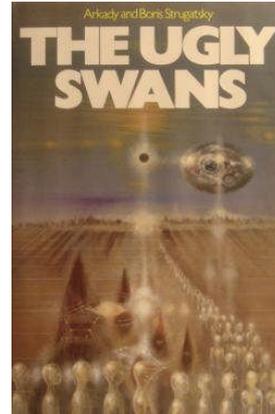
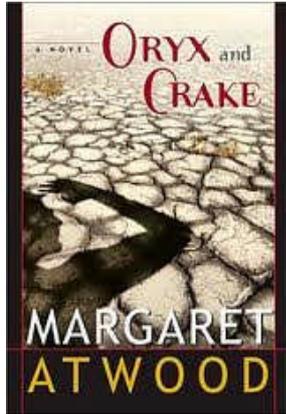


Science Fiction Across Continents and Cultures:

An Exploration of Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*
and the Strugatsky Brothers' *The Ugly Swans*



“All fictions begin with a *What if*. The *What if* varies from book to book... but there is always a *What if* to which the novel is the answer.”¹

-Margaret Atwood

Atwood later said,
“The *what if* of *Oryx and Crake* is simply,
What if we continue down the road we're already on?”²

“Every well-known author expresses the ideology of his society or a part of that society...”
-Victor Banev, in *The Ugly Swans*³

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¹ Margaret Atwood, *Curious Pursuits: Occasional Writing 1970-2005*, (London: Virago, 2005), 86.

² Coral Ann Howells, *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, (USA: Cambridge University Press 2006), 162.

³ Boris Strugatsky and Arkady Strugatsky, *The Ugly Swans*, (New York: Collier Books, 1979), 76.

Introduction

Science fiction writers throughout history have used the creation of new worlds to communicate current and potential problems of society. The themes and motifs of the genre allow the writer to escape the confines of reality. Science fiction is based on innovation in science or technology, or pseudo-science or pseudo-innovation, whether human or extra terrestrial in origin.⁴ Through the creation and manipulation of a fictional universe, the writer is then able to express ideas without restriction. This essay explores the characteristics and ideas of science fiction through two distinct cultures: Canadian and Russian. Not only do the cultures span place, they are also separated by time. *Oryx and Crake*⁵ by Margaret Atwood and *The Ugly Swans*⁶ by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky demonstrate a commonality in the realm of science fiction: the characters and the setting reveal a telling commentary on the political, social and environmental conditions of the time. In turn, this essay will: describe the authors and their selected works; present common themes; discuss prominent differences; and examine the context of the genre.

The Novels and Minds Behind Them

The post-human world of Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*

Margaret Atwood (b. 1939) is a Canadian author of many genres: poetry, cultural criticism, non-fiction, fiction, and science fiction. Her novels are bestsellers around the world, found on the bookshelves of individual homes and public institutions alike. Atwood's literature is discussed in high school and university classrooms for Canadian literature, women's studies, gender studies, and science fiction courses.⁷ Common themes addressed in Atwood's writing include: environmentalism, human and women's rights, and reconstructions of reality. Reingard M.

⁴ Reginald Bretnor, *Science Fiction, Today and Tomorrow*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1974), 11.

⁵ Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, (New York: Doubleday, 2003, Kindle edition).

⁶ Boris Strugatsky and Arkady Strugatsky, *The Ugly Swans*, (New York: Collier Books, 1979).

⁷ Howells, *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, 1.

Nischik states, "...Her exceptional talent for combining intellectually challenging writing with a high readability [has] made her a favourite with readers, critics, and scholars alike."⁸ Atwood has described her science fiction works as "speculative fiction" wherein she describes the world as it might be, a generation or so in the future, if we follow on the same path we are on. She has said her novels "invent nothing we haven't already invented or started to invent."⁹ Atwood's science fiction novel *Oryx and Crake*¹⁰ describes what might happen if we continue down our current road of global warming, genetic engineering and social inequality.

