Literature, Gender and Education for Children and Young Adults

Littérature, genre, éducation pour l'enfance et la jeunesse

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Dare to Disturb: Reading and Agency in Young Adult Dystopian Literature

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> Reading is the complex act of constructing meaning from print. We read in order to better understand ourselves, others, and the world around us; we use the knowledge we gain from reading to change the world in which we live.
> – National Council of Teachers of English, "Position Statement on Reading" (2014: online)

> I actually attack the concept of happiness. I don't mind people being happy – but the idea that everything we do is part of the pursuit of happiness seems to me a really dangerous idea and has led to a contemporary disease in Western society, which is fear of sadness. […] We're kind of teaching our kids that happiness is the default position – it's rubbish. Wholeness is what we ought to be striving for and part of that is sadness, disappointment, frustration, failure; all of those things which make us who we are. Happiness and victory and fulfillment are nice little things that also happen to us, but they don't teach us much. […] Ask yourself 'is this contributing to my wholeness?' and if you're having a bad day, it is.
> – Hugh Mackay (n.d.: online).

[1] This essay is a revised version of the keynote lecture given at FINNCON 2016. I would like to thank Valeria Illuminati, Rita Monticelli, Roberta Pederzoli, and Sam Whitsitt for their generous comments.

In a study done in 2009, Melanie D. Koss and William H. Teale stated that Young Adult (YA) novels constitute an increasing market, resulting in a "growth spurt in YA literature" (2009: 563).[2] They collected a corpus of 370 titles (published in English) between 1999 and 2005, out of a pool of "high quality (award winners) and popular" books, in order to get a "clearer picture of recent trends in YA book publishing" (2009: 564). Their findings, not surprisingly, suggested that the majority of popular and/or award-winning books are predominantly realistic in content (realistic fiction 47%; fantasy 12%; science fiction 3%) and are concerned with typically adolescent themes such as "fitting in, finding oneself, and dealing with major life changes." Moreover, and what interest me here, they found that "hopeful endings" are predominant (2009: 569).

Controversies abound surrounding children's and YA literature. They range from what constitutes children's and adult literature to which topics and tones are appropriate, but the idea that children's and YA literature must reassure its readers and provide positive models and feelings is still widely shared and represents, in the words of Perry Nodelman, an "unspoken convention" (1987: 19).[3] The desire to instruct and please remains one of the distinctive features of literature for children and teens. However, along with the persistent notion that children need hope and happy endings, there exists also the idea that the end of innocence is the goal of any pedagogy and often marks the entrance of young adults into adulthood.

Children's author Natalie Babbit sees happy endings as what makes a children's story different from one for adults. Even though not without pain, violence or grief, in the end, these stories must reassure their readers that, as she says, "everything will always be all right" (2006: 50). She is surely not alone. As Norma J. Livo puts it, good literature for children

[2] There is little consensus regarding the age demographic to which the term *YA* refers; for the authors of this study, it is the 13-19-age range. YALSA (the Young Adult Library Services Association) defines young adults as those in the 12-18-age range.

[3] On the different uses and meanings of happy endings to adults and children, see Pape (1992).

is supposed to "[give] comfort" (1987: 664), and the lack of a happy ending upsets readers, who turn out to be, more often than not, adults (Leigh Brown 197: 19). They complain that dark themes in YA novels, such as those penned by Robert Cormier, for example, are inappropriate "because they shatter innocence, lack hope and promote nihilism" (Smith 1998: n.p.). Author Anne Fine warned that books for the young "are becoming so bleak and realistic [that] they are killing off youngsters' aspirations," and called for "stories to have happier endings to avoid depressing impressionable readers" (in Clark 2009: 26). Whereas books in the past were "full of fun and adventures that ended with all the loose ends being tied up successfully," today's bleak and violent settings fail to "offer them hope" (2009: 26).

Other writers believe instead that "traditional literature does a disservice to young readers by holding out a skewed vision of a happy world awaiting them" (Cart in Smith 1998: n.p.). Along similar lines, author Michael Morpurgo believes that children "should be exposed to life's difficulties along with its pleasures" (in Miller 2002: 26), while Cormier went as far as saying that "when you [give young people] books with happy role models, you're telling them lies" (in Smith 1998: n.p.). Fortunately, the list of significant authors willing to 'disturb' their young readers is rapidly growing. Next to Maurice Sendak's dislike for happy endings (cf. Ciotti 1990: n.p.), Neil Gaiman has recently stated, "If you are protected from dark things, then you have no protection of, knowledge of, or understanding of dark things when they show up" (Popova 2014: online). And YA dystopian author Lauren Oliver has claimed that in real life, "there is no one point at which you get your happy ending" (in Kidd 2013: 53).

