FEED, JAM ALERTS, AND THE PROMISE OF THE SCIENCE FICTION 

DYSTOPIA

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
San Diego State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English

by
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Fall 2011
SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY

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Feed, Jam Alerts, and the Promise of the Science Fiction Dystopia

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The dystopian novel is a sub-genre of science fiction that emerged during the turn of the twentieth century, which has remained popular throughout the last century. The primary aim of dystopian fiction is disputable, and varies from author to author. While it is important to acknowledge that not all dystopian science fiction writing aims to accomplish the same outcomes, there are certain trends that can be found in a majority of popular dystopian fiction. For example, dystopian literature often aims to alert the reader of some particular crisis, and then concludes by encouraging the reader to take action in attempt to correct this crisis. In many dystopias, there seems to be a great deal of concern over consciousness-raising, but the approaches to achieving this goal vary significantly. By closely examining M. T. Anderson’s Feed and Linh Dinh’s Jam Alerts, and comparing these works to one another, we can begin to recognize the differences between conservative and progressive dystopian literature, and why these distinctions are important.
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INTRODUCTION

The dystopian novel is a sub-genre of science fiction that emerged during the turn of the twentieth century, and that has remained popular throughout the last century. The primary aim of dystopian fiction is disputable, and varies from author to author. While it is important to acknowledge that not all dystopian science fiction writing aims to accomplish the same outcomes, there are certain trends that can be found in most popular dystopian fiction. For example, dystopian literature often aims to alert the reader of some particular crisis, and then concludes by encouraging the reader to take action in attempt to avert this crisis. In many dystopias, there seems to be a great deal of concern over consciousness-raising. By closely examining selected samples of contemporary dystopian writing and comparing these works to one another, we can begin to recognize the differences between conservative and progressive dystopian literature, and why these distinctions are important.

The dystopian novel was never intended to function as merely escapist literature (although much of dystopian literature being produced today has become escapist at best). Examining the beginnings of dystopian literature is essential to differentiating conservative dystopian works from progressive works. H.G. Wells is often considered to be the father of the dystopian novel with his publication of *The Time Machine* in 1895. By looking at the historical events and social attitudes that gave rise to the dystopian genre, perhaps we can better understand what has allowed it to sustain its popularity throughout the years.

In addition to assessing the political and social climates we will also be looking into the development of theory, which helped shape the dystopian genre—borrowing from Claude Lévi-Strauss’ engineer/bricoleur dichotomy to discuss the different approaches to writing and
to look at how these approaches impact the formation of work. This historical and theoretical analysis will help in our understanding of contemporary dystopian literature, because many of the concerns expressed in early dystopian literature continue to be expressed in dystopian novels today.

Chapter two will focus primarily on M.T Anderson’s *Feed*, a contemporary young adult dystopian novel about the demise of humanity through the rise of consumerism and technology. Anderson claims that through *Feed* he is trying to reach out to the young adult demographic and inspire them to pursue social change. However, it is arguable that *Feed* is actually functionally conservative. Like many contemporary dystopian novels, *Feed* features a protagonist trying to revolt against the dominant ideology, who is ultimately unsuccessful because he was too naïve and waited too long to speak out against injustice. While Anderson is attempting to convey the importance of social consciousness, his message is overshadowed by the monolithic fatalism of the novel’s ending. Novels like *Feed* help to uphold the dominant ideology, despite their ostensible attempts to dismantle it.

However, it is not enough to simply state that dystopian literature has become a conservative form, without offering counter-examples; in chapter three we will explore the ways in which science fiction/dystopian literature can function progressively. Although there are several authors who might utilize dystopian themes in exemplary ways, we will be looking specifically at the poetry of Linh Dinh, and how he incorporates dystopian themes while imagining multiple possible futures. While at first glance it may seem that Dinh and Anderson utilize dystopian themes in similar ways, Dinh distinguishes his work by continually reimagining outcomes.
By putting these contemporary works in conversation with one another, we can more easily see the different ways that science fiction (specifically dystopian literature) can be approached, and the usefulness or helpfulness of the outcomes that these different approaches yield. We are at a point in literary history where the usefulness of literary study has been called into question, and I believe that the answer to this question might be found, at least partially, in scientific dystopian writing. Dystopian writing has the potential to be depressing and fatalistic, but it also has the potential to fuel conversations that can lead to new understanding of human relationships with both each other and technology.
CHAPTER 1
H.G. WELLS AND THE BEGINNINGS OF THE DYSTOPIAN NOVEL

The dystopian novel, a genre that was created to incite social change, has instead, become a passively consumed commodity in twenty-first century America. In order to understand why, we must explore the origins of the genre, and the social and political environment that bred some of the earliest dystopian literature. In addition, a basic understanding of its counterpart, the utopia, is necessary to understand dystopian themes, as the dystopia stems from, and remains inextricably intertwined with, its utopian roots. While the dystopia might seem to be easily distinguished from the utopia, there are several areas where they intersect. Many dystopian novels still feature utopian themes and the reverse is equally true.

Most people immediately think of Thomas More when they think of utopian literature, because More is generally perceived to be the father figure of the utopian novel. While there are elements of utopian writing in works that predate More’s *Utopia* (1516), he was the first to coin the term “utopia” and to give name to this particular sort of idealistic civilization, which is why he is often associated with the genre:

The word “utopia” was coined by the English scholar and humanist Thomas More (1478-1535) for the title of his book published in 1515. The word comes from a combination of two Greek words—“outopos,” and “eutopos”—and is something of a pun. “Topos” means, “place.” The prefix “ou” means “not” or “no” and the prefix “eu” means “good” or “beneficial.” (Bowman 9)
In creating this portmanteau, More was being ironic by pointing out that perfection exists nowhere. The word and the ideas behind it were picked up by the general public and became a popular concept: “By the early seventeenth century, the word utopia had seeped into common speech, and generally meant ‘a place, state, or condition ideally perfect in respect to politics, laws, customs, and conditions’” (Bowman 9). This definition has remained over the past few centuries, although the word has come to be used colloquially, as has its counterpart, “dystopia.” The dystopian genre was referred to as “anti-utopian” for the first few decades of its existence, because initially it was seen as the opposite of the utopia. The word “dystopia” did not appear until 1952, in a book called The Quest for Utopia, by Glen Negley and J. Max Patrick, who took the liberty of replacing More’s “eu” (or “u”) with the prefix “dys,” implying “bad” place, rather than “good” place or “no” place (“Bricolage”). “Dystopia” seems to be a more appropriate phrase than “anti-utopia” because it acknowledges a difference from the utopia, but does not limit analysis to strict opposition of the utopia.

Many utopian narratives were published in the wake of More’s Utopia. Among these were Francis Bacon’s New Atlantis (1624), Samuel Butler’s Erewhon (1872), and Edward Bellamy’s Looking Backward (1888). And while these authors did not envision the same “perfect” society, their novels all featured ideal societies in respect to political, social and legal conduct, without explaining the etiologies of these societies or their perfection. Much like the utopian authors, the dystopian authors each had their own visions of an extreme world; however, their accounts are of the world at its worst. While both genres may be inspired by discontent, the dystopian genre stems from very specific social and political conditions.
Perhaps the largest contributing factor to the creation of the dystopian novel was the second industrial revolution—generally accepted as having taken place during the years leading up to the turn of the twentieth century. The second industrial revolution was a time of fast-paced development in multiple ways:

Most of the technical advances that appeared during the two pre-WWI generations had their basis in increasingly sophisticated scientific understanding, and for the first time in history, their success was shaped by close links and rapid feedback between research and commercialization. (Smil 13)

This second industrial revolution differed from the first in that much of the thinking involved with the influx of invention was on a deeper and more scientific level; the primary means of invention was no longer merely trial and error, but was rooted in scientific study. In his book *The Culture of Time and Space*, Stephen Kern points out that these changes also altered human consciousness:

From around 1880 to the outbreak of WWI a series of sweeping changes in technology and culture created distinctive new modes of thinking about and experiencing time and space. Technological innovations including the telephone, wireless telegraph, x-ray, cinema, bicycle, automobile, and airplane established the material foundation for this reorientation; independent cultural developments such as the stream-of-consciousness novel, psychoanalysis, Cubism, and the theory of relativity shaped consciousness directly. (1)

Although the first printing of Kern’s book, which included this observation, was not published until 1983, he was certainly not the first to notice a drastic change in the human condition during that time. Virginia Woolf, although she identifies the change to be a bit later, makes the observation in her 1924 essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown”:

In or about December, 1910, human character changed. I am not saying that one went out, as one might into a garden, and there saw that a rose had flowered, or that a hen had laid an egg. The change was not sudden and definite like that. But a change there was, nevertheless; and, since one must be arbitrary, let us date it about the year 1910. (2)
It is difficult to assign a specific date, or even a specific year, to the grand-scale changes that took place, and it is ultimately unnecessary. What is important is that it is widely agreed that a significant change in the way that human thinking took place during the years surrounding the turn of the twentieth century. Woolf continues by noting the different effects this change had on society at that time: “All human relations have shifted—those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature”(2). Despite Woolf dating the change to have taken place in 1910, elements of change were already noticeable in the years leading up to the turn of the century. This rapid pace of technological development is likely what inspired much of H.G Wells’ writing, which we will discuss later as the blueprint of the dystopian genre.

Kern explains that during these changes and perhaps in response to the general sense of instability at the turn of the twentieth century, Americans handled their discomfort by clinging to their collective historical past:

"Every age also has a distinctive sense of the past. This generation looked to it for stability in the face of rapid technological, cultural, and social change. Its thinkers developed a keen sense of the historical past as a source of identity in an increasingly secular world and investigated the personal past with a variety of purposes. (36-37)"

As invention and technology began to speed up and machines began to take the place of people in the work environment, people began to come together in an attempt to conserve familiar ideals.

However, while many Americans clung to the comforts of their collective past, there were others who viewed a dependency on the past as weakness and an unwillingness to progress:
The debate about the value of the impact of the past on the present ranged between those who argued that the past had a positive effect as a source of meaning, freedom, identity or beauty and those who viewed it critically as an excuse for inaction, a deadening force of habit and tradition. (Kern 45)

Among those who viewed this reverence for the past as an inhibition to accessing the future was Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche felt so compelled to write on the subject that in 1909 he published an essay titled “The Use and Abuse of History,” in which he explains his distaste for those who allow their concern with the preservation of history to prevent them from evolving, and who in some cases actively reject opportunities to evolve. Kern states, “Nietzsche was particularly incensed by those who are chained to precedent and bowed under the weight of an ever heavier accumulation of memory and tradition” (52). In his essay Nietzsche acknowledges that history is important, but warns against relying too heavily on history for instruction on how to conduct oneself in the present or future: “The fact that life does need the service of history must be as clearly grasped as that an excess of history hurts it” (180). Nietzsche explains that while people generally subscribe to one extreme or the other in the debate over the importance of historical knowledge, it is best to maintain a balance between the two.

This disagreement, which began over a century ago, between those who looked suspiciously at the troubles that technological advancement might bring, and those who looked hopefully at the possibilities of those same advancements, remains to be resolved. The details of the argument have changed slightly over the years, but both sides of the disagreement continue to have affect on contemporary art in general. Nietzsche describes the attempts to preserve traditional language and values, and how these attempts are specific to those of conservative mind:

History is necessary to the man of conservative and reverent nature, who looks back to the origins of existence with love and trust; through it, he gives thanks for
life. He is careful to preserve what survives from ancient days, and will reproduce the conditions of his own upbringing for those who come after him; thus he does life a service. (185)

This outlook becomes problematic when, despite all conservative attempts, humanity evolves, and the conservative is left trying to preserve an ideal, which has already receded into the past. It is this type of conservative thinker who continues to view the dystopian novel as a progressive form. By latching on to the progressive ideas of past generations, he or she believes that they are contemplating the future in imaginative ways, while in reality they are affirming their own beliefs that the current way of life is the only possible existence. The anxieties that once inspired dystopian writing are now suppressed by the fatalistic outcomes that have become a common theme of the dystopian novel.

Somehow, the anxieties present in the literature at the turn of the twentieth-century continue to simultaneously inspire writers of dystopian novels today, while suppressing revolutionary inklings in readers. One reason for this may be that the aim of society’s progression has changed, and is no longer focused on the convenience of machinery. Instead it has become more concerned with increasing the speed and quality of communication, leaving the novel at a disadvantage in general due to its lengthy nature. We are further along technologically, however, we are in a similar position emotionally to that of the turn of the twentieth century. We are presently creating and inventing at a faster pace than ever before, but the human condition is similar to that which existed during Wells’ time—at the time of the second industrial revolution. We are experiencing a new industrial or technological revolution, which is more focused on improvement of communications technology. However, the second industrial revolution was not the only factor leading up to the birth of the dystopian genre.
It is possible that the spate of dystopian novels, beginning with Wells’ *The Time Machine*, stemmed from anxiety caused by an amalgam of the second industrial revolution, the ending of the Gilded Age and the closing of the “final frontier.” These three events overlapped with one another and seem to have created a sort of perfect storm for the pessimistic attitudes we see reflected in the dystopian novel.

The second industrial revolution brought both faster means of travel and communication in what was perhaps the greatest technological boom known in the history of mankind. Railroads quickly became the primary means of travel, and the introduction of telephones into the household was a significant step, which would forever change the way we communicate. While these inventions were seen as progress, they also caused anxiety, as is suggested by cultural historian Jacques Barzun: “New means of communication diminish privacy and wastefully multiply human contacts, robbing one of time” (603). Here Barzun implies that the invention of the telephone brought with it a new sense of alienation; people were suddenly just a phone call away from one another and could phone each other with no warning. And while it was convenient for obvious reasons, it was also troubling to adapt to this new pace of communication.

We are experiencing this same sort of anxiety today, with the pressures attached to the fast-paced evolution of communication devices. Echoing the anxiety over the telephone at the turn of the twentieth century, present day cyborg anthropologist Amber Case argues that, while twenty-first century technology is allowing humans to become more efficient and think in new ways, one drawback to the increasingly rapid pace of technological advancement is the growing ubiquitous nature of social pressures. Case gives the example of social networking sites and discusses how a part of our selves is now available 24 hours a
day via the internet. She explains how this omnipresent social vulnerability can be cause for a sort of latent stress or anxiety that we did not experience before the rise of the social network.

