

Alessandra Boller

Rethinking ‘the Human’ in Dystopian Times:
Modified Bodies and the Re-/Deconstruction of Human
Exceptionalism in Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam*
Trilogy and Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*

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1 Dystopian Fiction – a Flourishing Genre and Its Potentials

1.1 Dystopian Texts and Motifs

Dystopian fiction, a genre popular since the early twentieth century, has a new heyday. While utopian narratives appear to be outdated at this particular moment in time, “prophets of doom are unusually loud” (Heer) today and the genre might thus also enjoy noteworthy popularity due to the increasingly central theme of a threatening apocalypse and a post-apocalyptic world. Canadian author Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003-2013) and the novel *Never Let Me Go* (2005) by British writer Kazuo Ishiguro, the 2017 Nobel Prize winner, can be listed among the most famous contemporary anglophone dystopian and post-apocalyptic novels. These narratives, the main objects of this study, have generated particular attention in terms of dystopian and (post-)apocalyptic body discourses. However, they are far from being the only remarkable or relevant representatives of this genre. Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), P.D. James’ *The Children of Men* (1992), Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006), David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* (2004) and Kevin Barry’s *City of Bohane* (2011) can be listed as further examples. Besides, young adult dystopia has recently become a strong branch of young adult fiction, following the surge of vampire narratives. Suzanne Collins’ *Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-2010) and Veronica Roth’s *Divergent* trilogy (2011-2013) are typical and popular examples of this subgenre. Of course, this very short list is far from complete but it already hints at the variety of popular dystopian narratives published in recent decades in anglophone countries across the globe.

Furthermore, dystopia is a generic label which often ties in with various other subgenres; post-apocalyptic, speculative and science fiction are but three examples which stress those narratives’ generic hybridity. The popularity of dystopia transcends genre boundaries and national borders; if not restricted to literature written in English, this short list could easily be extended with countless examples from other (western) countries and languages.¹ Besides, these narratives also cross media boundaries, a fact also made visible by the many film adaptations or original films² produced in the last decade. Remarkably often, these are serialised adaptations of young adult book series such as the *Hunger Games* (2012-2015) or *Maze Runner* (2014-2018) while the classic young adult novel *The Giver* by Lois Lowry was turned into a single film in 2014. On the other side, a sequel to *Blade Runner* (1982), Ridley Scott’s groundbreaking film

1 The dystopian tradition is also becoming stronger in non-western societies. While J.M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) might already be labeled a classic, Ahmed Khaled Towfik’s *Utopia* (2011) has only recently been translated from Arabic for the western market, now also reaching a wider public.

2 Beside films, there are many other narrative formats or media which draw on dystopian tropes or which have developed their very own dystopian scenarios. For example, there are graphic novels such as *V for Vendetta* (1989) or video games such as *Fallout* (1997).

adaptation of Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), called *Blade Runner 2049*, was released in 2017 and thus more than thirty years after the first film. In general, dystopian films range from expensive major studio productions (Andrew Niccol's *Gattaca* (1997) and *In Time* (2011), Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006)) to independent productions (Mark Romanek's *Never Let Me Go* (2010), John Hillcoat's *The Road* (2009)) and from action movies (Michael Bay's *The Island* (2005)) to more philosophical or allegoric approaches (David Mackenzie's *Perfect Sense* (2011)). The Wachowskis' *Matrix* trilogy (1999-2003) is difficult to classify, but often regarded as a formative moment in the cinematic representation of dystopia and (post-)apocalypse, especially with regard to discussions of virtual reality (cf. Pietrzak-Franger, "Virtual Reality" 347f., 353). Besides, acclaimed director Darren Aronofsky planned to adapt Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy for television, a process that was, however, interrupted in 2016. In contrast, a film (1990) and a TV series (2017) based on her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* have been realised.

Ursula Heise supports the idea of the genre's new heyday by starting her 2015 essay "What's the Matter with Dystopia?" with the words "[d]ystopia is flourishing," but directly adds the central claim of her text: "In the process, it is becoming routine and losing its political power." Heise is very critical about dystopian fiction's recent tendency to turn away from the overt depiction and critique of political systems which was the focus of George Orwell's seminal *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, for example; a shift which Heer also describes. However, Heise's claim appears to be too narrow-minded: her article perpetuates the idea that dystopia has no impact on society and culture anymore, since it is not as unsettling, eye-opening and subversive as the texts often associated with classic dystopian fiction. This idea falls short of seeing dystopian fiction's engagement with challenges of contemporary (glocal) society, ethics, culture, politics and science – such narratives actually contribute to the search for solutions to contemporary as well as threatening future crises. While the central texts of this study were well-received by many critics, a remarkable quantity of these reviewers and scholars ignored the more subversive tendencies of both the *MaddAddam* trilogy and *Never Let Me Go*, reading them as very general cautionary tales only. Even though this was the function of the often apparently prophetic texts labelled classic dystopias today, this point actually misses the defamiliarising and uncomfortable – and powerful – aspects and potential of these contemporary novels: the 'ustopian' potential of Atwood's trilogy³ has only seldom been acknowledged, for example, and the critical scope of Ishiguro's novel is frequently belittled and limited, also by its film adaptation (see chapter 5), when it is interpreted as a simple allegory and when its characters' behaviour is deemed illogical. As the following chapters will show, such readings are anchored in and thus stem from a specific ideological framework.