Synopsis

The story is told through the eyes of Jimmy, who renames himself Snowman when he finds himself the sole human survivor of a lethal disease (Jetspeed Ultra Virus Extraordinary-JUVE) concocted and distributed by his scientist-genius friend Crake. The destruction of the human race was necessary to make way for Crake's bioengineered Crakers, who he designed to be self-healing, secular, community-driven hominids programmed to avoid overpopulation. The sexual act itself, a source of so much oppression and abuse in the human world, has been stripped of lust and is a group activity performed for the process of reproduction, not pleasure. In Crake's ultimate plan, Jimmy is the guardian of the Crakers.

Much of the story takes place in Jimmy/Snowman's memory, as he recounts his childhood in the Compounds (gated communities where the elite scientists live and work), his friendship with Crake, and his love affair with a former child prostitute from the third world who becomes Crake's assistant in the 'Paradise' project (the engineering of the Crakers). Jimmy struggles with the disappearance of his mother, a scientist whose morals prompted her to escape

⁸ Reingard M. Nischik, *Margaret Atwood Works and Impact*, (Canada: House of Anansi Press 2000), 1.

⁹ J. Brooks Bouston, "It's Game Over Forever," in *Bloom's Modern Critical Views*, (USA: Bloom's Literary Criticism), 94.

¹⁰ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*.

to the Pleeblands (the filthy, poverty-stricken world beyond the Compounds) to become a revolutionary. Throughout his life, Jimmy is witness to the worst of humanity: evil science, censorship in a totalitarian society, mass extinctions of species, global warming, and the injustices of the sex industry. He doesn't find out about Crake's master plan until the global population has been infected and Crake murders Oryx in order to prompt Jimmy to kill him. There is no place for humans—except for Jimmy—in the new world, and Crake is prepared to sacrifice himself for the success of his project.

Building a new future in Arkady and Boris Strugatsky's *The Ugly Swans*

Arkady Strugatsky (b. 1925, d. 1991) and Boris Strugatsky (b. 1933) wrote both individually and collaboratively. In partnership, they wrote collectively as the iconic “Strugatsky brothers.” John Givens describes the authors as “synonymous with Soviet Russian science fiction.”¹¹ The brothers' earlier novels reflect optimism for the Thaw period of the 1960s, while their later works, including *The Ugly Swans*, comment primarily on the human condition and notions of progress. Givens explains that these later novels are characterized by the presence of “Progressors”, “scientifically and socially superior beings who help ‘progress’ other cultures.”¹² This keystone element is encapsulated in the Strugatsky brothers' novel *The Ugly Swans*. Written in 1966-67 in the USSR's stagnation period, the novel was originally rejected for publication. It circulated in the dissident ‘samizdat’ until being published abroad in 1972.¹³ A later Strugatsky work, *Crooked Destiny*, explores the struggles of Felix Sorokin (an autobiographical character) composing *The Ugly Swans* under the censorship restrictions of the 1980s.¹⁴

¹¹ John Givens, “The Strugatsky Brothers and Russian Science Fiction,” *Russian Studies in Literature* 47, no. 4 (2011): 4.

¹² Givens, “The Strugatsky Brothers and Russian Science Fiction,” 4.

¹³ Viacheslav Ivanov, “The Lesson of the Strugatskys,” *Russian Studies in Literature* 47, no. 4 (2011): 7-8.

¹⁴ Elana Gomel, “The Poetics of Censorship: Allegory as Form and Ideology in the Novels of Arkady and Boris Strugatsky,” *Science Fiction Studies* 22 no. 1 (1995): 98.

