The Last Days: Haunting futures and parasitic subjectivities in the age of media franchising

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Abstract:
The dark and catastrophic futures of dystopian and post-apocalyptic YA fiction are often perceived of as critiques of late capitalist society, presenting an alternative to the status quo of what Mark Fisher once termed «capitalist realism». However, as these narratives at the same time comport according to the feedback and control mechanisms of genre conventions and popular media franchises, they also reproduce, within the system of genre and franchise structures, the very conditions under which creativity and, in extension, future worlds can emerge. The participatory aesthetics of dystopian and post-apocalyptic YA fiction, in which co-creation of other worlds is integral, here becomes a matter of adhering to the regulatory feedback of a system of control. Hence, the alternative futures presented by critical dystopias are already lost to the capitalist present. Nevertheless, this paper argues that one possible solution to the lost futures of capitalist realism can be found in the ecological concept of sympoiesis and in a parasitic notion of subjectivity. Discussing Scott Westerfeld’s two novels Peeps and The Last Days, it is suggested that the future of, and for, creativity lies in the haunting of parasitic infections.

Keywords:
Dystopian and post-apocalyptic YA literature, posthumanist philosophy, neocybernetics, media ecology, sympoiesis, participatory aesthetics, parasitic subjectivity, collaborative creativity, capitalist realism

There is no system without parasites.

The Parasite, Michel Serres (1982)

Despite all its rhetoric of novelty and innovation, neoliberal capitalism has gradually but systematically deprived artists of the resources necessary to produce the new.

Ghosts of my life: Writings on depression, hauntology and lost futures, Mark Fisher (2014)

This paper investigates the collective creativity of dystopian and post-apocalyptic YA fiction. It argues that the parasitic subjectivities of Scott Westerfeld’s two novels Peeps (2005) and The Last days (2006) offer a possible solution to the «slow cancelation of the future» (Fisher 2014, p. 6) that, according to Mark Fisher, is operative within contemporary cybernetic capitalism.

Dystopian and post-apocalyptic fiction has been a strong trend within YA literature over the last decade, with a number of highly successful global media franchises.1 Dystopian YA fiction here emerges in a precarious political tension, on the one hand thematizing and narrating a resistance...
against the catastrophic effects of capitalism; on the other, being an integral part of the very culture industry that supports capitalist ideology.

This tension is perhaps particularly evident in the way franchised dystopias employ the collaborative platforms of transmedia storytelling, in effect co-opting the «collective intelligence» Henry Jenkins prescribes as the critical and emancipatory potential of contemporary convergence culture (Jenkins 2006). Contemporary media franchises not merely reproduce popular cultural products; they in fact, as Derek Johnson argues, reproduce and control the very conditions under which creative cultural production can emerge. Presenting political agency as a central theme, dystopian YA fiction nevertheless produces a notion of the future as devoid of any alternative to the liberal-humanist version of freedom and subjectivity; in essence, a future already lost to the capitalist present.

If, as Mark Hansen and Erich Hörl (Hansen 2015, Hörl 2018) have argued, the media franchises and the biopolitical power of cybernetic capitalism not only capture and reify successful creative expressions, but also, in the media saturated environments of the computerized technosphere, operate in a temporality prior to the formation of creative subjectivities, there seem to be even less room – or hope – for any creative futures. Capitalist realism, as Mark Fisher argues, makes it easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (Fisher 2008).

Nevertheless, with Donna Haraway’s ecological concept *sympoiesis* and Michel Serres’ parasitic philosophy, in the following I will argue that Westerfeld’s post-apocalyptic narrative in fact does offer some sliver of hope. By presenting a distributed subjectivity haunted by future parasitic infections, what in Fisher’s *hauntology* amounts to the agency of the virtual or «that which acts without (physically) existing» (Fisher 2014, p. 18), I claim that Westerfeld’s narrative indicates a future of – and for – creativity.

