buildings where the Gardeners camp and hide, transforming it into an alternative chain of "rooftop gardens", into a nomadic, smooth space, permanently threatened by the intrusions of the polis, represented by CorpSe Corps agents. *The Year of the Flood* is the story of

this transformation of a smooth space into a striated one, a conquest which is almost complete when the virus wipes out all the boundaries, restoring its archetypal smoothness and nomadism (Westphal, 2011, 40).

Heterotopies of deviation

One perfect example of a "heterotopy of deviation" (Foucault's term for rest homes, psychiatric hospitals or prisons, the place for those who deviate from the norm) is, in Atwood's *Year of the Flood*, the Painball Arena, very similar to the Arena where the "hunger games" take place in Suzanne Collins' novel, both descriptions suggesting a space where punishment and death are ritualised. Both authors describe an enclosed forest, where the individuals (condemned criminals – Atwood; selected tributes – Collins) fight each other for life, until the others are killed, a place where survival becomes almost impossible. Those who manage to return from the Painball arena suffer a mutation that expurgates them from the human realm. The complex tableau of transgressions present in *Oryx and Crake* is completed with a new type, which crosses the human features and regresses to the sub-human. This is just one instance of the wide spectrum of extreme deviations present in Atwood's trilogy and is resumed by Toby in a phrase that synthesizes the main process that governs her fictional-dystopian world: "you wouldn't just cross the line, you'd forget there ever were any lines" (Atwood 2009, 118). The "long term Painballers" are those who refuse to get out when their term ends, and this category illustrates the most extreme primitivism, the sub-human condition (cannibalism becomes a common practice).

This regression into a sub-human state is present in *Hunger Games*: Katniss is



terrified by when she remembers a similar case of a tribute who went savage after winning the competition and who fed on his victims (Collins, 2008, 173). Even though *Hunger Games* emphasizes the limitless capacity of the Capitol to invent new rules and the impossibility to predict them, there is however an apparent limit to this transgressivity and that is cannibalism, but Katniss fears that the longer they stay in the Arena, the more susceptible the competitors become to such practices. At the centre of the novel there is a contradiction between the author's intention in showing the reader the most extreme effects this mass media experiment has on its subjects (whether is about the competitor or the spectators) and the desire to maintain the novel's protagonist as the main recipient for humanistic ideals (freedom, kindness, generosity). This becomes one of the major deficiencies of the plot: although the possibilities seem limitless regarding the situations the hero has to face in this arena where only one tribute has to survive, the author has only a few options in order to keep the profile of her character and also keep the main rule of the Hunger Games ("the real sport of the Hunger Games is watching the tributes kill one another"), and that is to eliminate all the other competitors through other means except Katniss direct action. A good example in this sense is when, isolated in a tree, she is surrounded by the most cruel competitors, the Career Tributes, led by Cato (who has a similar savage profile with Atwood's Blanco) and she tears down on a swarm of mutated bees (the tracker jackers) eliminating a few other tributes and thus managing to escape.

In *Oryx and Crake* the narrative perspective belonged to Jimmy/ Snowman, who was the perfect vantage point for observing the extinction of humanity since he as the companion to the scientist who devised it, namely Glenn, alias Crake. In *The*

Year of the Flood, the narrative point of view changes, shifting between two feminine characters, Toby and Ren, and being more intimate, secluded and marginal, observing the events from a more distanced perspective, the distance from the centre (the Paradise Dome where the new virus and the new race are conceived) and the margins (AnooYoo Spa, Scales and Tails and the Edencliff Rooftop Garden where Toby and Ren are usually located) increases. The author must keep Toby and Ren's vantage point of view, as witness to the apocalyptic events, the same privileged perspective that Jimmy the Snowman had in *Oryx and Crake*. The new emphasis in *The Year of the Flood* is on the periphery: Toby, Ren and The Gardeners are all marginal, victims (Ren or Toby) of the system and/or a nascent alternative to the hegemonic order (The Gardeners). *Oryx and Crake* was the account of an imploding centre both thematically (the virus was devised by the most powerful corporation) and narrative (no other character challenged Jimmy's version of the main events; from his perspective, the whole Crake's apocalyptic plan was meant to seek revenge for his secret affair with Oryx, in order to leave Jimmy as the sole survivor). *The Year of the Flood* is conceived as a narrative account of the periphery, alternativity, margins and it is significant for this new paradigm in the dystopian narrative, along with *Hunger Games*, *Divergent* and also a few dystopian films (*The Snowpiercer*, *Elysium*, *In Time*): these narratives choose their protagonist from the lower social strata, adopting a marginal point of view towards the social system described. The hero's journey starts from these "deviant", excluded margins, towards the oppressive centre of the authority. The classic dystopias of the twentieth century (*We*, 1984, *Fahrenheit 451*, *Brave New World*) selected their main character from the upper social strata, close to the top of



the hierarchy, and the journey towards freedom was from the centre towards the periphery. Margaret Atwood's earlier novels have been frequently scrutinized regarding their thematic concerns with the margins and the problem of the boundaries, Alice Palumbo's essay is the best example (Palumbo, 2009). The feminine narrators/ characters in *The Year of the Flood* and *MaddAddam* resemble the style of the classic *Handmaid's Tale*, but the recent novels have a more complex narrative combination between Toby's free indirect discourse and Ren's diary.

