FROM COVERS TO CONTENTS: PROBLEMS IN LABELLING MARGARET ATWOOD'S MADDADDAM AND SUZANNE COLLINS'S THE HUNGER GAMES AS SCIENCE FICTION WORKS

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Abstract: This article offers an analysis of two famous trilogies,Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam and Suzanne Collins's The Hunger Games, and underlines the problems that appear in labelling them as science fiction. It tries to define this genre from a structuralist perspective and reveal its fundamental characteristics, pointing out the fact that these novels overpass the traditional expectations regarding science fiction.

Keywords: clichés, fabulation, novum, science-fiction, society

Published simultaneously between 2003 and 2013, the trilogies written by the Canadian author, Margaret Atwood – *MaddAddam*–and the American novelist, Suzanne Collins – *The Hunger Games* – explore numerous political fears pertaining contemporary society: totalitarianism, fanaticism, aggressive mass media, overpopulation, environmental degradation, failed scientific experiments and Self alienation. Set in the near future, within the former U.S. borders, and depicting highly advanced technologies and genetically engineered creatures, these books have usually been labelled as science fiction. However, *MaddAddam* and *The Hunger Games* do not reflect the traditional characteristics of this genre and do not fulfil the general expectations when it comes to their covers and contents. Therefore, this article tries to define science fiction, underline its particularities and point out why these novels can or cannot be labelled as such.

Asked by a reporter working for "The New Scientist" to talk about "science fiction" in connection to the first two novels of the *MaddAddam* trilogy, *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and *The Year of The Flood* (2009),Margaret Atwood felt that the term had somehow lost its initial significance ("if it ever had one") and that it really needed to be redefined (Atwood, *In Other Worlds* 2). Moreover, incited by Ursula K. Le Guin's 2009 "Guardian" review of her books, Atwood wrote a detailed exploration of her "lifelong relationship with [this] literary form, or forms, or subforms" and published it under the title *In Other Worlds: Science Fiction and the Human Imagination* (2011). Her intention was not to produce "a grand theory" of science fiction but just to explore it from the perspective of a reader, writer and lecture (Atwood 1). Less of a theoretician and more of a practitioner, Suzanne Collins has accepted the label of "science fiction" right from the beginning and joined the long line of American SF authors. Instead of debating it, she chose to embrace the benefice offered by this type of literature, namely "the freedom to create elements that [one] wasn't going to neatly find in history" (Grossman 1). Thus, Collins showed more interest in using science fiction than in theorising it.

However, science fiction itself remains problematic and requires an in-depth exploration. Obviously before using it as a label and applying it to certain books, such as the ones examined here, one should try to explain the term and its content. In order to simplify things, our analysis begins from general known issues involving science fiction and the two trilogies and heads towards an abstract understanding of the genre. In doing so, we embrace a "structuralist" approach initiated by Adam Roberts in his 2000 work, *Science Fiction*, and

analyse the definitions of science fiction proposed by three important theoreticians and SF authors: Darko Suvin, Robert Scholes and Damien Broderick.

When talking about science fiction, most people have the impression that they know exactly what kind of works it includes, judging them right from their covers. Unfortunately, it is a given fact, that the shelves from the section dedicated to SF, just like that for children, are full with either "skin-tight black or silver or brightly coloured paperback volumes" whose covers reveal photorealist images of complicated devices, strange planets, futuristic cities or perhaps bizarre people surrounded by jet like flames (Atwood, *In Other Worlds* 2). Nevertheless, as Atwood suggests, they may also include "dragons and manticores, or backgrounds that contain volcanoes or atomic clouds, or plants with tentacles, or landscapes reminiscent of Hieronymus Bosch" (Atwood, *In Other Worlds* 2).

