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Recurrent Dystopian themes in Scott Westerfeld's Novel 'Uglies'

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Abstract

The genre of dystopian fiction has been largely studied, and a significant number of contributions explain its main themes and features. Plus, this type of literature is still strongly developed at present, with a several titles among the best sold. Scott Westerfeld's Uglies series (2005-2007), which can be found in this sort of works, is an example of recent dystopian literature which enjoys a large number of readers. The aim of this research is to determine whether Westerfeld develops in his first text of the series, Uglies (2005), a suggestion of recurrent themes in dystopian fiction. This can show to what extent Westerfeld frames his piece of fiction into a traditional dystopian setting. The results of this study, thus, can shed some light on the characteristics of 21st century dystopian fiction, which are to be compared with the traditional definition of the genre.

Keywords: Dystopian; Westerfeld; Uglies; Young-Adult-Fiction.

Dystopian literature, fiction whose aim is to satirize the flaws of a particular society and warn the reader about such dangers, has been profusely cultivated since works as early as Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) were published. This genre is best known for its production under the threat of 20th century totalitarianism and the Cold War, though during the beginning of the 21st dystopian literature is enjoying a notable flourishing era. The success of titles such as Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* (2008) or Virginia Roth's *Divergent* (2011), which have both turned into series of novels, prove the rise in the public's interest of this type of fiction.



The literary critic Susan Carpenter, for example, highlights the expansive moment dystopian works are going through, by pointing out that “there's no questioning the impact of *The Hunger Games*. Its heyday has given birth to an explosion of dystopian young adult literature that invariably unfolds in some environmentally compromised, governmentally bizarre future version of the United States (Carpenter, 2012).” The interest in dystopian fiction is not only notorious in literature, but also in some manifestations of popular culture. Such is the case, for example, of the film industry, which has contributed to the genre with a significant number of titles. Other examples are *Elyseum* (2013) or *Oblivion* (2013), let alone the film adaptation of *The Hunger Games* (2012).

The aim of dystopian literature being a parody of the author's contemporary society is a common feature in this genre and the one that defines it, a condition *sine qua non* the text turns into a different type of fiction. Mary Snodgrass, for example, in her definition of dystopia explains that it is “the negative side of the perfect world, a haven corrupted ” (Snodgrass, 1995, p. 179). This aspect is admitted by most dystopian authors when they explain their works. For example, Aldous Huxley in his *Brave New World Revisited* (1959), explaining most of the features of his influential dystopia *Brave New World* (1931), describes the societal problems on which he focuses in the satiric novel (Huxley, 2004, p. 26). George Orwell subsequently undertakes the same task when he sketches *Animal Farm* (1945), and the better known *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), also admitting the instructive purpose of both works (Orwell, 2001, p. 500).

The Academy has shed much light on the features of dystopian literature, explaining most of its themes and other narrative elements. In fact, this very piece of research continues a long term investigation that seeks to list the most common topics depicted in the genre (Galdón, 2011, p. 41). Among these, the following stand out as the most commonly developed in a selection of best known 20th century dystopias:

- Totalitarianism
- Alienation of citizens
- Dissidence of the main character
- Action set in the future



- Manipulation or erasing of the past
- Shallow culture and propaganda
- Warning to the reader

It is essential to point out that this list is part of an unfinished work of research, and may need alterations, or even the inclusion of new items as the investigation continues. The present work, though, aims to explain the way in which dystopian authors tackle this pedagogic task when they focus young readers in particular, since some 21st century authors seem to orientate their writing towards this specific audience. Actually, the dystopian genre seems to have gained the interest of young readers, placing some works among the best sold titles and even leading to film adaptations, canalizing such success towards a mass public. Hence, the question here raised is which of the above recurrent topics are developed in dystopias conceived for teenage reading, since a dystopian exercise requires a delicate depiction of various societal aspects. The analysis of one of best sold titles in the past decades can provide and answer to this question, though a further study on many more would be needed to state a wider conclusion. One of these welcomed young adult dystopias has been, for example, Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (1993). A study led by Douglas Fisher shows, for example, how *The Giver* arises among one of the school most read-aloud novels in San Diego County (Fisher, 2004, p. 11). More recent are Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* series (2005-2007), Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* series (2008-2010), or Michael Grant's *Gone* series (2008-2013).

Two main reasons have led to the choice of Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* for the present paper. In the first place, it seems reasonable to work on a series of fiction which is already finished, so the conclusions here addressed cannot become obsolete due to an unexpected turn of events in the writing process. Therefore Grant's *Gone* will need to be analyzed in further studies. Among the other works mentioned, *Uglies* and *The Hunger Games*, as they are more recent, require the attention of the academy, given that there is even some research about Lowry's *The Giver* already. Thus, *Uglies* stands out as the subject of study due to the fact that *The Hunger Games* is currently a flamboyant series of feature films, so a scholar approach to Collins's work will require more meticulous examinations and the support of cultural studies.



