

**Children of Oryx, Children of Crake, Children of Men:
Redefining the Post/Transhuman in Margaret Atwood's
“ustopian” *MaddAddam* Trilogy**

**Filhos de Oryx, Filhos de Crake, Filhos dos Homens:
Redefinindo a Pós-/Transumanidade na trilogia “ustopiana”
MaddAddam, de Margaret Atwood**

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Abstract: One of the main pillars of posthuman and transhuman thought is the use of technology as a means to ameliorate human life by helping overcome the flaws and limitations of the biological body. The effect of such trends has been central to the development of contemporary, third-turn dystopian novels in English, published in the past thirty or so years. However, one important aspect of such narratives is also their list of transgressive characteristics, distancing them from their modern, second-turn counterparts. The following article aims to discuss how transgressive the ideas of dystopia and transhumanism that form Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy are, essentially discussing whatever lies at the core of the human condition.

Keywords: transhumanism; “ustopia”; *MaddAddam* trilogy; post-apocalyptic fiction.

Resumo: Um dos principais pilares do pensamento pós-humano e transumano é o uso da tecnologia como meio de melhorar a vida humana ao auxiliar na superação de falhas e limitações do corpo biológico. O efeito de tais tendências tem sido central ao desenvolvimento de romances distópicos contemporâneos, de terceira virada, em inglês, publicados nos

últimos trinta anos, aproximadamente. Entretanto, um aspecto importante de tais narrativas também é seu rol de características transgressoras, que as distanciam de seus equivalentes modernos, de segunda virada. O presente artigo almeja discutir o quão transgressoras são as ideias de distopia e transumanismo que formam a base da trilogia *MaddAddam*, de Margaret Atwood, essencialmente discutindo o que encontra-se no núcleo da condição humana.

Palavras-chave: transumanismo; “ustopia”; trilogia *MaddAddam*; ficção pós-apocalíptica.

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The resurfacing of dystopian fiction in English in the past forty years has brought about relevant discussions around the reinvention of the genre (or its maintenance) and, also, about the interconnections it has established with current forms of social and political thought. However, it must be taken into account that contemporary dystopian fiction departs from classical dystopian texts, but follows different paths. Dunja M. Mohr (2007), in her study of contemporary dystopian fiction, when discussing the difference between the two shapes of the genre, states that the actual counterparts have their point of departure not in early, but in the feminist dystopian fiction of the 1960s and 1970s, in which:

[t]hese postmodern dystopias initially present a dystopian world, and then move on to a point of transition where we catch glimpses of the historical processes that lead from dystopia to utopia. However, in contrast to a classical utopian narrative and like the ‘critical utopias,’ they resist narrative closure (perfection). Without ever narrating or exactly defining utopia, these new feminist dystopias map not a single path but rather several motions and changes that may lead to a potentially better future.¹

But what really defines contemporary dystopias, still according to Mohr, is their transgressive potential, particularly that of crystallised

¹ MOHR. Transgressive utopian dystopias: the postmodern reappearance of utopia in the disguise of dystopia”, p.9.

binary oppositions, such as male-female, human-animal (or non-human, or alien), myth, history, among others.² While still maintaining their status of socio-political questioning as symptoms of their moments of production, contemporary dystopian fiction questions and exposes the fractures of Western modes of thought.

As symptoms, however, these narratives are as likely to change as the times in which they are produced. If it is true that, as stated by Francis Fukuyama in his now infamous *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), the alleged victory of liberal democracies over socialist/communist regimes, which marked the end of the Cold War, also marked the end of utopian imagination³, then one can affirm that dystopian fiction simply maintains its status as both a symptom of and a critique to its contemporary political contexts. Like its modern counterpart, which Gregory Claeys refers to as second-turn dystopian novels⁴, these contemporary, third-turn dystopian novels⁵ also discuss political issues using scientifically developed though highly oppressive societies as background but, unlike those, they now focus on the effects of politics on the individual body not simply as a metaphor for a class or social group.

