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Abstract

In her speculative fiction novel *Oryx and Crake*, Margaret Atwood follows emerging global capitalism to its possible ends. As a response to our own world, her novel provides us with an opportunity to examine our global state and conceivable destiny. The result is the discovery of a globalized society dominated by transnational corporations determined to control the population for their benefits. These corporations are reliant on the production of myths to convince consumers to buy their products of sex, beauty, and youth. In Atwood's world everything is available for a price. These myths, perpetuated by various media sources, infuse people with desires and ideals that benefit corporations even as the people responding to these desires recognize them only as natural. From this revelation in a fictional work, we can better understand the risks of globalization in our own world.

Globalization is often thought of as the creation of a global community that is aided by technology in producing "a better life and a more equitable society" (Poster, 2001, p. 611). Something like Disney World's Spaceship Earth, which shows how communication connects people in global communities in futuristic ways, this dream-like concept of globalization has yet to be achieved in this postmodern era in which technology already allows people to connect to other places on the earth instantly. According to Shiva (1997), an Indian physicist who concentrates on globalization, "economic globalization as we are seeing it unfold is not a process of ever widening circles of inclusion. It is a process of ascending hierarchies that concentrate power and exclude people from participation in the political and economic life of their societies" (p. 22). The economic powers behind the technologies that allow for a globalized world produce benefits only for those holding greater financial strength and withhold benefits from those unable to pay for them.

Margaret Atwood's creation of the globalized world of *Oryx and Crake*, published in 2003, follows this concept in refuting the theory that globalization results in a worldwide community of equality. This is evident in Atwood's descriptions of

the health gap and the living standards gap between the communities in the corporate compounds where various research is done and the communities in the pleeblands where those people with no intellectual use to science reside. The extreme differences between the rich and poor in *Oryx and Crake* are a reflection of the same condition in our globalized world made more obvious by Atwood's creation of physical barriers between the two communities. The myth that abundant technologies will deliver a great and unified world is disproved by Atwood in *Oryx and Crake* through her presentation of a world in which these technologies are only made available to people who have money and power.

Critics of globalization argue that the capitalistic consumerism of transnational corporations is what prevents the growth of a true global community. According to Shiva (1997), "though globalization is made to appear as natural, spontaneous, and inevitable it is, in fact, a political process shaped by the dominant interests of society, and especially the transnational corporations" (p. 22). Shiva suggests that the global marketplace is controlled by no true governing body but by corporations that do not have to answer to the public interest. Atwood follows this same model in *Oryx and Crake* in her creation of the corporate compounds. In Atwood's novel it is the compounds—not the government or the people—that control how the global world is run. The compounds produce and market food, medicine, and entertainment with no apparent government regulation and no intervention on the part of non-corporate society. They build themselves up to become, in a way, their own countries and to compete with each other for global dominance. These companies are under corporate leadership and enforce their power through a system of paid mercenaries, the CorpSeCorps men, and are outside of the reach of public interest. Jimmy, the main character of the novel and whose father is a worker within a compound, expounds in corporate rhetoric that "when there [is] so much at stake, there [is] no telling what the other side might resort to" (Atwood, 2003, p. 27) in order to justify this militaristic presence in a non-governmental institution. Through this creation of an atmosphere of corporate domination and control, "the 'global' as construct does not symbolize planetary consciousness" (Shiva, p. 22). Instead, "it excludes the planet and peoples from the mind, and puts global institutions in their place" (Shiva, p. 22). As with *Oryx and Crake*, the corporations themselves are the only concern of the corporations.

In order to reveal these corporate interests and the lack of equality between classes as the underlying truth in the myth of globalization, Atwood exposes the myths created by corporations that are used to control the world's populations. Throughout the novel, Atwood creates myths for the population of *Oryx and Crake* to consume; there are myths of sex, beauty, and motherhood and myths about how people should eat, make love, breed, live, and dream. These myths converge to create a society that is built on an obsession with fictions and with the construction of the fictional to create a better reality. The purpose of these myths, from the capitalistic standpoint, is to increase the wealth of corporations. Myths work well in this context because they "make sense of the inchoate flux of life, and provide a sense of purpose and conviction" (Cornwall, Harrison, & Whitehead, 2007, p. 5). Myths do this by providing, through media, images of the ideal life that are able to be realized through the consumption of products. Sorel explains this concept with the argument that "myths are not descriptions of things, but expressions of a determination to act" (Cornwall et al., p. 4).

