

Corp(Se)ocracy: Marketing Death in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*

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In his book, The Art Instinct, Denis Dutton proposes that our interest in narrative is built in—selected during the very long period the human race spent in the Pleistocene—because any species with the ability to tell stories about both past and future would have an evolutionary edge. Will there be a crocodile in the river tomorrow, as there was last year? If so, better not go there. Speculative fictions about the future, like The Year of the Flood, are narratives of that kind. Where will the crocodiles be? How will we avoid them? What are our chances?

—Margaret Atwood ("Margaret," par. 1)

Abstract

Margaret Atwood's novels of speculative fiction *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* articulate a currently possible future world of corporate control marked by profitable practices of death. Narrated by both individuals of privilege and also of the underclass, the novels reveal insidious systems of self-perpetuating diseases and cosmetic enhancements that ultimately bankrupt or kill the consumers. As the state is policed by CorpSECorps, the corporate security forces, individuals have very little protection or recourse, and groups such as God's Gardeners, conservationists who resist consuming the corporate products, are in danger of annihilation. Yet when humanity is destroyed by a bioengineered virus, it is those who have shunned the corporate materialism who are able to avoid death.

Keywords

Margaret Atwood, bio-engineering, corporate, CorpSECorps, death, dystopian, ecological, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake*, *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth*, post-apocalyptic, speculative fiction, *The Year of the Flood*

In the field of economics, a democracy is a government run by its people or their representatives, a theocracy is a government ruled by religion, and an autocracy is a government run by a single person with unlimited power. In Margaret Atwood's novels *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, the government is controlled by corporations. As this type of government is not yet a historically viable form, it has no name; however, the term "Corpocracy" could serve. Yet this term would be only partially sufficient for the world described in the two novels because the ruling corporations do not ultimately market traditional goods and services. While the products ostensibly range from genetically engineered food and preventative health medicines to bio-cosmetic services, the enormous capital gains of the super corporations rely upon a carefully premeditated market of, and for, death, a death hidden in the very products of consumption. As Crake, a main character in the first novel, explains, "The best diseases from a business point of view [. . .] would be those that cause lingering illnesses. Ideally—that is, for maximum profit—the patient should either get well or die just before all of his or her money runs out. It's a fine calculation" (*Oryx and Crake* 211). Thus, using one of Atwood's puns from the novels, the type of government in these novels can be regarded as a "Corp(Se)ocracy."

Danette DiMarco in her 2005 article, "Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained: Homo Faber and the Makings of a New Beginning in *Oryx and Crake*," characterizes the landscape of the novel's past as a "cycle of aggression against nature in the name of personal profit," noting the critical role of economics in the post-apocalyptic fiction (170). Not only is nature perverted for monetary gain, but the human body is exploited as the site for such profiteering because the ultimate market for biotechnical advances is cosmetic enhancements—enhancements that continually necessitate new

adjustments in a self-perpetuating industry. A secret secondary market exists in embedding new diseases into the pharmaceuticals designed to eradicate old diseases, thus endlessly depleting the consumers' bank accounts to cure newly engineered diseases. Truly, this dystopia markets death, but a death that compels the soon-to-be corpses to pay everything for the privilege.

Atwood's second novel of the MadAddam trilogy, *The Year of the Flood*, also negotiates similar territory. Yet, in contrast to the main character in *Oryx and Crake* Jimmy/Snowman's cynical memories of growing up in the prefabricated and heavily barricaded corporate environment and participating (albeit unknowingly) in the annihilation of mankind, *The Year of the Flood* explores the "pleeblands"—the overpopulated and crime ridden urban areas—and the eco-religion of the group God's Gardeners as its participants engage in preservation rather than body modification. In fact, this newer novel intimates that it is precisely the God's Gardeners' refusal to eat the corporate pseudo-food and use the corporate pseudo-medical supplies that enables them to survive the apocalypse. In both novels, as a review of another recent Atwood publication *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth* makes abundantly clear, "a small number of people have way too many grapes. Inequity is reaching a boiling point, and on human, national, economic and environmental fronts, we are setting ourselves up for some monumental payback" (Liss, par. 8). The two novels detail exactly what sort of debt is mounting and what the price may be.

