

From Modernity to Dystopia: Debord's the *Society of the Spectacle* in Atwood's *Oryx & Crake* as an Outgrowth of Bauman's Liquid Modernity

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood (2003) in *Oryx & Crake* embarks upon a post-apocalyptic narrative odyssey that intricately addresses genetic engineering, environmentalism, social stratification, and the profound repercussions of human violence. Central to this paper's discussion is the intriguing interplay between Guy Debord's (1967) seminal construct, *The Society of the Spectacle*, and the overwhelming presence of Liquid Modernity – a concept eloquently fleshed out by the distinguished sociologist, Zygmunt Bauman. In Bauman's framework, Liquid Modernity is typified by a society in a relentless state of transition, constantly reshaping its identity. This fluid societal model becomes deeply intertwined with Debord's exposition on "The Spectacle" as rendered in Atwood's dystopian world. Within the novel, we encounter a sharp critique of a Western society increasingly subsumed by an insidious consumerism and an ever-expanding entertainment complex, wherein even the most private and intimate dimensions of human life are not exempt from commodification. Atwood's masterful juxtaposition of these potent theoretical concepts accentuates an intrinsic relationship between the evolving paradigms of modern society and its seemingly inexorable trajectory towards a dominion marked by unbridled consumerism, superficiality, and alienation. Furthermore, *Oryx & Crake* functions not merely as a reflective lens into the excesses and pitfalls of Western capitalism and its resultant socio-political divisions but also, and perhaps more pertinently, as a prescient warning – illuminating a potentially bleak and calamitous horizon for human civilization.

Keywords: Dystopia, Margaret Atwood, *Liquid Modernity*, *The Society of the Spectacle*, *Oryx & Crake*, Guy Debord, Zygmunt Bauman.

Introduction

In his seminal 1967 treatise, Guy Debord, the French philosopher and literary figure, critically assesses the ramifications of capitalism upon contemporary society. He posits a perspective wherein social interactions have devolved, becoming a mere vestige of their former selves. Debord (1967) articulates, "The spectacle represents money for contemplation's sake; at this juncture, the entirety of practical utility has been exchanged for the full scope of abstract representation. The Spectacle isn't merely subservient to pseudo-utility—it epit-

omizes the very pseudo-utilization of existence” (p. 19). Embedded within the 49th thesis of *The Society of the Spectacle*, this excerpt encapsulates Debord’s critique of modern Western societal dynamics. Delving into the nuances of present-day society, he unveils the transformative effects of capitalism on both the macrocosmic and individual dimensions. Puchner (2004) elucidates, “the term ‘spectacle’” does not simply denote the mediatization of post-war Western capitalism, but its entire ideology: television; advertising; commodity fetish; super-structure; the whole deceptive appearance of advanced capitalism” (p. 3). Challenging the premise that the Spectacle merely operates as a tool for capitalism to mollify and distract the populace, Debord, in collaboration with other avant-garde artists and political scholars, founded the Situationist International (1957-1972). This movement emerged as a pointed response to the global implications of capitalism he discerned. Morgan and Purje (2016) posit that through an adept paraphrasing of Marx, Debord cements an intrinsic linkage between the Spectacle and economic dynamics. They suggest that interpersonal interactions have shifted from authentic exchanges to representations – a metamorphosis from genuine being to mere semblance. However, a divergence from the Marxian legacy is evident in the Situationist International’s emphasis. Instead of production, there’s a pronounced focus on consumption, as Best and Kellner observe (2017), who highlight this change of paradigm: “While traditional Marxism accentuated production, the Situationists spotlighted the significance of social reproduction and the emergent paradigms of consumer and media-centric societies post-Marx” (p. 1). In conclusion, Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* provides a critical foundation for understanding Atwood’s portrayal of a capitalistically evolved society in *Oryx & Crake*, which he perceives as the malady afflicting the Western hemisphere. Essentially, he reinterprets “Marxist notions of commodity fetishism and alienation tailored for the cinematic, advertising, and televised epoch” (Morgan & Purje, 2016).