In *Uglies* Scott Westerfeld presents a city set in the future, where the reader's society has disappeared due to a global crisis with fossil fuels and lack of respect for the available natural resources. The new social organization in *Uglies* is underpinned on equality among citizens, which is not only provided through politics or economics, but also with a compulsory operation that avoids ugliness and, therefore, all types of discrimination: everyone is to be pretty. The core dystopian element is the doubts about this sort of civilization fostered by the fifteen-year-old protagonist, Tally Youngblood, who unveils some gloomy truths and eventually tries not to be part of such equality.

Uglies can well be tagged as a dystopia since it depicts a society in which the protagonist does not want to live because of a series of negative features. Gregory Claeys, goes further than Mary Snodgrass in his definition of 'dystopia', explaining that this sort of literature "may in fact be sharply critical of the societies they reflect, (...) a fictional portrayal of a society in which evil, or negative social and political developments, have the upper hand (Claeys, 2011, p. 107)." The negative features of the civilization presented by Westerfeld in *Uglies* can be perceived by the reader through the distress felt by the main character, Tally, and her friend, Shay, since there is not a detailed description of the political structure. Then, is it possible to say that *Uglies* depicts a totalitarian state? There is indeed a ruling class, the Specials, who make the decisions. Citizens live at ease, though, since all their needs are granted and they are provided with occupations and entertainment. In fact, Tally's feelings towards the city at the beginning show that there is little left for complaints:

The view from up here was fantastic. Behind them the spires of New Pretty Town rose from the center of town, and around them was the greenbelt, a swath of forest that separated the middle and the late pretties from the youngsters. Older generations of pretties lived out in the suburbs, hidden by the hills, in rows of big houses separated by strips of private garden for their littlies to play in (Westerfeld, 2012, p. 46).

The trope that determines this novel being a dystopia is the fact that the characters feel distress and do not wish to live in such society any more. The protagonist meets a fellow teenager who is about to escape from the perfect dystopia,



as apparently life outside is fair and free: “They don’t separate everyone, uglies from pretties, new and middle and late. And you can leave whenever you want, go anywhere you want (Westerfeld, 2012, p. 89).” Tally subsequently feels, thus, that the authorities do not allow citizens to make any sort of decision, and people must follow all guidelines.

Isabel Walker Ross, who studies the influence and intertextuality in Westerfeld’s series of novels, states that the totalitarian government that rules in *Uglies* has got a blatant resemblance with Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* and Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (Walker Ross, 2010, p. 42). This is true insofar as in all three novels the citizens are given all their basic needs, but are disallowed to decide any aspect of their lives. Walker Ross suggests as well that the purpose of this totalitarian control is to maintain a strong social stability (Walker Ross, 2010, p. 46). The group in power, Special Circumstances, make sure citizens do not threaten the stability sought in *Uglies*. For this reason, they chase the outcasts living in the forest and force them to return to the metropolis, using the force whenever it is necessary.

A topic derived from the establishment of a totalitarian state is the alienation of citizens. In spite of the government satisfying their needs, the characters in a dystopia eventually realise that they are only granted hollow pleasures, if any. Hence, the dissatisfaction of the protagonist with society triggers the action. There is, in addition, a very common hinge in dystopian fiction, in which the main character is initially content with his life in the city and soon after realizes about how thorny his possibilities are when he wishes to fulfil any kind of individuality. In the case of *Uglies*, Tally is looking forward to getting operated on, so she can move to New Pretty Town, the district where young pretties live. Tally wants to be in that part even before the day she is supposed to, and sneaks into it to behold its beauty:

She could see New Pretty Town through her open window. The party towers were already lit up, and snakes of burning torches marked flickering pathways through the pleasure gardens. A few hot-air balloons pulled at their tethers against the darkening pink sky, their passengers shooting safety fireworks at other balloons and passing parasailers. Laughter and music skipped across the water like rocks thrown with just the right spin, their edges just as sharp against Tally's nerves (Westerfeld, 2012, pp. 3-4).



Tally actually argues any sensibility in becoming a dissident, after hearing from her friend Shay that all the entertainment and pleasure that they are given is just pampering. For the dissident-to-be Tally, the operation and mandatory equality are a must, since in the old times –i.e. the reader’s time–, differences gave way to conflict. Shay pulls Tally’s leg foretelling predictable Tally’s words, learnt at school:

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Shay recited. "Everyone judged everyone else based on their appearance. People who were taller got better jobs, and people even voted for some politicians just because they weren't quite as ugly as everybody else. Blah, blah, blah (Westerfeld, 2012, p. 44)."

The reader later discovers that not only is the operation an imposition of physical appearance, but also a reconfiguration of the brain to impede psychological difference among the population. A part of the brain is removed, and this is thus the reason that moves a larger group of dissidents to live in the wild, away from the control of Special Circumstances. In fact, the outcasts in the wild tell Tally the effects of the operation:

"There are no more controversies, no disagreements, no people demanding change. Just masses of smiling pretties, and a few people left to run things. (...) Becoming pretty doesn't just change the way you look, (...) it changes the way you think (Westerfeld, 2012, pp. 267-268)."

