Zero Hour: Time to Go

Time, Technology, Individuality, and the Postmodern Apocalypse in the Dystopian Fiction of Douglas Coupland and Margaret Atwood.

Figure 1: Clyde Clock by George Wiley, 2000. Photograph by Andy Bird.

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List of Abbreviations

GA  Generation A
GC  Girlfriend in a Coma
OC  Oryx and Crake
PO  Player One
YF  The Year of the Flood
Introduction

Recent contemporary dystopian novels by Margaret Atwood and Douglas Coupland, two influential and innovative Canadian authors, have considerably more in common than initially appears. Their novels do not only serve to entertain but, by depicting quite plausible future versions of our world, also seem to alert their audience of the consequences of late capitalism and consumer society. The novels underline how, as Jameson describes this phenomenon, “no society has ever been so standardized as this one, and that the stream of human, social and historical temporality has never flowed so homogenously” (Jameson 59). The five stories that interest me in particular use certain postmodern themes to work up to a catastrophe, or even an apocalypse. These works are Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and *The Year of the Flood* (2009), and Douglas Coupland’s *Girlfriend in a Coma* (1998), *Generation A* (2009), and *Player One* (2010). However, to simply refer to these novels as “contemporary” would not do them justice: it is too broad a term, as is speculative fiction, although the novels might match this description. “Speculative fiction can bring us that other kind of news; it can speak of what is past and passing, but especially of what’s to come” (Atwood 515). Although labelling a work of fiction is often problematic and “critical categories are as more or less fishy as they are less or more useful” (Barth 200) or, as Atwood says, like “nailing jelly to a wall,” it is important to note that the novels that are the main focus of this thesis can be ascribed to a specific genre in spite of their differences. Neither do these novels belong to the genre of science fiction because this essentially “denotes books with things in them we can’t yet do or begin to do, talking beings we can never meet, and places we can’t go” (Atwood 513). Since no technologies present in these five novels are completely unfamiliar, and since these speculative novels are predominantly dystopian as well as postmodern, I will refer to these novels as *postmodern dystopian* literature throughout my thesis. These late twentieth and early twenty-first century novels present societies that are both brim-full with references
to postmodern culture and capitalist consumerism, and are located in a near, dystopian future. This thesis focuses on these five novels and the representation of certain themes in them, their endings, and their significance as a newly emerged genre in which the concepts of time, technology, and individuality allude to an intense, postmodern, and dystopian future as well as to the possibility of an apocalyptic ending for these future worlds. In order to better understand these novels, some basic knowledge about what postmodernism means is necessary.

Postmodern critic Jean-François Lyotard’s attack on metanarratives is of particular importance in better understanding these novels and their distinct genre. Lyotard, author of *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), is well-known for his discussion of the problem with grand narratives, which he refers to as *grandes histoires* or *grands récits*; narratives that have a legitimizing function, claiming to tell the truth, as commonly seen in religion, science, and political programmes. During the Cold War, such forms of narration started to lose popularity to smaller-scale preoccupations or the *petit récit* (Woods 49). As Stephen Baker puts it, “Lyotard identifies the postmodern with a sceptical stance towards the legitimating function of narrative. (…) he posits the postmodern as a critique of narrative legitimation that extends beyond the specific instance or condition of that particular narrative to encompass a general or totalizing truth” (Baker 65). Typically, postmodern literature does not use such *grands récits* and opts for smaller, more personal narratives or *petits récits* instead: Atwood and Coupland make use of such particular forms of narration, ensuring that readers realize they are only witnessing one side of the story. Woods describes this as “a radically new form of epistemological freedom, resisting the dominance of overarching patterns which appear to ignore the details and experiences of differences in their effort to construct patterns which make sense of the world on a grand scale” (Woods 21). Realities need to be presented thoughtfully, as “there can be no metalanguage in which a thoroughly reliable judgement can
be made” (Gregson 63). This means that, typically, postmodern novels contain narrators of questionable reliability, which holds true for both Atwood’s and Coupland’s fictions discussed here. Further postmodern writing strategies used by Atwood and Coupland are: fragmentation of time and narrative; temporal distortion and disorientation of characters; combinations of genres; and open, ambiguous endings to indicate that there are multiple endings possible, but also to discreetly warn the reader of what could possibly lie ahead. Another typical feature of this new genre is the influence of postmodern culture or *postmodernity*; a concept that describes our socio-economic, political, and cultural condition. Postmodernity is the culture of globalization and can refer to living conditions, cultural activities, and daily life. The consequences of postmodern culture are reflected in Atwood’s and Coupland’s worlds, which all portray late capitalist dystopian societies. Postmodernity is the culture belonging to late capitalism with its hyper consumption, and “postmodernity works hand in glove with our capitalist economy. It plays into the market’s need for innovation, new-ness, from going to one fad to another” (Natoli 160). Postmodern culture is represented as depthless and artificial in these novels, and characters experience difficulty defining what is real and what is fake: Coupland’s characters in particular struggle with finding themselves in the chaos of postmodernity. Atwood appears more concerned about the consequences of consumer society for the planet rather than individuals.

Additionally, some understanding of the term dystopia is necessary, especially because the novels represented here seem to belong to a newer, more current and more postmodern type of dystopia. Several critics have observed a change in fictional dystopias after the Cold War. The more recent works are “in both form and content, reminiscent of the classical dystopias - in political terms clearly situated on the left of the spectrum (…) the dystopic scenarios are the *result* of the triumph and adaptation by Western societies of the values defended by progressive movements” (Domingo 739). Atwood herself agrees that her
novel *Oryx and Crake* is not a classical dystopia because “though it has obvious dystopian elements, we don’t really get an overview of the structure of the society in it, like the one provided in the epilogue of *The Handmaid’s Tale*” (Atwood 517). What characters and thus readers can understand about this world “comes to them through television and the Internet, and is thus suspect, because edited” (Atwood 517). Classical dystopian societies usually contain elements of both satire and tragedy, but whereas famous classical works of dystopian fiction, such as *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949) and *Brave New World* (1932), are mainly focussed on the dangers of political ideologies such as communism, the newly emerged dystopias portray as their main enemy postmodern culture, combined with rapidly developing technology and capitalist consumerism. Whereas of twentieth-century dystopian literature it can be said that “the shocking reversal between high utopian expectations and deep disillusionment with the Soviet attempt at socialism has been central to the nervous vacillation of the utopian-dystopian axis of our times” (Gottlieb 7), this no longer holds true for twenty-first century dystopian works: the novels discussed in this thesis are all post-Cold War and post-communism and have little to do with dangerous political ideologies, as they were written in a world where other dangers, such as epidemics, nuclear war, the running out of finite resources, and the extinction of species are more urgent and pressing.

The combination of twenty-first century dystopian fiction and postmodernist fiction enhances the idea that everything has already been experienced, done before. The novels express a feeling of exhaustion, or “the used-upness of certain forms or the felt exhaustion of certain possibilities” (Barth 64). Being new and original appears close to impossible for both author and characters. In postmodernist literature this exhaustion shows in the use of intertextuality and the borrowing or recycling of ideas from other written works. The most interesting feature of this literature is that it symbolically turns “the artist’s mode or form into a metaphor for his concerns (…) not just the form of the story but the fact of the story is
symbolic; the medium is (part of) the message” (Barth 71). The exhaustion of the literature reflects the exhaustion of the world depicted inside it. The exhausted, dystopian worlds are portrayed as a consequence of the people’s collective environmentally unfriendly and selfish actions, and the dystopian nature of these societies is frequently emphasized by the foreshadowing of an approaching apocalypse. Some critics argue that “when disaster is not followed by a brave new world, all that remains is a permanent state of disaster. Dystopian fiction is thus implicitly postapocalyptic” (Sicher and Skrodol 154). Interestingly, together with the anticipation of an oncoming apocalypse in these dystopian post-disaster worlds, the idea that this was brought upon humanity by human beings themselves is expressed in all five of the discussed novels. The authors clearly emphasize that the catastrophe waiting to happen will most certainly not be a natural disaster, nor will it affect just a small amount of people: the entire postmodern world will suffer from the apocalypse.

The three themes of time, technology, and individuality play important roles in postmodern society and therefore also in the future versions of our world described by Atwood and Coupland. These themes contribute to major plot turns that result in dystopian, sometimes apocalyptical endings. All five novels portray in their own way how an apocalypse would be the logical end to the postmodern world. Interestingly, the novels are not merely works of postmodernist fiction alone, as the worlds described in the novels are highly postmodern themselves: time is fragmented; technology causes individuals to become frightened of the future for various reasons; and consumer society has characters doubt their individuality. Characters feel exhausted, too, and find themselves in almost identical individuality crises that are intertwined with their postmodern lifestyles. This exhaustion is partly why the world coming to an end is no real shock to them: they anticipate it.

