Evo-Dystopias and Engineered Evolution: An Exploration of Foucauldian Biopower in

Stephenson's *Snow Crash* and Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*

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Worldcon76 Academic Track Paper

2,167 words

Synopsis:

"Evo-Dystopias and Engineered Evolution" primarily explores a new mode of science fiction writing: the evo-dystopia, a study of Foucauldian biopower and how it frames humanity's interpersonal relationships, and their relationship with nature. Specifically, the paper exemplifies Margaret Atwood's *Orxy & Crake* and Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* as models for an evo-dystopia. In building evo-dystopias, Atwood and Stephenson reveal their ideas of biopower, progress and limits, and assess in which direction our future lies.

Ecological science fiction fundamentally explores the relationship between humans and their environment, the balance between the unnatural and natural. Conflict arises when the human race exercises control over nature, our lives and those of other beings. This control is best described by Michel Foucault's philosophy of biopower, which he defines in his lecture, *Society Must be Defended*, as the "technology of power over the population as such, over men insofar as they are living beings." Biopower is simultaneously a tool and a weapon, has both the influence to guarantee life and to suppress it, to save and to kill.

Biopower is perhaps most evident in science fiction literature when used in excess. According to Foucault, "this excess appears when it becomes technologically and politically possible for man not only to manage life but to make it proliferate..."

This political aspect of biopower is exemplified in dystopian literature, in the corrupt and problematic societies of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, Phillip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, and Robert Heinlein's *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*. Technology is wielded as a means of suppression, a rationale of control over the general populous.

Yet some dystopias covet progress over suppression, in which case these two forms of biopower are intertwined into one narrative. These societies turn to evolution, engineering new and advanced human beings through technological biopower. These are the worlds of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl*, Margaret Atwood's *Oryx & Crake* and Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*.

What I propose in this paper is a new mode of ecological science fiction: the evo-dystopia, a narrative based on the exploitation of political and technological biopower, examining the limits and consequences of human control. First, I will explore the nuanced societies of *Oryx & Crake* and *Snow Crash*, how they build upon generic dystopic tropes and construct worlds which covet a new form of human. Then, I will discuss the narrative importance of evolution as a trope, the methods of which it is achieved in these novels, and the consequences of such choices.

Dystopias are primarily political in nature and problematic in essence, societies which are posed as rational and functional, yet deeply corrupt. Historically, dystopias are the satiric counterpart to utopias. These societies are often mirrored after real life political systems, exaggerated to produce a commentary, and, being the intrinsic antagonists, dystopias aspire to suppress all risks posed against their principles. Often, this takes the form of an omnipotent authoritarian regime, a force which knows all and sees all. However, the incarnation of the antagonist in an evo-dystopia lies in the question: who exercises the most biopower?

Atwood establishes a cohesive dystopia, divided into corporate groups under the management of a single, centralized government, which remains largely unseen. The government seems to focus fundamentally on the suppression of its citizens. The only

direct actions of the government are lethal methods of suppression. Most of the visible executive power, therefore, is bestowed on large businesses – OrganInc, HelthWyzer, RejoovenEssence, AnooYoo – each specializing in some form of bioengineering. The antagonist, Crake, who initially works for RejoovenEssence, uses his position to exert even more biopower over the population than the company would allow.

Contrarily, Stephenson divides the political landscape of *Snow Crash* into franchises in the absence of a strong governmental force, each of which runs a specific industry: namely, the Central Intelligence Corporation, a community of expert hackers – including the protagonist, Hiro– who have primary control over the Metaverse; and L. Bob Rife, who reins as the self-proclaimed monopolist of information, the head of multiple research corporations and televangelist cults, like Reverend Wayne's Pearly Gates. Fedland, the federal government, is rendered useless throughout the majority of the novel, a system set solely on suppressing its members rather than progressing as a society. Consequently, L. Bob Rife takes the role of the authoritarian antagonist, exercising the most biopower over the community.

