Is ‘The Brave New World’ Still Working In Our Time?

I.

In his non-fiction work Brave New World Revisited(1958), Aldus Huxley stated “The prophecies made in 1931 and coming true much sooner than I thought they would.” Indeed, his picture of the future world, which suggested a few appalling issues on humanity, had come true after its publication. It is no wonder the novel’s compelling, prophetic ideas made it possible for Brave New World to be ranked fifth on the list of “100 best English-language novels of the 20th century”.

Huxley’s Brave New World is often compared to George Orwell’s 1984, in that they both depict the future world as dystopian society. In comparison with 1984 which focuses on surveillance and severe regulation, Brave New World’s totalitarian state depends on conditioning and education rather than coercion. The authority’s governing methods are concentrated on controlling human desires and free will to pursue the society’s stability. Most notable examples are Hypnopaedia and a hallucinogenic drug called Soma. And surprisingly, they have become a reality in a similar mechanism in the twentieth century. In the real world, brain washing, influenced by the principle of Hypnopaedia, greatly contributed to the success of the Nazi’s propaganda. The conception of Soma, a scheme of controlling one’s subconscious, has a relation to MKUltra, the U.S.A. government-sponsored mind control operations in the 1950s.

Thus in this presentation I plan to re-evaluate the author’s concern of the future which is portrayed as the key ideas within the novel. This will include exploring the implication of the novel within those historical events, and therefore, it aims to discover how the novel contributes to enhance our vision of the world and humanity.

II.

In Brave New World, Hypnopaedia is introduced as a way of brainwashing education which intends to drill the idea of social behaviour and morals into targeted children while they are sleeping. A small speaker installed beneath each pillow whispers ‘Elementary Class Consciousness’ to sleeping children. It is about irrational insistence on classism and imposes the value of self-gratification, saying “Epsilons are still worse. They’re too stupid to be able to read or write…I’m so glad I’m a Beta.”(27) In doing so, these children become adults who conform to their surroundings. They become willing to fit in their place and correct caste in society. Indeed, they are designed to “like their unescapable social destiny”(16). This is well shown in the director’s triumphant shout that “The mind that judges and desires and decides-made up of these suggestions. But all these suggestions are our suggestions!…Suggestions from the State.”(29)
His assert confirms that Hypnopaedia is the significant governing principle together with Bokanovsky process, contributing to social stability. Bokanovsky process is a method of human cloning which focuses on identical genetic copies. This allows the government to control not only the whole number of population, but also the function of specific human beings. While this genetic engineering forms the backbone of the totalitarianism dictatorship by manipulating biological aspect, Hypnopaedia plays an important role in terms of shaping and controlling the mental world of the citizens. The essence of Hypnopaedia is a key aspect to effective control of the human emotion and behaviour which are considered to be highly variable, unpredictable and somewhat unreliable. This precludes one’s independent and higher thought. This proves to be effective when the citizens of the Fordian society unconsciously mention the adage from Hypnopaedia as if it is their own opinions, and put it into action.

This mechanism of brainwashing has become a reality as a form of political propaganda. This was evident in the Third Reich, which was the most notorious totalitarian state in history. In the real world, the government exploited the power of language to maintain the leader’s dictatorship and implementing Nazi policies, including Anti-Semitism and declaring total war.

Radio and loud speaker were the tools that the Nazi most heavily relied on, in terms of disseminating their ideology. Joseph Goebbels, Reich Minister of Propaganda in Nazi Germany once stated in his speech titled ‘Radio as the Eighth Great Power’, that “It would not have been possible for us to take power or to use it in the ways we have without the radio”

In 1933, the Nazi persuaded the manufacturers to produce the cheapest wireless sets in Europe. Consequently, the radio receiver named Volksempfänger (people’s receiver) was produced and sold at affordable price. In that year, one-and-a-half million sets were produced and in 1934, there was a huge increase in sales volume which was estimated more than 1 million in a single year. By the beginning of the war, over 70 percent of all households owned a radio set and it was the highest percentage anywhere in the world. (Welch 41-2) This ‘people’s radio’ was embraced by the Nazi Party as an effective way of distributing the ideas of National Socialism to the world. A good example is like this.

Whenever a speech by a Nazi leader or an important announcement was scheduled to be made, this network of radio wardens installed loudspeakers in public squares, factories, offices, schools, even restaurants. Sirens would howl and professional life throughout the nation would stop for the duration of the ‘community reception’ in an effort to persuade the individual citizen to identify with the nation. (Welch 42).

