

After the End: a Post-human Dys/(u)topia?*

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THERE IS an intended ambiguity which resides in my title, which also points to a greater ambiguity, namely the difficulty of distinguishing today between positive and negative within the realm of utopia, as Fredric Jameson has recently suggested (Jameson 2010, 21-25). The title also reveals a certain apocalyptic conception about the future and also regards the question about the (im)/possibility of utopia: can we represent or formulate a straightforward utopia that would not quickly be turned into nightmare? Do we really face an end of utopia, as it has often been proclaimed? Have we passed in a new era which is beyond utopia? How do the apocalyptic hypotheses about our future interfere with the anti-utopian tradition of the 20th century? How can we circumscribe the uniqueness of our present moment, as far as this interaction between two strands of imagination is concerned?

From its beginnings, anti-utopian writers such as Émile Souvestre have conceived their nightmarish worlds dwelling upon apocalyptic visions of the future with satirical undertones and criticism towards their contemporary real world. The 19th Century saw the emergence of a new combination between the apocalyptic expectations towards the future (sharp criticism towards the theories of progress—Charles Nodier and his *Hurlublu*) and utopian impulses to improve the present world (frequently taking the form of satire) (Fortunati and Trousson 2000, 182). The new apocalyptic imagination (scientific catastrophism) influenced and changed the course of the utopian tradition, displacing *eutopia* in a very visible way, although the negative counterpart of utopia had its own, well-established tradition, starting from Joseph Hall's *Mundus Alter et Idem* (1607) and Artus Thomas's *L'isle des Hermaphrodites* (Fortunati and Trousson 2000, 637). These texts stand as proof, in Corin Braga's opinion, not only for the autonomy of anti-utopias versus the utopian tradition, but also for its autonomy versus the Millennium, which did not particularly triggered its apparition (Braga 2008, 142).

The first apocalyptic novel to appear in English is considered to be *The Last Man* (1826) by Mary Shelley, a viral bio-apocalypse about the total disappearance of humanity, a tale told by Lionel Verney, the last man on earth.¹ Even though it is written by a

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Romantic author, *The Last Man* is one of the first attempts to de-dramatize the representation of the end of man, since the agent of the end is not supernatural, but natural, an apocalypse without the Judgment Day and its redeeming powers, without its religious dimension, an Apocalypse without Millennium (Paley 1993, 107). H.G. Wells, the true forerunner of modern dystopia, achieved literary celebrity with *The Time Machine* (1895), a novel which transforms a social problem (class inequalities) into a biologic and natural effect, profoundly molding the human nature, and based on a fatalistic materialism springing from Darwin's theory of evolution: human race becomes just another natural species, deprived of its god-like status. Although the differences are more important than resemblances, both novels do depict the post-human future, based on a non-dramatic, secular end of humanity, and structured on a distanced perspective towards the human past, seen as another species which goes extinct. Both writers attempt to describe the horror of the void, generated by the human absence, both are non-dramatic reflections on our post-human future.

Slavoj Žižek proposes in his *Living in the End Times* a shift in the traditional approach of utopia, a shift from content (the alternative social system) to the reflection on the subjective position from which such content appears as utopian (Žižek 2010, 84-85). The core of utopia is, in Žižek's opinion (following Lacan), to imagine a perfect paradise from which one is excluded, a de-realization of us as spectators, reduced to "an impossible gaze witnessing an alternate reality" from which the subject is absent (Žižek 2010, 82). In this study I have tried to follow this approach, in order to delineate the utopian dimension of a few key bio-apocalyptic novels that represent a post-human future, from Mary Shelley's *Last Man*, Wells's *Time Machine*, to recent examples such as Houellebecq's *Possibility of an Island* and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*. In this respect, a new definition of utopia, formulated by Fredric Jameson, seems very fruitful for our approach: utopia is an "operation calculated to disclose the limits of our own imagination of the future, the lines beyond which we do not seem able to go in imagining changes in our own society and world (except in the direction of dystopia and catastrophe)" (Jameson 2010, 23). Also very functional proves to be the assumption that the importance of utopia resides not so much in "what can be positively imagined and proposed but rather what is not imaginable" (Jameson 2010, 23). At this point the utopian impulse meets the apocalyptic imagination, and such is the case with the bio-apocalyptic narratives we discuss here. In Jameson's opinion, the uniqueness of the present moment resides in our impossibility to imagine the future, and contemporary writers such as Houellebecq and Atwood interrogate this impossibility in their novels.

