

AUTUMN 2006 HONORABLE MENTION

Peter Kardassakis

Instructor's Foreword

Written for “Technological Visions of Utopia,” Peter’s essay, “Perception in the Pursuit of Reality,” impressed our teaching team with its originality of argument and sophistication of construction. In it, he perceptively examines the complex relationship between social reality and individual perception within the context of E.M. Forster’s futuristic short story, “The Machine Stops,” and Aldous Huxley’s chilling dystopian novel, *Brave New World*. Peter addresses the overarching questions from the course about the relationship between “free will,” technology and utopia in terms of his own interest in the role of imagination and dissent in the development of the reader’s perception. Using close textual analysis, he argues that the literary allusions in both works serve as imaginative critiques of the controlling technological forces at work conditioning the homogenous societies in these stories. Furthermore, he astutely observes that there are two levels of readership encouraged by these texts; one is that of the imaginatively dissenting readers within the stories—Kuno and the Savage. The other is the readers of these stories, like Peter, who can glean from their textual example an alternate way of judging the gradations of information and misinformation which daily inundate us in a technologically advanced society. His conclusion—that being able to perceive the disjuncture between the “mere feeling of independence” and “the presence of human individuality” will lead to greater social creativity—is wonderfully illustrative of the best potential of utopian writing.

Jennifer Barker

Perception in the Pursuit of Reality

Peter Kardassakis

There is no truth. There is only perception. – Gustave Flaubert

Our reality in life is only as good as our perception of it. Especially in modern day America, where freedom of choice defines much of our culture, the role of perception is essential to maintaining free will as advances in technology allow outside forces to control the exchange of ideas in society. As technological advances allow authorities to influence sensual perception and information flow more and more, this phenomenon paradoxically makes society's perceptions increasingly dependent on competing technological innovations to validate or invalidate them. In this way, a society possessing no free will can be, as far as its citizens are able to tell, one hundred percent free simply because its citizens have been tricked into misidentifying imposed limitations as personal choices. Fittingly, E.M. Forster's short story "The Machine Stops" and Aldous Huxley's novel *Brave New World* originally and realistically portray the effects of what happens when technologically influenced perceptions are imposed onto a society and allowed to supplant reality, consequently eliminating social freedoms in the process. Forster looks at how technology's role in communication can influence perceptions, while Huxley discusses the potential of genetic engineering for creating a biased predisposition towards our experience of life; however, each author's scenario achieves the same end—a society in which the loss of personal freedom is accepted by citizens blinded by technology's ability to deceive the senses and inspire false confidence in misinformation. Thankfully, both writers also use literary allusion extensively in their stories to give their readers a historical measure by which to identify reality, and thus real freedom of choice, in the worlds they propose.

E. M. Forster paints a world in which the pseudo deity of "the Machine" controls every aspect of human interaction, thus eliminating the circulation of free thought. Through the instantaneous communication it allows, as well as the physical ease of lifestyle it encourages, the Machine directs human evolution both socially and physically. Forster notes that in Kuno and Vashti's world, "the clumsy system of public gatherings had been long since abandoned" (110). Vashti's interactions with other people in her time period repeatedly stress the fact that face-to-face social gatherings have been abolished for more efficient long distance communications through the Machine; simultaneously, this diminished need for travel is reflected in a physical weakening of the human body, further compacting humanity's dependence on its technological deity. Though the machine "did not transmit nuances of expression," society learns to get over this lack of emotional clarity (109). They cite the improved efficiency this permits, suggesting that Vashti lives in a society more concerned with "practical purposes" than actual human interactions. As her contemporaries become dependent on the Machine for all of their sensory input and information, the Machine gains the ability to control political thought and social expression, creating a culture of infinite uniformity, as Forster puts it: "seraphically free / From taint of personality" (122). Clearly this implies a society void of free will, but what

about the fact that humanity has freely chosen to empower the machine so fully over them? While Forster is clear to specify that the results of this loss of freedom, such as the outlawing of the respirator and the establishment of “undenominational Mechanism,” are not the work of the Central Committee, his implication that society in general is responsible suggests that humanity, not the machine, is at fault for this loss (121–122). Overall, the free choice of an idle lifestyle supported by the Machine leads to the extinction of free will for the majority of individuals. And yet the majority does not see this loss of free will due to their impaired perception; Forster elaborates saying, “the human tissues in that latter day had become so subservient, that they readily adapted themselves to every caprice of the machine” (124). Through this manipulation of perception, Forster creates a world in which freedom is still technically alive in that no one force has disallowed free thought—thus Kuno’s ability to deviate from the world around him—yet due to society’s perception that everything coming from the Machine is good, humanity no longer possesses the desire necessary to exercise it.

