

SPECULATIVE ECOLOGIES AND NARRATIVES OF TRANSFORMATION: THE MATERIAL ECOCRITICAL SELF IN SCOTT WESTERFELD'S *UGLIES*

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Abstract

*This article explores the environmental and transformative narratives in Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* (2005), situating the novel within ecocritical and materialist frameworks. It argues that *Uglies* uses the tropes of young adult dystopian fiction to critique anthropocentric ideals of material aesthetics and the socio-environmental costs of their pursuit. Through a close reading of the novel's treatment of materiality, technological developments, and environmental futures, the article shows how the novel foregrounds the entanglements between bodies, technologies, and ecologies, and resists the posthumanist separation of nature and culture. In particular, the text's treatment of the natural landscape as both refuge and site of transformation complicates the simplistic binaries of civilization vs. wilderness, offering a speculative ecology that foregrounds hybridity, relationality, and environmental agency. The paper further considers the impact on the central character's sense of self, especially in regard to the text's appeal for readers in its negotiation of normative pressures around beauty and identity. In doing so, the study contends that *Uglies* functions as a site for critically imagining more ecologically attuned ways of being in the material world. Ultimately, the article contributes to the ongoing conversations in ecocriticism and YA studies by illuminating how speculative fiction can intervene in discourses about environmental materialisms, transformations of the self, and the possibility of posthuman subjectivity.*

Introduction

In the face of escalating environmental crises, young adult (YA) science fiction has become a vital medium for exploring the complex interplay between humanity and ecological

systems. Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* series presents a dystopian future where societal norms enforce extreme physical modifications under the guise of equality and environmental harmony. This paper examines the *Uglies* series through the lens of material ecocriticism, a framework that emphasizes the agency of nonhuman entities and the narratives embedded within material forms. By analyzing how the series portrays the interconnections between human bodies, technological interventions, and ecological landscapes, this study aims to uncover the underlying messages about environment and identity.

Applying material ecocriticism to the *Uglies* series reveals how matter—ranging from engineered human bodies to manipulated natural environments—actively participates in the construction of societal norms and individual identities. The series depicts a world where compulsory cosmetic surgeries are mandated to achieve societal conformity, reflecting broader themes of control over natural processes and the commodification of the human form. This narrative invites readers to consider the implications of such interventions on personal autonomy and ecological balance. By highlighting the agency of both human and nonhuman elements, Westerfeld's work encourages a reevaluation of the boundaries between nature, self, and culture, prompting discussions about the ramifications of technological advancements on both the environment and human identity.

This study addresses several key research questions:

- How does the *Uglies* series portray the agency of nonhuman entities within its dystopian setting?
- In what ways do human modifications and environmental manipulations reflect societal attitudes toward nature and technology?
- How can material ecocriticism deepen our understanding of the interconnectedness between human identity and ecological systems in YA science fiction?

By exploring these questions, this paper contributes to the broader discourse on environmental humanities and YA literature, offering insights into how speculative narratives can inform and challenge our perceptions about environmental materialisms, transformations of the self, and the possibility of posthuman subjectivity.

Thesis Statement

This paper argues that Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* series, through its depiction of compulsory body modifications and manipulated environments, critiques materialist values and explores the implications on the Self of technological interventions in nature. Using the lens of material ecocriticism, the study highlights how the agency of both human and nonhuman entities within the series illuminates the interconnectedness of ecological systems, human identity, and societal norms. Ultimately, it suggests that *Uglies* serves as a narrative cautionary tale, urging readers to consider the impact of technological and materialist consumption on environmental sustainability and individual autonomy.

