

Corin Braga

The New Amazons: Second-Wave Feminist Dystopias

Abstract: From Antiquity to Modernity, the topic of the Amazons questioned the relationships between men and women, triggering a series of anthropological, social and cultural issues. In the wake of the second-wave feminism of the '60, resonating with the Women's Liberation Movement, several authors revisited this topos: Monique Wittig, *Les Guérillères* (1969), Joanna Russ, *The Female Man* (1975), Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), Joan Slonczewski, *A Door into Ocean* (1986). In this paper I focus on Joanna Russ's "polytopia", and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, the only utopia (to my knowledge) in which the ideal society is situated not in a different space or time, but in the (delusional) mind of the protagonist. My thesis is that, in these texts, the Amazones' utopia is a "thought experience", a demonstration by the absurd warning against the dangers of perpetuating a society that discriminates women.

Keywords: Utopia; Dystopia; Feminism; Amazons; Joanna Russ; Marge Piercy.

CORIN BRAGA

Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
corinbraga@yahoo.com

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Since Antiquity and the Middle Ages, the topic of the Amazons questioned the relationships between men and women¹. Historians and geographers, from Herodotus, Pliny, Solinus or Martianus Capella to Isidor of Sevilla, Brunetto Latini or Vincent of Beauvais perpetuated in their encyclopedias and *mappaemundi* the image of the warrior women living isolated from men². Expressing strange apprehensions and phantasms of the European patriarchal civilization, this stereotyped figure prompted a series of anthropological, social and cultural problems, ranging from ideas of separation between the sexes and fascination with parthenogenesis to the reversal of the social and cultural roles of the genders.

Within the new paradigm of the Renaissance, the Amazons were transferred from the mythical *Marvels of the East* to the extraordinary and imaginary voyages of the classical literature. During the late early modernity, several authors revisited the *topos* of the Amazons, making use of the satirical mechanism of the world upside-down in order to imagine entirely female women communities: Alain-René Lesage, *L'Isle des Amazonnes* (1721), Marivaux, *La Nouvelle Colonie ou La ligue des femmes* (1729), *La Colonie* (1750) and

Louis Rustaing de Saint-Jory, *Les femmes militaires* (1735)³.

With the first-wave feminism of the 19th and early 20th centuries, the figure of the Amazons generated a series of meliorist utopian fictions, such as Mary Griffith's *Three Hundred Years Hence* (1836), Mary E. Bradley Lane's *Mizora* (1890), Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett's *New Amazonia: A Foretaste of the Future* (1889) and Charlotte Perkins' *Herland* (1915) and *With Her in Ourland* (1916)⁴. During the 20th century it also nourished accusatory dystopias incriminating sexism, machismo, racism or colonialism, such as Katharine Burdekin's *Proud Man* (1934) and *Swastika Night* (1937), Buchi Emecheta's *The Rape of Shavi* (1983), Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), or Leslie Marmon Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999). For instance, Burdekin imagines, in *Proud Man*, a hermaphrodite character who comes from a far future in order to criticize the machismo in the societies of the 1930s; and in *Swastika Night*, she goes on attacking the role of genders in modern civilization and in the Nazi regime in particular⁵.

With the coming of postmodern science-fiction⁶, more sophisticated themes, such as exobiology, the trans-temporal journey, the parallel worlds, the war of the sexes, the multiple identities and personalities, will be grafted on feminist utopianism⁷. Some of the most complex utopias of this series are *Les Guérillères* by Monique Wittig (1969), *The Female Man* by Joanna Russ (1975), *Woman on the Edge of Time* by Marge Piercy (1976) and *A Door into Ocean* by Joan Slonczewski (1986). These texts resonate with the second-wave feminism of the '60, the American Women's Liberation Movement and with Monique Wittig's analyses, which state that the concept of man and woman,

of sexes and genders are social roles imposed by the « *straight mind* » of a patriarchal male society⁸.