Consistent with generic tropes, the dystopias of Atwood and Stephenson are based upon heavily commercialized culture. Large organizations, such as RejoovenEssence and the Metaverse, focus on marketing services and products to citizens. Most of the corporations in *Oryx & Crake* are medical companies, offering cosmetic surgery, genetic manipulation, advanced pharmaceuticals and the like. Citizens take advantage of the technology by altering their genetics and appearance arbitrarily. In *Snow Crash*, the Metaverse is a virtual reality, offering freedom from the constraints of the real world.

Citizens are able to craft their own avatars, build homes, interact with others – like an online dating service – and patron various businesses within the Metaverse.

Because the existence of such commodities relies on the advanced technology of the society, these products can be identified as a form of political biopower, materials used to control the population. Likewise, the media becomes an important trope of dystopian literature. Part of suppressing the populous lies in naïve contentment, in creating demand and filling it. Simply having the power of demand allows the society to control exactly what substances they provide, but more on that later.

In ecological science fiction, there is often an environmentalist component to the writing, advocating for the preservation of nature. Discussion of nature is an inherent thread in many dystopic narratives – because these societies are so developed, they often become estranged with nature. In many novels, nature is seen as a primitive force to be controlled or destroyed – this dynamic can be thought of as the garden/wilderness binary, nature as a garden cultivated by humans, or as a wilderness in the absence of humans.

Oryx & Crake employs both nature as a garden and as a wilderness. Atwood directly contrasts the two forms of nature by interweaving her pre- and post-apocalyptic narratives. Before the downfall, Atwood's dystopic society is disconnected with nature, and attempts to mimic their own idyllic version. Crake brings the "garden" philosophy to the next level with his "Paradice Project." A literal garden, Paradice is a greenhouse facility which hosts the Crakers – his attempts at human evolution – and acts as a cultivated, "natural" space. This directly contrasts with the wilderness of the post-apocalyptic world, a sprawling, untamed landscape where the Crakers continue to thrive, and engineered

animals become aggressive and feral. By juxtaposing the two forms of nature, Atwood exemplifies the consequences of excessive use of biopower.

Snow Crash employs the wilderness view of nature. In *Society Must be Defended*, Foucault describes the atom bomb as a textbook example of biopower – created to protect humans, yet utilized to exterminate them. With this in mind, the post-apocalyptic world of *Snow Crash* is a clear-cut case of excessive biopower. Stephenson makes little mention of the nuclear war which took place before the events of the novel, but focuses more on the how the war impacted the physical landscape. However, Stephenson seems to forgo nature entirely in his novel, fully embracing the cyberpunk trends of technology and urban culture. What little nature that remains is decimated, and will continue to be decimated by humans, simply because their "lifestyle" demands it. Even the Metaverse appears devoid of any virtual attempts at non-human organic life. And it is exactly this destruction of nature which throws *Snow Crash* into the realm of ecological science fiction, emphasizing the dominating force of humanity, and the idea of nature as obsolete.

Nature, in the case of an evo-dystopia, is not only subject to non-human life. A vital concept within ecological science fiction is the role humankind plays in shaping itself, in addition to its environment. Michael Page in his essay, *Evolution and Apocalypse in the Golden Age*, defines 'evolutionary writing' as a prominent mode within ecological SF, encompassing themes of change, control and creation. Evolutionary writing does not so much explore conventional Darwinist or naturalist ideals, as it uncovers the implications of tampering with the natural process of evolution. Fundamentally, it explores human ideals – what aspects of the human do we covet, and what aspects would we choose to change? If we could create the perfect human, what would it look like?

Biopower comes into play through this concept of control, in the ability to alter the human form through technology – this is the defining concept of an evo-dystopia. In evolutionary science fiction, human-altering technology is an inherent part of society, not only public to the community, but desired and widely accessible – less like Frankenstein's monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and more like the Hatching Center in Huxley's *Brave New World*.

Most often, this technology takes shape in traditional ideas of bioengineering. In *Oryx & Crake*, Atwood implements genetic manipulation as the foundation of the society. Each of the large-scale corporations – OrganInc, RejoovenEssence – represent a separate genetic project, whether that be engineering pigoons for human-pig organ transplants, or developing pharmaceuticals for curlier hair or more defined muscles. The citizens crave easy, convenient change, constantly altering their appearances to fit their ideals.