While both Barzun and Case acknowledge the way that such a quick influx of invention is capable of causing angst, they also acknowledge the benefits these new technologies bring. Barzun points out that the machine is a product of man, and is bound to have some positive effects:

For the machine is one of the works of man, not an alien intruder; it is born of handiwork and imagination, like art, and its material shape may achieve beauty fused with utility… one clearly good result of labor-saving by home appliances has been the emancipation of the servant class. (603-604)

Likewise, Case is an advocate for the ways in which technological advancements are presently helping American society. However, even when the benefits may outweigh the cost, we tend to look at technological advancement with skepticism. We are quick in pointing out examples of where it has gone wrong, such as the backlash that social networks have suffered due to questions of privacy, and the argument that children are not spending enough time out of doors. The idea is that the older generation is superior, and will not be as easily influenced by the influx of technology; that they are somehow able to better navigate these new technological terrains because they existed to see what life was like before. In general, the youth are quicker to accept the benefits of technology, but are discouraged by their elders. These attitudes are similar to the attitudes of the older generations during the turn of the twentieth century.

Another possible factor of influence at the time Wells was writing was the closing of the American west during the 1890s. Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faracher explain in their book, *The American West: A New Interpretive History*, that the first four hundred years of American history consisted of a constant move towards the West and continuous
settlement; the idea that one day soon there would be no new land to settle (a misguided idea, as there is land that has yet to be settled at present) frightened Americans, and signaled the entrance into a new period of American history (494). The American west was long considered to be “the final frontier,” and where does one go after they have conquered the final frontier? With nowhere left to go geographically, it is possible that this opened writers such as Wells and London up to the idea of time travel, alternate realities, and of course, outer space.

The late nineteenth century also saw the end of the Gilded Age (the slowing down of the biggest growth spurt the American economy has ever seen), which played an important part in the push towards a fascination with science fiction and skepticism towards technological advancement. The Gilded Age can be described as a false sort of accomplishment that put a majority of America’s wealth in the hands of a few. In an article from USA Today, Russ Juskalian explains the social and political conditions that existed during the Gilded Age: “We call the years of 1865-1901 the Gilded Age for good reason: It was a time when money trumped ideals, when the hopes of Southern Reconstruction shattered against racism and when wage earners were treated less like human beings than mechanical assets” (11). It was during this time that an increase of anxiety towards inventions began to emerge. Everything began to take shape around the good of the corporation:

“This is a government of the people, by the people, and for the people no longer,” wrote President Rutherford B. Hayes. “It is a government by the corporations, of the corporations, and for the corporations.” Hayes referred to a period in American history from the end of the Civil War through the failure of Reconstruction and beyond to the 20th century. Ruled by industry titans such as Rockefeller, Carnegie, Morgan and Scott, it was satirized by Mark Twain as the Gilded—not Golden—Age, one with just a shiny veneer. (Juskalian 11)
These conditions caused anxiety and gloom amongst a large portion of the American population. It would be easy for writers to conjure up dismal images and end-of-the-world scenarios during a time where life seemed to be getting continually worse for the American majority.

While it would be preferable to believe that these conditions remain confined to America’s past, we seem to be in no better position today. Joseph Stiglitz presents the argument that our present economic situation is reminiscent to that of the Gilded Age, and that we are well on our way to a similar, if not much worse, fallout: “Economists long ago tried to justify the vast inequalities that seemed so troubling in the mid-nineteenth century—inequalities that are but a pale shadow of what we are seeing in America today.” In his article “Of the 1% by the 1% for the 1%,” he discusses the American fascination with the idea of Reaganomics, or trickle-down economics, that is largely promoted by the wealthy, and explains how this economic design will only further separate the wealthy from the poor: “The more divided a society becomes in terms of wealth, the more reluctant the wealthy become to spend money on common needs.” At the beginning of the article, Stiglitz provides the following statistic “The upper 1 percent of Americans are now taking in nearly a quarter of the nation’s income every year. In terms of wealth rather than income, the top 1 percent control 40 percent.” These percentages continue to change to the advantage of the wealthy, and if something is not done to counter this trend, America is quite likely to experience a second Gilded Age.

As the economic growth that marked the beginnings of the Gilded Age began to pick up speed, romanticism began to decline. The decline of romanticism, more-or-less, directly preceded the rise of science fiction as a genre, with the publication of Jules Verne’s *A*
Journey to the Center of the Earth in 1864, and Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea in 1870. According to Floyd Stovall, Verne’s publications may have been contribution to the decline of romantic idealism:

There were three major causes of the decline of idealism in America and three closely related minor causes…. The major causes were the frontier, the Civil War, and the advance of science; the minor causes were the declining authority of the churches, the widening base of public education, and the influence of foreign writers. (376)

Verne’s publications, in addition to those of Wells which would come a bit later, represent both “the rise of science” as well as the “influence of foreign writers” that Stovall credits in part for the decline of romantic idealism. However, Wells would differentiate himself from Verne by latching onto the ubiquitous pessimism of the late nineteenth century: “the pattern of a technological society was established, the advance guard of scientific materialism had appeared, moral certainty was weakened, and the ground was prepared for pessimism” (Stovall 378). This pessimistic attitude would give birth to the dystopian genre, and would inspire the sort of fatalistic ending that continues to be a common trait of contemporary dystopian novels.

It can be argued that H.G Wells is to the dystopia as Thomas More is to the utopia. Certainly there were dystopian sentiments before Wells’ time, but he was the first to organize dystopian thought in a lasting body of work that would inspire and cultivate writers to come after him, all the way up to the present age. Wells has been linked to the dystopian genre since the early twentieth century, but no one really went as far as to suggest that he was the quintessential dystopian writer until Mark Hillegas in his book, The Future as Nightmare:

There is nothing new, of course, in the idea that a relationship exists between H.G. Wells and the anti-utopias of the twentieth century… but none of those who have commented on this relationship have done more than note that certain anti-utopias are counter-Wellsian or that their general scheme is foreshadowed by Wells. (4)
Hillegas aims to take this conception of Wells and further stress his importance to the genre: “Although Wells’s work had various ancestors, it is from him that the writers of anti-utopias learned the uses of this form” (4). Hillegas acknowledges that while certain aspects of anti-utopias to come after Wells may be traced further back in literary history, their ideas are largely rooted in Wellsian themes.

Hillegas goes on to suggest that writers of anti-utopias after Wells mimic more than just his form: “Many of the central as well as peripheral images in the anti-utopias were first generated in Wells’s early scientific romances, chiefly those written in the 1890’s… the relationship between Wells’s writings and the major anti-utopias extends beyond images and form” (5). Not only did the dystopian writers who followed Wells borrow from the imagery and formal elements of his writing, but many early twentieth century writers looked to Wells in terms of philosophical influence as well. Among those shaped by Wells is George Orwell, who credits Wells with profound impact:

Thinking people who were born about the beginning of this century are in some sense Wells’s own creation. How much influence any mere writer has, and especially a “popular” writer whose work takes effect quickly, is questionable, but I doubt whether anyone who was writing books between 1900 and 1920, at any rate in the English language, influenced the young so much. The minds of all of us, and therefore the physical world, would be perceptibly different if Wells never existed. (121)

This lofty praise suggests that Orwell himself is attributing his writing interests and themes to Wells. It is more than likely that Orwell also drew a considerable amount of inspiration from Wells in his dystopian ventures, which in turn went on to inspire the dystopian writers of the late twentieth century. Consequently, contemporary dystopian authors continue to be influenced by Wells.

Around the time that Hillegas was publishing his book in 1967, Wells began to receive more attention for his contributions to the dystopian genre. Today he is accepted as,
if not as the father of the dystopia, then at least as one of its primary influences. An article recently published in Booklist magazine reaffirms this contemporary opinion of Wells and his impact on the dystopian novel: “The dystopian novel, a literary form that imagines (sometimes satirically, sometimes somberly) a future world made even worse than the present one—dates back to 1895 and H.G. Wells’ The Time Machine” (Cart 34). After publishing The Time Machine, Wells continued to look towards the future in his work, such as his novel When the Sleeper Wakes (1899) and his prophetic 1901 essay, Anticipations (Kern 97). Wells had a fascination and talent for imagining and re-imagining the future: “For Wells the most disturbing thought about the future was that man is not the end of all things, and the most fascinating speculation was about what is to come after” (Kern 95). These same curiosities remain a driving force of science fiction today.

Wells’ influence may not be a direct link to those actively writing dystopian science fiction today, however, it can be argued that there are few degrees of separation between Wells and any given contemporary dystopian author. Hillegas explains that because Wells had such a lasting influence on those writers in the generation to immediately follow his, his influence was passed down through those authors even after he had stopped writing:

Wells had this impact on the anti-utopias because of his enormous popularity with the generation reaching maturity in the first decades of the twentieth century. All the major anti-utopians fall roughly into this generation: E.M. Forster was born in 1879, Evgenii Zamyatin in 1884, Aldous Huxley in 1894, C.S. Lewis in 1898, and George Orwell in 1903. (5)

Because Hillegas published this book in 1967, it could be argued that some of the “major” dystopian writers to come after this time are missing from his list; however, these authors would surely be informed by their own predecessors, who in turn were informed by Wells. Frederic Jameson later reiterates this idea in his 1982 essay, “Progress Versus Utopia.” Jameson makes an even larger claim that not only did the dystopian form come from Wells,
but that together with Verne, Wells helped to establish science fiction as a genre: “Whatever its illustrious precursors, it is a commonplace of the history of SF that it emerged, virtually full-blown, with Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, during the second half of the nineteenth century” (149). In any case, most writers who were joining the dystopian forefathers after the earlier half of the twentieth century were, for the most part, riding on the coattails of those before them.

There are a couple of exceptional writers in the later half of the century who succeeded in making the genre their own. For example, Margaret Atwood was the first to infuse her dystopian writing with feminist conceits. And Lois Lowry was one of the first to venture into writing dystopian literature for children with her book *The Giver*. However, even with their unique aim, there are still traces of Wellsian influence in their writing, and they are still presenting their idea in a conservative way. At this point the dystopian form has become, to borrow a word from Guy Debord’s Situationists, “recuperated” by the dominant ideology, and while still thought provoking on some level, it has lost its radical nature; the dystopian novel has become common, and even quite popular.

Tracing Wells’ influence through the past one hundred years of dystopian writing becomes increasingly thought provoking after examining his socio-political beliefs. Wells served as an Executive Committee member of the Fabian Society for two years in the early 1900’s (Pease 157). This is significant because of the ideals of the Society: “The Fabian Society was founded for the purpose of ‘reconstructing society,’ based on the competitive system, ‘in such a manner as to secure the general welfare and happiness’” (Pease 18). The Fabian society takes its name from the ancient Roman dictator Quintus Fabius Maximus, who is known for his delay tactics and war of attrition against Hannibal. This relationship to
Fabius is reflected in a motto which was printed on one of the first tracts produced by the Society: “For the right moment you must wait, as Fabius did most patiently, when warring against Hannibal, though many censured his delays, but when the time comes you must strike hard, as Fabius did, or your waiting will be in vain, and fruitless” (qtd. in Pease 23). The whole idea behind Fabius’ war strategies was to exhaust the opposition until they could be easily defeated. Similarly, the goal of the Society was to recruit as many followers as possible, and to place themselves on as many public committees and in as many public offices as possible, until they simply out-numbered their opposition. This should all be taken into consideration when looking at the history of the dystopian genre and its present literary position because it is likely that Wells’ fiction was heavily grounded in his socio-political goals.

The dystopian novel was more radical in nature at the turn of the twentieth century than at present for two reasons. Firstly, although the lifestyles of those living during the turn of the twentieth century were speeding up they were still much slower than ours are now in terms of communication and stimulation. A second reason is that it was becoming more and more popular at that time to travel by train, which gave people plenty of reading time. But even with both of these factors helping the novel to remain a popular form of entertainment, it was still not considered the preferred medium for spreading political ideas. While Wells was an advocate for social change, he did not expect this social change to come about by means of his fiction alone; he was also quite involved with the Society and wrote a number of political tracts in addition to his novels and stories. His fiction was likely heavily informed by his political goals and aspirations, but this was only one aspect of his approach. The beginnings of the dystopian novel did not so much inspire radical action as encourage other
writers to explore dystopian options, much in the same way that More’s Utopia opened the door to authors like Swift and Bellamy.

Although Wells fathered the dystopian form, his American counterpart would have to be Jack London. London’s *Iron Heel* went to print roughly twelve years after Wells’ *The Time Machine*, and although perhaps not as influential, it still carries tremendous importance. *Iron Heel* marks the beginning of the American dystopian novel, paving the way for books like Kurt Vonnegut’s *Player Piano* in 1952 and Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* in 1953. While twentieth century America saw a smattering of dystopian publications, the trend was much more popular in the United Kingdom during this time with the publications of Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* and *1984*, William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, and Anthony Burgess’ *A Clockwork Orange*, to name a few. The American dystopian novel remained popular, and around the turn of the twenty-first century a peculiar onslaught of young adult dystopian novels emerged, including M.T Anderson’s *Feed* in 2002, Suzanne Weyn’s *The Bar Code Tattoo* in 2004 and its sequel, *Bar Code Rebellion* in 2006, *The Hunger Games* trilogy, by Suzanne Collins, whose first book was published in 2008, and James Dashner’s *The Maze Runner* trilogy, whose first book was published in 2009.

In one sense, it seems logical that similar conditions would breed similar trends in literature. It is true that the 1990’s and early twenty-first century experienced a similar jolt of technological advancement to that at the turn of the twentieth century. However, just because the conditions may appear similar, does not mean that mimicking a semi-radical form from 100 years ago will have any significant effect on today’s reader. This is not to say that older
forms and genres are no longer valuable, but to encourage new ways of utilizing these forms. We should be asking ourselves if it is possible do something new and interesting with dystopian themes. We should be producing and studying texts with content that speaks to our current socio-political situation, and challenges our ways of thinking.