Each of the aforementioned themes will have its own chapter, the first being time. In all five of the novels, time can be experienced as accelerated and fragmented, and the future
as inevitable, thus a source of distress. Creative forms of narration accentuate the idea that
time is out of sequence and lived time is no longer in accordance with clock time. In the
worlds where an apocalypse occurs, the concept of time ceases to exist. This timelessness
insinuates the end of history and the end of importance. In another context, Francis Fukuyama
has described the end of history not as the end of the world, but as some sort of stagnation that
reveals itself in the end or absence of battles and the absence of *thymos*.¹ “The end of history
would mean the end of wars and bloody revolutions. Agreeing on ends, men would have no
large causes for which to fight. They would satisfy their needs through economic activity, but
they would no longer have to risk their lives in battle” (Fukuyama 311). In the pre-apocalyptic
worlds, humans appear unmotivated to fight but also unwilling to work hard for anything; the
postmodern man is spoilt and content the way he is. In the post-apocalyptic worlds, the
absence of other human beings creates an even deeper emptiness that allows for anything to
happen without significance as there are no witnesses to account for it. Chapter Two will
illustrate how technology is portrayed as highly advanced and out of control in these worlds.
The authors depict realities in which technology is a few steps ahead of our times and show
the potential dangers of certain developments, such as genetically modified foods, but also
television and the Internet. These are developments that simultaneously pose a threat to the
character’s individuality, which is the main focus of Chapter Three. Individualism has ceased
to be of much importance in these fictional worlds partly because there are more people than
the worlds can handle: being “special” or “different” has become a challenge. Furthermore,
without God or religion to hold on to, characters need to figure out who they are by
themselves. The characters’ identities are very much intertwined with the society they live in:
brands appear to have an impact, as well as television and the Internet, technological
inventions that seemingly remove depth from people’s lives. Lastly, Chapter Four is about the

¹ Thymos: the propensity to feel self-esteem, the wish for recognition by others.
significance of the novels’ open, ambiguous endings that are capable of not only signifying a new era but also, when the ending is apocalyptical, a completely new start. The open endings leave readers wondering whether these endings are to be interpreted as hopeful or discouraging. Essentially, all five of the novels warn of a postmodern apocalypse: an apocalypse that is the result of excessive consumerism, of reckless living, of human beings’ actions. The depicted catastrophes, foreshadowed by the extinction of several plant and animal species, is exclusively to be blamed on humanity.

Atwood and Coupland, then, in their late twentieth and early twenty-first century novels, have these themes contribute to their idea of a postmodern apocalypse. Their preoccupation with certain themes creates a dystopian atmosphere in their fictional, near-future worlds, and emphasize how the authors envision a new type of dystopia. Time, technology, and individuality appear inseparable and somewhat toxic in these dystopian worlds. The concept of time is meditated upon by both Atwood and Coupland to stress how near the future is and how uncertain: characters express feelings of nostalgia when they think of a recent past, and often express feelings of dread toward the future. The authors show how, frustratingly, human beings attempt to control time, as they already “own” and control everything else on Earth. Technology is highly developed in these novels and the characters largely depend on new inventions. The masses, the “common people” inhabiting these worlds, do not fully realize where their consumer goods come from nor comprehend how they came into existence: the societies are thoroughly late-capitalist, meaning that most consumers are far removed from the process of production. Atwood and Coupland subtly raise the question of whether recent technological developments improve or worsen the human condition. Individuality is posed as a problem: it is hard to clearly distinguish oneself from others in these postmodern dystopian worlds, and characters struggle with the idea that being unique might not be possible. Their individuality has been taken from them by factors beyond their
control, two fundamental factors being time and technology. This new kind of dystopia uses a combination of these three themes to create an atmosphere of doom. The characters grow aware that they are gradually moving towards the “End”: the end of an era, the end of a society, and in some cases the end of the world.

“Your sense of time will continue to shred. Years will feel like hours.”
- Douglas Coupland

Chapter One - Time

Time plays an important role in these postmodern dystopias where, by fragmentation and acceleration of time, an apocalyptic atmosphere is created. Time accelerates, until suddenly it comes to a halt and ceases to have significance. As the world gradually moves toward an end, “narrative time can no longer maintain the fallacy of linear progress towards a future oriented better world” (Sicher and Skrodol 167). The sequencing of time is chaotic in several of these fictional worlds, and all five novels express a concern for the uncertain future as well as regrets from the past. The future is portrayed as frightening and doubtful in the postmodern worlds, where time seems to pass faster than ever, and where decisions and developments from the past make it impossible to return to times where technology and new inventions were still regarded as signs of progress instead of threats. Time is characterized as one of the few elements that human beings have no control over. In the worlds depicted by Atwood and Coupland, the planet is portrayed as the helpless victim of human beings’ reckless lifestyles. Only time itself cannot be owned, stopped, or altered, which is experienced as frustrating in this accelerating, postmodern era. The novels’ characters express concerns for the near future

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and the influence time has over their lives. The passing of time is generally portrayed as chaotic and negative whilst a dark future is approaching rapidly.

Coupland’s novel *Girlfriend in a Coma* is the Rip Van Winkle-like story of seventeen-year-old Karen who is in a coma for almost eighteen years. At age thirty-four, she wakes up to an entirely different world; a world in which AIDS exists, whereas the Berlin wall is no longer there. She notices a difference in the perception of passing time (Tate 52). Time appears to go faster, and human beings seem too absorbed in their work-lives to notice time passing whilst they no longer have leisure time. Karen sees a hardness in people that she never detected before, as if they have lost the capability of enjoying themselves. She says: “they’re isolated. People work much more, only to go home and surf the Internet and send e-mail rather than calling or writing a note or visiting each other. (…) People are frazzled and angry, desperate about money, and, at best, indifferent to the future” (GC 153). This indifference or carelessness is also visible in the lives led by her friends: they escape thinking about the future by becoming alcoholics, workaholics, and drug addicts. Before, during, and after her coma, Karen receives ambiguous warnings about the future, and receives glimpses of the end of the world; the collapse of time. Andrew Tate explains that “Karen’s defamiliarizing, 1970s perspective allows Coupland to re-examine a world in which time has been restructured by countless labour-saving devices and a mechanised desire for efficiency. The major conceit of the novel is that Karen’s missing seventeen years anticipate the global collapse of time itself: human history comes to an abrupt end and chronology appears to evaporate” (Tate 52). Richard, the main narrator and Karen’s boyfriend, observes: “the seventies were over. With them left a sweetness, a gentleness. No longer could modern citizens pretend to be naïve. We were now jaded: the world was spinning more quickly” (GC 45). Although Richard understands her to some extent, Karen turns out to be the only one who realizes how quickly the world has changed, and is the sole human being who knows exactly
how much time is left before the inevitable apocalypse. Time, in that sense, can be seen here as accelerated, hurried, and inevitable, as the future in this novel appears to be fixed.

Another Coupland novel in which time seems to accelerate is Player One, a novel that takes place in about five hours. In this small timeframe, the world turns apocalyptic when the price of oil goes up drastically and the world resorts to panic. Its setting is an airport cocktail lounge in Toronto; thus, interestingly, both time and space are kept in narrow frames. In this novel, time seemingly accelerates as situations escalate. Furthermore, the sense that the characters have no control over what is happening in the novel contributes to the idea of humanity’s incapability of influencing time. Throughout the novel, direct references to time can be found, such as in the character’s thoughts. “Karen thinks, Our curse as humans is that we are trapped in time; our curse is that we are forced to interpret life as a sequence of events—a story—and if we can’t find out what that story is, we are lost somehow” (PO 5). The idea of the human “animal” with its idiosyncratic and obsessive need to locate itself in time is frequently returned to in Coupland’s works of fiction (Tate 51). The willingness of this character, another Karen, to interpret life “in sequence” is shared by several of Coupland’s other characters in other novels, and is articulated particularly to stress the fact that human beings, in this postmodern era, find themselves without a logical time sequence. Instead, there are little fragments of time, a phenomenon described by Jameson as follows: “Time is today a function of speed, and evidently perceptible only in terms of its rate or velocity as such: as though the old Bergsonian opposition between measurement and life, clock time and lived time, had dropped out” (Jameson 51). The representation of time as fragmented is a postmodern characteristic visible in practically all of Coupland’s fictional works, starting with his debut novel Generation X (1991), where many situations appear to be random, unconnected to previous moments, keeping his characters disoriented yet alert. In Player One time also appears to be out of sequence. The thoughts of Rachel in the final chapter, narrated
as Player One, Rachel’s digital alter ego, draw attention to this phenomenon: “Society collectively lost the sense that an era feels like an era – they forgot the way it felt when time and emotions and culture were particular to one spot in time, the way I suppose decades felt in the twentieth century. And lives stopped feeling like lives” (PO 211). The time slots or sequences in Coupland’s novels are narrated by several characters so that the reader does not only witness various events, but also gains different perspectives on the same event. There is not one way to read or interpret the story because, as Lyotard says, “It is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented” (Lyotard 81). This has been done on purpose: “Coupland’s fractured sequence of narratives, his novel constructed from multiple petits récits, is a late twentieth-century response to avant-garde narrative techniques at work in American fiction since the 1960s” (Tate 44). This partially holds true for Margaret Atwood’s style, too, as she also plays with time, petit récit, and situates her chapters out of sequence.

Atwood makes use of multiple narrators in both Oryx and Crake and The Year of the Flood and, to make the fragmentation of time even more apparent, also mixes chapters that take place before and after the apocalypse: the narrative of Jimmy/Snowman in Oryx and Crake has a double time-scheme. “The narrative alternates in consecutive chapters between the present story of Snowman and the past story of Jimmy, moving forward in a more-or-less linear fashion through each story until the point at which the past ‘catches up’ with the present” (Snyder 475). This creative form of narration suits the state of confusedness in which Snowman finds himself. He is trapped between the new, post-apocalyptic world where time has ceased to be of importance, and the old world, to which he cannot return. The Crakers do not understand the concept of time, and Snowman is the only one who remembers the past, which is the only type of time that still exists, in memory, for as long as Snowman lives. The narrative reflects and highlights the broken connections between past and present, and
between present and future (Hollinger 456). The recent past seems distant, and so does the future: Snowman cannot picture a future, and the possibility of a future in this world is only manifested in Atwood’s later novel, *The Year of the Flood*. This novel can be read as a sequel to *Oryx and Crake*, as it takes place during the same apocalypse and includes some of the same characters. The most striking differences between the novels are the focus and the location: *Oryx and Crake* takes place mostly in the *Compounds*, guarded wealthy neighbourhood areas, whereas *The Year of the Flood* focuses on a group of people called The God’s Gardeners, located in the outskirts or slums of the city, referred to as the *pleeblands*. These God’s Gardeners are anticipating and preparing for some sort of catastrophic event, which they refer to as “The Waterless Flood”. It is suggested that this will not be a flood in the biblical sense per se, as the imminent disaster will not be some divine retribution caused by God: it will be Godless, unnatural, and caused by human beings alone: they are responsible for it. The Gardeners do not yet know what this disaster will look like but they realize, and religiously accept, that humanity has brought whatever is coming upon itself. Halfway through the novel main character Toby realizes:

“We’re using up the Earth. It’s almost gone. You can’t live with such fears and keep on whistling. The waiting builds up in you like a tide. You start wanting it to be done with. You find yourself saying to the sky, *Just do it. Do your worst. Get it over with*. She could feel the coming tremor of it going through her spine, asleep or awake. It never went away, even among the Gardeners. Especially – as time wore on – among the Gardeners” (YF 285).