The covers designed for the *Hunger Games* series are no far from these assumptions, though, the first editions, had relatively simple colours and images. The first volume, *The Hunger Games* (2008), wore the traditional black covers, perhaps pointing out the oppressive atmosphere of the novel, deathor mourning. The second one, *Catching Fire*(2009),could not receive a better colour than dark orange suggesting flames and rebellion. As for the last one, *Mockingjay*(2010), blue was used probably as an allusion to hope and freedom. Of course, the covers are also decorated with a stylised version of amockingjay, a bio-engineered little bird which becomes associated with the protagonist and a powerful symbol of the revolution. The covers of the first volume show only the gold pin, Katniss wore in the arena, a bird imprisoned within a circle, but the next onesreveal a more realistic one as if the object became animated and opened its wings and fling freely towards new horizons. However, the publishers felt the need to elaborate the covers in a more SF style. Shortly after the movies based on this trilogy were released and scored record sales, the covers included the image of Katniss, embodies by actress Jennifer Lawrence looking as a superhero.The books were dressed up like this in the United States as well as in many Western countries. Yet, in East Europe, for instance, and especially in Romania, the covers have been replaced by new ones depicting eider a very provocative woman surrounded by flames and gazing at the reader or a dangerous green eye girl watching him from the bushes ready to hunt him. Perhaps, this type of design, is a reminiscence of the early '90s when after the fall of the Communist regime, the publishing market was invaded by pornography, and most books had to portray a sensual, partly dressed woman on their covers, no matter whether their content corresponded or not.

The covers created for the *Maddaddam* series are definitely more numerous, revealing on one hand the designer's failure to understand the topics presented by the books and on the other, Margret Atwood's discontent. The first novel, *Oryx and Crake*(2003) has on its cover eider the image of a man walking on a dry land, presumably Snowman, Lucas Cranach the Elder's painting *The Fall*, where Adam and Eve might be associated with Oxyx and Crake themselves, or is simply decorated with flowers, strange animals and even a rabbit sitting on a chairinspired by Hieronymous Bosch's painting *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. The second volume, *The Year of the Flood* (2009), had its title by numerous little flowers. As Atwood protested, designers included a big poppy and a lizard woman (elements which can be found within the book) and eventually made room for a goat sitting on a chair. Finally, the front cover of *MaddAddam*(2013), started by revealing a big pair of closed eyes and an egg with a hand print on it, later it kept only the egg but increasing its size and laid it inside a nest. The egg is nevertheless, a representative element in the book; the Children of Crake and all the other living creatures are said to be born out of two giant eggs laid by Oryx. Its final cover shows a flying creature, half eagle, half pig. The idea of the flying pigs encompasses Atwood's satire of the contemporary society.

After analysing the covers of these two trilogies and their various changes, we can see the great efforts both authors and publishers made in order to fit them or not within the so called boundaries of science fiction, and fulfil the expectations of their readers/customers, at least from an aesthetic point of view. Making the next step, and opening a book labelled as science fiction, most readers hope to find certain SF clichés such as highly developed technologies, space and time travel, aliens, mad scientists and experiments going awfully wrong.

However, as Atwood argues science fiction "includes the wildly paranormal— not your aunt table-tilting or things going creak, but shape-shifters and people with red eyeballs and no pupils, and Things taking over your body" (Atwood, *In Other Worlds* 3). It includes all sort of monsters but they are "of extra-terrestrial rather than folkloric provenance" and of course, "the common and garden-variety devils, and demonic possession, and also vampires and werewolves" cannot be actually labelled as SF because they already have their own "literary ancestries and categories"(Atwood, *In Other Worlds* 3). In short, as Atwood highlights "Plain ordinary horror doesn't count— chainsaw murderers and such because "you might meet one of those walking along the street". It's what you definitely would not meet walking along the street that makes the grade"(Atwood, *In Other Worlds* 3).

This makes us wonder how out of the ordinary, how unusual, Atwood's and Collins's trilogies are. While opening *Oryx and Crake*the reader encounters the fallowing incipit: "Snowman wakes before dawn. He lies unmoving, listening to the tide coming in, wave after wave sloshing over the various barricades, wish-wash, wish-wash, the rhythm of heartbeat. He would so like to believe he is still asleep…" (3). Barely awaken, the protagonist watches the sky, the lagoon, the noisy birds. He seems to be on a ship racked, on a deserted island, somewhere out of time, wearing his broken watch as a talisman.Trying to ensure his own survival, he sleeps on a tree branch, fearing animals and infections, and searching for food. Yet, nothing strange,out of the ordinary, happens for more than a chapter, and the reader may start to believe that what he actually has in front of his eyes is a realistic novel. Surviving on an empty island has been tried and done many times before. The idea of an adventure book, of a modern *Robinson Crusoe,* is not excluded eider.After all,in Daniel Defoe's novel, the protagonist undergoes a similar description: "When I waked it was broad day, the weather clear, and the storm abated, so that the sea did not rage and swell as before. (…)When I came down from my apartment in the tree, I looked about me again, and the first thing I found was the boat, which lay, as the wind and the sea had tossed her up, upon the land, about two miles on my right hand"(47).