Three decades post the release of *The Society of the Spectacle*, Zygmunt Bauman, the eminent Polish sociologist and philosopher, unveiled his 1999 magnum opus, *Liquid Modernity*. In this seminal work, Bauman paints society as being perpetually in flux. Antiquated social architectures dissolve, ushering in an order dominated by privatized concerns. The erstwhile communal ethos is supplanted by a pervasive pursuit of individual objectives. The notion of self-establishment is relegated to obsolescence. Bauman (1999) elucidates:

Our prevailing socio-cultural milieu can be aptly termed as “light” or “liquid” modernity, a stark contrast to the erstwhile “heavy”, or more aptly “robust” and “solid” modernity. The current form is not rigidly constructed or managed; it is an omnipresent, permeating, and saturating variant of modernity. (p. 339)

This liquescence engenders a milieu wherein traditional anchors, mores, and normative reference points cease to offer stability or guidance. Gane

(2001) asserts that “the conventional paradigms, ethical codes, or stable referential entities no longer present reliable orientation in individual life trajectories” (p. 269). Familial ties and ancestral roots diminish in importance, overshadowed by an intensified focus on personal ambitions. Bauman (1999) notes the attenuation of reflective strategies for goal attainment and highlights the rampant surge of desirables in modern contexts. Baudrillard (1990), in *Fatal Strategies*, terms this overwhelming array of possibilities as “hypertely”, elucidating the sheer volume of potential avenues an individual confronts. Margaret Atwood’s dystopian narrative, *Oryx & Crake*, provides poignant illustrations of the themes expounded upon in *Liquid Modernity* and *The Society of the Spectacle*. Atwood, a multifaceted Canadian literary figure, eschews the label of science fiction for her work, advocating for its categorization as speculative fiction. She delineates the distinction, asserting that while science fiction ventures into realms of the fantastical, speculative fiction navigates plausible terrains – “events that could conceivably transpire” (Potts, 2003). Framed within this speculative genre, Atwood’s narrative intent seeks to render the reader not as a mere consumer, but as a reflective entity. She opines that literature should function as a mirror where readers discern not the author, but their own visages and the sociocultural milieu they inhabit, as elaborated in *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Atwood, 1975).

The aim of this paper is to explore how Liquid Modernity and the Spectacle are inextricably linked in this novel, with the latter being the unavoidable consequence of the former. In *Oryx & Crake* Atwood portrays a polarized society deeply influenced by a consumerist attitude, where individual goals are significantly superior and more important than public interests, and where the concepts of roots and family have been relegated to be a second order need. The notion of family is discussed in *Survival*, where Margaret Atwood (1975) states that “in Canadian literature the family is handled quite differently. The Canadian protagonist often feels just as trapped inside his family as his American counterpart, he feels the need for escape but somehow he is unable to break away” (p. 131). This exploration of *The Society of the Spectacle* and *Liquid Modernity* in *Oryx & Crake* leads us to a polarized society, in which Atwood skilfully weaves these theories.

A Spectacular Society Promoted by a Liquid Reality

Oryx & Crake, the first novel of Atwood’s *MaddAddam* trilogy depicts a world ruled by the pharmaceutical industry, where “the relationship between the individual and society is changing because the concepts of identity, individual and individuality are becoming meaningless” (Palese, 2013, p. 1). The upper class of society lives in the “Compounds,” which are places designed with the only aim of consumption and promotion. Together with these Com-

pounds the reader finds the Pleeblands, places where the low social class is relegated to a life of second order. Atwood places special emphasis to describe the difference between these two places and the economic power of the former, stating that life in the Compounds is easier and more comfortable than in the Pleeblands. This difference between these two places shows an example of liquid modernity:

To meet the standards of normality, and to be recognized as a mature and respectable member of society, we must respond quickly and efficiently to the temptations of the consumer goods market. The poor and the idlers, those who have neither a decent income, or credit cards, nor the prospect of better days, are not up to these requirements. (Palese, 2013, p. 2)

The Compounds, with their focus on consumption and status, reflect Bauman's 'Liquid Modernity', in which social structures are ephemeral and individual-centric, and Debord's 'Society of the Spectacle', where life is reduced to a series of superficial images and representations.