Among genres for children and young adults, dystopias embody this controversy, trigger important reactions in their readers, and require an active participation. YA dystopias, by their very nature, deal with dark times and, much in line with critical dystopias, tend to offer open or not altogether unhappy endings. Through the combination of images of a bleak future with hope still possible, they interrogate the present, thus maintaining the potential to inspire the "social dreaming" that is central to utopia (Sargent 1994: 3). But most of all, they can also call to action their readers. Such features make the YA dystopian genre conducive to

inspiring teenagers who are on the brink of adulthood and struggling with the social structures that seek to construct them. What Keith M. Booker has said about dystopia in general, becomes particularly appropriate for its YA counterpart: "If the main value of literature in general is its ability to make us see the world in new ways, to make us capable of entertaining new and different perspectives on reality, then dystopian fiction is not a marginal genre" (1994: 176). And it is a genre that can make a difference: these novels may provide YA readers with challenging stories that not only help them make sense of their world, but offer them means of resistance. Speaking of the fantastic – by which he does not mean the genre nor its commodification by the culture industry – Jack Zipes claims that through fantasy (or imagination) we seek to make sense of the world (2009: 78). But most of all, we "do not need [fantasy] to compensate for dull lives, but […] for spiritual regeneration and to contemplate alternatives to our harsh realities. […] We need the fantastic for resistance" (2009: 79).

1. YA Literature and the YA Dystopia

If the definition of YA is problematic, as there is no consensus on the age of young adults themselves, YA literature does not fare much better and resists easy classification. Recent studies of the genre define it as writing in which the main characters are adolescents; it is often narrated in the first person (and therefore may present a naïve, limited point of view), thus enabling identification with the narrator and encouraging empathy for the protagonist(s); and it often focuses on the relationship between the society and the individual, thus questioning social constructions (cf. Campbell 2010; Hill 2014; Trites 2000).

Although science fiction has, at times, been thought of as 'bad' literature for boys, and therefore with a strong appeal for YA readers, there is a general consensus that Lois Lowry's 1993 novel *The Giver* represents the turning point for the development of the YA dystopia.[4] But the text that can easily be identified as the catalyst for the explosion of the genre today is, without any doubt, Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games* trilogy

[4] It is interesting that the release of its film adaptation (2014) has given it a new audience and a new life.

(2008-2010). Although earlier examples such as M.T. Anderson's *Feed* (2002), Nancy Farmer's *The House of the Scorpion* (2002), and French author Anne-Laure Bondoux's *Linus Hoppe* series (2001-2002) were positively received, like Lowry's text they enjoyed a second life after the enormous success of Collins's trilogy. A random look at 'commercial' dystopian series and stand-alone novels reveals a wealth of titles that explore what the future could look like in post-apocalyptic scenarios: Philip Reeve's *Mortal Engines* series (2001-2011); Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* series (2005-2007); Patrick Ness, *Chaos Walking* (2008-2010); Ives Grevet, *Méto* (2008-2010); Allyson Condie, *Matched* (2010-2012); Hugh Howey, *Silo* (2011-2013); Veronica Roth's *Divergent* trilogy (2011-2013); Lauren Oliver, *Delirium* (2011-2013); the *Maze Runner* series by James Dashner (2009-2016); and the Italian author Beatrice Masini's *Bambini nel bosco* (2010; and its utopian sequel, *La fine del cerchio*, 2014).[5]

The presence of so many visions of futures worse than the present raises the question not only of why such literature is so attractive to young adults, but also of its "aesthetic qualities and political valences," as Balaka Basu, Katherine R. Broad, and Carrie Hintz have remarked (2013: 2). These three critics break down their analysis to "three major areas of contention[: … how] these texts balance didacticism with pleasure[, … whether they] espouse radical political change, [… and whether] they offer their readers hope or despair" (2013: 2). The second and third of these concerns together with the development of critical reading and thinking seem to me the most relevant today.