However, there is no boat in Snowman's case and the second chapter titled *Flotsam,* slowly introduces us to a group of children who scan the beach for waste, and who are "thick-skinned, resistant to ultraviolet" (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* 6). Step by step, we discover that they are part of a genetically engineered species, called the Children of Crake and left under Snowman's care after a virulent pandemic had presumably erased mankind. Yet, they are not alone, as the land is also full of strange creatures such as "rakunks", "wolvogs", "pigoons" - products of failed scientific experiments (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* 42).

Collin's *The Hunger Games*begins in very similar way: "When I wake up, the other side of the bed is cold. My fingers stretch out, seeking Prim's warmth but finding only the rough canvas cover of the mattress. She must have had bad dreams and climbed in with our mother. Of course, she did. This is the day of the reaping" (3). Just like in the previous case, nothing unordinary takes place. Katniss, the protagonist-narrator, continues to describe her little sister, her mother and their cat. Moreover, readers are informed that they live in Seam, the poorest part of District 12, a place which "is usually crawling with coal miners heading out to the

morning shift at this hour. Men and women with hunched shoulders, swollen knuckles, many who have long since stopped trying to scrub the coal dust out of their broken nails, the lines of their sunken faces" (Collins *The Hunger Games*6). Such a description may definitely not send them to a SF book but rather to a realistic one à la Émile Zola. After all, he is one of Colin's favourite authors and his *Germinal*has deeply inspired her. Zola's mine workers have "stiff limbs" (97), and "the nails of [their] large hands, eaten by the iron" (63), and they live in a place where "all the blackness of the Voreux [the mine], and all its flying coal dust, had fallen upon the plain, powdering the trees, sanding the roads, sowing the earth" (Zola 63). Just like Atwood,Collins does not stop here. Slowly, after about two chapters, the reader finds out that the "reaping" refers to an annual draw following which twenty four boys and girls out of the twelve districts of Panem have to hunt and kill each other in a live television show. The Hunger Games represent a cruel way of entertainment for the rich people living in the Capitol and a horrible punishment for the inhabitants of the districts. Moreover, just like *Oryx and Crake*, Cllins's book is full od in all sort of advanced devices and mutated creatures such as the "mockingjays" (37).

Both trilogies portray their main characters while awaking up in apparently ordinary worlds which slowly start to crack and reveal their nightmarish features. The futuristic society depicted in *MaddAddam* rests officiallyunnamed, while that from *The Hunger Games*is ironically called Panem, (making reference to the Latin adage "panem et circenses" ("bread and circuses"). However, the two of them are actually sick versions of a possible America. This powerful country, just like the British Empire from Wells's famous book *War of the Worlds*(1897), faces its own destruction though, in this case, the real danger does not come from outside, in the form of Martian invaders, but from inside, from its unsolved problems and vulnerabilities. Likewise, the two authors do not go as far as Wells did and do not involve extra-terrestrial creatures or technologies that have not been invented yet. Readers are shown an ordinary world, one which might very well turn into reality if people do not try to solve their present problems. Science plays an important role in Atwood's and Collins's novels but it remains somewhere in the background. Society is actually the main focus of these books and the authors spend a lot of time describing its inner mechanisms, triggering strong feelings of familiarity and estrangement.

This issue takes us to one of the core problem of our article - Can these works be labelled as science fiction? Science fiction itself is a complicated concept that requires a series of explanations. Defining it proved to be quite a challenge as critics, historians and practitioners brought various definitions, launched fiery debates and failed to reach a consensus. Many of them regard science fiction as a genre or a branch of literature. Take for instance Isaac Asimov's definition: "Science fiction is a branch of literature which deals with the reaction of human beings to changes in science and technology" (35). Others reject the idea of "genre" because it denies the hybrid nature of science fiction.Instead, they choose to regard it as "a field where different genres and subgenres intersect" (Seed 1) or, as "the one field that reached out and embraced every sector of the human imagination, every endeavor, every idea, every technological development, and every dream" (Bradbury3). Indeed,SF is "a wide-ranging, multivalent and endlessly cross-fertilising cultural idiom" (Roberts, *The New Critical Idiom* 2). However, there are also theoreticians who see science fiction not as a "genre" or "field" but rather as a "mood". In this sense, Northrop Frye said that [science fiction] was "a mode of romance with a strong inherent tendency towards myth"(49). Yet, science fiction can also be seen as a vast culture, complete with its Klingon language, the V greeting sign and why not the District 12 sign. SF iswithout doubt a form of popular entertainment, a "a charming romance" in Gernsback's words, whichcombines elements of

