

**Construing the Postapocalypse in Two Different Spaces and Artistic Languages:
Margaret Atwood and Adrián Villar Rojas**

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ABSTRACT

From a thematic approach to literature and the arts, the article aims at exploring and comparing how the Postapocalypse is constructed in the trilogy *MaddAddam* by Canadian writer Margaret Atwood (n. 1939) and the recent works of the young Argentinean sculptor Adrián Villar Rojas (n. 1980). The production of both artists is approached as belonging to a dystopian tradition, defined mainly from Frederic Jameson's point of view. The main interest of Atwood's trilogy is centered on the conditions of survival of the human species on the planet after the "waterless flood", a pandemic produced in a laboratory of bioengineering. Atwood believes in the possibility of survival, in a new beginning of culture on the planet on the basis of an unprecedented hybrid life born out of the mixing of human beings and beings born in laboratories, and a new approach to animal and natural life. As to Villar Rojas, though his first site-specifics are quite pessimistic as to the fate of the planet, in the title of one of his XXIst Century exhibitions -*Today We Reboot the Planet*, in the *Serpentine Sackler Gallery*, London (2013)- the faith in a Postapocalypse begins to emerge. The analysis will precisely focus on the techniques he uses in his celebrated site-specific art to attain this aim.

Keywords: Postapocalypse- dystopia- literature- the plastic arts

**Construyendo el posapocalipsis en diferentes espacios y lenguajes artísticos:
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RESUMEN

Desde una aproximación temática a la literatura y a las artes, el artículo aspira a explorar y comparar cómo se construye el postapocalipsis en la trilogía *MaddAddam* de la escritora canadiense Margaret Atwood (n. 1939) y el trabajo reciente del joven escultor argentino Adrián Villar Rojas (n. 1980). El análisis de la producción de ambos artistas está encarado como perteneciente a una tradición distópica, definida principalmente desde el punto de vista de Frederic Jameson. El interés central de la trilogía de Atwood está puesto en las condiciones de supervivencia de la especie humana en el planeta después del "diluvio sin agua", una pandemia producida en un laboratorio de bioingeniería. Atwood cree en la posibilidad de supervivencia, en un nuevo comienzo de la cultura en el planeta sobre las bases de una vida

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inédita, surgida de la hibridación de seres humanos y seres nacidos en laboratorios, y de una nueva aproximación a la vida animal y natural. En cuanto a Villar Rojas, en el título de una de sus producciones del siglo XXI- *Today We Reboot the Planet*, en la *Serpentine Sackler Gallery*, Londres (2013)- también está presente la fe en un nuevo comienzo de vida en el planeta. El análisis tratará sobre las técnicas que usa el artista en sus famosos *site-specifics* para lograr este objetivo.

Palabras clave: postapocalipsis- distopía- literatura- artes pláticas



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Introduction

From a thematic approach to literature and the arts, the article aims at exploring and comparing how the representation of the Postpocalypse is constructed in the trilogy *MaddAddam* by the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood and the recent works of Adrián Villar Rojas, a young Argentinian sculptor that has attained worldwide fame. The production of both artists is approached as belonging to a dystopian tradition, defined mainly from Frederic Jameson's point of view. In Atwood's trilogy -which includes *Oryx y Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *MaddAddam* (2013)- the central narrative strategy is the refunctionalization of the *Old Testament*, mainly on the basis of the concepts developed by Northrop Frye in *The Great Code. The Bible and Literature* (1982), which underlie the analysis of the parodic use of the Biblical Myth in the novels¹. As to Villar Rojas, the titles of his compositions express the artist's main concerns about our state of society. He may resort ironically -or sentimentally- to family relationships, or the language of digital technology, which contrasts with his choice of clay and natural materials for the sculptured pieces as such- at least the ones produced before the *14th Istanbul Biennial*, when he introduced fiberglass for his series of huge animals standing on platforms on the water. The main interest of Atwood's trilogy is centered on the conditions of survival of the human species on the planet after the "waterless flood", a pandemic produced in a laboratory of bioengineering. In her trilogy, Atwood asserts the possibility of survival, of a new beginning of culture on the planet on the basis of an unprecedented hybrid life born out of the mixing of human beings and beings born in laboratories, and a new approach to animal and natural life. As to Villar Rojas, in the title of one of his 21st century exhibitions -*Today We Reboot the Planet*, in the *Serpentine Sackler Gallery*, London (2013)- the faith in a new beginning starts to show. The analysis will precisely focus on the techniques he chooses to attain this aim.

