

# Transrealism – a modern literary trend?

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**Apstrakt**— Književnost modernog doba svedoči o brojnim eksperimentalnim poduhvatima koji nastaju ukrštanjem žanrova u fikciji, poput spajanja istorijske fikcije i naučne fantastike, visoke tehnologije i lošeg kvaliteta života kojim se ukrštaju elementi detektivskih romana i distopijskih vizija, ili eksperimentalna dela u kojima se naučna fantastika spaja sa elementima strave i užasa. Cilj ovog rada je da istraži pojam transrealizma kao novog književnog pokreta 21. veka, koji spaja realizam kao tradicionalnu podlogu na kojoj počiva fikcija i pripovednu nit koja teži ka naučnoj fantastici, fantaziji ili predstavljanju strave i užasa, kao i da ispita koji su to osnovni elementi transrealizma kao pojma na primeru romana savremene kanadske književnice Margaret Etvud *Antilopa i kosac* (*Oryx and Crake*, 2003).

**Ključne reči** – Transrealizam; Književni pokret; Realizam; Fantazija; *Antilopa i kosac*

**Abstract** – The literature of modern era has witnessed numerous cross-genre fiction experiments including the blending of elements of historical and science fiction, the blending of high tech and low life that crosses the elements of detective fiction and dystopian visions, or the experiments in which science fiction has been crossed with the elements of horror. The aim of this paper is to explore Transrealism as a new literary movement of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that crosses realism, a traditional territory of literary fiction, with a narrative thread that heads toward science fiction, fantasy, or horror, and trace the principle elements of what is termed Transrealism in *Oryx and Crake* (2003), the novel written by a contemporary Canadian writer Margaret Atwood.

**Keywords** – Transrealism; Literary movement; Realism; Fantasy; *Oryx and Crake*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The term transrealism was coined by a writer and mathematician Rudy Rucker in 1983 in his essay “A Transrealist Manifesto” published in the *Bulletin of the Science Fiction Writers of America*<sup>1</sup> (Rucker 1991). It is used to describe a writing practice of blending science fiction tropes with realism. Rucker defines it as “writ[ing] about immediate perception in a fantastic way”, using “the tools of fantasy and SF [...] to thicken and intensify realistic fiction” (Rucker 1991, 435). According to Rucker, “transrealism tries to treat not only immediate reality, but also the higher reality in which life is embedded” (Rucker 1991, 435). In 2000, Broderick extended this concept arguing that transrealism “denotes *sf*

*with heart*, portraying against its fantastic and disruptive invented settings naturalistic characters (some of them robots or aliens) with complex inner lives and personal histories somewhat resembling the density of recognizable or real people” (Broderick 2000, 12). Broderick’s expanded definition serves as a fertile ground for examining certain fictional works of contemporary writers through the lenses of ‘transrealist discourse’, whereas the meaning of the term in this paper is limited to an interplay between fantasy and reality.

Transrealism as “a blend of speculative fantasy and bitter psychological truth-telling” (Broderick 2000, 37, Holloway 2004, Borchardt 2007, Aspley 2010, Chettle 2013) is widely explored in the works of innovative writers such as Philip K. Dick, J. G. Ballard, Joanna Russ, Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, Martin Amis and Margaret Atwood. According to Broderick, the works of these contemporary authors are marked by “the grittiness, the circumstantial *density* and chaotic unpredictability of lived reality”, the things that are, on the other hand, absent from speculative fiction, science fiction, magical fantasy and even some magic realism (Broderick 2000, 38). The works of these authors deal with twists between fantasy and realism in many ways. Transrealist discourse in these works interrogates complexities of transforming identity in a wider context of social exclusion. The intersections of fantasy and realism in transrealist discourse align what Broderick terms ‘disruptive invented settings’ with dissonant emotions including fragmentation, isolation, fear, and despair. Similar themes are explored in Christine E. Chettle’s doctoral dissertation that deals with the texts written by the 19<sup>th</sup> century authors analysed through the lenses of transrealist discourse (Chettle 2013).<sup>2</sup>

Transrealism is another literary endeavour of facing perceptions, another form of literature that sets its face against “consensus reality” (Rucker 1991, Sterling 2011, Steble 2015). Although the characters of a transrealist novel may resemble fictional in appearance, they are based on actual people: they are out of control, their actions are unpredictable and they are rooted in reality. The author usually appears as an actual character or his/her personality is divided among several characters. He/she narrates the world as he/she faces it with the help of science fiction tools such as time travel,