Literature Review

In contemporary debates on climate change and environmental shifts, literature has proven to be an effective platform for initiating critical discourse about both the short and long term implications within the natural as well human world, Speculative climate fiction which has always addressed the critical environmental issues originating from the human world has received much critical attention in the last decade. Cli-fi authors use their literary works to spread awareness of the problem, provide potential solutions and motivate readers to take action (Rong 21). Murphy (2009) in his book *Ecocritical Explorations in Literary and Cultural Studies*

writes that “the writing and reading of science fiction are intimately linked to, and based on, getting people to think both about the present and about this world in which they live. Science fiction stories that emphasize analogy between imagined worlds and the reader’s consensual world encourage such thinking as well” (89). For Murphy (2009), extrapolation helps people to understand how the present and future are linked, and that our actions today matter because they will shape our future.

Chris Baratta (2011) believes that ecocriticism “urges us to embrace the fact that the study of the nonhuman world is just as important as the study of the human world when we investigate current social and cultural constructs of civilization” (2). Further, he feels that it is the writers of science fiction who become aware and bring awareness of the “detrimental effects that humanity’s progress is having on the natural world” (4). For him, science fiction and fantasy are important genres through which environmental awareness can be propagated and disseminated in society. Eco-critical readings of speculative/science fiction reveal much about how authors pose questions regarding the connection between man and nature. Eric Otto (2012) conceptualizes “Transformative environmentalism” to interpret environmental concerns within the socio-cultural framework of science, industry and ideology.

Material ecocriticism is a branch of ecocriticism that emphasizes the agency of matter and the entanglement of human and nonhuman worlds. It builds on the posthumanist insight that matter is not passive but possesses vitality and the capacity to participate in meaning-making. As Iovino and Oppermann explain, “material ecocriticism investigates how material forms and processes signify and produce narratives” (Iovino & Oppermann 451). At its core, material ecocriticism challenges anthropocentric paradigms by positing that all entities—organic and inorganic—are active agents in shaping the world. It draws on the philosophies of thinkers like Jane Bennett, whose concept of “vibrant matter” suggests that nonhuman things (like metals, electricity, or storms) can influence human and ecological outcomes. Her work functions as a way “to articulate a vibrant materiality that runs alongside and inside humans to see how analyses of political events might change if we gave the force of things more due” (viii). Bennett in her challenge to abandon the human centric binaries through which we view the world, especially in her exploration of food as a way through which our self is materially tied into the world around us. In literature, this translates into a reading strategy that recognizes landscapes, objects, and environments as narrative participants rather than static backdrops.

Iovino and Oppermann’s concept of “storied matter,” emphasizes that material forms—whether biological, geological, or synthetic—are imbued with narrative agency. According to them, the physical world is not a passive backdrop but an active participant in meaning-making processes. In their introduction to *Material Ecocriticism* (2014), they define the field as “the study of the way material forms—bodies, things, elements, toxic substances, chemicals, organic and inorganic matter, landscapes, and biological entities—intra-act with each other and with the human dimension, producing configurations of meanings and discourses that we can interpret as stories” (7).

In literature, this perspective shifts the focus from human-centric storytelling to the ways in which nonhuman entities and forces contribute to narrative structures. For example, in analyzing a novel, material ecocriticism might explore how the physical environment—such as a polluted river or a dying forest—functions as an agent in the story, shaping the characters’ actions and the plot’s trajectory. This approach is particularly potent in science fiction, where speculative futures often dramatize the entanglement of human and nonhuman agencies. Stories of synthetic

life forms, ecological disasters, or alien ecosystems highlight the narrative creativity of material entities, underscoring their role as co-authors of human destiny.

Science fiction (SF) is particularly fertile ground for material ecocritical analysis due to its speculative engagement with nonhuman agency, technology, and planetary futures. Material ecocriticism allows readers to explore how SF problematizes human control and spotlights the reciprocity between humans and environments. As Iovino and Oppermann note, “science fiction offers scenarios where the boundaries between the organic and inorganic, the living and the non-living, become fluid” (9), echoing the ontological flattening advocated by new materialism. In terms of literary method, material ecocriticism invites “entanglement reading,” where attention is paid to how texts encode the intra-actions between entities. For instance, analyzing how a ruined cityscape affects characters emotionally and physically is part of understanding the materiality that constitutes the narrative.

