


# Beyond the human: George Stewart's fiction

 <https://doi.org/10.21814/anthropocenica.5987>

Maria do Carmo Mendes

Departamento de Estudos Portugueses e Lusófonos, Escola de Letras, Artes e Ciências Humanas,  
Universidade do Minho  
Portugal  
mcpinheiro@elach.uminho.pt  
ORCID: 0000-0002-4558-7146

## Abstract

In 1949, the American historian and novelist George Stewart published a dystopian novel, *Earth Abides* (translated into Portuguese as *Só a Terra Permanece*), which envisions an apocalyptic future. The narrative aligns with the reflections of Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro in *Há Mundo por Vir? Ensaios sobre os medos e os fins* (2023), regarding the existence of a world after humanity. Stewart crafts a fiction in which an American man suddenly finds himself alone in his country, a survivor of an epidemic caused by a deadly virus. The reader follows this character's survival journey, sharing in his perplexities and reflections on the impact humans can have on the planet. The character's scientific background in Natural Sciences facilitates an exploration of the intersections between Literature and Science from the outset. Stewart's work, with its strong ecological focus, is also a deep reflection on the harmful consequences of human interference in Earth's ecosystems. The central aims of this essay are: 1. To identify the dystopian elements in *Earth Abides*; 2. To show that the novel allows for an *avant la lettre* ecocritical reading (as it predates the formal establishment of this field within Literary Studies); 3. To highlight the American writer's warnings about the grim future that humanity faces, in which humans have played a dominant and often detrimental role through the exploitation of natural resources, deforestation, and climate change; and 4. To reflect on one of the most incisive literary analyses of the 20th century concerning the end of humanity.

## Keywords

Dystopia; Stewart (George Rippey); Ecocriticism; Apocalypse.

## Resumo

O historiador e romancista norte-americano George Stewart publicou em 1949 um romance distópico, *Earth Abides* (*Só a Terra permanece*, em tradução portuguesa), que imagina um futuro apocalíptico. Trata-se de uma narrativa que se enquadra nas reflexões de Débora Danowski e Eduardo Viveiros de Castro em *Há Mundo por Vir? Ensaios sobre os medos e os fins*, sobre a existência de um mundo depois do humano. Stewart constrói uma ficção na qual um norte-americano se vê subitamente sozinho no seu país, enquanto sobrevivente de uma epidemia provocada por um vírus letal. É o percurso de sobrevivência dessa personagem, nas suas perplexidades e cogitações sobre o que o ser humano pode provocar no planeta, que o leitor acompanha, partilhando as inquietações de uma personagem com formação científica em Ciências Naturais, o que desde logo propicia uma análise dos diálogos entre Literatura e Ciência. A obra de Stewart, com uma intensa componente ecológica, é ainda uma profunda reflexão sobre as consequências nefastas da interferência do ser humano nos ecossistemas terrestres. A comunicação tem assim como propósitos centrais: 1. Identificar os elementos distópicos da ficção *Só a Terra permanece*; 2. Demonstrar que o romance permite uma leitura ecocrítica *avant la lettre* (porque anterior à institucionalização desta área dos Estudos Literários); 3. Explicitar os alertas do escritor norte-americano sobre um futuro sombrio que se apresenta à humanidade e no qual o papel desta tem tido um lugar preponderante e tendencialmente negativo, na exploração de recursos naturais, na desflorestação e nas alterações climáticas; 4. Refletir sobre uma das mais acutilantes análises literárias, no século XX, sobre o fim do humano.

**Palavras-chave**

Distopia; George Stewart (George Rippey); Ecocrítica; Apocalipse.

**Introduction**

The American historian and novelist George Stewart published a dystopian novel in 1949,<sup>1</sup> *Earth Abides* (Portuguese translation: *Só a Terra Permanece*) which envisions an apocalyptic future. This narrative aligns with the reflections of Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro in *Há Mundo por Vir? Ensaio sobre os medos e os fins*, concerning the existence of a world after humanity.

Stewart crafts a fiction in which an American suddenly finds himself alone in his country as the survivor of an epidemic caused by a lethal virus. The reader follows this character's survival journey, his perplexities, and his thoughts on what humanity can inflict on the planet. This character, with a scientific background in Natural Sciences, facilitates an analysis of the dialogues between Literature and Science.

Stewart's work, with its intense ecological component, is also a deep reflection on the harmful consequences of human interference in terrestrial ecosystems. This essay has the following central purposes: 1. To identify the dystopian elements in the novel *Earth Abides*; 2. To show that the text allows for an ecocritical reading *avant la lettre* (since it precedes the institutionalization of this area of Literary Studies); 3. To clarify the American writer's warnings about a grim future facing humanity, in which humanity has played a prominent and increasingly negative role, in resource exploitation, deforestation, and climate change; 4. To reflect on one of the most incisive literary analyses of the 20th century regarding the end of humanity.

