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# Teen Futures: Discourses of Alienation, the Social and Technology in Australian Science-Fiction Television Series

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Leonie Rutherford

Prior to the present volume, there has been little attempt to theorise the concept of 'teen' television. What might we mean by the 'teen' in teen television studies? Research such as that of Angela McRobbie on print culture locates its definition in the way in which texts *address* and are implicated in the construction of teen subcultures.<sup>1</sup> Alternative definitions might include texts which: are at least partially coded for teen audiences; represent youth subcultures; define problems of teen identity; use actors who are embodied teenagers; and/or meet 'teen' needs according to developmental or social models (the parallel here would be 'young adult fiction' in the publishing market).

These questions are crucial to my analysis. Most of the science-fiction drama series produced in Australia since the mid-1960s have been coded for younger audiences, with an emphasis within the industry on their additional potential to be sold as 'family' viewing. Since the inception of the Children's Television Standards in the mid-1980s, it has been important for commercial broadcasters to meet a quota of designated 'C' certificate (children's) drama. The Children's Television Standards define 'children' as young people up to the age of fourteen;<sup>2</sup> most 'C' certificate drama, therefore, is bound by regulation to 'meet the needs' of viewers in the upper childhood to early teenage years. The Film Australia productions I discuss in this chapter (*Escape from Jupiter*, *The Girl from Tomorrow* and *Tomorrow's End*), as well as such series as Jonathan Schiff's *Ocean Girl*, are all classified by the Australian Broadcasting Authority as 'C' drama. What then is their claim to be considered 'teen' television?

The answer is partially to be found in their intersection with the genre of science-fiction cinema and television. Regardless of the embodied ages of its consumers, science fiction is culturally constituted as a 'young adult' product, in its status as spectacle, celebrating the pleasures of possibility.<sup>3</sup>

More crucially, to maximise audience share and, thus, industry profitability, these dramas are typically double- or triple-coded, cross-written with a range of references which address teen, child and 'family' audiences. Film Australia's productions, in particular, cast 'bankable' adult actors as protagonists, along with the diegetically more prominent teen

and child characters. While these series do not foreground fictional youth cultures to the same extent as some of the American serials analysed elsewhere in this volume, they do address questions of teen identity using the particular thematics of science fiction: in particular, the relationship of the individual to technologies and framing discourses of futurity. Unlike series such as *Buffy*, *Beverly Hills 90210* or *Roswell High*, these productions cast actors who are embodied teenagers. One could argue that this deflects the aspirational, desiring gaze of corporeal teenaged viewers; on the other hand, a case can be made that these programmes offer a different perspective on teen subjectivity, one located in a broader set of social and technological discourses.

According to Annette Kuhn the thematics of science fiction typically concern 'societal organisation' and technology.<sup>4</sup> The future is an imaginary space where different models of social organisation may contend. Within this space, teen identity may be represented in transformed relationships to familiar structures of family and other institutions.

Science fiction overwhelmingly prefers the action-adventure mode. However, more speculatively, science-fiction drama explores 'alienness' – of the body and of societal organisation. The exploration of alterity is one of the genre's defining tropes, a trajectory in which points of contact and communication must be found within difference. Potentially, this may construct a politics of exclusion, in which the teenager, troped as alien, may confirm the normative status of adult subjectivity. On the other hand, the teenager, as liminal category, one who is neither child nor adult, may function as an avatar of potential other futures, critiquing social hierarchies and global economic and technological regimes.

### **Alien Avatars: *The Girl from Tomorrow***

Through the narrative device of time or space travel, science fiction has developed its own version of the *idiot-savant* – the stranded alien, adrift in a world whose structures and knowledges are unfamiliar. The narrative device of the infantilised alien, often literally an 'alien youth', distantiates the contemporary middle-class world and its culture. For instance, the motif of the 'alien child' is exploited to this effect in Steven Spielberg's 1982 classic, *ET: The Extra-Terrestrial*.

