

Stephanie Bender

Just Popular Entertainment or Longing for a Posthuman Eden? The Apocalypse in Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam Trilogy

2019

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19502>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Bender, Stephanie: Just Popular Entertainment or Longing for a Posthuman Eden? The Apocalypse in Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam Trilogy. In: *Journal for Religion, Film and Media*. Apocalyptic Imaginings, Jg. 5 (2019), Nr. 2, S. 31–50. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19502>.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

https://www.jrfm.eu/index.php/ojs_jrfm/article/view/138

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Creative Commons - Namensnennung - Nicht kommerziell 4.0/ Lizenz zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu dieser Lizenz finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a creative commons - Attribution - Non Commercial 4.0/ License. For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Just Popular Entertainment or Longing for a Posthuman Eden?

The Apocalypse in Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam Trilogy*

ABSTRACT

In the context of the ecological crisis, tales of the apocalypse have become a regular feature of the contemporary cultural imaginary, be it in popular feature films, non-fictional texts, or dystopian novels. Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam Trilogy* (2004 [2003], 2010 [2009], 2014 [2013]) investigates this curious form of entertainment both by employing the template of the apocalypse itself and by reflecting on its cause and effect at the same time. The novels reveal how worlds and their respective compasses of good and evil are constructed through storytelling and that the apocalypse is also a story which functions either as a moral structuring device or as an anaesthetic for the estranged subjects of late capitalism. Assuming a meta-perspective, the *MaddAddam Trilogy* engenders ethical reflections on possible futures, incorporating recent philosophical strands like transhumanism and posthumanism.

KEYWORDS

(Post-) Apocalyptic Fiction, Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam Trilogy*, Narrative World-making, Ethics, Posthumanism, Ecology

BIOGRAPHY

Stephanie Bender is currently a PhD candidate in English Literary and Cultural Studies at the University of Freiburg, Germany. Her dissertation topic is "Future Fictions in the 21st Century: Ethics and Aesthetics". In addition to a degree in English and Sport Sciences (University of Freiburg), she holds a BA in International Business Management (HFU Furtwangen). Her research interests are therefore manifold and interdisciplinary, converging on questions of economics, ethics and ecology.

AVATAR (James Cameron, US 2009), the world's most popular film ever,¹ depicts a future humanity on the quest for new resources having plundered planet Earth to unviability; INTERSTELLAR (Christopher Nolan, US 2014), another block-

1 Cf. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/alltime/world/> [accessed 20 September 2018].

buster, likewise pictures the end of Earth's capability to host human life; *THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW* (Roland Emmerich, US 2004) imagines the worst possible results of climate change that makes large parts of the planet uninhabitable – so does *SNOWPIERCER* (Bong Joon Ho, KR/CZ 2014), only here the whole world is affected; in the Disney film *WALL-E* (Andrew Stanton, US 2008) humanity has already abandoned earth and left the cleaning of its mess to robots. The list of popular 21st-century future fictions portraying end-time scenarios as a result of anthropogenic ecological destruction could readily be continued – there is even a name for the newly emerging genre of science fiction dealing with the devastating legacy of climate change: cli-fi.²

Against the backdrop of doomsday prognoses of ecological degradation and numerous other problematic future-related tendencies, it seems to be immensely appealing these days to imagine the end of the world as we know it, or at least the end of humanity. Many of the films and novels which feature the end times are also tagged as apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic, which refers back to the biblical story of the apocalypse yet has come to mean something very different today. Often oblivious of the original story conveying hope and revelation, the apocalypse in popular fiction has become a synonym for catastrophe. Andrew Tate argues that “[a]pocalypse is widely understood in the shared, popular imagination as a kind of classy synonym for spectacular destruction, death on a vast scale and the collapse of all that a society might hold dear (families, cars, the comforts of home)”.³

Some contemporary works, however, still exhibit parallels to the Book of Revelation, adapted and playfully twisted to fit the ethical challenges of the contemporary historical circumstances. Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam Trilogy* (2004 [2003], 2010 [2009], 2014 [2013]) is a case in point which depicts the demise of human civilisation resulting from a bio-engineered plague. It differs from other popular “apocalyptic” or “post-apocalyptic” future fictions in so far as it functions as a meta-narrative on apocalyptic tales and worldmaking through storytelling. Atwood's novels use the template of the apocalypse and at the same time foreground its story-ness while imagining possible futures derived from present developments. By simulating these future worlds and pointing to their narrative constructedness, the novels further allow the reader to assess their ethical potential.

In representing competing worldviews, the apocalypse and its aftermath become catalysers of the distinct maps of morality upheld and constructed by different social groups through the stories they tell. In this sense, as in the original biblical tale, the apocalypse works as a moral structuring device. However,

2 Mayer 2014, 23.

3 Tate 2017, 11.

Atwood's depiction of the apocalypse in the *MaddAddam Trilogy* does not offer a fixed moral universe but remains ambiguous, leaving the final judgement of good and evil to the reader. The aesthetic projections merely offer opportunities for reflection which, as I see it, is the essence of ethics. At the same time, the trilogy is very unambiguous, with references to global capitalism and its future consequences revealing how, in order to soothe its alienated subjects, late modernity brings forth anaesthetic forms of popular entertainment. Representations of the apocalypse in popular literature and film can therefore also be read as an expression of the self-alienation of late capitalist societies, whose members flee into the aesthetics of their own destruction for the apparent lack of any pragmatic alternative to the depressing status quo. *The MaddAddam Trilogy* offers a playful meta-comment on these two readings in its address of the ecological crisis of the present.

IMAGINARIES OF HUMAN EXTINCTION – NEW UTOPIA OR COLLECTIVE DEPRESSION?