The cultural parasite: *Peeps* and *The Last Days*

While Westerfeld’s dystopian series *Uglies* (2005–2007) has been discussed at some length for its critique of consumerism (Canode 2018) and notions of freedom (Gadowski 2014), *Peeps* and *The Last Days* have largely been neglected in academic discussions. Both books present an ecocritical reconfiguration of two of the most popular genres within contemporary YA fiction: the supernatural vampire thriller and the dystopian narrative. *Peeps* tells the story of Texan teenager Cal Thomson, who after a brief sexual encounter with a stranger in a bar, finds himself infected with a parasite that alters his metabolism and imbues him with supernatural abilities. In short, the parasite turns him into a vampire. However, unlike normal parasite positives – or «peeps» as they are referred to in the book – Cal is immune to the most radical effects of the parasitic infection, retaining large parts of his human personality, while the «normal» peeps are transformed into rabid, flesh-eating monsters.

At the beginning, *Peeps* presents itself as a traditional supernatural adventure detective story. Cal is working for a clandestine deep conspiracy organization called the Night Watch, which for centuries has protected humanity against peeps. However, as the narrative progresses, it becomes clear that the real purpose of the Night Watch is not to eliminate peeps, but rather to regulate and cultivate their existence within human societies. The world has entered into a reoccurring mode of global crisis. Enormous and all-devouring sandworms are emerging from unchartered depths within the Earth. In order to muster an army with which to counter this threat, the pandemic spread of the parasite – transforming people into mindless superhuman monsters – has in fact been orchestrated by the Night Watch. Accordingly, the peeps have one function, namely that of embattling the giant sandworms. In this sense, the parasite and the
parasite positives are part of one giant, global immune system.

As it turns out, by accepting a parasitic subjectivity, in which the human has always emerged symbiotically in collaboration with its environments, biological as well as technological, the survival of human – or rather posthuman – culture and civilization is secured. As the narrative of *Peeps* transforms its narratological positions, turning the parasitic other into the position of protagonist and narrator, Cal – as well as the reader – must move from an anthropocentric humanist conceptuality to an ecological framework in order to make sense of the world. What at the beginning appeared to be a recognizable vampire thriller, within a traditional, patriarchal discourse in which agency, as Beppie Keane notes, is tied to masculine consumption of the other’s flesh (Keane 2014, p. 29 f.), mutates into a posthumanist apocalypse in which the survival of humanity is revealed as always having been contingent upon the non-human within the human.²

In *The Last Days* the supernatural thriller and dystopian narrative is merged with high school romance. The story is alternately narrated by one of the five members of a pop band called «The Last Days», in short chapters with titles taken from band names. As the world is ending around them, these five teenagers – Pearl, Moz, Zahler, Minerva and Alana Ray – start playing music together. Coming up with an original sound and a novel approach to the pop music genre is one of the main concerns of the story, and influences and different versions of combinations and genre hybridizations are explicitly discussed. As several of the band members become infected with the parasite, albeit to relatively minor monstrous effects, the contribution of «The Last Days» to the history of pop turns out to be the actual sound of the parasite. Channeling the parasite in musical form, the band plays an integral part in the struggle against the giant sandworms, presenting a means of direct communication with the subterranean monsters. Culture in Westerfeld’s novels is not only a necessity for the survival of civilization and the human race; it is also ostensibly a parasitic infection, a strange haunting object with a weird agency.

Thus, the creation of a new world, as well as the survival of creative imagination, hinges upon participating in the distributed agency of the parasite. Michel Serres has famously described this move from **being to relation** with the concept of the quasi-object. The quasi-object both upholds and transgresses distinctions, while at the same time functioning as the environment for these distinctions. It is the circulation of quasi-objects that, according to Serres, forms a collective: «This quasi-object, when being passed, makes the collective, if it stops, it makes the individual.» (Serres 2007, p. 225) However, once the process of parasitic infections have commenced – and according to Serres this process has always been in effect – there is no stopping new infections, new cascades of parasites. Serres’ process of parasitism, which in the following will be described as neocybernetic and ecological, will help us formulate a new kind of political collective: a parasitic subjectivity.