Margaret Atwood

When in 2008 the jury of the *Prince of Asturias Award* chose Margaret Atwood as winner of the prize, they justified their decision on "her outstanding literary work that has explored different genres with acuteness and irony, and because she cleverly assumes the classical tradition, defends women's dignity and denounces social unfairness" (*Fundación Princesa de Asturias*). The theme of the Apocalypse she develops in her latest production has to do with these interests and with another central one: her concern with ecology and environmental issues. This concern for the fate of the planet and man's responsibility in the process had already been present in an earlier novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), which, though centered mainly on "the dignity of women" issue, already constructs a wasteland in what was once Boston, Massachusetts. Yet, it is in *Oryx and Crake* that man's responsibility towards the environment and his fellow beings becomes the central theme, further developed in the *The Year of the Flood* and *MaddAddam*. The trilogy, as well as *The Handmaid's Tale*, have often been labelled as "science fiction". Atwood has rejected this genre and has

¹ For an introduction to Frye's central ideas see "El Antiguo Testamento en la ficción distópica de Margaret Atwood. Hacia nuevos contratos sociales". Montezanti, M. A. y Matelo, G. (coords.). *El resto es silencio*. Buenos Aires: Ed. Biblos, 2012.

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characterised her fiction as “speculative”. Why speculative fiction? The writer answered this question in an interview in *Wired* magazine, when she said:

I like exact labelling. Speculative fiction encompasses that which we could actually do. Sci-fi is that which we’re probably not going to see. We can do the lineage: Sci-fi descends from H.G. Wells’ *War of the Worlds*; speculative fiction descends from Jules Verne’s *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. Out of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* came Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*, out of which came *We* by Yevgeny Zamyatin, then George Orwell’s *1984* and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* was speculative fiction, while *The Martian Chronicles* was not. (qtd. in Thill)

“Speculative fiction encompasses that which we could actually do”, stresses Atwood. Atwood’s nightmares can actually happen². This is why her speculative fiction is so significant and has to do with justice and the need to negotiate a “new deal” in matters concerning natural resources, education, urban planning, bioengineering, among the most urgent ones.

As I stated in the introduction, her novels belong to a dystopian tradition. According to Frederic Jameson, a dystopia “is the portrait of a nightmarish society, it is always a narration, it is always a novel, with a plot and characters that generally end in a frustrated run away or an unsuccessful insurrection, a sad ending (which, may be, extends before us for ever)³ (25). Dystopia is what in the language of the technical terms of science fiction is called a “maximum future” novel. In other words, isolating a sinister trait or sign of our own present, it tells the story of an imminent disaster we are quietly anticipating and even silently waiting for. During the Cold War, the worst totalitarian state with complete control over the lives of the people; today, ecological disasters, a flood or a great drought, the spill of toxic substances, the accumulation of contaminating waste, famine, overpopulation, epidemics, a nuclear crisis, the bacteriological war, or “the stronghold society”, the refuge of a small super enriched group, with the monopoly of knowledge and technology “protected against the agitated masses of the underdeveloped or the Third World” (26). As Jameson states, “The dystopian novel narrates these catastrophes as events that are going to occur in our own near future, which the time of the novels approximates very quickly” (26): imminent catastrophes, narrated in a dispassionate tone. Though most of the above-mentioned traits apply to Atwood’s speculative fiction, there is always hope in Atwood’s open endings. Her apocalyptic narrations have not eliminated the faith in the possibility of future life and culture on the planet

I would like to go back to the opening paragraph of this presentation, that is, to the commentary of the jury that awarded Atwood the *Prince of Asturias Award for Literature 2008*, since her speculative novels are very appropriate examples to support the idea that in her creative work Atwood has shown a mastery of the classical tradition. In the novels under consideration, she has refunctionalized one of the central stories in the history of humankind:

² This has become more than evident while I am writing this article, 2020, a year marked by the the most tragic pandemic of the Modern Age.

³ All translations from Jameson are my own.

The *Bible*, more specifically the *Old Testament*. Thus, her dystopian novels show the evolution of a dystopian tradition connected with the refunctionalization of the *Old Testament*. The Biblical Myth plays a central role in the trilogy under analysis, to the point that the three texts could be approached as parodies of the Biblical intertext. The *Old Testament* had already been parodied in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Yet, to the quasi-didactic approach of the 1985 novel, which quite explicitly warns against patriarchal and religious fundamentalisms, the trilogy opposes a much more complex and ambiguous moral panorama, construed to a great extent on the basis of the dearticulation and rearticulation of the Biblical Myth to serve the broader topic of the process of ideology building in our Western societies.

