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MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HEART GOES LAST*: PANOPTICISM, DISCIPLINE SOCIETY, AND USTOPIA

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Abstract: The prologue of the novel *The Heart Goes Last* (2015) written by the Canadian author Margaret Atwood describes a crime-stricken future society plunged into an economic crisis. The alternative to such misery is the Consilience project, a city created to offer jobs and all the basic comforts (now considered luxuries) to all its inhabitants. The success of the system relies on the local prison, Positron, where all the citizens must present themselves once every two months, swapping their lives with those of other prisoners. The aim of my paper is to analyze Atwood's novel using the Foucauldian concepts of "panopticism" and "discipline society" expanded upon in *Discipline and Punish, the Birth of the Prison* (1976). These concepts describe two features of the fictional society created by Atwood: the awareness that one is being constantly spied on by an unidentified entity that creates a discipline society, and hence a city where order and equality reign, a utopia based on control and surveillance. The paper will also explore Atwood's concept of "ustopia" and how it applies to Consilience.

Keywords: Atwood, surveillance, discipline society, economic crisis, prison.

Introduction

The society described by Margaret Atwood at the opening of her novel *The Heart Goes Last* (2015) is an apparently dystopic one: stricken by an economic crisis, ruined by crime and a lack of hope for the future, where

40 percent of the population is jobless, with 50 percent of those being under twenty-five. That's a recipe for systems breakdown, right there: for anarchy, for chaos, for the senseless destruction of property, for so-called revolution, which means looting and gang rule and warlords and mass rape, and the terrorization of the weak and the helpless (Atwood 38).

Such a society, situated in the Northeastern United States (Atwood 7), is seen through the eyes of Stan and Charmaine, a young married couple that finds an apparent better society in the Consilience project. There, everybody is granted a job, a house, and, more generally speaking, equal treatment, all this by relying on the local prison, which is an integral part of the city.

This paper discusses how the concepts of “dystopia”, “utopia”, and “ustopia” are applicable to the fictional society created by Atwood and analyzes the relation between the prison and the civil society using the categories defined by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1976). Is the ideal society of Consilience a utopia? To which extent can we consider it as such?

Dystopia and Utopia in *The Heart Goes Last*

Having lost their house and jobs due to the crisis, Stan and Charmaine are forced to live in a car, considering basic comforts such as food and a bath to be luxuries. Personal security is now also a luxury, since the car is a precarious shield from thieves and rapists against whom the “only weapon is flight” (Atwood 5). However, this first section of Atwood's novel cannot be considered a dystopia. According to Lyman Tower Sargent's definition (Lyman, *Three Faces* 1-37), a dystopia is “a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which the reader lived” (Lyman, *Three Faces* 9). This definition hardly fits the world where Stan and Charmaine live, since it represents a moderate version of the turbulent, chaotic, and troubled times following the 2008 financial crisis¹. Indeed, as Atwood declared in an interview, she was just “writing reality as it is unfolding” (Neary). It is not hard to recognize the actual economic recession when she defines it as something that felt like an “overnight” event where “the whole card castle, the whole system

¹The crisis started in 2007, when the subprime mortgage market in the United States suffered a recession, developing into an international banking crisis which caused the collapse of the investment bank Lehman Brothers in 2008. The recession spread worldwide, especially in Europe with the European debt crisis. The 2008 financial crisis was compared more than once to the 1930s Great Depression (Temin 115-124).

fell to pieces, trillions of dollars wiped off the balance sheets like fog off a window” (Atwood 7). The effects of the crisis, in the novel, are investigated in reality-shows such as *The Home Front, with Lucinda Quant*, where the anchor interviews people who have been evicted from their homes in order to raise money to help them.

The lack of comforts, security, and hope makes Stan irritable and angry, while his wife Charmaine tries to keep her spirit high by resorting to memories that work as a counterpoint to the general desolation. This ‘nostalgia trap’ involves memories of her deceased grandmother Win and the way she used to comfort her (Atwood 4). The woman and her small but tidy house symbolize a time where everything was happy and safe; “[t]hat didn’t last, though. The happiness. The safeness. The now” (Atwood 25).