Film Australia's drama *The Girl from Tomorrow* is a slick adventure series with highly developed comic elements. In this series, the alien teen is a fourteen-year-old girl from the year 3000. The backstory is also familiar territory. Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek* and its sequels have familiarised generations of viewers with a projected history in which human culture evolves from a violent interregnum to an enlightened future. In *The Girl from Tomorrow*, the ultimate future is utopian, with a holistic-mystic technology based on channelling the power of the mind. The intermediate era, which provides the villain of the piece, is a dark age of anarchy and manipulation by tyrannic global corporations.

The strangeness of Alana, 'the girl from tomorrow', also provides a way of interrogating the difference of that liminal stage represented by the teen. The transitional space occupied by the teen in contemporary Western culture is almost erased in the year 3000. Teens and children are represented as part of a sober and conscientious adult continuum. Here the 'child' at school is not part of a segregated and differentiated category. In the first episode of the series, it is revealed that Alana's biological parents live off-world; she is educated in a tranquil garden setting by an almost contemporaneous guardian (the his-

torian Tualista). Already an apprentice healer, with a good deal more responsibility than the children of 1990s' Sydney who are depicted in the programme, Alana's major companion is a wrist-unit computer, PJ, who acts as organiser, friend and helper. The brutal dynamics of identity formation, common to the peer-group culture of the contemporary junior high school, are wholly missing from Alana's pre-time-travel experience.

Contemporary knowledges and social practices are rendered alien through the temporal dislocation of the 'girl from tomorrow'. Tualista's time-travelling history expedition to discover the causes of 'the Great Disaster' is hijacked by a twenty-sixth century buccaneer. As a consequence, Alana is deposited amidst the decay of a Sydney suburban rubbish dump in the year 1990. This plot device provides the vehicle for humour at the expense of the suddenly knowledge-poor Alana, as she negotiates differences in technologies and discourses. A farcical series of misadventures is structured around Alana's literal-minded misreadings of communication utterances whose purpose is manipulative rather than purely informative.

The series contrasts the 'innocent' and earnest Alana with the streetwise contemporary teenager, Jenny Kelly. On the other hand, the way in which Alana, Jenny and her kid brother, Petey, collude to outwit not only the villain, Silverthorn, but also the limitations imposed by parents and teachers, emphasises common youth perceptions and interests, constructing young people as subjects who are forced to inhabit and negotiate an 'alien', adult world.

### Smart Talkin' versus the *Idiot-Savant*: Truth and Contemporary Teen Discourse

In the thirty-first century a benign technology and cooperative governance have done away with the harsh economic, political and structural inequalities of race, class and age. Knowledge and sustenance are freely available to all citizens via 'public information terminals' and communal facilities which provide food, clothing and services. Transported to the year 1990, Alana functions narratively as an inept reader of contemporary institutions. Seeking directions, she asks a passing 'bag lady' where she might find a 'public access terminal': her attempted clarification – 'a public information bank' – heralds a drama of comic misunderstanding. The homeless woman directs Alana to an autoteller machine. The girl from tomorrow is a complete alien to 1990s' structures of exchange. Not only is she oblivious to the street dweller's position of social disadvantage; more crucially, she is ignorant of the function of money as the means of obtaining basic necessities. When PJ, her wrist computer, hacks into the autoteller machine, it disgorges a bundle of banknotes rather than the desired information, but Alana is unable to recognise the use or value of the money. This institutional incompetence is ironic in the light of the next sequence; having unconcernedly given away the cash which would have paid for her consumption, she shoplifts fruit from a 'self-serve' kiosk. The nuances of the commercial exchange have escaped her observation.

As *idiot-savant*, the alien teen renders visible the possessive practices which create social disadvantage through the commodification of basic resources. Alana's incomprehension is coded as an ethical position. She is wise in her ignorance of the practices of monopoly capitalism. This ethical positioning is crucial to the ideological work of the series and its

sequel, *Tomorrow's End*. The villain, Silverthorn, and the corrupt corporate moguls of the twenty-sixth century are products of an age in which global monopoly capitalism has brought about planetary degradation and social collapse.