In the light of hard evidence of the anthropogenic destruction of the world ecology, manifest in climate change and its effects, the sixth great wave of species extinction, soil degradation, enormous amounts of micro-plastics in the sea and elsewhere, it is not surprising that the frustration with our own species has grown to the point where one might hope for its extinction for the sake of all other life forms. Mark Jendrysik notes: “Reflecting this vision, a new genre of popular films and books asks us to consider how the Earth and the natural world might fare in the total absence of human beings. In doing so, they foresee a new sort of posthuman future, one in which nature survives the extinction of the human race.”⁴ According to Jendrysik, the possibility of our own extinction has become a new utopia – one in which nature manages to survive us and flourishes in a “world without us”.⁵ The phenomenon is comparable to a depression on a large social scale: the self-esteem of the human species is so low that it considers itself worthless and dreams of its own suicidal death. At the end of the last century, the “Voluntary Human Extinction Movement” was formed, proposing that we should “live long and die out” peacefully, simply by refraining from reproduction.⁶ The prerequisite for such self-hate is a profound alienation of human beings from themselves and from the natural and material

4 Jendrysik 2011, 35.

5 Cf. Alan Weisman's non-fictional book *The World without Us* (2007), in which he imagines nature reclaiming the Earth after humankind has vanished. There is also a novel with the same title by Mireille Juchau (2015) that belongs to the previously discussed end-times/cli-fi genre.

6 This is the slogan of the movement as proposed on its official website: <http://vhent.org/> [accessed 15 October 2018].

world surrounding them, which is brought about by the hegemony of neo-liberal capitalism and its concurrent forms of civilisation.⁷

In a similar vein, but with regard to the rise of fascism, Walter Benjamin concluded his famous *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936) as follows: “Mankind, which in Homer’s time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.”⁸ The proliferation of apocalyptic tales in contemporary future fictions also allows for the conclusion that once again humanity has reached a point at which there is a certain aesthetic pleasure involved in contemplating its own destruction: “Catastrophe on a global scale remains a curiously popular form of screen entertainment.[...] Such narratives not only seem strange visual companions to popcorn and ice cream, but also are highly marketable.”⁹ In an attempt to explain this odd phenomenon of taking pleasure in contemplating the end of the world as we know it, Elizabeth Rosen follows a similar interpretation: “No doubt, we do love apocalypses too much. But given that the world sometimes appears to be coming apart at its economic, political, and social seams and that there is ‘more and more information, and less and less meaning’ (Beaudrillard *Simulation and Simulacra*), our fascination with the apocalyptic myth is certainly understandable.”¹⁰ The contemporary human subject under late capitalist conditions is thus not only fundamentally estranged but also irredeemably overcharged with the complexities of this world and the proliferating information that circulates within it without creating much viable meaning for individuals and local communities, as Atwood’s *MaddAddam Trilogy* also illustrates.

“APOCALYPSE” NOW AND THEN

Margaret Atwood’s future fictions *Oryx and Crake*, *The Year of the Flood*, and *MaddAddam* are all written around an apocalyptic event which wipes out almost the entire human civilisation on Earth and which would therefore certainly be seen as catastrophic by ordinary standards. Here it becomes evident that the meaning of “apocalypse”, originally derived from the biblical Story of Revelation, has undergone a profound semantic shift up to the present. While in popular fiction today, “apocalyptic” is often understood as catastrophic and thus

7 Cf. Critical theory on capitalism and alienation ranging from Karl Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (1932), via Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (1944), to contemporary works like Hartmut Rosa’s *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity* (2013).

8 Benjamin 2008, 42.

9 Tate 2017, 13.

10 Rosen 2008, xi.

entails a thoroughly negative evaluation of the event(s) described, in traditional mythology, as well as in the Bible, it has very positive connotations and is meant to convey hope and truth.

The traditional narrative that has come to be known as apocalypse was fully formed only with the advent of Christianity. It has narrative antecedents in the Old Testament, and individual components of the apocalyptic story can be traced even further back to the ancient civilizations of the Vedic Indians, Egyptians, Persians, Mesopotamians, and Greeks. The etymological root of the word *apocalypse* is the Greek *apokalypsis*, meaning ‘unveiling’ or ‘uncovering,’ but the word, as it denotes cosmic events, is not used before it appears specifically attached to the Book of Revelation in the New Testament, where it refers to the divine revelation experienced by St. John of Patmos, who is shown the coming struggle between good and evil and God’s ultimate judgement upon the world.¹¹

The semantic change of the term “apocalypse” has its roots in the Romantic period around 1800, with the appearance of the figure of “the last man” in the cultural imaginary. Examples of this literary and artistic figure of a lonely survivor amid the ruins of civilisation can be found in Mary Shelley’s novel *The Last Man* (1826) or John Martin’s oil painting by the same title (1849). In this cultural and artistic trope, Eva Horn sees a departure from the original apocalyptic vision as divine intervention towards the secular catastrophe of a godforsaken humanity.¹² As a result of Enlightenment philosophy, with its emphasis on reason, humans as individuals, and the natural sciences, the belief in God as the sole omnipotent ruler has become radically undermined. Instead, humankind is thrown back upon itself, as expressed by depictions of “the last man”.

In continuation of the developments that had started in the Romantic era, “Last Man narrative became popular in literature, and, increasingly in the twentieth century, the cinema”.¹³ In the process, the apocalypse almost completely lost its original meaning of revelation and hope and has come to signify disaster or the end of humanity instead: “The result is that a story which was grounded in hope about the future has become instead a reflection of fears and disillusionment about the present, a bleak shift in emphasis from the belief in an ordered universe with a cogent history to one in which the overriding sense is of a chaotic, indifferent, and possibly meaningless universe.”¹⁴ Atwood’s *MaddAddam Trilogy* partially mirrors this shift, yet it is also ambiguous and very self-conscious about its treatment of the apocalypse, both as a plot element and as a discourse.