Let us consider in a very concise way the form and content of the trilogy. In *Oryx and Crake*, the present of the narrative has Snowman and the Crakers as protagonists. Snowman is the only human being that has apparently survived on the planet after a laboratory-produced pandemic, and the Crakers are a new species created by Crake, a brilliant specialist in bioengineering, before the chaos that preceded the pandemic, the waterless flood, a new form of the Biblical flood. The central interest of the novel is the fact that the reader witnesses the birth of new myths construed by the Crakers, in spite of the fact that they had been created by Crake from a positivist and scientific standing to overcome human weaknesses, such as passions, feelings and, specifically, “myths”. The novel ends when Snowman and the Crakers meet another human group that has apparently survived the pandemic. In *The Year of the Flood*, the second novel of the trilogy, the reader is allowed to complete the story of *Oryx and Crake*, this time from the point of view of two female characters, Toby and Ren. The narrative begins in year XXV, the year of the Flood, and covers the same period covered by *Oryx and Crake*—since the present of the narratives of both novels begins with the pandemic and end when the survivors meet. Yet, the story of *The Year of the Flood* goes back to year V, the year of the Creation. The Creation the novels refers to, and which is the landmark to measure time in the story, is the creation of *Edencliff Rooftop Garden* by the ecological sect led by Adam One. The sect, which had announced and had prepared itself for the catastrophe, aimed at reconciling traditional faith with science and respect for nature. Alternating with chapters devoted to advance the story, there are chapters dedicated to the reinterpretation of the *Bible* from the point of view of the Gardeners of God, who place human beings and animals on a same or similar status. Not only the title of the novel, but also the names of the chapters and those of the characters point to this parodic approach to the *Genesis*, a parodic approach much more subtly nuanced than that present in *The Handmaid's Tale*. In *The Year of the Flood*, the Biblical Myth is thus deconstructed and reconstructed to serve a new environmentalist and ecological ideology. From Northrop Frye's point of view, this would be another instance of the use of allegory, one of the main procedures of analogical thinking, to make the Biblical stories harmonize with new conceptual and moral standards⁴. As we witness, the same as in *Oryx and Crake*, the process of myth making, we confront the struggle of the characters at the end of civilization and we leave them at the beginning of a new era that will have to refound civilization on the planet. This refounding of culture is the central theme of *MaddAddam*. The story includes, as any saga of planetary dimensions, the war between good and evil, a war that ends with the provisional triumph of good. The emphasis

⁴ Frye mentions several instances of these tensions in the *Bible*: II Samuel 24:1 and I Chronicles 21:1, p. 10.

of the trilogy is on survival after the holocaust produced by the waterless flood: the reader witnesses the birth of a new culture developed by a new hybrid species born of the mixture of laboratory beings and human beings, and an original understanding with animals.

Margaret Atwood’s dystopic trilogy thus construes a utopia founded on the possibility of the emergence of a new humanism on the basis of hybridization and with living beings as its axis. In other words, through her trilogy, Atwood is achieving a dialogical construction of a new idea of Justice, which includes humankind as well as nature; through her bioengineered catastrophes and environmental devastations she is urging humanity to respond to the consequences of an environmentally compromised planet. Ultimately, the trilogy can be read both as a reflection on the power of narrative and myth and at the same time as Atwood’s commentary on a number of critical categories, such as dystopian, post-apocalyptic and speculative fiction.

Adrián Villar Rojas

Villar Rojas is one of the young Argentinean artists that has attained worldwide fame. He began his career as an international figure when he participated in the 2^{da}. *Bienal del fin del Mundo*, Ushuaia (2009); then came his participation in the 54th *Biennale di Venezia* (2011) and in an exhibition in the *New Museum* in New York (2012), followed by *Documenta 13*, Kassel (2012), the *Serpentine Sackler Gallery*, London (2013), his presence in the *Fondation Louis Vuitton*, París (2014) and in the *Sharjah Biennial 12* in the United Arab Emirates (2015) and in the 14th *Istanbul Biennial*, the same year. In 2017, Adrián Villar Rojas was chosen by *The Roof Garden Commission of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York, to produce a site-specific installation on the Roof Garden of the Museum⁵. As in Atwood’s novels, serious criticism of our “state of culture” is of paramount importance in his creations.