The trope of the alien teen not only functions to expose the crises within categories of economic relations. The system of education is also rendered strange by Alana's gaze. The curricula of the year 3000 are practical, interactive and are organised non-hierarchically. The learning relationship is one of supportive one-on-one guidance of a respected apprentice by a more experienced mentor. In stark opposition to this, in the educational and peer context of the junior high school of 1990s' Sydney, Alana is constructed as alienated, not only from the discourses of her peers, but also from contemporary modes of mediating knowledge. One of the elements associated with the trope of the *idiot-savant* is truth telling in fora where polite euphemism is the norm. Alana does not comprehend the strategies of mendacity and connivance which contemporary teens practise in order to evade adult surveillance and age-specific regimes of confinement. This incompetence codes her as a 'nerd' to her fellow students. Lying to teachers is how teens within the institution of the school conceal transgressive opinions and screen their own non-compliance behind a facade of dutiful attention.

When Jenny Kelly tells the time-traveller that she should 'sit down, shut up' and copy down what the Ancient History teacher says, Alana is characteristically bemused: 'How can anyone learn anything like that?' In her *overt* non-compliance she is coded as deviant. She transgresses school discipline by her open and honest inattention in class, as well as teen codes of *covert* non-compliance through her naive avowal of her lack of interest. Significantly, she merely voices what the mendacious, knowing silence of her peers has always spoken. The regimes of containment shared by the teens underline the universality of the youth experience. The modern 'children' also find educational institutions strange. The world adults have created is 'alien'.

While the drama foregrounds a youth perspective, there is also an adult gaze, however affectionate, in which the difference of 'children' is ruefully acknowledged. The commonplace perception of alterity is troped onto the 'teenager as alien'. This is effected largely through the stereotypical elements in the characterisation of Jenny Kelly, with her purple hair, overloud music and smart-mouthed one-liners at the expense of adult folly. To her mother, Jenny Kelly is an alien child, complete with the characteristic lifestyle markers of difference: divergent investments in fashion, music and subculture-specific linguistic forms.

Jenny is a sign of teenage alienation in general. Hers is a 'protest' femininity,<sup>5</sup> marked by punk inversion of hegemonic codes of beauty, seamliness, truth and duty. Jenny Kelly is alienated from the exemplary femininity of her own school peer group, with its iconography of classic blonde beauty, tanned skin and elegantly braided coiffures. She is an actor in a tragi-comedy of exclusion: the blonde set exclude Jenny from parties; she responds by sending a dead rat as a birthday gift; they respond with a gambit which ensures Jenny's social humiliation. Due to her smart mouth, her genius for extempore fabrication, and her traditionally masculine trait of rebelliousness, Jenny is coded as 'alien' to the exemplary models of sexualised teen femininity.

It was a cliché of another era that parents and teens suffer from a 'breakdown of communication'. The liminal status of the 'alien' child in this programme reveals that effective communication does exist – not in the 'truth-telling' exemplified by Alana, but in the mutually recognised and satisfying discourse of mendacity exemplified in contemporary adult–youth interactions. This transgressive insight is couched in a comic modality and, therefore, rendered less challenging. Adult–teen institutions (family or school) negotiate power relationships through a structure of fabrication and exhortation to (imaginary) duty. This is witnessed in the example of Jenny Kelly's creative tales. Her lies/stories leverage a space free from domestic duty/containment in which extra-curricular expeditions can take place. Jenny gets her way by telling mutually convenient lies. These lies meet the needs of parents and teachers as well as teens. They are not actually believed, but they are connived at because ignorance frees adults from the necessity of further attention and allows them to proceed with their own concerns.