11 Rosen 2008, xiii.

12 Horn 2014, 47.

13 Korte 2008, 152.

14 Rosen 2008, xiv.

MARGARET ATWOOD'S MADDADDAM TRILOGY

Assuming a meta-perspective, Atwood's trilogy takes up the phenomenon of the apocalyptic cultural imaginary, both on the story level and on the level of genre. The first novel, *Oryx and Crake* (2004 [2003]), begins in the chronological middle of the story with a description of a post-apocalyptic scenery: "On the eastern horizon there's a greyish haze, lit now with a rosy, deadly, glow. Strange how that colour still seems tender. The offshore towers stand out in dark silhouette [...] the ersatz reefs of rusted car parts and jumbled bricks and assorted rubble sound almost like holiday traffic".¹⁵ The typical description of a post-apocalyptic landscape filled with absence is rendered through the eyes and mind of Jimmy/Snowman, who, as a typical "last man figure", functions as the perceiving character or focaliser¹⁶ of the first novel. Like most of the central characters, he has two names: Jimmy in the pre-apocalyptic world, and the name he has given himself to assume a new identity, Snowman, in the post-apocalyptic present, alluding to the mysterious Abominable Snowman. In his mind, he constantly shifts back and forth between his reconstructed past and the post-apocalyptic present. Mediated by his memories and judgements, the reader learns about the state of the pre-apocalyptic society and about the why and how of the apocalyptic event, which has been caused by the scientist Glenn/Crake, who wilfully engineered a deadly virus killing almost the entire human population on earth.

In the second novel, *The Year of the Flood* (2010 [2009]), two narrators provide different perspectives mainly on the unfolding of the plague itself. While Ren's account is rendered in the first person, Toby's perspective is mediated by an external narrator, assuming her point of view. The doubling of narrative perspective highlights the narrative construction of pasts and realities, or of collective worlds that constitute realities. Before the breakdown, Toby and Ren were at some point in their lives both part of the eco-religious group the God's Gardeners, and through their narrative point of view, the world of the Gardeners as a space of difference in pre-apocalyptic society is represented very intensely in the second book.

The final part of the trilogy, *MaddAddam* (2014 [2013]), focuses on narrative world building in the post-apocalyptic world, in which there are only very few human beings left, together with a new biotechnologically enhanced humanoid species created by Crake, the so-called Crakers. Again, it is told by an external narrator and Toby is the main perceiving character, this time however with several others co-creating and shaping the narrative. Here, even more than in the

15 Atwood 2004, 5.

16 A focaliser character is the character from whose perspective the story is told, although that character is not necessarily the narrator.

two prequels, storytelling is foregrounded and examined as a collective process and as the basic means of world-construction. From this perspective, the apocalypse is also exposed as what it is – a story. It is a tale with a certain function, or, as I will argue, different functions for different groups of people and the respective worlds they inhabit and construct.

THE APOCALYPSE AS POPULAR ENTERTAINMENT IN LATE CAPITALISM

Seen from the outside, the three novels are a piece of art and popular entertainment aesthetically depicting the erasure of human society through an apocalyptic event. Hence, they could well be sorted into the genre of (post)-apocalyptic fiction. What distinguishes them from other works of the genre is the meta-perspective they assume, for in their story-world too, before the actual event, apocalyptic visions have become

a queasy form of popular entertainment. There had been online TV shows about it: computer-generated landscape pictures with deer grazing in Times Square, serves-us-right finger-wagging, earnest experts lecturing about all the wrong turns taken by the human race.

There was only so much of that people could stand, judging from the rating, which spiked and then plummeted as viewers voted with their thumbs, switching from imminent wipeout to real-time contests about hotdog-swallowing if they liked nostalgia, or to sassy-best-girlfriends comedies if they liked stuffed animals, or to Mixed Martial Art Felony Fights if they liked bitten-off ears, or to Nitee-Nite live streamed suicides or HottTotts kiddy porn or Hedsoff real-time executions if they were truly jaded. All of it so much more palatable than the truth.¹⁷

From the quote it becomes clear that the immense popular interest in apocalyptic tales and images in the pre-apocalyptic story-world does not represent a conscious reflection or an actual moral standpoint on the part of the viewers as perhaps in the case of “The Voluntary Human Extinction Movement”. Instead, it has to be seen as an extreme piece of entertainment for enormously bored and alienated subjects that could easily be replaced by any of the other horrific shows mentioned. The doubling of the apocalyptic imaginary the *MaddAddam Trilogy* represents endows the novels with a reflective angle on the function of apocalyptic tales and, indeed, of storytelling as part of worldmaking in and outside fiction as such.

The pre-apocalyptic hegemonic world of the trilogy, depicted mainly in the first book, *Oryx and Crake*, is a future version of the contemporary neo-liberal late-capitalist world: “In Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*, [...] we find a near-future world that both approximates and projects forward from the political, socio-eco-

17 Atwood 2014, 32.

nomical, technological, and climatological givens of our present moment.”¹⁸ This future simulation in which the large corporations have replaced the state as an institution clearly entails a critique of the neo-liberal capitalist world of today. Some critics like J. Brooks Bouson reduce the phenomenon to an “ever-spreading and deadly ‘virus’ of Americanism”,¹⁹ whereas I want to argue that “Americanism” is only the most obvious symptom of a global capitalist system that has its roots in European colonial trade and the debt-based economy.

The link between its creeds and practices, on one hand, and ecological degradation, on the other, is made explicit in the novels through descriptions of the devastated state of the natural world as a backdrop. As Sybille Machat proposes, “Margaret Atwood spins current environmental concerns of the early 21st century into the future and bases the physical world of the novel on their continuation.”²⁰ In *Oryx and Crake* this is expressed as follows: “the coastal aquifers turned salty and the northern permafrost melted and the vast tundra bubbled with methane, and the drought in the midcontinental plains regions went on and on, and the Asian steppes turned to sand dunes.”²¹ For the inhabitants of this near-future world, suppression thus becomes an important survival strategy, as Toby, one of the two focaliser characters of the second novel, *The Year of the Flood*, remembers:

[She thinks:] I knew there were things wrong in the world, they were referred to, I’d seen them in the onscreen news. But the wrong things were wrong somewhere else. By the time she’d reached college, the wrongness had moved closer. [...] Everybody knew. Nobody admitted to knowing. If other people began 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 in you 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.*²²

At the time, before joining the eco-religious sect the God’s Gardeners, Toby is an ordinary citizen of the near-future version of the United States, exemplifying the state of consciousness that is normal or necessary for its profoundly estranged subjects.