With some sense of humour, Danowski and Eduardo Castro (2015, p. 12) state that "The end of the world is an apparently endless theme – at least, of course, until it happens"<sup>2</sup>. The two essayists also highlight the proliferation in the arts, popular culture, political debates, and media of a "dystopian flowering" of narratives about the end of the world:

As the gravity of the current environmental and civilizational crisis becomes increasingly evident, new variations emerge and old ones are updated around an ancient idea that we will simplify as "the end of the world." These include blockbusters in the fantasy genre, 'docufictions' on the History Channel, popular science books at various levels of complexity, video games, musical and artistic works, blogs aligned with all ideological spectrums, scientific meetings, academic journals and specialized information networks, reports and statements from diverse global organizations, the invariably

---

<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, it is also the year of publication of George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984*.

<sup>2</sup> My translations.

frustrating climate summit conferences, theology symposia, philosophical essays, New Age ceremonies and other neopagan movements, and an exponentially growing number of political manifestos—essentially, all kinds of texts, contexts, media, speakers, and audiences (Danowski and Castro, 2015, p. 12).

Apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic scenarios are increasingly common in literature and cinema. The final years of Earth are depicted in contemporary literary narratives such as Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy and in disturbing films like "Melancholia" (2011) by Lars Von Trier or "4:44 Last Day on Earth" by Abel Ferrara (2011). Written and directed by the American filmmaker, "4:44 Last Day on Earth" is an apocalyptic drama in which scientists and theologians predict that solar radiation will destroy the ozone layer, and consequently, all life on Earth. The Danish filmmaker explores the distinct emotions of two sisters in the face of the announcement of the end of the Earth following a collision with a planet called Melancholia.

The climate crisis, which is now one of the greatest global concerns, is often associated with lethal viruses. Apocalyptic narratives anticipate a scenario of total or partial human extinction. This is the case in Margaret Atwood's aforementioned trilogy.

## 1. The Great Disaster

What makes George Rippley Stewart's work unique is the fact that it was published in 1949, at a time when environmental issues were not yet on the agenda. *Earth Abides* is, according to the brief editorial note in the Brazilian Portuguese edition,

a book that depicts what might someday happen. And this possibility is not unrealistic. (...). In this work by George R. Stewart, it is not the atom that annihilates humanity. A virus, simply a virus, destroys almost all human beings. And the survivors begin the Great March, leaving behind the Old Times, with all their ills, their crimes, their horrors. (...) The few survivors of the devastating epidemic forge new paths for life (my translation)<sup>3</sup>.

This introductory note contrasts the present and the future, pointing to a dystopian view of the current era – the end of the 1940s – and an optimistic

---

<sup>3</sup> "um livro que retrata o que pode algum dia acontecer. E não é irreal esta possibilidade. (...). Nesta obra de George R. Stewart não é o átomo que aniquila a humanidade. Um vírus, simplesmente um vírus, destrói quase todos os seres humanos. E os remanescentes reiniciam a Grande Marcha, deixando para trás os Velhos Tempos, com todas as suas mazelas, os seus crimes, os seus horrores. (...) os poucos sobreviventes da aniquilante epidemia abrem novos caminhos à vida".

outlook on the future. However, this is not the predominant idea in the novel. Before analysing its main elements, I will briefly recall George R. Stewart.

Born in Pennsylvania in 1895 and passing away in San Francisco in 1980, Stewart was a writer and professor of English at the University of Berkeley from 1923 until his death. In 1941, he published *Storm*, a novel about a cyclone that hit the Pacific, which the author named “Maria.” Featuring a young meteorologist as the protagonist, the novel describes the occurrence of a tropical cyclone. The celebrity of the work primarily rests on its introduction of a proper name to an extreme weather phenomenon, something that, starting with *Storm*, began to be used to label cyclones and hurricanes. Winner of the First International Fantasy Award in 1951, *Earth Abides* left a significant mark on Stephen King's novel *The Stand* (1978).