Media franchises, dystopia and collaboration

In a discussion of the politics of dystopian fiction, Mark Fisher argues that the cinematic adaption of Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* (2012) indicates a movement «toward new kinds of collective action» (Fisher 2012, p. 33). The never realized threat of suicide in the culminating scene – as opposed to the escapism into the woods of the opening scenes – marks a real challenge to the totalitarian power of the Capitol, says Fisher. Here a possible future, a utopia of sorts, beyond the biopolitics and control mechanisms of cybernetic capitalism, is suggested.
This is certainly one viable – and optimistic – interpretation of *The Hunger Games*, and to some extent it seems reasonable, at least as long as one focuses on the first book (or film) in isolation. However, once the narrative is understood as part of the feedback structures of the genre of dystopian YA fiction, as well as of the social networks of both the fandom and media franchises of *The Hunger Games*, the nature of this future becomes all the more problematic. Although ironically commenting on the regulated freedom of participatory culture by delineating a society where collective agency consists of following a set of pre-given rules – which are crucially *not* followed by the threatened suicide – it could be argued that this critique is dulled as the narrative, in its sequels, clearly attends to the very same rules it seeks to transgress.

Once the narrative functions as part of a media franchise, it also needs to reproduce the forms of participation under which the new subjectivities of an audience can be generated (Johnson 2013). Thus, the form of collaboration within a franchise is far from unproblematic, particularly as long as collaboration is viewed from the horizon of modern liberal humanism prefiguring subjectivity as absolutely autonomous and original. The «new kind of collective action» embodied by Katniss and Peeta will then only take the form of a repetition in accordance with a pre-given set of structures. The freedom of creativity – and an accompanying notion of a non-deterministic future – is thereby produced and regulated by the media system of the franchise. The participation in a collective action here runs the risk of generating participatory subjectivities as collaborators, in the bleakest political meaning of the word (Johnson 2013, p. 205). This is decidedly *not* the kind of collective action Fisher identifies in the never realized suicide of Katniss and Peeta. The function of parasites in *The Last Days* offers a solution to this problematic. The Last Days, sympoiesis and recursive causality

Time in *The Last Days* is out of joint. The narrative unfolds at a point in history when the world has ended, albeit in a temporality that has yet to affect the human world. The cataclysm, the world-ending event, in which the sandworms and the peeps reconfigure the world, has already taken place, and its effects at the beginning the novel are just starting to have an impact. This disjointed temporality plays into the general configurative textuality of the narrative, in which the reader participates in the reconfiguration of pop music genres, while negotiating between the different narrative positions and voices operative throughout the narration.

Furthermore, Westerfeld’s two books establish a feedback relation where both novels seem to reconfigure each other, and collaborate in the process of world building. While details and characters from *Peeps* return, *The Last Days* is very much a stand-alone book. Rather than establishing a causal relation where one book follows the other, the relationship between the two books could be read as an example of an event that reconfigures causality. In this sense the two books, as a non-causal relation, function as a collective generating itself. This self-referring turn, in a sense focusing on its own creation – and more importantly engaging the reader as a collaborator in this creativity – has a metafictional function.

A novel that to a large degree is about the art of creating music will, of course, also be potentially metafictional from the very beginning. And, as James Burton has pointed out, since metafiction focuses on the creation of fictional worlds, it is an ecological form of aesthetic expression (Burton 2017, p. 267). Metafiction, argues Burton, is characterized by a generalizing tendency, where the literary work recognizes itself as already part of the world.

Performing and creating music becomes a metaphor for writing and experiencing the
book itself. As such, one of the central themes of The Last Days situates the reader in a feedback loop, one in which reading performs this theme while at the same time being thematized. The theme of the book becomes the environment of reading. In a sense this could be read as a version of the overturn of background and foreground, which Timothy Morton has discussed as ecomimesis, where aesthetic experience coincides with the emergence of the material environment of a literary work rather than focusing on the production of meaning (Morton 2007, p. 31). As the reader becomes enmeshed in the transition between narrative levels, participation in the aesthetic experience is also a question of participating in a distributed subjectivity.

In Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene (2016), Donna Haraway proposes the concept of sympoiesis as a model for describing the emergence of collectives and distributed subjectivities, comporting with her earlier theories of feminist-cyborg subjectivity, situated cognition and the becoming-with of companion-species. Haraway writes:

**Sympoiesis is a simple word; it means ‘making-with.’ Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing. In the words of the Inupiat computer ‘world game,’ earthlings are never alone. That is the radical implication of sympoiesis. Sympoiesis is a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems. It is a word for worlding-with, in company. (Haraway 2016, p. 158)**

Sympoiesis describes how the organization of living systems determines the environment, while at the same time being open to feedback from that very same environment. By creating their environments, organisms are created by the environment. From a neocybernetic perspective, Mark Hansen has described this paradoxical environmental feedback as a system-environment hybrid (Clarke & Hansen 2009, p. 115). Neocybernetic systems theories argue that one should understand autonomy as a system that is structurally coupled to an environment, and with other systems, by way of organizational closure. Accordingly, subjectivity is, from a neocybernetic point of view, an emerging event, and hinges on a self-regulating and self-observing system that in turn prescribes the conditions under which the material environment comes into being. In the form of a sympoietic system-environment hybrid, it becomes possible to describe a political collective that is generated by systemic feedback, but whose future is nevertheless not controlled and predetermined by the system.

### Parasitic creativity and the dystopian/utopian imagination

The question is – and this brings us to the core of my argument – how will a neocybernetic understanding of subjectivity offer a solution to the lost futures of capitalist realism? Could it not be argued that a decentered and distributed process of individuation – individual as well as collective – is precisely what the capture mechanisms of postmodern cybernetic capital presupposes and reproduces? And are not cultural hybrids and generic reconfigurations precisely what media franchises are producing in order to adapt to and reshape new audiences and new modes of production? Does a parasitic subjectivity really lie beyond the regulation and control of a contemporary systemic organization, and if so, how can we make sense of it, from our current position? Or is the freedom of a parasitic subjectivity in fact precisely what late capitalism dreams of?

Here we find a tension within the utopian/dystopian imagination that according to Fredric Jameson is crucial to the very notion of utopia, namely between innovation and intelligibility (Jameson 2005, p. xv). How do we describe new worlds, using concepts from this one? The other world can-
not be completely closed to the present, as it would then be unintelligible; nevertheless, it must operate with a certain closure that prevents it from being merely an extrapolation of the contemporary situation. To a certain degree, this tension also corresponds to that between classical utopia – presenting a perfect world that is completely separated from this one, and therefore not capable of being of any relevance to the present – and anti-utopia, in which the impossibilities of utopia are deduced from the political status quo. Both of these forms of utopian imagination thus fail to produce a properly new and other world.

The concept of critical dystopia has been suggested as a solution to this problem. A critical dystopia negotiates between the antimonies of utopia and anti-utopia, and furthermore, it operationalizes this hybrid textuality in order to present a new world that estranges and affects this one. Critical dystopia is in this sense an «impure genre» (Vaccolini & Moylan 2003, p. 8), and blending popular genres then becomes an instrument of critique and resistance (Donawerth 2003). Critical dystopia ultimately operates with a discursive strategy that focuses closure as disruption of a system (Jameson 2005, p. 23 l. f.). However, it also evidently does so by using already established and reified concepts and generic forms. This again would then seem to land us firmly within the tension between innovation and intelligibility: there is simply no way to narrate new worlds. Such an act would also be an act of creating the very apparatus of narrative.