The 'truth-telling' of the girl from tomorrow, on the other hand, is unwelcome because it reveals the necessity of lies in the structure of adult–teen social relations. A teacher's interrogative – 'Are the boys [outside the classroom window] more interesting than my lesson?' – demands a lie. Fabrications demand complicity. In another scene, Mrs B, the rotund, pet-besotted habituée of the Kelly Deli, orders mounds of sweets for herself and her lapdog. Jenny Kelly exhibits a forced politeness. The 'alien' response, however, explodes the structure of adult phantasy. Alana treats Mrs B's rhetorical posturing – 'I don't know why I get so many colds' – as a serious inquiry, delivering a deadpan lecture on the effects of obesity and poor diet on the immune system. In the process she breaks the contract of complicity which structures adult–teen discourse. As Jenny ruefully remarks: 'You get us into more trouble by telling the truth than I do by lying.' The contradictory status of teen fabrication is vindicated in the second series, *Tomorrow's End*. In the 'future noir' of the year 2500, Jenny's talent becomes a socially valued asset in a world where lies are an essential survival technique.

### Parasites or Antibodies: Alien Teen Bodies

If the alienated punk body of Jenny Kelly in *The Girl from Tomorrow* signifies teenage difference from normative adult and exemplary peer styles,<sup>6</sup> the *mise en scène* of *Escape from Jupiter* creates an architecture of space which politicises the difference between adults and youth. The production design creates a binary between surfaces and interiority, a Faustian environment in which the teen's body itself is represented as alien, invasive and disruptive.

Film Australia's *Escape from Jupiter* was co-produced with NHK Japan and the Australian Broadcasting Commission, with a Japanese production designer (Kazuo Sasaki). The series is clearly influenced both by the retro and post-modern stylistics of Japanese *anime* and by a tradition of cinematic futurescapes – consisting of polyglot urban technocultures – which reached its apex in Ridley Scott's 1982 classic, *Blade Runner*. Corporate greed precipitates a planetary holocaust on the mining colony of Io, when engineers fracture the lava core. A paranoid business and defence culture threatens the colony with annihilation in an environment where technology itself becomes inimical to life.

The mining colony of Io is a product of rapacious venture capitalism; the architecture of its world is alien to the energy and curiosity represented by the bodies of the teens and younger children. The *mise en scène* utilises retro stylistics reminiscent of 1950s' iconography of the future, suggesting that Io is a 'hick', somewhat under-resourced, outpost. Combined with this, however, the programme uses state of the art CGI representations of holography and simulacra, celebrating the spectacular aspects of this future's communication and entertainment technologies.

In the form of domes and decaying metallic structures, human habitations hug the exterior of Io, while a red, bifurcated fissure reveals the interior. Shafts penetrate to the site of the 'deep drilling'. 'Deep' penetration to the fiery depths is redolent with Faustian overtones: the greed of the adult social world, associated with opportunistic monopoly capitalism, overreaches prescribed natural limits. The world of the interior is labyrinthine, proscribed to the teenagers and their younger siblings, who are defined as nuisance elements, disruptive to the smooth operation of the corporate machine. Because of the remoteness of the colony, its population consists of worker families. It is therefore also a village, a social formation which produces offspring who are superfluous to the economic imperative. To the director of the mining colony (Duffy), the main protagonists, though clearly around sixteen or seventeen years old, are always stigmatised as rule-breaking 'children': non-adult and non-productive elements.

To Duffy (played to camp perfection by Steve Bisley) the teen body is properly the subject of restraint. However, its creativity and energy cannot be contained by the geopolitical structures of the adult world. Two narrative motifs construct the body of the teen as anarchic. The first is the motif of the lost 'child'; the second involves the coding of corporeal size as either a subversive or redemptive element. The teen's body fits spaces not designed for human traverse; it evades limitations.

For the mining director the 'child's' body is a parasite, disruptive of normal workflow. Duffy's policy of corporeal containment is designed to ensure that production quotas are met efficiently. Teens should not be seen in spaces mapped as workplaces. Neither should they hear adult business; information crucial to the future of the colony is restricted. Nevertheless, throughout the thirteen episodes of the series, the alien body of youth escapes its bounds.