Spatially, this world is segregated into the compounds, where the corporation’s employees live in gated communities, and the pleeblands, which are ghetto-like, quasi-anarchistic places. Life in the compounds as described retrospectively by Snowman/Jimmy is furthermore characterised by artificiality and a

18 Snyder 2011, 471.

19 Bouson 2011, 17.

20 Machat 2013, 107.

21 Atwood 2004, 29.

22 Atwood 2010, 284–5.

high degree of mediation:²³ “Jimmy’s mother said it was all artificial, it was just a theme park and you could never bring the old ways back.”²⁴ The rich people’s compounds are full of fake replicas and would-be authentic architecture and furniture, such as the family’s Cape Cod-style frame house. In an account of his childhood memories Jimmy recalls: “The furniture in it was called *reproduction*. Jimmy was quite old before he realized what this word meant – that for each reproduction item, there was supposed to be an original somewhere. Or there had been once. Or something.”²⁵ As Jimmy’s comment expresses, the situation is reminiscent of Beaudrillard’s perfect simulacrum, meaning a copy without an original and nothing but signs referring back to each other – floods of information, but nothing “real” or actually meaningful.²⁶ This feeling of inauthenticity of compounder lifestyle is shared by the second narrator and focaliser of *The Year of the Flood*, Ren, who moves into the compounds as a child: “nothing felt right. All that faux marble, and the reproduction antique furniture, and the carpets in our house – none of it seemed real. It smelled funny too – like disinfectant.”²⁷

The children in the compounds grow up immersed in digital technologies and the virtual realities of internet-based computer games: “[Jimmy/Snowman] lets himself drift back to those after-school times with Crake. [...] They might play Extinctathon or one of the others. Three-Dimensional Waco, Barbarian Stomp, Kwiktime Osama.”²⁸ Confined to the relatively narrow space of their compound, young people have very little else to do that is considered “safe”, which diminishes the range of unmediated physical experiences for them and in the long run produces feelings of alienation. As a result of this very artificial lifestyle, depression seems to be frequent among the compounders. To keep up the toxic status quo, the problems of this future society are individualised and psychologised. Hence, the solution Jimmy’s dad proposes to his mother who, as a result of seeing through all of these problems is constantly in a low, trance-like mood, is: “Take some pills if you’re so fucking depressed!”²⁹ To ensure its socio-economic stabilisation, the compounder society furthermore requires collective anaesthetisation of its citizens through entertainment that can hardly ever be extreme enough, be it in aforementioned apocalyptic TV shows or live executions and child pornography.

23 I use “mediated” here as a kind of antipode to “authentic/natural”, referring to the gradual alienation from unmediated physical/corporeal experience to more and more mediated forms of experience, ranging from simple representation in language to experiences that are several times removed, for example in the consumption of digital media or copies of copies.

24 Atwood 2004, 34.

25 Atwood 2004, 33.

26 Beaudrillard 1994, 6.

27 Atwood 2010, 248.

28 Atwood 2004, 47.

29 Atwood 2004, 68.

On the whole, *Oryx and Crake* and the second novel, *The Year of the Flood*, point out the major shortcomings of the pre-apocalyptic world ruled by global capital: it is a world in which monetary profit and efficacy determine all values, including the value of human and non-human life. Owing to a lack of spirituality in this world of big business, nothing can be sacred (apart from monetary value perhaps). Instead, an overruling positivism justifies the supremacy of the natural sciences that work towards fantasies of complete mastery over nature, and whose findings can be turned into profit. In an argument with her husband on genetic engineering, Jimmy's mother declares: "You're interfering with the building blocks of life. It's immoral. It's... sacrilegious."³⁰ The lack of sacredness here stands in harsh opposition to other worldviews and world versions of the novels, such as that of the eco-religious sect the God's Gardeners, whose world is depicted very prominently in *The Year of the Flood*. Tate even goes so far as to argue that "[a] debate on what might be considered to be 'sacred' – life, community, art or a shared history of the planet – is fundamental to Atwood's trilogy".³¹ The trilogy certainly seeks to explore how human beings and collectives create values in their attempt at meaning-making via discourse and storytelling, which results in the production of different coexisting worlds with their respective maps of morality and values. In parallel to its biblical original, the apocalypse also functions as a moral structuring device, expressing their differences in worldmaking and morality.

THE APOCALYPSE AS A MORAL STRUCTURING DEVICE

In total, there are at least four different but partly overlapping belief systems with their respective moral compasses in *The MaddAddam Trilogy*: neoliberal capitalism, the natural sciences, the eco-religion of the God's Gardeners, and what can be summed up under "the arts", represented mainly by the "words person" Jimmy and on a metafictional level by the novels themselves. The apocalypse and what follows makes them and their narrative strategies of worldmaking visible and functions as an ethical testing ground for their maps of morality. It is fairly obvious that Crake's plans to re-create a "better" humanity have failed in certain respects, not least owing to inconsistencies in his worldview, which oscillates between a critique of techno-scientific capitalism and a deep alliance and indebtedness to it.³² However, it is impossible to simply depict him as the villain of the novels, owing to the ambiguous portrayal of the post-apocalyptic setting in the last novel, *MaddAddam*.³³ Despite some critics arguing that Atwood's novel, like most other (post-)apocalyptic fictions, is not very subtle in conveying

30 Atwood 2004, 67.

31 Tate 2017, 63.

32 Cf. Korte 2008, 157.

33 Criticism written before the publication of *MaddAddam* therefore often condemns Crake and the God's Gardeners for their fundamentalism and inhumanism.

its moral message,³⁴ I believe that the trilogy is very ambiguous as to its moral stance. The aesthetic simulation of possible future worlds merely provides opportunities for reflection for the reader rather than a fixed moral universe or even simple solutions for the ecological crisis at hand. Instead, *The MaddAddam Trilogy* lays bare the mechanics of world construction through storytelling and discourse and portrays its moral consequences. For example, for Crake and the God's Gardeners the apocalypse clearly represents something positive. From a post-anthropocentric or eco-centric point of view, it is difficult to totally oppose the take that "nature"³⁵ and its non-human creatures would be better off without the kind of human civilisation represented in the novels' pre-apocalyptic world. This idea is reinforced through the extensive portrayal of the God's Gardeners and their means of narrative worldmaking in *The Year of the Flood*.