Such a shift is relevant because one of the most important contemporary philosophical debates is related to the very essence of humanity in times of late, technological capitalism. Posthumanism and transhumanism have become, since the 1990s, unsettling areas of debate and, as it is usually the case with new bodies of thought, fields of heated debate. Cary Wolfe, in the introductory chapter to his *What is Posthumanism?* (2010), defends that

My sense of posthumanism is thus analogous to Jean-François Lyotard's paradoxical rendering of the postmodern: it comes both before and after humanism: before in the sense that it names the embodiment and embeddedness of the human being in not just its biological but also its technological world, the prosthetic coevolution of the

² MOHR. Transgressive utopian dystopias: the postmodern reappearance of utopia in the disguise of dystopia", p. 12.

³ FUKUYAMA. *The end of history and the last man*, p. 46.

⁴ CLAEYS. The origins of dystopia: Wells, Huxley and Orwell, p. 111.

⁵ For a more thorough definition of the term, see MARKS DE MARQUES, I sing the body dystopic: utopia and posthuman corporeality in P.D. James's *The children of men*.

human animal with the technicity of tools and external archival mechanisms (such as language and culture) of which Bernard Stiegler probably remains our most compelling and ambitious theorist—and all of which comes before that historically specific thing called “the human” that Foucault’s archaeology excavates. But it comes after in the sense that posthumanism names a historical moment in which the decentering of the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatic, and economic networks is increasingly impossible to ignore, a historical development that points toward the necessity of new theoretical paradigms (but also thrusts them on us), a new mode of thought that comes after the cultural repressions and fantasies, the philosophical protocols and evasions, of humanism as a historically specific phenomenon.⁶

In this sense, Wolfe argues, most – if not all – thinkers involved in the posthuman/transhuman debate tend to agree on the issue that both trends of thought deal with a means of evolution related to the advances in science and technology. Thus, it is possible to affirm that, if one follows the trend that posthumans are non-humans because they have surpassed the basic elements of humanity, they are also, essentially, better than humans. Biology is flawed, and it can only be saved or fixed through the interventions of man-made creations.

The relationship between humans, science, and posthumans, and the transgressive perspectives of the relationship between preservation and destruction of the world are two of the main topics found in Margaret Atwood’s series of books referred to as the *MaddAddam* trilogy: *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009), and *MaddAddam* (2013). The novels depict a post-apocalyptic world, decimated by what religious groups refer to as the Waterless Flood, and a retrospective narrative of the previous organisation of that world, where nation-states had been replaced by compounds driven by technological corporations, allowed only to the families of those working for them, and the pleeblands, spaces of social and economic abandonment outside the compounds. The pre-apocalyptic world had been suffering from the effects of climate change and biological extinction for many years, but the evolution of science – here presented as part of the technological capitalist project –

⁶ WOLFE. *What is posthumanism?*, p.xv-xvi.

has managed to create many transgenic species. In this clearly divided world, where the ones who may help maintain and develop the system have all the opportunities the compounds can offer while the others are forced into an existence of poverty, entertainment, no matter how cruel and/or real(istic) plays a central role. As J. Brooks Bouson (2009) states in his reading of the first novel of the trilogy:

As Atwood combines social observations with her scientific commentary in telling the story of Jimmy and deliberately sets the personal drama and private memory of Jimmy-Snowman against the larger social—and global—changes she describes, she also uses her narrative as a platform to voice her concern about a trend in contemporary culture that she finds troubling: the mainstreaming of violence and pornography into the mass culture. Even as Atwood expresses some of her deadpan humour in naming the forbidden sites Jimmy and Crake surf on the Internet—sites that provide live coverage of executions (shortcircuit.com, brainfrizz.com, and deathrowlive.com) or assisted suicides (nitee-nite.com) as well as porn sites (Tart of the Day, Superswallowers, and HottTotts)—she also conveys her uneasiness as she describes the degradation of culture in a society where violence and pornography have become cheap, and readily available, forms of entertainment. In a similar way, Atwood voices her concern as she describes, in her darkly satiric way, the violent computer games Jimmy and Crake play as adolescents—games like Barbarian Stomp, Blood and Roses, and Extinctathon—that turn mass destruction into an enjoyable spectacle.⁷