Lost children halt operations at regular intervals. When Kumiko, an attractive sixteen-year-old girl, visits the colony with her parents (mining engineers), she becomes the catalyst for male rivalry between the local teens, Michael and Gerald. Gerald's taunts seduce Michael and Kumiko into an expedition to view the deep drilling. Predictably, an explosion from the fractured lava core precipitates a disaster sequence, amidst an epic landscape of precipices, rockfalls and fiery chasms.<sup>7</sup> The teen bodies are literally and figuratively trapped in spaces created by adult greed.

The younger siblings in the series function as camp-comic stereotypes. Kingston, much like Petey Kelly in *The Girl from Tomorrow*, is an example of the geeky boy genius, with his round glasses and robotic toy dog. Gerald's kid sister, Anna, is more obviously coded as toylike, with her Barbie-doll vestimentary regime of pinks and purples and her headgear with its retro connotations of mouseketeer ears. Her cupie-doll sweetness is clearly

no serious threat. A comic effect is, thus, brought into play when the younger children set out to save their more capable teen siblings. The younger children prefigure the role of the teen body as 'antibody', a saving grace which is able to enter the fissures barred to adult forms. The miniature size of the child's body allows an avenue of communication and escape for Kumiko and the male teens.

Linda Mizejewski has argued that the excessively sculptured and constructed form of the bodybuilder in adult science-fiction cinema functions as a special effect.<sup>8</sup> The pumped-up bodies of the Schwarzenegger/Van Damme school are spectacular, rather than functional. They connote the triumph of technology over the natural body. The body that exercise technologies produce is excessive rather than human. In *Escape from Jupiter*, teen bodies, inversely, are less defined and, therefore, more flexible. They are neither cyborgs nor techno-products; rather, by means of their adaptive power, they subvert technologies and institutions which alienate the natural and evolving body.

The 'miniature' body of the teen in this programme functions as a beneficent antibody, entering the gaps in adult and corporate geopolitical architecture. These spaces have immense potential: Michael and Kumiko are able to gain entry to the antiquated space station, KL5, a refuge after the implosion of Io, through an airlock which is too small to admit adult bodies. Due to paranoid corporate policy, normal entry to the station has been prevented. The teen body becomes an optimistic trope of futurity, a signifier of plastic potential able to change and grow to meet the exigencies of survival.

The 'child's' body also penetrates virus-like through architectural gaps to overcome young people's exclusion from adult discourse. They slip through ventilation shafts and hidden passages to eavesdrop on hidden debates about the colony's future. Finally, the fuel and space constraints of the colony's shuttle craft ensure that it is the teens and younger children who must make the quest to Earth to get help for the stranded colonists. Teen bodies have been vilified as alien to corporate culture, yet they are the only bodies ultimately able to redeem it.

### Teens and the Trope of Futurity

As Patricia Holland demonstrates,<sup>9</sup> the prevalence of children and teens in the visual rhetoric of marketing is explained by the traditional connotation of potential. Hope for the future is troped onto the body of the teen. When Alana, the girl from tomorrow, meets two punk teenagers in a subway station she informs them she is from 'the future'. 'Future? What future?' quips the female of the pair. The discontent of the teenagers of the 1990s is an implicit critique of contemporary social and economic regimes which deny them a 'future'.<sup>10</sup> In the programmes analysed in this chapter, teenage anxieties about lack of social agency and 'disinheritance' from a fair share in material resources are projected onto representations of the future. *The Girl from Tomorrow's* construction of twenty-sixth-century Sydney exemplifies the worst teenage fears concerning the dystopian 'futures' adults have engineered for them.