The God's Gardeners' belief system is based on a post-anthropocentrism in which animals and other non-human creatures have souls and rights to life similar to those of human beings. They express this value system in hymns titled "Oh Let Me Not Be Proud", "Oh Sing We Now the Holy Weeds" or "We Praise the Tiny Perfect Moles", and sermons held by their leader, Adam One, on their feast days, such as "The Feast of Adam and All Primates", in which he discusses the close kinship between humans and "the other Animals" as well as the moral obligations that follow from that.³⁶ Instead of justifying eco-centrism scientifically or "rationally" only, Adam One connects the Gardeners' values and lifestyle to God and God's creation: "By covering such barren rooftops with greenery we are doing our small part in the redemption of God's Creation from the decay and sterility that lies around us, and feeding ourselves with its unpolluted food into the bargain. Some would term our efforts futile, but if all were to follow our example, what a change would be wrought on our beloved Planet!"³⁷ Many of Adam One's sermons incorporate scientific findings, yet he clearly points out that the purely scientific paradigm (as represented by Crake) is foolish in its denial of metaphysics and spirituality: "God is pure Spirit; so how can anyone reason that the failure to measure the Immeasurable proves its non-existence?"³⁸

In the Gardeners' world, the stories that Adam One tells in his sermons, the songs, and the rhymes all connect a spiritual and religious belief system to a certain mode of material living and especially of interacting with the natural environment in a sustainable manner, for example through community-based rooftop gardening as a form of non-capitalist production. Even though the

34 Bouson 2004, 140–1; Tate 2017, 66.

35 The framing of all that is non-human, or not human-made as "nature" is problematic from certain eco-critical perspectives, like Timothy Morton's *Ecology without Nature*.

36 Atwood 2010, 63.

37 Atwood 2010, 13.

38 Atwood 2010, 62.

Gardeners hardly partake in the capitalist world, they still sell some of their products at “the tree of life market”, which shows how all worlds are interconnected and overlap at their margins. In opposition to the inauthenticity of the compounds, the Gardeners’ lifestyle and their products are seen as “authentic” by their contemporaries living in the compounds: “the Gardener produce was the real thing. It stank of authenticity: the Gardeners might be fanatical and amusingly bizarre, but at least they were ethical.”³⁹ The God’s Gardeners also attribute “being ethical” to themselves and their way of living – a belief which is reinforced by their awaiting the apocalypse. For them, the story of the apocalypse functions as a moral structuring device par excellence, and furthermore mirrors the original meaning of the term as hopeful revelation:

We God’s Gardeners are a plural Noah: we too have been called, we too forewarned. We can feel the symptoms of coming disaster as a doctor feels a sick man’s pulse. We must be ready for the time when those who have broken trust with the Animals – yes, wiped them from the face of the Earth where God placed them – will be swept away by the waterless Flood which will be carried on the wings of God’s dark Angels that fly by night, and in airplanes and helicopters and bullet trains, and on transport trucks and other such conveyances.⁴⁰

It remains open whether Crake is the sole initiator of the plan to rid the planet of its human malady, or whether some of the God’s Gardeners are complicit in his plan, as they also aspire towards an apocalypse they call “the waterless flood”, which would cleanse the earth from a destructive human culture. Like its biblical precursor, the worldview represented by Crake and the Gardeners entails a moral map in which the pre-apocalyptic world is found evil and untenable and hope is directed towards a post-apocalyptic New Jerusalem, or Eden in the Gardeners’ jargon, as this sermon held by Adam One shortly after the plague indicates:

What a cause for rejoicing is this rearranged world in which we find ourselves! True, there is a certain – let us not say *disappointment*. The debris left by the Waterless Flood, like that left by any receding flood, is not attractive. It will take time for our longed-for Eden to appear, my Friends. But how privileged are we to witness these first precious moments of Rebirth! How much clearer the air is, now that man-made pollution has ceased!⁴¹

In opposition to Crake, however, the Gardeners see the root of evil not in the human genetic make-up, as the term Anthropocene (the age of human) implies, but in the toxic lifestyle of late capitalism.

39 Atwood 2010, 170.

40 Atwood 2010, 110.

41 Atwood 2010, 443.

Following Roger Moore, the contemporary geologic era should rather be called “Capitalocene”, as the ecological degradation stems not from human life in general but from a very distinct system of economic production and its concurrent belief systems and lifestyles.⁴² Hence, a different human world and culture is possible, in which the ecology is not wrecked. In the novels, this alternative world is represented by the God’s Gardeners, who accordingly believe in their surviving the flood as a result of their better lifestyle: “A massive die-off of the human race was impending, due to overpopulation and wickedness, but the Gardeners exempted themselves: they intended to float above the Waterless Flood, with the aid of the food they were stashing away in the hidden storeplaces they called Ararats.”⁴³ Apocalypticism from this point of view functions as an ordering device in an otherwise chaotic world, as it constructs a fixed moral compass of good and evil.⁴⁴ The example in the *MaddAdam Trilogy* demonstrates, however, that this moral compass only pertains to a certain group and their strategies of worldmaking through storytelling and discourse. The Gardeners live in an oral culture; in hymns, verses and sermons, they construct a belief system which is fundamentally different from the hegemonic system around them that they, in allusion to “hell”, call “the external world”.