Throughout this book, the main character, Jimmy, narrates his life in one of these Compounds before the apocalypse caused by his best friend, Crake. Jimmy "faces a consumerist society that naturalized violence and favors science over any artistic expression. A satirical version of our highly capitalist society" (Silva de Sá, 2014, p. 4). The book portrays both realities: the main character's life in the Compounds and how he has to struggle in order to survive in the hostile and dystopic environment he finds after the apocalypse. During his life in the Compounds, Jimmy notes that each Compound, owned by different pharmaceutical firms, is designed to captivate and attract, reflecting the fluid reality of his existence. Every Compound seems to be better than the other, and being promoted not only means better life conditions, but moving to a better Compound. Individual effort is the only way to promote rather than team work. As Jimmy states, "the HelthWyzer Compound was not only newer than the OrganInc layout, it was bigger. It had two shopping malls instead of one, a better hospital, three dance clubs, even its own golf club" (Atwood, 2008, p. 61). HelthWyzer means the highest social status in a society where appearances are the most important and useful way to establish a social relationship. As Morgan and Purje (2017) state:

Being is replaced by having, and having is replaced by appearing. We no longer live. We aspire. We work to get richer. Paradoxically, we find ourselves working in order to have a "vacation." We can't seem to actually live without working. Capitalism has thus completely occupied social life. Our lives are now organized and dominated by the needs of the ruling economy.

Debord's (2014) assertion in his thesis 42 that "the Spectacle is the moment

in which commodities reach complete occupation in social life” (p. 55) seamlessly aligns with Atwood’s depiction of a commodity-driven society in *Oryx & Crake*, where Jimmy tells how his life is after getting a promotion:

After a while he was granted a promotion. Then he could buy new toys. He got himself a better DVD player, a gym suit that cleaned itself overnight due to sweat-eating bacteria, a shirt that displayed e-mail on its sleeve while giving him a little nudge every time he had a message, shoes that changed colour to match his outfits, a talking toaster. Well, it was company. He upgraded to a better apartment. (Atwood, 2008, p. 294)

Food business is also absorbed by the Liquid Modernity and the Spectacle. Atwood, through Jimmy’s narration, reveals how genetic engineering has been co-opted by capitalist motives, altering food production to prioritize speed and volume over nutritional equity. Nevertheless, this fast production of food is not focused on eradicating hunger or finding a balance in the extremely polarized society they are living in. The protagonist’s depiction of a world where meat is not only a luxury commodity but also a symbol of socioeconomic disparity, underscores the skewed priorities in a society where technological advancements in genetic engineering are exploited for elitist benefits, rather than addressing fundamental issues like hunger. Not only expensive but also pure and real, being able to afford something as simple as a steak means power and wealth, thus, giving the consumer a status in a society affected by the illness of capitalism where commodities and abundance are the best way to boast. Taking into account that genetic engineering and artificiality play an essential role in a consumerist and capitalist society, Jimmy explains how the industry of coffee is affected by the desire of production and consumption with the only goal of becoming rich:

Happicuppa coffee bush was designed so that all its beans would ripen simultaneously and coffee would be grown on huge plantations and harvested with machines. This threw the small growers out of business and reduced both them and their labourers to starvation-level poverty. (Atwood, 2008, p. 210)

Therefore, food is not used as a means of help, but as a way to grow rich. This displacement of small growers by Happicuppa epitomizes the fluidity of Bauman’s Liquid Modernity, while simultaneously reflecting Debord’s notion of the Spectacle, where capitalist interests override communal welfare. The catastrophic impact of Happicuppa on small-scale producers exemplifies how liquid modernity destabilizes traditional economic structures, while the emphasis on profit maximization mirrors Debord’s concept of the Spectacle, wherein human relationships are subordinated to market interests. Moved by a capitalist motivation, Happicuppa growers only aspire to the accumulation, creating

bigger bushes, hence getting more money. Consequently, more money will give the chance to get bigger machines for harvesting, creating a capitalist spinning where the main goal is prosperity through a disproportionate process of production and consumption. The alienation of the worker makes them unable to focus on public interest, selling his labor as a commodity on the market, despite the fact that that capitalist desire negatively affects others up to the point of losing sustenance. Concurrently, the way Happicuppa system impoverishes small growers makes reference to the importance of individual achievements above the public interest, one of the main characteristics of this liquid modernity described by Bauman. Together with the application of genetic engineering in nourishment, the posthuman field cannot escape from the influence of the capitalist system. In the novel, scientists deal with animal mutations in order to create customized organs that are to be used in humans:

The pigeon organs could be customized, using cells from individual human donors, and the organs were frozen until needed. It was much cheaper than getting yourself cloned for spare parts or keeping for harvest-child or two stashed away in some illegal baby orchard. (Atwood, 2008, p. 27)

While superficially aimed at human benefit, these human-animal hybrid technologies, as Braidotti critiques in *The Posthuman*, ultimately serve the capitalist agenda, distorting natural inter-species relationships for profit. Rosi Braidotti (2013) explains that “advanced capitalism and its bio-genetic technologies engender a perverse form of the post-human. At its core there is a radical disruption of the human-animal interaction, but all living species are caught in the spinning of the global economy” (p. 7). Guy Debord asserts that the Spectacle is an instrument to pacify the masses, so despite the fact that this human-animal combination seems to be designed to offer an ephemeral solution to human illnesses, it is actually promoted by a capitalist desire.

More evidences of this link between the Liquid and the Spectacular are found in the way the pharmaceutical business acts. Guy Debord describes the Spectacle not only as a mediatization of the society, but also as a dictatorship where the government is free to act away from the public opinion. In his book *Comments on The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord (1988) states that “the nuclear industry, both military and civil, demands a far higher level of secrecy than in other fields” (p. 35). However, Atwood gives a different approach in her novel. In a world ruled by the pharmaceutical industry, those who take command of the Compounds have the power to manipulate, create, and destroy. During a conversation with his friend Crake, Crake explains Jimmy how HelthWyzer, the biggest and most profitable private business in this plausible future depicted by Atwood, alters medicines in order to get more money from the citizens the medications are supposed to heal:

So, you'd need more sick people. Or else – and it might be the same thing – more diseases. New and different ones. Right? HelthWyzer, they've been doing it for years. There's a whole secret unity working on nothing else. Then there's the distribution end. Listen, this is brilliant. They put hostile bioforms into their vitamin pills – their HelthWyzer over-the-counter premium board, you know? (Atwood, 2008, p. 247)

The preoccupation with physical appearance further exemplifies the intertwining of liquid modernity and the Spectacle, transforming body image into a consumable commodity: “Being individuals in the liquid society does not simply mean being good consumers, but also being competitive goods in the global market. Such condition does not only require the purchase of ‘fashion items,’ but, also, the purchase of a ‘fashionable body’” (Palese, 2013, p. 1). In the novel, Jimmy describes people's obsession with their physical condition, always following the pattern of the perfect body that can be shown to the others in an attempt to prove economic wealth. A perfect physical condition is no more a goal that has to be achieved through hard work, time, and perseverance, but a commodity, something that can be purchased. People in the Compounds are constantly bombarded with advertising of sculptural bodies, and the catalogue of products is almost unlimited, including “cosmetic creams, workout equipment, Joltbars to build your muscle-scape into a breathtaking marvel of sculpted granite. Pills to make you fatter, thinner, hairier, balder, whiter, browner, blacker, yellower, sexier, and happier” (Atwood, 2008, p. 291). Our own lack of capacity to look for a true meaning for reality leads us to create an adulterated image of reality. At the same time, the Spectacle plays an essential role in happiness. The capitalist spectacular society pacifies the masses offering new goals, new achievements: “Capitalism – having already served out most basic survival needs (the means to food, shelter, etc.) – relies on fabricating new desires and distractions in order to propagate itself and maintain its oppression over the working classes” (Morgan & Purje, 2016). The perfect body is one of the many distractions that society has to offer. Since individuals are no longer attached to a solid and stable social form, they have to get a fashionable body in order to become productive members of a capitalist society. Being healthy used to be one of the main aspirations years ago, but the situation is the opposite now in the liquid modernity described by Bauman. Dominic Boyer (2002) affirms that “Bauman's schema is valuable: ‘fitness’ is an ideal of ever-ready-to-deploy corporeal energy appropriate to flexible post-industrial work rhythms, just as ‘health’ calibrated the human body to more stable and predictable industrial rhythms” (p. 355).