The dystopian novel does not contain the element of speed that is necessary to move a group of people to revolutionary action in the twenty-first century. If ever there was a time that the dystopian novel did function as a vessel for radical change, it was the turn of the twentieth century, and even then it was less of a call to action than it was a means of generating thought. However, the pace at which today’s society communicates has led to a new socio-political context, one in which literature has become for the most part, obsolete in terms of organizing swift political action. Or, at least, this particular genre of literature has become obsolete. Wells was emerging out of a dissimilar context; as previously discussed the 1890s and early 1900s witnessed, perhaps, the most overwhelming progress in technology in history, even in comparison to the present.

If the dystopian novel was not seen to be a successful vessel for radical change during the turn of the twentieth century, then it is highly unlikely that it can be used to spark revolutionary action in the twenty-first century, despite the growing popularity of the dystopian form, and surrounding conversations on how to best to write a dystopian novel. On the contrary, the dystopian novel has become so popular because it allows the reader to experience the sense of rebellion, without actually rebelling; the dystopian novel offers its readers a simulation of rebellion; a self-satisfying catharsis. Instead of participating in revolutionary action and putting oneself at risk of consequence, we can simply read about what would happen if we did try to organize radical change. However, the dystopian novel
generally does not feature an element of hope. So instead of the reader finishing the book and feeling compelled to take political or social action, they read an imaginatively pessimistic warning sign of what will happen if they were to attempt revolution. As a result, the reader is pushed further away from ideas of revolutionary action, and settles comfortably back into their daily routine, thinking that it could be much worse.

Despite the shortcomings of the dystopian novel in terms of inspiring revolutionary action, there are still ways in which dystopian themes can be utilized to address current social and political concerns. We have already discussed the conditions that bred the dystopian form, and it is easy enough to trace a line through literary history hitting on all of the “important” dystopian novels. However, it is important to question why certain dystopian novels have received more attention than others, how they gained lasting popularity, and why they remain so broadly circulated. In his book *The Tourist*, Dean MacCannell gives a split definition of the modern tourist:

> The tourist is an actual person, or real people are actually tourists. At the same time, “the tourist” is one of the best models available for modern-man-in-general. I am equally in “the tourist” in this second, metasociological sense of the term. (1)

To describe the way that a cultural “site” or marker is established, MacCannell uses the example of trend setting or the spreading of fads to explain how cultural sites or productions gain popularity: “If there is any suspicion that mannerisms, affections, clothing or other artifacts were put before the audience for the purpose of initiating a commercially exploitable fad, the fad will fail” (24). People have certain expectations before they encounter a cultural site or production based on the things they have heard or read. In order to have these expectations met, “The medium must appear to be disinterested if it is to be influential, so that any influence that flows from the model can appear to be both spontaneous and based on
genuine feelings” (24). Samuel Delaney, science fiction writer and critic, later adopts these ideas, and uses the analogy of the tourist to specifically examine the “markers” of literature.

Delaney builds on McCannell’s idea of the metasociological tourist by explaining how literature becomes popular through the process of “marking,” in the same way that tourist attractions become popular (Shorter Views). Delaney explains that it is these sorts of “tourist stops” on the map of literature that have resulted in the ever-controversial literary canon: “For a complex mapping of those literary sites, with suggestion as to what to see now and what to see next is what the canon is” (Shorter Views 189). However, as Delaney goes on to point out, paying attention to the most prominent marks in the history of the dystopian genre may not be the most helpful approach in finding its significance in contemporary American society (Shorter Views).

American society today bears striking resemblance to what Delaney introduces as “Junk City.” Delaney introduces this concept by first discussing the binaries given to us by W.H. Auden, which have long been associated with utopian and dystopian fiction: New Jerusalem and Arcadia. New Jerusalem is, “the technological super-city where everything is bright and shiny and clean,” and Arcadia is, “that wonderful place where everyone eats natural foods and no machine larger than one person can fix in an hour is allowed in” (Delaney, Shorter Views 324). He explains that historically there have always been those who favor the idea of New Jerusalem, and those who favor the idea of Arcadia, and depending on which side of the fence one falls, their biggest fear will be the other. This brings us to the “undersides” of these two ideals: Brave New World and Land of the Flies. The idea is that when one is idealistically attracted to Arcadia, they will view New Jerusalem as an option that can only result in Brave New World, or “the city where everything is
regimented and standardized” (Shorter Views 324). Likewise, when one is idealistically attracted to the New Jerusalem, they will view attempts to achieve Arcadia as a regression, which can only result in Land of the Flies, where natural disasters reek havoc on a people that are not scientifically able to defend themselves from such forces as disease and famine (Shorter Views 324). In addition to these images borrowed from Auden, Delaney explains his belief that the post-modern condition has allowed for new images to emerge, such as what he calls, “Junk City”:

Junk City begins, of course, as a working-class suburban phenomenon…. But Junk City really comes into its own at the high-tech moment, when all this invades the home or your own neighborhood: the coffee table with the missing leg propped up by the stack of video-game cartridges. (Shorter Views 325)

Delaney explains that this sort of landscape is not one that Huxley or Orwell could have imagined, because we are dealing with a different sort of techno-industrial society than that of the time in which they were actively writing. Today’s reader can easily picture this new landscape, or “Junk City,” because we are already starting to see these sorts of trends emerge in the world of fashion and home décor. The realization that there are more than four possible outcomes should not end in a realization that there are five, or even six; instead, it should inspire and encourage the writers and thinkers of our current moment to seek out many alternative outcomes. However, in order to do so, it would seem that we must break away from the monotonous habits of the dystopian novel.

In “The Second Science-Fiction Studies Interview,” Delaney uses the terms “bricoleur” and “engineer” to theorize alternative science fiction writing (Shorter Views 315). He credits these terms to early structuralist criticism, and he undoubtedly picked them up from Claude Lévi-Strauss, who first introduced the bircoleur/engineer dichotomy in his book, The Savage Mind. Lévi-Strauss explains the etymology of the term bricoleur: “In its old
sense the verb ‘bricoleur’ applied to ball games and billiards, to hunting, shooting and riding.

It was however always used with reference to some extraneous movement: a course to avoid an obstacle” (16). The term “bricoleur” comes from the French noun “bricolage,” which refers to a construction or creation from a diverse range of materials or sources (“Bricolage”). Lévi-Strauss takes this original connotation, and uses it as a basis to start from in his attempt to describe what the “bricoleur” looks like in the role of an artist:

The “bricoleur” is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks; but unlike the engineer, he does not subordinate each of them to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project. His universe of instruments is closed and the rules of the game are always to make do with “whatever is at hand”… His first practical step is retrospective. He has to turn back to an already existent set made up of tools and materials, to consider or reconsider what it contains and, finally and above all, to engage in a sort of dialogue with it. (17-18)

In contrast, but not in complete opposition to the “bricoleur,” the engineer attempts to conceive of a specific idea that will open up new possibilities: “the engineer is always trying to make his way out of and go beyond the constraints imposed by a particular state of civilization” (Lévi-Strauss 19). Lévi-Strauss goes on to explain that both the engineer and the “bricoleur” suffer from limitation in some way; the engineer suffers from the limitations of imagination and possibility, while the “bricoleur” is limited by accessibility. And while the two are certainly different, there is some overlap in their technique (21).

In true “bricoleur” fashion, Delaney builds upon these pre-existing terms to differentiate between the ways that people go about constructing (or deconstructing) a story or novel: “The difference between the bricoleur and the engineer is not just a difference in scale and style. There’s also a difference in the movement of the thinking” (Delaney, Shorter Views 331). Delaney is applying these terms to the study of science fiction specifically, and explains how each type presents political issues in their writing. He begins by describing the
bricoleur: “The *bricoleur* starts with a local problem, then looks around among existing materials for things to fix it with, moving on to more complex solutions only when the simplest ones are clearly not working as well as they should” (Delaney, *Shorter Views* 331). The bricoleur is a sort of scavenger, capable of creating something new from the scraps of the old, assembling a decoupage of materials that alone seem useless, but when used in complement to one another, can be proven quite the opposite.

On the other side of the spectrum, is the engineer who is generally more concerned with political principle, and has a more calculated approach:

The engineer doesn’t really feel she’s started to work, however, until she’s got an overarching principle to apply to the solution of the problem, which she then implements as carefully and accurately as possible by precise technical means, moving in to take care of finer and finer problematic details— until, hopefully, principle wholly absorbs problem. (Delaney, *Shorter Views* 331)

Conceptualizing these different approaches to science fiction writing in terms of Lévi-Strauss’ “bricoleur”/engineer dichotomy, Delaney gives the reader a way to situate what they have read, and opens the door to discussion of how both of these approaches speak to our current moment. Both the bricoleur and the engineer have at one time or another proven more-or-less beneficial to the objectives of science fiction writing. Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut, Don DeLillo, and Jonathan Lethem could all be considered science fiction bricoleurs. In looking at the best-seller lists of the past few years, it becomes apparent that the engineer is currently trumping the bricoleur in terms of sales. However, it could be argued that the science fiction or dystopian novels produced by the engineer have become formulaic; the specifics of the plot and characters change from novel to novel, but the conceit remains relatively similar. In today’s late-capitalist America, which bears striking resemblance to Delaney’s “Junk City,” it seems likely that the tendencies of the bricoleur, who remains in a continual state of adaptation, might have their advantages over those of the
engineer in terms of generating political and cultural insight.

Contemporary American society is inundated and fragmented by excessive imagery that allows for a multitude of influences to inform our work, whether consciously or unconsciously. Because of the accelerated pace at which we communicate and consume (both information and commodities) in comparison to previous generations, we are pulling information from numerous places at once, not always realizing exactly where it may be coming from: “This is the way the web of influence works, passing in and out of the genre, crossing national and language boundaries and returning” (Delaney, The Jewel-Hinged Jaw 19). Once we realize that such differences exist, it becomes easier to distinguish literature which regards itself as a mosaic of an idea that is informed by several fields of study, from literature which holds fast to one particularity, often sacrificing discovery for determination.
CHAPTER 2

M.T. ANDERSON’S FEED AND THE QUANDARY OF FATALISM

While the dystopian novel has remained a popular form since its introduction, it has flourished during the past couple of decades, specifically amongst the young adult demographic. As discussed in the previous chapter, it is possible that the anxieties common to our current late-capitalist moment are similar to the anxieties that inspired some of the first dystopian novels. Michael Cart discusses this trend in an article that was recently published in *Booklist* magazine: “One of the most interesting trends in recent speculative fiction has been the continuing spate of dystopian and post apocalyptic novels that have become a staple of young-adult fiction” (34). Included in this boom of dystopian young adult science fiction is M. T. Anderson’s *Feed* (2002). *Feed* was written towards the beginning of the recent influx of young adult dystopia. The popularity of the young adult dystopian novel has grown quite rapidly and shows no sign of slowing, with the popularity of books like *Feed, The Hunger Games* series, and *The Maze Runner* series. While these books all feature new characters and plots, they are all, more-or-less, echoes of their forefathers. While this type of novel has proven quite popular, it is through this popularity that the dystopian novel has become a conservative form, incapable of promoting social or political change.

Anderson’s *Feed* functions as both a critique of present American lifestyles and a fatalistic warning of the future. The novel is set in future America and features a high-school boy named Titus, his girlfriend Violet, and their friends and families. In this futuristic world people have computer feeds surgically implanted in their brains, drive flying cars, and take
weekend trips to the moon. Early into the novel it becomes apparent that Titus is bored with his life and his friends. However, this changes when he meets Violet, a quirky girl who sees the world differently from his other friends. Towards the beginning of the novel, while on a group trip to the moon, Titus and his friends are attacked by a hacker and “naysayer of the worst kind” (Anderson 46). The attack causes damage to their feeds, and Titus and his friends spend the next few days in the hospital feeling lost and disconnected without their feeds. This event marks the beginning of Titus’ questioning the benevolence of the feed. After the attack, Titus spends the remainder of the novel equivocating over the positive and negative aspects of life with the feed.

Violet and her father are the only characters in the novel to resist the feed, and to question its effects on humanity. Because of finances and uncertainty regarding the moral implications of the feed, Violet’s parents did not have her feed put in at the usual age. This has a significant effect on Violet, and prevents her from recovering from the attack as the other characters do. Violet’s differences are the primary reason that Titus is attracted to her, but these same differences quickly make their relationship a difficult one; Violet’s oddities begin to upset Titus’ friends, and soon Titus finds himself choosing between Violet, his other friends and the ideologies that each represent. The later half of the novel follows the rapid deterioration of Violet’s health, which culminates in her death. In the end Titus is left alone, confused, and beyond repair.

Anderson presents a consistently pessimistic vision of the future in *Feed*. While he addresses many areas of concern throughout the novel, he specifically targets apathetic youth, the disintegration of both language and social relationships, and the infiltration of the media in human life. Returning to the engineer/bricoleur dichotomy, Anderson’s work in
Feed is certainly that of the engineer. He begins with a specific goal, and rather than allowing his work to access influences naturally, he invents the necessary story line and characters to convey his message. Anderson is not alone in this approach; in fact, most popular dystopian novels have been written in this way. The problem with engineering a dystopian novel is that the determination to arrive at the preconceived conclusion will often deprive the work of its full potential.

Feed was originally introduced to the market as a young adult novel, though it has found a place in a much broader range of audiences than the young adults for which it was originally intended. Anderson claims that he chose to gear the book towards adolescents, in order to present complex ideas about our present late-capitalist moment to a younger audience, encouraging awareness at an earlier age: “Ultimately in writing Feed, I wanted to say to kids who are already doubting what they see around them, ‘You already think in ways I’ll never be capable of, and are dreaming of things I can’t conceive of. Keep it up. We’re counting on you’” (Prince 63). While this is an admirable goal, it is a bit ironic considering the negative portrayal of teens throughout the novel. Of all of the teenagers mentioned in the book, the only character who seems to be discussed in a positive way is Violet. Anderson utilizes the other teenagers in the book to pick apart what he feels is wrong or regrettable about teens in contemporary society. He says as much in an interview about how he prepared for the writing of Feed:

I read entirely based on what I’m writing. I’m very suggestible, so I tend to conform my style somewhat to what I’m reading at the moment. That means I have to be careful in selecting my books. To catch the right vibe when I was writing Feed, I ingested a lot of moronic slicks each day before writing: Seventeen, Maxim, Teen Vogue—so that I’d naturally write like a dumb-ass hipster. (Prince 62)
This attitude may seem counterintuitive to Anderson’s previous statements about targeting teenagers with the belief that they are capable of making a change; however, he seems to be implying that because today’s teens will one day be running things, they need to learn to fulfill their potential. This becomes problematic because Anderson assigns his own personal beliefs as to what that potential is, to define whether or not young people are intelligent.