The epigraph of the novel, taken from the *Book of Ecclesiastes*, foreshadows the theme of (almost) total human extinction: “Men go and come, but Earth abides.” (Stewart, 1976: 4). This is the protagonist's first understanding, and his journey – somewhat mirroring that of the author, a passionate historian and geographer of the United States who travelled by car and bicycle – leads him to cross a vast portion of American territory in search of other humans. Isherwood Williams is a graduate student who wakes up after a near-fatal snakebite. On his return from the desert to San Francisco, he meets the absolute absence of other human beings. Ish speculates about the reasons of this mysterious disappearance, without any traces to explain it:

It might have emerged from some animal reservoir of disease; it might be caused by some new micro-organism, most likely a virus, produced by mutation; it might be an escape, possibly even a vindictive release, from some laboratory of bacteriological warfare. The last was apparently the popular idea. The disease was assumed to be airborne, possibly upon particles of dust (Stewart, 1976, p. 18).

Unable to resolve his perplexities, Isherwood concludes: “Civilization had retreated” (Stewart, 1976, p. 19).

A newspaper reveals that an unknown epidemic had rapidly spread across the United States, killing a large number of the human population. Over several months, Ish meets non-human animals: dogs, cows, chickens, and cats, coyotes, rats, calves, and horses. The protagonist's reflection shakes the anthropocentric view:

During thousands of years man had impressed himself upon the world. Now man was gone, certainly for a while, perhaps forever. Even if some survivors were left, they would be a long time in again obtaining supremacy. What would happen to the world and its creatures without man? *That* he was left to see! (Stewart, 1976, pp. 28-29)

Although familiarised with solitude and the outdoors (stimulated by his work as a geographer) and not particularly caring about human interaction, Isherwood feels that loneliness is becoming suffocating and that his mental faculties are declining. The only beings he establishes some proximity with are dogs he encounters on the streets, but they evoke an increasingly intense fear: some are too debilitated; others appear to be overfed. Ish suspects that the dogs are devouring each other. Princess, a female dog wandering the streets, becomes his only companion, but her presence leads the geographer to reflect on the importance of human-nonhuman interaction. While Ish's reflections certainly include critiques of the harmful human interference in terrestrial ecosystems, the considerations about the role of humans in the lives of plants and nonhuman animals are equally significant:

As with the dogs and cats, so also with the grasses and flowers whichman had long nourished. The clover and the blue-grass withered on the lawns, and the dandelions grew tall. In the flowerbed the water-loving asters wilted and drooped, and the weeds flourished. Deep within the camellias, the sap failed; they would bear no buds next spring. The leaves curled on the tips of the wisteria vines and the rose bushes, as they set themselves against the long drought. Foot by foot the wild cucumbers quickly sent their long vines across lawn and flowerbed and terrace. As once, when the armies of the empire were shattered and the strong barbarians poured in upon the soft provincials, so now the fierce weeds pressed in to destroy the pampered nurslings of man (Stewart, 1976, pp. 45-46).

By the beginning of the novel, Isherwood feels like Robinson Crusoe, affected by the deep despair of the exile and the desolation of the vast emptiness: "He had started out in the morning with a Robinson-Crusoe feeling that he would welcome any human companionship" (Stewart, 1976, p. 40)<sup>4</sup>.

He encounters a few rare humans, usually in pairs or groups of three, and concludes that these existences, driven primarily by the desire to survive, reveal an intrinsic human need: life in the company of other humans:

These people were physically alive, but more and more he realized that they walked about in a kind of emotional death. He had studied enough anthropology to realize that the same phenomenon had been observed on a smaller scale before. Destroy the culture-pattern in which people lived, and often the shock was too great for the individuals. Take away family and job, friends and church, all

---

<sup>4</sup> Later, Isherwood criticizes Defoe's hero and feels he's completely different from Crusoe: Did Crusoe really want to be rescued from his desert island where he was lord of all that he surveyed? That was a question that people had asked. But even if Crusoe had been the kind of man who wanted to escape, to renew contacts with other people, that would not mean that he himself, Ish, was such a person. Perhaps he would cherish his island. Basically, perhaps, he feared human entanglements" (Stewart, 1976, p. 99).

customary amusements and routines, hope too – and life became walking death (Stewart, 1976, p.79).

New York epitomises the most disturbing moment of Isherwood's long journey: he sees mainly rats, ants, and some dogs; he observes the decay of infrastructures, deprived of human care. City animals and wild animals control New York, and it will be a long time before Ish has any human contact.

## **2. A New Civilization**

Ish feels that he has a purpose to fulfil, as he refuses to accept the possibility of human extinction. Just like the God's Gardeners in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Year of the Flood*, he devises a plan to rebuild life on Earth: he collects seeds to preserve the main plants of the country, finds a woman whom he marries and has children with, and decides, with a small group of survivors, to create a "new world."

