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Dystopian Visions of Global Capitalism: Philip Reeve's *Mortal Engines* and M.T. Anderson's *Feed*

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Abstract:

*This article examines Philip Reeve's novel for children, *Mortal Engines*, and M.T. Anderson's young adult novel, *Feed*, by assessing these dystopias for children as prototypical texts of what Ulrich Beck calls risk society. Through their visions of a fictional future, the two narratives explore the consequences of the hazards created by contemporary techno-economic progress, predatory global politics and capitalist excesses of consumption. They implicitly pose the question: 'In the absence of a happy ending for western civilization, what kind of children can survive in dystopia?'*

KEY WORDS: children's literature, dystopias, risk, capitalism.

Futures with unhappy endings: dystopias for children

Children are emblematic of the future by virtue of the lives ahead of them. In the popular imagination they are an impetus for social change, and their very existence offers a sense of hope for the future. This conception of the child militates against the dystopic impulse in ways that typically refigure the genre in its children's literature manifestation. This is particularly so in relation to assumptions about intended child audiences and their need for the positive outcomes or succinct closures that John Stephens characterises as a requirement for "certainties about life rather than indeterminacies or uncertainties" (1992, p. 41). In our analysis of Philip Reeve's novel for children, *Mortal Engines*, and M.T. Anderson's young adult novel, *Feed*, we will assess these dystopias for children as prototypical texts of what Ulrich Beck calls 'risk society', a society in which such uncertainties prevail. These novels telescope their cultural critiques into futures that challenge current ideological agendas including the

hazards of techno-economic progress, predatory global politics and capitalist excesses of consumption. They implicitly pose the question: In the absence of a happy ending for western civilization, what kind of children can survive in dystopia?

In “Progress Versus Utopia”, Frederick Jameson argues that the analysis of science fiction—and, therefore, its utopian and dystopian pretensions—entails identifying traces of political unconscious. He goes on to say that behind those traces, the analyst should also uncover the “opinion, ideology, and even philosophical systems”, which he describes as symptomatic of “some deeper and vaster narrative movement in which groups of a given collectivity at a certain historical conjuncture anxiously interrogate their fate, and explore it with hope or dread” (1982, p. 148). What the imagined space and time of science fiction thus offer the reader is not a vision of a possible future, but an interrogation of the present. As examples of current dystopian texts for children, *Mortal Engines* and *Feed* reflect the hopes and fears at this historical juncture and, we suggest, are emblematic of the political consciousness risk society produces.

The essence of Beck’s risk society thesis is that we have now reached a stage of techno-economic progress in which “the social production of wealth is systematically accompanied by the social production of risk” (2004, p. 19). Scarcity is no longer the most significant problem in the West; in its place capitalist expansion is creating chemical, nuclear, ecological and lifestyle risks as well as political hazards like terrorism. As we will discuss, the ecological and human consequences of the contemporary alliance between techno-science and global consumer capitalism are apparent in the historical consciousness of Reeve’s and Anderson’s novels. So, too, are the social flow-on effects of risk society.

Beck uses the term ‘individualization’ to describe the prevailing need for people, in this case children, to learn to devise positive and flexible life stories in ways that are responsive to and resilient in the face of a social world which is no longer secure or predictable. As products of risk society, it is perhaps not surprising that *Mortal Engines* and *Feed* interrogate the socialization of their child characters into their narrative worlds and contest the “fixed meanings” the adult characters promote. Beck argues that the path through life is no longer as organized by social roles as it once was. Although this is potentially liberating, uncertainties and risks proliferate as a consequence.

In Beck’s thesis, individualization is an ambivalent force that has consequences not only for the individual, but for the body politic. In its dystopic aspect, the individual is politically disengaged and, instead, coopted into the ideology of the market, currently associated with the global spread of neo-liberal economic logic, de-territorialized transnational corporate capitalism, rampant consumerism, and a raft of social and environmental side-effects. Indeed, it is in relation to the political power of the individual that the environmental and social hazards of global risk society converge in Reeve’s and Anderson’s dystopias, and the political unconscious of each emerges. To explain how, we supplement Beck’s social theory with concepts and commentary from Zygmunt Bauman on the nature of utopian and dystopian visions in risk society.