In Aldous Huxley’s novel, *Brave New World*, the perversion of perception takes the form not of the control of communication, but of genetic conditioning. Huxley describes a world where, from the womb—though artificial it may be—fetuses, and later children, are taught to like the world in which they have been preselected to live. For workers “predestined to emigrate to the tropics,” “hot tunnels alternated with cool tunnels. Coolness was wedded to discomfort in the form of hard X-rays” (135). This process of associating cold with pain gives the embryonic babies experiencing it an innate predisposition towards warm weather. Conditioning allows for a world in which social prejudices become physical realities; for example, the Hatcheries intentionally deprive Epsilon embryos of oxygen to make them less intelligent. Upon being asked why one would keep an embryo below par, the Director replies: “Hasn’t it occurred to you that an Epsilon embryo must have an Epsilon environment as well as an Epsilon heredity?” (134). Not only are Epsilons stereotypically thought of as being mentally inferior, they are physically manipulated to be so. Thus society’s perception of reality becomes reality. When one recognizes the fact that—from a genetic standpoint—the babies selected to be Epsilons are in fact statistically more likely to be inferior, this practice’s connection to freedom becomes murky. One could argue that society is only tailoring environment to match a heredity created by Mother Nature. Of course, the babies in *Brave New World* aren’t created by Mother Nature, they are bred; and furthermore, fate dictates that while a child may suffer from inferior environment, some luck in genetics can make up for that. So by disallowing the presence of fate in the form of chance, Huxley’s society is inherently limiting not only personal freedom, but freedom in the form of nature’s unpredictability. It doesn’t necessarily matter that this is all done to increase social happiness. Huxley’s hatcheries create a society without ambiguity; what is destined to happen, happens; and, as a result, freedom of all forms is eliminated. Contrary to Forster’s society, where the desire to exercise freedom, not freedom itself, is removed, Huxley’s system of conditioned perception removes the human capacity to exercise free thought at an individual level, essentially removing the capacity for free will altogether.

While Forster and Huxley construct their dystopian environments using clearly dissimilar methods, the resulting “realities” created by each share many similar attributes. Because perception has become almost universally skewed in each, reality takes on different levels of existence; what is real to one group in society may or may not be so to the rest, thus freedom is not defined uniformly throughout. In “The Machine Stops,”

Kuno's reality of life beyond the distorted information feed and conditioned environment provided by the Machine contradicts Vashti's sense of security in knowing that life cannot survive away from the Machine's protection, just as Vashti's knowledge of a world of music greater than the distorted tunes of the dying Machine disagrees with a lecturer's advice to "Beware of firsthand ideas!" (121). Within *Brave New World*, the Director's knowledge of the genetic conditioning process contradicts his inability to disobey an order for quiet, instilled through that same conditioning; furthermore, the Savage's knowledge of Shakespeare and Mustapha Mond's knowledge of religion expand their reality to a world beyond the bookless prisons inhabited by conditioned Epsilons (139, 146, 137). Yet ultimately in both stories this multiple reality universe comes crashing down. In "The Machine Stops," Kuno's ability to think beyond that of the rest of society prepares the reader for a revolution amongst that society. According to Forster, as the Machine stops, humanity "dies," but Kuno and Vashti "have recaptured life" because they can see a future beyond the machine, setting them free of technology's limiting constraints (127). This shift in thought to look beyond conditioned perceptions into a world of greater free thought also occurs in *Brave New World* when the Savage debates with Controller Mond. The Savage, free of the constraints of genetic and social conditioning, vocalizes his great insight that freedom requires sacrifice, and thus free society requires the existence of toil and suffering. He does so saying, "What you need... is something with tears for a change. Nothing costs enough here" (147). The revelation of reality in *Brave New World* beyond what is conditioned does not require worldwide catastrophe to work its effect. It is a revolution in the mind of the reader, propagated by the Savage's refusal to blindly accept society's conditioning, which brings perception crashing down and a new emphasis on free thinking for Huxley's reader. In the end, both authors use this revelation of a reality without forced perception as a tool to encourage questioning of the status quo by their readers, which in turn is meant to stimulate free thought and encourage freedom in our own world.