Synopsis

The Ugly Swans is written from the point of view of Victor Banev, a famous writer. We are never given the name of the town the story takes place in, or for that matter, the country. The community is divided into three distinct groups: the adults, the children, and the slimies. The slimies are distinguished by a yellowing around the eyes, a symptom of their “yellow leprosy” or “oculara ringus”. In general, the town’s adult population despises the slimies, blaming them for the persistent rains and the betrayal of their children. The youth, including Banev’s daughter Irma, idolize the slimies and possess an unnaturally high level of maturity and intelligence. They speak openly about their desire to build a better future. As Banev meets various characters throughout the novel, such as Yul Golem the chief doctor at the leprosarium, Favor Summan, a double agent posing as a sanitary inspector, and the slimy Zurzmansor, he learns more and more about the current events. One morning, after days of isolated writing, Banev wakes up to learn of the mass exodus of the town’s adults. A soldier tells him about “the flying slimies...an invasion of earthworms, about the children who had grown into adults in two days...”¹⁵ Banev asks Golem, “Is this the new world coming?” and Golem answers simply, “Yes.”¹⁶ Banev and his lover Diana decide to remain, while Golem says, “I’m going from where I’m not needed to where I am needed. Not like you [Banev and Diana].” The novel concludes with a mysterious quote from Banev; “All this is fine, but I’d better not forget to go back.”¹⁷ One presumes he’s referring to the past. The slimies, who travelled from the future to correct the past, disappear, and it is as though they had never existed at all.

¹⁵ Strugatskys, *The Ugly Swans*, 222.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 231.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 234.

Common Themes in the Novels

Both *Oryx and Crake* and *The Ugly Swans* employ the genre of science fiction to comment on the social, political and environmental conditions of the times they were written. Our analysis shows that though the novels were written about three decades apart in disparate regions of the world, common themes and elements persist in both stories.

There are many parallels between the characters of the novels. Jimmy in *Oryx and Crake* is a “word person” whereas the scientist Crake is a “numbers person.”¹⁸ Victor Banev in *Ugly Swans*, being a writer, can also be considered a “word person.” One can also say that Golem, the doctor at the leprosarium exhibits “number person” qualities. It is these “numbers people” that actively work to facilitate the dawn of a new society governed by a new breed of human. The protagonists of both novels, Jimmy and Banev, are not the leaders of the movements, rather they find themselves chosen to be involved. One can speculate that the protagonists having the point of view of an artist or “word person” is not a coincidence in these novels, but something of an autobiographical reflection of the authors and their perspectives as artists.

The leprosarium in *The Ugly Swans* and the Rejoovenessence laboratory in *Oryx and Crake* are the places of experiment in both novels. Each is behind closed doors of the public who are kept in the dark, and the authorities who naively believe the results of the experiments will be of benefit to them.¹⁹ The slimy Zurzmansor tells Banev, “Certain parties imagine that we are working on their behalf, and we aren’t dissuading them.”²⁰ Social hierarchy appears in both novels. In *The Ugly Swans*, common people are ruled by the President. In *The Poetics of Censorship* Elana Gomel suggests the President, whom she summarizes as “a former freedom fighter who [became] a brutal tyrant, suppressing freedom of speech, demanding mindless

¹⁸ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 18%.

¹⁹ Strugatskys, *The Ugly Swans*, 86.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 172.

adulation, and either silencing or destroying intellectuals” symbolizes a Stalinistic figure.²¹ In the close-to-present world of *Oryx and Crake*, dictators have been swapped for transnational corporations. The social strata is topped by powerful pharmaceutical companies and funnels down to “word people” and impoverished third-world groups who do the “dirty-work” at the very bottom.

Juxtaposed against the pure and innately good Crakers and slimies are the so-called worst qualities of humankind. Jimmy and Banev are both heavy drinkers who cannot resist their sexual urges. A party at the Health Resort in *The Ugly Swans* is described as follows:

In the adjoining room all hell had broken loose. Half naked girls, imported from the capital, were kicking their legs on Rosheper’s enormous bed... The burgomaster was diving into [the girls] like a pig into a pile of acorns, kicking and grunting with enjoyment...²²

The character Oryx, who serves to symbolize the despicable sexual oppression of the modern world, was sold by her parents to a child trafficker, later being victimized in child pornography and prostitution.²³ It is these repulsive aspects of humankind that cause Crake to eliminate sexual desire from the Crakers. Reflecting on Crake’s decision, Snowman thinks, “No more prostitution, no sexual abuse of children... no pimps, no sex slaves, no more rape.”²⁴