Atwood is no stranger to dystopian fiction. Her 1985 novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, offers a blood-chilling view into a future United States ruled by a Christian fundamentalist theocracy intent on rebuilding the Caucasian race. Women, in this new government, have been stripped of all rights including the ability to own assets, read and write, and choose lifestyles and occupations. In particular, women with viable ovaries are conscripted to become Handmaids, vessels to be impregnated by the powerful Commanders of the new regime. The novel ultimately exposes the corruption of the totalitarian government, and implicates the citizenry itself for complicity in its own subjugation. And while many have cited the book for its feminist tones, Atwood contends, "There was also the risk it would be thought feminist propaganda

of the most outrageous kind, which was not really what I intended. I was more interested in totalitarian systems" (Hancock 114). Therefore, the novel is a speculation into the consequences of a power unchecked and—akin to the two later novels—an economic system that is manipulated by the powerful.

Oryx and Crake, like *The Handmaid's Tale*, offers prophecy in the form of "speculative fiction." Atwood explains, "I have to say that I put nothing into this book that we don't have or are not on the way to having. It's like *The Handmaid's Tale* in that I didn't invent. I just extrapolated" (qtd. in Halliwell 256). She further explains why her novels are speculative fiction and not "science fiction": "When people think of 'science fiction' they usually think of *Star Trek*, or they think *Star Wars*, or they think *War of the Worlds*—you know, talking squid [. . .] talking cannibalistic squid" (qtd. in Halliwell 259). The premise of the novel is that, in accordance with actual current events, technological advances, and ecological imbalances, the world has degenerated into a greed-riddled, corporately controlled environment with rules being enforced by a corporate paid "police force": the CorpSECorps. Yet, all protection of humanity has actually been eradicated without the awareness of the citizenry. Death and disease have become the profitable aim of corporate rule. Atwood does not see this as pure fantasy but rather as distinct possibility.

Oryx and Crake is narrated by Jimmy, the child of a corporate engineer father and disillusioned mother who later abandons her family to protest against corporate dictates. As he grows to adulthood in the protected confines of a corporate compound, he befriends Glenn—otherwise known as Crake—whose cynical immunity to life ultimately compels him to become the destroyer of mankind and bio-creator of a gentle new race, the Crakers. While the novel opens in the post-apocalyptic landscape with Jimmy grudgingly guiding the Crakers as ostensibly the sole survivor of mankind, much of the text is comprised of Jimmy's memories as to how the catastrophe has occurred. Through Jimmy's tortured conscious, the reader learns of the demise of the citizenry—literally by a virus created by Crake. The citizens are also to blame for their own demise because of their complicity with a corporate world that has forsaken moral and ecological concerns.

As noted, a select few, mostly bioengineers whose works constitute the backbone of corporate profiteering, are barricaded into the armed and fortified corporate compounds (fortresses, really). Jimmy notes the uniformity of the compounds with their faux architecture and identical retail and food outlets. The compounds are sealed off from contamination, both from disease and from non-corporate people. About this setting Atwood relates, "there isn't any what you may call 'government' anymore. That's completely caved [. . .]. [E]verything is being run by corporations now" (qtd. in Halliwell 261).

Jimmy remembers his childhood as being unchecked by parental or social intervention. He remembers himself as an adolescence sequestered with Crake watching pornography on the computer and playing violent video games. Death itself has become a form of entertainment with games such as "Extinctathon" and internet channels devoted to public executions. His young adulthood is characterized by a string of meaningless relationships with women and demeaning positions in advertising. Ultimately, he is rescued by Crake from his apathetic and jaded existence when Crake gives him a new career promoting a new product: the BlyssPlus pill, a form of birth control, sexual enhancement, and STD protection all in one convenient package. Unfortunately, though, what Jimmy does not know is that Crake has embedded a fatal virus into the pill, a virus that virtually eliminates the human population. Upon discovery, Crake brutally murders Oryx, a girl he first saw on an online child-prostitution cite and has since found (now a young woman) and brought to the compound to live, and Jimmy kills Crake in retaliation, thus leaving him alone and responsible for the naïve Crakers. Jimmy then finds himself negotiating a new world filled with the refuse and corpses of the previous era that attest to the follies of a people who refused to honor nature and each other.

Paul DiFilippo, in a review of the next novel, *The Year of the Flood*, surmises that the justification for a second novel that is neither a sequel nor a prequel to *Oryx and Crake* but instead a simultaneous retelling is that "Jimmy and Crake were members of the elite; with Oryx, after a childhood of poverty and slavery, joining the men in a life of privilege. They saw their civilization and its apocalypse from above. Our new characters survey it from

lower strata" (DiFilippo, par. 12). In this novel, the reader learns of Toby and Ren, two additional female survivors of what is known as "the waterless flood." With the onset of the plague in *Oryx and Crake*, Jimmy has been spared because Crake has immunized him. In the second novel, Ren and Toby, however, have apparently escaped death by avoiding contact with the disease: Ren is quarantined in the Sticky Room at the sex club Scales and Tails, and Toby is likewise sequestered in the ANooYoo Spa where she has been hiding. As with *Oryx and Crake*, much of the plot of *The Year of the Flood* is told through the memories of Toby and Ren, both members (at least for a while) of God's Gardeners.

