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Invitation to the Feed: The Body and the Environment in a Selection of Dystopian YA Science Fictions

Episode 6: Young Adult Science Fiction



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Rebecca Hutton, Alyson Miller, Elizabeth Braithwaite |

Technology, the environment, and the young adult figure often exist in an uneasy yet inextricable relationship in many young adult fictions dealing with dystopian futures. Nature and the artificial are frequently constructed as binaries that the young person must negotiate or resist in order to survive and preserve the future. Simultaneously, some texts also employ hybridizations of the young subject and technology, and of the natural world and technology, as part of this battle. In environmental dystopias, technology can function as both the saviour of earth (merging with or replacing the natural world to preserve what remains and avoid further degradation) and, more commonly, destroyer of the earth (see for example Applebaum 2010). Like the environment, the young body in these narratives is particularly vulnerable to this salvation or destruction through technology as the body is 'enhanced'. This article will address how Monica Hughes' *Invitation to the Game* (1990) and M.T. Anderson's *Feed* (2002) both construct dystopian futures from this nexus between the natural, the artificial, and the young person, towards visions of the young person (and the environment around them) as both beneficiary of advancement/enhancement and victim.

Applebaum (25) draws attention to the metaphors often drawn between the young person and nature in science fiction for young readers, explaining that these associations "can also offer potential insights with regard to environmental ethics and the lingering myth of the innocent child". The fragility of the young body becomes a powerful metonym for the fragility and innocence of the environment as technological substitutes erode and usurp nature in the world of the text (see Stephens 2010 and Curry 2013). As Curry argues, "[t]he degraded post-natural landscapes [...] are occupied by advanced and abject incarnations of the posthuman being on whose bodies are written the effects of environmental toxicity and an ethos of unlimited human progress" (45). The young bodies in Hughes' and Anderson's texts are thus intensive sites where the consequences of the loss of the natural environment can be brought into even sharper focus.



Through the merging of organic and inorganic materials in the bodies of the protagonists in Hughes' *Invitation to the Game*, there is a complex interaction between the natural world, technology and the body of the child that constructs a hazardous site not only for the formation of identity, but indeed, survival. Set in 2154, the young protagonists of Hughes' narrative exist in a dictatorship in which the majority



of tasks are completed by robots. As machines replace the value of human labour, young people are educated according to the gaps in the system; however, the majority are rendered useless and forced to live on Government welfare. The Game with which Lisse and her friends

eventually engage functions as an extension of a strategy to remove Earth of the unwanted bodies of its children.

While a number of YA texts suggest the potential for utopian landscapes in which the natural world is associated with beauty, and the artificial with the grotesque, Hughes' narrative complicates simplistic binaries. It is in between the virtual space of the Game and the utopic new world the protagonists come to name "Prize" (170), that the distinction between the artificial and the organic becomes more ambiguous. On entering the simulated reality of the "newfound country" (76), the protagonists are seduced by the beauty of the virtual realm, and unwilling to succumb to ideas of its artificiality: "Does it really matter if it's a dream or hypnosis or something else?" (74). Enabled by the complexities of technology, the utopic space entered into through the Game is not only inorganic, but also increasingly attractive: "I mourned for that image of spring and sunshine [...] Another chance to go through the door into a world, however unreal, where golden flowers bloomed so lavishly" (114). Caught in the space between the real and the unreal, the natural and the artificial, the protagonists become hybrids of body-and-technology, transformed and consumed by a Government desire to rid the Earth of its young.

The objectification of the protagonists through the enchantments of the Game occurs in order to colonize new spaces in which to live organically, and in reference to the lessons learned by the destruction of Earth. The rhetoric of betterment, however, is problematized by the trauma suffered by Lisse and her friends, and their knowledge of the negative possibilities enabled by technology. Indeed, the planet simulated by the Game in order to assimilate the protagonists is an enhanced version of a new world and ultimately fails to comply with the romanticism of their initial experiences. The group endures physical pain and illness (115), coldness, hunger and thirst, the threat of wild animals, and is not equipped with the tools or support networks necessary to aid their survival. While the protagonists eventually learn to build new lives in an alien environment, and to prosper without making the mistakes of the past (172), their adaptation is predicated on transforming the natural world into the artificial resources that ease the demands of daily life. These initial requirements are rudimentary – such as the need for knives and hunting materials – however as their colony increases, so too does a desire for new products and commodities, capitalising on the potential for the environment to enable future technologies:

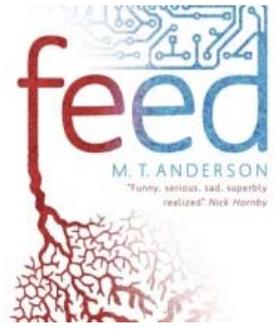
We have been reliving the discoveries and inventions of our remote ancestors, only speeded up enormously so that we will move from the Stone Age to the Bronze in less than five years [...] I wonder how far we *will* go. Iron Age. And what then? (171).