The possibility that these texts, because of their exciting adventures and gripping plots, may be read "ultimately as flights of fancy rather than projections of a possible future," is obviously a risk, but they may also provide young adults with an encouragement "to think about social and political issues in new ways, or even for the first time" (Basu et al.

[5] See also stand-alone novels like Cory Doctorow's *Little Brother* (2008); Sally Gardner's *Maggot Moon* (2012); Gillian Cross's *After Tomorrow* (2013); Louise O'Neill's *Only Ever Yours* (2015); and Niccolò Ammaniti's crossover novel, *Anna* (2015). This is only a very partial list of some of the YA dystopias published in the last years.

2013: 4-5). Whether the YA dystopian genre can be seen "as inspiring change or whether it has fallen short of its potential" is a question that cannot be answered easily. In order to test this idea, I intend to look at two stand-alone novels and their slightly different targeted audiences: Masini's *Bambini nel bosco* and Anderson's *Feed*. In particular, I will look at the acts of reading and storytelling within these novels as indicators of the texts' radical, political valences.[6] The act of reading – literally and metaphorically – within these novels can function as a mirror for the reading experience of young adults, as well as a stimulus to *read on*, as it were, since knowing how to read the world may also help to change the world in which we live.[7]

The control of literacy, and the acts of reading and telling stories, in fact, are important features for the construction and the maintenance of totalitarian regimes. Oftentimes, these activities are also linked to the theme of memory and forgetting. Because the authoritarian state controls its subjects through the strict use of language and propaganda and the hegemonic narratives that are permitted to circulate, critical reading and storytelling can represent important tools of resistance and subversion, and act as catalysts for personal and communal agency. By reading about bleak futures, and about how characters in those texts read and react to those futures, YA readers are invited to imagine a future they desire, and possibly to enact changes in the present that can begin to build that future.

2. Beatrice Masini's *Bambini nel bosco* (2010)

Reading and storytelling are central to the plot of Beatrice Masini's 2010 novel, *Bambini nel bosco* (Children in the woods, all translations are mine), published by Fanucci in a series called "Tweens," thus indicating a target readership around the 10-14-age range.[8] The story takes place in an indefinite future on a planet, after a bomb has destroyed life on Earth. Children that have survived live on a Base camp – a place seem-

[6] On the problematic presence of books in French children's literature (1980-2005) as an attempt to invite young readers to read, see Béhotéguy (2010).

[7] On the importance of reading and literacy for young adults, see McLaughlin and De Voogd (2004); Kaplan (2011); and Glenn et al. (2012).

[8] It was the first YA novel to be shortlisted for the Strega award in 2010.

ingly modeled on a summer camp but which in fact resembles a concentration camp. They are divided into "Lumps" (Grumi), which are small groups living in barracks called "Shells" (Gusci). The children can be "Leftovers," or survivors who have lost their parents, but who have "Shards" (Cocci), that is, fragmented – and often traumatic – memories of their previous lives that occasionally come to the surface and hurt them, or "Blossoms," that is, children who come from the cryopreservation systems and therefore have no memory or knowledge of the world (2010: 43). Despite their differences, they undergo the same treatment: they are constantly monitored; they are given pills that keep them in a state of tranquility and forgetfulness; they are brainwashed with Camp's rules that are broadcast through loudspeakers twice a day – don't think and you won't have troubles, don't enter the woods, don't keep secrets, etc. (2010: 22-23). In this new life, characterized by scarcity and constant surveillance, children survive as best as they can. They obey orders, they fight among themselves for food as well as for no reason at all, and they are progressively becoming barbarians. Malnourished and deprived of memories, they can barely use words, and are for the most part, illiterate.