In the novel, the greatest mass of people live in the disease saturated "pleeblands" marked by an overabundance of formerly taboo products, mainly sex and technology, and a lack of a truly healthy means of living. For example, Jimmy notices, "Asymmetries, deformities: the faces here [in the pleeblands] were a far cry from the regularity of the Compounds. There were even bad teeth" (*Oryx and Crake* 288). Shallow wants instead of needs are exploited, and the masses are utilized as human guinea pigs for corporate profit. Living on "secret burgers" that are rumored to be made of corpses, addicted to technology, cheap mass-produced goods, and sordid sex, the inhabitants of the pleeblands are abused primarily as unaware test subjects for new products and engineered diseases by the corporations. They are also systematically financially drained by these corporations. Death is capitalized on. Even criminality is exploited as the arrestees are featured on "Painball," a televised, fight-to-the-death television program.

The holocaust of humanity is blamed on scientific developments to enhance life that are then turned into money making endeavors instead of benefitting humanity. Pigs, genetically spliced to grow organs that are compatible with human tissue are used for cosmetic adjustments instead for medical reasons, for example. However, Atwood contends, "Science isn't the bad thing; the bad thing is making all science completely commercial, and with no watchdogs...[y]ou are in a world in which 'Buy a scientist' is not out of the question at all" (qtd. in Halliwell 261). Everything can be bought. And, as noted, the primary form of economic exchange is no longer traditionally manufactured goods but bioengineered products. From chickens that are engineered to

produce bulbous growths (tumors) that can be harvested again and again from the same animal, to "rakunks" a bio-engineered pet, the ostensibly original idea behind the "products" is to better human life. However, as noted, the corporate products are then marketed for expensive cosmetic purposes instead. Jimmy's father explains "What well-to-do and once-young, once beautiful woman or man, cranked up on hormones and shot full of vitamins but hampered by the unforgiving mirror, wouldn't sell their house, their gated retirement villa, their kids, and their soul to get a second kick at the sexual can?" (*Oryx and Crake* 55). Ultimately, as the products are successful in eradicating disease and rejuvenating the body, the corporations reputedly invent new diseases and embed the diseases into their own products to insure a continuing marketplace.

The absolute power of the corporations demands a security force. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Republic of Gilead employed the services of the Angels, Eyes, and Guards to instill fear and complicity in the citizenry; in these novels it is the CorpSECorps. Their job is to not only to protect the corporations and compounds from sabotage from "other companies, other countries, various factions and plotters" but to also maintain their unfair share of the marketplace (*Oryx and Crake* 27). *The Year of the Flood* provides additional background information: the CorpSECorps "started as a private security firm for the Corporations, but then they'd taken over when the local police forces collapsed for lack of funding, and the people liked that at first because the Corporations paid, but now CorpSECorps were sending their tentacles everywhere" (*Year* 25). The CorpSECorps is, of course, corrupt, murdering dissidents and others—including bystanders, torturing for profit, running the mob and "Seksmart," the only official sex trade market. The CorpSECorps accepts bribes for ignoring pleebland violence and crime, and it is the wholesalers for the illegal drug market. The CorpSECorps has also outlawed weaponry for citizens. Atwood relates that the citizens abide the corruption because "the CorpSECorps were better than total anarchy" (*Year* 34). The CorpSECorps is the epitome of the Orwellian Big Brother, except that it is motivated by money rather than politics. Unlike in *The Handmaid's Tale* in which leaders of the Republic of Gilead hide their ambition for power and status under the guise of religion, the Corporations of these novels simply go

directly for the gold. The novels intimate that the CorpSECorps "police" any competition to corporate profits; it is, apparently, against the law to engage in free enterprise.

Indeed, the CorpSECorps police were defending the worst of business practices. Zeb confesses to Toby that the CorpSECorps murdered Crake's father: "he got unhappy when he found out they were seeding folks with illnesses via those souped-up supplement pills of theirs [. . .] troubled his conscience. So the dad fed us some interesting data. Then he had an accident" (*Year* 244). The Corporations would, naturally, lose their profit margin if the populace were aware of these activities. Ultimately though, because the CorpSECorps police are merely mercenaries for hire and have no cause to adhere to, Toby surmises, "They must have been the first to desert [when the plague hit], heading for their gated Corporation strongholds to save their skins" (*Year* 21). Therefore, the protection force has no allegiance to the populace and is thus ineffective in any endeavor except in spreading death and destruction.