A solution to this tension is to use a neocybernetic framework. Narrative texts, says Bruce Clarke, are always embedded in environments, in media ecologies, and as such they are «semiotic structures that mediate self-producing systems» (Clarke 2014, p. 15). The interrelation of narratological concepts – voices, levels, moods – as well as the blending of genres, can then be described as the structural coupling of system-environment hybrids that, by looping feedback, are engaged in a process of sympoietic co-creation. A parasitic creativity: partly created by, while at the same time creating, the environment.

Looping narrators

The Last Days narrates the formation of a collective, the coming together of the five young people who eventually come to form the band called «The Last Days». The story begins with a chance meeting between Moz and Pearl, who each narrate from their own position, and as new members enter the band – Zahler, Minerva and Alana Ray – a new voice and perspective is added to the narration. A keen sense of the identity negotiations of style, music genre and sub-culture coupled with a never wavering solidarity with each voice and perspective lends The Last Days a heterogeneous and polyphonic character. Thus the narration is explicitly distributed. It is not evenly distributed, however. Of the twenty-nine chapters plus epilogue, Moz narrates eight, Pearl seven, Zahler six, Minerva five and Alana four. This distribution corresponds to the order in which each character/narrator is introduced into the narrative. Furthermore, the book is divided into six parts, with each part introduced with a short excerpt from «The Night Mayor Tapes», a transcript from a sort of journal or diary, presumably by the leader of the Night Watch, whose title is Mayor. Here, a different, more authorial and authoritative voice enters into the narrative, presenting condensed chunks of information about the world in an almost encyclopedic mode. While these excerpts function as an ontological framework, establishing the supernatural world of vampires and monsters as the real world within the fiction, the five narratives presented are much more uncertain about which reality they inhabit. Weird events that, in alignment with the framework of the Night Mayor, are to be read as signs of intrusion and dominance by the supernatural world are rationalized and presented with plausible natural explana-
Doubt is often cast upon the reliability of perceptions and sensation.

On a narratological level *The Last Days* plays extensively on that experience of doubt and uncertainty that Tzvetan Todorov claimed lies at the heart of the fantastic (Todorov 1975, p. 33). Between the six narrative positions that constitute the narration of the book, different versions of events are presented, forcing the reader to actively participate in the construction of the narrative. No stable version of events is available, the authoritative stance of extradiegetical framing by the «Night Mayor Tapes» notwithstanding. But narrative agency is not only distributed between different narrators, it is also distributed within each distinct narrative voice itself.

This distributed agency is particularly salient when sensation and perception is thematized in the many instances throughout the book when the creation and performance of music is the main focus. The drummer in the band, Alana Ray, is here presented as a true synesthetic, seeing music in a spatial register as colors and architectural forms and patterns. Shortly into the first rehearsal with the band, the music goes through synesthetic transformations:

I was afraid, but I couldn’t stop. I couldn’t bring my drumming to a halt any more than I could smother the tapping of my foot or the twitches in my face. I was trapped here, caught in the pattern I’d helped shape.

Then reality shifted once more, like the sprockets of a film finally catching, and I saw something I’d almost forgotten… *what music looked like.*

Moz’s guitar notes were scattered like Christmas lights across the ceiling, shimmering in and out. Pearl’s sinuous melody linking and electrifying them. The dog-boy’s riff spread out underneath, solid and steady, and my drumming was the scaffolding that held it aloft, all of it pulsating at ninety-two beats per minute, alive and connecting us.

I stared at the apparition awestruck. This was the way I’d been born to see music, before the doctors had taught me to separate my senses, to grab objects and faces and hold them in place. Before they’d cured me with therapy and pills.

How had this other reality returned? Every sense conjoined, complete and undivided … (p. 85-86)

Metaphor in the fantastic is, as Todorov notes, translated into reality (Todorov 1975, p. 76). The singer in the band, Minerva, who is infected by the parasite, has similar paranormal perceptions, and her magical and reality-bending song, in a language no one has heard of, in fact stem from these perceptions. She sings the parasite. And as Minerva infects Moz – the parasite is sexually transmitted – the autonomy of his narrative agency is also disrupted and distributed.