Mortal Engines: Predatory Cities and Municipal Darwinism

Mortal Engines will be read by many of its young readers as an exciting, even amusing, adventure story. However, the framework of the narrative offers a critique

of a potential future which is far from comic. In the post-apocalyptic future of Reeve's novel, globalization has reached its logical conclusion. There are no nation-states, and geopolitical borders as we now know them have long ago been obliterated, lost in a "flurry of orbit-to-earth atomics and tailored-virus bombs called the Sixty Minute War" (2001, p. 7, *from which all quotations are taken*) conducted by the ancients. These 'ancients' seem to be contemporaneous with our own generation, especially given the recognizable relics they have left, such as Seedys (CDs). The nation, as the site of politics, economy and identity, has been replaced by the municipality. In this de-territorialized world, traction cities like London scour (and scar) the landscape in search of prey—smaller, more vulnerable cities and towns which they consume for fuel and resources. This mobile metropolis arguably embodies what former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt describes as "predatory capitalism", but this is not the market economy of risk society with its global flows of financial capital and information.

The barren wastes of what was once the European landmass sustain only isolated static settlements. Thus, the sustainability of the city depends on its mobility and a form of civic cannibalism, justified by the ideology of Municipal Darwinism. In this "town eat town world", it seems only "natural" to the novel's protagonist, 15-year-old Third Class Apprentice, Tom Natsworthy, "that cities ate towns, just as the towns ate smaller towns and smaller towns snapped up the miserable static settlements. That was Municipal Darwinism, and it was the way the world had worked for a thousand years" (p. 10). Movement is considered not only imperative for survival, but viewed as a sign of social and technological progress.

Yet, the technological development of this future world seems antiquated, owing more to the machine engines of the Victorian era than the digital and bio-technologies of the 21st century and its weapons technology. In fact, it does not create new technology. As the novel's malefactor, Thaddeus Valentine (London's Head Historian) explains, every machine developed by the Guild of Engineers "*is based on some fragment of Old Tech—ancient high technology that our museum keepers have preserved or our archaeologists have dug up*" (p. 17, italics in original). However, the engineers have only a limited understanding of the technological risks involved and, in this regard, the novel's rendering of the risks of technological progress echoes Beck's claim that in risk society science can no longer predict the long-term consequences of new technologies. Indeed, it is the acquisition, uninformed development and ill-considered use of a particular piece of Old Tech—an atomic weapon referred to as Medusa—that drives the plot. Valentine acquires Medusa by treachery and delivers it to the Mayor of London who intends to use it to assure London's future in a world rapidly running short of prey. The Mayor has set his sights on Batmunkh Gompa, the stronghold of the Anti-traction League and the gateway to the region where the population continues to dwell in static cities.

Likewise, the social organization of London evokes nineteenth century industrial society rather than the postindustrial modernity Beck refers to as risk society. Characterized by rigid class hierarchies, its social stratification is reflected in the structure of the great traction city which rises two thousand feet above the ground in seven tiers. It is also reflected in the organization of labour, from the knowledge elites—the four great guilds, Engineers, Historians, Navigators and Merchants—who

along with the municipal oligarchy occupy the top tiers, to the lowly salvagemen, scavengers and the expendable convicts who labour in “nether boroughs” of its gut (p. 22). In this respect, the hierarchical social structure of *Mortal Engines* may seem a far cry from individualized risk society. However, just as the environmental devastation of the landscape shows the extreme consequence of the ecological hazards of risk society, our argument is that Municipal Darwinism is a possible consequence of individualization under globalism, a term Beck uses to categorise the negative face of globalization.

According to Beck, when the disembedding of the individual from the social structure that occurs in risk society is “institutionalized, it becomes a kind of superstructure” (p. 65), that is to say, it becomes ideology. As a manifestation of globalism, individualization is co-opted to the predatory ideology of consumer capitalism which, in *Mortal Engines*, moves seamlessly into its ideological construct, Municipal Darwinism. Municipal Darwinism institutionalizes the law of the jungle and the survival of the fittest. In this respect, Reeve’s literary project has much in common with the philosophical vision driving Bauman’s lecture “Living in Utopia”, despite the fact that neither writer ever actually names capitalism. Bauman delivered his lecture at the London School of Economics and Politics (2005), and his contentions in this lecture are particularly pertinent to our argument.