Each myth created in *Oryx and Crake* corresponds to a desired outcome that can be achieved by people should they have the funds to act upon their desire to align their lives with the suggestions of the myth. These suggestions are particularly effective because “they are composed of a series of familiar images and devices, and work to produce an order-of-things that is compelling precisely because it resonates with the affective dimensions of values and norms” (Cornwall et al., 2007, p. 6). The most productive myth to advance, therefore, is a myth that builds upon what is already desired culturally. In other words, new myths must follow old myths, but to further extremes. In *Oryx and Crake* Atwood takes cultural myths to extremes in order to allow readers to perceive the myths present in current culture.

Sex as Commodity in Oryx and Crake

In Atwood’s novel, the concept that sex is a consumable commodity has been instilled into culture by corporations through various forms of media. Through this commodification, sexual situations are altered and become no longer genuine. According to Baudrillard (1998), a prominent French theorist with expertise in media, once people aspire to create their realities from fictional ideas of what reality should be, “never again will the real have to be produced” (p. 167). His theory suggests that the real is replaced by replications of the real, and all further replications are based not on the real, but on the most recent replication. In *Oryx and Crake*, technology and myths of what sex should be have become so prominent that sex itself is provided technologically.

These myths suggest that sex is a commodity to be bought and that one needs only to use a search engine to discover exactly the sexual situation desired with every option free of responsibility and consequences. From Jimmy’s and his friend Crake’s adventures into online sex sites to Crake’s college experiences with school-sanctioned prostitution to the creation of the BlyssPluss pill, sex is altered to fit the sexual myths of society. Following Baudrillard’s theory, Internet pornography acts as source of many different simulations of sex, which helps people to form concepts of what sex is and should be. In just one session of online surfing, Crake and Jimmy encounter “elaborate confectionery in the usual orifices, then went to Superswallowers; then to a Russian site that employed ex-acrobats, ballerinas, and contortionists...the high-wire act with six flaming torches [and finally] HottTotts, a global sex-trotting site [advertised as] the next best thing to being there” (Atwood, 2003, p. 89). The act of watching from a distance has replaced the need to be there at all. Watching is participation in the sex act.

It is on the HottTotts site that Jimmy and Crake first encounter Oryx performing sex acts as a small child. Oryx is sold into slavery by her parents in a distant country and broadcast over the Internet to Jimmy who becomes obsessed with her. She was forced into these sexual situations by her handler without being provided with any understanding of what she was doing. While Jimmy admits that in these child sex videos “there were at least three layers of contradictory make-believe, one on top of the other. *I want to, I want to not, I want to*” (Atwood, 2003, p. 90), these images of sex still create the myth of sex for Jimmy and Crake, which is evident in both of their future liaisons with Oryx as an adult. The image of someone who looks like Oryx as a desirable sexual partner, one who is pictured to provide “agonizing pleasures” (Atwood, p. 90), is forever in the minds of Jimmy and Crake.

For Crake, the appropriation of a sexual partner during college is even more of a capitalistic venture than watching Internet pornography. Student Services provides students at Crake's school with sexual companionship in the form of prostitutes, adding the cost of such services directly to the students' tuition bills. According to Crake, "you could be very specific there, take them a picture or a video stimulations, stuff like that, and they'd do their best to match you up" (Atwood, 2003, p. 310). The Student Services system allows users to purchase as close to their concept of ideal sex as possible. According to Deery (1997), "Atwood's male observers try to impose on women a definite and containable shape or shapes to their liking" (p. 476), which is made evident through the various instructions students can give for sex workers to fulfill. For Crake, the ideal sexual partner is found not in the image of anyone Crake knows, but in an old screen capture of Oryx from when she was in a HottTotts video. In this situation, Baudrillard's idea that "'take your desires for reality!' can be understood as the ultimate slogan of power" (1998, p. 178) is realized when "Crake gave Jimmy a smug little smile, an alpha smile" (Atwood, p. 310). Crake, as buyer of Oryx sexually, has power over Jimmy who has not attained ownership of Oryx for any period of time. Jimmy is incapable of purchasing Oryx because his station in society is less than that of Crake, and the same opportunities are not available to him. Though Jimmy has his own experiences with prostitution in the pleeblands, his experience is not tailored to his deep desire for Oryx, nor is he able to make the purchase himself. Instead, Crake purchases for them "two girls covered from head to toe in sequins that were glued onto their skin and shimmered like the scales of a virtual fish" (Atwood, p. 289). In this world, purchased sexual simulations give Crake power over Jimmy, and Jimmy gains nothing from the more real instances of sex that he has with women who volunteer to engage in sex with him for free. Crake has power over the women through his money, but Jimmy has no power over the women he sleeps with; they can come and go as they please. The simulation has surpassed the real in *Oryx and Crake*.