Like any dystopia, the novel has its share of misfit characters: Tom, a young boy who feels and is described as different, as he engages in small acts of rebellion, from not taking his pills, to taking short, tentative walks in the woods, and trying to remember; and Jonas, one of the young supervisors who monitors the children and is critical of the system, and who aids the children's escape into the woods. The use of two misfits could be a strategy that allows different readers to identify differently: younger readers may identify with Tom, while older readers could identify with Jonas. Tom stands apart from the others because in his solitary walks at the edge of the wood he finds a book and, being a Leftover, he knows how to read. The discovery of Tom's secret by Hana, the group's hard and bossy leader who nonetheless asks him to share the stories with them, acts as catalyst for the transformation of the group. Reading the fairy tales and listening to stories that speak of the woods, of parents that die or abandon their children, and of houses made of fantastic food (Tom Thumb, Little Red Riding Hood, Three Little Pigs, Hansel and Gretel, among others), the group finds the courage and hope needed to entertain the possibility of leaving the Base camp and starting

a search for a better life on their own. The group's resolution, therefore, both violates and resists the Camp's laws, and presents a challenge to themselves. It is also through the act of reading that the Leftovers try to recover memories as well as explain and teach the Blossoms words and ideas they have never known before, because the book, as Hana says, is what "has stories and words within it [and Tom] must read them all to them, so they can remember" (2010: 33). And thus, slowly, they learn new words and with them the power of language. And so it is that reading allows the group to move from individual isolation and selfishness to small acts of cooperation and sharing. After a period in which Tom is not allowed any changes in the ritual readings and is required to repeat the exact words and accompanying gestures of the words (2010: 35), the group learns new words that they use in more complex sentences (2010: 67). But words and reading also provide them with a sense of identity. As they resolve to leave the camp and find a better place, they name themselves "the children in the woods" of the title, and state that they are about to become their own tale (2010: 55). Being different becomes a positive value as they enjoy their uniqueness: "before we were all the same, same as the others and we were nothing. Now we are us" (2010: 79). Tom becomes their new leader, rather than their boss, and Hana, who gives him a new name together with the title of new leader, becomes a reader herself, recovering and accepting her previously hidden identity as a Leftover (2010: 134-135). But the book confers a new identity also on a character called Cranach, the most insignificant boy in the group, who is entrusted with the task of protecting the book, and thus he becomes "Cranach, the keeper/guardian" (2010: 91).

Knowledge and the power of language are inextricably linked with a sense of the past and its memory. Shards, the fragmented memories that haunt the Leftovers, are also a source of envy and jealousy among the group, because if one has a memory, it means that they also have a past, and as Jonas says, "without the past, it is more difficult to envision the future" (2010: 95). The novel, however, complicates Jonas's point of view. As some of the younger children learn new words and risk reading their new lives and identities as an exciting adventure, they also become more demanding and rebellious. Hana perceptively remarks,

> It's like a great game. They have the memory of an ant […]. They have erased everything, the beatings, hunger, and loneliness. It's as if they were born here. […] They don't have a past. Therefore, they do what they can: they enjoy the present and demand the future. They require it. (2010: 150)

Literacy brings with it a liberating force to be reckoned with: "when you have the words, Tom thought, you can say things, good ones and bad ones. You can protest and rebel. You want things. Without words you can't" (2010: 149). As they learn to deal with the power of language and its complexities, they also learn the importance of community, and with it, the principles of democracy and negotiation for what Ruth Levitas calls the "education of desire" (2010: 6): "our strength is being together. And being together also means that we decide together, which doesn't mean that we desire the same thing, but that we choose that which the majority desires" (Masini 2010: 109). The group becomes a community: they find a mutant animal and they tame it; they build a shelter; they keep track of time; they find Lu, another lost young girl and take care of her; they share tasks and, slowly, affection; and they also face together the need to come to terms with death, as one of the children, ZeroSette, falls from climbing a tree. But most of all, they listen to the stories, discuss them, and ultimately trust them. They move in fact from the act of reading to that of creating their own stories, in the sense that they create new stories when they don't find one in the book that matches their experiences and they trust that dreams and hope are in the stories as much as in the lives they are creating (Masini 2010: 79, 174).

The book ends in a bittersweet way. Their encounter with death makes Hana recognize the difference between fairy tales and life, which cannot always have a happy ending like the stories in the book: "And anyway this is our life. It can't always have a happy ending, it's not a story in your book" (2010: 156). But the boy's death does not undermine or reduce the importance of stories. Once McKemp, the adult in charge of the Base, discovers their escape, he sends Jonas into the woods to recover them and bring them back. It is as if the words conjured the adults, who up to that point were only an eerie absence: as Tom narrates his last story, "when they least expected it, somebody

[comes] and [helps] them" (2010: 174). Masini's ending is somewhat ambiguous. A relatively happy ending compensates the fact that the children are brought back to the Base. Masini does not seem to trust her younger readers with a story that will not reassure them with some notion of 'normality' – that good adults exist, that they take care of and save children, that for some of them the bleak future ends with the adoption on the part of couples and of one of the Supervisors. For the rest of them, it is Jonas who will take care of them, in an ending reminiscent of Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas": they walk away, back into the woods, in search of other children and other stories to create.

