

DYSTOPIC RECONFIGURATIONS OF CORPORATE AMERICA: MARGARET ATWOOD'S "THE HEART GOES LAST"

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ABSTRACT. *Dystopic Reconfigurations of Corporate America: Margaret Atwood's "The Heart Goes Last"*. One of Margaret Atwood's dystopic novels, *The Heart Goes Last* is an intricate examination of human nature, the precariousness of love, free will, the roots of social evil and the potential dangers of excessive institutional power. Grounded in an examination of Atwood's text, this paper aims to analyze the techniques through which the image of "corporate America" is re-configured in a nightmarish setting where the fight for power, money and control negatively re-positions the ethical limits of humanity.

Keywords: *dystopia, Margaret Atwood, Canadian literature, power, control, corporate America, freedom, social experiment*

REZUMAT. *Reconfigurări distopice ale Americii corporatiste în The Heart Goes Last de Margaret Atwood.* Una dintre cele mai recente capodopere distopice ale autoarei Margaret Atwood, *The Heart Goes Last*, este o analiză plurivalentă a naturii umane, fragilitatea iubirii, voința liberă, rădăcinile răului social și potențialele pericole ale puterii instituționale excesive. Pornind de la textul atwoodian, lucrarea de față își propune să analizeze tehnicile prin care imaginea Americii corporatiste e reconfigurată într-un cadru de coșmar unde lupta pentru putere, bani și control repoziționează limitele etice ale umanității într-o categorie negativă.

Cuvinte cheie: *distopie, Margaret Atwood, literatură canadiană, putere, control, America corporatistă, libertate, experiment social*

"Is it better for a man to have chosen evil
than to have good imposed upon him?
(Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange*)

The winner of the Red Tentacle award, Margaret Atwood's *The Heart Goes Last* is a dystopic novel which has received favourable critical attention and was praised for being a "jubilant comedy of errors, bizarre bedroom farce, SF prison-

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break thriller, psychedelic 60s crime caper (...)” (Harrison), a “visceral study of desperation and desire” which “journeys into the dark heart of greed, exploitation and brutality (...)” (Anita Sethi), and “a dizzying game of betrayal and counter-betrayal involving extramarital affairs, human-organ trafficking, blackmail, espionage, identity theft and sex-bot manufacturing” (Lyll). Initially, parts of the novel appeared on the online Byliner as part of Margaret Atwood’s innovative Positron series, inspired by Charles Dickens’ serial novels². The novel warns about the potential disasters of late capitalist and consumerist societies by repositioning the American reality in a dystopic setting and challenging vulnerable individuals’ moral limits when faced with poverty and hunger.

Margaret Atwood’s personal interest in social issues, cultural codifications, gender politics and the (negative) potentiality of technology has greatly influenced her fictional works. As Rigney observed, some of Atwood’s novels, *Bodily Harm* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*, explore “the confrontation with power and its universal forms: dictatorship, tyranny, torture and the reality of violence” (104). These novels incorporate disturbing predictions related to the dangers of extremist ideologies and oppressive dictatorships. The *MaddAddam Trilogy*, on the other hand, obsessively points to the potential dangers of biotechnology. *The Heart Goes Last*, published in 2015, raises ethical issues and tackles the idea of free will in a post-capitalist, inhospitable environment. By employing specific literary techniques and using spatial representation, the novel dismantles the notion of corporate America and proposes an altered environment after an economic collapse, much reminiscent of the post-Great Depression era.³

In *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*, Atwood explains her preference to use the term “speculative fiction” to describe her dystopic writing because such form of literature “means plots that descend from Jules Verne’s books about submarines and balloon travel and such-things that really could happen but just hadn’t completely happened when the authors wrote the books” (14). The frightening part about her fiction is precisely the familiarity of the setting which transposes the reader into a (possible) future state, against infernal environs. In Katherine Snyder’s words,

Dystopian speculative fiction takes what already exists and makes an imaginative leap into the future, following current socio-cultural, political, or scientific developments to their potentially devastating

² Margaret Atwood talks lengthily about her Positron series in an interview for the Los Angeles Times. The interview is available on YouTube. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=4&v=ecXMhKMKkzY. Accessed 30 October 2018.

³ The action of the novel happens after World War II, as it is mentioned by the narrator. Thus, the novel may be read as some sort of twisted alternate timeline of a dystopian, post-war America (annihilated by severe economic crisis).

conclusions. (...) These cautionary tales of the future work by evoking an uncanny sense of the simultaneous familiarity and strangeness of these brave new worlds (470).