<sup>1</sup> It was reprinted in Rucker’s anthologies *Transreal!* (WCS Books, 1991) and *Seek!* (Four Walls Eight Windows, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> For more detailed analysis see Chettle, Christine Elisabeth, (2013): *Transrealism as a discourse of social change in Victorian literature*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Leeds: England.

antigravity, high technology, alternate worlds, telepathy, etc. In his essay “Transrealist Manifesto” Rucker explains the meaning of the term *transrealism*: the “trans” aspect involves time travel as a symbol of memory, escapism as a symbol of enlightenment, alternate worlds as symbols of numerous world-views and telepathy as the ability to communicate fully, while the “realism” aspect refers to the world the way it actually is (Rucker 1991). A transrealist novel is also characterized by numerous unexpected happenings hooked into a coherent narrative.

One has to transgress the conventions of the mainstream/realist fiction in order to transcend it. The precursor of this trend is a postmodern writer Philip K. Dick and his novel *Valis* published in 1978 (Rucker 1991, Broderick 2000, Steble 2015). Division between subjective and objective world of the novel’s main character is successfully presented in science fiction, while his split personality (Dick/Horselover Fat) and his sly metaphysical remarks that permeate the plot are the typical elements of transrealist fiction.

One of the questions that have been raised in this paper is whether transrealism as a blend of components which are both a part of SF and naturalistic reality, can really call for social change and act as a remedy for collective justice in modern world. Atwood’s novel *Oryx and Crake*, for instance, particularly highlights the emotive aspect of transrealism which Broderick summarizes as ‘sf with heart’: by emphasizing the sentimental in her blend of fantasy and realism, Atwood provides potential for reflection on the social reform and emotional perception. Atwood’s novel will be examined through the lenses of transrealist elements detected in ultramodern age of enlightenment where people are slaves of technology and those of ethical transgressions in the age of transgenics.

## II. ORYX AND CRAKE AS A TRANSREALIST DISCOURSE

Margaret Atwood’s dystopian novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* originally published in 1985 is considered as her first literary take on what is assumed to be a new literary trend of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Be that as it may, this novel definitely heralded and foreshadowed her later preoccupations in writing that have been characterized as a perfect blend of fantastic and real. *Oryx and Crake*, the novel that appeared almost two decades after *The Handmaid’s Tale*, is regarded by the author herself as a work of speculative fiction rather than science fiction because it does not deal with things that cannot happen or, as it is the case with *The Handmaid’s Tale* - the things that human beings had not already done in some other place or time, or for which the technology did not exist. Namely, Atwood has often claimed to write speculative fiction rather than sci-fi (Atwood 2004, 516, Maed 2017, 40-41, Brooks Bouson 2010, 142), since real sci-fi must include Martians and space invasions (Atwood 2011, 6).

As the first novel of a trilogy (the other two being *The Year of the Flood* /2009/ and *MaddAddam* /2013/), *Oryx and Crake* was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize for Fiction in 2003, and for the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2004.

Like the post-nuclear totalitarian vision of *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Nikolić 2014, 2015), the story of *Oryx and Crake* is set in a society that is “only a few steps ahead of our own” since “the bioengineered apocalypse [the author] imagines is impeccably researched and sickeningly possible” (Brown 2003). The novel gives us genetic modification, pigeons, wolvogs, rakunks and Crakers and a mad scientist in a modern version of Dr Frankenstein due to his ethical transgression. The story is told from the perspective of the main protagonist Snowman, whose original name is Jimmy, and who also assumes the animal code name “Thickney” for the purpose of playing the online-game *Extinctathon*. Jimmy’s childhood friend is Glenn, whose player-name in the game is from “the Red-necked Crake” (Atwood 2003, 81) and whose main goal as being a brilliant geneticist is to replace *homo sapiens*, destructive species, with their more peaceful and environmentally friendly version, but eventually turns into a mad scientist whose invention of a wonder drug BlyssPlus causes mass chaos and initiates the process of wiping out the human race. Oryx, whose name originates from an African antelope, is a mysterious girl whom Jimmy and Crake recognize from a child pornography site. Crake hires her for sexual services and as a teacher to the superhuman Crakers.