The first time that Charmaine comes across the advertisement for the utopia, while working as a waitress in a bar, something reminds her of the happier and safer old times with her grandmother (Atwood 25). The TV in the bar broadcasts the attractive image of

a shiny black-glass wall, with people walking in – young couples, holding hands, energetic and smiling. Pastel clothing, springlike. Then a house, a neat, freshly painted house with a hedge and a lawn, no junked cars or wrecked sofas lying on it, and then the camera zooms in through the second-floor window, past the curtains – curtains! – and moves through the room. (...) Through the open bathroom door there’s a charming deep-sided tub with lots of giant fluffy white towels hanging beside it. The bed is king-sized, with nice clean sheets in a cheerful floral design, blue and pink, and four pillows (Atwood 25).

The advertisement promotes the Positron Project in the city of Consilience as the only solution to the general chaos and crisis, a way to “solve your problems while solving the nation’s problems” (Atwood 26). Consilience is an apparent utopia since, again in Lyman’s words, a utopia is “a good or significantly better society that provides a generally satisfactory and fulfilling life for most of its inhabitants” (Lyman, *Problems* 226). Utopias, according to Atwood, are made to “do away with the ills that plague us” (Atwood, *Cartographies* 23) and utopianism is a major feature in American culture, impacting city planning and scientific management (Segal 7). These elements, Segal writes, represent the standard vision of the future in American utopian novels, and they produce a “healthier, happier, more efficient, more productive” society (173). Indeed, as Mark Seltzer claims, “nothing typifies the American sense of identity more than the love of nature (...) except perhaps the love of technology (...)”

and this might combine with the discovery that “bodies and persons are things that can be made” (Seltzer 1). This is the kind of society that is described by Atwood.

What is the Positron Project?

The Positron Project is an experimental ‘double’ city formed by a prison, Positron, and the city itself, Consilience. The name of the city is a combination between ‘Cons’ (convicted) and Resilience, as it is explained in the TV advertisement. The speaker seems to address directly the desperate and the hopeless who, like Stan and Charmaine, are asked whether they are tired of living in their own cars (Atwood 25). What is shown is the image of a city reminding one of the suburbs from the 1950s, since “that was the decade in which the most people had self-identified as being happy” (Atwood 41). Choosing a perfect copy of that decade seems to align with the concept of “nostalgia mode” elaborated by Fredric Jameson, where a culture “replaces true historical awareness with a pastiche of images ‘cannibalized’ from the past” (Jameson 17) and takes only the brightest sides of it. The 1950s were an era when Americans used to say that “home and family were the wellsprings of their happiness and self-esteem” (Coontz 25) and particularly the suburban areas were built with the precise aim of shielding middle-class families “from the multiplying problems and growing diversity of the rest of society” (Coontz 34).

The houses in Consilience are typical of the suburbs, the TV broadcast is a nostalgic *pastiche* of movies and series cleansed of any form of sex or violence “to avoid overexcitement” (Atwood 43), rock music and hip-hop are forbidden, and everybody goes to work because everyone has a job. Order and equality reign and people seem to reflect the image of that utopian satisfactory and fulfilling life that has been already mentioned. The mechanism of this society rests on the local prison, which is as large as the city itself, since “if prisons were scaled out and handled rationally, they could be win-win viable economic units” (Atwood 40). The rationalization of the prisons means that once every two months, the civilians must enter the prison to live and work there and leave their homes and jobs to their “alternates”, those who had been convicted in the previous two months.

Stan and Charmaine apply for the project and they immediately obtain a job and a house, both agreeing that the mechanism works perfectly. Consilience is totally crime-free, unemployment does not exist, and the streets remind one, with their plastic peace, of “a town in a movie, a movie of years ago” (Atwood 32).

A Discipline Society

What makes this society work is discipline, which is applied inside and outside the prison. This makes it, using Foucauldian terminology, a “discipline society”. Atwood seems to have built her fictional society retaining some of the features recognized by Michel Foucault. One of them is the strict distribution of people in space (Foucault 141), which means that each person has their fixed space that is orderly interchangeable. Moreover, this feature sometimes requires enclosure, hence “a protected space of disciplinary monotony” (Foucault 141). Enclosure, in the novel, is visible in the dichotomy city/prison and in the very fact that people who choose to apply for the project are completely secluded from the outside world. No phone calls or communication is allowed, let alone leaving Consilience.