Atwood describes a term that she coined to delineate some of her own fiction: ustopia, which "is a word I made up by combining utopia and dystopia-the imagined perfect society and its opposite-because, in my view, each contains a latent version of the other" (65). Her ustopias-for instance, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *the MaddAddam Trilogy* or *The Heart Goes Last*-explore different articulations of (un)ideal societies which gradually consume their own utopianism and turn into a nightmarish trap. Rather than being a harrowing future-image, some of her novels expose the flaws of seemingly ideal ideological agendas. *The Heart Goes Last*, ironically, displays an exemplary model of a society where promises of "maximum possible happiness"⁴ and "A MEANINGFUL LIFE" (A Meaningful Life) are gradually corrupted by greed and power politics.⁵ Ustopias like *The Heart Goes Last* are not limited to condemn the state or technology, but also explore the complex relationship between culture and economy and the devastating consequences of societies which abuse and disregard human rights. As Moylan asserts,

gradually (...) dystopia's critical sensibility is taken up by authors who look beyond technology and the authoritarian state and turn to the especial imbrication of the economy and culture that capitalism has achieved at the cost of diminishing the complexity and potential of all humanity and the earth itself (xii)

Besides, Atwood's *The Heart Goes Last* challenges "capitalist power as well as conservative rule-and refusing the false 'utopianism' of reformist promises (...)" exposes the hidden intentions behind seemingly reformatory acts of governmental institutions and individual investors. Ustopias, speculative fictions and dystopias dismantle capitalist and totalitarian regimes and are a literary manifesto of contemporary controversial practices of control and exploitation:

the new dystopias have rekindled the cold flame of critique and have thereby become a cultural manifestation of a broad-scale yet radically diverse alliance politics that is emerging as the twenty-first century commences (Moylan xv).

⁴ Kindle version. Instead of opting for misleading device-specific numbering systems, quotations will be identified by chapter names. For more reliable and accurate references, readers should consult printed editions of the novel.

⁵ The roots of Consilience can be traced back to the nineteenth-century Harmony establishment, the utilitarian mentality being one of the core-ideas behind Positron/Consilience. As greed and thirst for money grows amidst social instability, the whole idea of a perfectly self-sustaining society turns into Kafkaesque nightmare.

The Heart Goes Last tells the story of a young couple, Charmaine and Stan, as they struggle to survive in a post-capitalist America where individual property is a privilege of the rich, whereas poverty-stricken individuals live in cars and dilapidated buildings. In *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*, Atwood asserted that “in literature, every landscape is a state of mind, but every state of mind can also be portrayed by a landscape” (72). Spatial representation is one of the most effective tools to reflect the degradation and hopelessness of a forsaken nation. America’s glory and its subsequent downfall are mirrored in the ruins, abandoned buildings which are the space inhabited by a decadent society. The landscape evokes a heightened sense of forsakenness as the economic and cultural stability collapse. In other words, Atwood’s construction of spatiality exhibits a tendency to convey the degrading nature of mankind. The Atwoodian America is filled with pitch-dark enclosures, closed rooms, prisons, smelly cars and inside-spaces which stand in opposition with the economic and social freedom generally associated with America.

The couple’s universe is truly terrifying: the novel starts with describing their sleeping habits, “with the windows shut except for a crack at the top” so “the air gets dead and supersaturated with their own smells” (Cramped). It is an exasperating and toxic environment out of which there is no escape: “So what can he do? Where can they turn? There’s no safe place, there are no instructions. It’s like he’s being blown by a vicious but mindless wind, aimlessly round and round in circles. No way out” (Where?) The land of dreams is turned into the land of nightmares; Stan is faced with a post-Lapsarian emptiness as he contemplates the precariousness of their existence. The economic disaster and the collapse of the system destabilize the characters’ living conditions and, indirectly, interrogates the stability of contemporary economy:

then everything went to ratshit. Overnight, it felt like. Not just in his own personal life: the whole card castle, the whole system fell to pieces, trillions of dollars wiped off the balance sheets life fog off a window. There were hordes of two-bit experts on TV pretending to explain it had happened—demographics, loss of confidence, gigantic Ponzi schemes—but that was all guesswork bullshit. (...) Not enough jobs, too many people (Where?)