Chemically modified sexual engagements are also more valued than natural ones in *Oryx and Crake*. The BlyssPlus pill, a sexual supplement produced by Crake's corporation, as Crake describes it to Jimmy, is the height of this modification of sex and the human body in order to mirror the more ideal myth of the perfect human. The pill will "take a set of givens, namely the nature of human nature, and steer these givens in a more beneficial direction than ones hitherto taken" (Atwood, 2003, p. 293). This more beneficial direction involves three myths of ideal sexual humans: shelter from "all known sexually transmitted diseases," "an unlimited supply of libido and sexual prowess, coupled with a generalized sense of energy and well-being," and "prolong[ed] youth" (Atwood, p. 294). All of this will occur without "jealousy and violence, eliminating feelings of low self-worth" (Atwood, p. 294), therefore corrupting the natural emotions of human beings. Through the BlyssPlus pill, even sexual encounters between two willing participants not involved in sex trade are made artificial and a part of commerce. Because libido is purchased, sex becomes nothing but an artificial corporate creation. People on the BlyssPlus pill, the virtual representations of child sex workers through video over the Internet, and the physical sex workers at Crake's school and in the pleeblands are all simulators of sex, though all groups engage in what onlookers and participants would consider sex acts.

There can be sex with the BlyssPluss pill, but it cannot be real sex; it can only be a representation of the idea of real sex because many of the natural features of sex have been removed or covered by the pill. The most audacious of these removals is the revoking of the ability to procreate, which is the fourth capability of the pill. BlyssPluss “act[s] as a sure-fire one-time-does-it-all birth-control pill, for male and female alike, thus automatically lowering the population level” (Atwood, 2003, p. 294). Sex enacted while participants are on BlyssPluss can only be artificial because the pill produces an artificial reproduction of sexual hormones and removes the aspect of mating from sex, making sex itself a simulation of the mating act that involves none of the reality. For the population of *Oryx and Crake*, all that will remain of sex is the illusion of the hormonal impulse that was once caused by the necessity of mating.

Capitalistic globalization in *Oryx and Crake* goes beyond just sex. The production of food to feed the global marketplace also relies on the spreading of global myths in order to make the food produced by corporations desirable. A team at Crake’s school, Watson-Crick, is fundamental in the creation of a new frontier: food-related global commerce. While other corporations have created chickens that mature quickly, the students at Watson-Crick have engineered a way to create just the parts and have “a three-week improvement on the most efficient low-light, high-density chicken farming operations so far devised” (Atwood, 2003, p. 203). In a stunning example of how the real is replaced by the myth, Crake, when asked what these creations are, replies, “those are chickens” (Atwood, p. 202). Through the marketing of chicken to a globalized economy that does not interact with live animals but sustains itself on their parts, the economy has essentially already reduced animals down to their parts in the minds of consumers; the creation of an animal made only of parts is simply the next step in this cultural trend. These ChickieNobs, as they are called, look nothing like the birds they claim to be modeled after but are “large bulblike object[s] that seemed to be covered with stippled whitish-yellow skin. Out of it came twenty thick fleshy tubes, and at the end of each tube another bulb was growing” (Atwood, p. 202). This creature produces “chicken parts” (Atwood, p. 202). The myth of animals as consumable parts is fulfilled in the reality of an animal being created that is nearly all consumable parts and contains very little of the animal from which the parts were once taken. In her essay *Feminist Epistemology After Postmodernism*, Braidotti (2007) deconstructs the workings of strong bio-powers, or those corporations that deal in genetics and biology for profit. Braidotti claims that “bio-power has already turned into a form of bio-piracy in that it aims at exploiting the generative powers of women, animals, plants, genes and cells. The self-replicating vitality of living matter is targeted for consumption and commercial exploitation” (p. 70). The biology students at Watson-Crick pirate the power of the creation of animal parts and redistribute this power to false animals, thereby exploiting the powers that were once available only to natural animals. They have removed even the need for animals to be bred to produce food, and the remaining original animals have no more use to humanity.

Following the same theory, employees at the OrganInc and HealthWyzer compounds are pirates of human generative powers. Scientists in both compounds work with pigeons to create human genetic material in non-human creatures. At OrganInc Farms, the goal of the corporation is to “grow an assortment of foolproof human-tissue organs in a transgenic knockout pig-host organs that would transplant

smoothly and avoid rejection” (Atwood, 2003, p. 23), thereby removing humans from the process of growing their own organs. At HealthWyzer, scientists are using pigeons to do research on regenerative skin cells and are attempting to “grow a young, plump skin cell that would eat up the worn cells in the skins of those on whom it was planted” (Atwood, p. 55), thereby growing human tissue on non-human animals. These artificially grown organs and implantable skin cells, through marketing, are viewed as human replacement parts and not as animal-farmed human genetic material. Through “glossy and discreetly worded” (Atwood, p. 23) brochures and catchy slogans such as “NooSkins for Olds” (Atwood, p. 55), the global market is convinced to purchase simulations of human body parts. Similarly, Braidotti (2007) argues that in our culture contemporary genetic-driven societies euphorically associate the genetic code or DNA to marketable brandnames. Genetic materials (like stem cells) become data banks of potentially profitable information and are commercialized as such. The very widespread practice of patenting and enforcing intellectual property rights as a standard way of doing scientific research demonstrates the point. (p. 70)

This branding of genetic material is the basis on which the compounds of *Oryx and Crake* build their empires. Pigeons create humanity from the parts of humanity that are bred in them in much the same way that ChickieNobs take over the marketplace and create new versions of the real chicken from only parts of the chicken.