Let us start with the 2^{da}. *Bienal del fin del Mundo*, Ushuaia (2009). On this occasion, Rojas produced an enormous whale. The name of the composition was *Mi familia muerta – My Dead Family*. It was described by the artist almost in the terms of Jameson’s approach to the dystopian genre. Actually, Villar said “that his approach was very simple”, “like an extreme documentary film” (Bremme). The whale has lost his way and is dead in the middle of the *Bosque Yantana*. It is an unsettling sight. The skin of the animal shows scar-like craters. The sculpture - the result of teamwork- was made of clay, wood and other materials. In 2011, Villar Rojas was chosen to represent Argentina in the *Biennale di Venezia*. The name of his composition is again dramatic: “The Murderer of your Heritage”, and it has been referred to as belonging to the series “Ahora estaré con mi hijo”, “Now I will be with my son”. It is a site-specific installation for the Argentine pavilion that consists of a series of monumental sculptures of clay, cement, wood and sackcloth. Though the artist first chose clay for its low price and availability in his native town, Rosario, it has come to influence his concept of form and to identify his art. With their crude physicality and cracked surfaces, his sculptures are polysemic ruins of a future universe. For some critics, his site-specific installation in Venice is based on the theory of the multiverse or meta-universe, which states that many different

⁵ I have mentioned only some of the site-specific exhibitions that the artist produced in the period under consideration. The list is far from being exhaustive.

universes could coexist, including the universe in which we live. Thus, “the large clay figures displayed over the whole space of the Artiglierie could be seen as simultaneous apparitions of these alternative worlds in ours, calling the attention to the other paths that humankind could have taken during its evolutionary history”⁶ (*Oye Borges: Borges en la Bienal de Venecia*). Some other viewers think that the composition was inspired in Jorge Luis Borges’ story “Las Ruinas Circulares” (*Oye Borges: Borges en la Bienal de Venecia*). As for curator Rodrigo Alonso, he expressed about Villar Rojas’ site-specific at the Biennale:

His work possesses a distinct personal tone. It combines formal experimentation with the construction of a narrative, which allows him to reflect on art, its forms of appearance, and its meanings, as if it were the end of times and the end of the world. His last pieces derive from a story, which speculates on the present from a hypothetical future, unfolding a political dimension of fantasy. Focused on that end of the world—ours—he suggests that we rethink the place of art creation as a shelter for existence, passion and sensibility. (Quoted by Haas)

Villar Rojas’ participation in *Documenta 13*, Kassel (2012) meant a very significant stage in his career and the darkest moment of his dystopic approach, according to my point of view. He chose the Weinberg Terraces, on a hill looking over the highway -a property very seriously damaged during World War II and which bears witness to the dimensions of the conflagration- to develop his own Apocalypse. Yet, when in 2013, he was chosen to inaugurate the new building of the *Serpentine Sackler Gallery*, in Hyde Park, London, hope in a new beginning was not only evident in the title of the exhibition, but in the central element of his site-specific exhibition. The occasion was very significant because the building had been designed by the world famous Iraqi architect Zaha Hadid. The title of Villar’s exhibition showed –as anticipated- a mild belief in the possibility of a new beginning of life on the planet and the artist resorted to the language of digital technology to express his intention. The title of the exhibition was: “Today We Reboot the Planet”. From my point of view, the presence of an enormous elephant was very significant in the conception of the exhibition: the animal was apparently supporting the structure of the building. The new beginning Villar Rojas starts to glimpse is thus founded on a new understanding of the relationships between the natural and the human world – the same as in Atwood’s novels. Though Villar displays a world of ruins, the ruins of the future, perhaps, this animal is not dead. He is making an effort to sustain civilization. Yet, when interviewed by Jonathan Jones on the occasion of the exhibition, he declared: “This whole project is about trying to force life to appear”, (...) eyeing the green shoots rising from the bulbous potatoes swaddled in rich black soil. “We will fail. No matter what we do, they will fail” (Jones)⁷

Yet, in his piece of sculpture for the *Fondation Louis Vuitton*, París (2014), though the planet has become just layers of geological strata given the shape of a sarcophagus, the “green” shoots are there. And we can also see them in the concrete cubes, he built for the *High Line* in New York, a site-specific which he named “The Evolution of God”. And the “green” shoots also timidly emerged out of the marble, stone and concrete columns he

⁶ My translation.

⁷ This part of the interview is taking place in another aisle of Villar Rojas’ east London workshop, where the Argentinian artist is examining potato plants growing out of the gutted flank of a fish.

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produced for the the *Sharjah Biennial* of 2015: “The past, the present, the possible”. Life, at least natural life, can prevail after the Apocalypse.