The leader of the Gardeners, Adam One, educates the others and often preaches about time. He comes up with an interesting alternative perception of time: he argues that the sixth day of creation, the creation of Man, could still be on-going. Time might be going fast for earthlings, but God is perhaps not yet finished with creating man, meaning that humanity would be placed at the beginning of time rather than at the end of it. Adam says: “God cannot be held to the narrowness of literal and materialistic interpretations, nor measured by Human
measurements, for His days are eons, and a thousand days of our time are like an evening to Him” (YF 14). Even though the novel’s main characters are not religious as such, both Toby and Ren firmly believe that this Waterless Flood is approaching. The “Flood” is foreshadowed by several events, such as the continuous extinction of a great number of plant and animal species, and the significant near-extinction of honeybees, a theme also addressed by Douglas Coupland in Generation A. This is an actual problem: “The strange phenomenon known as colony collapse disorder came to light in 2006, when the first reports came in of bees abandoning their hives and disappearing” (Goldenberg). The disappearance of honeybees and the reality of this matter is used in these postmodern dystopian fictions to stress that such issues are already visible today, and warns against an extravagant consumerist lifestyle.

The absence of time, in Snowman’s world, resembles a permanent state of present where human beings’ actions are no longer relevant. Snowman gradually grows depressed, and considers committing suicide. Snowman is the name of Jimmy post-apocalypse, and the novel starts off with him, the last human being left alive, looking at his watch. When Snowman does this, “it causes a jolt of terror to run through him, this absence of official time. Nobody nowhere knows what time it is” (OC 3). In the timeless world, Snowman is haunted by memories and voices from the past; the voice of Oryx especially taunts him. Even though his friend Crake created new beings to inhabit the world and for Snowman to look after, Snowman cannot picture a future now without other human beings around. The new beings or Crakers have no sense of time nor of the future: the world in which they live consists of a permanent present. The world without time means a world without history, without any historical or cultural relevance. “Atwood’s new world on the other side of technoscientific disaster, product of culture’s ultimate reconstruction of nature, has all-too-quickly arrived at the same ‘end of history’ as Wells gives us in The Time Machine” (Hollinger 457). On the last page of Oryx and Crake, Snowman walks towards three people roasting a rakunk, a hybrid
cross-bred animal, and wonders what Crake would have wanted him to do next. It is not completely certain whether he intends to kill these people or himself as the ending is ambiguous, open to interpretation. The last sentence is as follows: “From habit he lifts his watch; it shows him its blank face. Zero hour, Snowman thinks. Time to go” (OC 433).

Death and the apocalypse, the world without time, is both inescapable and meaningless because any historical framework that could interpret individual deaths has been destroyed (Jameson 61). Snowman dreads the present, which makes for an interesting paradox with the world portrayed in Coupland’s Generation A, where most people wish to only live in an intense present in order to escape thinking about the past and worrying about the future. The end of history has arrived, and the people have become the “last men” whom Francis Fukuyama described in 1992 as “men without chests” (Fukuyama xxii), products of capitalism and liberal democracy; humans who are content with their situation, lacking thymos, and therefore do not try to excel, compete, or be much better than other human beings. “For them, the liberal project of filling one’s life with material acquisitions and safe, sanctioned ambitions appears to have worked all too well. It is hard to detect great, unfulfilled longings or irrational passions lurking just beneath the surface of their existence” (Fukuyama 336). This is even more clearly depicted in Coupland’s Girlfriend in a Coma, Ipod (2006), and Generation X (1991), where characters are utterly bored with their unchallenging lives. In Generation A, the majority of the world’s population escapes from reality and their ennui by taking Solon. This drug is advertised as designed for people who do not want to think about the future: “SOLON CR is indicated for the short-term treatment of psychological unease grounded in obsession with thinking about the near and distant future” (GA 112). Addicts live in a constant and intense present. Solon turns people “from a dog into a cat” in the way that they become completely independent and highly selfish. None of the five main characters in Generation A are taking Solon – they even turn out to be allergic to it – and particularly Harj,
from Sri Lanka, who glorifies American society before he actually witnesses it with his own eyes, does not understand why anybody would take such a drug. To him this addiction, which has taken on pandemic proportions, is absurd: why would young, healthy Americans need a drug like that? He tells them: “But to not think of the future? All of you smart and rich young people – whose future could be more charming and golden?” (GA 159).

In Girlfriend in a Coma, the protagonists survive the apocalypse and are only then fully able to understand the meaninglessness and uselessness of their previous selfish and consumerist lives: there was nothing charming or golden about it. The friends witness what could possibly be the world’s actual end. Time has stopped in a similar way as in Oryx and Crake, as the group of friends are the only survivors of what appears to be a pandemic sleep, of which Karen receives confirmation through a vision. She proclaims: “The world’s over now. Our time begins” (GC 206). This start, resulting from the end, seems promising: the friends have the world to themselves, for an unknown period of time, and they could start over if they wanted. The world is breathlessly awaiting the advent of the Homo superior (Gomel 345), yet the survivors undertake no action whatsoever. The friends live recklessly for about one year, taking whatever they want from supermarkets and setting fire to buildings. Pamela and Hamilton drink whisky and watch old movies all day while pretending to be the movie stars in them. Finally Jared, their ghost-friend from the past, reappears to give his friends an ultimatum after their year of relentless living. “This past year - if you’d have tried - you would have seen even more clearly the futility of trying to change the world without the efforts of everybody else on Earth.” Jared is disappointed in his friends’ reaction to the apocalypse:

You saw and smelled and drank the evidence of six billion disasters that can only be mended by six billion people. A thousand years ago this wouldn’t have been the case. If human beings had suddenly vanished a thousand years ago, the planet would have healed overnight with no damage. (…) One hundred years ago-or even fifty years ago-the world
would have healed itself just fine in the absence of people. But not now. We crossed the line. The only thing that can keep the planet turning smoothly now is human free will forged into effort. (GC 265)

In the absence of time, Coupland’s characters constantly pretend to be living in the past, and hold on to it. They miss the nineties and associate the past with a state of innocence, of which Karen is a good example. Wendy thinks: “Friends and family want to protect Karen and her innocence from the modern world, the changes that have occurred since her sleep began. Her innocence is the benchmark of their jadedness and corruption. The world is hard now. The world doesn’t like simplicity or relaxation” (GC 138-139). Snowman actually misses a dystopian version of the world, including its many imperfections. He and others of his generation never knew any other world, which is why this novel surpasses feelings of nostalgia: the new generation does not remember what the world used to be like, and unlike their ancestors they have no past to mourn.

In dystopian worlds where the past is already too remote for nostalgia, the main focus becomes the imminent future. Characters in all five novels are undoubtedly frightened: they know they will have to face the future humans have created for themselves, and they dread what it might look like. Several, such as the group of five in Generation A, acknowledge that they are supposed to try and change it; it becomes their calling. This also applies to the survivors in The Year of the Flood and Girlfriend in a Coma, as they appear to be the only ones to realize the severity of their worlds’ situation. They imagine that, unless serious measures are taken, the future will be terrible. “After the worst has already happened (…), the future can be imagined as a replay of disaster scenarios, in which we compulsively repeat past imagining of the future. This is a distinctly postmodernism marker of an end to the Western tradition of looking forward to the terminal transformation of the world” (Sicher and Skrodol 159). As these novels are late-twentieth and early twenty-first century works, written after
World War II and the Cold War, and most also after 9/11, the “terrible future” has, in a sense, already happened. Utopian dreams have gradually lost their credibility after actual disaster, and ceased to be in fashion after World War II (Fry 189). The wish to go back in time, then, mainly results from feelings of remorse that such disasters have happened to occur in the real world, which is also expressed by the novels’ characters: “Just last month, in the break room with Dr. Yamato, Karen joked that the smartest thing science could do was to make a pill called September 10: if you took it, it would be as if 9/11 had never happened. Now Karen wants a pill that would make the whole twenty-first century disappear – that will make this unavoidable future vanish” (PO 174-175). Because of recent history it has become easier for both reader and character to imagine more terrible events happening in the future. Finally, characters realize that resources are running out and that this will affect everyone. In Player One, soon after the rude awakening of the price of oil becoming 600 dollars a barrel, Luke reckons: “If we don’t mutate quickly, in ten thousand years we’re merely going to be the same humans we are now, except we’ll have run out of resources” (PO 111).