In this paper I focus on two of these complex and intriguing feminist utopias: Joanna Russ's *The Female Man*, a "polytopia" in which four distinct personas of the narrator live in four alternative worlds differentiated by the relationship between the sexes, and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, the only utopia (to my knowledge) in which the ideal society is situated not in a different space or time, but in the (delusional) mind of the protagonist.

In *The Female Man*, Joanna Russ, within a convoluted plot, uses four female characters, who are the avatars of a unique identity, living in parallel worlds and in different times. Joanna (who comes nearest to the condition of the author) lives in a world that reproduces the America of the 1970s; Jeannine lives in a parallel history, in which the Second World War did not take place because Hitler was assassinated in 1936, China did not switch to communism and America is still under the sway of the great crisis; Janet comes from a future world, Whileaway, separated from ours by 10,000 years, where there are no more men (they all died of an epidemic affecting only the male sex) and women reproduce themselves by technologically assisted parthenogenesis; and Jael, also from a future world, parallel to that of Janet, in which men and women are separated into two warring societies, Manland and Womanland.

The four Js meet when Jael, using the technology of the future, brings about a "fusion of the braids" of time-space. The fictional worlds of Joanna Russ's novel make up a multiverse of a quantic nature, in which each reality evolves on inter-crossing

probability lines. It is this “wave function” associated to parallel worlds that allows the instantaneous journey in time and space and the meeting of the four characters.

[...] there must be an infinite number of possible universes (such is the fecundity of God) [...] It’s possible, too, that there is no such thing as one clear line or strand of probability, and that we live on a sort of twisted braid, blurring from one to the other without even knowing it, as long as we keep within the limits of a set of variations that really make no difference to us. Thus the paradox of the time travel ceases to exist, for the Past one visits is never one’s Past but always somebody else’s; or, rather, one’s visit to the Past instantly creates another Present (one in which the visit has already happened) and what you visit in the Past belonging to the Present – an entirely different matter from your own Past. And with each decision you make (back there in the Past) that new probable universe itself branches, creating simultaneously a new Past and a new Present, or to put it plainly, a new universe.⁹

The probabilistic universes of quantum physics allow Joanna Russ to offer a framework for no less than four versions of secondary worlds, differing from one another according to the types of relationships between the two sexes. Jeannine’s America is a society dominated by the patriarchal mentality, by the “straight mind”. Women are subordinated to men and to the reproductive function. In order to occupy a place in society, a woman must contract a marriage, which is why Jeannine’s parents insist that she should

marry Cal, although she does not love him. Joanna lives in an America where women’s emancipation is in full swing. Clever, creative, independent, in order to make herself accepted and noticed in a men’s society she needs, though, to become a “female man”, a character that refers not so much to homosexuality as to a gender-role game. Janet belongs to a feminist utopia of the future. Whileaway is an ideal society made up of women only, which has abolished all the evil and violence of the male behaviour. It corresponds to the civilization of female Warriors of Monique Wittig, a civilisation of the She, where the pronoun “she” has replaced the pronoun “he” in the language for designating the whole human race (thus reversing the linguistic convention that attributes, by synecdoche, the masculine “man” to all humans). Finally, Jael comes from a nightmarish, anti-utopian world, where the battle of the sexes rages. Like the Amazons of the ancient and medieval “marvellous Indias,” who lived in isolation from men (even on separate islands), the women and men of Jael’s world live apart, on two continents, in homosexual couples or with young males changed by aesthetic surgery, and bartering children for resources. Jael herself is a State assassin, whose task is to kill the leader of Manland.

Susan Ayres analyses Joanna Russ’s prismatic narrative device in terms of a “*literary war machine*” (borrowing Monique Wittig’s concepts), which is supposed to lay siege to the reigning sexual order.

In deploying this literary war machine, Russ critiques – in a manner similar to Wittig’s *The Straight Mind* and her utopian novel *Les Guérillères* (1969) – heterosexual institutions that regulate gender, showing how two

representatives from a world similar to ours respond to those institutions. She also shows two alternative worlds that further undermine, but do not offer solutions to the ways in which heterosexual institutions regulate gender. Ultimately, Russ's war machine succeeds by reappropriating language, as illustrated by one character's change into the female man.¹⁰

In order to build this "parallax" critique, with multiple perspectives, Joanna Russ experiments, in each of her fictional worlds, different ways of separation and distribution of the good and evil between the masculine and feminine poles.