The key issues of material ecocriticism in the contemporary world are thus issues of the intersections between the human and material world. The idea that objects can have agency and as such cannot be controlled by human forces. Additionally, the obligations of humanity towards the disasters in the ecological world that have been created. This perspective has profound implications for addressing contemporary ecological crises, as it calls for a reimagining of human relationships with nature as one that is grounded in mutual respect and interconnectedness. For Iovino and Oppermann, material ecocriticism is not merely a theoretical framework but a call to action—a way of fostering a more inclusive and sustainable worldview.

Material ecocriticism thus urges readers to recognize the narratives of and about the physical world, as approached in works of literature, as an active participant in these narratives. By doing so, it bridges the gap between literary studies and ecological awareness, fostering a holistic understanding of the world as an interconnected web of vibrant, storied materialities.

Theoretical Framework

This paper proposes to use the idea of materiality in conjunction with the impacts of technology to determine the psychological as well as material impacts of the environmental landscape and its deterioration as presented in science fiction young adult novels where the ruins, cities and society of a postapocalyptic world are set in a future which has its roots in the present-day world.

The framework for this study considers literature and cultural artifacts as not merely representations of the material world but as active participants in the ongoing creation of meaning. While material ecocriticism argues for an understanding of materialism that is not confined to individual behavior but is embedded in socio-cultural and ecological contexts, calling for a more collective and environmentally conscious critique of material consumption. By connecting the psychological mechanisms that mediate the relationship between materialism and well-being with material ecocriticism, we can better understand the complex interplay between human well-being and ecological sustainability. This serves to emphasize the need for a shift in both individual behaviors and societal values to address the environmental crises of our time.

A key term in material ecocriticism is “storied matter”—the idea that material entities “embody and express meanings, act as storytellers, and participate in the formation of cultural texts” (Iovino & Oppermann 13). This invites new ways of reading literature where the material world is no longer just setting or metaphor but a co-narrator. The movement also critiques the binary of nature vs. culture, foregrounding hybridity and interconnectedness. It is especially relevant in the Anthropocene, where human impacts are materially inscribed into geology, climate, and systems of belief. Literature, particularly speculative fiction, can reflect and refract

these themes to highlight that “narratives are not only human products but emerge from the dense interplay of bodies, natures, and discourses” (Iovino & Oppermann 7).

Christopher, Saliba, and Deadmarsh's (2009) article *Materialism and Well-being: The Mediating Effect of Locus of Control* explores the relationship between materialism, well-being, and locus of control, presenting a theoretical framework that highlights the impact of materialistic values on psychological outcomes. This framework critiques the cultural and psychological dimensions of material consumption while linking them to broader environmental and ecological consequences. In this context, the authors' investigation into how materialism influences well-being and is mediated by locus of control can be viewed as part of a larger critique of the materialist mindset that underpins much of contemporary society's environmental degradation.

In their theoretical framework, Christopher et al. (2009) argue that materialism—defined as the tendency to value material possessions and success—has a detrimental effect on individual well-being. The authors align with previous studies that show materialism is "often linked to lower levels of well-being" (683), which reflects a deeper tension between human happiness and consumption. By framing the external locus of control as a metaphor for a worldview that externalizes responsibility for ecological and social problems, individuals who perceive environmental issues as beyond their control may engage in materialistic consumption without considering the ecological consequences, contributing to the ongoing degradation of the planet. In contrast, those with an internal locus of control, who believe that their actions can influence outcomes, may be more likely to adopt sustainable behaviors, reducing materialistic tendencies and fostering a more harmonious relationship with the environment.