'One of the most immediate signifiers of the genre of science fiction', according to Janet Staiger, 'is the representation of a known city in which readily distinguishable sections of today's cityscape are present while other parts are rewritten.'<sup>11</sup> The futures of *The*

*Girl from Tomorrow* and *Tomorrow's End* are binary opposites traced across the landscape and architecture of Sydney – dark versus light, space versus constriction, vistas of nature versus vistas of waste and urban degeneration. The Sydney of the thirty-first century appears bucolic, its setting primarily virgin bushland, cool green lawns, pristine beaches and sheltered coves. There are no streets, no cars, no highrise buildings. The few domiciles and facilities are set amidst the green of nature.

The proliferation of space is itself politicised: the polis of the far future appears to be a series of federated villages. The state has a direct democracy (a World Council) and its population is small. Scientists, politicians, historians, teachers and children mix easily in an Edenic setting. The benevolent and ethical atmosphere of Alana's Sydney suggests the seriousness of a secluded religious commune. Children live together in dormitories, with individual, though Spartan, cells as sleeping quarters. The *mise en scène* invokes health and harmony with nature. The denizens all wear sandals and white robes, or loose tunics and trousers in natural fibres and colours. Their major activities like education and training are conducted outdoors in the sunlight; people walk from place to place. There are no dedicated weapons and the societal philosophy is one of non-violence and mutual cooperation.

By the end of the second series, *Tomorrow's End*, the crusade which inspires such austerity and ethical commitment, even in its young people, is disclosed. The planet has been redeemed from a 'Great Disaster' after half a millennium of dedication. The plot of *Tomorrow's End* exploits a common motif in fiction of time travel: the alteration of history. The temporal adventures of the first series have made tragic changes to the subjective timeline experienced by the teens. Alana's remembered 'present' has been obliterated from history. To reinstate the utopian future, the teens have to face the 'future noir' of twenty-sixth-century Sydney. Their task is to identify and prevent the catastrophe which will otherwise obliterate all possible futures.

The world of 2500 is a wasteland. As with the cities in the films analysed by Janet Staiger, the Sydney of the twenty-sixth century is dark:

[T]he metaphoric implication of an end to civilisation or alienation from natural light pervades the atmosphere . . . darkness and urban-design chaos as bricolage also permit labyrinthine cities where only overhead schematics provide a sense of orientation . . . [T]hey are entropic, characterised by debris, decay and abandonment. Thus these dystopias' city architectures comment on a potential, post-industrial, age-of-communication society. The forecast is not favourable. For the future noir city is more nightmare vision, more anxiety than wish-fulfilment.<sup>12</sup>

The primary metaphor of entropy in *Tomorrow's End* is the ruined arc of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, framing the eerily illuminated bulk of a modernist skyscraper whose eminence suggests an imposing and sinister fortress. The highrise is a survivor from the late twentieth century. In 1990s' Sydney, its mirror-like frontage houses the 'Global and Interstellar Research Institute'. By the twenty-sixth century the Institute has become 'Globecorp', a planet-wide totalitarian regime with its own private army ('GlobeCops'),

and digital surveillance systems which monitor and control dwindling resources and an increasingly feral population. An elite few control the planet backed by security forces and a military-style organisation of career minions. These bland corporate cogs cheerfully 'modify/brainwipe' antisocial elements, condemning them to a life as worker-drones for the corporation.

Outside the Corporate Centre the populace is divided into two groups. The first consists of neo-tribal scavengers who evade the surveillance of the GlobeCops by cannibalising the debris of past commodities and technologies. Silverthorn – the time-travelling antagonist of the series – is chief of one such tribe. Their vestimentary code is paramilitary, with breastplates reminiscent of tyre treads, bandoliers of junk metal and battered military helmets rent to reveal bushy growths of unkempt hair beneath. The tribes are a cargo cult: the origin of their clothing (recycled waste) exemplifies the fate of contemporary commodities in this dystopian future. The second group consists of street and slum dwellers who inhabit the pavement level surrounding the Globecorp fortress. These are a heavily monitored social underclass whose resistance, if present, remains covert. The *mise en scène* of this netherworld is reminiscent of the anarchic, poly-racial Los Angeles depicted in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*. Globecorp's Sydney underworld is also, if less insistently, a post-modern urban melting pot.<sup>13</sup>