The Waterless Flood is part of a project carried out by Glenn, also known as Crake, which involves the extinction of the human race and the repopulation of the planet by bioengineered hominids whose DNA is based on the human genome but whose biological (i.e. animal) characteristics have been enhanced, known as the Paradise Project. In fact, Crake's project is to create new humans who are devoid of what he believes is the main cause for social problems: culture and symbolic

⁷ BOUSON. "It's game over forever": Atwood's satiric vision of a bioengineered posthuman future in *Oryx and Crake*, p.97.

thinking in general. This actually allows Crake to name the first members of his created species after well-known historical characters, simply for his own amusement, as the Crakers themselves would never attribute any meaning to the reference. In one of the many memories that comprise the first novel in the trilogy, Jimmy (also known as the Snowman, Crake's best friend) states that Crake believed he had "...eliminated what he called the G-spot in the brain. *God is a cluster of neurons*, he'd maintained."⁸ This project of eliminating cultural human traces from the Crakers (the name Snowman gives the species) can be seen in the Crakers' vegetarianism and, also, in the enhancement of their animalistic mating process, where their genitalia physically changes during the mating season:

[s]ince it's only the blue tissue and the pheromones released by it that stimulate the males, there's no more unrequited love these days, no more thwarted lust; no more shadow between the desire and the act. Courtship begins at the first whiff, the first faint blush of azure, with the males presenting flowers to the females – just as male penguins present round stones. At the same time, they indulge in musical outbursts, like songbirds. Their penises turn bright blue to match the blue abdomens of the females and they do a sort of blue-dick dance number, erect members waving to and fro in unison ... From amongst the floral tributes the female chooses four flowers, and the sexual ardour of the unsuccessful candidates dissipates immediately, with no hard feelings left. Then, when the blue of her abdomen has reached its deepest shade, the female and her quartet find a secluded spot and go at it until the woman becomes pregnant and her blue colouring fades. And that is that.

No more No means yes, anyway, thinks Snowman. No more prostitution, no sexual abuse of children, no haggling over the price, no pimps, no sex slaves. No more rape.⁹

Here, we find the first interesting ironic twist Atwood's novels impose upon the general notions of posthumanism and transhumanism. One common ground both philosophical fields advocate is that science and technology should be used to ameliorate human existence through our

⁸ ATWOOD. *Oryx and Crake*, p.157.

⁹ ATWOOD. *Oryx and Crake*, p.165.

relationship to them. In other words, humans must relate to technology in order to maintain our status within late technological capitalist societies. However, Crake's post/transhuman project does the opposite: it uses bioengineering to destroy humans and science, reverting humans (which is, essentially, what Crakers are, based on their genome) to a pre-human status (humanity understood as a social and technological basis). The Crakers are, thus, posthuman by being pre-human if, according to Crake, culture is what makes us human.

In this sense, it is important to discuss whether the *MaddAddam* trilogy can really be read as post-apocalyptic fiction. Though there is no question that Atwood creates a dystopian world, for, as Coral Ann Howells (2006) states, “[the Canadian author] shares the dystopian impulse to shock readers into an awareness of dangerous trends in our present world, though she always includes ‘something which isn’t supposed to be there’ in order ‘to surprise the reader’”,¹⁰ the central issue here is whether the Waterless Flood destroyed or restored the world. The environmental elements are central in Atwood's dystopia¹¹ and in the description of the pre-Flood world, readers clearly see that the socioeconomic divide between the compounds and the pleeblands can be read as both utopia and dystopia. If we acknowledge Crake's project of “rebooting” humanity (and the planet, by extension) as a utopian impetus, though, then the move from culture to nature is a move from dystopia to utopia, and the post-apocalyptic world is the result of technological capitalism, not of Crake's intervention in it. Even though Jimmy's narrative in *Oryx and Crake* is indeed a “last man” narrative, a central element of post-apocalyptic fiction, but one in which “[i]n order to create a cosmogony that made sense to the Crakers, Jimmy needed to establish a theogony first”,¹² as even God is dead in this “ustopia”, term coined by Atwood herself to describe “the perfect society and its opposite – because, in [her] view, each contains a latent version of the other”.¹³

¹⁰ HOWELLS. Margaret Atwood's dystopian visions: *the Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*, p.162.