3 For an overview of the reception of Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* see Cooke (64f.) who also explains the reviewers' backgrounds and the importance attributed to genre markers.

Heise's article also points towards the canonical status of a set of texts published in the first half of the twentieth century; a time which can be seen as the genre's first heyday: George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) might be the texts most firmly anchored in cultural memory. Despite the manifold dystopian narratives published recently, these titles are apparently still inseparably connected to the term dystopia. Those novels portray static human societies and totalitarian regimes whose authority rests on surveillance, mind-control or manipulated mass media. While such (global) totalitarian political systems mostly are not in the main focus of dystopian fiction and film today, many of these texts are at least as important, revolutionary and subversive as the now canonical dystopian texts were in their own time. It can be maintained that "dystopias proliferate," but the "social order is no longer broken down by a failure of the political imagination, but by catastrophic climate events that deliver a new interval of geologic time: a dry or frozen planet beset by anarchy, population decline, even new speciation" (Heer). In recent dystopian fiction, all this is often brought about by humanity's reckless exploitation of the planet and the development of new, seemingly unethical technologies which do not only change the environment but the human race as well. Even though motifs such as surveillance, common and traditional by now, have not vanished entirely, approximately since the 1990s contemporary dystopian fiction seems to have turned away from them in favour of a motif which also played a subordinate role in the classic texts. The controlled and regulated (human) body, which was also essential in the utopias of the early modern time, is foregrounded in the context of biotechnology, genetics and disease; it is omnipresent in the dystopian and (post-)apocalyptic narratives written around the turn of the twenty-first century. Thus today's rigorous focus on altered and alterable bodies exceeds the interest of most of the canonical texts, although Huxley's biopolitical dystopia might be seen as one of the foundation stones here.

The dystopian portrayal of the altered human body eventually and necessarily involves post- and transhuman or (artificially and culturally produced) pathological bodies; all of which are employed to rethink and ponder the status of humanity and its corporeality. By introducing new bodies, which often but not exclusively enter the stage when the demise of human civilisation is almost complete, these narratives foreground scenarios which revolve around the idea that humanity may literally experience the end of the world or at least the end of what is generally called the human race. It is particularly this notion of alteration and transiency that will be of major importance here. In order to understand the above mentioned claims and observations, various steps back need to be taken to cast a glimpse at the very foundational western assumptions about and strategies to deal with humanity and human bodies, since these become the point of departure for every discussion of the necessary re-thinking of 'the human' in times of crises such as climate change, the loss of species diversity but also of severe political crises such as (civil) wars or new global demarcation strategies.

With the rise of biotechnology⁴ and the rapid advances that biology and genetics have made and are making, people tend to become aware and afraid of the possibility that different, ‘other’ and abnormal bodies could be created, or, in a seemingly even worse case, that human bodies could be marginalised and thereby become ‘other.’⁵ Besides, with the rise of new diseases and the spread of global pandemics (such as, for example, the HIV from the late 1970s onwards and the latest spread of Ebola in 2014/15) and with conspiracy theories which attribute such a spread either to terrorists or to states that assign scientists to create diseases on purpose, people also become increasingly aware of the fragility of their bodies.

The human being does not only relate to notions of the mind, rationality and the intellect. Although western societies are often linked to these attributes, the reality of bodies – fragile, permeable and open to diseases and damages – cannot be disregarded. As Judith Butler explains in her essay collection *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), the “body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency” and it is exposed by skin and the flesh to the gaze, violence and the touch of others (26) which underlines both the positive and the potentially dangerous reality of the body. Butler stresses that vulnerability and loss are parts of bodily life and thus situations and experiences that all human beings share (cf. *Precarious Life* 20, 31) and which have become increasingly felt in western society after 9/11, the caesura which prompted Butler to write these essays.

Despite these insights, mankind is commonly imagined and discursively produced as a stable ‘being’ – it is even difficult to speak of ‘species’ here, because in

4 Biotechnology has already been used for a long time to modify organisms to make them match human purposes and accommodate human needs (i.e. the exploitation of resources, or the alleged improvement of plants for human purposes such as food production). This idea can especially be applied to agriculture and large biotechnology corporations such as Monsanto which has often been criticised for its very controversial methods. In this context, nature is often perceived as imperfect while biotechnology can offer the means to ‘improve’ it. Terms such as ‘imperfection’ or ‘improvement’ already disclose an anthropocentric bias which classifies the world according to the value something entails for humanity. In general, biotechnology draws on fields of classic biology (e.g. genetics) and contemporary usage of genetic engineering, for instance, has again been advanced further with the CRISPR-Cas method already commonly proclaimed as a new gene revolution by scientists and the media. There is a strong bias towards the term biotechnology due to its complexity and imagined threats which, however, are evaluated differently depending on the critic’s viewpoint and discipline. For a more detailed definition and discussion see chapter 4.

5 Even texts that are not clearly utopian or dystopian ponder demarcation strategies and mankind’s fear of the ‘other’ and the unknown. Sometimes, these strategies and fears become the driving forces in the story world. The *X-Men* comics and now films are a good example for the portrayal and negotiation of these fears from the outsiders’ (i.e. mutants’) perspective. Simultaneously, they deconstruct the believed in stability of the human species as they often stress that the mutants might be the next and advanced step of evolution.