Through depicting the world inhabited with bioengineered creatures endowed with human DNA that start to outnumber human beings, Atwood questions and blurs the fine line between humanity and monstrosity. Namely, since the Crakers as bioengineered creatures prove to be more adaptive to the post-apocalyptic Wasteland, they eventually turn Snowman into an outcast resembling the Frankenstein’s monster. Snowman survives the calamity, but he is constantly threatened by viruses and the transgenic beings (pigeons with “human neocortex tissue growing in their crafty, wicked heads” (Atwood 2003, 235) and perfectly formed Crakers from whose brain all human negative impulses are erased) that reproduce themselves and run wild. As he believes he is the only survivor for the most of the novel, Snowman cannot help but wonder what it means to be human in the age of transgenics.<sup>3</sup> Although in the end of the novel he hears human voices on the radio and even witnesses three other survivors, he expresses both fear and hope for human company. The split between “numbers people” (Crakers) and “word people” (Snowman) before the plague turns out to be the split between the bioengineered and non-bioengineered beings afterwards. Namely, the superhuman Crakers eventually take the priority as the favoured human subjects, while Snowman, though more “human” in a traditional (organic) sense, now becomes the “other” and thus disempowered and somewhat dehumanized (Ku 2006, 111-112). Their partial resemblance to human beings challenges the human form. Since they combine the best genes of all earthlings, they are “hypothetical wonderkid[s]” (Atwood 2003, 250) whose reproduction

<sup>3</sup>Coral Ann Howells also explores the ethical dimension of the novel by arguing against the opposition between science and art, animal and human (Howells 2004, 93).

process is far more radical procedure than cloning. Moreover, Crake designed them as being immune to racism, hierarchy, territoriality, the torment of sexuality, and “any harmful symbolisms, such as kingdoms, icons, gods, or money” (Atwood 2003, 305). Snowman likens himself to an outcast, an intruder, an animal, and even a monster in contrast to the Crakers and he eventually starts whistling “like a leper’s bell” to notify Crakers of his arrival (Atwood 2003, 152). At one point he admits that even pigeons as being fast evolving hybrids of pig and human, would have ruled the world if they’d had fingers (Atwood 2003, 267). Whereas those transgenic beings are incessantly evolving or are already perfect, Snowman is fading, aging, and eventually turning into an animal or even a monster. Moreover, he does not acquire the animal’s strength or any other advantage (e.g. bird’s wings) but shares with animals the inferior status formerly imposed on them by human beings (Ku 2006, 118).

Through the example of Crake the mad scientist we will explore another transrealist element in Atwood’s novel. Namely, set in an ultramodern age of enlightenment, *Oryx and Crake* faithfully depicts people as slaves of technology in a technocratic age. Since technocracy goes hand in hand with capitalism, a brilliant scientist Crake is also a product of a capitalist machinery. Namely, the technocratic system privileges “numbers people“, thus allowing Crake to abuse his power that will ultimately lead to demise of the human race. His scientific idealism, obsessional interests and the Whizz Kid aspects of his genius are, however, perverted by the forces of capitalism present in every core of modern technocratic-scientific system. As a transgenic scientist, Crake belongs to the new generation of butchers operating on humans and animals, playing with lives and sacrificing any life for scientific breakthroughs. During the experimental stage of Crake’s sexual tonic BlyssPlus, “a couple of the test subjects had literally fucked themselves to death, several had assaulted old ladies and household pets, and there had been a few unfortunate cases of priapism and split dicks“ (Atwood 2003, 295). Crake does not show any emotional engagement when faced with such casualties but concludes that his medicine “still need[s] some tweaking“ (Atwood 2003, 295).

Experiments on species and scientific endeavours are financed by such corporations as OrganInc Farms, HelthWyzer and RejoovenEsense. The newly coined words related to science and technology in this novel resemble the use of specific religious-related rhetoric in *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Nikolić 2015), thus underlying the interplay of science, religion and technology and their tremendous influence on futuristic society. Crake reveals to Jimmy the secret of the vitamin pills of the pharmaceutical company HelthWyzer (hostile bioforms are put in their drugs) and exposes the company’s main goal – that is, making more profit by asking scientists to create diseases and increase people’s chances for infection (Atwood 2003, 211). The creation of the BlyssPlus Pills, the bioengineered species and the plague JUVE denote the fallibility of scientific inventions. When ingenuous Crake starts producing JUVE, partly because of his egotism and partly because of his constant clash with capitalism, he becomes contaminated by greed and animosity and his brilliance has begun to take up a monstrous form. Atwood

seems to put the blame on the application of transgenics: “It’s not a question of our inventions [...] but of what might be done with them; for no matter how high the tech, *homo sapiens sapiens* [“very wise man“] remains at heart what he’s been for tens of thousands of years – the same emotions, the same preoccupations” (Atwood 2003, 383).