In Jeannine's America, women have the negative traits that the male "establishment" imposes on them: educated women are frigid, while the active ones are neurotic, and in general all women are shy, dependent, nourishing, passive, intuitive, emotional, stupid, submissive and beautiful (which is not a quality, but an advantage as a sexual object). By contrast to the role they are reduced to, women are overwhelmed by flattering clichés and stereotypes, whose function is only to further reify them: Mother Earth, eternal mermaid, symbol of purity, force of life, altruistic love, gateway to another world, etc.¹¹

Janet's world, *Whileaway*, is a utopia where every evil element has been removed from women's gender. In this female (and feminist) Land of Cockaigne, the evil deeds of the aggressive and contemptuous male behaviour have been put to right and social security is ensured:

There's no being out too late in *Whileaway*, or up too early, or in the wrong part of town, or unescorted. You cannot

fall out of the kinship web and become sexual prey for strangers, for there is no prey and there are no strangers – the web is worldwide. In all of *Whileaway* there is no one who can keep you from going where you please (though you may risk your life, if that sort of things appeal to you), no one who will follow you and try to embarrass you by whispering obscenities in your ear, no one who will attempt to rape you, no one who will warn of the dangers of the street, no one who will stand on street corners, hot-eyed and vicious, juggling loose change in his pants pocket, bitterly sure that you're a cheap floozy, hot and wild, who likes it, who can't say no.¹²

The other two worlds, that of Joanna and that of Jael, are better balanced in the distribution of good and evil between the two genders. Joanna's contemporary America is a liberal society that is beginning to discover and to claim its rights and freedoms, to set up a new sexual order, militating for women's emancipation and for the equality of social roles. Nevertheless, this equality is not "natural," women are supposed to assume the role of men, to become "female men."

Finally, Jael's future world is a dystopia, in which sexual contradiction has found no other way out but separation and war. Since neither gender is willing to give up anything of its independence and privileges, the solution found by either in order to ensure the perpetuation of the race is much worse: turn the young boys either into ephebes on behalf of the men or into insemination agents for the women.

The worlds of the four J's make up a kind of theoretical matrix covering the possible

permutations of the relationship between the two sexual poles, male and female. Those of Jeannine and of Janet show an asymmetrical relationship, in an inverted distribution: a backward-looking, patriarchal society, with women in an inferior position, in the former; a matriarchal, futuristic society without men, in the latter. Those of Joanna and Jael offer a symmetrical, equal, but also mutilating and unstable relationship: the women compete with the men for their condition and position and give up their specificity, in the former; in the latter the women usurp the power of the men, in an intestine battle of the sexes. So Joanna Russ's novel is a polytopia, with four "quantic" versions, whose fictional worlds could be qualified respectively as a meliorist (although "critical") utopia (Joanna's America); a feminist utopia (Janet's Whileaway); a machos' dystopia (Jeannine's America); and an anti-utopia (Jael's Manland and Womanland).

But these "braids" of the multiverse are after all nothing more than the chronotopes corresponding to four personalities, four dramatic *personae* or four faces of the author. The parallel worlds are "external correlatives" of several attitudes and reactions that the author observes in the laboratory of his own multiple (literary) identity. Through the four J's, Joanna Russ explores the possible social solutions for the woman's condition and at the same time she expresses her personal affective experiences as a woman, the different tendencies and behaviours that coexist in her. And, like Thomas More at the end of his *Utopia*, she seems to reach the same heart-rending conclusion: her story is nothing but an unachievable wish, all these worlds are nothing but chimeras or nightmares, there is no place for her reveries in the real world.