Moreover, Atwood’s use of irony underscores the absurdity of (existing) social and cultural practices. Such ironic instances include Stan’s inability to find a job because he is overqualified, the general willingness to buy baby blood out of desperation for lasting beauty, the construction and use of sexbots instead of actual sexual intercourse or Charmaine’s self-deceptive readiness to impersonate the angel of mercy and euthanize people. The altered environment alters the characters’ moral thresholds as well. In a lawless context, ethical principles lose their ontological validity. Instead, desperation and poverty

determine the new moral standards. Even the idea of masculinity is reshaped: "there used to be a lot of jobs licking ass in the corporate world, but those asses are now out of reach". Again, Atwood points at the contemporary tendency to adopt a bootlicker position to please corporate superiors in hopes of a promotion; in *The Heart Goes Last*, sycophancy loses its primary significance and Stan has to adapt to the new living conditions by renouncing this part of his personality and finding other ways to make a living.

In Atwood's post-economic America, the rich egotistically rule over the poor and money becomes an instrument for social segregation. What's truly appalling about Atwood's narrative is the sense of pervading loneliness and the total erasure of community values in the post-economic framework: "if anything happens, we're on our own, Stan tells her too frequently" (Brew). The spatial representation, which denotes containment (both on a literal and figurative level), confirms the despairing conditions of this new world order.

Amidst hopelessness, the Positron Project appears as a heaven-sent gift. As expected, Charmaine is fascinated by the Positron Project's offer which is alarmingly similar to job offers nowadays:

We offer not only full employment but also protection from the dangerous elements that afflict so many at this time. Work with like-minded others! Help solve the nation's problems of joblessness and crime while solving your own! Accentuate the positive! (Pitch)

This is the part where Atwood's different approach is mostly visible: instead of positioning her characters in a post-apocalyptic setting or in a totalitarian state, Charmaine and Stan get to choose whether to take part in the Positron Project or not. Free will is of utmost importance in the novel. The fact that they choose to subject themselves to constant surveillance, the potential genetic experiments and the prospect of living in a prison reflects the obliteration of ethical limits due to extreme poverty and no future prospects. Spatially, Corporative America is replaced with a wasteland in the first part of the novel and adaptation implies mislaying one's moral compass. The lack of individual liberty or free speech is a personal choice. But once Charmaine and Stan accept the conditions, there is no turning back: "The Project wants serious commitment. Because after that night you were either out or you were in. In was permanent. But no one would force you. If you signed up, it would be of your own free will" (Night Out).

The main building in the town of Consilience is filled with "half a dozen young, earnest, dark-suited, zit-picking graduates of some globally funded think tank's motivational-speaking program" (Twin City), reminiscent of contemporary corporate sectors and practices. The ironical reference to motivational-speaking programs highlights the techniques employed by big corporations nowadays to boost their employees' morale and thus, maximize

profit. Typically, the project presents itself as a functional option to economic and social instability and promotes the idea of a utopian paradise by obsessively repeating the word 'success':

If it succeeds-and it has to succeed, and it can succeed if they all work together-it could be the salvation, not only of the many regions that have been to hard-hit in recent times but eventually, if this model comes to be adopted at the highest levels, of the nation as a whole. Unemployment and crime solved in one fell swoop, with a new life for all those concerned-think about that! (Twin City)

The Positron Project promises a great future for America⁶ and present themselves as trailblazers: "they're like the early pioneers, blazing a trail, clearing a way to the future: a future that will be more secure, more prosperous, and just all-round better because of them! Posterity will revere them. That's the spiel" (Twin City). Ironically, the Positron Project's moral corruption clears the way to an Orwellian age rather than the actual establishment of a utopic society. Their efforts to eradicate any form of resistance (journalists and outsiders who criticized the "regime") reminds one of the totalitarian ideologies hidden behind the mantra of well-being.

Ironically, Ed, the head of the Positron Project, falsely promotes individual liberty and prosperity in exchange for compliance:

the spokesmen (...) have braved a lot of indignant screaming from the online radicals and malcontents who claim that Consilience/Positron is an infringement of individual liberties, an attempt at total social control, an insult to the human spirit. Nobody is more dedicated to individual liberties than Ed is, but as they all know (...) you can't eat your so-called individual liberties, and the human spirit pays no bills, and something needed to be done to relieve the pressure inside the social pressure-cook. (Twin City)

The Heart Goes Last employs both literally and figuratively Foucault's Panopticon to create tropes of entrapment and containment in which individuals are permanently surveyed and silenced.⁷ Resistance is intimidated and

⁶ The Positron Project, from this perspective, is a variation on Donald Trump's catchphrase, "Make America Great (Again)". Instead of setting realistic goals for the benefit of the community, the Positron rhetoric operates on fallacies and deceptive slogans.