Material ecocriticism, with its focus on how human desire for material goods contributes to ecological harm, resonates with this finding. Materialism, in this sense, can be seen not only as a personal or psychological issue but also as a manifestation of a broader cultural narrative that prioritizes consumption over environmental sustainability and collective well-being. The research suggests that people driven by materialistic values may suffer from a "shallow" sense of fulfillment, which material ecocriticism frames as part of an unsustainable worldview that fails to recognize the interdependence of human and ecological health.

Analysis

Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* opens with the young protagonist Tally Youngblood who is one of a group of young teenagers called ‘uglies,’ who at the age of sixteen are required to have complicated surgeries to make them ‘pretty’ - and just like everyone else. People aspire to become pretty as soon as possible and are made to feel ashamed of their natural looks. The other novels in the series are *Pretties* (2005), *Specials* (2005) and *Extras* (2007) which continue the story of Tally and her mission to find out the truth behind the mass propagation of the idea that everyone should look pretty.

For science fiction writers, questions of biological changes lie either in human nature or the natural surroundings. Genetic engineering, DNA manipulation, creation of cyborgs and hybrids of man and machine are the subject matter of contemporary science fiction, but so is the mutation of the surroundings. The novel opens with Tally noticing that the “early summer sky was the color of cat vomit” (3). The sky's unappealing color is not just a reflection of Tally's own internal feelings, but is the foreshadowing of a diseased environment where technology feeds on nature like termites.

While most critics like Bullen and Parsons (2007) have noted the novel's dystopian critique of conformity and control; In this study we are extending that reading by grounding it in

ecocritical and posthumanist theory. In the world of the *Uglies*, adolescents undergo compulsory cosmetic surgery on their sixteenth birthday, transforming from “Uglies” into “Pretties.” The Pretty surgery, while sold as a rite of passage, also ensures compliance by embedding lesions in the brain. Tally, the protagonist, initially longs to become Pretty, but her experience in the Smoke—a community of resisters living in the wild—reveals the authoritarian underpinnings of the beauty regime. Slavoj Žižek outlines what he calls the ‘four riders of the apocalypse’ in the 21st century as being “ecological crisis, the consequences of the biogenetic revolution, imbalances within the system... and social divisions and exclusions” (x). Westerfeld’s *Uglies*, which draws upon the divisions created by beauty aesthetics between the Pretties and the Uglies on the basis of allocation and access to resources and technology encourages a rethinking of aesthetic ideology through this speculative imagining of a future society obsessed with beauty.

The surgery to become ‘Pretty’; is thus not merely a cosmetic one - but rather a form of social control that restructures cognition and impacts the relationship of our Body with the Natural and Nature. This links to Braidotti’s (2013) concept of the posthuman subject, which recognizes the body as technologically mediated and politically situated. Tally’s modified and modifiable body becomes a site of contestation—one that complicates Enlightenment ideals of an autonomous, stable self, and affirms Braidotti’s emphasis on the body as “a threshold of transformation” (89). Tally’s identity is therefore not essential or static, but relational, shaped by her embodied experience across environments and regimes.

In aligning beauty with environmental degradation and resistance with ecological embeddedness, *Uglies* foregrounds the ethical stakes of aesthetic ideology. Moreover, the novel illustrates how bodies and environments are seen as coextensive and mutually implicated in systems of power and care. "human agency meets the narrative agency of matter halfway, generating material-discursive phenomena in the forms of literature and other cultural creations, including literary criticism" (Iovino and Oppermann 9). Rather than reject technology, *Uglies* suggests that ethical futures lie in reconfiguring our relationships with bodies, others, and environments. Through its speculative world-building, the novel imagines a posthuman ethics that is rooted in materiality, interdependence, and the refusal of normative constraints on beauty and being.