The bimestrial exchanges between inmates and civilians are consistent with another Foucauldian principle, that of ‘partitioning’: “each individual has his own place; and each place is individual” (143). In Consilience, the same concept applies to the jobs the inmates have while in prison, whose details must not be discussed or shared with anybody else, not even with one’s own partner. The aim of partitioning, in Foucault’s words, and probably in Atwood’s intention as well, is to eliminate “the effects of imprecise distribution, the uncontrolled disappearance of individuals, their diffuse circulation, their unusable and dangerous coagulation” (Foucault 143). This leads to the constant possibility to “establish presences and absences, to know where and how to locate individuals, to set up useful communications, to interrupt others, to be able at each moment to supervise the conduct of each individual, to assess it, to judge it, to calculate its qualities or merits” (Foucault 143). In this way, the space becomes an “analytical space” (Foucault 143).

A discipline society, according to Foucault, contains places called ‘functional sites’, “particular places” which are “defined to correspond not only the need to supervise, to break dangerous communications, but also to create a useful space” (143-4). In the novel, such places are present especially in the prison, where each inmate has their specific working duties. Activities in a discipline society must be controlled through a precise timetable, which regulates “the cycles of repetition” (such as the bimestrial exchange), and the temporal elaboration of the act, which defines a “chronological schema of behaviour” (Foucault 152). The latter is represented by the actions that are repeated by both inmates and civilians in the twin cities every day in the same way. Eventually, “time penetrates the body and with it all the

meticulous controls of power” (Foucault 152). The timetable is also studied with the aim of not wasting precious time.

Such a society, although successful and equal, hides a deeper level of control and coercion. The city of Consilience is, in fact, a prison itself. Despite the contractual clause that recites “If you sign up, it will be of your own free will” (Atwood 33), the people who apply to become part of it must undergo an infringement of their individual liberties. Consilience’s inhabitants will never be able to leave the city or to have contacts with the outside world that, anyway, does not appear so pleasing in its desolation made of “past strip malls with plywood over most of the windows” and “derelict burger joints” (Atwood 31). They are confined to a space they will never be allowed to leave unless it is “in a box” (Atwood 82), as Stan’s brother Conor warns when he learns about his intention to apply for the Positron Project.

The most unsettling aspect is that a similar management of space, although less restrictive, is a feature of any modern city, according to Richard Sennet. It is possible to find anywhere “a divide between the inside and the outside” and the “tendency to wall off the differences between people, assuming that these differences are more likely to be mutually threatening than mutually stimulating” (Sennet xii). This division, as Gyan Prakash maintains, is due to the “unprecedented agglomeration of the poor” which produces “the specter of an unremittingly bleak ‘planet of slums’” (Prakash 1). The only solution is made out to be building “fortified ‘privatopias’ erected by the privileged to wall themselves off from the imagined resentment and violence of the multitude” (Prakash 1). Such a city shares important features with the Positron Project: the “machine-like functioning” (again, with the monthly repetition of the exchange between inmates and civilians) and the subjugation to “excessive technological and technocratic control” (Prakash 1). In any case, technocracy seems to define, as Scott Bukatman claims, “the American relation to manifest destiny² and the commitment to an ideology of progress and modernity” (Bukatman 4).

Panopticism

One of the major features of Consilience is its safe streets, in total contrast to what happens in the ‘walled off’ outside world. The reason is not only its wealth, hence the lack of incentive to commit any crime at all, but also the control, enforced for the sake of people’s security. Once

² The concept of “manifest destiny” was coined in 1845 by John L. O’Sullivan to justify the American expansionism and it has been used ever since with the same aim. (Cfr. with Merk, Frederick and Lois Bannister Merk. *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History: A Reinterpretation*. Harvard University Press, 1995).

again using Foucault's terminology, this permanent observation results in "Panopticism", which is defined as "a surveillance based on a system of permanent registration" where "the role of each of the inhabitants present in the town is laid down, one by one" and their "slightest movements are supervised" (Foucault 196). Panopticism constitutes "a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism" (197). The Panopticon, in Foucault's view, is conceived as an architectural instrument (usually a tower) to give the prisoners a state of permanent visibility where they never know whether they are looked at or not, hence assuring "the automatic functioning of power" (201). Power is not conceived as a relation of sovereignty but as a relation of discipline (208).