The experience of the world, coinciding with its narration, is distributed between narrators, but these narrators, as narrative agents, are themselves also distributed. Narration in *The Last Days* is in this sense continuously open to new agencies; it is a collaborative collective whose organization – and control – constantly shifts. Perhaps nowhere else is this collective as explicitly thematized as when it comes to the control and organizing structures of the band itself.

The band as collective body

Sympoiesis describes how organisms are open to the environments in which they emerge, and while the environment too is open and adaptable, it also means that organisms are constantly adapting to an ecosystem, within that system’s structural organization. Control is still a matter of closure, although in the form of system-environment hybrids. This is how the group dynamics of the band are presented: as the sympoietic organization of an ecosystem, where each member is open to feedback from the others, while simultaneously affecting these others.
The process of naming the band thematizes this sympoietic closure. Up until the final chapter of the book, the band has no name. Attempts at naming the band recur throughout the narrative, poignantly so in a scene right before their first gig, when a record company executive threatens not to sign the band if they do not have proper name. The threat proves to be false, but negotiations concerning the band’s name continue until the end of the book, when in the epilogue Moz, from a genuinely post-apocalyptic position, reflects on the events unfolded in the struggle against the monstrous sandworms, where the band’s music has played an important part in averting total annihilation:

We’d become famous after all, even though the old ways of manufacturing fame – television, magazines, movie soundtrack – hardly existed anymore. There was still a lot of radio around, ten thousand backyard stations juiced with solar power, so everyone knew our songs. They know our name too, thanks to Pearl, who’d finally come up with the three perfect words to describe us. Even if it is a stupid plural. I mean, it doesn’t really make sense without the s at the end.

The Last Day? Come on. That’s as bad as the Desk. (p. 255)

While it appears to be quite clear from the beginning that Pearl will be the one in charge of the band, it is a control that is grounded precisely in her ability to be open and attentive to the affects of the others. Pearl is a multi-instrumentalist with pitch-perfect hearing and accordingly has an acute sense of how to listen to and understand, from a position of radical alterity, her fellow band members. Pearl comes forth as a wandering subjectivity, relational. She controls the group only as an effect of her ability to remain open, open to the collective but also, and more importantly, by remaining an open collective herself. The organization of the band is not hierarchical, but rather that of the collective individuality of a swarm, or a pack. This relational – and ecological – dynamism is first indicated by Zahler as he ruminates on his work as a dog walker during a day when his dogs are «acting paranormal» (p. 49) after being spooked by a cat that apparently seems to be dominating a pack of rats. This weird renegotiation of the control functions and hierarchies of nature is yet another sign of the pending apocalypse. Binary oppositions are replaced by an ecological logic that focuses on processes rather than dialectics. The organizing structure of the band is constantly renegotiated, retroactively rewriting its own history. «Every time you add or subtract from the pack, everything gets rearranged» (p. 50) says Zahler, not fully aware of precisely the extent of this rearrangement.

Participating genres
The band «The Last Days» is clearly a distributed subjectivity, an ecological organism consisting of a number of organisms that are mutually affecting and being affected by the control system of an evolving structure. Likewise, the narration of The Last Days is distributed over a number of narrators, whose relation is not simply causal (although connected by the binding of the book), but rather characterized by a feedback that reconfigures causality. The reader participates in this feedback, and it is a participation that is more radical than that of a traditional, hermeneutic act of interpretation. Rather, the ecomimetic function of the metafictional loops here also indicates a posthumanist understanding of the participation of the reader, in the form of a distributed subjectivity. This parasitic participation is further highlighted by presenting the function of genre as a feedback system of cultural memory.

In The Last Days, genres of popular music are presented as open systems that can be coupled to new systems and reconfigured as new genres. Here, genres are, as Derrida argues, open participatory structures, that is, ecosystems (Derrida 1980). The latest music
genre in *The Last Days* is simply called «The New Sound», and as it turns out, it is a parasitic genre not only in the sense that it is a distributed system participating in a number of different generic structures: not only is it a mix of post-rock, ambient and punk, it also incorporates the music of the parasite: «The New Sound was the music of monsters» (p. 195), as Pearl realizes during their first gig.