Distrust of corporate techno-futures is also traced in *Escape from Jupiter*. Kumiko's view of the colony she is reluctantly visiting is shaped by consumer culture. The holo-screen she views on the journey disgorges not entertainment but heroic promotions for the mining corporation's colonial enterprise. This scene appears to cite the floating 'babble machines' from *Blade Runner*'s LA, which hover above the streets dispensing, as Staiger puts it, 'not news but ads'.<sup>14</sup> A subject of urban marketing ideology, Kumiko expects the other teens to be 'neanderthals', without style or consumer credibility.

The cityscapes represented in these programmes reflect an anxious engagement with the future of commodity production. Commodities and communications technologies are a source of pleasure for the teens represented. While the dark side of consumer and information culture is traced in the twin spectres of digital surveillance and planetary degradation, a future without entertainment culture and peer fashions would be a reality in which the difference between adolescence and adulthood could be erased. The bland but worthy 'utopian' society of thirty-first-century Sydney presents an austere picture of what such a world might mean for the future of adolescence.

### Organic versus Acquisitive Technologies

The discourse of ecologism is a potent subtext to the television dramas analysed in this chapter. Typically, the junction at which the utopian and dystopian timelines divide is forged by the misuse of technology. Certain kinds of science and its technologies are demonised while others are humanised and embraced as a means of resolving global problems. Anxiety is primarily invested in military and consumerist technologies which lead to environmental degradation and the production of waste.

Valorised knowledges and technologies are coded as organic. Typically feminised and/or infantilised, they are associated with nurturing, healing or play. In *The Girl from*

*Tomorrow*, thirty-first-century technology is made possible by amplifying the potential of the human brain. Its 'transducers' and generators produce no waste products but yield enough energy for both time and space travel. Alana and her female mentors are capable of using this organic power as a weapon, yet they choose to use it to heal – in a medical and an ecological sense. The invention of the transducer is the catalyst which enables the rehabilitation of the planet after the Great Disaster.<sup>15</sup>

Information technology in the service of monopoly capitalism is associated with digital surveillance and curtailment of civil liberties. Conversely, IT may be coded as feminine or toylike. The wrist computer, PJ, in *The Girl from Tomorrow*, is a mentor and friend, complete with a youthful male voice. The 'Helen' computer on the Orca Research Station in *Ocean Girl* is nominatively gendered female; she plays a beneficent and educative role for the young crew of the vessel. Play technologies – from the holographic gaming simulator in *Escape from Jupiter* to the robot dog of the programme's younger male sibling – are optimistically presented.

Technologies appropriated or operated by the teen or child are also recuperated. The ludic space of the special effect in science-fiction cinema, often associated with child characters, has been read as an optimistic sign of the future of technology. Infantilised technology features in the resolution of dystopic regimes in the series under discussion. The girl from tomorrow prevents global nuclear destruction by attaching her computer, PJ, to one of Globecorp's miniature surveillance droids, which has been appropriated as a toy by Jenny Kelly's kid brother. The merging of organic technology (a prototype transducer), the childlike computer and a child's toy is able to deflect the nuclear missile and save the world. A similar narrative motif is found in *Escape from Jupiter*. Kumiko's computer – contemptuously dismissed by Duffy as 'a child's toy' – is launched into space to decoy a rogue defence satellite away from its attack on the KL5 Station. In each case a teenage girl sacrifices her major object of cathexis, her techno-friend. In the hands of adult and corporate culture, technology becomes inimical to life. When operated by teens, however, as play, quest or special effect, it is redeemed.

## Conclusion

In the teen drama series discussed in this chapter, science fiction's speculative exploration of alterity reinforces tropes concerning the *difference* of youth. Generational markers of separation between adult and adolescent culture (such as vestimentary codes, musical and linguistic practices) are linked to the trope of the alien child. Jenny Kelly, with her purple hair and hyperloud music is 'sister under the skin' to the 'girl from tomorrow', whose domestic incompetence results in disasters such as microwaved laundry. Both are misfits, their behaviour inexplicable to harried and bemused parents.

