

Posthuman Societies – The Biopolitical in Recent Utopian Texts

“Biomass?” Da5id says.

“A body of living stuff. It’s an ecology term. If you take an acre of rain forest or a cubic mile of ocean or a square block of Compton and strain out all the nonliving stuff – dirt and water – you get the biomass.”

[...]

“Industry expression,” Hiro says. “The Industry feeds off the human biomass of America. Like a whale straining krill from the sea.”

Neal

Stephenson¹

1. Introduction

In his 2002 book *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* Francis Fukuyama eloquently discusses the influence that recent technological developments have on our society.² His aim is neither the correct depiction of a possible future in science nor dystopian science fiction world building but rather to shape an awareness of fundamental changes that society will necessarily undergo if recent trends continue. It is a work of reasonably argued observations that nonetheless vibrates with dystopian thoughts similar to those evoked by Neal Stephenson’s term “biomass“. Fukuyama argues that humanity is not threatened by a single disruptive invention such as nuclear power, but rather through a subtle corrosion of what he considers human nature.³ His argument, without ever using the term itself, resonates with Michel Foucault’s concept of biopower and the massive reformative influence it has on our society. Biotechnological development is continuously eroding the boundaries of human nature, thus propelling us into “our post-human future”.

Another book, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire*⁴, argues for this exact change in society as a fundamental element at the heart of a paradigm shift in sovereign power. This shift, so they argue leads towards the constitution of the global system of power relations referred to as Empire. Empire is the expression of a global market and a worldwide flow of products, information and population. In Hardt and Negri’s opinion, Empire usurps the sovereign vacuum left by the decline

¹ Neal Stephenson: *Snow Crash*, London: Penguin 1992, S. 70

² Francis Fukuyama: *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*; New York: Picador 2002.

³ Fukuyama: *Posthuman Future*, Preface

⁴ Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri: *Empire*. Cambridge, Mass. / London: Harvard UP 2000.

of national power and establishes a new world order, which is without a “territorial center of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers” and that needs to be characterized as a “*decentered* and *deterritorializing* apparatus of rule”.⁵ Hardt and Negri further posit that Empire is of “hybrid constitution”, merging the functions of power “in the form of a rhizomatic and universal communication network” constituted of nation-states, international political organizations and transnational corporations.⁶ It is within this network that sovereign power is negotiated, all parts struggling continuously for their own ends. In the end though, neither of them is independent of the others, and Empire’s goals are unified only by the forced consensus of a balance between the different parts. This new world order establishes itself without a central ordering power but through “constitutional processes” within a “site of struggle”.⁷ Hardt and Negri define Empire conceptually without boundaries, whether territorial, historical, or social. And it is precisely Empire’s boundless social rule that evokes Foucault’s concept of the biopolitical and resonates with Fukuyama’s threat against human nature. It is within the realm of the biopolitical that Empire exerts power over society:

“The rule of Empire operates on all registers of the social order extending down to the depths of the social world. Empire not only manages a territory and a population but also creates the very world it inhabits. It not only regulates human interactions but also seeks directly to rule over human nature. The object of its rule is social life in its entirety, and thus Empire presents the paradigmatic form of biopower.”⁸

Empire’s rule over society works via socially integrated operations and communication systems, forming society from “its interior, following it, interpreting it, absorbing it, and rearticulating it.”⁹ The networks of this new world order thus call into question the very essence of human nature by controlling the “the production and reproduction of life itself.”¹⁰

2. Cultural Expression

⁵ Ibid.; Preface XII f.

⁶ Ibid.; p.316 & 319.

⁷ Ibid.; p.319.

⁸ Ibid.; Preface XV.

⁹ Ibid.; p.23.

¹⁰ Ibid.; p.24.

When looking at these two socio-philosophical arguments, the emergence of Empire and the biopolitical threat to human nature, in a cultural framework, it seems almost inevitable to resort to the field of Utopian studies. In his books *Demand the Impossible* and *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* Tom Moylan shows emphatically that the utopian imagination is ideally suited to reflect the social changes of a time.¹¹ It is within a socio-historical specificity that he seeks to uncover certain changes in the literary genres of utopia, anti-utopia and dystopia, which in turn lead to his analysis of the critical utopias of the 1970s and the critical dystopias of the 1990s. In correspondence with this analysis, one should be able to detect another historically specific change in society analog to the development of biotechnology and the emergence of Empire, which must then have a response in the utopian imagination. But it is not in the formal aspect of subgenre classification where a difference is to be found. Rather it is within the frame of the sociopolitical critique that dystopian texts of the new millennium negotiate the paradigm shift brought about by Empire and its biopolitical rule over society. This critique of “our posthuman future” can be found in many recent dystopian films, novels and computer games.