In terms of reading, the novel offers its share of frustration to its young readers, as they need to be able and willing to postpone understanding and clarity. It is typically disorienting in that it starts 'in the middle' and many of the features of the bleak future are made sense of only as the story progresses.[9] Anxiety, loneliness, insecurity, selfishness, fear, and lack of affection and solidarity are the feelings experienced by the protagonists and transmitted to the readers. And a certain frustration results from the bittersweet ending that sees the dismemberment of the group. And yet, while the open ending works to reassure readers that hope is possible, it may also deflect some of the book's strength. The vague extrapolation of the future and its social order may reassure contemporary readers that they do not need to fear such a future since their present may not seem so bad in comparison, and as long as they live under the protection of their parents. And even in the event of a disaster, such fate can be countered by the intervention of good adults, just as fairy tales and the novel itself teach us. And yet, the very act of reading, within and outside of Masini's novel, provides a metaphor and a reflection on the salvific power of language and words, of how personal and communal agency are still possible in the face of abuse and control. If the book within the story is a source of empowerment, rebellion, and

[9] For example, the difference between Leftovers and Blossoms is explained only on p. 43 in a dialogue between the guardians, whose existence is only found twenty pages into the story (2010: 21). Similarly, mention of the bomb and its consequences appears only on pp. 43, 94, 99.

resistance for the protagonists, similarly the novel itself can be understood to represent a tool in the hands of the young adults reading it, as Jonas's last words suggest: "Books are useful anyway; to preserve stories, so that others may get to know them" (2010: 200) and, I would add, find inspiration in them.

3. M.T. Anderson's *Feed* (2002)

Although reading seems almost absent from the world imagined in M.T. Anderson's 2002 novel, *Feed*, it is the distinguishing element at the basis of its narrative of resistance.[10] Set in a not-so-distant future America, the novel follows the story of Titus, the self-conscious young narrator who thinks of himself as being stupid, but is actually the product of a shallow, culturally impoverished society where writing is obsolete, reading is considered unnecessary, and art is absent. The culturally decadent and environmentally collapsing future America is governed by corporations where wealthy individuals are hooked up from birth to "the feed," a kind of computer chip that connects them to the Internet through brain implantation. With minimal extrapolation from our present, Anderson imagines that the feed enables instant wireless messaging and updates users on entertainment possibilities and commercial and social trends, responding to an individual's every thought with targeted advertising. Hence, thoughts and desires are constantly monitored by corporate interests, making this future a grotesque, materialist utopia. One of the great advantages of the feed is, according to Titus, "that you can be supersmart without ever working" (2002: 47), thus being provided with access to almost infinite quantities of data that remain, however, unused. Without being aware of the danger, Titus captures the real principle of the feed:

> it knows everything you want and hope for, sometimes before you even know what those things are. It can tell you how to get them, and help you make buying decisions that are hard. Everything we think and feel is

[10] *Feed* has recently been published also in an adult edition, a fact that corroborates the nature of crossover texts of much YA literature.

> taken in by the corporations, […] and they make a special profile, one that's keyed just to you. (2002: 48)

By keeping teenagers and adults up to date about everything that is fashionable, the feed forces them to buy just for the sake of buying, with unprecedented speed. And in so doing, it profiles consumers and co-opts hope and desire. In this society of instant gratification, everything is disposable and trends come and go instantaneously: for example, during a party, two of Titus's girl friends go off to the bathroom to change hairstyles "because hairstyles had changed," and clearing the table after dinner means literally throwing dishes and table away (2002: 20, 128-129). But perhaps one of the strongest indications of Anderson's consumer culture (one, however, that in my experience in teaching the text is not easily recognized by young readers) is the commodification of historical symbols of resistance and rebellion into the "Riot Gear" collection: "Kent State culottes," "Stonewall Clogs," the "Watts Riot top," and the "WTO riot Windbreaker" are co-opted into yet another act of consumption (2002: 159-165).[11]