known, extrapolation of known or logical theoretical science" (qtd.Canavan and Link 19).It can be praised for its complexity but also deplored for its commercial use and abuse. Thus, Bruce Sterling arguesthat science fiction has also been transformed into a mere "category [with] self-perpetuating commercial power-structure, which happens to be in possession of a traditional national territory: a portion of bookstore rack space" (qtd.Atwood, *In Other Worlds 7*).Finally, science fiction can just be seen as "a shelving aid, [meant] to help workers in bookstores place the book in a semi-accurate or at least lucrative way" (Atwood *In Other Worlds*2).This multitude of perspectives complicates the process of defining and encapsulating science fiction. Moreover, as if this was not enough, science fiction is in a constant change as Tom Shippey ironically remarked: "it changes while you are trying to define it" (qtd.Jakubowski and Edwards 258).

In order to simplify things and facilitate a better understanding of science fiction, we chose to regard it as a literary genre and begin our structuralist approach(just like other theoreticians such as David Seed, Adam Roberts or James Gunn did) with the instructive definition offered by the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "Science fiction is an imaginative fiction based on postulated scientific discoveries or spectacular environmental changes, frequently set in the future or on other planets and involving space or time travel" (1593). Without doubt, SF is an "imaginative fiction" different from the "realist" one which requires "accuracy" and "verisimilitude". However, not all imaginative fictions can be labelled as science fiction and in his 2006 study, *Science Fiction: Second Edition*, Adam Roberts clearly explains this aspect by comparing Jan Watson's tale, *The Jonah Kit* (1975) and Franz Kafka's short novel *Metamorphoses* (1915). Both of them are imaginative and involve the transformation of a man into a whale or a huge insect, but the first one show the result of a scientific experiment while the second relies on symbolism. This makes Roberts conclude that SF works need "material, physical rationalisation, rather than a supernatural or arbitrary one" (*Science Fiction* 5). However, he forgets to stress the fact that there can also be hybrids which unite both scientific evolution and fantastic implications.Other features mentioned by the OED as being representative for this genre are: "scientific discoveries", "spectacular environmental changes", "space or time travel". However, we agree with Adam Roberts that they are not enough and that a SF story needs to have "a concrete and material symbol" that would play the role of a "crucial separator between SF and other forms of imaginative or fantastic literature" (*Science Fiction* 6). Such a "separator" could be a spaceship, or a time travel device. Obviously, Roberts's ideas are derived from Suvin's theory regarding the presence of the *novum* within science-fiction works. Back in 1979, the famous SF theoreticianclaimed that "SF is distinguished by the narrative dominance or hegemony of a fictional 'novum' … validated by cognitive logic" (*Metamorphoses* 63). The word "novum" comes from Latin and means "new", or "new thing" (Roberts 7). The "novum" or its plural "nova" include all the elements of estrangement, such as robots, spaceships, aliens etc. "Hegemony" is a term taken from the Marxist theory and implies the maintenance of power through means of persuasion rather than direct force. In other words, the "novum" revealed by the SF works has to convince the reader of its existence and veracity in a subtle manner and not by standing out in an aggressive, ostentatious way. More importantly, the hegemony of the "novum" has to be enforced by a crucial element – "cognitive logic". The "novum" can exist only by through logical explanations that involve scientific processes or discoveries. Without these attributes a story cannot be qualified as science fiction and it will open a door for speculations regarding the fantastic. Later on, Darko Suvindeveloped his theory and proposed in his 1988 study, *Positions and Suppositions in Science Fiction*, one of the best known and comprehensive definitions of science fiction: "[This] is a literary genre or verbal construct whose necessary

and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment" (37). The "estrangement" is a term taken from Brecht and is usually understood as "alienation", yet in the context of SF it refers to the element of difference which "estranges" the reader from his real life. "Cognition", on the other hand, represents the reasoning, the "logic implications", the "constraints of science" which separate science fiction from fantasy. Adam Roberts assumes that "cognition" or "cognitive" may be a synonym for science and that the association "cognitive estrangement" can be just another phrase of "science fiction" (*Science Fiction* 8).