2.1. Margaret Atwood – *Oryx and Crake*

One example of a posthuman society is depicted in Margaret Atwood’s 2003 novel *Oryx and Crake*, which describes a devastated world with natural resources depleted. The elite of society has taken refuge in corporately owned, heavily guarded enclaves, while the mass of people live in the unprotected surrounding sprawl. In this corporate world, employees are regarded as assets, the most cherished of which work in the field of the life sciences, genetically engineering new species of plants and animals to comply with the demands of a growing population and a dying nature.

Under corporate control grade school pupils are introduced to the creative potential of genes and grow up with the fundamental knowledge that the power of creation is at their disposal. Genetic engineering is used to solve all problems that this dystopian world produces. Growing organs for failing human bodies, new species of animals more resistant to the environment, stones that filter

¹¹ Tom Moylan: *Demand the Impossible – Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*. New York: Methuen. 1986.
Tom Moylan: *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*. Boulder: Westview. 2000.

the air: Everything is possible in this brave genetically engineered world. *Oryx and Crake* shows human science to be the master of all biomass and the corporations the masters of science itself.

It is thus obvious that *Oryx and Crake* takes us into the realm of the biopolitical, with the question of who holds power over the reproduction of life at its core. Corporations provide for education, entertainment, information, communication, and of course profession for their employees. With this method the corporation controls all social interaction and has integrated its values and standards into society. In the novel this biopower is manifested in the character Crake who plays the role of the calculating scientist providing the corporation with the ultimate biopower. On the one hand he manufactures a pill that stimulates sexual drive, while secretly sterilizing humanity. On the other hand he then presents the sterile population with an alternative in reproduction, a better human race that has none of the flaws of the old one. He has genetically altered humanity and created a product, which is supposed to be sold as an alternative to children. In this we find Atwood's most poignant critique of corporate behavior, as she extrapolates the idea of the biopolitical to literally take hold of the means to the reproduction of life in the very essence of humanity itself. Human society falls victim to the exploitation mechanisms of creating a disease for the profit of selling a cure.

Interestingly enough, though, Atwood does not let this corporate dystopia become reality but rather places a utopian moment of hope in this bleak vision. In his delusion of omnipotence, Crake has incorporated a virus in the pill, thus eliminating all of humanity and leaving the earth to be taken over by his floor models, the only survivors naturally adapted to the climate and living conditions. To his own logic, he has thus broken the cycle of self-destruction and saved the human race, or as Margaret Atwood put it herself:

„The human race seems bend on destroying itself, and the biosphere along with it, because it seems unable to check its own greedy and aggressive behaviours. [Crake] uses science to speed up the process, true, but only because he thinks that he's made some essential improvements to the breed, and wants in all benevolence to eliminate the defective model – ourselves.“¹²

It is with this benevolent act that Crake undermines the corporate vision of a capitalist utopia in

¹² Margaret Atwood: „My Life in Science Fiction“. IN: *Cygnos* 22 (2); 2005. p.163.

which all human reproduction, all life, has become a marketable product. He has loosened the corporate chokehold on the world's biomass – humanity included – and has given it a chance for betterment. With this creative act, he has written the future anew, creating a counter-narrative that challenges the hegemonic order and reveals a glimpse of hope. It is not hope for us though, but for the created and revised version of humanity. And in this I see the historical specificity of *Oryx and Crake* and other dystopias written after 2000. In recognizing the fundamental paradigm shift towards Empire and its looming threat of a posthuman society, with its power based in the biopolitical, Atwood creates a society in which corporate control is not limited, but universal and all-embracing, it is a constituent of life itself. Consequently, her site of resistance, her counter-narrative needs to be biopolitical as well and so she creates a new human race; renegotiating social life from its interior, interpreting it anew and rearticulating it, in re-writing the creation myth of Genesis.