The great moment of a dystopian pedagogy has returned: never before has been stressed to such an extent that this apocalyptic zero point is due solely to human actions and beliefs. The new era is that of the "Anthropocene" (Žižek 2010, 331), when humanity is forced to represent itself as another biological species among others (but the most problematical for the entire planet), when the boundaries between natural and human history are blurred (Man as having God-like possibilities to become a force of nature, to self-destruct and to create a new human species). 20th century has confirmed in a convincing manner that the human factor has succeeded to blur the boundaries between natural catastrophes and cultural catastrophism.

The new universal subject, described as species, structures the characters' outlook in both Houellebecq's and Atwood's novels (they have anticipated the intellectual debate). This is a staple of bio-apocalypses, a sub-category of apocalyptic fiction that also overlaps with utopia—the desire to build a new human species through genetic engineering, dystopia—an experiment with catastrophic consequences, and pastoral—the “epoch of rest,” a transgression of opposites, of historical transformation and time (Jameson 2010, 23). In fact, these three concepts and possible worlds are placed by these authors on a single linear process, generated by our current state of confusion and pre-apocalyptic chaos that will eventually lead to a radical transformation of the world as we know it.

1. *The Last Man* and the void of our absence

ONE OF the crucial difficulties in writing apocalyptic fictions centered upon the total end of humanity is generated by the very impossible nature of the subject: how to witness the Event of total annihilation and also render it in a verisimilar way? How to find the proper narrator for such a difficult task? Mary Shelley chose to identify the narrator with the protagonist, to construct the all-witnessing post-human subject through a first-person narrative that records the transformation of the central character, Lionel Verney, as he lives through the end of humanity. Even though the material proof of man's civilization remains intact, the disappearance of humans produces a mutation not only visible in the art objects, but also in Verney's outlook: he loses his human appearance. This is a shocking revelation, described as an encounter with his mirror-image: “I entered one of the palaces, and opened the door of a magnificent saloon. I started—I looked again with renewed wonder. What wild-looking, unkempt, half-naked savage was that before me? The surprise was momentary. I perceived that it was I myself whom I beheld in a large mirror at the end of the hall” (Shelley 2004, 362).

Shortly after this fragment, the narrator addresses the reader, in a very utopian fashion, in order to prove the verisimilar aspect of the scene: “Will my readers scorn the vanity, that made me attire myself with some care, for the sake of this visionary being? Or will they forgive the freaks of a half-crazed imagination?” (Shelley 2004, 363). This strange interpellation, when the narrator directly addresses the reader, contradicts the very apocalyptic premise and finality of the novel (the total end of human species, no survivors, no possible readers), but it fulfills a crucial function, also present in utopian literature: Verney, the traveler-narrator, seeks to mediate between this world of the future when Man disappears and the actual world of the readers from the author's historical time, to tame the total estrangement generated by this apocalyptic event, the world of the future as Otherness (Fortunati and Trousson 2000, 640). A few pages later, the apocalyptic finality returns, rendering absurd and pointless Verney's writings, since the assumption that there are no humans left alive becomes evident: “I also will write a book, I cried—for whom to read?—to whom dedicated?” (Shelley 2004, 371). This also stands for the end of meaning, along with the other endings (of time, human culture, civilization, art, literature etc), which will later be echoed in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, whose protagonist, also the last man on earth, understands that no human representative will ever read his account.

The “Last Man” theme appears not only in a vast range of poetic works from the Romantic period, but also structures the late literary response of the bio-apocalypse, namely those written at the end of the last century and at the beginning of the 21st century, from Kurt Vonnegut’s *Galapagos*, to Michel Houellebecq’s *Elementary Particles* and *Possibility of an Island* and Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*. In many respects, Shelley’s viral apocalypse sets the pattern for an entire series of novels: it is one of the first to completely secularize the end of the world (no hope for renewal, no new beginning, no Millennium), one of the first to de-dramatize the end of the human race, emphasizing the resistance of this ending to interpretation (Verney remains a pure witness, incapable of making sense of this impossible Event; his survival remains also a mystery), the last man as the narrator of the end perceived as a slow, silent process of disappearance (the protagonist is also the narrator in *Possibility of an Island*), first person narrative dealing with a non-representable event, the total annihilation.