In a sense then, the new is ostensibly a reconfiguration of the old, remembering the old, but from the future position of the parasitic remainder within the system. A new systemic organization emerges as a system-environment feedback, creating while being created by its past organizations. In a similar manner, Westerfeld reconfigures the generic structures at play in his two books, presenting a narrative that is new and original by being haunted by its virtual futures. *The Last Days* presents a critique of the teleological temporality at work in the autonomized version of individuality whose ultimate expression is perhaps the neoliberal dream of transhumanism. Evolution is an ecological feedback, where new systems are coupled to each other, becoming new collectives, in the form of parasitic infections. But rather than a threat to the living, the parasite – following Michel Serres – has always been the form of the living, a «nesting series of vampires» (Serres 2007, p. 51), a future haunting the present.

**Musical (sonic) feedback**

The most literal expression of creative environmental feedback in *The Last Days* is of course music itself. The music that the band produces emerges as a collective effort, an organism dependent on all of its minute particulars. Each component affects the whole. While this distribution is upheld by the general ecological aesthetic of the book, it is particularly stressed in a number of scenes. Alana Ray’s drumming is perhaps the most explicit example of this kind of creative environmental feedback. As she is introduced to the band, and to the reader, she is using empty paint buckets as drums, set up on a subway grate in Times Square «suspending herself over a vast concrete echo chamber» (p. 60). Here the environment explicitly becomes part of the music. Conversely, music has the ability to adapt to and affect the environment. As it turns out, the parasitic «New Sound» sub-genre attracts and stimulates peeps as well as sandworms. Music also clearly becomes a prosthetic, and part of the body, a sort of embodied memory organism.

Playing their first gig, Zahler is about to forget his part, but eventually the corporeal memory takes over. Music is a cultural system to which the biological system can be coupled; it inhabits – and haunts – the body. It is very literally embodied culture. This biocultural technology is even more stressed in Moz’s reactions. In the silence that extends as Zahler hesitates, Moz seems to be succumbing to the bestial and violently homicidal tendencies of the parasite. However, here too a corporeal memory proves stronger: «Six years of practice took over: the Big Riff grabbed me, coiled around my spine and out my fingers, my nervous system responding as automatically as breathing.» (p. 212) The body here is a distributed body where the instincts of the parasite negotiate the corporeal memory of playing music, a coupling of systems – biological and musical – that eventually results in the emergence of a new distribution, a new perception and a new subjectivity. Each specific emergence of music, each new organization then emerges as a new world, as an effect of the feedback between system and environment, as a system-environment hybrid. It is music «for insects» (p. 252), as Alana Ray says, at once calling to mind the *Umwelt* theory of bio-philosopher Jacob von Uexküll and Brian Eno’s ambient music, both of which see an environmental agency as potentially world-generating (Fischer 2016, p. 80).

As it turns out, it is much through the efforts of the band that the threat of the total destruction of human civilization is averted.
The parasitic «New Sound» reconfigures the organization of the Night Watch, turning its hierarchical structure into an ecological collective, a distributed collective that acknowledges the alterity of the sandworm as the environment from which it emerges. The new form of collective action that Fisher asks for can here be located in the symbiotic relations underlying the very notion of sympoiesis. This notion of co-production is described by the second-order system Gaia theory. Here, as Bruce Clark argues, it becomes possible to describe a biopolitics that differs from the politics of purification that dominates the autonomous individuality of capitalist modernity. From a sympoietic understanding of ecological evolution, the immune system has never had the function of merely eliminating or expunging a hostile exterior world (Clarke 2017, p. 206).