In both Atwood’s and Coupland’s fiction, past times represent a state of innocence, whilst in the present, characters have to deal with feelings of resentment, responsibility, and guilt. The characters deal with these feelings in different ways: in Girlfriend in a Coma they take excessive amounts of alcohol and drugs not to think about the future, the masses in Generation A take a drug specifically designed to live in an intense present, and characters in Player One merely follow the news and worry. Atwood’s characters are also worried but feel responsible enough to try and make changes while preparing themselves for the worst. Whereas Toby in The Year of the Flood tries to live an environment-friendly life even before the Flood, the friends in Girlfriend in a Coma only decide to try and make positive changes after they have actually experienced the consequences of postmodern consumer lifestyle. In Atwood’s novels, a secret community exists that tries to ruin the capitalist world by
engineering animals that seem normal, but are programmed to destroy things, with the help of Crake, bio-engineer and mastermind behind the apocalypse. He decides to take measures into his own hands and designs both a virus to extinguish the human population, thus human history, as well as a brand-new species to populate the Earth instead of human beings, whom he despises. Interestingly, in all of these novels, the idea that a final disaster or apocalypse is right or justified dominates. Lyotard phrases it as follows: “Under the general demand for slackening and for general appeasement, we can hear the mutterings of the desire for a return of terror, for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality” (Lyotard 82). Humanity is asking for it, which is emphasized especially towards the end of the novels: the depicted problems can be seen as direct consequences of the actions of human beings, who have not worked hard enough to change their worlds, and are therefore not too surprised when catastrophe hits their world. The technologies developed in these worlds and the reluctance of humans to do anything about the consequences of them may have damaged the world beyond repair, and that which has been fantasized and speculated about before is now imminent, with not enough time left for any damage control.

“You're going to miss the 1990s more than you ever thought”

- Douglas Coupland

Chapter Two – Technology

In this postmodern age, recent technological developments have drastically changed society in just a few decades, and the novels with which this thesis deals raise the question whether these developments improve or worsen the human condition. In the novels, technology is

portrayed as highly advanced, addictive, and often out of control. Its presence in this type of literature emphasizes a concern for future developments as the portrayed technologies are at least equally culturally dominant in these fictional worlds as in our own. Atwood is mainly concerned with the effects technology can have on the planet: species die out and resources run out in the world of *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*. Douglas Coupland recognizes these problems, too, yet focuses more on how technology influences human beings on a personal and cultural level. Both authors express a certain fear or anxiety toward the postmodern future and, although in different ways, seem to want to alert the reader that if we continue down this consumerist road, the world will become a dark place. Technology influences the postmodern world as well as its inhabitants. The lives the characters lead represent how in capitalist consumer societies “technology makes possible the limitless accumulation of wealth, and thus the satisfaction of an ever-expanding set of human desires” (Fukuyama xiv). The novels portray how humans quickly grow accustomed to new technologies and become increasingly lazy, greedy, and demanding. Questions are raised, such as: for how long can our planet handle consumerism on such a large scale, and also, to what extent does technology influence human beings? The highly developed technology in these five novels poses a threat to both the planet and its people: “Dystopia has finally arrived because, on the one hand, the reconstitution of society seems impossible while, on the other, technology threatens basic concepts of individual freedom and of human life” (Sicher and Skrodol 166). Characters are more defined by technology than they realize: they have become highly dependent on new inventions, and are in some cases even addicted to them.

The three of Coupland’s novels discussed here are full of references to technology and its contribution to man’s downfall. It is described as the root of various problems that the characters struggle with. First of all, there is the Internet, of particular importance in *Generation A* and *Player One*. Not only do characters in *Generation A* communicate through
the Internet and, at the end of the novel, try to use it to reach the rest of the world with the truth about Solon, but one of the characters is a former World of Warcraft addict. Julien gets stung by a bee whilst sitting on a bench in Bois de Vincennes, right after his online alter ego has suddenly disappeared. He panics: “I had spent 114 solid days in-game on World of Warcraft, and was at the end of a twenty-four-hour levelling jag, when my avatar vanished. Not even a little pouf of smoke - I, Xxanhtroxxusxx, simply ceased to be. I did the usual things. I shut down. I unplugged. I rebooted. I checked the options and preferences. I logged back into the world. And still I was gone” (GA 18). At the moment of his bee sting, Julien has no sense of time and does not even realize what day it is. He appears to be controlled by technology, a simple videogame, rather than the other way around. This fear of humans’ “enslavement by machines” goes at least as far back as Marx’s theory and the concern that the labourer would become “an appendage of the machine” (Marx and Engels). In the twenty-first century, the machine is present everywhere, within and beyond the workplace, and as the twenty-first century man seems inseparable from inventions such as television and Internet this concern has only grown. Where the concern of Marx and Engels was that “the modern laborer, (…) instead of rising with the progress of industry, sinks deeper and deeper below the conditions of existence of his own class,” today the concern expressed in postmodern dystopian literature is that the modern consumer is sinking into enslavement to addictive machines. Julien’s isolation for scientific research is beneficial for him as it forces him to cope with living offline; it helps him realize how “enslaved” his former self was. Later, on the remote island of Haida Gwaii, Julien is grateful for the experience: “Finally, my life was a story. My days would no longer feel like a video game that resets to zero every time I wake up, and then begs for coins” (GA 170).

The mentioning of Google hits and celebrities, along with an abundance of brand names (Häagen-Dazs, Wii, Toblerone, Kellogg’s, Abercrombie & Fitch) indicates how
interwoven the future world is with postmodern culture in Coupland’s work. *Player One* contains a character that has much in common with Julien, namely Rachel, a beautiful nineteen-year-old girl with an interesting condition: multiple structural anomalies in her limbic system affect her personality, as she cannot tell faces apart, nor can she understand humour or irony. This is why Rachel prefers the online world over the actual world: she can be herself there without being exposed to difficult face-to-face communication. Unlike Rachel, Luke, a former priest, does not find any consolation in the online world: “Karen is obviously here to hook up with someone she’s met on the Internet. Luke can’t believe how many people meet on the Internet these days. It came out of nowhere and now it’s the cause of over half the problems his flock comes to him with: online gambling debt, get-rich-quick schemes, porn addiction, parents freaked out about the sites their kids visit, shopaholism” (PO 23). Luke certainly is nostalgic for the days before the Internet, when his flock used to confess to him their “more interesting” problems, such as shoplifting or having an affair. Karen of *Player One* is also uncomfortable with the online world. On her way to Toronto she notices a young man on the plane taking pictures of her and then wonders on what website he will post her. Such references emphasize the popularity of modern inventions and the speed at which human beings become accustomed to them. Several of Coupland’s other novels, such as *Microserfs* (1995), anticipating the internet boom of the late nineties, and *Ipod* (2006), featuring a group of video-game programmers, revolve around the world of computer geeks and emphasize how the development of new computer technologies can influence society.

Other technologies featuring in Coupland’s worlds are associated with the food industry, the scientific and medical world, and the development of drugs. In *Girlfriend in a Coma* technology has, in seventeen years, “improved”. Cars are faster and cleaner, there is cloning, new foods – “it suddenly got good around 1988” – and new cosmetics. However, Karen does not see these developments as improvements because, according to her, the
appearance of new technologies has caused human beings to collectively devolve: “I remember when I first woke up how people kept on trying to impress me with how efficient the world had become. What a weird thing to brag about, eh? Efficiency. I mean, what’s the point of being efficient if you’re only leading an efficiently blank life?” (GC 214).

Technology and time are closely and quite logically linked here because as time progresses, more inventions are developed - and faster than ever. The speed at which technology has developed is clearly experienced as frightening among older generations (Karen of Player One is an example of this), whereas younger generations desperately try to keep up, gradually losing themselves in digital worlds. What Karen of Girlfriend of a Coma experiences after she awakens is nothing compared to what she would have woken up to just a decade later. Still, the difference between the world of 1979 and 1997 is striking. Karen’s friends try to “update” her and introduce her to everything new. Karen remains sceptical about new inventions, and is more interested in the change she perceives in people, who she claims have empty looks in their eyes. The biggest difference Karen perceives is that her friends are now using drink and drugs to cloud their better judgement, and are completely accustomed to new technologies, thus unable to see them for what they are: part of devolution, part of the culture that assists in degenerating human kind.

In Generation A, the development of Solon started out as an experiment to design a drug that would alter the taker’s perception of time. The time-stretching drug turned out to have a soothing and calming effect to which the scientists became addicted themselves and therefore, in spite of the difficulty and expense of production, they decided to keep on producing it, especially because the drug turned out to have “a one-hundred-percent user satisfaction rate and a one-hundred-percent word of mouth recommendation rate” (GA 337). The novel’s protagonists, eventually all put into quarantine, are of special interest to these scientists because they are allergic to their drug. The individuals are brought into futuristic,
isolated rooms for thorough medical examination. For several weeks they are allowed no human contact, they have to eat unfamiliar substances that resemble jelly, and voices speak to them through invisible speakers to provide them with little to no information as to what is going on. The food in this future world is interesting, not only the substance the characters are fed in quarantine, but also the way “regular food” has developed. As the bees have all died out, apples are hard to come by and fought over on eBay. Corn has become one of the main reasons why the majority of the world’s population is morbidly obese. This is learned from Zack, a young man working in the corn industry in Mahaska County, Iowa, who is stung by a bee in his combine tractor. “Corn is a fucking nightmare,” he says, “A thousand years ago it was a stem of grass with one scuzzy little kernel; now it’s a bloated, foot-long, buttery carb dildo” (GA 3). This, too, is a contemporary issue that is considered an unhealthy recent development. The novel critiques this issue; Zack mentions that the corn industry’s response to this phenomenon is that they are completely blameless, while consumers are kept in the dark.