Similarly, in *Snow Crash*, Stephenson plays on the idea of evolution through the avatar. Within the Metaverse, citizens are able to shape their own physical appearance as they wish – they can appear as the opposite sex, fictional creatures, body parts, and so on. While this is not physical change, avatars continue to represent the freedom of ideals. Through the Metaverse and avatars, citizens engineer a reality entirely of their own creation, albeit virtual.

Despite the overall acceptance of this technology, conflict surfaces from the abuse of such biopower, based on the ideals the antagonist. The antagonists of *Oryx & Crake* and *Snow Crash* share similar philosophies. Crake and L. Bob Rife both wish to rid the human race of "unnatural" aspects – self-awareness, concepts of religion, fate, entitlement – and endeavor to create a massive monoculture.

Foucault, in *Society Must be Defended*, specifies an excess of biopower as "viruses that cannot be controlled and that are universally destructive." There are, of course, other forms of excessive biopower – namely nuclear war, which ravaged the world of *Snow Crash*. However, an interesting comparison between *Oryx & Crake* and *Snow Crash*, is that Atwood and Stephenson both investigate this specific iteration of biopower, the virus, both of which are employed as orthodox drugs.

In *Oryx & Crake*, Crake finds fault in the human race in the form of discourse, whether that be political, social or sexual. As a response, Crake engineers a new breed of beings, the "Crakers," a more primitive, unified version of humans, free from the fallacies he finds destructive. In order for the Crakers to live to their full potential, Crake believes he must create a new reality in which they could thrive. He does so through BlyssPlus, a miracle-drug marketed as a contraceptive and means to extend life – hence the importance of the media. BlyssPlus unknowingly harbors a virus which decimates the human population, wiping the slate clean for the Crakers.

In *Snow Crash*, Rife, who values information above all, attempts to subdue the masses by eliminating their willpower, so that he might better control the data they contain. His ideal human is a subservient one, essentially a computer. Rife succeeds in creating human-computers by engineering the remote-control Refus, a group of people with microchips implanted into their brainstems. In addition, Rife engineers Snow Crash, hacker slang for computer crash, which emerges in two forms – a physical drug and a computer virus. The physical drug is an addictive inhalant, acting as an anti-evolutionary catalyst, leaving the user with little cognitive ability. Their addiction and lack of willpower allows Rife to control them as he controls the Refus. The computer virus, Snow Crash, is

intended for the hackers, contracted through a bitmap file within the Metaverse, eradicating the hacker's ability to process binary code, leaving them obsolete.

Ultimately, Foucault's philosophy is laced throughout all basic tropes of evo-dystopias in the question of how is biopower used by the government? Many of these components are inherent in dystopian literature, such as an authoritarian antagonist and the substantial use of the media, but there remain some tropes which are specific to the evo-dystopia. Evo-dystopias require a heavily commercialized culture, accessible and accepted technology – mainly pertaining to genetic modification – a saturated market for said technology, and some discussion of nature through the wilderness/garden trope.

What sets an evo-dystopia apart is the evolutionary writing, narratives based on the bodily progression of human life. *Oryx & Crake* and *Snow Crash* clearly exemplify the former trend, in the authors' use of posthuman entities and intense bioengineering. Both books fulfill Foucault's definition of abuse of biopower, both political and technological.

Fredric Jameson, SF scholar and graduate mentor to Gerry Canavan, argues science fiction does not reflect our imagination of the future so much as it "defamiliarizes and restructures our experience of our own *present* [...] transformed into a contemplation of our own absolute limits." Science fiction literature acts as a platform to explore alternative theories, possibilities, and histories to current conflicts, for writers, such as Atwood and Stephenson, to offer their commentary on contemporary issues. Ultimately, we see that evo-dystopias, while not new, are deeply relevant today as reflections of our technological prowess and political ideals.