A researcher who has studied this particular dystopian trope in Westerfeld’s *Uglies* is Philip Gough. Gough highlights that this way of thinking is that of adolescents, since they need to foster their identity, and this is a task that a dystopia will hamper. According to Gough, the teenager feels “the fear of being alone, the desire to be part of a group, to be an individual without being an outcast, the need for purpose to make life meaningful, and companionship and love.” Gough suggests that that the operation denies all these, making all citizens equal and majorly affecting identity (Gough, 2010, p. 59). Thérèse Remus, moreover, points out that this policy of turning everybody equal is unnatural, since difference is the base of Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution. For Remus, the government indeed manages to spread dullness and a lack of spirit (Remus, 2013, pp. 4-5).



This type of alienation arises in *Uglies* as a typical consequence of the rule of a totalitarian party, and some scholars see the resemblance in other well-known titles of the genre. Walker Ross, for example, mentions a strong influence of Ray Bradbury and Aldous Huxley. In the first case, Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* depicts the same shallow-minded society that quibbles about nuisances, but is provided with all sorts of pleasures and entertainment. Walker Ross indicates a fragment of *Fahrenheit 451* that illustrates the parallelism:

You must understand that our civilization is so vast that we can't have our minorities upset and stirred. Ask yourself. What do we want in the country, above all? People want to be happy, isn't that right? Haven't you heard it all your life? I want to be happy, people say. Well aren't they? Don't we keep them moving, don't we give them fun? That's all we live for isn't it? For pleasure, for titillation? And you must admit our culture provides plenty of these (Bradbury, 2008, p. 78).

Happiness is exactly what most people seek in *Uglies*. Teenagers who undergo the operation quickly join a frenzy of dancing and playing:

It was all one big party, just like they always promised it would be. People were dressed up tonight, in gowns and in black suits with long coattails. Everyone seemed to find her pig mask pretty funny. They pointed and laughed, and Tally kept moving, not giving them time to do anything else. Of course, everyone was always laughing here. Unlike an ugly party, there'd never be any fights, or even arguments (Westerfeld, 2012, p. 12).

Keeping all citizens in contempt is, thus, a common trope in dystopian fiction. However, Walker Ross insists on seeing a direct influence also from Huxley's *Brave New World*. According to this researcher, the similarity is totally blatant, yet Westerfeld does not acknowledge reading Huxley, so "the key to this lies perhaps in exactly *how* similar the works are (Walker Ross, 2010, p. 13)."

In order to highlight a warning effect on the reader, dystopian literature is usually set in the future, so that it can provoke a sort of reaction. This feature, though, has been seen in numerous manners. There are some novels that draw the attention to an



imminent near future, such is the case of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) or Alan Moore and David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta* (1982), which are both set in a three-decade-far future, so the dangers there depicted are about to happen to the reader. Others, like Eugene Zamiatin's *We* (1921) send the action to a distant several-centuries-far outlook. Jack London's *Time Machine* (1895) is possibly an extreme case, since the action in his dystopian novel is set in the year 802,701.

Scott Westerfeld follows the same pattern, so the action in *Uglies* is set three hundred years from our time. There are some hints about this in the text. For example, The Boss, one of the members of the resistance, is in charge, among other duties, of the protection of old documents produced in the reader's age. When the protagonist finds these magazines, he yells at her: "Those magazines are over three centuries old, and you're not wearing gloves (Westerfeld, 2012, p. 202)." Westerfeld, furthermore, who has explained his work in the media in frequent occasions, highlights this: "Uglies is set three centuries after an "oil bug" has destroyed our present-day economy and all but erased our species (Westerfeld, 2012, web)." In addition to this, the authors makes the characters look back and judge the flaws of our own civilization, the society of which the reader is part. The collapse of it mentioned in the book is caused, thus, by our greed and misuse of resources:

Seeing them now, at night, the ruins felt much more real to Tally. On school trips, the teachers always made the Rusties out to be so stupid. You almost couldn't believe people lived like this, burning trees to clear land, burning oil for heat and power, setting the atmosphere on fire with their weapons. (...) The mess left by the Rusties proved that things could go terrible wrong if you weren't careful (Westerfeld, 2012, p. 62 & 74).

In brief, Westerfeld does acknowledge the use of this dystopian device with the purpose of underlining the flaws of our society, with the aim to warn the reader and try to have an effect on his critical view of the world.

Regarding the past, i.e. the reader's present, a recurrent dystopian characteristic appended to totalitarian power is the manipulation or the erasing of any documents describing past times. One of the best-known cases in this genre is the main character's job in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Winston Smith is in charge of editing old official



newspapers, adapting the texts so all the Party's predictions match what actually subsequently happened (Orwell, 2000, p. 43). Ray Bradbury, who is, as it was highlighted before, one of the influential authors Scott Westerfeld acknowledges the most, also depicts in *Fahrenheit 451* a drastic cultural rupture with the past. The government has got special units in charge of burning books that some citizens might have kept (Bradbury, 2008, p. 48).

