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The Generative Functions of Monstrosity in Dystopian Fiction: Monster Theory, New Materialisms, and Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* Trilogy

Elmore, Jonathan

E-mail: elmorej@savannahstate.edu

Abstract

This piece explores affinities between speculative realism, speculative fictions, and monster theory all united by the shared purpose of addressing the increasingly violent, unintelligible and more and more difficult to ignore presence of the real in the everyday lives of first world citizens. Arguing that human relationships to the real are radically changing in the 21st century, this piece positions SF as a privileged site of negotiating this newly forming relationship between humans and the real that is increasingly impossible to ignore or explain away.

Key Words: Speculative Realisms, Speculative Fiction, Monster Theory, Margaret Atwood *MaddAddam*

“And, ultimately, we must face up to it: horror is more real than we are.” Ligotti

I'm going to make some sweeping claims in the next few pages, and like all broad, generalizing moves they will be far more inaccurate than accurate; however, it is undeniable that sweeping changes are underway in the first two decades of the 21st century. Changes in both the fictions humans conceive and our so called “reality” that apes them. I'm going to suggest affinities between speculative realism, speculative fiction and monster theory all united by the shared purpose of addressing the increasingly violent, unintelligible and more and more difficult to ignore presence of the real in the everyday lives of first world citizens.

At the beginning of the 20th Century, Virginia Woolf marked another time of sea change when she famously wrote, “on or about December 1910, human character changed” (4). Now, just over a century later, we can be far more precise: On exactly September 11th 2001, at 8:46am EST, human character changed. Within the profound rupture that was 9/11, the cultural functions of dystopian fiction were also forever altered. As Sicher and Skradol explain, “9/11 was an intrusion of the real that made it impossible to un-imagine dystopia as nightmare or fantasy” (Sicher and Skradol 152).

As such, dystopian fiction can no longer be explained away as foreshadowing or even forewarning of impending disasters. “Rather the effect of reading any dystopian text post factum, when history has given chilling new meaning to the original context in which the disaster was imagined, reverses the relationship between fiction and reality” (153). In other words, these fictions are not simply warnings of possible future implications of current events; instead, they interpret the current implications of historical events already past. The fictions are realer than what passes for reality in our media-soaked culture.

And these intrusions are coming thick and fast throughout the short life of the 21st Century. If we grant Sicher and Skradol their thesis, that 9/11 irrevocably changed our relationship to dystopian fiction, and I think we must, then we must also consider seriously the implications of their argument now twenty years, and many “intrusions” later. Fundamentally their consideration of dystopian fiction, is itself a consideration of representation in an increasingly unintelligible and mediated world. And a lot of different writers and thinkers are calling for the need to find a more appropriate medium for articulating the changing reality of the 21st century. And “reality” is the key word here. Until very recently, continental philosophy had long since abandoned the “real” as little more than a fantasy, and literature hasn't made claims on the real since Queen Victoria sat on the English throne. Even the hard sciences increasingly prove that humans do not perceive reality except through indirect, often highly technological, ways....the Hadron Collider being perhaps the most famous example of one such attempt at getting to the reality of existence.

However, if dystopian fiction articulates the real in the 21st century, what do we mean by the real? Fortunately the humanities has answers for this question. In literary studies and continental philosophy, thinkers have been speculatively working through the how humans access reality.

Speculative Turn in Philosophy

Until recently continental philosophy had been almost entirely anti-realist. As Harman, Srnicek, and Bryant explain, “continental philosophy [has focused] on discourse, text, culture, consciousness, power or ideas as what constitutes reality. But despite the vaunted anti-humanism of many of the thinkers identified with these trends, what they give us is less a critique of humanity’s place in the world, than a less sweeping critique of the self-enclosed Cartesian subject. Humanity remains at the centre of these works, and reality appears in philosophy only as the correlate of human thought” (2-3). Now, I’m a big fan of continental thought, but it is undeniable that these traditions rely on a kind of implicit anthropocentrism.

Recalling Sicher’s and Skradol’s thesis that events like 9/11 are intrusions of the real into our social reality that cannot be ignored, there has been recent voices in continental thought that have identified moments of the real forcing itself upon us. For example Žižek’s sweeping claim that “The ultimate and defining moment of the twentieth century was the direct experience of the Real as opposed to everyday social reality--the Real in its extreme violence as the price to be paid for peeling off the deceptive layers of reality” (5-6). On the one hand, we have growing pressure to address the real that increasingly intrudes upon us, and on the other hand, continental philosophy’s persuasive anthropocentrism is not well suited to address reality outside of the human mind.