The vantage point of the narrator

Atwood manages to maintain this privileged perspective necessary both for an apocalyptic novel and for a dystopia in *The Year of the Flood* through these characters: Toby and Ren are nomads, condemned to restlessness and continuous movement through the social layers, and forced to numerous transgressions. Atwood places them at the right spots in order to observe the entire dystopian geography with its zones and divisions by creating a threatening antagonist who pursues Toby throughout the last two novels, namely Blanco, a "long-term Painballer". This character has a precise narrative function, adding dynamism to the plot: through Blanco we are conveyed a precise image of the practices employed by the overwhelming and sinister force of control, suggestively called CorpSe Corps. Blanco best exemplifies how humanity has regressed to a sub-human condition (a serial killer who runs a food chain, SecretBurgers), when violence has become common practice, and the most abominable crimes are tolerated. Because of Blanco, Toby is forced to leave her job at Secret Burgers and seek refuge at the God's Gardeners, a green religious sect that rescues "the deviants"

from the absurd norms imposed by the Corporations, and also the excluded.

Because of the same sinister character, Toby is forced to leave the Gardeners and radically change her identity, having her fingerprints and voiceprint replaced with surrogates by a Chinese doctor, opting for another radical transgression: she becomes a totally new being, with a different name (Tobiatha), in order to be accepted for a job at the one of the Compounds. The spatial transgression of an unsurpassable boundary between a gated community (where the destiny of humanity is shaped) and the rest of the territory (where chaos prevails) literally means for Toby embracing the post-human condition. In fact, both Toby and Ren have the biographies of permanent nomads (the same goes for Adam One, Zeb and the other Gardeners), and this permanent mobility triggered by the most extreme insecurity is not dissipated after the Event ("The Waterless Flood"), when Blanco and other Painballers survive and force Toby out of her static sheltered condition. She becomes the typical post-apocalyptic wanderer through a space of the pastoral, which has eluded all types of spatial boundaries, leaving only the proof of the monstrous transgressions: from human to post-human, and from nature to bio-engineered species. All the characters left alive (Jimmy's illusion that he is the last man ends at the end of *Oryx and Crake*) are forced to enter the new space of wilderness and of the unknown forces and external obstacles. Here Atwood fully revives one of the main thematic concerns of her fiction and essays, namely survival, also a central experience for the entire Canadian literature (Ridout, 2009, 35). In *MaddAddam* trilogy, the obstacles are no longer internalised, "the life plan" of the characters becomes blurred and uncertain, and the dull existence in an everyday urban environment is elevated to a nearly heroic story of survival.



Nature transformed: heterotopias and heterochronies

One of the most important focus of the new dystopias is the space of complete surveillance, where no alternatives of evasion seem to be left for the protagonists. *Hunger Games* describes a simpler spatial organisation, and more centralised than in *Madd-Addam* trilogy, which reflects both the fourth and the fifth heterotopic principle described by Foucault: at the centre there is the Capitol, the place of the ultimate power of control over the rest of the territory, divided into the Twelve districts, surrounded by natural obstacles (mountains) and artificially maintained in a state of primitivism and poverty. *Hunger Games* reflects the openness of the heterotopia to the heterochronies: the Capitol and the districts seem to belong to different slices of time, separated by decades of evolution/devolution. This gap between the advanced technology of the centre and the regression of the rebellious margins is present in *The Year of the Flood*, but in a different manner: the Gardeners programmatically avoid any use of the technological devices, continuing a neo-Luddite technophobic tradition. For them, any technological device becomes the synonym for surveillance and consequently oppression, exclusion and anonymous death by accident (they repeatedly invoke such outcomes for their members, for those who have undisclosed the policies of their corporations, the ironic word is “corpicide”). One of their most important teaching regards their exclusive reliance on memory, on an oral culture and a regression towards the apocalyptic time of the early Christianity:

Beware of words. Be careful what you write. Leave no trails. (...) The Spirit

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travels from mouth to mouth, not from thing to thing: books could be burnt, paper crumble away, computers could be destroyed. Only the Spirit lives forever, and the Spirit isn't a thing. (Atwood, 2009, 7)

Their avoidance of the written word alludes to the well-known dystopian tradition and suggest that under the guise of Corporations the worst totalitarian practices have returned:

As for writing, it was dangerous, said the Adams and the Eves, because your enemies could trace you through it, and hunt you down, and use your words to condemn you. (Atwood, 2009, 7).