With respect to the God’s Gardeners and their eco-religion, Atwood’s trilogy also assumes a meta-perspective by depicting in detail the process whereby Toby becomes a Gardener, which allows for a deconstructive look behind the scenes. When Toby is asked to join the Gardeners’ leadership ranks by becoming an “Eve”, she fears that it would be hypocritical: “‘I’m not sure I believe in all of it.’ ‘In some religions, faith precedes action,’ said Adam One. ‘In ours, action precedes faith. You’ve been acting as if you believe, dear Toby. As if – those two words are very important to us. Continue to live according to them, and belief will follow in time’.”⁴⁵ Having accepted the position, Toby finds out that in spite of the Gardeners’ apparent technophobia, each of the leaders secretly owns a laptop and that Adam One sometimes deliberately “invents” certain stories to make the members believe and do what he thinks is right: “‘Forgive me, dear Toby,’ he said when the rest had gone. ‘I apologize for my excursion into fiction. I must sometimes say things that are not transparently honest. But it is for the greater good.’”⁴⁶

With regard to the often comic representation of the Gardeners, and also Toby and Ren’s sometimes critically distanced narrative perspectives, Hope Jenkins argues that the Gardeners are criticised by the novels for their “inhuman-

42 Cf. Moore 2015.

43 Atwood 2010, 47.

44 Cf. Tate 2017, 17.

45 Tate 2017, 201.

46 Tate 2017, 219.

ism” and that therefore *The Year of the Flood* should be understood as a “cautionary tale about cautionary tales” in ecocritical movements.⁴⁷ I would question this reading by arguing that the Gardeners represent not “inhumanism” but a step towards “posthumanism”, and that their portrayal and especially Toby’s immersion into their creed are depicted very positively by the novels.⁴⁸ By foregrounding the narrative constructedness of the Gardeners’ belief system, Atwood emphasises that it is the stories that determine the action, in this case the distinctive behaviour of Gardeners towards the natural world. Even though Toby is emotionally distanced from the Gardeners’ world in the beginning, she becomes a real Gardener by first acting “as if” she believes, before fully internalising the Gardeners’ creed and habits. She even keeps them up throughout her isolation during plague and carries them over into the post-apocalyptic setting. The last part of the trilogy, *MaddAddam*, consequently ends with the teachings of the Gardeners being successfully passed on to the Crakers.

Similar to the Gardeners’ teachings and beliefs, Crake’s map of morality stands in opposition to the capitalist map, yet is heavily indebted to a purely scientific worldview and its essentialism. While it is typical of (post-)apocalyptic fiction in recent years that the catastrophe is of anthropogenic origin (e.g. a nuclear incident in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, climate change in *THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW*), the *MaddAddam Trilogy*’s apocalyptic event is still an exception, as it is caused *deliberately* by Crake to solve the problem of human-made ecological destruction. It is therefore fuelled by good intentions, echoing the idea of human extinction as a new utopia. As Crake furthermore bioengineers the Crakers, who are meant to survive the plague, the parallels to the Biblical apocalyptic story become more obvious: the end of humankind and its late modern form of civilisation, which is rendered as morally debauched in the novels, becomes the beginning of a better posthuman world – at least from Crake’s point of view. Instead of God, however, it is Crake as an ordinary human being who has put himself into a God-like position by bringing on the apocalypse, self-righteously reigning over life and death: “Sitting in judgement of the world, thought Jimmy; but why had that been his right?”⁴⁹ The consequences of not asking about rights is often thematised in representations of the scientific belief in “progress” and mastery in science fiction, starting with Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.⁵⁰ In this early science-fiction novel, a scientific experiment to arti-

47 Jennings 2010, 11;14.

48 Again, reading the last part of the trilogy leads to conclusions than are not that same as when one looks at *The Year of the Flood* alone.

49 Atwood 2004, 406.

50 Some scholars define *Frankenstein* as an important forerunner of science fiction in the form of scientific romance (e.g. Parrinder 2015, 40), while others follow Brian Aldiss’s claim (see Aldiss 1973) that *Frankenstein* is actually the ur-text of all science fiction (e.g. Alkon 1994).

ficially create a human being goes off the rails, confronting the scientist and his contemporaries with unforeseen moral problems. In a similar manner, Crake engineers a new humanoid race which is genetically freed from the human flaws he primarily sees in symbolic thinking and representation. According to him, these human traits have led to the will to dominate others and nature in a violent manner – ironically, this is exactly what he does himself through his act. In the end, however, Crake’s plans fail, as his creatures breed with the humans that have survived in spite of the plague; the Crakers even start to develop artistic and symbolic forms of representation, as well as a quasi-religious creed, in which – all the more ironically – he functions as a god-like figure, even though “Crake was against the notion of God, or of gods of any kind, and would surely be disgusted by the spectacle of his own gradual deification”.⁵¹ However, in dialogue with one of the Gardeners, Crake’s wish to assume god-like power under the guise of scientific feasibility is foreshadowed: “‘Illness is a design fault,’ said the boy. ‘It could be corrected.’ [...] ‘So, if you were making the world, you’d make it better?’ [Ren] said. Better than God, was what [she] meant. [...] ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘As a matter of fact, I would.’”⁵² Here it becomes evident that the unfettered belief in a world which is fully explainable and controllable through the paradigm of the natural sciences is comparable to a religious creed, yet without metaphysics or a god. The centre of this belief system is instead occupied by humanity.

Therefore, Crake and his worldview symbolise a form of humanism that transcends the biological boundaries of the human through science and technology, and therefore becomes a kind of transhumanism. Francesca Ferrando states that “philosophically, transhumanism roots itself in the Enlightenment, and so it does not expropriate rational humanism. By taking humanism further, transhumanism can be defined as ‘ultra-humanism’”.⁵³ Instead of aspiring for more conventional transhumanist goals such as radical life expansion and enhancement of intellectual capabilities,⁵⁴ which he only uses as dummy “carriers” for his real designs,⁵⁵ Crake’s transhumanism runs in the opposite direction: back to what is conventionally thought of as a more “primitive” stage of evolution because the Crakers’ intellectual capabilities are somewhat limited, they have a very short lifespan, and their physiology is fit for eating nothing but leaves. Hence, Crake’s redefinition of what is “good” and what progress means for the

51 Atwood 2004, 126.

52 Atwood 2010, 176–177.

53 Ferrando 2013, 27.

54 As depicted on the website of the transhumanist movement <https://humanityplus.org/> [accessed 12 October 2018].

55 Crake uses a pill he calls “BlyssPluss” as a carrier for his deadly disease and advertises it as prolonging youth, among other effects.

planet and its ecology is engrained in his apocalyptic deed, mirroring a fundamentally different map of morality which has common ground with the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement and human extinction as the new eco-utopia, as well as with the God's Gardeners' belief. The future world turns out to be quite different from how Crake had intended it to be, as the Crakers could not be rid of artistic production, storytelling and myth creation, and share their world with the surviving human and non-human creatures, as well as with other hybrids. The post-apocalyptic world can thus be interpreted as coming close to a posthumanist utopia – or in Gardener terms, a posthumanist Eden.