The generation of new concepts of humans and animals by global corporations changes what is perceived as real. These new ways of considering reality lead to “a broad and extensive change in the culture, in the way identities are structured” (Poster, 2001, p. 611). People no longer base their self-images on the self they were born with because that self is easily manipulated. They need no longer to consider animals as food or their food as animals because the concept of food as coming from nature is no longer appropriate. The new reality of *Oryx and Crake* is one of the promise of eternal youth. The global economy, through its product marketing, has created the ideal human for people to attempt to become. The capitalist compound counts on this myth to create demand for its product, operating on the belief that no

well-to-do and once-young, once-beautiful woman or man, cranked up on hormonal supplements 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. (Atwood, 2003, p. 55)

This ideal human is perfectly young and healthy and has the money to remain in this state for generations, if not forever. This is a reflection of the current spread of “new bio-technologies of ‘Life’” which involve “the widespread phenomenon of the traffic in organs and body-parts; and the growing industry of genetic engineering and farming of living tissues and cells” (Braidotti, 2007, pp. 70–71). *Oryx and Crake* hypothesizes a future to our world’s current ventures into the manipulation of nature. In Atwood’s novel, nature is overcome by technology so that a new nature might take its place and be made available for purchase in a system of capitalist globalization. In our world, as well as in the world of *Oryx and Crake*, “invading territories and putting down stakes are not the only ways of conquering nature. Western scientists, too, have traditionally been depicted as subduing nature... They share some of the same attitudes as colonists:

conquer, map, know, sell” (Deery, 1997, p. 482). Jimmy’s father, in this way, is similar to a cartographer who maps territories and then becomes conquerer of the lands he maps. His job is that of a “geneographer[:] He’d done some of the key studies on mapping the proteonome...and then he’d helped engineer the Methuselah Mouse” (Atwood, p. 22). Jimmy’s father, like transnational corporations, moves from creation of the map to manipulation of the territory to benefiting from the sale of the results of this manipulation.

While the upper-class scientists benefit from the manipulation of the population to buy into the concept of humanity that powerful corporations offer them, the true benefactors are the corporations themselves. The transnational corporations of *Oryx and Crake* and of our own world take part in global commerce—not for the altruistic reason of merging the gap between cultures and classes, but to widen the gap between the rich and the poor. Through capitalist globalization, the wealthy have access to foods, technologies, medicines, and ideas to which those in poverty will never have access. When Jimmy goes to visit Crake’s college, there is a considerable difference between the images of Crake’s more affluent school and Jimmy’s less affluent school. While Jimmy “shared a dorm suite [with] one cramped room either side, silverfish-ridden bathroom in the middle” (Atwood, 2003, p. 188), Crake got “real shrimps instead of the CrustaeSoy they got at Marth Graham, and real chicken” (Atwood, p. 208). While Jimmy is with Crake at his school, he savors the real food and the clean environment that he cannot achieve himself. Even worse is the difference between these schools and the pleeblands; the pleeblands are “a giant Petri dish: a lot of guck and contagious plasm got spread around there...the air was worse in the pleeblands... more junk blowing in the wind” (Atwood, p. 287). Despite the obvious standard of living gap, the people of the pleeblands also savor what pieces of the capitalist myth of perfection they are allowed. Jimmy and Crake encounter advertising in the poorer areas of the pleeblands for products that compounds like theirs have produced. The people of the pleeblands are the greatest consumers of these products, leading Crake to comment that “this is where [their] stuff turns to gold” (Atwood, p. 288). The people who are unable to receive the financial benefits of technology choose instead to physically benefit through purchase while pushing themselves further into poverty and providing those not in poverty with their meager earnings, widening the economic gap.

For a price, corporations will fulfill the desires that they instill in society, creating a cycle of fulfillment and desire through commerce that results in greater and greater riches for corporations and greater and greater desires to be fulfilled by scientists and embodied by the masses. This unending cycle of human alteration and corporate riches that is found in *Oryx and Crake* is Atwood’s interpretation of the effects of globalization through capitalism and her prediction of what might occur if global capitalism is left unchecked.

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