The Gardeners have even adopted a medieval style of clothing (compared to medieval monks) and openly rejected all “the shimmering things” of consumerism, including phones and their cameras. Their iconophobia is simply resumed as “if you can see it, it can see you!”, an ironic allusion to the Orwellian tradition. The pervasiveness of technology cannot be easily overcome, since none of the Gardeners seem to be immune to its fascination: Ren longs for the camera phones, and Toby finds a laptop in Adam One's room (later the author discloses the purpose of this: organised bioresistance through hacking).

In *Hunger Games*, the heterochrony is a structural principle: Capitol seems the analogous image of the present, depicting a society of whose main functions are regulated by the necessities of spectacle and consumerism, while the Twelve Districts are artificially kept in an older version of the mode of production, close to the nineteenth century industrialism: Katniss' District 12 are coal miners who fight with starvation, poor health, and are forced to recourse to hunting and fishing, which are



pre-agrarian modes of survival (this is why Katniss survives in the arena). Later, already selected as a tribute, and with an uncertain fate, Katniss will find out about the other District's occupations (District 11 – agriculture, 4 – fishing, 3 – factories): the total isolation of the districts from one another is emphasized and their utter dependence on Capitol's whims and new rules. The scarcity of food in her District and fight for day-to-day survival are summed up by Katniss in front of a typical feast at the Capitol, her first meal upon arrival:

I try to imagine assembling this meal myself back home. Chickens are too expensive, but I could make do with a wild turkey. I'd need to shoot a second turkey to trade for an orange. Goat's milk would have to substitute for cream. We can grow peas in the garden. I'd have to get wild onions from the woods. I don't recognize the grain; our own tessera ration cooks down to an unattractive brown mush. Fancy rolls would mean another trade with the baker, perhaps for two or three squirrels. (Collins, 2009, 79)

At first glance both Atwood and Collins seem to continue the long dystopian tradition, whose main characters are experiencing the most idyllic communion with nature and whose only protection from the totalitarian intrusion is to be found in the pastoral, seeking refuge in the wilderness (Katniss) or avoiding the consumerist entrapment (the Gardeners produce their own food and resources). Yet both authors break with this tradition. The heterotopic space of the Arena is the place where the authority (CorpSe Corps – *MaddAddam*; Capitol – *Hunger Games*) manages to generate a perfect simulacrum of nature, replicating its species through mutations (a main concern for both authors). In this respect the bees

play a crucial role in both novels. In *Hunger Games*, Katniss manages to break her entrapment with a help of a new species of mutated bees, the tracker jackers, created in the laboratory by the Capitol and strategically placed near every District to maintain the imprisonment of its citizens, and their isolation (they provoke death, hallucinations, madness and they hunt down those who destroy their nests – the idea of hallucinations turning to madness could have been more fruitfully explored). Atwood offers a more disturbing version of the nature transformed into a limitless space of surveillance: the "Exfernal powers" devise a new species of cyborg bees, able to track down every deviance from the norm. Another crucial example of nature turned to simulacrum from the Arena in *Hunger Games* are the poisonous berries that imitate the real ones, another means to eliminate the other competitors, and to emphasize Katniss revolt against the final changing of rules, when the Capitol demands only one winner, and the romance between Katniss and Peeta is in full bloom (Collins, 2008, 200). However, at the end of the first volume of *Hunger Games* Katniss witnesses the most disturbing mutation of all, the other tributes seemingly transformed into animals/monsters:

(...) in that moment I realize what else unsettled me about the mutts. The green eyes glowering at me are unlike any dog or wolf, any canine I've ever seen. They are unmistakably human. And that revelation has barely registered when I notice the collar with the number 1 inlaid with jewels and the whole horrible thing hits me. (Collins, 2008, 405).

This unusual hypothesis can be read either as referring to the fictional world of the novel or to the present of the reader. The



tributes turned into vengeful animals is a metaphor for the transformation underwent by all the competitors and the viewers of the *Hunger Games*. It can be an allegory to the brainwashing process that is analogous with the one in the present, the spectacle of violence and hatred in current mass media. It can also stand as proof that the dystopian experiment of the Capitol has succeeded over its subjects.