¹¹ Atwood herself has been a very vocal activist for environmental issues, and she has been using her Twitter account (@MargaretAtwood) to raise awareness to such issues since July 2009.

¹² MARKS DE MARQUES, “God is a cluster of neurons”: neo-posthumanism, theocide, theogony and anti-myths of origin in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*”, p.163.

¹³ ATWOOD. *In other worlds: SF and the human imagination*, p.66.

However, *Oryx and Crake* is a novel that is comprised of two narratives. The first axis is that of Jimmy's recollections of his upbringing and relationship with Crake and, later, with the mysterious Oryx, a woman with no known origin, who may or may not have been sexually explored as a child and who becomes both Crake's and Jimmy's lover. The second axis presents Jimmy and a group of Crakers in the post-Waterless Flood world. The relationship between them, also explored in *The Year of the Flood*,¹⁴ is complex and ironic: the Crakers see Jimmy as a gateway to their own history. The Crakers develop language and, through that, Jimmy gives them their own cosmogony:

The Children of Oryx, the Children of Crake. He'd had to think of something. Get your story straight, keep it simple, don't falter: this used to be the expert advice given by lawyers to criminals in the dock. *Crake made the bones of the Children of Crake out of the coral on the beach, and then he made their flesh out of a mango. But the Children of Oryx hatched out of an egg, a giant egg laid by Oryx herself. Actually she laid two eggs: one full of animals and birds and fish, and the other one full of words. But the egg full of words hatched first, and the Children of Crake had already been created by then, and they'd eaten up all the words because they were hungry, and so there were no words left over when the second egg hatched out. And that is why the animals can't talk.*¹⁵

Jimmy creates the Crakers' myths of origin and acts as their prophet (and as Oryx and Crake's apostle) mainly for his survival in this post-apocalyptic (or neo-prelapsarian) world. This means that Jimmy allows the Crakers' entry into the symbolic world of culture and, thus, a return to humanity (or humanism), the very traces of which Crake tried to erase in his creation. Language is, thus, both restorative and creative,¹⁶ as it creates the Crakers' myths of origin and, by doing that, restores their human position.

¹⁴ *The Year of the Flood* is not a sequel to *Oryx and Crake*, as the actions of both novels happen in parallel. Thus, the discussion of the relationship between Jimmy and the Crakers applies to both.

¹⁵ ATWOOD. *Oryx and Crake*, p.96.

¹⁶ MOHR. "Transgressive utopian dystopias: the postmodern reappearance of utopia in the disguise of dystopia", p.18.

And it is precisely the central role of language in the construction of humanity the element that Atwood's trilogy introduces. In fact, a great part of the narrative in *The Year of the Flood* is constituted by the creation of two cosmogonies: that of the God's Gardeners, an eco-religious group, and built around sermons delivered by their leader, Adam one, and that of the Crakers, told by both Jimmy and Toby, another human survivor to the Waterless Flood and a former member of that eco-religious group. In fact, by the end of the novel, Toby questions the existence of the image of God constructed by the God's Gardeners¹⁷ – mainly due to all the ordeals she is forced to go through – and she replaces her God by that Jimmy creates for the Crakers and she, too, becomes a prophetess.