Westerfeld’s text poses critical questions surrounding not only body autonomy and beauty, but also links the same to environmental devastation and sustainability by reading these issues as "tangles of natures and cultures that can be unraveled only by interpreting them as narratives about the way humans and their agentic partners intersect in the making of the world" (Iovino & Oppermann 6). Tally Yongblood, who lives in a world where children are taught in schools how human beings of the past world destroyed themselves and their environment due to an abuse of natural resources. Tally and her friend Shay explore the ruinous remains of the towns where the ‘Rusties’ used to live; a nickname given to the people of the twenty-first century who used a lot of metal in their constructions which rusted. Through Tally’s recollections, we are given clues as to what led to humanity’s destruction: “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” (62).

Nearly two hundred years before the time in which the novel is set, human beings faced an apocalypse, ‘The Last Panic’ which resulted in an annihilation of both man and environment. These ‘rusties’ are meant to symbolize us, the present-day human beings. Other information given about the kind of practices which became the reason for their downfall, as Tally notes, are

“Rusties had been insane, almost destroying the world in a million different ways” (200). Through Tally’s eyes, the readers come to know what the Rusty Ruins look like:

Only a few twisted shapes of metal remained, rising above the trees like skeletal fingers grasping at the air. Burned-out groundcars were everywhere, choking the streets out of town, twisted together in the collisions of the Rusties’ last panic (147).

We are told that the Rusties were not self-sufficient, they fought wars, cut trees, wasted resources like metal, cut straight through the wilderness in order to build railroads and other infrastructure, built mechanical contraptions that could tear through anything; “the Rusties sure knew how to make a mess” (181).

The issue of environmental degradation becomes one of the central themes of the novel and is developed through a parallel of the natural world and city world i.e., Uglyville and New Pretty Town. Among the assorted reasons that Westerfeld gives for the environmental destruction in the days of the Rusties, one is the mutation of various plant species and genetic engineering gone wrong. This is something that Tally stumbles upon when she is on her way to join Shay in Smoke. When she questions the Rangers whom she sees burning the wild white tiger orchids growing on a hillside, they respond that they are trying to save the world.

About three hundred years ago, some Rusty figured away to engineer the species to adapt to wider conditions. She messed with the genes to make them propagate more easily [...]

They turned into the ultimate weed. What we call a monoculture. They crowd out every other species, choke trees and grass... (181-182)

The Rangers tell Tally that fire is the only thing that can stop the encroachment of the orchid species over the landscape, and she comes to know how the delicate balance of nature, when disturbed, can lead to danger and death.

The wilderness, in contrast, operates as a space of ecological and ethical transformation. The Smoke embodies the concept of trans-corporeality, wherein human bodies are materially intertwined with environmental systems. The Smokies’ refusal of surgical alteration and their reliance on the environment foreground a relational ontology that disrupts anthropocentric hierarchies and the illusion of bodily autonomy. The Smokies live in reciprocal relationship with their surroundings, recycling old-world trash and relying on renewable resources. When Tally begins to live with them, she rethinks the very foundations of her identity, beauty, and agency.

Iovino and Oppermann challenges critics and readers to not only consider narratives that are applied to matter as metaphors, but to instead use anthropomorphizing as a “heuristic strategy” (8). This, they claim, is a technique that reduces the distance between the human and the nonhuman and thereby lets the reader access perspectives that could be important when attempting to deal with the world in new ways through the use of imagination. Westerfeld’s depiction of the natural world also destabilizes binaries between wilderness and civilization. The city is clean and beautiful but ecologically barren; the wilderness is dangerous and difficult but fosters autonomy and critical reflection. This tension, as explored in the literature on YA ecodystopias, notably by Hintz and Ostry (2003), invites readers to question the costs of progress and the exclusions required to sustain a utopian surface.