It is this tension that has spawned the speculative turn in continental philosophy. Grouped under such labels as speculative realism, speculative materialism, and object oriented ontology, thinkers from the continental tradition have begun to formalize systems of thought whose object of study is reality itself. And importantly, this is not some kind of return to what Graham Harman calls, “naive realism.” For example, Harman proposes “that philosophy’s sole mission is *weird realism*. Philosophy must be realist because its mandate is to unlock the structure of the world itself: it must be weird because reality is weird” (334). He explicitly articulates the real as “that which cannot be accessed except by indirect means” (334). Likewise, Žižek sees the real as only accessible through mediated means: we “experience ‘real reality’ itself as a virtual entity” (11). Taking a different, but no less mediated, tack, Meillassoux argues that the real is accessible through mathematics, and, in fact, he goes as far as claiming that the real is literally that which can be mathematized.

My point is that the speculative turn in continental thought returns to questions of reality, motivated by the intrusions of the real into our social and cultural constructs, the real that is increasingly impossible to ignore is still not accessible except through mediated means, and it is this unavoidable mediation that brings us to certain strains of fiction.

Speculative Turn in Literature

Recalling the proposition that began this piece “the effect of reading any dystopian text post factum, when history has given chilling new meaning to the original context in which the disaster was imagined, reverses the relationship between fiction and reality” (153). In other words, these fictions are not simply warnings of possible future implications of current events; instead they interpret the current implications of historical events already past. These fictions are closer to the real than our socially constructed and media censored reality. Yet the speculative turn within fiction includes more than what generally falls under the genre definition of dystopian fiction. The speculative turn in literature, just as in philosophy, embraces all texts attempting to articulate the various intrusions of the real that increasingly make themselves impossible to explain away as fiction in the first place. This would include speculative fiction (within which lives much of what gets called dystopian fiction, but the speculative turn in literature is perhaps best captured under the sign of SF. Science fiction, science fact, speculative fiction, supernatural horror fiction, sword and sorcery fantasy, slipstream fiction, and so forth all find themselves drawn together by a common purpose under the sign of SF: the task of rendering intelligible the intrusions of the real increasingly common in the 21st century.

It is probably worth mentioning that I am well aware of the various turf genre distinctions that I just blurred together. Certainly, big proper names like Margaret Atwood, Ursula K. LeGuin, and Darko Suvin have argued convincingly for this or that distinction between this loose collection of genres.

I'm not disparaging this work but focusing on the commonalities between those disparate genres gives us a critical mass of work informed by and informing speculative philosophy and engaging seriously with the task of rendering the real intelligible.

I realize I've rushed through the crisis of the real in the 21st century, speculative realism and now SF incredibly quickly and instead of explaining any of these further, I'd like to throw one more entirely too big set of ideas into the mix: Monster Theory. It seems to me that one of the richest commonalities within SF for articulating the real lies within the monsters so common to SF's various genres.

Monster Theory

Itself a relatively new system of thinking, Monster Theory is probably most clearly articulated by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen as an interpretative methodology. In fact, Cohen introduces his book as "a sketch of a new *modus legendi*: a method of reading cultures from the monsters they engender" (1). Moreover, this reading occurs at the moments of unintelligibility:

"Vampires, burial, death: inter the corpse where the road forks, so that when it springs from the grave, it will not know which path to follow. Drive a stake through its heart: it will be stuck to the ground at the fork, it will haunt that place that leads to many other places, that point of indecision [...] The monster is born only at this metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment--as a time, a feeling, and a place. The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically "that which reveals" "that which warns, "a glyph that seeks a hierophant" (4).

Working backward through this passage, the monster is nothing but a carrier of meaning, of warning, of revelation. These are written into monstrous flesh, into monstrous bodies, into the objectivity of the monstrous. Ineffectively concealed beneath the unreality, the impossibility of the monster's bodily existence is the material reality of their warnings and revelations tattooed into the material objects that are monstrous bodies. And the revelations they embody are those of indecision, incognition, those at the crossroads of known and unknown:

"'Monster Theory' must therefore concern itself with strings of cultural moments, connected by a logic that always threatens to shift; invigorated by change and escape, by the impossibility of achieving what Susan Stewart calls the desired 'fall or death, the stopping' of its gigantic subject, monstrous interpretation is as much process as epiphany, a work that must content itself with fragments (footprints, bones, talismans, teeth, shadows, obscured glimpses--signifiers of monstrous passing that stand in for the monstrous body itself). (6)

My point is that the intrusions of the real in 1st world culture is a particularly salient string of cultural moments that are, in fact, the real itself, and SF's monsters are particularly well-suited to take us through the mediations separating us from the real.