The interesting turn in Atwood's posthuman/transhuman project is found in the final novel in the trilogy. *MaddAddam*, unlike its two predecessors, is clearly a novel about the rebuilding of the world, not merely from a material, but also from a cultural perspective. While the narrative structure roughly follows the same found in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, alternating the present with memories from the past (of Jimmy, Crake and Oryx in the first novel, the God's Gardeners, Ren and Toby in the second, and of Zeb and Adam One, founders of the God's Gardeners in the final narrative), there are two important deviations from the Paradise Project, Crake's project of de/re/transhumanisation through the creation of a new species, decimation of the (old) humans and repopulation of the Earth, the name being a clear pun with the famous quote by Albert Einstein that states that God does not play dice with the universe. The first one is the creation of a new species, a Craker-human hybrid, first generated when a group of male Crakers sense that Ren and Amanda (who was in shock from being abducted by Painballers, psychopathic criminals) are in their fertile period and mate them, in an episode that, if all participants were humans (from a cultural, pre-apocalyptic perspective), would certainly be considered rape. But the Crakers have no sense of culture to this extent; they simply follow their biological instincts – to the point that Toby, who witnesses the entire episode, refers to it as “a major cultural misunderstanding” and wishes she had a pail of cold water.¹⁸ Toby's attempts to understand the sexual intercourse between the Crakers and two human females is revealing

¹⁷ ATWOOD. *The year of the flood*, p.416.

¹⁸ ATWOOD. *MaddAddam*, p.13.

of the difficulty in understanding what the creatures are. Despite their humanoid appearance and the fact that their DNA is mostly based on the human genome, developing language does not do enough to overlap their biological (i.e. animalistic) rituals. Hence Toby's duality: to see it as a cultural misunderstanding (in which case the Crakers are humans who share a different culture), and to have the desire to separate them, much like people do with animals, with cold water. It is important to mention, though, that not once is the word rape used throughout the narrative to describe the sex act, which is ironic for two reasons. First, because it conveys the understanding that both parties need to know (as in have the cultural knowledge) of rape so that a forced sexual intercourse can be deemed such; secondly, because rape is one of the very practices Crake uses as an example of things to eradicate via the creation of creatures devoid of culture.

The second deviation from the original project comes in the character of Blackbeard, a young Craker with a very curious mind, who becomes interested in the act and the possibilities of reading and writing:

“What are you making, Oh Toby” It's little Blackbeard: she didn't hear him come in. “What are those lines?

“Come over here,” she says. “I won't bite you. Look. I'm doing *writing*: that is what these lines are. I'll show you.

She runs through the basics, *This is paper, it is made from trees....*

“Now,” she says, “you have to draw the letters. Each letter means a sound. And when you put the letters together they make words. And the words stay where you've put them on paper, and then other people can see them on the paper and hear the words.

Blackbeard looks at her, quinting with puzzlement and unbelief. “Oh, Toby, but it can't talk,” he says. “I see the marks you have put there. But it is not saying anything.”

“You need to be the voice of the writing,” she says. “When you *read* it. *Reading* is when you turn these marks back into sounds. Look, I will write your name,”

She tears a page carefully from the back of the notebook, prints on it: BLACKBEARD. Then she sounds out each letter for him. “See:” she says. “It means you. Your name.” She puts the pen in his hand, curls his fingers around it, guides the hand and the pen: the letter *B*.

“This is how your name begins,” she says. “B. Like bees. It’s the same sound.” Why is she telling him this? What use will he ever have for it?

“That is not me,” says Blackbeard, frowning. “It is not bees either. It is only some marks.”

Take this paper to Ren,” says Toby, smiling. “Ask her to read it, then come back and tell me if she says your name....

Blackbeard slips into the room again. He’s carrying the sheet of paper, holding it in front of him like a hot shield. His face is radiant.

“It did, Oh Toby,” he says. “It said my name! It tiked my name to Ren!”

“There,” she says. “That is *writing*.”