The tradition of the bio-apocalyptic narrative established by Mary Shelley relies on a structure of three stages of the historical process, the great tribulation towards the end: the decayed world which corresponds to the historical realities of the author, chaotic and incomprehensible, harshly criticized; the point of no return when the apocalyptic event is ensued upon the world (the global pandemic in both *The Last Man* and *Oryx and Crake*; the mutation in the human species in the *Possibility of an Island*), and the nostalgic return to what resembles a pastoral world, the result of the collapse of civilization, social and national boundaries, beyond technology, progress, social conventions and city life. The third stage of this historical process, generated by an initial utopian impulse, is present in all the aforementioned bio-apocalypses, but it undergoes divergent literary treatment with every author, receiving an essential ambiguity with *Possibility of an Island* and *Oryx and Crake* (I shall discuss it later). In Shelley’s last three chapters of the novel, we plunge into a paradisaical space when human time, history, quest for power, wars and even death are all abolished. Verney asks himself: “Was there such thing as death in the world?” (Shelley 2004, 361). When he first arrives in the future world of the Eloi, Wells’s Time Traveler, although disappointed with the intelligence of the new species that has replaced humanity, is also charmed by the apparent return of the Paradise Lost, a return of the pastoral world, when “the whole earth had become a garden,” when property and social disparities had been abolished along with wars and history, and of course progress. The dream of the pastoral, evident in these pages, rejects utopian planning in an explicit manner, but it will be shattered with the apparition of the Morlocks. Both in *Possibility of an Island* and in *Oryx and Crake*, the third stage appears to be a pastoral, but in the end is revealed as something different, difficult to pin down in one specific category (what we could call a “pseudo-pastoral”).

The ending of *Last Man* is also significant for the recent bio-apocalyptic narratives: Verney witnesses the end of all things, and he is ultimately reduced to his gaze: “I shall witness all the variety of appearance, that the elements can assume—I shall read fair augury in the rainbow—menace in the cloud—some lesson or record dear to my heart in everything” (Shelley 2004, 374). The concise and quick reference to a supernatural agent comes at the very end of the novel in the same form of the gaze that surrounds the last witness and representative of the human race, a gradual distanced perspective: “Thus

around the shores of deserted earth, while the sun is high, and the moon waxes or wanes, angels, the spirit of the dead and the ever open eye of the Supreme, will behold the tiny bark, freighted with Verney—the LAST MAN” (Shelley 2004, 375). The world devoid of human presence retains its fascination, since it represents a regression towards the stillness of the first moments of creation, with Verney as a new Adam, an embodiment of the impossible utopian gaze: horrified, and yet daring to look into the void of our absence.

2. The “deadly nausea” of the impossible gaze

THE DUALISM of utopia is also present in *Time Machine*, between the present world of the Time Traveler and the bleak future of humanity, starting from the same utopian impulse to represent the unthinkable, to describe the unimaginable, a desire to render the shock of the last man witnessing the End of all. The typical journey motif can be interpreted as a literary pretext in order to motivate and fulfill the utopian fantasy of being present at the end of the world, the Event which excludes all possible witnesses, since it is not only an end of a world, but also the final death of our universe. The Traveler confesses his fascination and his purpose of the journey: “So I traveled, stopping ever and again, in great strides of a thousand years or more, drawn on by the mystery of the earth’s fate” (Wells 2002, 88).

The encounter of the Time Traveler with Otherness occurs in the 11th chapter, when, instead of going backwards to his epoch, the Traveler is accidentally cast in the farthest future, long after humanity has disappeared, and Wells depicts one of the key images for the apocalyptic fiction and film, a “sloping beach” where the Traveler faces the void, the end of intelligent life and the imminent Heat Death of the universe, but also the impossibility to describe the visceral sensations when facing the abyss: “I cannot convey the sense of abominable desolation that hung over the world. The red eastern sky, the northward blackness, the salt Dead Sea, the stony beach crawling with these foul, slow-stirring monsters, the uniform poisonous-looking green of the lichenous plants, the thin air that hurts one’s lungs: all contributed to an appalling effect” (Wells 2002, 88). The literary device and motif of time-traveling, very frequent in late Victorianism, proves here extremely functional for the representation of the ending of the world as a slow process of decay, gradually unfolding before the eyes of the Traveler as if it were a film:

Then I stopped once more, for the crawling multitude of crabs had disappeared, and the red beach . . . seemed lifeless. . . . I saw nothing moving, in earth or sky or sea. . . . The darkness grew apace; . . . Beyond these lifeless sounds the world was silent. Silent? It would be hard to convey the stillness of it. All the sounds of man, the bleating of sheep, the cries of birds, the hum of insects, the stir that makes the background of our lives—all that was over. . . . A horror of this great darkness came on me. The cold, that smote to my marrow, and the pain I felt in breathing, overcame me. I shivered, and a deadly nausea seized me. (Wells 2002, 89)

The end of all life forms gains the dramatism and the vividness of a visual performance, the progression of the moving image, enriched with the precise account of the sensorial effects that the spectacle produces (“the deadly nausea”). This continuous quest for the final moment of life on earth seems to be triggered by the desire to catch a glimpse of its mystery, but it also accounts for the impossibility of perceiving it directly and simultaneously: the Event is a diffuse presence, and it continuously escapes the Traveler’s look. The Traveler cannot fully grasp and experience the end, since it eludes the human presence, but it can experience it as a perceiver, who is absent from the historical time he witnesses: due to the Time Machine, he has a position very similar to that of the spectator (present and yet absent). The experience of viewing a film presupposes the absence of the spectator from the screen but also his presence as a perceiver, according to the well-known theory of Christian Metz and other subsequent Lacanian film theorists, centered on the pivotal concept of the gaze (McGowan 2007, 6). After publishing *The Time Machine*, Wells became an established writer, considered the founder of the science fiction (“scientific romance”), but we can also emphasize this important innovative stylistic device of his fiction: its ability to depict the rapid passage of time in vivid images that resembles a filmic experience. Simon Wells, the director of the latest adaptation of *Time Machine*, notices “the description of the world viewed in speeded-up form” (Wells 2002, XI).

There are though other respects in which Wells’s fiction proves essential for the understanding of our present *fin de siècle* atmosphere and of our contemporary post-human utopias as well: a social problem (class struggle and inequalities) is transformed into a biological, genetic one (the human race has split in two divergent species, both significant for their degeneration), a naturalization of culture which is also a current practice today; the crucial importance ascribed to Darwinism and its consequences (the future decline of the human species). The fascination with the total end of the world is also present, and is presented with the same detachment and de-dramatization, even if it reaches cosmic proportions, as in Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia*, where we also have the idea of the total disappearance of intelligent life from the entire universe, a hypothesis sustained by Justine in her last dialogue with Clare (the imminent end of Earth spells for the end of intelligent life forms in the universe).

3. The fascination with the post-human future

TWO CHARACTERISTIC phenomena of contemporary culture are, in Slavoj Žižek’s opinion, a return of the popularity of Darwinism (“the Darwinist reduction of our human societies to animal ones”) and our fascination with the end of our race, our fascination with observing the world from which we are absent, excluded (Žižek 2010, 84-85). Both tendencies meet in the form of post-human utopias, which could be another term for the bio-technological apocalypse, generated by the same trans-human revelry about the replacement of the *human sapiens sapiens* with a different specimen, purified of the faults and frailties of his human ancestor, and, most important, whose bonds with sexuality have been erased. The post-human utopias seek to elide the inheritance of the past century, conceiving possible ways of surpassing the human nature, and, as

Jean-Michel Besnier has noted, they can envision a bright future of *bien vivre* only if/when the man as we know today had disappeared forever (Besnier 2009, 21). The ancestor of the post-human utopias is, of course, to be found in the last decades of the 19th century with Francis Galton and the concept of “eugenic utopia” (Nate 2009, 90).

Three contemporary novels capture, in my opinion, the actual drive towards a post-human utopia, rendering with dramatism its dire consequences, capturing the ambiguity between the blind utopian impulse of the actual scientific paradigm, its dystopian truth, and these novels are: *The Elementary Particles* (1998), *The Possibility of an Island* (2005) and *Oryx and Crake* (2001). All three novels build their plots around a significant three-folded temporal structure, precisely unfolding the three stages of the waning of human species, a three-act structure of a dramatic narrative: the first act when all the premises for the human dissolution are gathering surreptitiously, the second act when apocalyptic progression gains momentum and reaches its culminating point, and the third act when all human conflicts reach their resolution in the seemingly pastoral future.