The mismatching of adult and teen subjectivities also functions as an ironic ploy in these narratives. Contemporary institutions – the police, the welfare agencies, media and politics – are rendered strange through the puzzlement of 'alien' teens. The liminal status of the alien or time-travelling teen exposes the crises within contemporary social and economic relations. Camp and comic modalities are used to reinforce an ironic truth: that teens also find these institutions alien.

Youth on other worlds, in other futures, is shown to be *different*. This difference may offer a subversive alternative to constructions of 'exemplary' teen subjectivity. Can teens be educated as social partners by means of a mentor–apprenticeship model? Can misfits challenge the possessive practices which create social disadvantage through the commodification of basic resources? Would a world without the pleasures of consumption be a world in which adolescence itself could not be expressed?

Finally, these series trace anxieties about the technological and ecological future. Left to follow its own trajectory, rapacious venture capitalism threatens to deliver planetary annihilation. The global exploitative regimes designed by adults disenfranchise young people from their share in the promise of 'tomorrow': 'Future? What future?' The future might be utopian, as in *The Girl from Tomorrow*, with an organic, telepathic technology. More probable, these series seem to suggest, are dystopic techno-futures, the culmination of the violent and acquisitive trends of our own era.

## Notes

1. Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture: From 'Jackie' to 'Just Seventeen'* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Education, 1991).
2. Australian Broadcasting Authority (2002), *Children's Television Standards 1999*. Reproduced from the Australian Broadcasting Authority's website: <http://www.aba.gov.au/tv/content/childtv/standards/#1>, cited 13 June 2002.
3. On the infantilisation of spectacular cinema, see Barry Keith Grant, "'Sensuous Elaboration": Reason and the Visible in the Science-Fiction Film', in Annette Kuhn (ed.), *Alien Zone 2: The Spaces of Science Fiction Cinema* (London and New York: Verso, 1999), pp. 22–8.
4. Annette Kuhn, 'Introduction', in Kuhn, *Alien Zone 2*, p. 3.
5. The term is an adaptation of Bob Connell's category, 'protest masculinity'. R.W. Connell, *The Men and the Boys* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).
6. Interestingly, Jenny's body is normalised in her visit to the thirty-first century in *Tomorrow's End*. The holistic technology of the future cleanses the abject elements of her punk persona – signified by the removal of the dye from her hair – and paves the way for Jenny's reintegration into the familial world of 1990 in the closure of the series.
7. The science-fiction film's aesthetics of destruction have been analysed by Susan Sontag in her chapter 'The Imagination of Disaster', in Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (New York: Delta, 1966), pp. 208–25.
8. Linda Mizejewski, 'Action Bodies in Futurist Spaces: Bodybuilder Stardom as Special Effect', in Kuhn, *Alien Zone 2*, pp. 152–72.
9. Patricia Holland, *What Is a Child: Popular Images of Childhood* (London: Virago, 1992), pp. 8–22.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 100–21.
11. Janet Staiger, 'Future Noir: Contemporary Representations of Visionary Cities', in Kuhn, *Alien Zone 2*, p. 97.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
13. See David Desser, 'Race, Space and Class: The Politics of Cityscapes in Science-Fiction

Films', in Kuhn, *Alien Zone 2*, pp. 80–96. Both Desser's and Staiger's analyses share insights with Fredric Jameson's work on science fiction and post-modernism, most recently in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).

14. Staiger, 'Future Noir', p. 114.
15. The trope of telepathic or quasi-mystical technology features in another series of the 1990s, Jonathan Schiff's *Ocean Girl*. Merging the genres of science fiction, mythic fantasy and the Robinsonnade, *Ocean Girl*'s narrative juxtaposes the organic science of marine biology with the acquisitive and xenophobic technology of 'Praxis', an organisation vaguely reminiscent of the CIA.