Blackbeard nods: now he’s grasping the possibilities.¹⁹

The passage above marks the official entry of the Crakers into the symbolic world (or return to it, if we consider the Crakers as posthumans who are, actually, pre-humans), and this will change considerably the roles of the prophets in creating the Craker cosmogony. A great part of the narratives contained in both *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* (and, in part, in *MaddAddam*) are related to the construction of an oral tradition, from Jimmy and Toby, to the Crakers, which acts as their mythology – stories transmitted orally that help explain their existence and that of the world around them. This dynamics has a specific ritual – the storyteller (or prophet) needs to be wearing an old baseball hat to become the centre of the storytelling circle. Such stories (obviously invented) are, thus, transmitted in a vertical hierarchy, from humans to posthumans. But at the moment Blackbeard learns how to read and write, he also learns how to tell stories. The entry into the symbolic world of narrative and storytelling allows the young Craker boy to replace his human proxies in the construction of a genuine Craker mythology.

However, what young Blackbeard does is actually more than that. The last forty or so pages in *MaddAddam* are narrated by Blackbeard, and his narrative is actually based on fact, as when he tells the other Crakers what happened when the remaining God’s Gardeners face the murdering Painballers:

¹⁹ ATWOOD. *MaddAddam*, p.202-203.

Toby cannot tell the story tonight. She is too sad, because of the dead ones. The ones who became dead, in the battle. So now I will try to tell this story to you. I will tell it in the right way, if I can. . . .

This is the Story of the Battle. It tells how Zeb and Toby and Snowman-the-Jimmy and the other two-skinned ones and the Pig Ones cleared away the bad men, just as Crake cleared away the people in the chaos to make a good and safe place for us to live.²⁰

Not only does Blackbeard become the first Craker to learn reading and writing, but he also becomes their first historian. Even though he himself did not partake in the battle, his oral account of the events are based on first-hand testimonials of those who did. With the ability to tell stories and the movement towards history, the Crakers become potentially autonomous individuals in the sense that they are responsible for their own history. The final part, aptly titled “Book”, indicates that the transition from hierarchical cosmogony to autonomous mythology to history is finally complete:

Now this is the Book that Toby made when she lived among us. See, I am showing you. She made these words on a *page* and a page is made of *paper*. She made the words with *writing*, that she marked down with a stick called a *pen*, with black fluid called *ink*, and she made the *pages* join together at one side, and that is called a *book*. See, I am showing you. This is the Book, these are the Pages, here is the Writing....²¹

This is the end of the Story of Toby. I have written it in this Book. And I have put my name here – Blackbeard – the way Toby first showed me when I was a child. It says I was the one who set down there words.²²

The story that Blackbeard writes down in the Book is that of the birth and upbringing of the first Craker-human hybrid individuals, the children of Ren, Amanda and Swift Fox, giving way either to the creation

²⁰ ATWOOD. *MaddAddam*, p.357-358.

²¹ ATWOOD. *MaddAddam*, p.385.

²² ATWOOD. *MaddAddam*, p.390.

of yet a new species, or the re-humanisation of both species in different ways – the Crakers’ entry into culture; the humans’ entry into a new relationship with the environment. But the fact that Blackbeard’s Book – originally Toby’s journal – carries both historical and mythological narratives, intermingled with the narrator’s own perspective and presented ritualistically, gives the Book a religious element, marking, thus, the Crakers’ full return to the elements of culture Crake wished to eliminate from his posthuman project. Whether this was achieved because of the influence of humans upon the Crakers or merely catalysed by it, though, remains unclear.

Atwood’s posthuman/transhuman project, thus, transgressed the essence of posthuman and transhuman thought, in which the main goal is to overcome the limitations and flaws of the biological body through our relationship with technology. In Atwood’s ustopia, what we see is the opposite: the ideal of ameliorating the human condition could only take place after the total abandonment of technology and a return to our biological, animal condition. The question that remains in the end is whether it is possible to project a posthuman future reverting to a prelapsarian lifestyle. Culture may be too strong a force to be simply abandoned, as is our human condition. However, Francis Fukuyama (2003), in his study of posthumanism, states that one key element in the posthuman condition will be the recommencement of history.²³ If we take this into consideration, the Crakers – both pure and in their human hybrid form – have successfully achieved such a condition.

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²³ FUKUYAMA. *Our postmodern future*, p.12.

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