⁷ The city of Consilience permanently monitors its inhabitants and controls every movement and act of speech. On the other hand, Positron, the twin-city, is a prison facility where the inmates are constantly surveyed and rebels euthanized. Genetic manipulation, compulsory free labor, silencing, euthanizing and brainwashing are some of the regulatory practices. From this perspective, much of the novel is a twisted variation on Michel Foucault's complex idea of Panopticon.

eradicated, much in the fashion of former communist and Nazi regimes. Ed and his company exert traditional forms of intimidation over rebels by resorting "to social surveillance, to chasing fast youth down dark alleyways, to fire-hosing and pepper-spraying suspicious-looking gatherings" (Twin City). The economic and social "looming collapse" and the "wasteland of poverty and debris" (Twin City) are the alternatives for Ed's artificial paradise. The idea to spend one month as a prisoner in Positron and one month as middle-class citizens in Consilience is terrifyingly appealing for the characters, yet quintessentially disturbing.

The slogan "CONSILIENCE=CONS+RESILIENCE. DO TIME NOW, BUY TIME FOR OUR FUTURE!", the leitmotif of the whole Twin City chapter, reinforces the idea of a prosperous future community. Like many others, Charmaine believes in their visionary insights and chooses to ignore the conspicuous warning signs. She believes in the idea of Consilience/Positron as "a nest, with a golden egg shining within it" (A Meaningful Life), but as is the case with fairy tales, there's always a giant or a witch who guards the golden eggs.

As it happens in totalitarian states, the individuals from the programme are monitored and prohibited from watching pornography or listening to violent music (hip-hop and rock); any form of protest against Management is strictly banned and has serious consequences. A form of resistance against such silencing practices is moral decay, which is embodied in Charmaine. She starts cheating on Stan with Max, the Alternate husband⁸ and ironically, she attempts to trick the system. Her desperation culminates in the act of adultery and wild sexual encounters: "anything, she answers. Anything inside this non-house, inside this nothing space, a space that doesn't exist, between these two people with no real names. Oh anything. Already she's abject" (Tidy). Sexual desire can be linked to the faulty and oppressive system of Consilience/Positron. Inmates desire to have sexual intercourse with chickens, Charmaine enacts the role of the promiscuous woman, Stan imitates Charmaine's adulterous sex scenes with Jocelyn, Ed has sex with a sexbot: these are some of the representative, highly ironic manifestations of latent frustrations.

Charmaine's job is to euthanize the rebels, the unfit, the *others*: "but someone has to do it, for the good of all" (The Heart Goes Last). The Special Procedure is some sort of dark angel of mercy. As the condemned die, the narrator remarks: "then he's unconscious. Then he stops breathing. The heart goes last" (The Heart Goes Last). These faulty individuals are "relocated to a different sphere, because they were not suited to the life of Consilience" (Headgame). As the narrator comments, "Consilience was a closed system-once

⁸ In *The Heart Goes Last*, Alternates are the couple who live in houses for one month while the other couple is in prison, then they exchange places. Alternates are not allowed to meet or to be in contact under any circumstances. The whole idea behind Alternates is profit-oriented and seeks to maximize the Management's financial gain.

inside, nobody went out" (Haircut), which is reminiscent of former dictatorships, where everyone who is against or is criticizing the social machine is considered the enemy. It's a place where moral sins have no legal consequences and Charmaine remorselessly plays her role as the death angel. When outsiders attempt to uncover the horrors of Positron/Consilience, they are taken to prison because "the new order that is a beacon of hope, a beacon that risks being deliberately sabotaged" (Threat).

Surveillance is a shadowy presence in the life of the inhabitants of Consilience, similar to Orwell's Thought Police: "the odd black Surveillance car, gliding past silently as a shark" (Scooter). The whole city is under permanent surveillance: "or it seems empty: no doubt there are eyes embedded everywhere—the lamppost, the fire hydrant. Because you can't see them doesn't mean they can't see you" (Choke Collar). When Stan is asked to act as messenger and to escape from the facility by Jocelyn, one of the founders of Consilience, but also a traitor, the whole profit machinery behind the idea of Positron/Consilience is exposed. Prisons are the locus of perversion in the novel. Jocelyn explains that

prisons used to be about punishment, and then reform and penitence, and then keeping dangerous offenders inside. Then, for quite a few decades, they were about crowd control—penning up the young, aggressive, marginalized guys to keep them off the streets. And then, when they started to be run as private businesses, they were about the profit margins for the prepackaged jail-meal suppliers, and the hired guards and so forth (Valentine's Day)