This function is granted, in Atwood's novel, not by a tower that supervises the prison but through a sophisticated system of surveillance, which is, using David Lyon's words, "any collection of personal data, whether identifiable or not, for the purposes of influencing or managing those whose data have been garnered" (2). Data are collected through video recordings, eye and fingerprints scans, a plastic pass-card with a barcode, and the control over electronic devices such as mobile phones, so that information can be "stored, matched, retrieved, processed, marketed and circulated" (Lyon 2). The population of Consilience is always under the impression of being observed: black surveillance cars, probably remote controlled, circle around their homes, and people suspect that their thoughts are also spied on (Atwood 50-1). All this makes society – and not just the prison itself – function as planned, hence reversing Foucault's intuition about how prison reproduces elements already present in the social body (231). Atwood's society does exactly the contrary, reproducing elements of the prison in the city. At any rate, surveillance outside the prison is a way to coordinate the social relations between the inhabitants, which are "reshaped through the increasing use of new technologies" (Lyon 5).

People and Power in Consilience

For the most part of the novel, Atwood depicts a society that appears as a possible solution to nowadays problems. This solution, which has been applied in some real cities, according to Nicholas Fyfe, is part of "an oppressive 'criminology of intolerance' in which the prevailing concern is to exclude anyone that will disrupt the smooth running of the system" (Fyfe 43). Likewise, in *Consilience*, "all those with bad attitudes" are thrown "out the Discard door" (Atwood 32).

As Foucault noticed, a vector of power was also the control over people's bodies to make them "docile" (25). That means that a body or a person must be rendered useful and inoffensive. All this is possible only if the body is both "a productive body and a subjected body", a condition that can be obtained through "violence or ideology", even when the former is "subtle" and makes use "neither of weapons nor terror" (Foucault 25). The rulers of Consilience reach this goal by using people as a permanent workforce, controlling their lives and discouraging their potential criminal or even disturbing acts, and, most important of all, by manipulating their thoughts. The final and most disturbing part of the novel shows innovative but secret neurosurgery performed on people to make them fall in love forever with whomever one wants. As Ed, the ruler of the Positron Project, explains

why not take an existing body and brain, and, by a painless intervention, cause that entity – that person – not to put too fine a point on it, that hot babe who won't come across for you – cause her to home in on you and you alone, as if she thinks you're the sexiest hunk she's ever seen? (...) It's not a pill, and, believe it or not, it isn't science fiction. The technique they're refining at our Las Vegas clinic is based on the work that's been done on the erasure of painful memories, in vets, child-abuse survivors, and so forth. They discovered that not only can they pinpoint various fears and negative associations in the brain and then exercise them, but they can also wipe out your previous love object and imprint you with a different one (Atwood 262).

This is a way to stop and control people's natural instincts, such as those both Stan and Charmaine had felt for their respective alternates, Max and Jocelyn, during their first months in Consilience. Yet, as Atwood enquires, "How far can humans go in the alteration department before those altered cease to be human?" (Atwood, *Cartographies* 28).

The control over people's bodies gives rise to an even more unsettling practice, which is the suppression of criminals and the harvesting of their organs to sell them. Such a practice is not new. The risk of putting a price on people's organs was already the subject of Robin Cook's novel *Coma* which, in the 1970s, dealt with the black market for human organs in a Boston hospital. Perfectly healthy patients who underwent minor surgeries mysteriously fell into an irreversible coma and were moved to a long-term intensive care facility which turned out to be the center for massive organ trafficking. The novel was later turned into a movie directed by Michael Crichton in 1978 and in a miniseries directed by Mikael Salomon in 2012.

One of the individuals in charge of suppressing criminals in her new role as the “Chief Medication Administrator” is Charmaine herself. Her job cannot be revealed to anybody, not even to Stan. Criminals are killed through an injection that provides them with a sense of peace and serenity before the heart, as in the title, “goes last”: it stops, and the person is dead. Foucault defines similar practices as “a utopia of judicial reticence: take away life, but prevent the patient from feeling it; deprive the prisoners of all rights, but do not inflict pain, impose penalties free of all pain” (11). The ritual, named “special procedure”, is carried out in maximum secrecy, eliminating, as Foucault writes, “the torture as a public spectacle” (9). He also claims that the people in charge of this duty “no longer touched the body, or at least as little as possible” (Foucault 9). Positron’s policy is the same, but Charmaine always strokes the convict’s hair as a respectful human gesture (Atwood 68), all while being afraid to be punished for it because there are surveillance cameras in the room (Atwood 69). Reassuring the people before the injection might be, in a Foucauldian point of view, a way to show that “the body and pain are not the ultimate objects of its punitive action” (11). The main idea behind these killings is explained by Jocelyn:

The main deal is the prison. Prison used to be about punishment, and then reform and penitence, and then keeping dangerous offenders inside. Then, for quite a few decades, they were about crowd control – penning up the young, aggressive, marginalized guys to keep them off the streets. And then, when they started to be run as private businesses, they were about the profit margins for the prepackaged jail-meal suppliers, and the hired guards and so forth. (...) Suppose I told you about the income from body parts? Organs, bones, DNA, whatever’s in demand. That’s one of the big earners for this place. (...) There’s a big market for transplant material among aging millionaires, no? (Atwood 126).