Scott Westerfeld does not stop here but goes a step further and raises questions about the balance between technology and the environment in diverse ways. He achieves this through Tally’s understanding of her own world and the exploration of the wilderness that lies beyond the boundary of the city. Tally’s wonder at the sight of the full moon and the sounds of nature makes it clear that the inhabitants of her world do not interact with the environment. They are not

allowed or not interested enough to venture out, explore and discover the world beyond the New Pretty Town and Uglyville. Tally realizes:

Being in the city all the time made everything fake, in a way. Like the buildings and bridges held up by hoverstruts, or jumping off a rooftop with a bungee jacket on, nothing was quite real there. (74)

Tally's desire to sneak out is not simply a manifestation of teenage rebellion or curiosity; rather, it can be seen as a desire to not just understand the past but also to reconnect with nature. In order to show the readers and Tally what the outside world is like and how it contrasts with what she is familiar with, Westerfeld makes sure that Tally does not succeed in her initiation into society as a pretty, and winds up wandering the vast wilderness beyond the city in order to discover 'The Smoke'. The narrative not only revisits the ruins of the past, where humans interacted with technology before their eventual extinction following the Last Panic, but also reflects on the future and the dystopia it brings. It presents a speculative vision of an artificial city—not as a lesson learned from previous generations' technological interventions, but as a precursor to another impending apocalypse, where human interaction with nature has been completely severed.

Many emerging concerns regarding the preservation of the environment need to be seen in relation to social concerns. Westerfeld's characters interact with nature in a secluded clearing located in the heart of wilderness, 'Smoke'. It is Tally's friend, Shay, who first talks about The Smoke and its residents saying that "they're not like the Rusties, burning trees and stuff. But they don't put a wall up between themselves and nature" (92).

The inhabitants of this post-apocalyptic world like Shay seem unsatisfied with what Dr. Cable, a Special with the job of maintaining peace and order, called living in equilibrium with the environment. Once Tally leaves the city and heads for Smokes, her journey is a journey of realization that nature and wilderness is larger and much more awe-inspiring than she ever imagined.

She'd never seen dawn from outside the city before. Like most uglies, she was rarely up early enough, and in any case the horizon was always hidden behind the skyline of New Pretty Town. The sight of a real sunrise amazed her. A band of orange and yellow ignited the sky, glorious and unexpected, as spectacular as fireworks, but changing at a stately, barely perceptible pace. That's how things were out here in the wild, she was learning. Dangerous or beautiful. Or both. (151)

As Tally makes her way forward, she continues to be amazed by the beauty of nature and finally begins to understand why people chose to live outside close to nature with all its glory for it seemed as if "the world seemed to belong to her. Even in the cool air, the sun felt wonderful on her skin" (162).

The chapter entitled 'The Model' is the one in which Tally finally arrives at the Smoke and gets to take in her surroundings. From the very first impression of the Smoke, it becomes clear that the place is a mingling of technology and nature. It is a place where boundaries between nature and culture blur.

The scents of wood smoke and cooking drifted up to Tally, smells that made her think of camping and outdoor parties. In addition to the smoke there was a morning mist in the air [...] A few solar panels glimmered feebly, gathering what sun was reflected from the mist. Garden plots were planted in random spots between the buildings, twenty or so one-story structures made from long planks of wood. (195)

The Smokies engage in building paths for their hoverboards throughout the Smoke by tearing up metal from abandoned railroads, they build latrines, canal systems, and use solar panels. When Tally is horrified that they cut trees just like the Rusties in order to use them as building material, Shay reassures her that they plant just as many trees as they cut. The Smoke is a fully-functioning, well thought out community standing on its own. Shay realizes “They seemed so serious, as if their lives were a really complicated trick that had to be planned and replanned every day” (p. 204). Though Tally worries that the Smokies kill animals and destroy nature just like the Rusties used to, she soon realizes that it is not so. We are told that “The Smokies hunted, but they were like the rangers, killing only species that didn’t belong in this part of the world or that had gotten out of control thanks to the Rusties’ meddling” (230).