In Atwood’s two novels, consumers are also purposely kept ignorant: citizens have no knowledge of how their foods are manufactured and are specifically educated to only support the extremely capitalist system, not to question it. Everything in this world is approached from a business point of view, which is underlined when Crake’s father, a top researcher at HealthWyzer, mysteriously disappears after he discovers that HealthWyzer supplements contain viruses to make an even larger profit from the selling of their antidotes. If the people are not slaves of their machines, then at least they are slaves of consumer society: the novels emphasize that “the people of the United States are concerned with their material comfort and their individual well-being. They are self-absorbed and intent on acquiring the latest gadgets and responding to the latest fashions” (Williams et al. 177). The people are merely regarded as consumers and happily play that role; they follow the path of least resistance. Typical
consumer goods in the world of *Oryx and Crake* are ChickieNobs, Happicuppa coffee, and pigoons.

The human and the natural are re-engineered, genetically manipulated to something cheaper, easier, more profitable, and more addictive. The scientists working for wealthy compound corporations that create these products are not expected to ask questions, let alone ethical ones. Crake realizes that there are many defects in the society he lives in, and especially, defects in the human race. He dreams of drastically changing the human population, which is why besides designing the BlyssPluss pill, the drug that spreads the lethal virus that eventually exterminates the entire human population on Earth save for Jimmy, he also designs new creatures that are, according to him, the perfect replacements for human beings. Every now and then, Jimmy and Crake discuss the elements that they dislike in humans: Crake challenges Jimmy to think about these things mainly because he wants to test if Jimmy shares his sympathies. Crake believes the whole concept of love unnecessarily complicates the lives of humans, and finds it highly unpractical. He creates the Crakers so that they never want anyone they cannot have. Even in *The Year of The Flood*, where Crake occurs a few times as a boy called Glenn, his actual name, his sympathies and master plan are already foreshadowed:

> Illness is a design fault,” said the boy. “It could be corrected.” Yes – he was definitely Compound. Only brainiacs from there talked like that: not answering your question up front, then saying some general kind of thing as if they knew it for a fact. Was that the way my real father had talked like? Maybe. “So, if you were making the world, you’d make it better?” I said. Better than God, is what I meant. All of a sudden I was feeling pious, like Bernice. Like a Gardener. “Yes,” he said, “As a matter of fact, I would. (YF 177)

The creatures secretly developed by Crake in his Paradice Dome are specifically programmed not to have any of human kind’s design faults. They would be unable to understand love, humour, ethics, racism, sarcasm, or art. Snowman is supposed to look after the creatures, and
Crake tells him what he needs to do: “Watch out for art, Crake used to say. As soon as they start doing art, we’re in trouble. Symbolic thinking of any kind would signal downfall, in Crake’s view. Next they’d be inventing idols, and funerals, and grave goods, and the afterlife, and sin, and Linear B, and kings, and then slavery and war” (OC 419-420). Crake’s way of thinking is, in many ways, similar to the beliefs of Adam One, who is convinced that human beings are defective and, as mentioned before, unfinished. He also believes that the future of human kind will be dark and unpleasant. A firm believer in the Waterless Flood, Adam One also argues that humanity is in a state of devolution and, like Karen, blames technology.

Crake wants to drastically change the world and, engineering the human, uses modern technologies to do it. Growing up, Crake and his friend Jimmy play a lot of videogames such as Blood and Roses or Barbarian Stomp; mostly violent and crude games that glorify war and history. One day Crake discovers a new game: EXTINCTATHON, monitored by someone who calls himself MaddAddam. “Adam named the living animals, MaddAddam names the dead ones. Do you want to play?” By winning at this game, Crake comes into contact with the Gardeners through some sort of messaging programme hidden inside it. Crake helps the Gardeners by designing animals, destructive weevil, as well as bombs to attack and destroy infrastructure, restaurant chains, and Hapicuppa coffee plantations. Part of his genius is due to the excellent education he received at the Watson-Crick institute, a highly technological university with technologically advanced teaching materials. There is a noteworthy difference between Jimmy’s school, the run-down Martha Graham Academy, school for the highly undervalued arts, where the dorms have cockroaches and students can easily pass through cheating, and Crake’s university – high-tech, modern, wealthy, and clean. The government surely does not care for investing in the arts, which are supposedly only studied by those with poor grades in the sciences. This novel clearly illustrates “how education that separates scientific and aesthetic ways of knowing produces ignorance and a wounded world” (Squier),
and emphasizes the idea of a division or disturbed balance between art and science that is further addressed in Chapter Three.

Not only is technology depicted as superior and as the cause of an unbalanced world, it is also depicted as addictive, particularly in Coupland’s worlds. Characters such as Julien and Rachel can be said to be internet addicts, and Rachel even admits that she is more comfortable being her online alter ego Player One than herself.  

Player One takes place only a few years into the future, in a world not strikingly different from ours when it comes to the available technologies in it. Technology is very casually present in this novel: television, the Internet, and smartphones play a seemingly subordinate role, causing technology to appear as neither a major problem nor an imminent threat. Technology is definitely portrayed as having a bad influence on human beings through Karen’s eyes in Girlfriend in a Coma. Even though the newly developed devices are more efficient, new technologies have changed human beings into work-absorbed gourches, and the emptiness that Karen detects in people she interprets as proof. The negative effects of technology and consumer society are especially emphasized after everyone but Karen and her friends falls asleep. What they witness is a toxic world with radiation, roads full of abandoned cars, dead bodies everywhere, and weather that “isn’t weather anymore” (GC 254). They get to see what a post-postmodernist world would look like. All three of Coupland’s novels emphasize how postmodern life is carelessly lived in the present, without much regard for the future, whilst suggesting that a price will have to be paid. Several of the consequences of postmodernity are already palpable: “Together with the postmodernism of lifestyle and consumer choice there is, necessarily, another postmodernism: that of deregulation, dispersal and disruption, as the securities of tradition and community are continually crushed” (Malpas 3). In both Atwood’s and Coupland’s worlds, the technologies developed in consumer society is responsible for the extinction of many animal and plant species, the decay of the planet, and the disorientation of the western world citizen – a balance
has been disturbed: “Late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines” (Haraway 152). The balance between what is real and what is artificial has been disrupted, causing human beings to be confused as to where they belong, which is clearly reflected in Atwood’s and Coupland’s novels – particularly by their characters’ identity crises.

“You've become a notch in the Internet's belt. Don't try to delude yourself that you're a romantic lone individual. To the new order, you're just a node. There is no escape.”

- Doulgas Coupland

Chapter Three - Individuality

Difficulties with finding one’s identity are experienced by many of the characters portrayed in Atwood’s and Coupland’s works and emphasize how, in postmodern culture, it has become challenging to distinguish oneself from everybody else. The novels, each in their own way, portray how “lives are unravelling; the American Dream is taking up space in Disneyland; everyone’s individual life is going on-line, virtual-face-to-virtual-face in cyberspace. And when and if we think about postmodernity, we see it as the root and cause of all this” (Natoli 7). Several characters struggle with the idea that being unique might not even be possible in their postmodern consumer societies. Furthermore, the influence of television and the Internet on individuality is notable in all novels: watching distressing and repulsive programmes has

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damaged Jimmy, and characters in Coupland’s novels *Generation A* and *Player One* have become Internet addicts. These novels reflect how people’s social lives have become less personal because of new technological inventions (Malpas). Their individuality has partially been taken from them by factors beyond their control, such as modern technology, marketing, and large corporations. Then there is the idea that people’s personalities are genetically preselected, and that that which they believe makes them unique can simply be ascribed to genetics or malfunctions of the brain. In *Player One*, Rachel already believes that her personality is mainly the result of genetics.

In *The Year of the Flood* and *Oryx and Crake*, individuals are divided into two distinct groups, which influences their identity: either they belong to the rich suburbs, or to the slums or *pleeblands*. In the suburbs is a very clear division between “science people” and “arts people”, or scientists versus literary intellectuals: the ones who study science or bio-engineering are certain to get a proper job with proper payment, whereas the ones studying art are regarded as inferior snobs, and often cannot find well-paid jobs. This division between arts and science possibly refers back to a problem detected in the late fifties by C. P. Snow, who spoke of “two cultures” or two distinct “groups” of people that, even though they are “comparable in intelligence, identical in race, not grossly different in social origin, earning about the same incomes,” have “almost ceased to communicate at all,” because in the intellectual, moral, and psychological climate they have very little in common (Snow 84). In his 1959 lecture, Snow explains that he believes that “the intellectual life of the whole of western society is increasingly being split into two polar groups” (Snow 87), and Atwood’s future world clearly represents a western world where science and arts have absolutely nothing in common any more. Crake is a highly intelligent scientist but does not understand art or love: “Watson-Crick has trained Crake to ignore his emotions and even his dreams” (Squier). He knows little about art or history and therefore does not appreciate it.
Furthermore, it appears as though science has gradually replaced religion, a phenomenon typical of postmodernity: “It is undeniable that capitalism and science emerged as a result of the decline of metaphysical, religious, and political certainties concerning the nature of reality” (Habib 124). Atwood and Coupland both place an emphasis on how postmodernity somehow reduces the possibility of being and feeling individual by having their characters experience “crises” of individuality and by having them openly worry about the concept.

In both author’s worlds, characters often do not feel of individual importance, too insignificant to make any life-changing decisions, as they encounter a very postmodern “lack of challenge that may be experienced by individuals who live in material plenty and political security” (Williams et al. 176). In Girlfriend in a Coma, characters try to escape from both their unchallenging lives and the approaching and worrisome future by losing themselves in mind-altering substances or work, and thus become alcoholics, addicts, or their jobs.