A POSTHUMANIST EDEN

The post-apocalyptic setting of the *MaddAddam Trilogy* has already been discussed against the philosophical backdrop of posthumanism by critics like Valeria Mosca, who argues that Atwood stages not the end of humanity but “the end of ‘the human’ as it is traditionally conceived”.⁵⁶ Posthumanism in this sense has to be distinguished radically from transhumanism as it provides an attempt to overcome humanist anthropocentrism in favour of non-human agents and subjectivities, as well as systemic ways of thinking and relationality. According to Francesca Ferrando, “[p]osthumanism is a philosophy which provides a suitable way of departure to think in relational and multi-layered ways, expanding the focus to the non-human realm in post-dualistic, post-hierarchical modes, thus allowing one to envision post-human futures which will radically stretch the boundaries of human imagination.”⁵⁷

Posthumanist themes such as animal personhood and hybridity are taken up especially in *MaddAddam*, which depicts the post-apocalyptic scenery in more detail. The pigeons, as pigs with human brain tissue, provide a good example for posthumanist subjects and relations in the last novel: being a product of technological alteration and a hybrid between human and animal, they become fully accepted members of the post-apocalyptic society and are granted subjectivity and agency. Instead of talking and writing about them in an objectified manner, as is usually the case with animals, Toby for instance corrects her narrative about Snowman-Jimmy clinging to a pigeon: “clinging to its back. Her back. The Pigeons were not objects. She had to get that straight. It was only respectful.”⁵⁸ The pigeons are also given a voice, as the Crakers are able to communicate with them. The final book of the trilogy ends on a very positive note with a funeral in which different species take part and mourn their dead together: “The Pigeons wished to carry Adam and Jimmy to the site for us, as a sign of friendship and

56 Mosca 2013, 47.

57 Ferrando 2013, 30.

58 Atwood 2014, 350–351.

interspecies co-operations. [...] The Crakers sang all the way.”⁵⁹ The postapocalyptic mixed-species society can thus be seen in the light of a posthumanist utopia, which furthermore makes it difficult to simply condemn either Crake’s apocalyptic deed or the creed of the Gardeners.

STORIES MAKE WORLDS AND VALUES

In its meta-textual approach, the *MaddAddam Trilogy* not only imagines the practical and non-hierarchical coexistence and co-habitation and even cross-breeding of humans, technologically modified creatures, and animals, but also reflects on the role of stories in shaping worlds and their systems of thought and moral judgement. Like many posthumanist philosophers, Cary Wolfe points out the importance of language for posthumanist theory: “What I am suggesting here is that your theory of language matters, and it matters not just epistemologically [...] or methodologically [...] because all sort of consequences, both ontological and ethical, follow in its wake – consequences that I have tried to draw out on the terrain of the question of specific differences and the question of subjectivity.”⁶⁰ Language and storytelling are therefore a major theme in all three novels, referred to by metatextual comments such as: “There’s the story, then there’s the real story, then there’s the story of how the story came to be told. Then there’s what you leave out of the story. Which is part of the story too.”⁶¹ What furthermore contributes extensively to the theme of story-telling are the Crakers and their need for stories to give them an identity and a history. Despite the fact that Crake did his best to rid his newly created human race of art, symbolic thinking and myth creation, every night “[a] story is what they want”.⁶²

On a formal level, the theme of storytelling as world construction is represented mainly by the different narrative situations of the three novels that draw attention to the act of narration itself. In *The Year of the Flood*, for example, this happens through a doubling of narrative perspectives, featuring both Ren’s account of the years just before and after the flood and Toby’s perspective on exactly the same events. Narrative construction becomes most explicit in *MaddAddam*, in which Toby is the main focaliser character. Her own story is however interwoven with the stories she tells to the Crakers and the stories her partner Zeb tells her. This makes the point that storytelling is a collective phenomenon; it is not just the narrator who creates and shapes the story, but also her audience and the stories she is told by others. One might even go so far as to con-

59 Atwood 2014, 373.

60 Wolfe 2010, 47.

61 Atwood 2014, 56.

62 Atwood 2004, 124.

clude that the whole physical book the reader is holding in her hands is actually the result of Toby's writing down the story, owing to metatextual comments like Toby telling the young Craker Blackbeard: "'I am writing the story,' [...] 'The story of you and me, and the Pigoons, and everyone.'" ⁶³ In spite of Crake's efforts, the Crakers furthermore learn how to write and tell stories themselves, so that in the end, the narrative is taken over by Blackbeard: "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 that I was the one who set down these words." ⁶⁴ Through the sometimes deliberately invented stories which first Snowman and later Toby tell the Crakers, as well as Toby's and Blackbeard's writing, the Crakers build up something like a common history or foundational myth, reminiscent of other foundational cultural and religious texts like the Bible. They decide that this book must also be copied and continued: "another Book should be made, with the same writing as the first one. And each time a person came into the knowledge of the writing [...] that one also was to make the same Book, [...] at the end of the Book we should put some pages, and attach them to the Book, and write down the things that might happen after Toby was gone." ⁶⁵ This marks the Crakers' transition from an oral culture to a written culture and proposes that storytelling and symbolising practices are basically what makes human beings human, and that these cannot be genetically "edited out".