Bauman maps the utopian impulse across the ages using three metaphors. Beginning with the pre-modern era, he says the utopian posture entailed ‘the gamekeeper’ approach. The gamekeeper’s role is to defend and preserve the natural balance of the world, a project which rests on the belief in the world as governed by a preordained,

divine chain of being. The modern world replaced this vision with ‘the gardener’, the utopian who actively sought to control the world in order to create the harmony that would produce the greatest benefit to mankind. Reaching our contemporary, postmodern era, Bauman proposes that “we are all hunters now” (2005, p. 5). Even when they hunt in groups, hunters are individualised in their pursuit of quarry, and the hunt itself takes place in a climate of deregulation and competition.

Like Municipal Darwinism, capitalism is informed by a belief in “a single evolutionary scale of development of society from less to more developed” that John Urry says assumes that all societies “will move towards a ‘western model’” (2004, p. 6). With a nod to capitalism’s exploitation of the natural resources and cheap labour of the Third World, it is such a belief that justifies London’s attack on “undeveloped” Batmunkh Gompa in *Mortal Engines*. London is the society into which Tom has been socialized. Not surprisingly, then, he believes it is “only natural that traction cities should eventually spread all the way across the globe” (p. 223) and has little sense of the environmental and human cost involved. In the early stages of the novel he does not question the fact that Batmunkh Gompa and its population will pay the price of London’s literal and metaphorical progress.

Neither does he question his station in life, determined by his origins in Cheapside. Tom’s acceptance of his position in London’s social hierarchy tallies with Beck’s claim that the ideology of globalism individualizes risk and that socially systemic problems are also individualized, indeed, transformed into personal failure. This leads to new forms of inequality and, as a result, new forms of discrimination and social stratification emerge in risk society. This is arguably the case in *Mortal Engines*

where the complexity of the social structure disguises the fact that individualism is institutionalized and amounts to a form of social Darwinism. Firmly positioned in London's immovably tiered social hierarchy, the orphaned Tom is quite alone and certainly expendable. So, too, is his eventual companion, the disfigured outcast, Hester Shaw, and both their lives are put at risk through the self-interest of Thaddeus Valentine.

Hester's failed attempt to assassinate Valentine is the catalyst for the child characters' questioning of Municipal Darwinism and thus the novel's interrogation of this aspect of individualization that Beck links with globalism. Valentine has murdered Hester's parents in order to obtain the nuclear weapon, Medusa, and mutilated Hester's face in the process. When her bid to avenge her parents' death is thwarted by Tom, Hester escapes London through a waste chute and Valentine pushes Tom out after her in order to keep his secret safe. Tom becomes, in this moment, London's excrement, but he is also literally disembedded from the social and ideological world of London, and we suggest that this is a figure for the disembedding of the individual under the politically-charged concept of globalization.

Tom is then stranded in this inhospitable terrain of the "out-country", and forced into an alliance with Hester in order to survive and make his way home to London.

According to Beck, in the absence of a re-embedding or the institutionalization of individualism, the disembedded individual is forced into negotiation and dialogue in order to adapt to a changing social world. Moreover, this promotes the politicization of everyday life and Beck argues that this comes about through the interaction between globalization and individualization. He explains it this way:

They [individualization and globalization] both increase the number of cultural opposites we have to be able to experience simultaneously ...

Everyone, in quite everyday ways, is transported into a polyvalent action situation, in which she or he is forced to “translate” across different horizons of meaning. The result is that self-chosen lives have built-in contradictions and that they give rise to political discussion, because the pressure to have to choose and negotiate between irreducibly different cultures, certainties, and styles of life has public consequences. (p. 69)

This is inflected in *Mortal Engines* through the individualized ways in which the child protagonists respond to risk, uncertainty and injustice.