Not only do the authors achieve the same revelation of reality for their readers, they also both do so using literary allusion as a lens for revealing that truth in their fictional societies. The most central thematic use of allusion in either text comes in Kuno's quotation of the fifth-century Greek philosopher Protagoras when he says: "Man is the measure... Man's feet are the measure for distance, his hands are the measure for ownership, his body is the measure for all that is lovable, desirable, and strong" (116). By citing a well-known adage about the importance of man's physical being as a measure of perceiving the world around him, Forster highlights the lack of reality achieved in Kuno's society due to humanity's physical dependence upon the Machine. Forster further utilizes allusion in the form of an ironic reference to Vashti's ignoring a view of Greece—the birthplace of philosophy—because she finds no "ideas" there, as well as references to the conquering of Wessex, England, suggesting Kuno's ability to conquer the machine's deception after viewing the hills of Wessex with his own eyes (114, 119). Continuing this English theme, Huxley's Savage uses extensive quotations from Shakespeare in his argument with Controller Mond. The Savage's citation of Hamlet's famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy saying, "Whether tis' better in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune...." serves as the primary basis for his discovery that society's greatest source of distorted reality comes from its abolition of suffering (147). The Controller's response, referencing characters from Othello, only serves to exemplify the point that true perception in Huxley only comes through the knowledge of history and literature

afforded to Mond as a world leader or the Savage as an unconditioned individual (148). While both Forster and Huxley are using textual allusion to further their themes on perception, they are also using them more subtly to warn their reader of the necessity of literature and history to maintain the exchange of free thought and the existence of free will in society. Overall, both authors use allusion as a foil to juxtapose past realities with the distorted perceptions they portray in order to give their works significance as a literary lens for discerning reality in our own time.

Throughout their writings, Forster and Huxley both embrace a multidimensional outlook on the role of freedom in dystopian society in order to emphasize the necessity of imagination, as well as the role of dissent in fostering that imagination under such settings. They establish a world in which freedom no longer exists in free thought, but in the misidentification of externally imposed thought as being one's own. Thus the aspect of freedom associated with individual independence is preserved since humanity does not know any better; but a much more fundamental aspect of freedom, original thought, is formally abolished by society. While objective freedom no longer exists, the psychological benefits enjoyed by an individual who thinks that he or she is free still remain. Yet both Huxley and Forster imply that such a false sense of freedom is not merely enough; in each society a select few undergo their own quest to attain the capacity for free interpretation—such as Kuno and the Savage—and in doing so they set in motion a revolution in the minds of both society and the reader. Once this occurs and reality is exposed, under the pretext of individualism for society and under the lens of allusion for the reader, a genuine paradigm shift takes place in the definition of freedom. It loses its false identity as a mere feeling of independence and regains a greater identity as the presence of human individuality, in essence allowing for the inclusion of emotion and creativity in these fictitious worlds. For both Forster's Kuno and Huxley's Savage, as well as for the reader, this redefinition of freedom brings about a sense that the world exists beyond merely them and their static perception of it. Consequently this new sense of imagination is meant to serve as a source of hope that though society is far from ideal, it will someday transcend the limitations of externally imposed perceptions to form a utopia based upon free thought and originality. In the words of Ursula K. LeGuin: "It is above all by the imagination that we achieve perception and compassion and hope."

Works Cited

Flaubert, Gustave. Attributed quote. 27 Nov. 2006 <<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/g/gustavefla161911.html>>.

Forster, E.M. "The Machine Stops."

Huxley, Aldous. *Brave New World*.

LeGuin, Ursula K., and Susan Wood. "Dreams Must Explain Themselves." *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*. New York: Putnam, 1979.