Violet is portrayed as an intelligent character because she rejects the feed and is generally old-fashioned in nature. Judging from Anderson’s commentary on the novel, Violet acts as a sort of surrogate for Anderson’s own values. The irony here is that Anderson’s “progressive” character is desperately trying to regress throughout the novel. Instead of trying to utilize the feed in interesting ways, Violet is continually trying to outwit the feed, and revert to the way of life that came before the feed. She is a conservative presence in a progressive world. She is also the hero of Anderson’s novel, and the presence in the story whom he would have his readers emulate.

Anderson’s critique of the American youth permeates the novel as one of its dominant themes; aside from Violet Durn, all of the young characters featured in the book are depicted as apathetic, naïve, and helpless against the influence of their feeds. One of the most noticeable specific critiques of youth in the novel is the mocking of their vernacular. Anderson draws a clear correlation between the build up of technology and what he believes to be the “break down” of language in this novel. A lot of the language used in Feed mimics the text-lingo used by American youth at present. Some commonly used abbreviations and acronyms among American youth are: lol (laugh out loud), ttyl (talk to you later) and brb (be right back); in reflection of this, the characters from Feed use terms such as: unit, mal/malfunction, fugue, null, lo-grav or meg. It is true that slang words like these are easily
picked up by advertisers, and then appropriated for use in commercials, television programs, films, or podcasts. In this same way, we receive a lot of the language we use from slang or phrases that are invented by advertisers. It is also true that these phrases or slang words tend to move in and out of style much in the same way that clothing or haircuts go in and out of style. In this way, language becomes consumable, words and phrases become commodities. However, this is not a phenomenon brought on by technological development, and language is not “breaking down” as Anderson suggests; language is evolving. It is likely that the quickening pace of technological advancement is having an effect on the speed at which our language evolves, but it is not the solitary cause of a shift or change in language.

The most clearly articulated critique of language in this novel is when the characters talk about an English-to-English dictionary that they can access on their feed to look up words like “suppuration” that are no longer used. Anderson uses this analogy to criticize the vernacular of the American youth. However, this English-to-English dictionary sounds strikingly familiar to what we presently know as a thesaurus. What Anderson regards as the destruction of the English language is actually just a natural evolutionary process that has been going on for centuries. And while Anderson would likely agree that the English language has evolved over time, he seems to have a particular problem with the effect that advertizing is having on contemporary slang. A majority of the vocabulary used in *Feed* is made up of shortened words and they tend to talk as if constantly reciting lines form commercials. For example, Titus makes the following observation about Quendy while at a party: “Usually Quendy is just a broken, little economy model of Calista” (Anderson 25). The way Titus describes Quendy it would seem that he was describing a car; here Titus is using the language of advertising to talk about his friends. These are just a couple of
examples of how Anderson’s narrative attempts to show the reader that much of our “original” slang and phrases have been spoon fed to us by advertising companies. He points out that advertising survives by appropriating the language of the people, and by simultaneously introducing new language to the people. However, while Anderson is trying to slight the youth by suggesting that they have lost their ability to communicate and that they are incapable of originality, he ends up proving himself wrong. Titus may speak primarily in language he picks up from the feed, but he is still able to generate meaningful metaphors and think creatively. In fact, Violet is initially attracted for his metaphorical speech and ability to think deeply.

Anderson sees language as one small aspect contributing to our paralysis as a society, and our collective inability to break free of the dominant ideology. And many of his reviewers agree with Anderson’s pessimistic view of language in this novel. Lauren Adams wrote the following in a book review of *Feed*: “Anderson’s hand is light throughout; his evocation of the death of language is as hilarious as it is frightening” (564). To say that Anderson does a good job of capturing the “death of language” is to insinuate that the English language is in danger of dying. While there are dead languages, English is so widely used that it is much more likely that it is evolving rather than dying. Critiques insinuating that these changes mark the beginning of the death of the English language are fueled by a fear of change, and a desire to preserve a familiar ideology.

In addition to critiquing contemporary vernacular, Anderson uses the social relationships in *Feed* to parody the superficiality of American society. Throughout the book Titus and his friends are constantly surrounding each other, but rarely present. When they throw parties, they gather together, only to zone out on the feed: “I looked around me.
Everyone was nodding their heads to the music, or had their eyes just blank with the feedcast.

It was just a party. Nothing but a party” (Anderson 83). Here Anderson is merely exaggerating grievances with American youth of the present. He is repeating the common critique that children today spend too much time on computers and playing video games, and that this sort of behavior will lead to a decline in social skills. In *Nation of Rebels*, by Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter, the argument is made that we are beyond recovering from the negative effects of technology and consumerism: “We live in a world of total ideology, in which we are completely alienated from our essential nature” (5). Anderson shares this sentiment in his writing. His characters all sit at parties but no one talks to each other and then when they leave the feed informs them of what they may have missed at the party. The only way that these characters know how to speak to each other, and to communicate with each other, is through the language that they have been given by the feed. Everything about their personalities and their outward appearance is an amalgam imagery they have absorbed from the feed. In a lot of ways it seems as though these friendships only exist as constructs, or simulations. However, Anderson’s anxiety about this issue is not unique. People have been concerned about the effect technology and consumerism might have on children for years.

During the past few years there has been an increase of attention and study focusing on how advertising specifically affects children; authors like Harry Flood in his essay “Manufacturing Desire” and Douglas Rushkoff in his essay “Which One of These Sneakers is Me?” discuss how advertisers are beginning to market children at earlier and earlier ages, to more quickly interpolate them into the capitalist mentality. Anderson reiterates these arguments through his portrayal of the reliance that his characters develop on their feeds.
Titus and his friends become so reliant upon their feeds that an absence of the feed leaves them socially paralyzed and depressed:

I missed the feed. I don’t know when they first had feeds. Like maybe, fifty or a hundred years ago. Before that, they had to use their hands and their eyes. Computers were all outside the body. They carried them around outside of them in their hands, like if you carried your lungs in a briefcase and opened it to breathe. (Anderson 47)

The idea of not having 24 hour access to the feed is completely foreign to these kids; they are dumbfounded by the idea of having to live without their live feed, much in the same way that most Americans are becoming more and more reliant on their cell phones and internet-access, sometimes to the point of addiction. The feed is integral to their lives, and without it, they have trouble communicating with one another and making sense of the world around them. While there are some adult characters in Feed, the novel is centered on the critique of American youth.

Anderson’s decision to chose the young adult demographic as his focal point reflects the American tendency to target youth issues. In his book The Scapegoat Generation, Mike Males debunks the idea that contemporary American youth are somehow worse behaved than the youth of previous generations: “Modern American hostility against adolescents has become so extreme compared to that of other societies that the most destructive deceptions easily achieve political and media currency” (16). Males argues that statistics portraying teen sex, drug use, and violence have been manipulated since the early 1980s to suggest that behavioral problems in teens are increasing:

By a consensus of major indexes, youth of the early 1980’s were the best educated and healthiest ever, experiencing long-term declines in nearly all problem behaviors and enjoying the best future prospects and longest life expectancies of any in history. It was a singularly odd time for professionals, authorities, and the media to suddenly proclaim an “epidemic” of youth crisis. Considerable evidence has been amassed that agency and industry self-interest, not the true conditions of teenagers, were the real motivators. (29)
This “industry self-interest” refers to companies that create a need for a product, rather than responding to pre-existing needs or wants. Convincing parents that their children are in need of behavior-modifying products or counseling both creates a need, and displaces responsibility. Whenever something goes wrong, the unruly youth become a convenient group to blame. Males later shows that only after the rise of these campaigns did the behaviors in question begin to increase among teens; this correlation suggests that the campaigns themselves may have contributed to the increase in illegal activity and general debauchery.

Now, almost thirty years later, it is possible that this same sort of manipulation is occurring with campaigns against advertising to children. It is true that advertisers have begun to target children and their social groups; however, the same is true of adults. Capitalism relies on people having friends, because it helps tremendously in splitting people into market groups, no matter what age. However, the idea that this goes unnoticed by the American populace, as Anderson suggests with his characters in *Feed*, is simply not true. Violet is the only one amongst her peers that seems to notice or care:

> Everything we’ve grown up with—the stories on the feed, the games, all of that—it’s all streamlining our personalities so we’re easier to sell to. I mean, they do these demographic studies that divide everyone up into a few personality types, and then you get ads based on what you’re supposedly like. They try to figure out who you are, and to make you conform to one of their types for easy marketing. (97)

What Violet describes in this passage is not something that will start happening in the future of American society; it is already taking place, and awareness is not as uncommon as Anderson suggests. Just as Males suggests that teen campaigns increased rapidly in popularity due to hidden political agendas, perhaps the recent outcry against advertising to children has more to do with a general anxiety caused by advertising than an actual concern
for children specifically. Adults are uncomfortable with the ways that advertising affects their own lives, but may feel that an argument focusing on advertising’s negative influence on the youth may be more successful at decreasing the amount of advertisement.

The tendency for older generations to critique the behavior of younger generations is nothing new. Anderson is certainly not alone in his annoyance with current language trends and a seemingly apathetic youth, but he seems unaware that his annoyance is a traditional conservative stance that is fueled by an anxiety of the future and a skepticism of progression; through the consistently pessimistic parodies throughout Feed, Anderson suggests that the youth of today are somehow reaching a new level of ineptness, when in reality he is just re-stating a conservative argument that has existed for years. This sort of misunderstanding fosters conservative writing, which is presented, marketed, and critiqued as something it is not: revolutionary.

Aside from his critique of American youth, Anderson also touches on the current anxiety that many Americans feel over the issue of data mining, and the invasiveness of processes used to obtain consumer information. This issue is most clearly addressed during Violet and Titus’ trip to the mall, when they run around scanning random items to confuse their feeds:

> Everything we’ve grown up with— the stories on the feed, the games, all of that— it’s all streamlining our personalities so we’re easier to sell to. I mean, they do these demographic studies that divide everyone up into a few personality types, and then you get ads based on what you’re supposedly like. They try to figure out who you are and make you conform to one of their types for easy marketing. (Anderson 97)

Presently, advertising agencies rely on club cards and other incentive programs to obtain data from customers. Every time someone uses a club card at a grocery store, what he or she purchases is reported. Individual purchasing patterns are compiled and compared. This data
is then analyzed to identify dominant purchasing patterns, which are in turn used to generate new advertisements, specifically engineered according to reported product interest. In traditional dystopian form, *Feed* takes this concept of data mining further, by introducing an exaggerated data mining system that is surgically implanted in the human brain. While we have not yet reached this point of technological advancement, we are possibly headed in this direction.

In an article from *Brandweek*, Brian Morrissey discusses recent research in the field of data mining, which shows that advertising agencies are currently working on mastering the art of tapping into social networks:

> The online social networking universe presents a tempting pool of data for advertisers to use in order to improve their targeting techniques. The rise of Facebook and other social destinations means that users are revealing their connections, their influences and tastes like never before. Information like this is obviously a potential gold mine for marketers. (10)

Right now all that is prevents market researchers from taking complete advantage of the information contained in these sites is the issue of privacy. However, it is only a matter of time until market researchers find a way around these blocks. Facebook, the popular contemporary networking site, has recently released news that suggests they may soon be going public:

> They are nearly at 500 shareholders, which is generally when companies have more than 500 shareholders, they’re required to make significant financial disclosures— though they can choose to remain private and keep their stock from trading publicly. However, most companies facing mandatory disclosures opt to go public. (Cowley)

The result of Facebook being a publicly traded company is that their information will also go public. This information is appealing to market researchers, because they will be able to study trends with considerably less effort than was required before; all of the information they need has already been conveniently gathered and separated into target markets. The
assumption is that once advertisers are able to freely access whatever information they want, we can expect the pace of trends to increase drastically, as is demonstrated in *Feed.* However, while Anderson brings up the troubling aspects of this issue, he offers no solution. He portrays a very fatalistic view of the future.

*Feed* contains the same dual-sided view of capitalist/anti-capitalist mentalities as Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle.* In the novel, Anderson portrays a ‘future’ in which we have allowed technology too much ground:

> 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. (48-49)

While the world depicted in *Feed* is in hopeless ruin, Anderson seems to be writing with the notion that we are still, at this point, capable of breaking free from the dominant ideology through spreading awareness of the influence of advertising and the media; he insinuates that we must not let our current situation continue to deteriorate, for fear that we end like the characters of *Feed.* Debord held the same sort of view; however, he refers to the dominant ideology as “the spectacle.” Debord describes the spectacle as “both the result and the project of the existing mode of production. It is not a supplement to the real world, an additional decoration. It is the heart of the unrealism of the real society” (6). In this book, Debord suggests that we are perpetuating spectacular society by supporting it and emulating it at once; he explains that the spectacle mirrors our behaviors, and we mirror the behavior of the spectacle. In the case of *Feed,* the spectacle has completely taken over every aspect of living. *Society of the Spectacle* was first published in English in 1970, and while it was considerably insightful for its time, the idea of a dual-sided reality is a dated one.
The majority of Anderson’s novel is dominated by a dual-sided Debordian view of society, although he does admittedly graze the surface of more recent philosophical thought, such as that of Debord’s successor, Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard took Debord’s dual-sided idea of reality one-step further: “We are no longer in the society of the spectacle, of which the Situationists spoke, nor in the specific kinds of alienation and repression that it implied” (30). Baudrillard explains that there is no longer a clear-cut distinction between reality and the “spectacle.” Instead, society has become so inundated by media that reality and the “spectacle” have dissolved into one another, resulting in what Baudrillard refers to as “hyperreality.” However, while some may respond to this realization in panic, Baudrillard does not believe this irreversible blending to be the end of the world, and warns against the temptation to indulge in pessimism:

But one must watch out for the negative turn that discourse imposes: it is a question neither of disease nor of viral infection. One must think instead of the media as if they were, in outer orbit, a kind of genetic code that directs the mutation of the real into the hyperreal. (30)

Baudrillard also introduces the idea that our constructed realities disable us to escape from under the layers of constructed existence to take part in any truly unique or original experience. To his credit, Anderson does allude to these ideas in his novel. Unfortunately he uses these theories as a means to his pessimistic end.