Apocalyptic alternatives and eco-utopian promises

Not only the story in *The Year of the Flood* is complementary to that in *Oryx and Crake*, but also its dystopian description of the pre-plague life which opens to an alternative, that represented by the God's Gardeners, an alternative which is both pastoral and apocalyptic. The contrast is present in the post-apocalyptic world between the pastoral (nature restored) and the anti-utopian aspect of Crake's new humanoid species, and between the pastoral and the menacing presence of the savage Painball survivors, who can threaten the whole system of values that Snowman has conceived for the Children of Crake (they lack the notion of evil and cannot grasp the differences with the humans around them), especially in *MaddAddam*.

Ren and Toby share the same important apocalyptic desire with Jimmy and the Gardeners: the apocalyptic end of humanity becomes a compensatory projection, as the first type of reaction to a world where barbarism and unbridled scientific progress have definitely mingled, where nature has been completely destroyed (all species gone extinct), and the splicing of genes had generated infinite mutations. One of Toby's reflections sums up the entire set of analogies with the present:

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By the time she'd moved to college, the wrongness had moved closer. She remembers the oppressive sensation, like waiting all the time for a heavy stone footfall (...) everybody knew. Nobody admitted to knowing. If other people begun to discuss it, you tuned them out, because what they were saying was both so obvious and so unthinkable. *We're using up the earth. It's almost gone.* You can't live with such fears and keep on whistling. The waiting builds up like a tide. You start wanting it to be done with. You find yourself saying to the sky. *Just do it. Do your worst.* Get it over with. She could feel the coming tremor of it running through her spine. It never went away, even among the Gardeners. (Atwood, 2009, 285)

The Gardeners, "the fugitives from reality", led by the messianic figure of Adam One, create the most important heteropia in the novel, the alternative to the "striated space" of the Corpse Corps, a nomad, smooth space in a permanent reconfiguration at the margins of the dystopian corporatist city. If it were to use a Deleuzian term, it could be said that The Gardeners have a rhizomic, alternative type of organisation, in contrast to the State apparatus, opposing both the hierarchical and the totalitarian mode exemplified by the rest of the society described by Atwood. This is the reason why they succeed in generating the collapse of the main hegemonic network, replacing it with an alternative one, endlessly generating alternatives. The main Gardener group is challenged itself by a nascent alternative to the movement gravitating around the messianic and the pacifist Adam One: his brother Zeb decides to take direct action and put into practice his brother's apocalyptic teachings, in a more literal sense, employing the destructive power of science towards the artefacts of civilization.



Conclusions

The Gardeners are Atwood's complex and memorable synthesis between a contemporary extreme version of ecologism and the apocalyptic messianic tradition of early Christians. Towards the end of *The Year of the Flood* this singular mixture becomes strikingly evident. Adam One's sermons open each new chapter, and Atwood brilliantly illustrates the progression of his messages from a pacifist, non-violent and still humanistic vision towards a millenarian version, resembling John of Patmos, but in a much more radical version:

Do we deserve this Love by which God maintains our Cosmos? Do we deserve it as a Species? We have taken the World given to us and carelessly destroyed its fabric and its Creatures. Other religions have taught that this World is to be taken up and rolled up like a scroll and burnt to nothingness, and that a new Heaven and new Earth will then appear. But why would God give us another Earth when we have mistreated this one so badly? No, my Friends. It is not this Earth that is to be demolished, it is the Human Species. (Atwood, 2009, 508)

The chaotic tribulation preceding the final demise of civilization and the extinction of mankind are interpreted as signs for the final Judgment on contemporary Man, according to the biblical hermeneutic. Adam One's quoting Isaiah 34 is of great significance in this sense, showing civilization in ruins and replaced by man's fellow creatures (Atwood, 2009, 443). The principle of hope for a new heaven on Earth, in the absence of man's destructive actions is also present:

How privileged we are to witness these first precious moments of Rebirth! How much clearer the air is now that man-made pollution has ceased! (...) Does not the Dove symbolize Grace, the all-forgiving, the all-accepting?(443)

The atheist, post-humanist Glenn/ Crake receives in *The Year of the Flood* a religious response, and his mundane extinction of humanity is interpreted as a divine punishment by Adam One, who reverses man's singularity in a forgiving nature:

All creatures know that some must die/
That all the rest may take and eat/
Sooner or later, all transform/
Their blood to wine, their flesh to meat./
But Man alone seeks Vengefulness/
And writes his abstract laws on stone/
For this false Justice he has made./
He tortures limb and crushes bone. (Atwood, 2009, 511).

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Note

¹ One good example is the viral campaign "Stop watching us!" which has sprung debates on the internet in 2013.