Our focus is on Tom who, for much of the novel, simply wants to go home. Before he and Hester return to London, they are pursued by the Borg-like “Resurrected Man”, Grike (Shrike, in the UK edition), almost sold into slavery, captured by pirates, rescued by Anti-Traction League activist, Anna Fang, and taken to Batmunkh Gompa. Tom remains resistant to the alternative world-views of the Anti-Tractionists, and it is not until he arrives in Batmunkh Gompa that he is able to transcend his own cultural horizons and question the justice of Municipal Darwinism. This is part of a gradual process, not an epiphany. To survive in the out-country, Tom must engage in negotiation and dialogue across social and cultural differences, indeed, with people he does not like or understand at first. Ultimately, however, his alliance with Hester and, reluctantly, the Anti-Traction League, becomes the basis of a reciprocal network which Beck regards as a community of choice rather than social structure. Tom’s

biographical trajectory is no longer pre-determined by his class status. Disembedding has opened the way to individual agency and a more cosmopolitan political consciousness, which Beck says the interaction between individualization and globalization makes available, although in no way guarantees. Tom's travels across the globe, therefore, stand in contrast with the movement of the great traction city which symbolises the destructive spread of globalism consuming all in its path.

As the plot continues, Tom and Hester return temporarily to London. This home and away storyline is by no means a novel narrative device in children's literature.

According to Nodelman and Reimer, "a surprising number of children's books ... show children who first must experience and cope with the difficulties of life on their own" (2003, p. 198). Typically, however, they are "rewarded with a secure home life where others will look after them" (p. 198). This narrative trajectory moves from independence, agency and autonomy, to dependence and subjection, reinscribing the child into a world that is presented as stable and secure. Such closure supposes that the world is as it should be and thus socialises child readers into the ideology of their culture. This is not the case in risk society or in *Mortal Engines*.

Neither is such an outcome simply because London is ultimately destroyed by Medusa. When Tom and Hester return to London, it appears to be

... bigger than he remembered, and much uglier. Strange how when he'd lived there, he had believed everything the Goggle Screens told him about the city's elegant lines, its perfect beauty. Now he saw that it was ugly—no better than any other town, just bigger: a storm front of smoke and belching chimneys, a

wave of darkness rolling toward the mountains, with the white villas of High London surfing on its crest like some delicate ship. It didn't look like home.

(p. 281–2)

Tom's detachment tempers somewhat the climactic destruction of London which follows this moment of return. At the same time, however, *Mortal Engines* does not offer its characters or the reader a sense of justice done. Tom finds it impossible to morally weigh the reprieve for Batmunkh Gompa against the destruction of London and resulting loss of life. This is no simple story of good and evil. Tom is not a hero. As Beck says, "self-chosen lives have built-in contradictions" (2004, p. 69) and it is this that gives rise to political discussion in *Mortal Engines*. The discussion continues because the *Mortal Engines* saga continues across three more novels, all of which are like this first instalment in being fast-paced adventures designed to entertain younger readers. Not so *Feed*, a young adult novel offering a considerably bleaker commentary on the contemporary world.

***Feed*: the dystopia of eleventh-hour capitalism**

In M.T. Anderson's *Feed*, the disembedding of the main characters is again a gesture which interrogates global capitalism, the socialization of the young, and the political potential of individualization inherent in the current socio-political climate of risk society. To consider the text in light of Bauman's analogy for the utopian imagination as is manifest in the postmodern hunter, where *Mortal Engines* focuses on the municipal hunters seeking resources, *Feed* zeros in on the individual hunter consuming goods. Set in a not-too-distant future, the novel's consciousness of the

geopolitical and environmental hazards of consumer capitalism in risk society is figured through characters who are for the most part unfazed by clouds so artificial they are trademarked, farms that grow great walls of meat in which mutant eye and heart cells sometimes generate into blinking organs, the last forest in the district cut down to build an air factory, and a sea so toxic that a visit to the beach requires a suit fit for a present day trip to the Chernobyl reactor. This environmental degradation is indirectly revealed as background information while the plot progresses, mirroring the fact that in promoting social atomization, socialization into consumer capitalism reduces political consciousness. The characters' (and, therefore, the implied readers') awareness of this outcome of predatory capitalism is limited by the parasitical relationship corporate capitalism—in the novel, the Feed Corporation—has with the consumer. By comparison, *Mortal Engines* works with the reverse schema and foregrounds the ways in which dwindling resources drive the larger plot machinations and character actions which must respond to these conditions.