Uglies does not portray manipulative media. The biased alteration of knowledge about the past is spread in schools, who adapt history to justify the dystopian policies imagined by Westerfeld. The aim of the operation is to make everyone as pretty, seeking absolute equality, hence granting social stability. This is, then, a major flaw of past times, with the consequence of thorny flux:

"Right, and things were so great back when everyone was ugly. or did you miss that day in school?"

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Shay recited. "Everyone judged everyone else based on their appearance. People who were taller got better jobs, and people even voted for some politicians just because they weren't quite as ugly as everybody else. Blah, blah, blah."

"Yeah, and people killed one another over stuff like having different skin color." Tally shook her head. No matter how many times they repeated it at school, she'd never quite believed that one. "So what if people look more alike now? It's the only way to make people equal (Westerfeld, 2012, pp. 44-45)."

Not only until the members of the resistance unveil the truth about the dystopian government does the protagonist learn the purposes of this manipulation:

"I wonder why they don't tell us that in history class. They usually love any story that makes the Rusties sound pathetic."

David lowered his voice. "Maybe they didn't want you to realize that every civilization has its weakness. There's always one thing we depend on. And if someone takes it away, all that's left is some story in a history class (Westerfeld, 2012, p. 346)."



The evidence that Westerfeld follows this dystopian model can be seen when the resistance hidden town is found by the government. The character known as The Boss immediately gets the old magazines to protect them from the fire, since these documents are “priceless and irreplaceable artifacts (Westerfeld, 2012, p. 291).” There is a clear resemblance between this and the burning of books in *Fahrenheit 451* (Bradbury, 2008, p. 53).

In addition to this, Amanda Craig (as Walker Ross highlights) interviews the author of *Uglies* to explain some of these dystopian tropes, and comes to the conclusion that this erasure of the past, well illustrated with the burning of documents, is also metaphorically depicted in the operation. Thus, the government gets rid of the past not only by removing texts, but faces too: “(Westerfeld) sees the literal loss of face as a loss of culture, akin to the books destroyed in Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (Craig, 2006).” Hence, Westerfeld also sees the necessity to establish a historical breach, separating our time and the dystopian one, in which the government draws us as a society to be forgotten.

The resemblance between *Uglies* and *Fahrenheit 451* is also notorious in the fact that there is a cultural impoverishment. Brian Stableford, for example, who also provides an account of common topics in this genre, points out that Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* is a depiction of the literary “man’s fear of the illiterate masses (Stableford, 2011, p. 269)”. Furthermore, Walker Ross considers that the emptiness of the culture in *Uglies* is a heritage from Westerfeld’s reading of *Fahrenheit 451*, which supports the thesis of Bradbury being one of the strongest influences: “The cultures in both texts create shallow and empty-headed people. Clarisse laments that people in Bradbury’s world do not talk about anything – everyone says the same thing (Walker Ross, 2012, p. 31).”

However, Bradbury is not the first one warning about shallow societies focused on vain pleasures. This topic is depicted in works as early as Huxley’s *Brave New World*, among others, which shows the traditional characters worried about image and trivial things, such as sex, drugs, or fun. Lenina, for instance, encourages Bernard, one of the protagonists, to enjoy the pleasure frenzy: “why you don’t take soma when you have these dreadful ideas of yours. You’d forget all about them. And instead of feeling



miserable, you'd be jolly. So jolly (Huxley, 2004, p. 79).” Among the more modern examples of dystopian literature, Suzanne Collins also portrays in her *The Hunger Games* this sort of petty civilization. Such feature can be found when Katniss and her fellow wretched visitors from the hungry working-class districts get to visit the Capitol, where they find a city only worried about fashion and social life, and absolutely unaware of the misery and scarcity among the rest of the nation. The characterization of Effie Trinket, who escorts Katniss to the capitol and teaches the protagonist manners, represents these shallow well-fed citizens, oblivious to the real struggle:

Bright and bubbly as ever, Effie Trinket trots to the podium and gives her signature, “Happy Hunger Games! And may the odds beever in your favor!” Her pink hair must be a wig because her curls have shifted slightly offcenter since her encounter with Haymitch. She goes on a bit about what an honor it is to be here, although everyone knows she’s just aching to get bumped up to a better district where they have proper victors, not drunks who molest you in front of the entire nation (Collins, 2011, p. 23).

There is, thus, a recurrent dystopian figure, the one who does not worry about the struggle of civilization, and only cares about the simple entertainment offered by the ruling power. Scott Westerfeld imagines in his book a society obsessed with appearance. If school explains to children the necessity to abolish ugliness in order to maintain stability, the truth is that the reader can feel the protagonist’s desire to undergo the operation is pure hedonism. This is especially notable when Tally invites Shay to simulate physical changes with the computer, and the latter is totally uninterested:

“You can dish it out, but you can't take it, huh?”

“No, I mean I just can't. I never made one.”

Tally's jaw dropped. Everyone made morphos, even littlies, too young for their facial structure to have set. It was a great waste of a day, figuring out all the different ways you could look when you finally became pretty.