Reflecting on their past, the friends realize that they never fundamentally changed their personalities. Richard says: “I have always noticed in high school yearbooks the similarity of all the graduate write-ups—how, after only a few pages, the identities of all the unsullied young faces blur, how one person melts into another and another” (GC 32). Richard and his friends have always waited for the moment they became “crisp individuals”, although this moment never arrived. The way they spend their time determines who they are: Wendy has become her job, Richard an alcoholic, and their friend Linus travels around the Unites States for many years, mainly in search of himself, yet when he comes back he has not had any life-changing revelations. Bitter and disillusioned, Linus starts to accuse others of being fake, or of “not being genuine,” and accuses Hamilton of talking in “little TV bits”. He confronts him, saying: “You’re never sincere. You’re never nice. You used to be a little nice one. I don’t think you’ve ever had a real conversation in your life. (…) you’re not even boring. You’re just kind of scary” (GC 82). Pamela has had a career as a supermodel, and seems to be the
only one who has “lived the dream,” but comes back with less personality than she had before she modelled. She regrets her model career, reflecting back on it as a waste of time or, as interpreted by Tate, “a period when she incarnated desire culture, because it has diminished rather than intensified her sense of individuality” (Tate 54). At age forty, the friends still have that same feeling they had when they were in high school: that the future is undefined, ahead of them. The only difference is that they are older now and thus have less time to “become someone”. The choice the characters make to go back in time and attempt to change the planet is what finally gives them a purpose in life; a story. They need this because they do not believe they can fundamentally change their lives themselves: “I read about this study,” Wendy says to her friends, “The researchers learned that no matter how hard you tried, the most you could possibly change your personality—your self—was five percent (GC 81)”.

Coupland appears preoccupied with this subject, as characters in Player One and Generation A, too, are concerned with their personalities and their uniqueness being in the hands of forces beyond their control.

One of these forces is technology: especially in combination with science, personality suddenly becomes a biological or genetic factor rather than anything else. Furthermore, the invention of the Internet has several characters obsessed with the idea of leaving something behind after they die, or having the world remember them somehow. Luke of Player One half-jokingly says: “I want to be part of history. I want a Wikipedia page. I want Google hits. I don’t want to be just a living organism that comes and goes and leaves no trace on this planet” (PO 202). Luke, just like the characters in Girlfriend in a Coma and Generation A, selfishly wishes for his life to be a story of some kind. At the end of Player One, Rachel observes: “Seeing one’s life as a story seemed like a nostalgic residue from an era where energy was cheap and the notion of the super-special, ultra-important individual with blogs and Google hits and a killer résumé was a conceit the planet was still able to materially
support. In the New Normal we need to trip ourselves from notions of individual importance” (PO 211). In Atwood’s world as well as several of Coupland’s, characters fear that they will eventually be remembered as mere numbers rather than persons. Comments related to individuality in postmodern times frequently appear in Coupland’s works and are often related to technology and popular culture: “Books turn people into isolated individuals, and once that’s happened, the road only grows rockier. Books wire you to want to be Steve McQueen, but the world wants you to be SMcQ23667bot@hotmail.com” (GA 265). In defence of her syndrome, Rachel says that “personality” is actually the result of a multifactorial gene process, simultaneously addressing the question to what extent people’s individuality is defined by their conditions and to what extent people have their personalities in their own hands. Rachel and Crake have in common that they both prefer to think extremely rationally about life: Rachel because she is unable to not take situations literally and therefore depends on facts for her interpretations, and Crake because he appears to be “programmed” to ignore his emotions and only trust science, as his education at Watson-Crick has ensured. The downside of his purely technical education is that Crake thinks of human beings as faulty machines that are in desperate need of improvement. Only the rational, only that which can be proven, exists.

It is therefore not surprising that, to most inhabitants of Atwood’s world, God does not exist, although several human beings do find refuge in the company of groups of people such as the Gardeners because with them they pose no direct threats to the regime. Adam One explains to Toby: “They view us as twisted fanatics who combine food extremism with bad fashion sense and a puritanical attitude towards shopping. But we own nothing they want, so we don’t qualify as terrorists” (YF 58). Toby chooses to join the Gardeners not for religious reasons but for practical ones: in their company, she is at least moderately safe from gangs and the CorpSeCorps. Although initially Toby feels like a fraud for not being a true believer,
she soon moves up the ladder and is promoted to an Eve. The Gardeners do not openly advertise because believing in God is not considered to be rational. In Coupland’s worlds, too, several characters have deliberately chosen to stop believing, and they struggle with the consequences. In *Player One*, there is one man, namely Bertis, the sniper on the roof, who firmly believes that he can decide who lives and who dies. This stranger, depicted as an unpredictable fanatic, claims that he dutifully kills people who bother God. He looks down on the others: “Look at you all. You’re a depressing grab bag of pop culture influences and cancelled emotions, driven by the sputtering engine of the most banal form of capitalism. No seasons in your lives—merely industrial production cycles that rule you far better than any tyrant. You keep waiting for the moral of your life to become obvious, but it never does. Work, work, work: no moral. No plot” (PO 136). Bertis’s life apparently does have a plot because his religion provides him with a mission. His beliefs largely define his thoughts, his actions, and his personality. In the same novel, Luke has recently turned his back on the church and finds himself slightly lost and wondering who he really is, which signifies that a break away from God can cause a crisis of individuality. This is also emphasized in *Generation A*, where religious Diana from Ontario happens to be in love with her Pastor, which eventually results in her excommunication. This “decision” comes with a lot of freedom, but also with several difficult questions that need to be answered because who she is and the meaning of life are no longer defined by what higher powers have to say. In *The Year of the Flood*, God’s Gardeners find support and consolation in religion as the world embarks on an ever darker future. Their religion gives them hope: hope that they are chosen or special in some way, and that they might therefore survive the Waterless Flood. After the protagonists have lived with the Gardeners for a while, they all learn to appreciate and respect their values: they gradually become Gardeners themselves and hold on to this identity as things escalate and the apocalypse begins. In *Girlfriend in a Coma*, religion does not play a
major role even though the mission that the group of friends is provided with means that they will, like prophets, be spreading some sort of faith in the future, proclaiming that they know the truth. Jared, the novel’s co-narrating ghost, allows Linus, who does not see a purpose in life, to see part of heaven, which convinces him not to give up on the world just yet. This novel “concentrates on the search for spiritual meaning in an era that ostensibly no longer needs God” (Tate 20), and ultimately provides characters with hope that there is more to life. The group of friends all need to open their eyes in order to receive some sort of revelation or vision, to see what consumer society is doing to the planet and to make them feel responsible for and hopeful about the future.

The individuality problems characters face in these postmodern future worlds partly exist because they live in consumer societies, where brands are important and appear to have an influence on personality. Novels that focus on such aspects are referred to by James Annesly as “Blank Fictions”: contemporary American novels that focus on the culture of the postmodern and are preoccupied with violence, indulgence, sexual excess, decadence, consumerism, and commerce (Annesly 9). He mentions authors such as Bret Easton Ellis and Catherine Texier, but also Coupland as examples of such literature. “Their novels are predominantly urban in focus and concerned with the relationship between the individual and consumer culture” and should be read as the product of postmodern culture (Annesly 2). Atwood and Coupland have a slightly different approach to the influence this type of society has on their characters’ sense of individuality, partly because of Coupland’s focus on popular culture. Although this does not play a substantial role in Atwood’s novels, it should be noted that there are plenty of luxury items on the market in her novels, too, which characters, such as little Ren, secretly wish to possess. Little Ren from The Year of the Flood has some identity issues concerning consumer products as she spent a substantial part of her childhood with the Gardeners, who forbade usage and purchase of many items. She moves to the luxurious
HelthWyzer compounds, where she suddenly has to attend high school, and she eventually adapts her actions as well as her thoughts in order to blend in, rejecting any Gardner-thought that pops into her head. “The first time, I told him happicuppa was the brew of evil so I couldn’t drink it, and he laughed at me. The second time I made an effort, and it tasted delicious, and soon I wasn’t thinking too much about the evilness of it” (YF 262). The world confuses young Ren and she is easily tempted: she changes from being Compound to Gardener to Compound to one of the few survivors of the apocalypse, which quite ironically suddenly makes her unique.

Coupland purposely sneaks an abundance of brand names into his novels to emphasize how his characters’ lives are unknowingly influenced by them. Lego, Volkswagen, Prada, McDonalds, Google, Nokia, Levi’s, Hyundai, Fanta, Ericsson, Disney: all his characters are familiar with these. Furthermore, there is some kind of judgement attached to these names, as all of them have price tags – meaning that brand names could say something about the amount of money you make. A certain image is attached to most brands, too: Abercrombie & Fitch, at least to Harj, is a very desirable and authentically “American” brand whereas GAP is described as terribly mainstream, and Rachel happens to wear a Chanel dress which has the other characters assume she must be rich, or famous, or both. Narrators and their acquaintances discuss merchandise and favourite brands, fuelling a concern that perhaps “Coupland, like Bret Easton Ellis, is obsessed with the surface details of consumerism at the expense of more substantial narrative concerns” (Tate 83). However, this is a significant element of Coupland’s style, which he uses to mock consumer society. Andrew Tate says about Coupland’s novels that they “cannot conceal a distinct sense of thrill at some of the novelties and enticements that such a way of life might generate; the narratives also seem to endorse a tactile appreciation for made things” (Tate 75). Indeed, Coupland’s novels and especially his characters are known to demonstrate a keen awareness and moral ambivalence
regarding what Richard describes as “the excitement and glamour and seduction of progress” (GC 280). *Girlfriend in a Coma* pursues the idea that generational identity can be created, or bought: identity has become a sly marketing scam (Tate 78).