Although Titus represents the society's average teenager obsessed with materialism, unlike his friends, he is also somewhat uncomfortable and different. He does not qualify as dystopia's traditional misfit, as his discomfort is typical of teenage angst: he feels "dumb" (2002: 20), worries about the fact that "cool was flying just ahead of [him], and [he] could never exactly catch up to it" (2002: 279), and his identity depends almost entirely on his peers' approval. Like the majority of the population, including adults (cf. fragments of the U.S. President's speeches on the feed and Titus's own father's jargon, 2002: 85, 55), he is inarticulate and often at a loss for words, as corporate-owned School™'s main mission is to teach people how to be good consumers. Thus, the novel, for example, registers Titus and his friends' recurrent need to look up the *odd* words used by Violet, a young woman they meet during their spring break vacation on the Moon: "suppuration,"

[11] The passage also serves the purpose of showing the erasure of memory and history on the part of the hegemonic culture, while Violet, the resisting character, who tries to remember what incited one of the riots, is made fun of for her weird interest (2002: 163-164).

"autumnal," and "contusions" are some of the words (2002: 23, 120, 123).[12] Titus cannot write and barely knows how to read, but what is worse is that his illiteracy prevents him from reading his society as the dystopia that it is.

Meeting Violet, however, unsettles him and turns out to be a feeble education for Titus. Violet clearly represents the dystopian misfit and strikes Titus as different – a weird, yet intriguing individual amid a society of conformists: "she was watching our stupidity" (2002: 13). Her manners and language set her apart as a critical and independent thinker, so much so that at one point Titus tells her, "it sometimes feels like you're watching us, instead of being us" (2002: 168). Unlike the majority of her peers, Violet is home schooled and did not get the feed implanted in her brain until she was seven years old, a fact that makes her more vulnerable when the group is attacked by a terrorist hacker and they are temporarily disconnected from the feed. The attack turns out to be much more dangerous for Violet, who slowly starts losing control of her basic functions and is left with a short amount of time to live. Her parents' choices are a sign of resistance but also a reminder of their economic status and, hence, of their diminished citizenship.[13] If Titus feels stupid, Violet is perceived both as "too smart" (2002: 107) and "pretentious" (2002: 66), but also caught up in the desire to be "normal" and be accepted (2002: 267, 269). Violet is aware, however, of her contradictions (cf. 2002: 217) and, unlike Titus, is also aware of the problems that a feed-controlled society creates. In one of the central passages of the book, originated by a reflection on the part of Titus about Violet who is "always reading" things about how everything is dying, she lectures Titus on democracy and the problem of representation when only 73% of the American population can afford the feed, and concludes,

[12] In contrast, Anderson creates an inventive teen jargon that characterizes Titus's discourse: "and I was like, *This will be big, really big*, but then I guess I wasn't so skip when we were flying over the surface of the moon itself, because the moon was just like it always is, after your first few times there, when you get over being like, *Whoa, unit! The moon! The goddamn moon!*" (2002: 4).

[13] Violet and her family also represent the disadvantaged segment of humanity, those who cannot afford the feed and live in the poor sectors of this depleted, decadent society despite their uncommon and exceptional education.

"*When you have the feed all your life, you're brought up to not think about things.* […] *Because of the feed, we're raising a nation of idiots. Ignorant, self-centered idiots*" (2002: 113).

The act and skill of reading and writing as well as her fluency with words are what distinguishes Violet and turns her into an activist. Brought up in a home where, in Titus's words, "everything had words on it" – papers, books, and even posters on the wall – (2002: 135), she plans to resist the feed through what Elizabeth Bullen and Elizabeth Parson call "acts of consumer disobedience" (2007: 134). By choosing random, unrelated items over the feed without buying them, she creates "a customer profile that's so screwed, no one can market to it" and prevents the corporations from profiling her (Anderson 2002: 98).[14] Unfortunately, her "purchasing history" is also what makes her an unprofitable investment for the corporations that turn her down and let her die (2002: 247). But Violet's resistance is not limited solely to her acts of consumer disobedience; it is also enacted through language and the protection of memory. Having lost one year of her memory because of her malfunctioning feed, Violet starts sending Titus files of her memories so that he can preserve them, read them, and eventually tell them back to her: "*I'm afraid I'm going to lose my past. Who are we, if we don't have a past?*" (2002: 253). She also plans to live fully her remaining days and drafts a list of things she wants to do before she dies (2002: 229-233). Her list becomes Violet's modest utopia, 22 items that mix simple, achievable wishes like dancing, seeing art, and going to the mountains, with questions like, "Is there any moss anywhere?" (2002: 229), and more impossible yearnings like "getting older," seeing "the years pass," and being without the feed (2002: 231, 230). But the list turns into a narrative of a life that did not and is not going to happen, a critical nostalgic vision of what could have been.