Overpopulation, pollution, over-exploitation of natural resources, and consumerist society in *Oryx and Crake* is paralleled in *The Ugly Swans*. Crake tells Jimmy, “As a species we’re in deep trouble... Demand for resources has exceeded supply for decades in marginal geopolitical areas, hence the famines and droughts; but very soon demand is going to exceed supply for *everyone*.”²⁵ The character Pavor expresses a similar perspective on humanity:

²¹ Elana Gomel, “The Poetics of Censorship: Allegory as Form and Ideology in the Novels of Arkady and Boris Strugatsky,” *Science Fiction Studies* 22 no. 1 (1995): 97-8.

²² Strugatskys, *The Ugly Swans*, 42.

²³ Fiona Tolan, *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 275.

²⁴ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 43%.

²⁵ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 77%.

“We’ve ruined the natural world and the man-made one is ruining us... We’ve gone through all philosophical systems... we’ve tried all possible ethical systems and we’ve stayed the same amoral louts we always were, no better than troglodytes.”²⁶ It is obvious that the authors of these novels share a similarly pessimistic and cynical opinion of contemporary humanity.

Both novels conclude with the establishment of a new human race, one naturally evolved, the other genetically engineered. In both, there is little room for humans, save for a few special individuals. The Paradise project created a population with pre-selected characteristics; “The king-of-the-castle hard-wiring that had plagued humanity had, in [the Crakers], been unwired.”²⁷ In the case of *The Ugly Swans*, the new species naturally emerges out of the old one: “The old species is adapted to one set of conditions, and the new one is adapted to another.”²⁸ The theme of apocalypse, wherein a post-human world takes form is essential to both stories. *The Ugly Swans* concludes with the city—a symbol of the old way of life—dissolving in the advent of the new society.²⁹ *Oryx and Crake* ends with the replacement of a globalized, consumerist society with a primitive, natural community.

In his speech at the middle school, Banev says, “The writer is an instrument which indicates the condition of society...”³⁰ This is true for both Margaret Atwood and the Strugatsky brothers who speak through their writing to comment on the social, political and environmental facets of contemporary society.

Key Differences of the Novels

As discussed in Margaret Atwood’s book *In Other Worlds* what science fiction is can be a matter of personal judgment. Even within the genre of science fiction there are discrepancies, as

²⁶ Strugatskys, *The Ugly Swans*, 129-30.

²⁷ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 80%.

²⁸ Strugatskys, *The Ugly Swans*, 196.

²⁹ Gomel, “The Poetics of Censorship,” 98.

³⁰ Strugatskys, *The Ugly Swans*, 70.

Atwood reveals, preferring to view her dystopic novels *Oryx and Crake* and its sequel *Year of the Flood* not as science fiction but as what she terms “speculative fiction,”³¹ meaning that her stories have a possibility of becoming reality. When looked at from a wider angle in terms of science fiction in Soviet Russia and contemporary Canada it becomes even more important to realize that science fiction, although inferring certain qualities as a genre, can be used and viewed very differently according to place and time, culture, and the individual.

One of the largest factors affecting the difference between *Ugly Swans* and *Oryx and Crake* is the place and time. As a current era piece we can see the idea of globalization in Atwood’s novel; the only reason a world wide epidemic is able to spread so quickly is because of the interconnectivity of the global economy. Whereas in the Strugatsky novel we only see a small town that is isolated much like the world situation at the time (1967) with the world being partitioned into spheres of influence of the USA and USSR. While not apparent in *Ugly Swans* it is important to note that these novels see a contrast in opinions towards technology. Many soviet SF novels of the time were embracing the newfound sciences of genetics, cybernetics and other research which had previously been labeled “pseudo-science”³² and was now permitted under the political thaw era of Krushchev in the late 1950s and early 1960s.³³ In Atwood’s novel, the largest warning is that technology is dangerous, something that would become a grave reality in the USSR with the Chernobyl disaster of 1986. The most important difference between the atmospheres at the time of writing was the level of freedom the authors had. While Atwood had a great deal of freedom with *Oryx and Crake* and was able to push ideas that would cause readers to question things like large corporations and technological advances, the Strugatsky brothers did not have such a luxury. Despite having their SF roots in the thaw era, the brothers were often

³¹ Margaret Atwood, *In Other Worlds*, (Toronto: Signal, 2011), 6-7.