The Internet and marketing appear to go hand in hand, especially in Atwood’s world, where *everything* can be sold, bought, and watched online. The future representation of television/Internet in Atwood’s world is quite appalling: during their teenage years, Crake and Jimmy spend lots of time watching online television, looking at the most disgusting shows, from animal snuff sites to people being electrocuted or stoned to death on alibooobo.com, to an abundance of semi-forbidden pornography websites, where they can see sex tourists have intercourse with scared little children. Whereas Crake finds these websites hilarious, they clearly affect Jimmy and leave him damaged mentally: he is never able to have a normal relationship with a girl and is never sure what is real and what is not, even before the apocalypse. Postmodernists in the twentieth century are known to have coupled death and television (McHale 16), and it appears that in the twenty-first century, at least in contemporary literature, it has become more common that death and the Internet are paired up: the Internet can be seen as a new technological threat capable of removing depth from people’s lives. Characters who do not make much use of television or the Internet, such as God’s Gardeners, or the narrators of *Generation A* after they have moved to the isolated island, are clearly less exposed to such negative influences, and are less distracted from living their own, individual lives.

The postmodern identity crises appear to be mainly a western-world phenomenon: through the eyes of Harj it becomes clear how intertwined with consumerism and postmodernity these crises are. For Harj, visiting America is like visiting Disneyland. This is an interesting metaphor that Coupland is likely to have picked up from Jean Baudrillard. Sometimes referred to as the high priest of postmodernism, Jean Baudrillard is known for
using Disneyland as a metaphor for the United States of America: Disneyland is “presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real,” meaning that Baudrillard accuses America not of falsely representing reality, but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real (Qtd. in Habib 118). Until Harj finds out about the mass-consumption of Solon, everything about America excites him: “suburbia! Factory outlet malls!” and he imagines the people “wearing Abercrombie & Fitch garments” (GA 72). On the island, after Harj has seen the downside of America’s consumer society, Harj tells a tale called “The Man Who Lost His Story,” about a guy named Craig who does not know what to do with his life, clearly reflecting the western-world individuality problems Harj has observed. “Craigs” appear to be Coupland’s equivalent of Fukuyama’s “last men”. The main problem they encounter seems to be their self-absorbedness: they are too obsessed with their own uncomplicated lives to see any bigger picture. The question “Who am I really?” is constantly on the minds of these people, who no longer find hope or consolation in religion or God. They have already witnessed too many terrors to believe in a God—religion has thus become a characteristic of the past. And so there is a gap to be filled. New inventions such as television and the Internet can at least occupy the character’s minds from time to time. Technology, like drugs, becomes another way for characters to un-attach themselves from who they should or want to be. Brand names, extremely violent and/or extremely dumb television programmes, and the invention of new gadgets influence their lives even though they do not intentionally mean for this to happen. Several characters only find out who they are once they are provided with a clear mission, like the Gardeners or the groups of people in Generation A and Girlfriend in a Coma. Each in their own way, these novels show how the characters’ individualities are gradually being consumed, by drugs, TV, and mass culture. The authors place an emphasis on how postmodernity disorients their characters, who are all desperate to find a clear purpose for their lives.
“We will accept the obvious truth that we brought this upon ourselves”

- Douglas Coupland

Chapter Four – The End

The themes of time, technology, and individuality influence the characters in the way they think and make choices, thus influencing the storyline: the authors use these themes to create convincing dystopian stories with open, ambiguous, and sometimes apocalyptical endings that can be interpreted as both hopeful and depressing. Significantly, all five novels deal with major plot turns toward the end of their stories. Although their stories are quite different in content, both authors appear to want to get a certain message across through their dystopian yet realistic fiction. Raffaella Baccolini says that such dystopias “point towards change” and that “it is important to engage with the critical dystopias of recent decades, as they are the product of our dark times. (…) We need to pass through the critical dystopias of today to move toward a horizon of hope” (Baccolini 521). Hope is a very important aspect of the postmodern dystopian genre, as classic dystopian stories are usually not meant to be hopeful: “If utopias promise salvation from earthly cares, then dystopias signify, not the promise of damnation but the absence of promise” (Rohatyn 99). Although they should not be confused with “happy” endings, the endings of Atwood’s and Coupland’s novels definitely reveal a silver lining.

Coupland’s three novels leave the characters in a world in considerably worse condition than it was at the novels’ beginning, yet he also provides his characters with hope for a better future towards the end. The apocalyptical world of Girlfriend in a Coma depicts the darkest version of Coupland’s future worlds. The characters experience this post-

apocalypse version of the world for about one year. The world has become an ugly place reeking of toxic waste and rotting flesh. In chapter twenty-eight, titled “The future is fake,” a post-apocalyptic supermarket is described:

Inside the blackened supermarket, scores of animals, birds, and insects have made the building their home. Shit of all types splotches the floor, as so tussles of feathers, fur, bones, and soil. Squirrels and raccoons have reduced the cereal aisle to fiber while the meat department’s offerings have been entirely looted by wildlife. The smell of rot, a year later, is ebbing away, masked by the smell of shampoos and cosmetics fallen to the floor in a small earthquake six months prior. (...) A white-smocked Leaker sits at the counter - a beef jerky skeleton. (GC 218)

The apocalyptic world is an ugly and depressing sight. Crashed cars and dead bodies fill the landscape: time has stopped. Individuality has ceased to matter. Technology is dead, too, and its carcass makes the world toxic; unfit for life. It is stressed, by co-narrator Jared, that this post-apocalyptic world is the result of consumer society. Pessimism is also reflected in the negative chapter titles: “Every idea in the world is wrong,” “No sex no money no free will,” “Reject every idea,” and “Infinity is artificial,” for example, do not point towards any silver lining whatsoever. These titles emphasize that the world, even before the apocalypse, is not perceived as very promising or satisfactory. At the end of their post-apocalyptic experience, Jared encourages his friends to ask questions to try and make their fellow citizens stop and think, even if that means “barking on street corners” and “being mistaken for crazies” (GC 270). In the novel’s last chapter, called “The End,” narrated by Jared, the group of friends accept their new faith, who then decide to “go clear the land for a new culture” (GC 271). The amount of guilt and shame the characters feel when they behold their wrecked planet causes them to decide to change. They are allowed to go back in time—back to 1997, where there still is hope—to try and make a difference. Richard and his friends are definitely filled with hope and courage and the moment of the novel’s end, although this does not guarantee their success. Although others might decide not to listen to them, the group of friends begin to see
themselves as “the adults who smash the tired, exhausted system” (GC 281) and decide to take the opportunity to make a difference for the future of their world.

Although a darker world than our own is portrayed in this novel, the open end of Generation A does not suggest an oncoming apocalypse or any other disaster: it is the end of an era, but what will happen next remains ambiguous. Interestingly, one reviewer claimed that Generation A is “Coupland’s most hopeful novel yet” (Sunday Telegraph), although the hopeful part is only visible towards the end, as generally, the novel clearly critiques the postmodernity of the near-future society and the technologies that have developed in it. The extinction of the bees, which is a direct consequence of the mass-production of Solon, has awakened a certain fear in society, a little voice that says: “you are responsible.” It has caused mankind to realise that they are about to face the severe consequences of their abundant and irresponsible lifestyle. However, Solon makes sure that takers do not hear this voice; it takes this concern away and thus only those who are not addicted to Solon could possibly change the direction the world is headed in. The world gets worse before it gets better, and only when the main characters are isolated from the dystopian reality can they clearly see it for what it is. On the island of Haida Gawii the characters realize, thanks to another story told by Harj, how human beings will continue to corrupt and destroy their planet unless they undertake action. Similar to the characters in Girlfriend in a Coma, they feel “chosen” and determined to go on a mission: to bring the bees back and to show the world what Solon is doing to them and the planet. Months later, when Harj narrates the final chapter of the book, it is said that Solon is no longer produced because their story finally reached the world, although according to Harj “there was no glory in it” for the five of them (GA 354). This very last part of the book he spends walking on the beach with Julien, who tells him that a new beehive was recently discovered in Tacoma. This is when Harj realizes that their group of five was always meant to help the bees survive: “we were the only hope they had of finding their way home” (GA 357).
The ending of the book, therefore, is rather optimistic yet remains open to interpretation.

*Player One* alludes to a disaster on a grand scale: the world is rapidly running out of oil, which causes global panic and, although the world does not end per se, this situation sketched by Coupland is not an implausible future event. This kind of end of the world is commonly referred to as peak-oil or post-peak oil apocalypse, and can be seen as an event of human kind’s own making. Some of the characters anticipated this event: Karen and Warren have met online on a peak-oil apocalypse forum. Eventually, the price of oil hits $600 and explosions are heard. This peak-oil phenomenon, which is more like a postmodern catastrophe than an actual apocalypse, as only those with consumerist lifestyles will be affected by the consequences, has happened because of technology: the invention of cars and airplanes is partly to blame, as is time, because over time human beings have grown accustomed and attached to their new, luxurious modes of transportation. After the initial panic, characters take consolation in the fact that an actual apocalypse is not yet imminent. It is the end of life as they know it - but not the end of the world. Rachel is able to see what will happen next in her near-death experience, and explains: “It will begin to rain, and the chemicals outside the lounge will crackle and fizz and drain away. Gas will be rationed and doled out by the government, and it will never go below $350 a barrel again” (PO 212).