All three novels retain a strong contrast and tension between the two opposite worlds, specific to the utopian genre, and these worlds are separated by the apocalyptic event and connected by the same consciousness, the Protagonist/narrator/last knowing witness. The decayed, pre-apocalyptic world of the belated humanity is the frame of reference, which either has clear dystopian features in *Oryx and Crake* (the corporate world of eugenic politics and genetic engineering, a vast experiment on human race set in the near future), or embodies the sexual decadence in its purest form with Houellebecq’s novels, which have a strong satirical element—the Menippean satire (Carlston 2007, 19). The post-human world of the future appears, especially in *Oryx and Crake*, to have regained its paradisiacal status, a total erasure of previous traumatic memory, which continues to exist fragmented in Jimmy/Snowman’s mind, but his efforts are directed towards effacing the last remnants, even if this means to hunt any other possible survivors. Snowman’s purpose is to assure a radical new beginning, with the new human race, to break the circle of endless repetition of human errors and history. The footprint in the final chapter of the novel is the ironical refutation of his illusions: Jimmy finally encounters a group of human survivors, although Atwood has masterfully maintained throughout the whole novel the impression that Snowman is the last man on earth. This final revelation places the protagonist in an impossible position: to eliminate those three survivors would be, according to human ethics, unacceptable, and he still represents the human race (and feels compassion when he observes their miserable condition); to let those live means to jeopardize the post-human utopian plan of creating a new beginning. A similar moral deadlock is implied in *Possibility of an Island*: by the end of the novel, the reader is placed in the same insurmountable position, unable to choose between the humans and neo-humans, between the degenerate, violent world before the end of human civilization and the cold, heartless, motionless world after Man’s demise. The satirical undercurrent that runs through the novel until its epilogue rather convinces us that the disappearance of humanity would restore the paradise on Earth (the regeneration of the environment).²

Both Houellebecq (*The Elementary Particles*) and Atwood place an adjuvant for the protagonist/witness as the scientist who not only favors the idea of effacing human history and inheritance, but also convinces everyone about the necessity to replace it, and

finally conceives the practical means to accomplish this post-human ideal: Michel Djerzinski's genetic experiments lead to a radical mutation in a gradual way; Atwood's *Crake*, the main antagonist of the human race, devises a lethal virus, the wrong antidote and the humanoid species to replace Man (a complex scenario of a genetic apocalypse); in his second novel, Houellebecq suggests that the birth of the post-human utopia is the result of a series of absurd, grotesque and prosaic accidents (Daniel's encounter with a fundamentalist religious movement, the Elohim, whose leader was murdered etc.).

They all have in common the death drive that pervades the belated humanity (euthanasia, eugenics) and the desire to erase sexual impulses and desires, the root of all evils and decadence that have reached their pinnacle in the last period of human race (both authors use vivid descriptions to depict the age of extremes and sexual excess). The gap between the two antagonistic worlds is filled with the ambiguous image of Man, that of the Creator (doomed and culpable) and also a despicable creature (the observations made by the last Daniel in the epilogue are also relevant). The very extinction of human race is rooted in the same human frailty: the addiction to sexual pleasures, although the precise account of its disappearance is shrouded in mystery in Houellebecq's novels, influenced by Clifford D. Simak's *City* (1951), especially in *The Elementary Particles*, with its Prologue and Epilogue written from a far-future perspective, belonging to the new species, analyzing the present human life as if it were an extinguished biological specimen, with an awkward, senseless behavior. The new post-human species lacks any erotic engagement and any other specific human affects as well, and this is of course very clear in both Houellebecq's bio-apocalyptic dystopias. The fact that this broad spectrum of specific human affects is absent both from the last generation of humans and from their humanoid substitutes leads to the same bleak conclusion about the radical impossibility to find a new beginning, as if the non-human replicas have preserved the worst feature from their ancestors: the lack of compassion. In *Oryx and Crake*, the new species, "Children of Crake," are as well devoid of any sexual impulses, since they have a complete innocent mindset which cannot be easily perverted, in spite of Snowman's mistakes, who embodies the portrait of an anti-Master. Their childish behavior very much resembles the wellsonian Eloi.

These are different worlds in time, not space, and this feature of modern utopia (dominated by *uchronia*) is underscored by Wells in *Time Machine*, where the passing of the ages is radically changing the same location (London). Houellebecq and Atwood maintain the same setting in order to delineate the passage of time. Daniel 25, writing from the far-future, notices the disappearance of the sea, even though the house is located near the sea, since the first Daniel. He eventually leaves his shelter following his ancestor's footsteps, guided by his diary, a narrative pretext to describe the new post-human reality, an inhospitable, deserted environment (*The Possibility of an Island*). In *Oryx and Crake*, Jimmy/Snowman inhabits the same laboratory where Crake has conceived the new species.