Some of the differences between *Mortal Engines* and *Feed*, and therefore our critical approaches to these narratives, are likely to be nation-based. Where London's Municipal Darwinism in *Mortal Engines* can be read as a metaphor for the abuses of British imperialism cast into a future where globalization has subsumed geographical borders, the evils pervading *Feed*'s dystopic vision are unequivocally the product of American-driven models of late capitalism. Each nation is arguably faced with its guiltiest sins in these metaphoric deployments. This division is complicated, however, by the fact that globalization consumes where imperialism exploits. Nonetheless, the similarity between imperialism and global capitalism as predatory politics is central to

both these narratives' reliance on consumption, in both cases defined as a malignant force that these dystopias implicitly critique.

In an aptly named chapter, "Consuming Life", in *Society Under Siege*, Bauman addresses Beck's contentions about individualization, specifically he quotes Beck saying that the "experts dump their contradictions and conflicts at the feet of the individual and leave him or her with the well-intentioned invitation to judge all of this critically on the basis of his or her own notions" (Beck quoted in Bauman 2002, p. 195). Taking up this position, Bauman says the predicament of individuals, doomed to compensate for the irrationality of their world, is the reason that "consumer society" has come into its own. Life, he argues, "turns into a shopping spree and is neither more nor less consuming than the excitement, adventure and challenge of the shopper's activity are able in principle, and manage in practice, to be" (2002, p. 195). This excitement is evinced in *Mortal Engines* when all the inhabitants of London gather into a mob thrilled and intoxicated by the imminent kill of a smaller city. It is also particularly pertinent to our analysis of *Feed* wherein shopping sprees and the destructive forces of unbridled consumption are at the core of the novel's custom-built model of a profoundly capitalist risk society.

"Set against the backdrop of America in its dying days" (p. 311), the teenagers of *Feed* have been blue-toothed to the internet through an implant in their brains. The technology is called 'the feed', a name that collapses corporate feeding of consumers (with products to fulfil their desires) and corporations feeding on the consumers in their relentless pursuit of wealth. The novel's teenagers are bombarded by direct-line advertising and propaganda from infancy. Their synaptic pathways have formed

according to the laws of the corporation, and at School™ they learn how best to shop with their cyborg technology.

Feed's plot traces the failed relationship between average teenager, Titus, and the girlfriend he abandons, an intelligent activist called Violet. The pair meet on a vacation on the Moon where, along with their friends, they are victims of a hacker at a dance club. The hacker tampers with their feeds, and the teenagers are temporarily disconnected from the constant stream of advertising and entertainment to which they are ordinarily subject. While most of the victims fully recover from this experience of disembedding, it transpires that Violet's feed is seriously damaged and she ultimately dies because the Feed Corporation refuses to repair the device. The reason it refuses to do so is connected with the consumer activism she undertakes. Unlike her peers, she is not "re-embedded" in consumer society and, as a result, begins to politically question her world just as Tom in *Mortal Engines* was forced to question his.

In this respect, the novel bears out the claim of Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan that "the dystopian text usually begins directly in the terrible new world" and "the textual estrangement" works through a focus on "a character who questions the dystopian society" (2003, p. 5). Faced with the exploitative corruption of her world, Violet's modes of resistance are specifically tailored to capitalism's evils. She takes up a campaign of indiscriminate shopping for unrelated items in a bid to confuse the statistics that produce her consumer profile. Her actions are indicative of Beck's claim that under globalism, the chief work of government has become increasingly economic rather than political; indeed, it serves the capital's agenda. The arbitrary shopping choices Violet makes in her acts of consumer disobedience are the reason

she becomes unprofitable as a social subject, and is thus left to die. In this regard, capitalism kills the individualist agenda (supposedly at the core of neo-liberalism) and Violet, too, because she is no longer fit for, nor fits into, her society.

The activist, however, is not the focal character in *Feed*. Violet's dissenting voice is displaced, shifted outside the role of central protagonist and relegated instead to a sidelined and narratively punished character position. This movement of the empathetic subject position out of the narrative centre is unusual in children's and young adult literature. Texts for children are usually ideologically focalized through the protagonist with whom child readers are invited to identify as the narrative progresses through their experiences and maturation, as is the case with the classic *bildungsroman*. As we have argued in relation to *Mortal Engines*, this stock plot structure is likely to be based on a number of adult assumptions about children and their need for heroes and happy endings.