As closed spatial markers, prisons act as the perfect hideaways for organ trafficking; even the idea of harvesting babies' blood is viable for Management. As long as it makes profit, that is. Ed, the head of the organization, a "control-freak body-parts salesman, potential baby-blood vampire" (Shipped), the dictator in political terms, is an unscrupulous puppeteer, driven by an impulse to make as much money as possible, regardless of the methods. He encapsulates the new CEO from former American corporations and epitomizes human greed and selfishness. Employing free indirect discourse, the narrator points at Stan's decisions and their consequences: "He'd done it himself. So many small choices. The reduction of himself to a series of numbers, stored by others, controlled by others" (Choice)

In Atwood's Consilience/Positron universe, humans start to be gradually replaced by machines as one of the consequences of the new order, a common theme in post-humanist fiction. The fabrication of sexbots and prostibots at Possibilibots offers "the greatest possible happiness of the greatest possible number—that's what Possibilibots stands for, am I right?"⁹. Moreover,

⁹ This idea is clearly an intertextual reference to the Utilitarian doctrine, which was the leading ethical theory of Victorian England. Utilitarianism was founded by Jeremy Bentham. See *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*.

Management creates surgical procedures whose aim is to control minds and erase data in order to induce feelings of love, which are similar to "love potions in the old fairy-tale books (...) the kind where you get imprisoned by a toad prince" (Requisition). In other words, Atwood's mind control devices are a pastiche of traditional fairy-tale potions.

Atwood playfully hints at today's tendency to overreact on social media, blogs and YouTube videos instead of actually trying to help a cause:

Prison abuses! Organ harvesting! Sex slaves created by neurosurgery!
Plans to such the blood of babies! Corruption and greed, though these
in themselves are no great surprise. But the misappropriation of
people's bodies, the violation of public trust, the destruction of human
rights-how could such things have been allowed to happen? (Flamed)

She captures existing double standards and the sanctimoniousness and moral humbug which is a frequent phenomenon among online nonconformists. Surprisingly, the outrage is bilateral:

there were a few rotten apples, but without them it would've worked. In
response, some said that these utopian schemes always went bad and
turned into dictatorships, because human nature was what it was (...) some bloggers objected, others agreed, and in no time at all 'Communist' and 'Fascist' and 'psychopathy' and 'soft on crime' and a new one, 'neuropimp,' were whizzing through the air like buckshot (Flamed)

Atwood subtly inserts contemporary references into her dystopic America. Unexpectedly, the novel ends on a rather idealistic tone: Charmaine and Stan are reunited, they have a baby and live a quiet, but happy life. Nevertheless, the reader is left to wonder whether the new world order is any better than the last. As a matter of fact, Consilience/Positron is never mentioned again.

The Heart Goes Last is indeed one of Margaret Atwood's greatest dystopic achievement. The novel is another literary variation on distorted cultural politics, regulatory regimes and social brainwashing in which, as in her other masterpieces,

there is a recognizably Atwoodian voice, witty, self-ironical, politically and morally engaged as her worldly texts respond to what is actually going on in her own place and time, speaking her double vision of how things look on the surface and what else is happening at the same time inside, underneath or elsewhere (Howells 162).

The Heart Goes Last illustrates, like her other novels "the artifice of representation, where the real world is transformed and reinvented within the imaginative spaces of fiction" (Howells 162). By using spatial tropes of

containment (the smelly car, the prison, Consilience/Positron), Atwood creates a ustopia which challenges and negatively alters the characters' ethical limits. Moreover, Atwood urges the reader to re-evaluate the ongoing changes in social, economic and technological fields by constantly referring to familiar cultural and social practices. In the novel, as in *Oryx and Crake*, "corporations can own, patent, and commodify technologically designed species" (Bouson 93) and can even alter human behaviour and induce mind control. As seen, irony is another useful tool to pinpoint the dangers of extremism and preposterous human attitudes. Corporate America is both challenged and reinstated through irony; capitalist symbols are transposed and contested in a transgressing setting. A typically Atwoodian *magnum opus*, *The Heart Goes Last* transgresses the norms, unsettles notions, fascinates and shocks, and twists our perception on moral codes and cultural codifications.

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