“Not even one?”

“Maybe when I was little. But my friends and I stopped doing that kind of stuff



long time ago (Westerfeld, 2012, pp. 40-41)."

Image is not Tally's only concern, which also includes partying with other pretty lads (Westerfeld, 2012, p. 12 –quoted above). Even the park where teenagers intimate is called "Pleasure Gardens".

In short, it can be affirmed that Westerfeld considers the shallowness of future culture an essential element in a dystopian novel, so as to add the general warning to the reader about the danger of not cultivating the mind. This, thus, facilitates the totalitarian power the task of alienating the citizens, since they lack the capability to judge or develop a critical assessment, fact that needs to be added to the elimination of any past to which this civilization could be compared.

At this point it can hitherto be said that all those recurrent dystopian elements that were mentioned at the beginning have been confirmed in *Uglies*. Yet, a close study of the text and the revision of scholar approaches to Scott Westerfeld's novel raise some others that were initially not included in the original set of topics. Jennifer Miskec and Chris McGee, for example, set up a series of frequent themes in *Uglies*, in which, besides explaining the intellectual dullness and the dissidence of the protagonists, include some others such as the necessity of isolating the citizens in a metropolis (Miskec and McGee, 2007, p. 174). It is therefore essential to focus on these other topics and verify whether they could be added to the original group of thematic features in dystopian literature.

For this task, the urban aspect underlined by Miskec and McGee can be used as a starting point. According to both scholars, a common dystopian policy developed by these fictional totalitarian powers is the concentration of the population in metropolis, presented by the ruling elite as a safe option. This trope has actually been minutely analyzed recently, and this thesis was explained in the 16th Culture and Power Conference at University of Murcia (Galdón, 2013). However, if totalitarian leaders justify this separation between the city and natural-rural space in terms of safety and comfort for the people, a close study of the texts and the societies drawn by these authors proves that there are other reasons for such isolation. The purpose of it is, instead, to hamper the options to escape and disallow the citizens to know other



realities which could make them question their lives in the city. Some dystopian authors do consider this element vital. Eugene Zamiatin, for instance, even depicts what he calls a "Green Wall" that completely separates the dystopian city from the rest of the world. As taught by the government, anything coming from beyond this urban space is automatically understood as harmful:

From behind the Green Wall, from some unknown plains the wind brings to us the yellow honeyed pollen of Rowers. One's lips are dry from this sweet dust. Every moment one passes one's tongue over them. Probably all women whom I meet in the street (and certainly men also) have sweet lips today. This somewhat disturbs my logical thinking (Zamiatin, 1952, p. 5).

This trope can also be seen in Huxley's *Brave New World*, where an electric fence separates those living in the wild from the civilized inhabitants of a dystopian London who, in fact, despise natural areas (Huxley, 2004, p. 93).

The answer to whether Westerfeld continues this urban isolation can be found in several parts of his book. First of all, Pretty Town is not surrounded by a wall. Yet, people are not free to roam in and out. Tally and Shay are warned about their violation of the law as soon as they approach the city limits:

"Second warning. Restricted area."

Tally stopped her board. "If you keep going, Shay, you'll get busted and we won't be doing anything tonight (Westerfeld, 2012, 51)."

Secondly, the dangers of nature are eventually compensated for its beauty and also the evidence of seeing that life there is possible and actually pleasant. On the contrary, the city is an artificial set:

She'd never been beyond the city limits at night, had never seen it lit up like this from afar.

Tally pulled off her spattered goggles and took a deep breath. The air was full of sharp smells, evergreen sap and wildflowers, the electric smell of churning water.



"(...) Out here, you find out that the city fools you about how things really work (Westerfeld, 2012, pp. 57-59)."

Later on, Tally starts to love living in the hidden town of dissidents, the Smoke, where people live in conditions similar to those of the reader's time:

The physical beauty of the Smoke also cleared her mind of worries. Every day seemed to change the mountain, the sky, and the surrounding valleys, making them spectacular in a completely new way.

Nature, at least, didn't need an operation to be beautiful. It just was (Westerfeld, 2012, p. 230).

Finally, the third part of the process, after the safety alleged by the government and the realization of the protagonist about the goods of life in nature, is the reaction of the ruling class when they find outcasts living beyond the city limits. In spite of not being any political or economic threat for the dystopian civilization, the runaways are chased and, when caught, their settlements and artifacts destroyed. For example, when the Specials, those in charge of preserving social stability in *Uglies*, eventually find the Smoke, not only do they imprison all the dissidents, but also burn all the remains of their hidden town (Westerfeld, 2012, p. 287). This is, according to Walker Ross, one more similarity between *Uglies*, and *Fahrenheit 451* (Walker Ross, 2010, p. 12).