It is in this way that we think that her farewell to her mouthpiece characters, her multiple personalities, should be read:

Goodbye to Alice Reasoner [Jael], who says tragedy makes her sick, who says never give in but always go down fighting, who says take them with you, who says die if you must but loop your own intestines around the neck of your strangling enemy. Goodbye to everything. Goodbye to Janet, whom we don't believe in and whom we deride but who is in secret our savior from utter despair, who appears Heaven-high in our dreams with a mountain under each arm and the ocean in her pocket, Janet who comes from the place where the labia of sky and horizon kiss each other so that Whileawayans call it the Door and know that all legendary things come therefrom. Radiant as the day, the Might-be of our dreams, living as she does in a blessedness none of us will ever know, she is nonetheless Everywoman. Goodbye, Jeannine, goodbye, poor soul, poor girl, poor as-I-once-was.¹³

Woman on the Edge of Time by Marge Piercy (1976) offers another original variation within the utopian genre. As all utopias are double-ended narrative devices¹⁴, with a negative pole (such as Thomas More's England) and a positive one (as Thomas More's Utopia), in Marge Piercy's novel the negative point of reference, which occupies the here and the now of the utopian architecture, is the America of the second half of the 20th century. The central figure of the novel is Consuelo Ramos, a Mexican woman, emigrated to the United States and living a miserable life among thieves, prostitutes,

matchmakers. Marge Piercy uses the character to elaborate a furious, ravaging critique of the social status of the immigrants in the USA. The family background of the protagonist is made up of misfits and dominated by violence (like the relations between Connie and Geraldo, the lover of her niece, Dolly).

Connie herself is treated by the social assistance system as a psychopath, as a madwoman who abuses her daughter during her obnubilation fits. Committed for a second time to a psychiatric asylum, she has nightmarish experiences. The doctors experiment on the sick, in order to control or at least limit their aggressive behaviour. So Connie is submitted to an experiment with cerebral implants, called “dialytrodes”, meant to reduce her violence, but in fact to annihilate her personality and her decision-making capacity. She fights against this depersonalization by fleeing from the hospital, then by mimicking absurd attitudes, in order to convince the doctors that the treatment is not working. Just as in *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* by Ken Kesey (1962), the clinic is an allegory of our world and of the massifying system that turns the individuals into Manchurian candidates.

However, this external impersonal perspective on the events, reflected in the final medical report on the state of the patient, is contested by the narrator’s subjective perspective, situated within the character’s consciousness. Marge Piercy rewrites from the inside the story of a woman who, according to the doctors’ diagnosis, suffers from paranoid schizophrenia. Or, adopting Connie’s point of view, her delusional story becomes perfectly coherent, and as real as the “objective” narrative. It tells about the mental “war” (with all the little strategic gestures of refusal, dissimulation, lying, revolt, fleeing, mental evasion, etc.) that the character

wages against an amputating system. This contradictory double perspective can give the creeps, because it questions the sick label that society applies to anomic persons. Marge Piercy’s America is a dystopian world built by a reduction of the *mundus* (the primary world) to its most repellent aspects.

Connie’s most effective tactics, enacted in order to resist the “brainwashing,” is the creation of compensating worlds. Finding herself, as a citizen of a consumerist, selfish society, in a dystopian position, she creates parallel realities in the future, where she takes refuge in her moments of distress and disorientation. As a rule, the alternative universes imagined by utopists or counter-utopists have ontological densities similar to the primary universe, and in order to get there one must cross geographical or astral spaces or units of time. As far as we know, Marge Piercy is the only author who situates utopia in the mental space of a character. It is a beautiful metaphor of the imaginary condition of invention of all “non-places,” but a disturbing metaphor, even a heart-rending one, because it places doubt on all utopian reverie, seen as a fantasy flight and liberation from an unbearable present. What represents to the character a real future world, to her doctors is only a systematic delirium.