The text also debates human accountability to the environment in the chapter titled ‘Suspicion’ in which David, the leader of the Smokies, has a debate about deforestation with other inhabitants of the Smoke. In these dialogues, issues such as soil erosion, protection from sunlight and clear-cutting spring up. Scott Westerfeld highlights one of the most critical issues of contemporary times and shows what would happen if deforestation were allowed to thrive unchecked:

“Clear-cutting” was the word for what the Rusties had done to the old forests: felling every tree, killing every living thing, turning entire countries into grazing land. Whole rain forests had been consumed, reduced from millions of interlocking species to a bunch of cows eating grass, a vast web of life traded for cheap hamburgers. (233)

Tally’s repeated horror at witnessing the cutting of trees even by the Smokies is a reflection of how the problem needs to be dealt with care and one could end up repeating the mistakes of the Rusties if such practices continued unchecked. Futuristic dystopias in science fiction can serve as a mitigation strategy by raising awareness and prompting action, ultimately transforming the post-present into a utopia, as envisioned by environmentalist scholars.

It is here at the Smoke where Scott Westerfeld brings out the beauty of hard labor and the importance of community life in which each individual plays a significant part in survival and sustenance. Westerfeld shows the importance of things that objects that are made by hand and carry their value not in just use but also in the spirit of labor. Many uglies are attracted to the Smoke because of the freedom it allows, in contrast to the constricting, controlled environment of the New Pretty Town or Uglyville. Once the characters become attuned to living in peace with nature, they become less self-conscious about the physical beauty of their own physique:

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. (230)

By now, Tally understood that nothing in the Smoke ever lost its value. Nothing was discarded or given away just because it was old or broken. Everything was repaired, refitted, and recycled, and if one Smokey couldn’t put it to use, it was traded to another. Few things were given away lightly. [...] city things were disposable and replaceable [...] Here, in the Smoke, objects grew old, carrying their histories with them in dings and scratches and tatters. (231-232)

At Smoke Tally finds satisfaction and happiness when working alongside other Smokies to build structures around the Smoke and finds out how things like sewing and knitting work, which is something she had never known before. She notes that “however blistered her hands became, Tally felt stronger than ever before. [...] She learned from David how to repair her clothes with a needle and thread, how to tell raptors from their prey, and even how to clean fish”

(230). Despite the fact that Tally's life back home was easy due to technology, she relishes her time in the Smoke because of the joy that labor brings. The narrative is thus comparing human beauty with nature's beauty, creating an equilibrium between the two by emphasizing nature's beauty and its enduring presence over transient human constructs of physical beauty.

Though it is subtle, the critique on chemically treated foods and preference for organic food is there in the novel. Tally's ultimate disgust for the 'SpagBol' or packets of instant, soy-based dehydrated Spaghetti Bolognese is put in sharp contrast with her experience of fresh organic food at the Smoke. The 'rich taste' of the fresh food that Tally gets at Smoke is proof of what her world has been missing all along, and why it is not a utopia. By retaining the element of food, we can revisit material criticism in relation to food as a material entity as well. Bennett's concept that "food is an active inducer-producer of salient, public effects, rather than a passive resource at the disposal of consumers" (Bennett 134). Revelations like these add to Tally's perception of reality and she comes to know that cutting off completely from nature is not the solution to problems.

The food was serious too, and was piled on their plates in serious quantities. It was heavier than Tally was used to, the tastes too rich, like whenever her food history class tried to cook their own meals. But the strawberries were sweet without sugar, and although it seemed weird to eat it plain, the Smokies' bread had its own flavor without anything added. Of course, Tally would have happily devoured anything that wasn't SpagBol. (204)

In the city and for a while out in the wilderness Tally uses her hoverboard to travel which remains suspended a few feet above the ground. However, when Tally trudges on her feet in the Smoke she notices the gnarled roots, branches of the trees, and feels the seriousness of the nature around her. This first-hand experience with flora and fauna leaves a deep impression of Tally, so much so that she no longer wants to return to the city. Not only does she become a part of the community in the Smoke, but she also finds herself more peaceful and at ease than she ever was before. "Forgetting her troubles was easy in the Smoke. Life was much more intense than in the city" (229).