Anderson attempts to present Baudrillard’s theories in terms that his young adult readers can understand, but in doing so he errs in placing too strong an emphasis on the negative possibilities. This inability to experience new or unique happenings is first addressed towards the beginning of the book, when Titus is thinking about how great it is to be with a group of friends on the moon: “Everyone is leaning toward each other and people are laughing and they’re chatting, and things are great, and it’s just like in a commercial for
jeans, or something with nougat” (Baudrillard 4). Titus is enjoying this moment because it reminds him of a commercial; he is reminiscent of a moment that he never lived himself, a moment that he merely watched other people simulate. This is ironic because he prefaces this comment by saying that he feels sorry for people who have to travel alone when really it could be argued that he is just as alone as the people he is feeling sorry for. Anderson does not necessarily directly misrepresent the idea of hyperreality, but he does choose to use these ideas to compliment the novel’s pessimistic end.

Baudrillard’s ideas have significantly influenced post-structuralist theory and semiotics. However, Anderson does not necessarily accomplish anything that advances Baudrillard’s work; he concentrates too heavily on theories of the past by revisiting theoretical standpoints that have already been exhausted. In his book, From Utopia to Apocalypse, Peter Paik explains the stasis that can be a symptom of allowing post-structuralist theory too heavy an influence:

Poststructuralist and deconstructionist theory thus tends to act as a factor reinforcing the existing order by reducing dissent to a safely foredoomed possibility rather than a shattering intervention that imposes ineluctable duties and forced choices in clearing the way for the establishment of a new law and the foundation of a new order. (10)

The theoretical elements of Feed fit this description, making it a conservative novel. Novels like Feed condition society to read about characters whose attempts at radical change are met with disastrous consequence. Through these novels the reader is conditioned to settle into the role of onlooker, happy to let fictional characters play out their ideas of radical political change. While the authorial intent of many dystopian novels and stories has been stated to inspire or move the reader to action, this approach proves to be ultimately impotent.

It has been suggested by Elizabeth Bullen and Elizabeth Parsons in their article, “Dystopian Visions of Global Capitalism,” that Anderson chose to set the novel in a space
and time not our own, in order to have more creative license in his critique of the present:

“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” (2). This is one of the elements of *Feed* that make it a traditional dystopian novel. *Feed*, rather than a trajectory of what could happen in the future, is an exaggerated critique of the way that we are currently living our lives. The feed itself closely resembles an exaggerated version of many of the social networks that we utilize at present. The only real difference is that whereas we currently operate on external computers, it is surgically implanted in the human brain. From the way that the feed is described in the book, it appears to function as a television, computer and cell phone all in one; it is the ultimate form of convenience and streamlining. The feed takes note of what its owner purchases, and then presents said owner with a personalized collage of advertisements throughout the day. These elements of the novel make it easily marketable as a science fiction or “futuristic” novel. However, while this might seem like a terrifying idea, many Americans of the middle and upper classes are essentially already operating under this sort of system. The only tangible differences are that we are not yet physically engineered to access these technologies from our own heads, and that Anderson’s fictional society is progressing at a slightly faster pace. We are already relying on search engines like Google and Bing to supplement our stored knowledge and we are already accustomed to sorting through several advertisements each day. We are living lifestyles quite similar to those described in *Feed*, just less efficiently.

In his haste to criticize America’s reliance on technology, and concentrating so painstakingly on denouncing technology, Anderson fails to acknowledge the good that has also come from technological advancement. Returning to W.H. Auden’s binaries, *Feed* is an
example of the expressed fear of Brave New World, and the glorification of Arcadia. But whether Anderson is pro-New Jerusalem or pro-Arcadia makes no difference. What is important, and what makes his novel so conventional, is that he subscribes to either one. *Feed* contains all of the familiar elements of the traditional dystopian novel, despite the reviews that it has received proclaiming its ingenuity. It is not necessarily that Anderson has done anything wrong; it is simply that he has done nothing new. A similar rapid pace of technological development is what inspired much of H.G. Wells’ writing over one hundred years ago: “Several of his romances are warnings of what may happen if technological development gets out of hand, and others deal with the destruction of civilization by cosmic catastrophe” (qtd. in Hillegas 17). *Feed* does not accomplish anything that has not already been accomplished, and perhaps more effectively accomplished, by books like *The Time Machine* (1895), *Iron Heel* (1907), and *Brave New World* (1932). This is not to say that the genre is incapable of functioning as a form of entertainment for contemporary readers, but that there is little social or political value to a traditional dystopian novel, *Feed* or any other, in contemporary American society. In fact, novels such as *Feed* work to support the dominant ideology, not to refute it.

Anderson’s pessimistic warning is arguably to that of Ted Kaczynski in his treatise, *Industrial Society and its Future* (1995). While Kaczynski’s intentions may be more confrontational than Anderson’s, their works are similarly narrow in scope, and suggest that the only possible outcome of technological advancement is the demise of humanity. Kaczynski’s treatise begins by drawing attention to all of the problems with modern society:

> Among the abnormal conditions present in modern industrial society are excessive density of population, isolation of man from nature, excessive rapidity of social change and the breakdown of natural small-scale communities such as the extended family, the village or the tribe. (47)
Kaczynski identifies industrialism as the direct root of all of modern man’s problems. He views violent revolution, resulting in a return to primitivism, as the only possible solution to capitalism. Kaczynski, like Anderson, believes that to continue down the path of late-capitalism can only result in the ruin, and eventual extinction, of mankind. I do not mean to equate Anderson’s *Feed* to Kaczynski’s *Industrial Society and its Future* in terms of approach, but rather to point out that the two employ similar reasoning. Both authors imply that there is only one possible outcome of the capitalist society, and that is the destruction of humanity; however, Kaczynski is bolder in his proclamations:

> Thus science marches on blindly, without regard to the real welfare of the human race or to any other standard, obedient only to the psychological needs of the scientists and of the government officials and corporation executives who provide the funds for research. (92)

In contrast to Kurzweil’s optimistic view of technology, Kaczynski proceeds to explain that the good and bad aspects of technology cannot be separated from one another, and that the benefits of science are not worth the destruction that it will ultimately cause. Kaczynski insists that there is only one possible outcome of a technological society.

The world that Anderson creates in *Feed* is the sort of world that Kaczynski warns against in his manifesto. Anderson is less blatant in his implications; however, both suggest that regressing technologically is the only way to escape demise. Both authors refuse to acknowledge the positive possibilities of technological advance. The main difference between the two is that Kaczynski was willing to resort to violence himself, whereas Anderson’s intention is to inspire revolutionary desire within America’s youth; however, revolution seldom happens peacefully, and in order to be successful, those who Anderson wishes to inspire would likely have to resort to violent or destructive means.
Anderson has no trouble bringing all of the negatives facets of capitalism to the surface, and rather than offering a solution, he leaves his readers with little hope. Violet tries to fight against the hegemony of capitalism, and is defeated. Neither one of Violet’s parents had the feed growing up, and because of their wariness regarding the nature of the feed, they decide not to have Violet’s feed installed at the usual age. They waited until Violet was seven years old. This failure to conform, coupled with the terrorist attack from the beginning of the novel, ends up causing Violet’s health to deteriorate throughout the novel, and ultimately her death. Her attempted rebellion against the feed, and thereby the dominant ideology that “encourages” the use of the feed, results in her death. Violet’s father shares with Titus his belief that the combination of a late installation of the feed, and his neglect to opt for the more expensive model were contributing factors to Violet’s health issues:

“They say,” he told me, “that it was the late installation that made it dangerous. The brain was already wired to operate on its own. The feed installation was nonstandard. They have also told me that if I had bought a better model, perhaps it would have been more adaptable.” (Anderson 289)

Because Violet’s parents hesitated in having her feed installed, and because Violet intentionally tries to resist the feed, those who have the power to save her refuse to do so. This serves as an example to others who might consider rebelling against the dominant ideology, including Anderson’s readers. Her death also leaves Titus in a state of hopelessness, which is where the novel ends. In this way her rebellion works to reinforce the ideals she spent her life so passionately battling against. People will hear about how she died, and even if they are fundamentally against the feed, they will see that it is in their best interest to not question the status quo. However, this is an unnecessary point to make considering that in the world of the feed, society—and humanity itself—is finished. Regardless of the outcome of rebellion, the world depicted in Feed is clearly facing its end.
In the same way that Violet tries to live above the control of the feed, many Americans attempt to live above the influence of the consumer lifestyle. However, to completely escape, one has to almost fully disconnect from society. This causes the once-simple aspects of living to become much more complex, and a feeling of complete isolation from the rest of the world. Many people who attempt to lead alternative lifestyles outside of the influence of consumerism eventually find it too difficult and return to the comforts of mainstream society. This desire to break free from the dominant ideology, combined with the unwillingness to give up the comforts of the capitalist lifestyle, is likely the reason novels like *Feed* are so popular.

When people become disgusted with the mentalities and values of the dominant culture, they will often seek to rebel or refute society by joining some kind of counterculture. Heath and Potter discuss the desire to reject society: “Since the entire culture is nothing but a system of ideology, the only way to liberate oneself and others is to resist the culture in its entirety. This is where the idea of counterculture comes from” (7). However, most people are unaware that these countercultures are reifying the very ideologies they stand against. Perhaps the most insightful part of *Feed* is when this issue is briefly addressed. One day, out of boredom, Titus and his friends are trying to “scam” the Coca-Cola company:

> There was this promotion, where if you talked about the great taste of Coca-Cola to your friends like a thousand times, you got a free six-pack of it, so we decided to take them for some meg ride by all getting together and being like, Coke, Coke, Coke, Coke, Coke for about three hours so we’d get a year’s supply. (Anderson 158)

What Anderson may have been trying to point out was the false sense of satisfaction that many Americans, particularly the youth, feel when they believe they have successfully rebelled against capitalist culture. However, it is a combination of that satisfied feeling, and an ignorance of how deeply capitalism is rooted in American mentalities, that prevents any
real progress from being made. Titus and his friends think that they will be taking Coca-Cola
for a “meg ride” if they cheat the system to get a year’s supply of free Coke. However, this
act of rebellion ultimately results in the group becoming thirsty, and leaving to purchase
some Coca-Cola. Here, Anderson’s point is reminiscent of the sentiments expressed in the
essay “On the Poverty of Student Life,” written by the members of Situationist International
and the students of Strasbourg University, in 1966. This essay explains the mentality of the
student who, seeing himself at a financial disadvantage, decides to glamorize his poverty by
adopting a pseudo-bohemian lifestyle. In this case what the student views as his rejection of
society is actually his acceptance of his unfortunate financial situation. Yet, he continues to
spend his money on every “cultural” commodity he can find:

> In an era when *art is dead* he remains the most loyal patron of the theaters and
film clubs and the most avid consumer of the packaged fragments of its preserved
corpse displayed in the cultural supermarkets. Consuming unreservedly and
uncritically, he is in his element. If the ‘Culture Centers’ didn’t exist, the student
would have invented them. He is a perfect example of all the platitudes of
American market research: a conspicuous consumer, conditioned by advertising
into fervently divergent attitudes toward products that are identical in their nullity.
(Situationist International, “On the Poverty of Student Life”)

These behaviors are brought on by the desire to rebel, but in reality, the dominant ideology
relies on people to behave in such ways. For years now, people have been supporting ideals
that they claim to be against. Ironically, this critique can be turned upon *Feed* itself.

> We have come to the point where countercultural groups have become fashionable.
Countercultures no longer serve as a means of rebelling against the dominant ideology; they
have been recuperated by the dominant ideology and are now being sold as commodities.
The distinction of “counterculture” may as well be synonymous with “niche market.” By
dividing ourselves into distinct countercultural sects, we are just making ourselves easier to
target: “The market obviously does an extremely good job at responding to consumer
demand for anticonsumerist products and literature” (Heath and Potter 98). Advertisers and market researchers have noticed the trend in “anticonsumerist” products, and have adapted to these demands: “The critique of society has been one of the most powerful forces driving consumerism for the past forty years” (Heath and Potter 98-99). The argument here is that in spite of our attempts to dismantle the dominant ideology, we have largely helped it to grow. For example, Anderson argues that he is using the capitalist system as a means to perpetuate his ideas and inspire awareness and curiosity in his readers “Because that’s the one thing the media does not encourage: a real sense of curiosity” (Prince 3). However, it could be argued that Anderson publishing and selling a novel reflecting anti-capitalistic sentiments is hypocritical.

The dystopian novel—specifically those that express anti-consumer or anti-capitalist themes—have become recuperated by the dominant ideology. Recuperation here is used in the Situationist sense: “The word recuperate, which means recover: the activity of a society as it attempts to obtain possession of that which negates it” (Situationist International). The dominant ideology maintains its dominance by recognizing the dystopian novel as a possible threat, and recruiting it as a tool of its own, therefore redirecting the initial aim of the novel; by the time any sort of revolutionary idea gains enough popularity to be successful, it has already been recuperated by the dominant ideology, and therefore rendered useless as a revolutionary tool. Often times the most popular literary genres will reflect and uphold the dominant ideology of their time: “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: the class which is the material force of society is at the same time the ruling intellectual force” (Situationist International). This suggests that popular literature or philosophy at any given time is likely a reflection of the dominant ideology, regardless of its
appearance as something else. The reason the dystopian novel has remained a popular item over the course of the last century is because it is in accordance with the dominant ideology.