Instead, the focal character in *Feed* is Titus, who is unlikeable, selfish and often demonstrably stupid, but also depicted as the everyman of his generation. The epitome of a vacuous teenager, he is neither the coolest nor the nerdiest kid. He hangs out with his friends in the wealthy in-crowd and is apathetic about the social inequalities and ecological destruction his world produces. Violet, on the other hand, comes from a significantly lower socio-economic background and is home-schooled by her academic father. As with Reeve's tiered vision of London, the lower levels of *Feed's* unnamed city [the unnamed American city in *Feed*... avoids an apostrophe on an italicised title] are inhabited by individuals of lower social standing. In both novels, the ideological superstructure is made manifest by the narrative's use of physical setting in what amounts to an unspoken but nonetheless trenchant critique or

of oppressive hierarchies of power. Readers of *Feed* are invited to assess this world by inhabiting two opposed subject positions as represented by the novel's protagonists, and these tally with Bauman's figures of the bystander and the actor.

Violet is Bauman's "actor", challenging and questioning her world. Because Violet's resistance comes to nothing, and becomes one of the main factors contributing to her terrible slow death, the novel's textual closure appears to offer no hope for the actor. However, Violet functions as more than an exemplar; it is principally her responsiveness that amplifies the reader's perception of Titus, who commits what Bauman sardonically describes as "the regrettable, yet excusable and forgivable *misdeed* of 'bystanding'" (2002, p. 202). The novel makes clear that the bystander does not escape the tragic fate of the activist, but rather he will also die in the way that a frog immersed in gently heated water is boiled before it realises its danger in time to escape. In *Feed*, the biological impact of progress has accelerated to such a degree that by the novel's close Titus can see his mother's teeth through the flesh of her closed lips.

To the question posed in our introduction "In the absence of a happy ending for western civilization, what kind of children can survive in dystopia?" the answer M.T. Anderson seems to make with this unhappy ending is, no-one. The novel's rendering of the hazards of risk society, however, are predominantly revealed through Violet's utopian yearnings for what has been lost as a result of technoeconomic progress. Knowing she is dying, Violet makes a list of things she would like to happen in her life including sitting in a place where you can't hear engines, the question "Is there any moss anywhere?" (p. 243) and looking out over a lake "which won't steam like lakes do and won't move when the wind isn't on it, or burn sticks" (p. 245). Encasing

Violet's modest utopian vision (one that is easily accessible and taken for granted in our own time) in *Feed*'s dystopic world invites readers to make comparative judgment of their present and potential future in ways that throw the glories of capitalist progress into sharp relief. Technology is not the hoped for utopia, and, for Violet, utopia is a world more like our own.

In opposition to Violet, the mainstream characters' desires for something better have already been coopted by consumer capitalism. Bauman's parable of a Google search for the term utopia, from his "Living in Utopia" speech, is salient here. According to Bauman,

the impression I received after reading a statistically decent random sample is of the term 'utopia' having been appropriated mostly by holiday, interior design and cosmetics companies, as well as by fashion houses. All of them offering individual satisfactions and individual escapes from individually suffered discomforts. (2005, p. 7)

In this description, the individualist nature of the capitalist dream is paramount. Beck's thesis of individualization is arguably, and in many respects, a product of capitalism's unwavering sales pitch to individual desire as the dominant model for pleasure and success. Further, Bauman argues that the role of progress in this contemporary, lay vision of utopia operates entirely in the service of such consumerism. He points to the pressing need evoked by the companies his Google search uncovers to "change your wardrobe, your furnishings, your wallpapers, your look, your habits—in short, yourself—as often as you can manage" and that "the disposal of things—abandoning them, getting rid of them—rather than...their appropriation" is at the core of the enterprise (2005, p. 7-8).

Applying his critique to *Feed*, when Violet dies her father poignantly and pointedly says to Titus, ““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,”—he pointed at his daughter—‘what happens to them once we discard them, once we throw them away’” (p. 304). His pronouncement speaks as directly to David Harvey’s contention that the age of disposable goods produces an environment of equally disposable relationships and values (1990) as it does to Bauman’s comments about disposal things.