³² Erik Simon, “The Strugatskys in Political Context”, *Science Fiction Studies* 31 (2004): 379.

³³ *Ibid.*

hemmed in by the limitations of state censorship and the only approved literary style of “socialist realism”. As their work moved farther from the accepted norm and became more satirical, the brothers became known as “troublesome and unreliable authors.”³⁴ Although it was circulated in illegal typewritten copies (samizdat) and was published abroad (tamizdat) *Ugly Swans* was not officially published in the USSR until 1987.

From a cultural perspective, we can see the difference between these two works in Atwood’s focus on the materialistic impulses of western culture. Her novel has as its downfall the western obsession with beauty, longevity and material gain as well as the relatively new cultural concern of sustainability and the destruction of the environment as genetic modification and engineered farming take over. The Strugatsky’s apocalypse centers around the Russian view of a disconnect between children and their parents. This issue is often confronted by Russian culture and most clearly exemplified in Ivan Turgenev’s classic novel *Fathers and Sons* where fathers become obsolete in the view of their sons. Also culturally significant to the Strugatskys’ work is their use of Aesopian language, something that, as Elana Gomel points out in her article “The Poetics of Censorship”,³⁵ many western readers do not necessarily understand. In order to circumvent censors in the Soviet era as well as the Imperial era, authors would write allegorical stories to communicate a larger point. For Russians, it is more important to be able to read between the lines than simply read the written words. The Strugatskys were known to do this well with their work in order to “comment on present-day realities”³⁶ and continued to do so in Perestroika era as Aesopian language had become a “popular generic mode.”³⁷

³⁴ Simon, “The Strugatskys in Political Context”, 387.

³⁵ Gomel, “The Poetics of Censorship,” 91.

³⁶ Givens, “The Strugatsky Brothers and Russian Science Fiction,” 4.

³⁷ Gomel, “The Poetics of Censorship,” 99, 104.

The individual authors are the final factor that influence the differences between these two works and their styles. Early in their career the brothers' focus was on technological advances, as they became more satirical about society this developed into an emphasis on Aesopian language and avoiding the censors. With one brother an expert on Japan and the other an astronomer, the Strugatskys had very different life experiences and backgrounds from Atwood. Their literature differs in style and form, yet both are distinct examples of quality writing by skilled authors. As all writers do, the Strugatskys and Atwood embed references to other great authors in their works. References to classic Russian writers, as well as some Japanese ones, are embedded in the Strugatskys literature. Arkady translated many English novels by authors like Isaac Asimov, Frederic Brown, and John Wyndham, and it is likely that these readings influenced his writing. When Atwood wrote *Oryx and Crake* she had studied not only classical western literature and SF but was well-versed in Russian authors like Gogol and Zamyatin as well. It would not be surprising if Atwood was also familiar with the Strugatsky brothers.

Delving into a comparison between *Oryx and Crake* and *Ugly Swans* it is important to realize those differences that arise due to the individual authors and their cultures as well as the era and place they were written. While Atwood and the Strugatskys have completely different backgrounds, both novels tackle the societal demons of their cultures and have become classics in the realm of dystopic science fiction.

Conclusion

Authors choose to use science fiction due to its capability to creatively express ideas and concerns. Science fiction is extremely successful due to its various themes and detachment from reality. What science fiction does greatest is combine science and art into a cohesive unit. The art aspect examines the faults of scientific progression, giving emotion and humanity to what

formerly seemed solely factual, emotionless science. Science fiction creates a thoughtful meeting between reason and emotion, as exemplified by *Oryx and Crake* and *The Ugly Swans*.

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