Anderson argues that it is important to make sure that the youth of America are aware of how their lives are affected by consumerism, but he never specifies why. Anderson intended this novel to awaken a generation of teens who are under the capitalist spell. However, his tone and message are condescendingly conservative, and the book itself is a traditional dystopian novel that is receiving good reviews because the dystopian form has aligned itself with the dominant ideology. When considering the previously mentioned engineer/bricoleur comparison, the traditional dystopian novel stems from an engineering approach. Or, at least historically, dystopian novels written by “engineers” have gained more popularity than those attempts by the “bricoleur.” The consequence of allowing the genre to idle in its own tradition has caused an increase in what Delaney refers to as “needless tragedy”:

If SF is affirmative, it is not through any obligatory happy ending, but rather through the breadth of vision it affords, through complex interweave of these multiple visions of human origins and destinations. Certainly such breadth of vision does not abolish tragedy. But it does make a little rarer the particular needless tragedy that comes from a certain type of narrow-mindedness. (The Jewel-Hinged Jaw 27)

*Feed* is just one example of many contemporary dystopias that include this “needless tragedy.” And while Delaney specifically scolds the unnecessary excess of tragedy, the same could be said of unrealistic optimism.

There are a number of articles that have been written on the intricacies of the dystopian genre that suggest ways in which to successfully inspire radical action from readers. One such suggestion can be found in Mark Decker’s essay “Politicized Dystopia and Biomedical Imaginaries,” where he argues; “A politicized dystopia would need to have
utopian potential in order for it to motivate people to political action. After all, convincing people that they are doomed no matter what they do will probably not get them to turn out at the polls” (61). While it may be true that a purely pessimistic dystopian novel is incapable of inspiring readers to action, it does not mean that the only ingredient missing is a splash of hope. Plenty of utopian novels, some written well before the dystopian split, feature Decker’s suggested amalgam of two parts pessimism one part hope, and were no more successful at pulling a reaction out of their readers. While Decker’s main argument is questionable, he does make an interesting comment about the authors of dystopian novels and their questionable training, or lack-there-of, in the sciences: “The problem with relying on scientific thought to critique modernity, however, is that the utopian or dystopian tale can be based on science that in retrospect is either completely wrongheaded or at least largely outmoded” (53). Decker points out that because the dystopian novel is a work of Science Fiction, the creative imagination of the author is able to paint a picture of the future that may never actually be possible; the cause and effect reflected in many dystopian novels is unrealistic and can tend to be unnecessarily dour. This is the sort of writing that works people into an anxious frenzy, which results in stagnation in thought and action.

On the other side of this argument is Kay Sambell. In her essay “Presenting a case for Social Change,” she presents the argument that in order for dystopian literature written for children or young adults to be successful, there can be no allusion to hope; she explains that the success of the dystopian form is inextricably bound to a sinister ending, while simultaneously acknowledging that this would go against the dominant themes in writing children’s literature:

The problems of reconciling the aim of presenting the dark truth of the values against which one cautions, whilst simultaneously maintaining a sharp focus on
hope (often regarded as essential for the young) forms a significant creative dilemma for children’s authors using the dystopian narrative form. (Sambell 64)

Although these arguments may be valid in terms of discussing the accountability that authors of children’s literature grapple with, it is an unnecessary argument in terms of inspiring social change in children. Squabbles over which tactics in writing dystopian literature will be most successful in bringing about action are superfluous; no particular method in writing dystopian novels will be more successful than another, because the dystopian novel is no longer (if it ever was) a radical form. This is not to suggest that dystopian themes are useless, but rather that dystopian novels are not an ideal vessel for inspiring collective social change. The arguments presented by Sambell and Decker are just two of many similar arguments, all of which surround the idea of how best to approach writing a dystopian novel. The fact that there are “how to” essays being written on the young adult dystopian novel, implies that the form has already been recuperated by the dominant ideology and is now fully in support of the capitalistic system it once set out to critique. The conversation surrounding the dystopian novel continues to chase its own tail, when it could be branching out in another direction completely.

One reason for this could be the inability to imagine alternatives. It has been suggested Paik that “it is easier at the present historical moment to imagine the destruction of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism” (123). Popular dystopian fiction tends to portray futile endings where everything collapses and falls apart, perhaps because it is easier to give a negative critique than it is to make helpful suggestions or proposals. Novels such as *Feed* are a symptom of our habit as a society to fester in the dregs of late-capitalism; regardless of the author’s intent, these novels promote a fear of progress:

Programs of radical political change, on the other hand, remain in effect foreclosed not only because of their lack of popular appeal—the persistent
identification of state socialism with sclerotic bureaucracies, corrupt one-party rule, pervasive economic stagnation, and a disillusioned and cynical population—but also thanks to the usurpation of the socialist dream of equality and abundance by neoliberal capitalism. (Paik 125)

Here Paik is explaining that the reason the “dream of equality and abundance” suggested is not working, is because this promise is not capable of being fulfilled when it is still embedded in capitalism. Contemporary Neoliberals try with good intention to marry the positive aspects of socialism and capitalism, which results in a watered down version of both, leaving people unhappy on either side of the fence. Contemporary dystopian novels such as Feed are one symptom of this watered down revolutionary movement.

Although Anderson considers the rapidly increasing production of new technologies to be a danger to humanity, there are those who look at technological progress and its possibilities with optimism. Ray Kurzweil is both an inductee into the National Inventors Hall of Fame and a recipient of the National Medal of Technology. He is a respectable scientist with an optimistic outlook. In his book, The Singularity is Near, he describes a future in which “We will preserve and enhance the intelligence that evolution has bestowed on us while overcoming the profound limitations of biological evolution” (Kurzweil 21). He also explains that the general anxiety over the rapid increase in technology may stem from a narrow view of a much larger picture: “The future is widely misunderstood. Our forebears expected it to be pretty much like their present, which had been pretty much like their past. Exponential trends did exist one thousand years ago, but they were at that very early stage in which they were so flat and so slow that they looked like no trend at all” (10-11). Kurzweil suggests that up until this point technological advancement has been accelerating in a linear direction, and is only now gaining enough speed to begin exponential growth: “the rate of change itself is accelerating” (11). Kurzweil explains that although many people believe that
technology is rapidly evolving at present, we are only now on the brink of exponential growth; we can expect the rapidity of technological advancement to not only continue, but to become even more efficient in the next couple of decades. He does acknowledge that eventually, this time of growth will hit a wall:

The classical metaphorical example of exponential trends hitting a wall is known as “rabbits in Australia.” A species happening upon a hospitable new habitat will expand its numbers exponentially until its growth hits the limits of the ability of that environment to support it. (Kurzweil 433)

Relating the limits of technology to the limits of “nature” is Kurzweil’s subtle response to those who believe science and technology to be unnatural forces, which must be feared: “Even the human population is now approaching a limit… the overall growth in human population is slowing” (433). He suggests that in the same way that natural growth and expansion occur and then slow, so will information technology. However, he claims that this will happen after multiple significant changes have been made in the way that we function as a species.

Kurzweil does acknowledge the dangers that are intertwined with the benefits of science: “Technology empowers both our creative and destructive natures” (396). However, unlike Anderson, he looks towards the future with optimism, and confidence. He suggests of how we might deal with the regulation of these advances, included, but not limited to, “oversight by regulatory bodies, the development of technology-specific ‘immune’ responses, and computer-assisted surveillance by law enforcement organizations” (413).

Juxtaposed with Kurzweil’s optimistic predictions of the future, Anderson’s Feed seems to suggest more a lack of faith in humanity than a lack of faith in technological reliability.

Taking this into consideration, it is quite possible that what is hindering the portrayal of alternative futures in dystopian writing is the uniqueness of our current situation, and the
truly infinite possibilities that a rapid progression of technology brings. A common critique of the dystopian novel, and science fiction in general, is that those who are writing these texts have no formal training in the field of science, and that much of their predictions are based on pure speculation. This is not to say that authors without a background in science should refrain from writing science fiction, but to allow recent scientific development and innovation to inform their fictional work, so that rather than beginning with a particular ending in mind (often a fatalistic one) and designing a plot around that ending, the literature might more accurately reflect the uncertainty of humanity’s future.

In his book *Terminal Identity*, Scott Bukatman argues that the ability to explore multiple futures is what validates the genre of science fiction and sets it apart from other genres: “Science fiction constructs a space of accommodation to an intensely technological existence. Through language, iconography, and narration, the shock of the new is aestheticized and examined” (10). If this “space of accommodation” were more often being used for purposes other than to criticize our present, then this process would prove much more interesting and useful. The anxiety that comes hand-in-hand with technological advancement seems to be largely responsible for these trends: “Technology, after all, always creates a crisis for culture, and the technologies of the twentieth century have been at once the most liberating and the most repressive in history, evoking sublime terror and sublime euphoria in equal measures” (4). The anxiety expressed in contemporary literature is a result of the anxiety felt by a large portion of the American people, which in turn fuels this same anxiety; the dystopian novel has been stuck in this self-perpetuating cycle for quite some time. While there is validity in Bukatman’s argument, Frederic Jameson acknowledges this
objective of science fiction as a common defense of the genre roughly eleven years before

*Terminal Identity* was published:

> Whence the canonical defense of the genre: in a moment in which technological change has reached a dizzying tempo, in which so-called ‘future shock’ is a daily experience, such narratives have the social function of accustoming their readers to rapid innovation, of preparing our consciousness and our habits for the otherwise demoralizing impact of change itself. (151)

While it is definitely a step forward to view science fiction as an aid in acclimating to technological progress rather than a way to instill conservative values in readers, Jameson would argue that science fiction is capable of more: “We must therefore now return to the relationship of SF and future history and reverse the stereotypical description of this genre” (153). Jameson suggests that there remains a lot of untapped potential in science fiction writing and offers an alternative purpose to science fiction: “It becomes unexpectedly transformed into a contemplation of our own absolute limits” (153). Science fiction is capable of challenging technological progression; real life technology then feeds off of these challenges, and responds with challenges of its own. The literature and the technology continue to nourish one another in this way, until they reach a limit. This relates back to both Kurzweil and his ideas on the natural cycles of exponential growth, and to Delaney and his non-linear view of both literature and technological advancements: “Man’s technical achievements, like his aesthetic ones, do not form a single line, but a web, in which numerous lines can be traced” (Delaney, *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw* 21). Rather than technology and literature both developing side by side in a linear path, the two evolve with one another, as well as with other fields of study.

This natural dynamic relationship between art and technology can suffer when interfered with by the dominant ideology. Unfortunately, most present trends that we see in contemporary dystopian art reflect the interests of the dominant ideology. Bukatman
explains the pressure placed on filmmakers to oblige these sorts of trends: “The mode of production of the science fiction film has committed it to certain kinds of narratives, conflicts, and closures that must find a profitable commercial niche” (12). Here Bukatman is speaking specifically of science fiction film; however, this idea can be applied to many media, including literature. Delaney discusses this issue in regards to literature:

Excitement in reading invariably comes from the anticipation of (and the anticipation rewarded by) the inevitable/expected. This inevitability—without which there simply is no reader gut-participation—is also what holds fiction to all the political clichés of sexism, racism, and classism that mar it as an art. To write fiction without such structural inevitabilities, however (as practically every artist has discovered), is to write fiction without an audience. (The Jewel-Hinged Jaw 92)

As previously stated, the problem with much of contemporary dystopian fiction is that it leaves little room for imagination, and much of it prescribes to the same outlook that one day capitalism will result in the end of the human race; the genre has become rooted in conservative ideals.
CHAPTER 3

EXPLORATION OF POSSIBILITIES THROUGH
DYSTOPIAN THEMES IN LINH DINH’S JAM ALERTS

Although the dystopian novel has come to be a conservative form, it would be a mistake to label science fiction on the whole as conservative, just as would it be a mistake to think that dystopian writing cannot be of value. It is important to consider the possibility that what has allowed the dystopian novel to be recuperated by the status quo is our tendency to affirm the familiar, which prevents the dystopia from evolving or taking new forms. We have already examined the ways in which novels such as Anderson’s Feed can be considered conservative, and while Feed may have some interesting stylistic elements, it is monolithic in its negative view of the American present and future, and much of contemporary dystopian fiction shares a similar view. However, by putting Feed into conversation with a progressive work such as Linh Dinh’s Jam Alerts, we can more easily distinguish between Anderson’s fatalism, and Dinh’s multi-faceted view of the future.

Although a handful of contemporary dystopian writers of science fiction are pushing the evolution of the genre, the dystopian novel has for the most part calcified as escapist literature containing revolutionary plot. Because of this reputation it will be difficult to change course, but not impossible. There are writers who are taking new approaches to dystopian writing. However, their work is fairly unpopular. One of these authors is Linh Dinh, a Vietnamese-American poet, fiction writer, artist, and translator. Coming from a working-class background, he was born in Saigon, Vietnam in 1963. In 1975 he came to the
United States. He currently resides in Philadelphia, but he has also lived in both Italy and England. He has written three books of fiction, and seven books of poetry including *Jam Alerts*, which we will look closely at in this chapter. Ron Silliman refers to Dinh as “singular” or “isolated” because of his unique background, and his ability to draw from several discourses while writing. In a blurb on the back cover of *Jam Alerts*, Silliman writes:

Linh is writing straightforward poetry, but from a perspective shared by almost no one else. This kind of exile is far deeper than mere geography. Reading *Borderless Bodies*, you can feel Linh’s deep loneliness on every page & realize that there are aspects of his poetry that you can’t find anywhere else. We probably haven’t had a writer this singular since the death of William Burroughs. (Back Cover)

Perhaps what distinguishes Dinh as an author, and what has also instilled in him a tendency to write as a bricoleur, are the many discourses available for him to draw from. Dinh’s writing is unique because he embraces confusion rather than letting it overwhelm him:

“Poets, on the other hand, should welcome all opportunities to become befuddled. To not know what’s happening forces one to become more attentive and to fill in the blanks. Hence, poetry” (Dinh, “On My Belly” 23). This attitude is what distinguishes Dinh as a bricoleur; he embraces gaps in knowledge by filling in the blanks with found information or ideas. The ability to excel at writing in a fragmented society is a trait of the bricoleur, and arguably a valuable trait for any writer in the twenty-first century.