All three novels continue the great utopian tradition, present in *The Last Man* and *Time Machine*, regarding the (narrator)/Protagonist/Traveler. The style of the first person narrative (*The Possibility of an Island*) and the subjective perspective has many narrative and thematic functions. It creates the bridge between the reader and the protagonist, and, as a consequence, it enhances a direct participation to the representation of the end of a world, which, in these cases I have discussed, really means the End of all,

capitalized. It locates as well a subject, a unified perspective able to surpass the gap between radical different worlds in time, sometimes locating the witness for the apocalypse (end of civilization, end of humanity, even the end of Earth as in *Time Machine*) in the first person singular “I” as in *The Last Man* and *The Possibility of an Island*.

The neo-human avatars of Daniel I are created to be a prolongation of the human conscience in a post-human environment, a *neutral subject* able to witness and describe with a scientific precision the new world, where human race has survived as a savage, almost extinct species. Houellebecq’s neutral style perfectly enacts the “cynical subject” of our times, offering the detached chronicle of the end of man, and the best instance of a post-human writing, a narration stylistically shaped to sound as if it were the last record of humanity. Daniel’s post-human avatars are the perfect fictional motivation to represent the un-representable, fulfilling the analogue function as the time machine in Wells’s novella, Verney’s and Jimmy’s miraculous survival to the global pandemic (*The Last Man*, *Oryx and Crake*).

Conclusions

IN CONCLUSION, the utopian, impossible gaze creates a dynamic, performative vision that captures the end as a process, transgresses both the dystopian pre-apocalyptic world and the post-human utopia, a gaze in the absence of the human body, reduced to its purest fantasizing act of capturing the void, the gap that always escapes the sight, but also the post-human utopian space. In order to enact the utopian gaze, which in our understanding of the term means to capture the ending of the world as a process directly unfolding before the witness’ eyes, literature and these writers in particular have practiced a visual style that acts as a substitute for the film medium. They have placed the Protagonist in the position of the perceiver, both absent and present at the Event. The best example comes from *Oryx and Crake*, where the entire 13th chapter represents the apocalyptic tribulations towards the end as a filmic progression, and positions Jimmy as a voyeur: “Meanwhile, the end of a species was taking place before his very eyes. . . . Site after site, channel after channel went dead. A couple of the anchors, news jocks to the end, set the cameras to film their own deaths” (Atwood 2003, 344). The end is the Event that excludes all witnesses and can be shown as it happens only in film, where the gaze becomes the camera. The most striking example is Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia*: the film ends with the actual collision of the planets in the background, the three human witnesses in the middle (an extreme long shot, deep focus) and with the camera as if it was abandoned in the field, filming in the absence of the human agency. □

Notes

1. Anne Mellor names it “the first English example of what we might call apocalyptic or end of the world fiction,” in Mellor, *Mary Shelley*, 148.
2. This eco-ideology is present not only in some important postwar nuclear apocalypse, from Brian Aldiss’s *Greybeard* (London: Panther Books, 1968) to Edgar Pangborn’s *Davy* (London: Wyndham Publications, 1964), to some recent studies such as Alan Weisman’s *The World without Us* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2007) and countless documentaries and film studies.

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Abstract

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The possibility for the human race to go extinct and the consequences of a biogenetic revolution are two important ideas that usually appear as inter-related in a sub-genre of the apocalyptic fiction, the bio-apocalypse (from Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* and Wells' *Time Machine* to Michel Houellebecq), which is also situated at the crossroads between utopia and dystopia. The present paper will focus on the a few essential elements that structure this hybrid genre, using a comparative approach between the beginnings of bio-apocalypse with Mary Shelley and the present developments of which the best examples are *The Elementary Particles*, *The Possibility of an Island* and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, using the concept of the "utopian gaze." Houellebecq and Atwood's novels raise a few unsettling questions about the actual crisis of the human civilization, about the impossibility to surpass it, about the desire to replace and re-shape the actual human genome and conceive a different human species. The final question leads to a paradox: we have always fantasized the disappearance of the humans, but when this utopia is really attainable, it becomes a nightmare. Is it really desirable for the human race to go extinct? The disappearance of humanity leads either to an undesirable and bleak utopia or to a dystopian equilibrium.

Keywords

Mary Shelley; Margaret Atwood; Michel Houellebecq; post-human; bio-apocalyptic dystopia; utopian gaze; the "last man" motif.