The inhabitants of Connie’s future utopian world argue for their own possible existence, invoking the argument of the parallel realities: they are a possible future among other futures. They must struggle for their reality to materialize, so that it does not remain a mere fold among infinite possibilities:

Alternate futures are equally or almost equally probable... and that affects the... shape of time [...] We must

fight to come to exist, to remain in existence, to be the future that happens.¹⁵

In order to give birth to their own world, the inhabitants of the future endeavour to mentally contact people from the past who are sensitive to empathetic or telepathic communication. These contact characters, like Connie, who belong to our world are for the people of the future agents able to determine the evolution of humanity towards that very future.

Nevertheless, Connie herself comes to wonder, at times, whether these visitors from the future, as well as her own visits to the future world, are no more than hallucinations. Her future correspondents could be no more than alternative personalities of an exploded psyche:

Luciente as a fraction of her mind, as a voice of an alternate self, talking to her in the night. Perhaps she was mad.¹⁶

Connie is a character that finds herself in a difficult balance not only “on the edge of time,” but also on that tight thread between the primary world and the possible worlds, between reality and fantasy, between soundness and madness. Fighting for alternative future universes is a way of fighting, by projection, for one’s own future; it’s a confrontation between the identities of a multiple personality, in order to find out who will take the upper hand: the positive or the negative characters.

Each of the character’s split personalities (“fractions of identity”) is in contact with two future worlds. These two uchronias, corresponding to the good and evil sides of the character, are respectively a utopia and a dystopia.

The first one, the utopia, is set in the year 2137, in Mattapoisett, in a decentralized community that would have been formed in the United States and everywhere else in the world after a profound social and moral revolution. The former leading system would have had to fold and move over to Antarctica, or the Moon, in space, but it continues to fight the communist society by using weapons and androids, so that stability and order are not ensured yet.

The community of Mattapoisett is a naturist society, practising an ecologist, even an animist philosophy. People organize their life and their subsistence means by protecting nature and living together with it, they even speak to the animals, who have become if not more intelligent at least as sweet as the beasts created by God in Paradise. Since resources are limited, they have reduced industry and technology to the bare minimum, without stopping research nonetheless. Education is pragmatic, by direct apprenticeship. Medicine is based not just on homeopathic principles, but also on noteworthy progress in genetics, so that the Mattapoisettians no longer treat disease by using surgery, but cell stimulation. They might equally well prolong the life of the individuals, but they have decided that the quest for immortality raises ethical and anthropological issues that had better be left alone.

From a social point of view, the utopian people of the future have abolished private property, trade and finances, they have founded a communist society. They are all self-motivated in their work to do what they please and what is at the same time necessary for the group, so that poverty and indigence, as well as theft and violence have disappeared. There is no government or any central state organism, the Mattapoisettians decide everything

in the councils that function as the wise people's assemblies of the ancient tribes. The functions of the leaders are exercised by rotation, nobody aspires to power any longer and people behave modestly and altruistically. This healthy, harmonious life has facilitated powerful spiritual progress. The Mattapoisettians are more intelligent (a visionary intelligence), they have discovered, for instance, the journey by mental projection in time.

From a moral point of view, they have established spontaneous relationships of equality and brotherhood. There are no longer any persecuted or misunderstood minorities, everybody has equal rights and chances. They have abolished the racism that Connie suffered from in her time:

We broke the bond between genes and culture, broke it forever. We want there to be no chance of racism again.¹⁷

In this racial "*melting pot*" there are no more any nuclear families, relationships are free and children are brought up in common. If feminist utopias isolated women from men and offered them the capacity of parthenogenesis, Marge Piercy turns all individuals, male and female, into mothers:

It was part of women's long revolution. When we were breaking all the old hierarchies. Finally, there was that one thing we had to give up too, the only power we ever had, in return for no more power for anyone. The original production: the power to give birth. Cause as long as we were biologically enchained, we'd never be equal. And males never would be humanized to be loving and tender. So we all become mothers.¹⁸

The issue of biological inequality between man and woman is solved by a de-sexualization of conception, of pregnancy and birthing: children are conceived *in vitro* by random selection of the traits and put into gestation in artificial matrixes.