Atwood's Monsters

I'd like to close by looking toward how this kind of *modus legendi* could work within a specific dystopian fiction: Atwood's *Maddadam* trilogy. If we take seriously that dystopian fiction can no longer be explained away as foreshadowing or even forewarning of impending disasters, and that instead "the effect of reading any dystopian text post factum, when history has given chilling new meaning to the original context in which the disaster was imagined, reverses the relationship between fiction and reality" (Sicher and Skradol 153), then what intrusions of the real do Atwood's monsters reveal becomes our basic research question.

Typically Atwood's trilogy, and many other similar dystopian, post-apocalyptic tales, get treated critically as cautionary tales...i.e. Look at what could happen if we don't mend our ways. As Karen Snyder explains: Dystopian speculative fiction takes what already exists and makes an imaginative leap into the future, following current socio-cultural, political or scientific developments to their potentially devastating conclusions. [...] These cautionary tales of the future work by evoking an uncanny sense of the simultaneous familiarity and strangeness of these brave new worlds (Snyder 470).

While Snyder captures the dominant critical framework for most readings of Atwood's trilogy, it also represents the approach to dystopian fiction that I am arguing is no longer ultimately compelling after so many and such forceful intrusions of the real that characterize the 21st century. Instead, I take the trilogy as a cautionary tale about what has already happened.

Its task is not to warn us to change, but rather to help us understand what we have already changed. In fact, the narrative structure of the three volumes themselves set the stage for this kind of revelation. All three books contain two roughly parallel chronologies. The narrative present of the trilogy is set in a post-apocalyptic America after Crake's BlissPlus virus has exterminated nearly the entire human race. The various narrators of the novels (Snowman the Jimmy, Toby, Ren, and Zeb) fill in the pre-virus backstory that is eerily familiar as an analog to our 21st century America. The narrative perspective is that of explaining events that have already happened and attempting to understand and come to terms with them. Thus the narrative structure of the novels performatively models the cognitive task of dystopian fiction after 9/11...of explaining and coming to terms with events that have already happened. Moreover, it is the monsters that inhabit the backstory of the novels and their affinity with "real" 21st century monstrosity that, I argue, allows the trilogy to explain events of the 21st century post facto.

Perhaps the most pervasive theme of the trilogy is genetic engineering. In the narrative present of the novels, this theme most clearly manifests in the crackers themselves who are the genetically engineered brain children of Crake made apparently to inherit the Earth now cleansed of humans. However, in the narrative past (analog to our present) it is the monstrous products of genetic engineering that pierce the virtual veil and render intelligible the effects of genetic modification and engineering. While the narrative is filled with genetically modified creatures including Wolvogs (cute dog/wolf splices designed to be both attractive and effective security), rakunks (rat/skunk splices sold as household pets), asphalt eating microbes (designed by the eco-terrorist group MaddAddam), and chickenobs (a bizarre mass of muscle and protein without beak, feet, eyes, or brain that supplants the chicken in mass produced foods), it is the pigeons whose monstrosity most forcefully engages the reality of genetic engineering.

Designed by Jimmy's father among others, the pigeons are what Chris Gray has termed, "living pharmaceutical factories" (123). Swine spliced with human DNA, the pigeon body "grows" organs fit for transplantation into human hosts. Already rendering the boundary between human and animal fuzzy in terms of physicality (i.e. pigeons are neither entirely swine nor homo sapiens and more alarmingly the same can be said of recipients of pigeon grown organs) once human neocortex tissue is successfully grown within the pigeons, their bodies also call into question the boundary between human and animal in terms of sentience and consciousness.

At first a philosophical problem, this slippage becomes alarmingly a practical conundrum as the OrganInc compound where the pigeons are designed, raised, and harvested increasingly serves "pork" to its employees and their families, and to complicate things even further "when the pigeons are released from their pens, the abomination of cannibalism gives way to a reversed 'food chain,'" as the emboldened pigeons began to hunt the last remaining humans (KU 114). One of the results of genetic engineering in the novels is the erosion of the cannibalism taboo as human/animals and animal/humans begin to identify one another as food. Furthering the progress of unintended consequences, the human cerebral tissue grown within the pigeons initially to treat brain injuries in humans, takes root and generates a capacity for language among the pigeons which seems to be at least in part telepathic.

My point here, and the larger point of dystopian fiction as I'm positioning it, is not to suggest that our current forays into genetic modification could lead to results such as this, but rather that we have already passed the point of no return. "In a new study published in the peer reviewed *Public Library of Science (PLOS)*, researchers emphasize that there is sufficient evidence that meal-derived DNA fragments carry complete genes that can enter into the human circulation system through an unknown mechanism, and one of the blood samples the relative concentration of plant DNA is higher than the human DNA" (107). In short Atwood's novels, and much dystopian fiction, must no longer be read as warnings of what could happen, and instead as calls to action (informed by speculative philosophy, SF, and yes monster theory) at policy, scientific, economic, and cultural levels regarding how we are going to confront the effects of events already past.

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