While the bricoleur has a distinctive style of assemblage that sets him or her apart from the engineer, both approaches are capable of yielding an end product eventually. The results from the project of the bricoleur may appear quite different from the results of a project that has been engineered, which we will explore by noting the differences between Anderson’s *Feed* and Dinh’s *Jam Alerts*. One key difference between the work of the engineer and the work of the bricoleur is that the former begins the project with the end
product in mind, while the latter begins his task with no particular end in mind, and must eventually resign himself to an end. Dinh falls into the latter category: “One may begin writing a poem in complete freedom, that is, in complete randomness, but one should end the exasperating process in abject submission” (“On My Belly” 23). While there are many authors who could be categorized as bricoleurs, Dinh is exceptional because he is one of the few authors to fuse bricolage, poetry, and science fiction. His unique approach and perspective give him an advantage in writing dystopian literature, and while he looks at technology with skepticism, his writing is much more polysemic than Anderson’s.

While I may be suggesting that bricolage is an approach well suited to science fiction, it is important not to confuse the role of the bricoleur with that of the scientist, or to suggest that the bricoleur is somehow starting off with an advantage over the engineer in the realm of science fiction. Rather I argue that the scientist and the bircoleur have a more complementary relationship. Lévi-Strauss explains the relationship between the scientist and the bricoleur: “the scientist creat[es] events (changing the world) by means of structures and the ‘bricoleur’ creat[es] structures by means of events” (2). While it may seem that Lévi-Strauss is suggesting that the engineer is more in line with the progression of science, this is not the case; in fact he is suggesting that while there are considerable differences between the bricoleur and the scientist, theirs is a relationship that thrives because of these differences, not in spite of them. The bricoleur makes use of the materials discarded or forgotten by the scientist, and reassembles them in various ways: “the materials of the bricoleur are elements which can be defined by two criteria: they have had a use… and they can be used again either for the same purpose or for a different one if they are at all diverted from their previous function” (Lévi-Strauss 35). Because the bricoleur is not a scientist, his or her speculations
may not always be precise. However, the job of the bricoleur remains important; his or her
speculations challenge the present shape of things and can result in progression or
rearrangement. This technique can be seen throughout Jam Alerts, as Dinh repeatedly revisits
his feelings toward technology and re-imagines the future of humanity. These trends in his
writing are what distinguish Dinh as a bricoleur.

Bricolage pairs nicely with science fiction in particular because of the necessity in
science fiction to be continually reimagining outcomes. According to Lévi-Strauss, the
materials of the bricoleur are not limited to one outcome. The bricoleur does eventually yield
a finished project, but realizes that the conclusion to each project is not the only possible
conclusion, and will often immediately begin work on rearranging the original materials to
experiment with alternative results:

The set of the “bricoleur’s” means cannot therefore be defined in terms of a
project (which would presuppose besides, that, as in the case of the engineer,
there were, at least in theory, as many sets of tools and materials or “instrumental
sets,” as there are different kinds of projects). (Lévi-Strauss 18)

Even after the bricoleur has ‘completed’ a project, he or she holds onto the materials used,
knowing that they might be useful in future projects; of the materials used, none are confined
to one “definite and determinate use” (Lévi-Strauss 18). Because the bricoleur realizes that
there is value in recycling pre-existing materials, he will often revisit conclusions from past
projects to generate new projects: “In the continual reconstruction from the same materials, it
is always earlier ends which are called upon to play the part of means” (Lévi-Strauss 21). Of
literature being produced today, these tendencies can perhaps be seen most clearly in
contemporary poetry, specifically those poets who practice appropriation and erasure. It is
less common to encounter this sort of approach in science fiction; however, one can see how
the method of building off of previous outcomes could work as an advantage to a science fiction author.

Aside from his persistence in revisiting his works, Dinh sets himself apart as one of the few poets to incorporate aspects of science fiction into his poetry, and he does so while drawing from multiple ethnic and cultural discourses. Lévi-Strauss would argue that this inclination to incorporate aspects of the self into ones work is another trait of the bricoleur:

The bricoleur also, and indeed principally, derives his poetry from the fact that he does not confine himself to accomplishment and execution: he “speaks” not only with things, as we have already seen, but also through the medium of things: giving an account of his personality and life by the choices he makes between the limited possibilities. The bricoleur may not ever complete his purpose but he always puts something of himself into it. (21)

An example of this can be found in Dinh’s poem “Torino 2006,” where he references Futurist Umberto Boccioni’s *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, a sculpture which attempts to capture “the dynamic sensation of movement itself” (Kern 120). Boccioni’s sculpture is one of many works of art produced by the Futurists, which glorifies speed and technological revolution. The Futurists were excited by the quickened pace of change that took place during the second industrial revolution; while the majority looked at technological advances with weariness, the Futurists were unabashedly excited and encouraged with each new invention. In stark contrast to those who clung to tradition for comfort in these times of rapid change, the Futurists saw this fondness of history as a flaw holding them back from achieving their full potential.

Boccioni and other Futurists of the early twentieth century were, in a way, bricoleurs themselves: “The Futurists strained the limits of traditional genres to create new forms” (Kern 99). Not only is Dinh drawing from his own personal knowledge (no doubt his time spent living in Italy has something to do with this particular reference), he is also surely
aware of the historical significance of the artwork, and uses that significance to enrich the
meaning of his own work. Kern explains the significance of Boccioni’s sculpture in reference
to the French philosopher, Henri Bergson:

Boccioni was intrigued by Bergson’s distinction between relative motion (that we
know from outside) and absolute motion (that we intuit from within), but
challenged Bergson by insisting that an artist could synthesize both in a single
image. (120)

By referencing Boccioni in his artwork, Dinh is attempting to make use of the already
existent sign, and to add meaning to what that sign signifies. He uses his historical
knowledge as leverage to critique contemporary art:

Yes, it’s true they wheeled out a laminated blow-up
Of Boccioni’s “Unique Form of Continuity in Space”,
Rechristened “Futuristic Man” by the media. (Dinh, Jam Alerts 78)

It is possible that Dinh is suggesting that the attitudes surrounding our present technological
boom resemble those that surrounded the second-industrial revolution in some ways.

Later in this same poem, Dinh references Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, founder of
Futurism and author of the Futurist Manifesto (1909): “The original futuristic man, Marinetti,
once declared that war/Is a form of universal hygiene. Imagine” (Dinh, Jam Alerts 78). Here
Dinh is referencing Marinetti’s “Le Futurisme,” or “The Futurist Manifesto,” which was
published in February 1909 in Le Figaro in Paris. The manifesto was a quick-paced,
passionate call to action in blind support of technological revolution. Dinh refers to the line
in the manifesto in which Marinetti writes, “We will glorify war—the world’s only
hygiene—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas
worth dying for, and scorn for woman.” Marinetti is well known for being both an activist
and fascist; thus this statement is one of many equally bold claims made in the manifesto,
which ultimately supports technological advance at any cost.
In her article “The First Futurist Manifesto Revisited” Marjorie Perloff examines both the successes and follies of the piece. Perloff reminds us that while the manifesto may seem immediately shocking to a present-day reader, there is no way Marinetti’s readership at the time of the manifesto’s publication could have known what would happen a few years later: “The Marinetti who wrote these words in 1908 was an anarchist-socialist who wanted to rid Italy of the papacy and what was perceived to be the inertia and powerlessness of parliamentary democracy” (154). Perloff explains that because of the way the manifesto was written, people reading the manifesto at the time of its first publication were less likely to object to Marinetti’s rashness:

The narrative frame thus prepares us for the violence, power, energy, and sense of urgency of the manifesto itself. By the time the first proposition is made, Marinetti’s audience has suspended its disbelief, especially since the pronouncements to follow are all uttered by a “We” rather than a more overtly egotistical “I.” (153)

Perloff suggests that the passion and speed of the manifesto prevented its readers from immediately disagreeing with its premise, allowing time for Marinetti’s message to resonate.

There was no way for readers of the manifesto at the time of its initial publication to know that in the near future Marinetti’s imagery would become a reality. Marinetti writes:

We will sing of great crowds excited by work, by pleasure, and by riot; we will sing of the multicolored polyphonic tides of revolution in the modern capitals; we will sing of the vibrant nightly fervor of arsenals and shipyards blazing with violent electric moons; greedy railway stations that devour smoke-plumed serpents; factories hung on clouds by the crooked lines of their smoke; bridges that stride the rivers like giant gymnasts, flashing in the sun with a glitter of knives.

In contrast with the vast majority of their peers, the Futurists were so excited about technological advancement that they were unable to accept the idea that these changes could have negative consequences. Perloff points out that whereas most people during the early
twentieth century were concerned with the negative effects that technology could bring, the Futurists saw only the positive potential of technological advancement:

What makes the First Futurist Manifesto such a poignant document is thus its place on the cusp of an era that it has largely misapprehended. The “great crowds excited by work, by pleasure” turn out to be the masses of soldiers dying in the trenches, and the desired “revolution” paves the way for the Fascism of the 1920’s. (155)

However, it is important to note that while the misapprehensions of Futurism seem terrifying in hindsight, it can also be destructive to see nothing but the negative possibilities of scientific advancement. It is as if Dinh included these references to suggest that neither extreme is without its faults, and that perhaps the best approach to progress lay somewhere in between excitement and fear. He refers to Marinetti and Boccioni to remind us of the danger of misapprehension, while allowing for the possibility that technological advance may not a sure sign of our ruin.

As controversial as Marinetti was, Dinh resembles him in a couple of ways. For example, both Dinh and Marinetti seem to thrive off of the unknown: “As he declares at the end of his 1909 manifesto, “We don’t want to understand.” Art, in his view, must move beyond understanding, beyond reason, to create its own mode of being” (Perloff 155). It could also be argued that they hold similar beliefs regarding the evolution of literature. Marinetti writes in his manifesto: “Up to now literature has exalted a pensive immobility, ecstasy, and sleep. We intend to exalt aggressive action, a feverish insomnia, the racer’s stride, the mortal leap, the punch and the slap.” And while Dinh is not so enthusiastically aggressive in his writing, the very structure in which he has chosen to present his ideas shows that he is pushing for change. He identifies patterns of recycled art in a negative way, although his poem itself is an assemblage of historical meaning, intertwined with references to popular culture, and fictional accounts of the future.
A majority of technological dystopian works are written by authors who embrace at least some aspects of technology themselves, despite the negative portrayal of technology in their works. Dinh shares his writing process in an interview published in American Poetry Review: “I write with a lap top while lying on my belly (like Jarry!). I revise directly on the computer and do not print out working drafts. I am entirely a paperless writer” (Dinh, “On My Belly” 23). Although many of his poems display disgust with how technology impedes on the natural, Dinh is not in complete opposition to technology. However, like many other Americans he does have a complex relationship with technology; rejecting some aspects, while embracing others:

I do not mind natural noises—bird songs, children whinnying, old men clearing their throats—filtering through my window but I cannot work with any sort of mechanical din in the background whatsoever, such as canned music or even the ticking of a cheap alarm clock. I own neither a TV nor a stereo. (Dinh, “On My Belly” 23)

By “mechanical din” we can assume that Dinh excludes the sounds of his fingertips hitting his keyboard, and the whirring of the fan on his laptop, which he previously claims to rely on wholly for his writing. Although Dinh is writing from a unique perspective, his attitude tends to reflect the anxieties of many Americans.

In Dinh’s poem “Man Wearing Glasses,” he compares our present way of life with the agrarian lifestyle we have largely left behind. The “Glasses” referred to in the title are his twenty-first-century, late-capitalist American lenses through which he now sees everything:

Plucked from the land, I must be taught
How to cross the road to order a steak.
Removed from the soil, I inject
Dirt into every article of speech.
I cannot look at any landscape, a lake,
A canyon, a cave or a volcano, without
Recalling some presumptuous painting. (Dinh, Jam Alerts 101)
This passage recalls Jean Baudrillard’s theory of hyperreality by suggesting that our vision of nature is imposed upon by all of the images of nature we have come into contact with through media. Baudrillard makes the argument that contemporary society is continuously becoming more and more fragmented, and that as this fragmentation multiplies “artificial signs” become “inextricably mixed up with real elements” (20). While there can be a tone of annoyance detected towards these “artificial signs” in Dinh’s poetry, he simultaneously attempts to take these anxieties and organize them in an aesthetically pleasing way. Dinh is setting himself apart from authors like Anderson by showing that meaningful metaphors can still be made using contemporary language and imagery. Dinh acknowledges himself as a product of contemporary society, and draws from both his experiences in nature and his experiences with contemporary art to create meaning in a variety of ways. While both Anderson and Dinh are critiquing contemporary society, Dinh leaves room for alternative outcomes, while Anderson’s novel is purely fatalistic.

Dinh’s ability to contemplate alternative futures can be seen in his poem “The Earliest Poetry,” in which people digging a well in the far-off future stumble upon what is presumably a laptop computer. Because of the way the laptop opens, the discovery is believed to be some type of “weird book” (Dinh, *Jam Alerts* 131). It is assumed to be poetry because of its short length—“It must be poetry we assume/ Though we don’t know what language it’s in” (131)—and the space bar is interpreted as a caesura. What is not specified in this poem is why the people who discover the laptop mistake it for a book of poetry. Dinh leaves this open for interpretation; it could be that these people have progressed so far beyond our contemporary technology that they are unable to recognize such an antiquated computer, or it could be that they are living in some kind of nuclear aftermath and have
regressed so far technologically that they are unable to identify the object. This ambiguity allows the reader to consider multiple interpretations. At the beginning of the poem it is implied that the people discussed are hundreds of years in the future, yet they are digging a well. What Dinh does not tell us, is how they are digging this well; are they digging with hands and shovels? Or, are they using some advanced well-digging machine? Dinh does not say. Even the language that Dinh chooses to use in this poem is ambiguous. The tone lacks any suggestion of progression, but it doesn’t suggest a return to primitive society either. Dinh remains unclear what sort of society these future peoples are living in, but slyly insinuates that things are not too different from the present, or perhaps even the past. By omitting information he allows the reader options in interpreting his work.