Villar Rojas’ concern with life, now human life in a historical context, is, in my opinion, the theme he developed for the *Istanbul Biennial*, *SALTWATER: A Theory of Thought Forms*, curated -the same as *Documenta 13-* by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev. Estambul is one of the three intercontinental cities in the world and the organizers of the exhibition exploited that cosmopolitan character by projecting the exhibition outside the city to the Sea of Marmara, the Bosphorus and the Black Sea. This is the way in which Adrián Searle introduces his article on the Biennial in *The Guardian*

Just south of Istanbul, on the island of Büyükkada in the Sea of Marmara, Leon Trotsky lived from 1929 to 1933, in exile and constant fear of assassination. Beyond the caved-in walls of his house is a path winding down to the sea. Suddenly, one clammers out on to the foreshore, to be faced with a pair of gleaming white giraffes, perched on plinths in the swell. A whole bestiary stands in the water: a gorilla with a stone lion perched on its back; a bear; a rhino carrying an elk on its shoulders; a sheep is laden with a huge bundle of firewood; an ostrich wears what looks like a fur coat. (s/d)

The bestiary was produced by Adrián Villar Rojas. In my interpretation, the fiberglass animals reaching the coast, “all burdened with other bodies, other animals made from cloth, pottery, iron, wood and terracotta” (Searle), allude to the tragedy of the refugees. According to Brad Evans and Zygmunt Bauman,

those people who are forced to flee intolerable conditions [and] are not considered to be “bearers of rights,” even those supposedly considered inalienable to humanity. Forced to depend for their survival on the people on whose doors they knock, refugees are in a way thrown outside the realm of “humanity,” as far as it is meant to confer the rights they aren’t afforded. And there are millions upon millions of such people inhabiting our shared planet. The migrants of the post-colonial era have been and still are exchanging inherited ways of eking out existence, now destroyed by the triumphant modernization promoted by their former colonizers, for the chance of building a nest in the gaps of those colonizers’ domestic economies. (s/d)

I have to avow that in this way of approaching Villar Rojas’ work for the Istanbul Biennial, I am indebted to Canadian writer Yann Martel, who, in *Beatrice and Virgil*, used animals as characters to refer to the Holocaust. But, unlike Martel’s characters, who are killed, the immigrants arrive at their destination. They are alive, so in an optimistic interpretation, there is hope for survival, they are experiencing their Postapocalypse and Villar Rojas is making his public aware of the presence of “those people who are forced to flee intolerable conditions [and] are not considered to be “bearers of rights,” even those supposedly considered inalienable to humanity”.

I would like to add, as a sort of final comment on the work of Adrián Villar Rojas, that in spite of the critics’ attempts, and my own personal attempt at attributing meanings to his site-specifics –a practice sometimes even encouraged by the titles of the site-specifics themselves- the artist has always denied any intention of conveying a message through art. This is what he said to Gianluigi Ricuperati in an interview on the occasion of his exhibition *Rinascimento* (2016) at *Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo* in Turin:

My practice is not traversed by a metadiscursive intention of giving some edifying message to viewers. I think what language calls an “artist” is a reader of his/her time, an animal that eats and digests what happens around him/her without any goal other than fulfilling a feeding cycle. This feeding cycle implies finding, processing, consuming, digesting and turning food into energy which finally reaches the viewers, as well as the excrements and leftovers of this process. The viewers receive everything. If the output of this animal called “artist” has enough proteins and is tasty enough for those other animals called “viewers” to feed themselves, it will take on—a major, a minor?— part in new “feeding cycles” that can under no circumstances be controlled by the animal “artist”. He/ she is just a little—sometimes a big— link in a quite chaotic food chain. We should dismantle this fantasy of a rational and fully controlled communication process, where information transfer is the main goal of the agents. The human animal produces discourse because it is a discursive animal, not just because it has to cooperate in achieving pragmatic goals. This is why I assert that I do not seek any particular metadiscursive purpose. I produce discourse like cats make poop, which later becomes part of many other unexpected processes of energy circulation.

Final remarks

I believe that Margaret Atwood and Adrián Villar Rojas’s approach to the Postapocalypse betrays an ultimate hope in survival. The survival of culture on the planet on the basis of a new humanism concerning not just human beings but “living beings”, in Lévy-Strauss’ approach. A posthumanism, in Rosi Braidotti’s terminology, that would demand new social contracts with nature as one party to them, and that would incorporate citizens independently of their nationality (immigrants), colour, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or generation. A social contract inclusive and glocal from the point of view of migrant and transnational subjects, mobile in a shared life space; an instrument that would be able to translate the Cyborg emancipatory political metaphor expressed by Donna Haraway: A new social and epistemic contract with the capacity to regulate transversal entities immersed in and immanent to a huge web of human and non human relationships (animals, plants, technologies) connected to a vast spectrum of eco-others.

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