This new way of life requires several learnings: starting from the beginning means, first of all, naming the years. Each of them will be named after the main event that occurred during it: thus, year ONE is called "the Year of the Baby," after the birth of Ish's first child with Em: "Now the new life begins. Now we commence the Year One. The Year One!" (Stewart, 1976: 124)

It is also the year when Ish plants his first garden; year TWO is the year of Ezra, in honour of one of the survivors who dies; year THREE is the year of the fires. Traumatic events, such as a puma invasion, lead to the naming of a year; but there are others with more promising designations. This is the case with year 18, called "The Year of Schoolteaching," when Ish dedicates himself to creating a school and ensuring that all the children learn to read and write:

Ever since the first children had been old enough, Ish had tried, in a more or less desultory way, to give them some kind of teaching, so that they could at least read and write and do a little arithmetic, and know something of geography. But it had always been difficult to get the children together, and there seemed to be so many things that they wanted to do, either in play or in earnest, and the schoolteaching had never accomplished very much, although most of the older children could read after a fashion. (...)

In this Year 18, however, Ish really tried to get together all of the children who were of proper age, so that they would not grow up completely ignorant (Stewart, 1976, p. 141).

Year 21 – "the Year of the Coming of Age" – celebrates the existence of a true community: the Tribe, composed of 36 members.

The second part of the novel (titled "The Year 22") is primarily a reflection on the community's achievements and failures. The latter prevails, as Isherwood holds high expectations:

After the Great Disaster, he had thought that the people, if any survived at all, would soon be able to get some things running again and proceed gradually toward re-establishing more and more of civilization. He had even dreamed of a time when electric lights might go on again. But nothing like that had happened, and the community was still dependent upon the leavings of the past (Stewart, 1976, pp. 145-146).

The conflict that arises between the Tribe's leader and its members is essentially tied to Isherwood's belief, which he vainly tries to instil in his family and friends, that resources are finite: the fire will go out when the matches run out; domestic animals will disappear if they are not cared for; crops must be cultivated, or the community will run out of food; the children and young people born after the catastrophe know only a world of material abundance. Isherwood's plea tries to rebuild the basis of social organization and the possibility of the community's future:

We mustn't go on living forever just in this happy way, scavenging among all the supplies that the Old Times left here for us, not creating or doing anything for ourselves. These things will all give out some day—if not in our years, in our children's, or grandchildren's. What will happen then? What will they do when they won't know how to produce more things? (Stewart, 1976: 149)

We've drifted along all these years not doing anything about producing our own food and getting civilization back into some kind of running-order, as regards all the material things. That's one matter, and an important one, but it isn't the only one. Civilization wasn't just only gadgets and how to make them and run them. It was all sorts of social organization too – all sorts of rules, and laws, and ways of life, among people and groups of people (Stewart, 1976, p. 151).

In other words, Isherwood desperately tries to ensure survival, which requires work, basic norms, and values. However, the Tribe's image of Ish as a "prophet of doom", along with the abundance of resources (that seems inexhaustible), and the perspective that it is pointless to think about a future with no horizons beyond procreation, lead to lives of idleness within the community: "He, alone, could think into the future" (Stewart, 1976, p. 182).

The community returns to a primitive state and proves incapable of dealing with various calamities: floods, storms, frosts, and diseases that claim the lives of children. The relationship with physical environment changes: human beings, once the "lords of the universe," now face a hostile nature: "But now nature had become so overwhelming that any attempt at its control was merely outside anyone's circle of thought. You lived as part of it, not as its dominating power" (Stewart, 1976, p. 273).

### **3. An apocalyptic post-apocalypse.**

Isherwood's aging and his failure to build a new civilization deepen in the third part of the novel – "The Last American." It is also in this final part that the conflict between humans and non-humans intensifies: Ish, on his deathbed, hands over to the young members of the community the hammer that has accompanied him from the beginning, a tool that protected him on various occasions, and serves as a symbol of an extinct world and a faint optimism that the new generation might be capable, not of rebuilding the past – defined by slavery, conquests, wars, and tyrannies – but of creating a future where a harmonious relationship between humans, and between humans and nature (both animal and plant), is possible. However, the sentence that concludes the novel – "Men go and come, but earth abides" (Stewart, 1976: 324) – reflects the dominance of a pessimistic view regarding human action.

In George Stewart's vision, a post-apocalyptic universe seems tragically doomed to failure.

### **References**

- Danowski, D. e Castro, E. V. de (2023). *Há Mundo por Vir? Ensaio sobre os medos e os fins*. Antígona.
- Ferrara, A. (Director). (2011). *4:44 Last Day on Earth* [Film]. Wild Bunch.
- Stewart, G. S. (1976). *Earth abides*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Von Trier, L. (Director). (2011). *Melancholia* [Film]. Zentropa Entertainments.