Where *Uglies* is full of references to the importance of connecting with nature and the need to address issues such as clear-cutting, Westerfeld's second book of the series *Pretties* does not dwell on this theme because the story shifts to the main conflict which is letting everyone in the world know that the surgeries and operations done to make everyone pretty also make the brain dull. However, some discussion of Tally in this novel with Dr. Cable does allude to the issue of environment preservation. Dr. Cable tells Tally:

Left alone, human beings are a plague. They multiply relentlessly, consuming every resource, destroying everything they touch. Without the operation, human beings always become Rusties [...] Outside of our self-contained cities, humanity is a disease, a cancer on the body of the world (104).

But most importantly, Tally and her friends also question what their current society is doing:

[David] smiled grimly. "Maybe it's not so complicated. Maybe the reason war and all that other stuff went away is that there are no more controversies, no disagreements, no people demanding change. Just masses of smiling pretties, and a few people left to run things."

Tally remembered crossing the river to New Pretty Town, watching them have their endless fun [...] "Becoming pretty doesn't just change the way you look," she said.

"No," David said. "It changes the way you think." (31)

Thus, we find out that part of the reason why the world decided to make everyone pretty and surround them with technology to simplify life was to stop relying on nature for resources and sustenance. However, as Westerfeld has already shown in the first novel, *Uglies*, staying completely cut off from nature is not the cure or the answer to all the problems. He shows us what happens when nature is exploited to an extreme, in the story of the Rusties, and then shows us what human beings have lost when they lost touch with nature in the adventure of Tally's journey to the Smoke and her experiences.

Just as there's no such thing as bad weather, only inappropriate clothing, there's no such thing as 'saving the planet,' only keeping on thinking and working for a sustainable society forever (4).

Rather than focusing solely on technology, we can better explore materialism, self-care, and self-perception, in terms of their connection to nature's deterioration. Under the guise of self-upgradation, we are horrendously ignoring nature and the environment. This is exactly what the *Uglies* are doing and what the Rusties have already done—we can view both as dystopian representations that highlight the Smokies as a more conscious alternative. Thus, the nexus between self-perception, not just as self-upgradation as a facade of consumer materialism, can be linked to environmental degradation and our anthropocentric mindset. To overcome this anthropocentric attitude, we must first abandon material consumerism, just as Tally does at the end. In this way, we can transition from environmental phobia to sustainability and a conscious ecological awareness. Interestingly, this narrative does not merely depict a shift from dystopia to utopia but rather mobilizes utopias through both past and futuristic dystopian settings, both deeply entrenched in material consumerism.

Conclusion

Science fiction has long functioned as a bridge between the past, present, and imagined futures, and Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* series stands as a poignant example of how speculative fiction can frame environmental and ethical questions for a younger audience. This close reading has demonstrated how the novels—particularly through Tally's transformation—offer a critical lens on contemporary society's dependence on technology and disconnection from nature. Westerfeld's narrative doesn't merely caution against a dystopian future; instead, it encourages reflection and deliberate thought about the consequences of our choices today.

Through Tally's time in the Smoke, the text foregrounds the importance of sustainable living, manual labor, and community-based values. Her shift from passive consumerism to active participation in a self-sufficient community illustrates the novel's investment in ecological consciousness and communal resilience. Westerfeld reminds us that environmental stewardship is not a solitary endeavor but a shared responsibility—an idea echoed in ecocritical discourses that promote an "ethic of stewardship" grounded in mutual care between humans and the natural world (Garrard 114-20).

While the environmental theme becomes less central in the later novels of the series, the foundation laid in *Uglies* remains a compelling invitation to envision a future where technology and nature are not adversaries but can coexist through informed, collective action. In this way, Westerfeld's work aligns with the evolving trajectory of eco-fiction—one that is less about impending catastrophe and more about sustaining hope, community, and ecological balance in the present.

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