Faced with the daunting task of accompanying Violet in her last days, Titus does not rise to the occasion and his actions preempt Violet's acts of resistance. He pretends he has not received Violet's files and de-

[14] Violet is also the only character in this disposable, commodity culture that is able to propose a theory of the postponement of gratification, another form of resistance (2002: 143).

letes all the memories. But Anderson's disturbing ending and choice to show Titus in a very negative light can actually force readers to resist identification with the protagonist while asking them to interrogate their own actions. As Bullen and Parsons have noted, while Violet is the challenging and questioning "actor," Titus embodies Zygmunt Bauman's "regrettable, yet excusable" position of the "bystander." Since readers are experiencing the story and its world through Titus whose actions are unlikable, they are simultaneously invited to reject and critique both his actions and society (Bullen and Parsons 2007: 134). The novel ends ambiguously as far as Titus's resistance is concerned and, once again, it is the mention of a book that may make a difference. During a very harsh confrontation with Violet's father who informs Titus of his daughter's impending death, he is invited to "go back and hang with the eloi." Titus doesn't understand the word, "eloi," and Violet's father refuses to explain the reference from H.G. Wells's *Time Machine* and tells a frustrated Titus to "read it" (Anderson 2002: 291). Similarly, to make sense of it, the readers are placed in the same position as Titus and are thus invited to find out for themselves the meaning of the reference and, hence, to read and value the act of reading. Although we are not told if Titus follows Violet's father's invitation, his subsequent actions indicate a modest change, Titus's own way of resistance. At Violet's deathbed, he starts talking to her, trying to become her memory and memorial. He researches and reads on the feed the kind of "strange facts" that interested Violet and goes back to tell them to her, and in the act of storytelling he also tries to resist the feed:

> I tried to talk just to her. I tried not to listen to the noise on the feed, the girls in wet shirts offering me shampoo. I told her stories. They were only a sentence long, each one of them. That's all I knew how to find. So I told her broken stories. The little pieces of broken stories I could find. I told her what I could. (2002: 296)

But if he can only offer her fragments of stories, he also tries to remember Violet and to reconstitute her dis-membered body through the act of remembering and storytelling:

> There's one story I'll keep telling you. I'll keep telling it. You're the story. I don't want you to forget. When you wake up, I want you to remember yourself. I'm going to remember. You're still there, as long as I can remember you. As long as someone knows you. […] This is the story. […] I told her the story of us. "It's about the feed," I said. "It's about this meg normal guy, who doesn't think about anything until one wacky day, when he meets a dissident with a heart of gold. […] Set against the backdrop of America in its final days, it's the high-spirited story of their love together, it's laugh-out-loud funny, really heartwarming, and a visual feast. […] Together, the two crazy kids grow, have madcap escapades, and learn an important lesson about love. They learn to resist the feed. Rated PG-13. For language, […] and mild sexual situations." (2002: 298-299)

This heap of broken recollections, this simplified story narrated in a 'Hollywood commercial style' is all Titus can offer to honor Violet's memory. But in his storytelling, he rewrites Violet's futile resistance and his own failure to break free from the constraints of society. Like Violet's narrative of a life that is not going to be, Titus uses a creative, utopian nostalgia to imagine what could have been, to desire an alternative ending.