This question of 'how far we will go' is taken to the extreme in Anderson's *Feed*. As with *Invitation to the Game*, in *Feed* the nexus of natural world, technology and the adolescent body becomes a site of contestation in relation to physical and emotional survival, and issues of agency and inter-subjectivity. Anderson's text is set in the USA after ecological disaster, at a time in which approximately 73% of Americans have an electronic device called the 'feed' implanted in their brain. The feed was originally intended to assist in speedy learning, but has become a means by which people can be influenced and even indoctrinated into consuming ever more physical items, and to see themselves in terms of this consumption. The dedication before the novel proper begins positions the reader to be opposed to this particular piece of technology even before the concept of the feed is explained: "to all those who resist the feed", which is followed by the initials of the author.

Despite being clearly a constructed piece of technology, the feed operates to blur the boundaries between organic and technological, and between self and the external force of advertising. As Violet, the "dissenting



voice” (Bullen & Parsons: 134) to the values of the society dominated by the feed, explains: “the feed is tied in to everything. Your body control, your emotions, your memory” (170). By extension, the feed is also tied into recipients’ sense of self. For example, Violet rages “*You don’t have the feed! You are feed!*” (202, original emphasis). Although not “constitut[ing] a focalizing character with whom readers might align” (Bradford: 132), Violet highlights the contrast between organic and technological even in her very name, with its resonance of the flower. And in one of the text’s many constructed ironies, as she lies dying from her malfunctioning feed, her father works outside in the garden to keep the flowers free from grass, his feedpack (an older form of technology) “glitter[ing] in the sun” (297).



However, this is not an either/or set up – there is no escaping the feed. As Violet’s father explains, there is no real choice in whether or not to get a feed, for not to have one makes it almost impossible to live in this world, as he found when lack of the feed cost him a job (288). The feed is also the primary mode of communication, education and entertainment in the society, and to a great extent involved in regulating bodily processes (which is a significant contributor to Violet’s death). Violet’s death is particularly poignant given her links to the natural and her placement in opposition to the artificial across the entirety of the text. In her first appearance Violet is even wearing wool, a natural fibre (rather than plastic), which is mocked by the other young people around her (21). By contrast, Titus, the narrator who has grown up with the feed and who is “unlikeable, selfish and often demonstrably stupid, but also depicted as the everyman of his generation” (Bullen & Parsons 134) cannot see the irony in liking “the way the synthetic breeze was on [Violet’s] hair” (91), nor can his father see the irony in his statement that “It’s about people”, having just extolled to Violet the virtues of an air factory in comparison to trees (125).

As such, *Feed* has none of the utopian associations of technology that appear in Hughes’ text. Where Hughes’ characters long for the beauty of the (artificial) world, Anderson’s characters are clearly constrained in theirs. Realising that his dying daughter is as much a consumed product as the more obviously manufactured items that Titus and those like him compulsively buy, Violet’s father says, “We Americans [...] are interested only in the *consumption* of our products. We have no interest in how they were produced, or what happens to them [...] once we discard them” (290). Unlike the protagonists of *Invitation to the Game*, who are looking forward to a future of agency and self-determination individually and as a group, the only thing about which the people in the world of *Feed* can be sure is that “Everything must go” (299–300).

To an extent, both Hughes’ and Anderson’s dystopian futures situate the young person and their environment as victim of the encroachment of technology and the artificial. However, this encroachment in each text is also inextricably linked with survival. While the artificial is conflated with the destruction or replacement of essential natural systems (particularly the bodies of the children in Hughes’ text in favour of robots; both the mind and the environment in Anderson’s text) it is only through the merging of organic and inorganic that life can be sustained as well. This leaves the young characters of the texts and the contemporary reader caught in a conundrum where complete separation from one (i.e. the inorganic) or the other (the organic) seems a greater risk. Rather than being a matter of *everything must go*, it might rather be a matter of *everything must stay*. The task at hand for the implied reader then becomes one of determining how this might be possible without continued fall into victimhood or further loss.

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Bios

Rebecca Hutton is a PhD candidate in the School of Communication and Creative Arts at Deakin University, Australia. Her research focus is young adult texts, particularly dystopian fictions and GLBTQ narratives.

Alyson Miller teaches literary studies at Deakin University, Geelong. Her research focuses on scandalous texts, with a particular interest in issues relating to gender, sexuality and identity.

Elizabeth Braithwaite is a Research Fellow in the Centre for Memory, Imagination and Invention at Deakin University. Her main area of research is post-disaster fiction for children and young adults.

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