Another influential theoretician, Robert Scholes, was more preoccupied by the literary features of the science fiction works. In his 1975 study, "Structural Fabulation", Scholes focused on the metaphors that conceive SF. For him, 'fabulation' represented any "fiction that offers us a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the one we know, yet returns to confront that known world in some cognitive way" (2). In short, 'fabulation' includes not only science fiction, fantastic and other imaginative works like Borges, Thomas Pynchon and Herman Hesse. The word depicted has to be characterised by 'discontinuity', a kind of Suvinian 'novum', but as Scholes stressed, it does not furthers too much from the reader's reality and in addition, it comes back to confront it. The main focus of the 'structural fabulation' lies not on science itself but rather, on the "fictional exploration of human situations made perceptible by the implications of recent science" (Scholes 8).

The insightful author and critic Damian Broderick also offers a complex definition of how science fiction should be perceived today:

> *Sf is that species of storytelling native to a culture undergoing the epistemic changes implicated in the rise and supercession of technical–industrial modes of production, distribution, consumption and disposal. It is marked by (i) metaphoric strategies and metonymic tactics, (ii) the foregrounding of icons and interpretative schemata from a collectively constituted generic 'mega-text' and the concomitant deemphasis of 'fine writing' and characterisation, and (iii) certain priorities more often found in scientific and postmodern texts than in literary models: specifically, attention to the object in preference to the subject*. (Broderick 155)

According to Adam Roberts, Broderick enacts the pseudo-scientific discourse central to almost all SF works. The theoretician argues that the "metaphoric strategies and metonymic tactics"help SF texts convey eider the whole real world or just part of it. Broderick also stresses that there are numerous SF "icons" and "interpretative schemata" similar to Suvinian 'novum' or Scholesian 'discontinuity' and representative for science fiction as a literary genre. However, they are repetitive and lead to the creation of a 'mega-text' that includes all the SF books, films, shows, games etc. Broderick also mentioned the fact that such works have "certain priorities".They do not focus on insightful experimental styles, elaborate descriptions or detailed characterisations which might reveal complicated human psychologies. Instead they give more attention to "the object in preference to the subject" (155). The narrative, the feeling of estrangement and the alienation have priority. The characters and the scenario become just like Jones said "pieces of equipment" (5). This type of writing approaches science fiction works to pulp fiction, a literary genre which deals with lurid or sensational subjects and is often printed on rough, low-quality paper. This similarity lead to qualifying science fiction as "popular" but also "adolescentin", "crud", low-quality. To put it short, science fiction proved many light years away from anything marked as "high culture". Though, such a critical perspective sends us to Sturgeon's Law or Revelation from

1958,according to which "The existence of immense quantities of trash in science fiction is admitted and it is regrettable; but it is no more unnatural than the existence of trash anywhere" and therefore "The best science fiction is as good as the best fiction in any field" (Hartwell 7).

MaddAddam and *The Hunger Games* may be labeled as science fiction because they definitely reflect the "interaction of estrangement and cognition" Suvin used to talk about. The worlds they depict are familiar, well-known and yet they gradually change and shock their readers. The fictional 'novum' exercise its hegemony coming forward step by step, fallowing a logical and convincing strategy. There are genetically engineered creatures, extremely developed weapons, highly effective medicines, sophisticated devices such as holographs, or really ingenious outfits, including harmless burning cloths.

However, the action is set somewhere in a near predictable future and characters do not travel to other planets or dimensions. They do not have superpowers and do not use unknown technology. Their enemies do not come from outer space and are represented by ordinary human beings. The 'novum' is not that new and imaginative as SF readers would normally expect. Everything, Atwood and Collins described, had already been invented while the authors were writing their books. The pigs with human DNA do exist and are used in xenotransplantation, pills leading to mass mortality or cyber warfare are constantly seen and feared. Yet, science and scientific development are left somewhere in the background and society and its individuals are given a special attention. From covers to contest, *MaddAddam* and *The Hunger Games* do not reflect the traditional characteristics of science fiction; they are possible scenarios of our world, speculations upon contemporary fears and a warning signal regarding our future. Therefore, taking all these elements into consideration, we conclude that and labelling Atwood's and Collin's trilogies as science fiction can be problematic and disappointing.

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