Another type of dystopian feature that was not acknowledged in the original set was the surveillance of citizens carried out by the government. Yet, it is true that surveillance is the best-known element from George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Some scholars regret that commercial television has caused that surveillance is perhaps the only known theme explained by Orwell, understood, besides, in a particularly wrong manner. Such is the idea explained by Michael Sherborne, who thinks that these television shows are "hardly a tribute (Sherborne, 2009, p. 8)." The surveillance that the government carries out in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* consists of a series of electronic devices called *telescreens*, which both broadcast propaganda and record video and sound of their surroundings:

The telescreen received and transmitted simultaneously. Any sound that Winston made, above the level of a very low whisper, would be picked up by



it; moreover, so long as he remained within the field of vision which the metal plate commanded, he could be seen as well as heard. There was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment (Orwell, 2000, pp. 4-5).

This idea goes beyond science-fiction, since it is based on the social tension that Orwell feared in the war and post-war years, where anyone could be reported as a conniving traitor to the realm (Sherborne, 2009, p. 97). While early authors in the genre, such as H.G. Wells –*When the Sleeper Awakes*–, Eugene Zamiatin –*We*–, or Aldous Huxley –*Brave New World*–, do not emphasize this totalitarian form of repression, the idea becomes, however, a common trope in a significant number of authors after George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Such is the case, for instance of the above mentioned Ray Bradbury, who in *Fahrenheit 451* imagines a mechanical dog that analyzes behavior and reports all those in the city who might be acting against the state regulations:

The Hound half rose from its kennel and looked at him with green-blue neon light flickering in its suddenly activated eye bulbs. It growled again, a strange rasping combination of electrical sizzle, a frying sound, a scraping of metal, a turning of cogs that seemed rusty and ancient with suspicion (Bradbury, 2008, p. 37).”

Gregory Clays, when studying the different stages of dystopian fiction, understands that this concern about the infeasibility of free-will and a stifling surveillance is triggered by the events known about the Second World War and the later Cold War (Clays, 2011, pp. 118-119). The question that can be raised at this point is whether contemporary dystopias, once this political context is no longer conditioning the author’s view of society, keep on depicting an extreme surveillance, underpinned on the development of technology. For this task, the analysis of Westerfeld’s *Uglies* can shed some light on the matter, and the conclusions can afterward be compared with other 21st century dystopias in future research.

A shallow approach to *Uglies* does not show the presence of mechanisms conceived to the vigilance of citizens. Although it seems that Tally Youngblood, the protagonist, enjoys all sorts of gizmos for her leisure, she does not feel followed by the



government. Yet, the reader easily comes to the conclusion that the Specials track both location and other personal information. The first glimpse in the novel is the announcement to Tally and Shay that they are hoverboarding near the city limits (Westerfeld, 2012, p. 51), what proves that the citizen's exact location must be reported at all times. In the second place, a more complex surveillance is unveiled when Shay runs away from the metropolis, as Tally is arrested in order to be interrogated. Dr. Cable, the leading member of the Specials, asks the protagonist about Shay's reasons to leave. She knows that there is a group of outcasts hidden in the forests, and all this information can only be retrieved through a strong surveillance:

Our city can stand a great deal of freedom, Tally. It gives youngsters room to play tricks, to develop their creativity and independence. But occasionally bad things come from outside the city."

Dr. Cable narrowed her eyes, her face becoming even more like a predator's. "We exist in equilibrium with our environment, Tally, purifying the water that we put back in the river, recycling the biomass, and using only power drawn from our own solar footprint. But sometimes we can't purify what we take in from the outside. Sometimes there are threats from the environment that must be faced."

She smiled. "Sometimes there are Special Circumstances."

"So, you guys are like minders, but for the whole city."

Dr. Cable nodded. "Other cities sometimes pose a challenge. And sometimes those few people who live outside the cities can make trouble."

Tally's eyes widened. Outside the cities? Shay had been telling the truth—places like the Smoke really existed.

"It's your turn to answer my question, Tally. Did you ever meet anyone in the ruins? (Westerfeld, 2012, pp. 106-107)."

'Minders', thus, is how Tally understands surveillance. The third notable evidence of surveillance is a pendant. This pendant is given to Tally by Dr. Cable, who forces the main character to pretend to run away to the hidden Smoke. Once there, the pendant



would send the Specials the location of the dissidents' headquarters. Nevertheless, Tally realizes in the Smoke about all the good will of the outcasts, who just wish to live away from the control of the government. Therefore, she makes the decision of throwing the pendant into the flames. The consequences that follow this action show the technological surveillance achievements of the Specials:

Tally kissed his hand and slipped inside, where she kicked off her shoes and crawled into bed with her clothes on, falling asleep in seconds, as if the weight of the world had lifted from her shoulders.

The next morning she awoke to chaos, the sounds of running, shouting, and the scream of machines invading her dreams. Out the bunkhouse window, the sky was full of hovercars.

Special Circumstances had arrived (Westerfeld, 2012, pp. 283-284).