The band participates in and reconfigures the distributed organism regulating the sandworms, emerging as a new systemic organization, a new system-environment hybrid, that nevertheless, in hindsight – but only in hindsight, retroactively – has a history and causality. «The Last Days» changes the system, by being part of the system. Likewise, The Last Days emerges from the genre of dystopian YA fiction (among other genres), but at the same time this genre, and whichever media ecologies comprise it, come into being only by this emergence. This is the point of the book. It changes the genre, while also simultaneously remembering the history of the genre.

Planetary feedback
In the end, the many system-environment hybrids of The Last Days would all seem to gravitate towards a Gaian vision of planetary feedback. Here, very literally, the world reconfigures itself – and its co-inhabitants – on a regular basis. Just as the parasite is part of the infected body, humanity and human civilization – including art and music – are part of the bio-cultural organism that is planet Earth. The problem is not the franchise structures of the culture industries and contemporary entertainment, but rather an anthropocentric humanist notion of autonomy, which can only identify feedback as control. However, a parasitic – posthumanist – participation means reconfiguring causality, in which belonging to an environment simultaneously creates that environment.

Westerfeld’s Peeps and The Last Days indicate how the genre text, the dystopian SF text, is part of the organizing principles of a franchise, and in this sense controlled by feedback, operating according to a pre-established structure. The future has thus already happened. But the genre text is also, even in its most controlled instantiation, always plus one. It is a new structure whose feedback alters, if only by temporal and spatial disjuncture, the original structure, generating a new organizational structure. Sympoiesis offers an alternative to the lost futures of media franchises. Here a critical dystopian – parasitic – imagination finds the energy to formulate potential new worlds beyond the biopower of cybernetic capture.

From the horizon of xenophobic capitalism, whose notion of individuality will always be absolutely autonomous, becoming parasitic might be tantamount to suicide, but from an ecological and neocybernetic position it is precisely here that the «new kinds of collective action» sought after by Mark Fisher become possible. This also means that the future, however much it might appear to be regulated by media franchises and globalized cybernetic power, will always be haunted by the agency of the virtual, by the trace of the parasitic other, the sandworm operating from within the system, remembering its past and future organizations. As Moz sums up in the Epilogue, appropriately named after the British post-punk band The Cure:

The earth was cured – or at least we humans thought so.

No one knew what the worms thought, or if they thought anything at all. We’d killed
practically all of them… except for the most intelligent ones, Cal always pointed out. The ones who somehow figured out that our music was deadly. So the next time the worms rise up, they’ll all be descendants of those clever enough to escape. They probably get smarter with every invasion of the surface: wormy evolution in action. (p. 257)

In the haunted temporality of ecological feedback, causality is recursive and retroactive. Only after the end comes the past into being. But the last day will always harbor yet another visitor, that uninvited guest, already sitting beside you, \textit{para situs}, as Serres reminds us, producing yet another cascade of worlding infections. There is no future without parasites.

Notes

1. The success of Suzanne Collins’s \textit{The Hunger Games} (2008), and its ensuing media franchise, has been instrumental in this development, in terms of both narrative and franchising strategies. Other relevant franchises are: Veronica Roth’s \textit{Divergent} series, the post apocalyptic \textit{The 5th Wave} trilogy by Rick Yancy, Lauren Oliver’s \textit{Delirium} trilogy, as well as Michael Grant’s \textit{Gone} series. See introductions to Han, Jin J; Triplett, C. Clark & Anthony, Ashley (eds.), \textit{Worlds Gone Awry: Essays on Dystopian Fiction}, and Hinz, Carrie & Levine, Elizabeth (eds.), \textit{Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults: Brave New Teenagers}.

2. This is how the concept of posthumanism is used in this article, as an ecological, cybernetic, systems-theoretical concept, following Hayles and Wolfe. Although Haraway makes a point about the theory of sympoiesis being «com-post», rather than «posthuman» (Haraway 2016: 11), it could nevertheless be argued that sympoiesis, as a cybernetic and ecological concept, comports precisely as a posthumanist concept, according to Hayles and Wolfe. See also my dissertation, in particular Chapter 1 (Israelson 2017).

References