This ability to simultaneously promote multiple possible futures is one area where Dinh differs from Anderson. In *Feed*, Anderson implies that humanity will eventually run out of time, and come to a tragic end. Towards the end of the novel Violet messages Titus from her deathbed to warn him that he must change his ways: “*But there’s always time to change. There’s always time. Until there’s not*” (Anderson 276). Titus’ situation continues to fall apart as the novel concludes. After seeing Violet in her unfortunate state, Titus becomes so upset that he begins to repeatedly purchase the same pair of pants: “I ordered another pair. I ordered pair after pair. I ordered them all in the same color. They were slate. I was ordering them as quickly as I could” (293). Anderson portrays Titus as completely helpless; he and Violet are too late in trying to resist the feed and as a result Violet dies, Titus is left in utter despair, and the world falls victim to environmental devastation:

I stayed up all through the early morning, shivering, ordering, and was awake at dawn, when I put on clothes, and went up to the surface, and watched the shit-stupid sun rise over the whole shit-stupid world. (294)
There is no question of what happens at the end of Anderson’s *Feed*; the characters are all left helpless and hopeless, and it is quite clear that for them and their world it is too late. Where Anderson suggests that we will one day prove to be a means to our own destruction if we do not correct current behaviors, Dinh cultivates multiple possible futures through his ambiguous poetry.

Dinh revisits this concept in a similar poem found two pages later in the collection titled “Recent Archeo News,” where he imagines what sort of artifacts an archeological dig might unearth in the early thirty-first century. The poem is comprised of multiple journal entries from the years 3005-3006; these entries are all playful quips, which analyze artifacts being discovered from our present day society, through the perspective of someone living in the future. The poem is humorous, but also troubling. One of the first entries reads:

8 February 3006—30 billion scraps  
Of well-preserved, well-made plastic  
Accidentally unearthed in Athens. (Dinh, *Jam Alerts* 136)

The word Athens suggests the ancient ruins in Athens. The people of ancient Greece could never have imagined machines such as airplanes and train cars, yet these machines exist, and our society has come to depend on them in many ways. Much like in his poem “Man Wearing Glasses,” Dinh is suggesting that despite the growing anxiety over the progression of technology man will continue to evolve, and it is possible that in the future our current ways of living will be regarded as archaic. Several generations of the past believed that the world would come to an end in their time, and this same belief circulates among present generations. It is possible that Dinh is making light of these worries; he is giving the reader options, rather than confirming what is already feared.

This again can be contrasted with *Feed*, where Anderson sees our current situation ending in the demise of both the human race and the planet; this is the kind of attitude that
Dinh seems to be mocking in his poetry. The people are all suffering from mysterious lesions and the ocean is a toxic wasteland. At the end of the novel when Violet dies the phrase “Everything must go” is repeated as Titus realizes that it is too late and all is lost. There is a clear moral lesson to be learned from *Feed*; Anderson is warning teens of what could happen to the world if we don’t take action and correct our present self-destructive behaviors. In contrast, Dinh’s poetry, while not altogether optimistic, sees the possibility for technology to take us further than our own demise. Dinh does acknowledge the potential dangers of technology, but he examines them as possibilities, not as certainties.

Another way that Dinh can be contrasted with Anderson is in their approaches to critiquing contemporary vernacular and the ways in which the English language is evolving. As previously discussed, Anderson has a very conservative view of language, and he criticizes the use of contemporary vernacular, suggesting that it is a sign of ignorance in its users. While Dinh and Anderson may be in agreement in some areas, Dinh seems to hold the opposite opinion in regard to the evolution of language. He addresses condensed language in the title poem of his collection “Jam Alerts”. This poem consists of a series of events reported to have taken place between 5:13 Am and 9:46 AM in what looks like some sort of emergency dispatch report. Almost all of the words used are truncated or condensed, but the reader can still easily understand the sentence. For example the first line reads, “5:13 AM, FATL HIT N RUN, SUSP FLEEING, ARTERIES CLGGD,” which can easily be read as “5:13 Am, Fatal hit and run, suspect fleeing, arteries clogged” (Dinh, *Jam Alerts* 16). Although there are a variety of messages that can be taken from this poem, it shows, in response to Anderson, that condensed language and evolution of language are not confined to
youth vernacular; many professions use jargon that consists of acronyms and shortened words as a more efficient way of communicating.

Dinh further expresses his minimalist preferences in regard to language in his poem “What Words Do.” In this poem he expresses a frustration with the inefficiency of language, particularly flowery writing: “Grafting words onto words/ The wishy-washy don’t trim away what’s superfluous” (Dinh, *Jam Alerts* 97). One can notice that Dinh himself consistently uses conjunctions wherever possible throughout his collection, thus “trimming away what’s superfluous” in his own writing. The poem is a mere five lines long, which may have been a conscious choice by Dinh to formally add support to his premise.

One of the side effects of trying to marry conservative ideals with dystopian fiction is that we are left with an overwhelming amount of didactic science fiction literature; these works are created with a specific lesson or moral in mind. These didactic novels often end up being read as escapist literature with one or two central moral lessons. While the intention may be good, the product causes science fiction to become less distinguishable as a genre, and disallows the genre from fulfilling its potential. In her article “Towards an Aesthetic of Science Fiction,” Joanna Russ reminds us that science fiction can function as a positive reaction to progress: “Science fiction is a positive response to the post-industrial world, not always in its content (there is plenty of nostalgia for the past and dislike of change in science fiction) but in its very assumptions, its very form” (17). Because the majority of dystopian writers tend to publish didactic novels, it becomes difficult to think of the dystopian genre in other ways. However, Russ suggests that one reason for the popularity of didactic science fiction is that people seek out literature not to learn, but rather for the sake of familiarity: “Of course didactic fiction does not always tell people something new; often it tells them
something they already know, and the re-telling becomes a reverent ritual, very gratifying to all concerned” (113). Because readers would rather buy a book that reaffirms their ideology than one that challenges their ideology, certain literary patterns have been able to remain popular.

Russ is not alone in this belief; Delaney reiterates this concept: “The mistake that we make as adolescent readers is to assume a story is exciting because of its strange happenings and exotic surfaces, when, actually a story is exciting exactly to the extent that its structure is familiar” (Delaney, *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw* 91). By “adolescent readers” Delaney is not necessarily referring to readers of a certain age, but rather to the average reader, possibly even including a majority of students who study literature at the university level. In this case, the bulk of readers in America are what Delaney refers to here as “adolescent readers,” which is likely why Anderson’s *Feed* is more easily marketable than Dinh’s *Jam Alerts*; people may believe that the ideas presented in *Feed* are what attracts them to the book, but this attraction is more likely linked to the book’s structure. To the “adolescent reader” *Feed* is more easily digested than unconventional books like *Jam Alerts*.

However, it is not only the “adolescent reader” who makes the mistake of finding excitement in familiarity. Delaney explains the “reader gut-participation” that guarantees the popularity or unpopularity of a work:

> Excitement in reading invariably comes from the anticipation of (and the anticipation rewarded by) the inevitable/expected. This inevitability—without which there simply is no reader gut-participation—is also what holds fiction to all the political clichés of sexism, racism, and classism that mar it as an art. To write fiction without such structural invariabilities, however (as practically every artist has discovered), is to write fiction without an audience. (*The Jewel-Hinged Jaw* 92)

Although Delaney here is referring to literature in general, he provides explanation as to why Dinh is not as widely read as Anderson. It certainly does not help that the university is slow
to accommodate new forms. Literary study at the university level has fallen into an ongoing pattern of resistance and skepticism, followed by acceptance and praise. The English department seems to be unable to escape the urge to cynically scrutinize all new prospects to the point of exhaustion before allowing itself to accommodate new additions. Nothing is simply accepted from its initial impression. However, the eventual acknowledgment of larger literary trends is ultimately unavoidable, and has proven to be so repeatedly. The argument over teaching the canon has been going on for years, and seems to work mostly as a distraction in delaying the inevitable. English, as a field of study tends to foster the idea that certain works are reserved for certain levels of learning. All of these factors contribute to the lack of demand for work by authors such as Dinh in both the popular and academic realms.

In addition to calling for new forms of science fiction literature, Russ believes that the analysis of science fiction should be something quite different from the analysis of other genres. She claims that the science fiction genre is more complex than other literary genres, and therefore requires a unique critical approach:

Criticism of science fiction cannot possibly look like criticism we are used to. It will—perforce—employ an aesthetic in which the elegance, rigorousness, and systematic coherence of explicit ideas is of great importance. It will therefore appear to stray into all sorts of extra-literary fields, metaphysics, politics, philosophy, physics, biology, psychology, topology, mathematics, history, and so on. (Russ 17-18)

Part of the reason that we are not seeing a rush of criticism like that which Russ calls for is because much of the science fiction that has been published over the past century does not ask to be analyzed in such ways. While science fiction or dystopian literature may have started in sharp distinction from other genres, the lines are becoming blurred as these genres are becoming accepted as mainstream writing.
Much of contemporary science fiction is heavily rooted in the fiction side of things and may be less concerned with scientific validity. However, Russ claims that these faulty predictions of the future are a part of what makes science fiction:

Mistakes in scientific possibility do not turn science fiction into fantasy. They are merely mistakes. Nor does the out-dating of scientific theory transform the science fiction of the past into fantasy. Error-free science fiction is an ideal as impossible of achievement as the nineteenth century ideal of an “objective” realistic novel. (112)

If all science fiction presented scientific thoughts or theories that have already been proven valid, the genre would not be accessing its full potential. The science of science fiction does not need to be accurate in order for the work to be effective. Surely scientific knowledge cannot hurt an author, but it is not a prerequisite either.

As we continue to progress technologically, literature continues to be an important part of this movement. As was discussed in chapter one, literature has a history of acting as a conduit for technological progression. And while the science fiction novel may not be an ideal form for inspiring social change, it can be effective in fleshing out scientific ideas, regardless of their possibility:

Art lies half-way between scientific knowledge and mythical or magical thought. It is common knowledge that the artist is both something of a scientist and of a ‘bricoleur’. By his craftsmanship he constructs a material object which is also an object of knowledge. (Lévi-Strauss 22)

Although many science fiction works depict inventions that could not actually work, or world conditions that may never actually arrive, there is still value to be extracted. Science fiction works as both a potential space for us to imagine multiple possible futures, and a place to flesh out ideas about human nature and our relationships with each other and technology.

Dinh’s work stands out as ambiguous rather than didactic, and it resists the monologic impulses found in Feed. While Feed may seem to be progressive in nature at first, it becomes
easily distinguished as a conservative novel when compared to *Jam Alerts*; in fact, the presentation of *Feed* as a progressive novel is what makes it so concretely conservative. Jean Baudrillard warns us of the seriousness of mistaking novels such as *Feed* as progressive:

> To choose the wrong strategy is a serious matter. All the movements that only play on liberation, emancipation, on the resurrection of a subject of history, of the group, of the word based on “consciousness raising,” indeed a “raising of the unconscious” of subjects and of the masses, do not see that they are going in the direction of the system, whose imperative today is precisely the overproduction and regeneration of meaning and of speech. (86)

Although Baudrillard is not writing in response to *Feed* in particular (his book predates Anderson’s by over two decades) he suggests that the continuing popularity of works such as *Feed* (conservative works that are presented as progressive works) could eventually be met with serious consequence. Baudrillard is not alone in his worry; Delaney shares similar concerns when he discusses the way that we appraise the quality of a work. He addresses the science fiction community in particular:

> To speak of “the science fiction community” is to speak of a reading and writing community that, while it numbers in the thousands, is still small enough so that sales or mass popularity is not the only factor broadly meaningful to a writer’s reputation. In that community quality writing is still—sometimes—capable of generating more excitement than simple ubiquity of copies spread about, which is finally what sales alone mean. (Shorter Views 273)

Delaney explains that there are many different definitions of the word quality, and that the financial success of a written work is only one of many ways to assess the value of a work. He also notes that because the science fiction community is smaller than communities affiliated with other genres, it remains a population capable of producing new and exciting work.

Delaney is not placing his own value judgments above any other; he is simply noting that there are several ways of defining the quality of a work. He then goes even further to say that the literature that is generally perceived to be of high quality, has simply won favor with
the majority of the educated: “Even though individual judgments constitute it, such quality is still a social construct: Thus no one individual judgment (such as mine) can confirm—or deny—it. It takes a web of educated/excited responses” (Shorter Views 289). So, while there is certainly a diversity of opinion among these educated or privileged few, the majority of these few tend to decide what the rest of the population should be reading. While Delaney acknowledges that the idea of “high quality” literature is an unavoidable social construct, he explains that the tendency to ignore the opinions of the few prevents progression: “And though high quality is a socially constructed phenomenon as much as any other, we must still distinguish it carefully and repeatedly from both popularity and sales—if science fiction is to retain any sort of life” (Shorter Views 291). It is when we begin to confuse quality with commercial success that we lose sight of the social importance of literature.

Ironically, Anderson and Delaney agree on one thing: Both see tremendous importance in addressing the young adult demographic. However, where Anderson supports tradition and aims to conserve the values of his own generation, Delaney encourages his readers and students to seek out new young writers, in hopes that we will never settle into one totalizing definition of quality:

> It’s particularly important for young readers (and young writers) to articulate clearly and vigorously, in fanzines, at conventions, in letters to friends, in conversations with all, each other, and sundry—and even in science fiction classes—their responses, their judgments, and their excitement at the writers who produce around them: That means their excitement over new writers, even over brand-new writers—even as these readers listen to, and contest with, recommendations and judgments (such as mine) from a generation or so ahead. (Shorter Views 291)

Keeping Delaney’s words in mind, it is important to provide these young readers with literature that will provoke these conversations, rather than stifle them, utilizing the space that the science fiction genre offers. Dinh’s poetry is a step in the right direction because it is
progressive, yet sensitive to the delicate nature of our present moment. Through Dinh’s work we can see that science fiction does not necessarily need to be confined to the novel, and that dystopian themes do not always have to culminate in a fatalistic ending.
REFERENCES