Again, this represents a metafictional comment on the importance of narrative and literature as a means to make sense of the world, or rather to make a world at all. It matters who tells the story, how it is told, with what intentions, who listens, what features in the story and what is left out for the kind of world that is created thusly, and the maps of morality it will entail. Crake's problematic worldview and the dystopian depiction of the pre-apocalyptic capitalist world furthermore mirror what happens if the arts and humanities are almost eliminated or are at least "no longer central to anything". ⁶⁶ By letting the Crakers turn into a book culture, Atwood emphasises the value of art and literature for any future or (post)human society. In this sense, the trilogy can itself be seen as contributing largely to an ethics for the future in the age of the Anthropocene or Capitalocene.

Rather than being only "a cautionary tale" about possible future developments, as the *MaddAddam Trilogy* is often referred to, the story is, I want to suggest, about storytelling and how stories make both (future) worlds and eth-

63 Atwood 2004, 374.

64 Atwood 2004, 390.

65 Atwood 2004, 386.

66 Atwood 2004, 227.

ics. In this sense, the apocalypse must also primarily be seen as a story that can make sense of an otherwise chaotic and possibly hopeless present. It can function both as a moral structuring device for testing or promoting the values and alternative interpretations of good and evil of a given group, or it can simply be reduced to a piece of mass entertainment for the alienated subjects of late capitalism. The difference between the two functions or readings of the apocalypse amounts to the degree of consciousness and reflection involved in the telling and listening to of the apocalyptic tales. By reflecting on these different readings and foregrounding narrative forms of worldmaking with their respective maps of morality, Atwood's trilogy allows the reader to come to their own ethical conclusions about the ecological crisis through aesthetic simulations, without foreclosing any definite answers. This distinguishes her speculative fiction fundamentally from other tales of the contemporary apocalyptic imaginary and provides a link back to the original meaning of the apocalypse as revelation. *The MaddAddam Trilogy* uncovers that it is through stories that we make worlds and that there is a need for new and different stories to create better futures.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aldiss, Brian W., 1973, *Billion Year Spree. The True History of Science Fiction*, Garden City: Doubleday.
- Alkon, Paul K. 1994, *Science Fiction before 1900. Imagination Discovers Technology*, New York: Twayne.
- Atwood, Margaret, 2004 [2003], *Oryx and Crake*, New York: Anchor Books.
- Atwood, Margaret, 2010 [2009], *The Year of the Flood*, London: Virago.
- Atwood, Margaret, 2014 [2013], *MaddAddam*, New York: Anchor.
- Beaudrillard, Jean, 1994 [1981], *Simulacra & Simulation*, translated by Sheila Faria Glaser, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Benjamin, Walter, 2008, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, edited by Michael Jennings, translated by E. F. N. Jephcott, Cambridge: Belknap.
- Bouson, J. Brooks, 2004, "'It's Game Over Forever': Atwood's Satiric Vision of a Bioengineered Post-human Future in *Oryx and Crake*", *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 39, 3, 139–56.
- Bouson, J. Brooks, 2011, 'We're Using Up the Earth. It's Almost Gone'. A Return to the Post-Apocalyptic Future in Margaret Atwood's *Year of the Flood*, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 46, 1, 9–26.
- Ferrando, Francesca, 2013, Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms: Differences and Relations, *Existenz. An International Journal in Philosophy, Religion, Politics, and the Arts* 8, 2, 26–32.
- Horn, Eva, 2014, *Die Zukunft als Katastrophe*, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer.
- Jendrysik, Mark S, 2011, Back to the Garden: New Visions of Posthuman Futures, *Utopian Studies* 22, 1, 34–52.
- Jennings, Hope, 2010, The Comic Apocalypse of *The Year of the Flood*, *Margaret Atwood Studies* 3, 2, 11–18.
- Korte, Barbara, 2008, Fundamentalism and the End: A Reading of Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* in the Context of Last Man Fiction, in: Stierstorfer, Klaus / Kern-Stähler, Annette (eds.), *Literary Encounters of Fundamentalism. A Case Book*, Heidelberg: Winter, 151–163.

- Machat, Sibylle, 2013, *In the Ruins of Civilizations: Narrative Structures, World Construction and Physical Realities in the Post-Apocalyptic Novel*, Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier.
- Mayer, Sylvia, 2014, *Explorations of the Controversially Real: Risk, the Climate Change Novel, and the Narrative of Anticipation*, in Mayer, Sylvia / Weik von Mossener, Alexa (eds.), *The Anticipation of Catastrophe. Environmental Risk in North American Literature and Culture*, Heidelberg: Winter, 21–38.
- McCarthy, Cormac, 2006, *The Road*, London: Picador.
- Moore, Jason W., 2015, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, London: Verso.
- Mosca, Valeria, 2013, *Crossing Human Boundaries. Apocalypse and Posthumanism in Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake and Year of the Flood*, *Altre Modernità / Otras Modernidades / Autres Modernités / Other Modernities* 9, 38–52.
- Parrinder, Patrick, 2015, *Utopian Literature and Science. From the Scientific Revolution to Brave New World and Beyond*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rosen, Elizabeth K., 2008, *Apocalyptic Transformation. Apocalypse and the Postmodern Imagination*, Plymouth: Lexington.
- Shelley, Mary, 1994 [1818], *Frankenstein*, edited by Stanley Appelbaum and Candace Ward, Mineola: Dover.
- Snyder, Katherine V., 2011, "Time to Go". *The Post-Apocalyptic and the Post-Traumatic in Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake*, *Studies in the Novel* 43, 4, 470–489.
- Tate, Andrew, 2017, *Apocalyptic Fiction*, London: Bloomsbury.
- Wolfe, Cary, 2010, *What is Posthumanism?*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

FILMOGRAPHY

- AVATAR (James Cameron, US 2009).
- INTERSTELLAR (Christopher Nolan, US 2014).
- SNOWPIERCER (Bong Joon Ho, KR/CZ 2014).
- THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW (Roland Emmerich, US 2004).
- WALL-E (Andrew Stanton, US 2008).