In short, it can then be said that surveillance is an important feature in the dystopia presented by Scott Westerfeld, even though the Cold War scenario is chronologically far. Pauls Gough's study of *Uglies* states that this type of close observation of citizens is not drawn by Westerfeld by chance, and is based on Michel Foucault's invigilation scheme, as described in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Gough, 2012, p. 60). Plus, other works written around the beginning of the 21st century suggest some sorts of citizen-watching, like Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*. In its second part, for example, *Catching Fire* (2009), the president of the government blackmails the protagonist, Katniss, since he knows some secrets about her that would stain people's view of Katniss as a savior and well-doer (Collins, 2009, p. 28). It is, therefore, necessary to continue the study of this theme in modern dystopian literature, since its presence in other works would lead to suggesting the inclusion of surveillance in the list of recurrent topics developed in this genre.

The analysis of all the common features in this kind of novels has led to the consideration of a last element among the typical dystopian themes that was not originally pondered: romance. After the revision of the titles here mentioned as representation of the dystopian genre, romance arises as a vital part in the development of the plot. Such circumstance highlights the fact that the absence of this



topic in the series of recurrent themes in dystopian literature results in a major flaw in the initial analysis. Romance and the necessity to be loved is drawn by authors as a key influence on main characters in dystopias as early as Zamiatin's *We* and Huxley's *Brave New World*. In the first case, sex is a compulsory task among citizens, so romantic links in a certain couple are erased, since the state is the only institution to be *loved*:

The woman had a disagreeable effect upon me, like an irrational component of an equation which you cannot eliminate. I was glad to remain alone with dear O-, at least for a short while. Hand in hand with her, I passed four lines of avenues (Zamiatin, 1952, p. 10).

Love is, thus, one of the core storylines along the century, from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, in the post-war scenario; to the more modern *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1978), by Philip K. Dick. Does it still propel the action in modern dystopias, such as the one here studied? Romance surrounds Scott Westerfeld's protagonist from the story's very beginning. Although Tally and Peris are presented in the first chapter as best friends (Westerfeld, 2012, p. 3), she longs for the operation as her beloved Peris undergoes it before her, so he is sent to the area reserved for the new pretties, while she waits in Uglyville on her own:

But she had to see Peris, had to talk to him. She wasn't quite sure why, exactly, except that she was sick of imagining a thousand conversations with him every night before she fell asleep. They'd spent every day together since they were littlies, and now...nothing. Maybe if they could just talk for a few minutes, her brain would stop talking to imaginary Peris. Three minutes might be enough to hold her for three months (Westerfeld, 2012, p. 9).

As a result, Tally does not embrace the conditions provided by the government, and the later spying mission, due to political belief, but for the wish to reencounter Peris. This is not achieved, since the protagonist learns in the Smoke the dystopian truth about Pretty Town, and the programmed alienation there carried out. Romance is here a hinge again: the dissident David embodies Tally's admiration of the resistance and she falls in love with him:



She pulled away to take a breath, thinking for just a second how odd this was. Ugliers did kiss each other, and a lot more, but it always felt as if nothing counted until you were a pretty. But this counted. She pulled David toward her again, her fingers digging into the leather of his jacket. The cold, her aching muscles, the awful thing she had just learned, all of it just made this feeling stronger (Westerfeld, 2012, p. 280).

This makes her ditch her wish to go to Pretty Town, and she later fights for the Smoke's right to live away from the control of the government.

In regards to this matter, Kaleah Wolf is the scholar who has gone the deepest in her analysis. In her study on romance in young adult dystopias, Wolf highlights love as a central focus in the genre. In fact, this researcher understands that Tally takes up the cause against the Specials majorly thanks to David (Wolf, 2013, pp. 39-40). Wolf goes beyond this axis part in the *Uglies* series, since romance seems to also support the development of the plot in Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* series. This, therefore, arises as an interesting subject of study that shall be carried out in the future.

Conclusions

When all the topics listed at the beginning of the present research have been analyzed, and some others have materialized thanks to the contributions of a valuable number of scholars, it is time to provide an assessment of their presence in Scott Westerfeld's dystopian novel *Uglies*. So, being alienation of citizens the first of them, it is remarkably extreme in this title, since alienation is developed not only through education or propaganda, but with a straight operation in the brain. It is, indeed, Tally's disgruntlement when she realizes about this, triggered by her stay in the Smoke, what fosters the confrontation presented in *Uglies*. This confirms the second thematic feature: the dissidence of the main character. She joining the Smokies and their struggle to escape from the Specials leads to the development of a storyline that spreads along three books. This is, in fact, the pattern followed in most dystopian novels, though the results of such conflict results in different ends.

The thorny scenario drawn by Westerfeld is, as described in the novel, the consequence of economic and politic actions in the readers present, as it was explained



before. Therefore, *Uglies* is set in the future, to enhance the warning message. It, then, goes along with the dystopian tradition, which uses the negative context as a prospect to warn the reader. Besides, such future society hides all reminiscence from the past, that is, the reader's present, so the citizens of this dystopic metropolis do not know about the conditions in which we live. This is not the only manipulation carried out by the Specials in *Uglies*. All the citizens are encouraged to have shallow cultural interests, and worship quibble ideals. While Zamiatin focuses on sex, Huxley on drugs or Bradbury on television, for example, Scott Westerfeld makes his characters pursue physical beauty and meaningless entertainment, like an active social life. The aim of this is to wipe out the slightest possibility of critic thought, so social stability is granted. All these elements confirm that the society designed by the Specials is nothing but a totalitarian regime, since citizens do not have any possibility to make decisions or criticize the ruling power, and life is planned from the very day of birth until elder years.