Bauman’s discussion is also profoundly reiterated in *Feed* through the novel’s depiction of the need to change yourself as a metaphor for progress as it is typically figured within contemporary utopian desires. The girls in Titus’s friendship group have to go to the toilets to change their hairstyles every few hours, and their clothing fashions have to change within days. Obsolescence is inextricably bound up in these social and economic equations because the promise of a consumer’s utopia is always illusive. According to Titus, “It was like I kept buying things to be cool, but cool was always flying just ahead of me, and I could never exactly catch up to it” (2002, p. 293). His anxiety about maintaining cool status is, however, implicitly trivialized given the narrative’s distressingly visceral rendering of Violet’s agonizing death, which counterpoints the inanity of Titus’s life. Her condition is most deliberately weighed against Titus’s main source of discomfort in the novel, whether he has chosen the right model of car for his parents to buy him.

Main protagonists in adolescent fiction often provide role models implied readers will identify with, thus taking them on an ideologically controlled narrative journey.

However, *Feed* asks readers both to identify with, and resist, Titus’s world-view. On

the one hand, the narrative establishes a range of commonalities between the first person narrator and the implied reader. The things he enjoys—parties, shopping, resort holidays, internet chatting, watching popular soap-operas, hanging out with his friends and meeting girls—are all common diversions enjoyed by teenagers in the West. Constructed thus, the character says to them, ‘you are like me’. On the other hand, the narrative relies on profound irony and a wry parody so that implied readers are invited to make discriminating judgments of Titus and his value system. Although readers are shown the events of the plot from Titus’s perspective, it is almost impossible to empathize with him given his cruelty to Violet as she dies. Readers are thus given the provocative narrative position of experiencing the world of the story through Titus, and simultaneously having to reject and critique that world-view, while they are looking through it. This produces a kind of schizophrenic reading situation that foremost requires readers to step outside the norms the novel assumes average teens would usually inhabit. In this respect, despite killing off Violet as the activist, the novel takes a profoundly activist position by virtue of its narrative structure.

Titus betrays the egocentrism often attributed to adolescents, but also the political consciousness of the world into which he has been socialized. Although bystanders like Titus can typically excuse themselves with claims of ignorance, the feed technology, like the contemporary internet, makes this less tenable. As Titus explains, “Everyone is supersmart now. You can look up things automatic, like science and history” (p. 59). He goes on to say, “And it’s really great to know everything about everything whenever we want, to have it just like, in our brain, just sitting there” (p. 61). But the information in Titus’s brain mainly does, as he says, just sit there. The novel plays out what information media analyst, Albert Borgmann claims about

contemporary uses of the internet: “the complement to having ‘the world at your fingertips’ is having nothing in your head” (1999, p. 206).

Indeed, with the exception of Violet who tries to interest Titus in world politics and injustices, the teenagers who populate the novel never engage with politically pertinent information because it cannot compete with the entertainments offered by constant chat with friends, feedcasts of soap operas, the government sanctioned news bulletins that reassure them about the proliferating risks of their world, and the constant advertising that motivates their existence. Of this kind of world, Bauman makes a profound moral assessment: “Let us note that in the age of universal accessibility and instantaneity of information, the ‘I did not know’ type of excuse adds to the guilt rather than brings absolution from sin. It carries a connotation of ‘selfishly, for the sake of my peace of mind, I refused to be bothered’, rather than of ‘the truth has been guilefully hidden from me.’” (2002, p. 204).

Feed depicts precisely this mode of moral failure when Titus explains that:

Of course everyone is like, *da da da, evil corporations, oh they’re so bad*, we all say that, and we all know they control everything. I mean, it’s not great, because who knows what evil shit they’re up to. Everyone feels bad about that. But they’re the only way to get all this stuff, and it’s no good getting pissy about it, because they’re still going to control everything whether you like it or not. Plus, they like keep everyone in the world employed, so it’s not like we could do without them.” (pp. 60-61)

In justifying his bystander status and his consumer desire, Titus denies the political power of the individual. His compliance, however, is not only a matter of moral indifference encouraged by individualization under globalism. It is also a

consequence of his belief in the propaganda produced by the feed. Titus has been socialized into the consumer society of his world and in this regard, the novel is critical of the adult world.

While the Feed Corporation is clearly implicated, the novel's satire is particularly biting in relation to adults, namely, politicians and parents, and the failure in their duty of care to their children and their citizens. The presidential feedcasts that pepper the narrative are typically dishonest, evasive, and filled with overblown rhetoric including the repeated use of the phrase "the American people". Harold Pinter's acceptance speech for the 2005 Nobel Prize made direct reference to the dangerously lulling effect these words have on a populace which prefers to stand by.