Jimmy tells, "Accepted wisdom in the Compounds said that nothing of interest went on in the pleeblands, apart from buying and selling: there was no life of the mind" (*Oryx and Crake* 196). Yet, God's Gardeners are an intelligent, if somewhat naïve, group surviving without corporate and artificial products. Living on produce grown on rooftop gardens, God's Gardeners have evolved from a survivalist and fundamentalist religion into a full blown culture complete with texts and their own products such as honey and vinegar, both of which are natural preservatives. Jeanette Winterson notes, "With values diametrically opposed to those of the ruling CorpSECorps, the Gardeners aren't 'the answer,' but at least they've asked enough questions to avoid a life of endless shopping and face-lifts" (Winterson, par. 6). God's Gardeners are initially exempt from CorpSECorps persecution, even as the group actively protests corporate products. When Toby wonders why the CorpSECorps doesn't just "move in openly, blitz their opposition," Zeb rationalizes: "that officially they [the CorpSECorps] were a private Corporation Security Corps employed by the brand-name corporations, and those corporations still wanted to be perceived as honest and trustworthy, friendly as daisies, guileless as bunnies" (*Year* 266). Later, the CorpSECorps does indeed destroy the

rooftop garden and pursues the sect. In a sermon, the leader of God's gardeners, Adam One explains,

Alas, we were becoming too powerful for their liking. Many rooftops were blooming as the rose; many hearts and minds were bent towards an Earth restored to balance. But in the success lay the seeds of ruin, for those in power could no longer dismiss us as ineffectual faddists: they feared us, as prophets of the age to come. In short, we threatened their profit margin.
(*Year* 275)

Every economic theory is fueled by the concept of supply and demand. Socialism attempted to alleviate economic maneuverings with an ideal of equity; however, the allure of Capitalism has continued to reign with virtually no rebellion. Capitalism, in its purest form, allows the market to determine price and availability; however, the so-called Capitalism prevalent in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* is manipulative at best, totalitarian at worst. Instead of relying on supply and demand, the corporations have created artificial demands and promoted engineered dependencies. Manufactured diseases necessitate manufactured cures; body enhancements need to be maintained with age. Prices can be raised with ensuing procedures and by depleting natural resources, thereby ensuring ever-increasing consumer costs as the resources dwindle. God's Gardeners, recognizing the dangerous trends, attempt to live self-sufficiently with little waste and even less interference with nature. The Gardeners grow their own food, shun faddish retail products, practice survival skills, and recycle. At the outset the group seems to be naïve and even comically fanatical, but it is members of their group who ultimately survive annihilation.

With the onset of the plague in *Oryx and Crake*, Jimmy is spared because Crake has immunized him. In the second novel, Ren and Toby, however, have apparently escaped death by avoiding contact with the disease. Yet as the virus has spread worldwide, sparing virtually no-one, avoiding the source alone seems hardly reason enough to have escaped death. Later, other members of God's Gardeners appear to have been spared, and *The Year of the Flood*

suggests that it is the refusing of corporate food and drugs that enables the members of the sect to resist the epidemic. It makes sense that if the corporate products had been embedded with agents of death in the form of diseases, the rejection of the products could account for survival. God's Gardeners choose to owe a debt to life-giving nature rather than owe the death-selling corporations.

In *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth* Atwood notes that "some debts are not money debts: they are moral debts, or debts having to do with imbalances in the right order of things." She relates, "Thus, in any consideration of debt, the concept of balance is pivotal: debtor and creditor are two sides of a single entity, one cannot exist without the other, and exchanges between them—in a healthy economy or society or ecosystem—tend toward equilibrium" (163). Yet as Atwood also notes, "Every debt comes with a date on which payment is due" (166). In a keen and disturbing allegory, Atwood retells the story of Ebenezer Scrooge as he witnesses the debts of mankind to the Earth in the past, present, and future from such past experiences as the Black Death to current day "disasters-in-the-making" (190) to a future possibility of "chaos, mass death, the breakdown of civic order" (201). Atwood's thesis suggests that exploitation of humanity and of the planet demands payback. Failure to repay the debt will result in horrible, but completely foreseeable, events, events that are fictionally conceived in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*. Death might be not just the payback but also the price and product as well.

In a less pessimistic prophecy, from an ecological (or even political) perspective, *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* allow that redemption—even life—is offered on a multitude of levels to those who resist joining exploitative practices. Not only is the resistance to such practices a virtuous endeavor in saving nature, but it may also have healing powers for humans as well. In essence, the attempt to restore even a fraction of the Earth's balance results in a portion of at least some of the grapes.

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