Something about their world has changed that can never be reversed: a new and dystopian era begins, which is referred to by Rachel as the “New Normal”. Baccolini’s ideas about recent dystopian works, namely her optimistic view of them as “a new oppositional and resisting form of writing, one that maintains a utopian horizon in the pages of dystopian science fiction and in these anti-utopian times” (Baccolini 518), might thus hold true for Coupland’s dystopias. Coupland’s three endings could be interpreted as fairly positive because the characters, even though their world is not ideal, are finally provided with clear goals in their lives, which at least provides them with hope on an individual level.
The nature of Atwood’s novels is different in the sense that they are written with perhaps more of a direct emphasis on the responsibility of human beings. *Oryx and Crake* is particularly hard to interpret as hopeful because the novel’s main character has no hope himself. In the last chapter, Snowman becomes aware of the presence of three other human beings on the beach. He is not sure how to approach them, as he had already accepted that he was the last human being left on Earth. After weighing his options, he whispers “what do you want me to do?” in the hope that Oryx or Crake might provide him with an answer. “Oh, Jimmy,” says the voice, “You were so funny. Don’t let me down.” After which Snowman looks at his watch and thinks: “Time to go” (OC 433). Those are the last words of this novel, and thus it remains unclear what Jimmy has decided and what will happen next. Although the sudden appearance of other humans might be interpreted as a hopeful sign, for the main characters of *Oryx and Crake* it is not: the existence of human beings means that Crake’s plan has failed and simultaneously suggests that Jimmy will not be able to protect the Crakers from dangerous human influences. The mood throughout the novel is not cheerful at all; the timelessness of the post-apocalyptic world eats at Jimmy as he tries to protect himself from the wild cross-bred animals that are the result of his society’s immoral technologies. The world will soon look like that of *Girlfriend in a Coma* or worse. The idea that humanity, with its consumerist and selfish attitude, has caused all this, is unbearable to Snowman.

The ending of *The Year of The Flood*, even though the novel portrays the exact same world as *Oryx and Crake*, presents itself as more positive: in spite of it taking place mostly in the pleeblands, there is hope for the Gardeners, and the fact that several of them survive means that they have the possibility to start a new civilization somewhere. The post-apocalyptic storyline explains how the characters happened to survive: they all reside in some kind of quarantine when the virus arrives in their city. Toward the end of the novel, Ren and Toby encounter the same people on the beach as Snowman; it is the exact same scene, but
because they approach them from the opposite direction, Snowman cannot see them. When Ren and Toby detect Jimmy approaching the fire he, according to Ren, narrator of this final chapter, looks like he is going to shoot the three because “he has that kind of maniac focus” (YF 502). The two women interfere and gain control of the situation: Ren orders Jimmy not to shoot Amanda, while Toby points her spraygun at the men. Moments later, when the two ex-criminals are dismantled and cuffed, Jimmy is hugged by Ren and he confusedly says: “I’m such as mess. Sometimes I think everyone’s dead” (YF 504). Although this story has an open ending, too, it is considerably more optimistic than Oryx and Crake’s ending. The final prayer in the book can be seen as a consolation as it is called “The Earth Forgives”. The last pages assure that Jimmy is going to be taken care of, that the main characters are safe, and that a group of Gardeners has survived who might start a new, more peaceful world. “For the reader stunned with the accelerated tempo of world history the ‘sense of an ending’ might appear restful rather than disturbing; the utopia of permanence might seem to be worth paying the price of an apocalypse” (Gomel 355). Read from that perspective, the ending of The Year of the Flood is perhaps the most hopeful ending of all, as technology is no longer a threat in this world and, as the survivors form only a small group of people, there is no need for a capitalist, consumer society to exist. It has died out together with the rest of the world’s population. It can be said that a certain “utopian potential of the universal disaster is particularly prominent in those texts where the action takes place sometime after zero hour” (Gomel 345), and that this holds true for Atwood’s novel, where “Zero hour” represents the crucial moment to make the decision to either quit, or start over. There is an opportunity there, but also a lot of responsibility: Snowman does not want this responsibility, whereas the Gardeners accept the challenge, which is not only entering a new era but also making a completely new start.

In Girlfriend in a Coma the apocalypse has not actually happened, although the characters are shown that it will, unless they choose to interfere: the crucial moment of
choosing situates before the end of time. There is hope for their world only if the characters
decide to undertake action and if the world is willing to listen to them, which is not
guaranteed. In Player One and Generation A the end of the world is not yet imminent, either,
but the endings do hint that a change in attitude similar to that in Girlfriend in a Coma is
necessary for the planet’s survival. The postmodern apocalypse that is warned of in these five
novels is the result of excessive consumerism, of reckless living, of human being’s actions.
The depicted catastrophes, foreshadowed by the extinction of several plant and animal
species, are exclusively to be blamed on human beings and consumer society. The biggest
difference between these authors’ endings is that Atwood’s characters can leave the old world
behind if they want to, and “reset” time to start anew, whereas Coupland’s characters are left
behind with worlds that are in need of drastic change.

But now that the Waterless Flood has swept over us (...) I can write anything I want.

- Ren from The Year of The Flood, p.7

Conclusion

Although Atwood’s and Coupland’s postmodern dystopian novels clearly critique postmodern
society, they do so by addressing the major themes of time, technology, and individuality in
distinctive ways. Atwood focuses more on the world or society as a whole, whereas in
Coupland’s novels the characters’ individual lives are central. Coupland’s characters typically
wish to interpret their lives in sequence; as a story. They appear to be self-involved, like “men
without chests”, lacking challenge: they quite selfishly worry about their personal lives and
what their significance might be in these worlds, neither looking at the bigger picture, nor
actively trying to change their situation. Atwood’s characters, in particular Toby and Adam
One, regard time from a wider perspective and are more concerned with the future of their
environment. Both authors use smaller narratives, flashbacks, and flash forwards to indicate that, with the end of the world approaching, time increasingly becomes out of sequence. *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* have double-time schemes to emphasize the difference between the world pre-apocalypse and post-apocalypse, where time has lost meaning. In Coupland’s *Generation A* and *Grilfriend in a Coma*, characters undergo a process of learning and are rudely awakened by catastrophic events. Catastrophe appears necessary to provide them with some sort of purpose in life.

Technology has such an impact on the storylines because the combination of pressing time and advanced technology results in a fear and concern for the future. Atwood is mainly concerned with the effects technology can have on the planet: species die out and resources run out in the world of *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, whilst bio-engineering is criticized. Although both authors recognize environmental problems and incorporate current affairs into their fiction, Coupland focuses on popular technologies such as television and the Internet. The online world is attacked by Coupland through characters who either struggle with it, express an extreme dislike for it, or are helplessly dependent on it: “reliance on commercial technology is figured as a potentially destructive addiction” (Tate 64). His characters are initially enchanted by new technologies rather than afraid of them, and only when characters are excluded from consumer society do they discover how these new technologies are part of man’s devolution. For Karen, her coma helps her see this; for the characters of *Generation A* and *Player One*, it is the fact that they are stuck somewhere for a period of time. For *The Year of the Flood*’s Toby, it is the community of the Gardeners that helps her see more clearly. It becomes evident that characters in all five novels initially have their judgement clouded by the societies they live in, whilst it is highlighted that the dangers of keeping society ignorant of what they consume are many, and that educating students only to be able to become geniuses of science leaves the world incomplete and lacking something.
Another postmodern dystopian characteristic is an emphasis on a disturbed balance between ethical right and wrong and the incorporation of contemporary concerns, such as the emergence of a division between science and the arts, or the extinction of species, that are then used to create plausible and fearsome future versions of our world. Accordingly, these novels denote the idea that the disappearance of nature is the price that is paid for postmodernity. Jameson speaks of the disappearance of nature in connection with postmodern society and “urban degradation” of the countryside. Hyper consumption causes “commodification of the countryside and the capitalization of agriculture” (Jameson 69) and the postmodern dystopias specifically warn against this culture’s side-effects. Additionally, in all of these future worlds, religion has made way for science and the rational, and has clearly ceased to play a major role in the characters’ lives: “God is a brain mutation” (YF 377). The message both authors seem to send is that in such a consumerist society, where so many catastrophes have already befallen, and where nature is alienated and slowly retreating from humanity, human beings alone are responsible for the mess – and there is nothing that any God can or will do about.

And so, without religion and without clearly sequenced life stories, characters in all five novels are trying to find a clear purpose for their lives, yet the wish to be unique cannot easily be fulfilled in these tough postmodern societies. The characters have become slightly disillusioned with their overall significance in the world. For Toby, Amanda, and Ren of The Year of the Flood, the community of the Gardeners at least provides them with the necessary guidance and a safety net, as well as a sense of identity. As God and religion are depicted as something from the past and rational thinking is encouraged, strong-mindedness appears necessary for survival. There appear to be many factors disorienting the postmodern consumer, and both Atwood and Coupland play with these, using the themes of time, technology, and individuality to gradually build up to a certain plot twist and/or catastrophe.
that introduces a new, dystopian era. These themes signify how the characters are uncomfortable with their lives and with the world they live in; change appears necessary and imminent. Although changing themselves is constantly on their minds, *Girlfriend in a Coma*’s characters appear to need the apocalypse to help define who they are, and the groups of people in *Generation A* and *Player One* similarly need to witness some kind of disaster before they realize that change really depends on them. Atwood’s characters are stronger in that respect, as they decide to take measures in their own hands earlier on, such as Crake with his master plan and the brave Gardeners who do not give up hope and force themselves to remember how beautiful the world once was. Crake tries to encourage his fellow human beings to undertake political action, and the novel *Oryx and Crake* is regarded by several critics as “concerned to encourage something like conventional political action on the part of its readers” (Hollinger 465). Coupland’s characters eventually find a purpose in life, which is hopeful for them, although it remains ambiguous whether Coupland’s worlds will undergo any major positive changes because the sad reality sinks in that the planet is unable to repair itself because of what humans have created and allowed to be created over time.

The postmodern dystopia uses the themes of time, technology, and individuality to come to a larger truth about the future of our own world, confronting readers with their culture and lifestyle. It seems that Coupland conveys the idea that there is still time enough to change the future if individuals simply combine forces, whereas Atwood solemnly addresses the possibility that there is no future if we continue down this consumerist road. However, there is hope here, too, as even though Atwood’s world is the most damaged, the total destruction provides opportunities for a new beginning. Adam One wisely states something that can also be learned from Coupland’s narratives, namely that “...we must be a beacon of hope, because if you tell people there’s nothing they can do, they will do worse than nothing” (YF 248).
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