Although motivated by greed and economic interests, the shocking mechanism behind the success of the Positron Project produces a society that works as none of the previous measures had done (both in the novel and in reality).

Consilience as an Ustopia

The turning point in the novel is when what truly happens in Consilience is exposed. The person revealing the truth to the media is Lucinda Quant, the journalist who, at the beginning of the novel, had interviewed the evicted people to help them. The comments stemming from

her reportage reveal how the perfect utopia of the Positron Project is tinged with dystopian features: an ustopia. The term, coined by Atwood, combines utopia and dystopia, defining “a perfect society and its opposite” since “each contains a latent version of the other” (Atwood, *Cartographies* 8). Indeed, the closing remarks in the novel, which are probably Atwood’s own reflections, show that this is a two-sided story that cannot prompt clear judgements, but only questions. Clearly, a city – or a society – where everything works perfectly, there is no crime, and everybody has a rewarding job is a desirable utopia, which “can’t exist because fallen human nature doesn’t permit it” (Atwood, *Cartographies* 23). Such a result obtained through the infringement of basic human liberties and rights means that everything *does not* work perfectly, and that crime is not exposed but hidden. Since freedom is a basic human right, no society consciously deciding to limit it in such a major way can be considered ideal. Nevertheless, the question is: was not the crisis described at the beginning of the novel an infringement of one’s basic liberty? Stan and Charmaine were deprived of their freedom to feel safe when sleeping, they were not free to eat nourishing food, to take a bath, or free to lead a dignified life with a rewarding job. Moreover, as a couple, they were also deprived of real intimacy in a safe environment.

Atwood’s answer considers each aspect of the situation. One side of the story is recounted by Ed, when he describes the project and its dark sides:

online radicals (...) claim that Consilience/Positron is an infringement of individual liberties, an attempt at social control, an insult to human spirit. (...) you can’t eat your so-called individual liberties, and the human spirit pays no bills, and something needed to be done to relieve the pressure inside the social pressure-cooker (Atwood 38).

The other side of the story is offered by the people when they learn about what really lies behind the Positron Project:

there’s always two sides, at least two sides. Some say those who got their organs harvested and may subsequently have been converted into chicken feed were criminals anyway, and they should have been gassed, and this was a real way for them to pay their debt to society and make reparation for the harm they’d caused, and anyway it wasn’t as wasteful as just throwing them once dead. Others said that was all very well in the early stages of Positron, but it was clear that after Management had gone through their stash of criminals and also realized what the going

price was for livers and kidneys, they'd started in on shoplifters and pot-smokers, and then they'd been snatching people off the streets because money talks, and once it had started talking at Positron it wouldn't shut up. Yet others said that the twin city idea had been a good one at first: who could sneeze at full employment and a home for everyone? There were a few rotten apples, but without them it would've worked. In response, some said that these utopian schemes always went bad and turned into dictatorships, because human nature was what it was. As for the operation that imprinted you on a love object – if not of your own choice, then of somebody's choice – what was the harm in that since both parties ended up satisfied? (Atwood 285).

Atwood's conclusion is, like the rest of the novel, a debatable one, and it can raise thoughts and considerations. Nonetheless, it can be read through the lens of utopia and how the author sees the necessity to improve society "insofar as it lies within our power" (Atwood, *Cartographies* 31). In her opinion "we should probably not try to make things perfect, especially not ourselves, for that path leads to mass graves" (Atwood, *Cartographies* 31). For the same reason, *The Heart Goes Last* eventually inches closer to the idea of dystopia and, as all the dystopias, is a "prophetic vehicle... warning us of terrible sociopolitical tendencies that could, if continued, turn our contemporary world into the iron cages portrayed in the realm of utopia's underside" (Baccolini and Moylan 2).

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