Feed is equally critical of Titus's parents, who are no better informed or politically aware than their son. The novel's commentary partly relies on having adults speak a version of teenage idioms drawn from our own time, while teenagers use some newly jargonised words and phrases. For instance, when Titus's father comes to see him in hospital after the hacker attack, Titus asks how his mother is. His father replies: "She's like, whoa, she's like so stressed out. This is...Dude," he said, "This is some way bad shit" (p. 67). Titus's mother and father appear to be conventional middle class parents; their use of language, however, suggests that the difference between the generations is one of linguistic fashion rather than maturity or political awareness. In other words, Titus's parents' teen-speak implies that their assumptions about the world are equally adolescent. The mimicry holds up a powerfully critical mirror to present day readers.

By way of a counterpoint, the narrative explains that Violet's father, an academic who teaches dead languages, learned the old-fashioned way and equalled or outperformed

his classmates who had the “advantages” of the feed technology. But in terms of reader positioning, Violet’s father is regularly mocked, and even Violet is embarrassed by his pretentious language. On first meeting Titus, he says “the sarcasm of my daughter notwithstanding, it is nonetheless an occasion of great moment to meet one of her erotic attachments. In the line of things, she has not brought them home, but chosen instead to conducted her trysts at remote locales” (p. 150). By making the only positive adult character sometimes ridiculous, the novel carefully sets itself just outside a didactic and sermonizing critique of contemporary America by decentring intelligent dissenting characters. Violet’s father is demonstrably right in his critical assessments of the world of the novel, but he is not recognised or celebrated for his intelligence in ways that might alienate an implied reader likely to resent a message about an old-fashioned, adult academic being ‘in the know’.

Despite this submerging of critical commentary, combined with the fact that the actor Violet fails and the bystander Titus remains largely unchanged, the novel is not entirely pessimistic. Entangled in the pessimism of dystopian writing is the inverse impulse of hope: demonstrating to humanity the end point of the course on which they are headed has within it the implicit hope that the disastrous outcome can be averted. We argue this because to have a happy ending is to release the reader from their engagement with the problem. Happy endings are typically comfortable solutions. But to leave the reader grimly contemplating Violet’s wasted life, is to leave them considering and questioning how this came about. Violet’s narrative punishment encodes within itself the call to action that the novel makes. In this respect *Feed* is accurately dedicated “to all those who resist the feed”.

For Titus, this resistance is not possible. His thoughts so entirely concatenated to the feed, he can only describe his experience and his world according to capitalist logic and language. At the close of the narrative, he tells the Hollywood sales-pitch version of his and Violet's love story. He says "it's about the feed...it's about this meg normal guy, who doesn't think about anything until one day he meets a dissident with a heart of gold...it's the high-spirited story of their love together, it's laugh-out-loud funny" (p. 311). Hollywood clichés abound as he continues but the feed then gets the last word. Titus's final thoughts in the novel are about feeling blue, prompting the feed to transmit an advertisement telling him he needs new blue jeans which are on sale and "everything must go" (p. 314). Indeed, everything about this culture must go if humanity is to survive.

Conclusion

Zygmunt Bauman says that 'it stands to reason that in a world populated mostly by hunters there is no room left for utopian musings' (2005, p. 6). Perhaps it also stands to reason that this is the case for contemporary risk society, the political unconscious of which is manifest in the dystopic visions of *Feed* and *Mortal Engines*. Both novels explore the politically ambivalent phenomenon of individualization in ways which reflect Beck's distinction between the evils of globalism and the potential community under globalization. In the process, they contest some of the ideological assumptions and narrative conventions common to children's literature.

At this historical juncture, individualization is something we might view with dread, certainly from the perspective of globalism. However, if children are to be resilient and adaptable citizens in the face of an uncertain and unpredictable future in risk

society, they need to be able to view it critically. To do this, one necessarily has to stand outside culture and ideology. From this point of view, individualization is both the problem and the solution and it is what makes *Mortal Engines* and *Feed* unsettling texts, but it is in leaving the reader with some discomfort that they ask the reader to seek its cause. In this way, the act of reading becomes the impetus to action. These texts can then be read as empowering, mapping a trajectory from bystander to actor.

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