The second uchronia of the novel is a future dystopic place. Mattapoisett is, unfortunately, only one of the possible worlds of the future. During the dialytrode implantation Connie feels projected into an alternate space, a technological, robotized New York. Gildina, her contact in this anti-uchronia, is a woman who lives sequestered in her flat, a sexual slave to her master, without access outdoors and without the desire to go out. This world seems entirely artificial, the sky is pale grey and the sun is irradiating, life has been replaced by simulacra. The people themselves, like Cash, Gildina's partner, have submitted to mental operations that offer them SC ("sharpened control") over their bodies and psyche:

He turns off fear and pain and fatigue and sleep, like he's got a switch. He's like a Cybo, almost! He can control the fibers in his spinal cord, control his body temperature. He's a fighting machine.¹⁹

This means that in the alternate negative future the industrial, technological, capitalist and consumerist civilization has won, that the "multis" have changed the population according to a machine-man (counter)ideal.

Connie has the precise intuition that the result of this war for the future takes place in her psyche. For example, Marge Piercy succeeds in overlapping, in disturbing scenes, the resistance that the character opposes to the doctors to an airborne fight that takes place among the inhabitants of

Mattapoisett and the attack robots sent by the imperialist technocrats. That the psychiatrists and modern medicine (in fact the present social system) correspond (and are the cause that lead) to an infernal future is not at all encouraging. But even more important, as we have already suggested, is that the confrontation between utopia and dystopia takes place in the brain of the protagonist, that the human soul has become the “somewhere else” of the utopian genre, carrier of positive or negative worlds.

In conclusion, the Amazones’ utopia, with everything that it implies (separation of the sexes, inversion of gender roles, parthenogenesis, etc.), as a central theme of the second-wave feminist utopian writings, is the logical result of a “thought experience”: how to guarantee the autonomy and independence of a women’s society? It is a demonstration by the absurd, which does

not express so much a realistic social project that the authors would like to see put into practice, as a warning against the dangers of perpetuating a society that discriminates women. The separation of women, the breach between the two genders of the human race, is a more than ambiguous utopia, a demonstration of the saying that one’s utopia can be someone else’s anti-utopia, so much the more when both the one and the other are the same person (the author, the reader).

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NOTES

1. See an extensive survey of the *topos* of the Amazons in Adriana Babeți, *Amazoanele. O Poveste*, Iași, Polirom, 2013.
2. See Corin Braga, *Le paradis interdit au Moyen Âge. La quête manquée de l'Éden oriental*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2004, p. 276-279.
3. See Corin Braga, *Pour une morphologie du genre utopique*, Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2018, p. 350-352.
4. Darby Lewes, *Dream Visionaries: Gender and Genre in Women's Utopian Fiction, 1870-1920*, Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 1995; Corin Braga, *Pour une morphologie du genre utopique*, p. 268-279.
5. See Corin Braga, *Pour une morphologie du genre utopique*, p. 408-413.
6. Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*, New York & London, Methuen, 1986; Idem, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky. Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*, Boulder (Colorado) & Oxford, Westview Press, 2000.
7. Dunja M. Mohr, *Worlds Apart? Dualism and Transgression in Contemporary Female Dystopias*, Jefferson, McFarland & Company, 2005.
8. Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1992.
9. Joanna Russ, *The Female Man* (1975), ed. G. Jones, London, Orion Publishing Group, 2010, p. 6-7.
10. Susan Ayres, "The «Straight Mind» in Russ's The Female Man", *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 22, Part 1, 1995, <http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/65/ayres65art.htm>. See further Dunja M. Mohr, *op. cit.*, 2005.
11. Joanna Russ, *op. cit.*, p. 199.
12. *Ibidem*.
13. *Ibidem*, p. 206.
14. See Corin Braga, *Pour une morphologie du genre utopique*, p. 67-71.
15. Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1976, p. 197-198.
16. *Ibidem*, p. 252.
17. *Ibidem*, p. 104.
18. *Ibidem*, p. 105.
19. *Ibidem*, p. 297-298.