2.2 Karyn Kusama – *Aeon Flux*

In stark contrast to Atwood's creation of an alternative within the frame of the biopolitical and her placing of the site of resistance within posthuman society itself, is the vision that Karyn Kusama's 2005 film *Aeon Flux* offers. The film negotiates the side effects of scientific progress and the social consequences that both could have on human society. *Aeon Flux* combines two main scientific themes: the accidental creation of a viral or bacterial agent that leads to a disease and the social consequences of human cloning. In the world of *Aeon Flux* 99 percent of human society died due to a disease created by humans, forcing the survivors to live secured within the walls of the city-state Bregna. Outside the city walls, nature is abundantly reclaiming earth from humanity and is viewed as a chaotic threat by the surviving civilization. In its despair to create a cure to the disease, science resorted to a vaccine that had an unfortunate and unforeseeable side effect: it sterilized humanity thus threatening to eliminate humanity for good. Bregna's leaders then began a secret project of cloning, using the DNA data of the surviving percent of humans. But the limited amount of genetic

material at hand led over time to deterioration in the cloning process, thus placing Bregna's posthuman society on the slope toward inevitable extinction once more, should no cure to the sterility be found. In order to find it, the scientist-leader of Bregna, Trevor Goodchild, uses humans to experiment on and covers up any fatalities. In *Aeon Flux*, posthuman society is depicted as destructive and in the end non-functioning, creating a dystopian vision of where we are headed should the threat of biotechnology remain unchecked.

In part this dystopia functions similar to Atwood's in that it posits the threat of posthuman society clearly within the reaches of science. In contrast to the novel though, there is no clear-cut anti-corporate sentiment in *Aeon Flux* that sees science as a threat to human nature because it is wielded by transnational corporations and used to hold sway over society for capitalistic corporate ends. The film rather discusses government and corporation as two aspects, which seem complexly interwoven and not distinguishable. The governing body of Bregna is organized corporatively and has many of its administrative features replaced by economic features: Its rulers are not organized in a senate or ministry but rather as the board of executives of Goodchild Industries, which handles the genetic engineering facility, the scientific laboratory in search of the cure, the DNA database but also all managerial and governmental aspects of the city, including food supply, medical aid, maintenance, and security. The line between corporate and governmental control can hardly be drawn. Rather, both aspects blend into a single one. It is here that Hardt and Negri's prediction of a modulating network of commands is turned on itself, integrating all hybrid elements of Empire's constitution into an amalgam of corporation-government, concentrating the struggling parts into one source of power, which then controls our posthuman future.

Another difference between Atwood's and Kusama's posthuman dystopia arises, when considering where the utopian hope lies within the dystopian society. In the novel the horizon of hope was clearly indicated within posthuman society, which was where humanity was inevitably headed. The film, on the other hand, postulates a return to the natural way of life, leaving posthuman society behind. Cloning and the biopolitical manipulation of reproduction lead humanity to the brink of

extinction, the film propagates, but in the end, nature finds a way to restore itself without the help of science. In fact, the scientist working on a human-induced solution fails and his work is destroyed before he finds out that it has been made superfluous by nature restoring reproductive capability to the human race without any scientific intervention. The film asserts that no matter what human ingenuity comes up with to destroy itself, nature finds a way in the end to prevail. In *Aeon Flux* posthuman society is only a phase between natural human societies – all biopolitical power ceases to exist and society is on its way towards its utopian horizon.

3. Conclusion

To sum up, I posit that cultural artists have picked up on a growing concern in today's society. We are faced with a revolutionary change in biotechnology, leaving us vulnerable to a manipulation of what can only be termed human nature. Especially the still unrealized but not quite unimaginable technology of human genetic engineering threatens the essence of our existence. This threat is clearly expressed and negotiated by artists in their respective works of art. The resonance this threat finds in works of art oscillates between two poles. On the one hand, one can discover the vision of an irremediable change of human society towards the posthuman, thus making utopia possible only by taking biopolitical power out of the hands of Empire and handing it back to the individual. On the other hand, posthuman society can be viewed as temporary, all threats in the end being equated by a tendency towards a natural balance. This view of the future affirms that nature always finds a way and that posthuman society will not prevail. The utopian moment thus lies within overcoming all dystopian threats, relying on natural forces to even out the score that human biotechnology has skewed.

Whichever position a work of art takes, in the end, though, one can feel a little relief that artists today have reacted culturally to the development of biotechnology and the threats that it might pose to human nature. In this artistic expression we can always find a helping hand at discussing all future possible worlds, opening the mind of their audiences to the possibility of an alternative.