The BlyssPluss Pill, a pivotal element in Atwood's narrative, crystallizes the fusion of the spectacular and the liquid modernity, symbolizing the ultimate commodification of human desire and vulnerability. Moved by the misanthropist desire of eradicating the human being, Crake designs it as a way to create

a pandemic that wipes out humanity. The pill is thought to give the humans the chance to strengthen their feelings and senses, but it actually contained the virus of an Ebola-like disease. The advert created to sell the product is the paradigm of the Spectacle:

Throw Away Your Condoms! BlyssPluss, for the total body experience! Don't live a little, Live a Lot! Simulations of a man and a woman, ripping off their clothes, grinning like maniacs. Then a man and a man. Then a woman and a woman, though for that one they didn't use the condom line. Then a threesome. (Atwood, 2008, p. 367)

The strikingly vibrant nature of this advertisement effectively captivates the audience's attention, compelling them to perceive it as the latest coveted commodity in the marketplace. This pill is the perfect combination of Debord's and Bauman's theories. In a world where the traditional social bases are melting, experiencing new sensations becomes a priority. This emphasis on individual achievements and experiences leads to the constant search of happiness in a society which is in a constant change. Thus, leading to the extreme of making "everything in capitalist society a commodity produced for the market" (Watts, pp. 96-97) or, in other words "the commodification of everything" (Hall, p. 545), encompassing the commodification of the human body itself, regardless of the moral dilemmas it may entail. BlyssPluss pill reflects the essence of the Spectacle, where the individual is a slave of the immediacy of the present moment. Additionally, the BlyssPluss ad explicitly sexualizes, selling unattainable ideals.

Conclusion

In *Oryx & Crake*, the reader finds a nation based on the increasing predominance of private issues, individual goals, and consumption. Surrounded by a capitalist and consumerist environment, the Compounds offer their citizens everything they might desire in an attempt to keep them happy and pacific. Atwood deals with a capitalist spinning in which Zygmunt Bauman's *Liquid Modernity* and Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* are interconnected in order to show a plausible future for our culture. Rooted in western ideals of self-determination and private enrichment, traditional social structures, such as familial bonds and long-term residency, have dissolved into a state of flux, echoing Bauman's concept of liquid modernity. This preoccupation with private affairs and material enrichment, manifested in the pursuit of fleeting pleasures through commodities, embodies Debord's critique of the Spectacle as a distraction from deeper societal issues. Hence, concurrently, this process of "liquefaction" gives place to a society based on secrecy which exerts a continuous bombard with advertising of commodities considered to award their owners a

higher social status. In this liquid-spectacular society, the concept of commodity has transcended to an extent in which everything can be purchased and sold. Happiness, Beauty, a Perfect Body, and even the most intimate aspects of life have turned to be mere objects for production and consumption. Alienated from the real world, citizens who have lost the old values of friendship and home, live in an artificial reality in which they consider that the acquisition of products is the best way to establish a social relation by means of an altered image of the self, based on the imperious necessity to live the present moment. The “liquefaction” of traditional values engenders a profound emptiness within the individual. In response, there emerges a reoriented hierarchy of values, where personal objectives are prioritized over collective well-being. The capitalist state exploits this dynamic, offering ephemeral goods disguised as personal aspirations, intended to fill this existential void. This process establishes a pattern of behaviour in society that is compliant and malleable. Ultimately, Atwood’s *Oryx & Crake* not only portrays a society marked by a vacuum of traditional values and profound alienation but also serves as a critique of a culture ensnared in the cycle of “work hard, buy harder”.

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