In terms of reading, *Feed* can be very frustrating both for its language – an inventive teen jargon Anderson creates – and the unhappy ending.[15] Despite the bleak ending, Violet's acts of resistance and Titus's more modest rebellion constitute a utopian experiment that disrupts the perception of their society and our own, and attempts to offer an alternative set of values. Despite the fact that the protagonists ultimately fail to resist, the novel's epistemological process positions readers to adopt a more critical awareness of their own world as well as of the society portrayed in the novel. Unlike Masini's novel and many commercial YA dystopias, and as Carter F. Hanson also noted with regard to *Feed*, "rather than providing an 'elsewhere' that distances the reader from the contemporary social conditions and economic modes of postindustrial capitalism, Anderson extrapolates a future based on entirely familiar

[15] Both are among the most common reasons for some of the 15% 1-2-star ratings on Amazon.com; most of the complaints about language come from adults who also object to the use of profanity.

consumer habits and Internet technology" (Hanson 2015: 260). Anderson's limited extrapolation makes it easy for readers to recognize the assonances between their present and the future society and more difficult to write them off as flights of fancy. The double movement to identify with the protagonist and also resist such identification may encourage readers to exercise agency. Despite the unhappy ending that sees the narrative punishment of Violet and limited agency from Titus, storytelling, imagination, and a reevaluation of the literal and metaphorical act of reading are some of the tools of resistance and can provide an example. *Feed* presents a dystopian society that the male protagonist as well as readers may not read as such at first; it is through Titus's interaction with Violet that he achieves a feeble critical distance from his own society. Thus, the novel enacts an epistemological process whereby readers, by recognizing Titus's world as dystopian, can also learn to read their own worlds in a new, critical way. Far from showing that utopia can be reached, the reading of YA dystopia can show the critical process necessary for the education of desire.

4. Conclusion

> Fiction can show you a different world. It can take you somewhere you've never been. Once you've visited other worlds […] you can never be entirely content with the world you grew up in. And discontent is a good thing: people can modify and improve their worlds, leave them better, leave them different, if they're discontented.
> – Neil Gaiman, "Why Our Future" (2016: 8).

In the "Foreword" to Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry's volume on utopian and dystopian literature for children and young adults, Jack Zipes, recognizing that we live in "very troubled times," states that "More than ever before, we need utopian and dystopian literature" (2003: ix). We need literature, then, that challenges and disturbs YA readers. As E.B. White said, children should not be "written down to but written up to" (Popova 2015: online). Using challenging themes, complex visions, and unsettling endings, writers can motivate readers. As Zipes also reminds

us, "without discontent there is no utopia" (2003: ix). When asked whether young people can handle dystopia, Lois Lowry replied, "Young people handle dystopia every day: in their lives, their dysfunctional families, their violence-ridden schools. They watch dystopian television and movies about the real world where firearms bring about explosive conclusions to conflict" (in Zipes 2003: xi). By doing away with the 'unspoken convention' of happy endings, the bleak futures imagined in these novels do not renounce hope, but invite Anderson's YA readers to resist and Masini's younger ones to negotiate between relief and awareness. The characters of both novels educate themselves and are educated into a displacement of and critique of the societies they live in.[16] In dystopian worlds where diversity is discouraged, to portray characters that resist and exercise agency is an important message for YA readers who tend to embrace conformity in their need to fit in and belong. But reading in particular allows "teens to play with their identities in a safe and controlled manner" (Koss and Teale 2009: 569). Because adolescence is that time in which teens attempt to define themselves and construct subjectivity, reading YA dystopia can promote alternative thinking and create hope for change. Utopia is neither reached nor accomplished at the end of the novels, but a utopian dimension is maintained for the readers and is fostered through hope and the education of desire. The encounter with an imperfect, botched utopian experiment serves to "create a space in which the reader is both brought to experience an alternative and called to judgment on it" (Levitas 2007: 56). Through a process that Tom Moylan has called one "of pleasure and pedagogy" (2008: 80), the function of utopia moves from being merely that of "goal and catalyst of change[,] to one of criticism" (Levitas 2010: 226). Thus, utopia's function is not only that of promoting change, but through the act of reading it becomes one of developing criticism. Reading is at the basis of the cognitive estrangement needed to achieve a critical perspective on our own world and an understanding of what is necessary to begin to articulate our desires with concrete actions in order

[16] On the other hand, female characters in popular dystopias often seem to be imprisoned between romantic triangles (cf. Collins's Katniss) and narrative punishment (cf. both Anderson's Violet and Roth's Tris).

to challenge the inequities of our societies. In this light, the ambiguity of (un)happy endings serves to disturb, challenge, and motivate young adults. By resisting the convention of reassuring readers, the futures foreshadowed in these dystopian novels do not foreclose hope; they actually interpellate YA readers to intervene critically in the imagination and construction of a future they desire and to possibly do something in their present that can begin to build that future.

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