However, if the topics listed when starting this study have been confirmed, there are others that had not been considered, and must be added. Such is the case, for example, of the dystopia being set in a metropolis. The city is the context designed by the government to fulfill their necessities of control of the population. Subsequently, the natural space arises as the only escape for dissidents, who must hide there. Such control confirms the second theme that has to be added: surveillance. If this is a classic trope in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the truth is that surveillance is developed in different manners in the genre. *Uglies*, for example, presents a technology to track the position of all the citizens, so the government can study their activities. Finally, the last topic that is to be added to the series is romance in the dystopia. Westerfeld uses love to awaken Tally's emotions and change the development of the storyline, launching the different phases of the novel.

The case of romance not being included in the original list, when it is present in most dystopian works, highlights the condition of such series of topics as work in progress. The fact that the original thematic group had to be completed proves that this is a task to be continued and constantly revised, since the thematic complexity of dystopian works will vary depending on the author's critic view of the present.



The method, finally, has proved efficient to draw the validity of those recurrent topics both in *Uglies* and traditional dystopian themes. The comparison between them results in a clear understanding of negative consequences of current flawed politics and economic problems, that lead to the undesirable future depicted in Westerfeld's novel. Plus, the comments on literary antecedents in the genre help to understand the influences in *Uglies*, and highlight the fact that in most cases they are universal worries, as tropes such as totalitarianism or a shallow culture have been criticized by dystopian authors since the beginning of the 20th century, if not before.

Discussion

When approaching the study of dystopian literature, the researcher will find that much has been written on the matter. The field has been developed by a remarkable number of scholars, even though in most cases it is presented as a subgenre of utopian works. There are thorough academic volumes that analyze this type of fiction, such as *No Place Else. Explorations in Utopian and Dystopian Fiction*, edited in 1983 by Eric S. Rabkin, Martin H. Greenberg and Joseph Olander (Rabkin et al., 1983). Another example of a volume on utopian literature that provides a meticulous approach into dystopias is Mary Snodgrass' *Encyclopedia of Utopian Literature* (Snodgrass, 1995). Yet, an author who tackles exclusively the features of dystopian works is Erika Gottlieb's *Dystopian Fiction East and West: Universe of Terror and Trial* (Gottlieb, 1992). However, it is possible to find more up-to-date publications that, while they are not oblivious to the previously mentioned authors, contribute with a contemporary analysis and a revision of classic dystopias from a 21st century point of view. Such is the case, for example of the edition by Gregory Claeys, *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* (Claeys, 2011), which consists of a series of painstaking investigations by experts from all over the world.

In addition to these, valuable recent scholar works specialized on specific authors can be found, like Huxley or Orwell. Michael Sherborne's studies of both is possibly the most notable case. His contribution results in much interest even though well known dystopian books have already been largely analyzed. Authors like Sherborne, though, do not only provide with a complete description of dystopian features, but also a connection to more modern titles and even their influence on other artistic fields.



In the case of *Uglies*, the fact that Scott Westerfeld himself has provided commentary on his literature needs to be considered. However, the sources are to be assessed before using such contributions for academic purposes. For example, Westerfeld has been professionally interviewed, so the information here extracted can be of much help at understanding his dystopian vision of the future. Besides, Westerfeld has published a large number of comments about his works on his blog, in many occasions in response to readers' inquiries. Nevertheless, there are some other sources that are of great interest when approaching *Uglies* as an enthusiast, though not quite academic. Such is the case of the volume *Mind-Rain*, for example. Some references to this title can be found, but *Mind-Rain* (Westerfeld, 2009) is actually a compilation of views about *Uglies* written by fellow young adult fiction authors.

Finally, if we focus on modern dystopian fiction, the academic community offers a significant number of works on novels such as Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies*, Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* or Veronica Roth's *Divergent*. At the time of analyzing scholar works on *Uglies* for the development of the present research, though, a unique circumstance arose. Most works were carried out by young scholars, and their contributions had been part of university thesis on several occasions. One of these is Isabel Walker Ross, who studies influences in *Uglies* providing a well-developed study (Walker Ross, 2010). Other scholars that tackle different sides of Scott Westerfeld's novel are Philip Gough (Gough, 2010), Thérèse Remus (Remus, 2013), or Jennifer Miscec and Chris McGee (Miscec and McGee, 2007). The reader will find that all these contributions have appeared in the last decade, what gives an idea of the interest that the genre arises these days. In fact, as it was mentioned in the introduction, film adaptations of dystopias like *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*, with a notable success, highlights the necessity to continue these threads and gather information, in order to conform a solid line of studies on the features of modern dystopias.



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