*Oryx and Crake* also warns against the death of the language since it “had lost its solidity; it had become thin, contingent, slippery, a viscid film on which [Snowman] was sliding around like an eyeball on a plate” (Atwood 2003, 260). Snowman’s attempt to keep a journal fails since there are no future readers [Crakers cannot read], that is, “any reader he can possibly imagine is in the past” (Atwood 2003, 41). Although he at first ponders the fact that he can still retell his misfortunes to the three survivors he sees at the end of the novel, he soon gives up fearing that they might harm him: “There are three of them and only one of him. They’d do what he’d do in their place: they’d go away, but they’d lurk, they’d spy. They’d sneak up on him in the dark, conk him on the head with a rock. He’d never know when they might come” (Atwood 2003, 374). His wish to be a storyteller and leave his trace of existence in the newly established world order is undermined by his desire for dominance and control, his belief in hierarchy and his distrust of strangers. Eventually, he ends up leaving only the footprints in the snow. Namely, in the age marked by complicity of biotechnology and capitalism, people like Snowman become demonized and their monstrosity reflects the price humans must pay for their anthropocentrism.

### III. TOWARDS THE CONCLUSION

Unlike the escapist fantasies that take the readers further from reality or sci-fi stories that reassure us that the reality we rely upon is fixed, transrealism is meant to be “uncomfortable” since it tells us that “our reality is at best constructed, at worst non-existent” and gives us “no escape from that realisation” (Walter 2014). Atwood’s novel uses transrealist techniques to challenge the “consensus reality”, the term Rucker employs when discussing transrealism. Namely, it is the “consensus reality” that defines who is normal and who is not from various perspectives and tackles the issues of anthropocentrism, man’s desire for dominance and control, sexuality, racism, capitalism, modern consumerism, man’s absence of empathy upon facing the scenes of mass destruction (i.e. Snowman’s surprising acknowledgement of lacking empathy when he witnesses the scenes of demise of the human race), political oppression, etc.

The theme of genetic engineering, human and animal cloning, and gene manipulation in the time when Aldous Huxley wrote his novel *Brave New World* (1932) has definitely positioned dystopian novel in the genre of science fiction. Today, however, when biotechnology is so much present as to produce dystopian scenarios in reality, this theme has left the sci-fi genre and entered the field of post humanist realism and transrealism. Atwood’s novel offers a model of a dehumanized future that is, nevertheless, more based on the actual reality of post industrialist consumer society than futuristic vision. It is a novel deeply rooted in problematic

modernity that does not belong to the genre of sci-fi but a specific stylistic area of transrealism. Instead of constructing the escapist world, Atwood provides her readers with the signals that point to the terms of “here and now”.

Finally, one of the most important issues when addressing the reception of *Oryx and Crake* is answering the readers' questions related to what is real and unreal, that is, the presence or the absence of fantastic elements in this novel. Namely, speculative fiction, to use Atwood's classification of this novel, has been easily mistaken for fantasy, due to its hypothetical versions of the future it offers or the events that are not or cannot be confirmed in the reality. However, hypothetical and alternate events are integral parts of fiction regardless of time setting of the novel. Apocalyptic narratives set in the future do not comply with the conventions of fantasies since they deal with the future that has not happened (yet). Similarly, historical novels can deal with history that has never happened and include fictional plots in their narrative structures. Moreover, dystopian novels do not fit into a basic convention of the fantastic narratives – the reader and characters that express disbelief and mistrust in terms of the events narrated. Dystopian novels may fall under the umbrella of transrealist discourse since they are read with the acceptance of the world depicted as a sort of hyperbolised reality that holds strong relations with the actual world. Transrealism, if regarded as a new literary trend, seems to bridge the gap between fantasy and reality in the most subtle and imaginative way.

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