Another notable similarity can be found between the novel’s Hypnopaedic phrases and the text of Hitler’s speech. In his autobiography ‘Mein Kampf’, Hitler wrote that a fundamental principle of propaganda is repetition. Hitler agrees with Sigmund Freud’s insistence that “the orator who wishes to sway a crowd must exaggerate, and he must repeat the same thing again and again.” Hitler insists as below.

“The receptivity of the great masses is very limited, their intelligence is small, but their power of forgetting is enormous. In consequence of these facts, all effective propaganda must be limited to a very few points and must harp on these in slogans until the last member of the public understands what you want him to understand by your slogan.” (Mein Kampf, Adolf Hitler, pages 180-181)

Similar rhetoric strategy can be sensed in Hypnopaedic sentences of Brave New World. This may suggest that Huxley cleverly created the imaginary world’s slogan based on mass psychology. Here are a few examples of intended rhetoric.
“COMMUNITY, IDENTITY, STABILITY”

“Everyone belongs to everyone”
“Everyone works for everyone else”
“The more stitches the less riches”
“When the individual feels, the community reels”
“A gramme is better than a damn”
“Cleanliness is next to fordliness”
“Civilization is sterilization”

Repeated key words and themes such as ‘Every one’, ‘Community’ and ‘Stability’ can be easily found. Also, the use of internal repetition like rhyme and alliteration is appeared as ‘-ty’, ‘-ches’, ‘-eels’, ‘-am’, ‘-ness’ and ‘-tion’. These techniques enable the certain ideas to be naturally emphasised and inscribed in the listener’s memory quickly. In addition, the striking contrast of using negative and positive construction is frequently used such as ‘individual feels, the community reels’, ‘the more stiches and the less riches’ and ‘a gramme and a damn’. Though logically irrational, through consistent assertion, they are presumed to be true. This works effectively by making the listeners sympathise with the nonsense argument of the speaker.

On top of that Hypnopaedia’s fundamental principle seemed to influence Hitler’s speech tactic. Hypnopaedia is conducted on the belief that it is much easier to indoctrinate specific thoughts into people during light sleep. This is because while sleeping, one’s subconscious mind can be receptive to absorbing the message exposed to, without rational judgment. In this regard, irrational idea is likely to be incepted into one’s mind and influence one’s thought, feeling and behavior.

Hitler’s tactic proves this mechanism is convincing. It is a well-known fact that his speech was mostly conducted during the evening hours. He asserted that “In the morning and during the day it seems that the power of the human will rebels with its strongest energy against any attempt to impose upon it the will or opinion of another. On the other hand, in the evening it easily succumbs to the domination of a stronger will” (Mein Kampf). This shows that he was very much aware of the fact that people are likely to be easily swayed by the lunatic dictator’s incitement, when they are tired and thus more vulnerable to suggestion.

III. A mutual relation between the conception of ‘Soma’ and the hallucinogenic drug ‘LSD’

Though Bokanovsky process and brainwashing are key elements to complete the Fordian society’s stability and the citizens’ happiness, there still exists various conflicts such as stress, sadness, humiliation and disappointment triggered by human relationship. Accordingly, the government distributes a ‘free’ special pill called Soma that is designed to eliminate the recipient’s low mood. This means, Soma functions to close off the possibility of one’s spontaneous will to resolve a problem requiring logical thinking. To borrow Huxley’s own explanation, “The daily soma ration was an insurance against personal maladjustment, social unrest and the spread of subversive ideas”. Herein, the government’s impure intention can be noticed. No citizen realises this secrecy of the society since they are accustomed to take Soma as a method of escapism. They regard it as the norm to avoid confronting the troubles in life and instead pursue the immediate gratification provided by Soma. However unknown to them, the more the intake of Soma, the less it becomes of the ability to think and reason. This may lead to the abuse of Soma, destructing one’s autonomy.

In 1936, Aldous Huxley wrote “Propaganda and Pharmacology” to put an emphasis on mind-control drug technology. Huxley predicted that “The propagandists of the future will probably be chemists and physiologists as well as writers.” This perception of reality later became true when the C.I.A (Central Intelligence Agency)’s
confidential Project MKUltra was revealed to the public in 1970’s.

Project MKUltra is much known as the C.I.A.’s mind control program commenced in the early beginning of 1950’s and discontinued in 1973. It was the experiments on humans which aimed to weaken the individual to force confessions through mind control, with a variety of methodologies. “Another aim of this was to find drugs which would irresistibly bring out deep confessions or wipe a subject’s mind clean and program him or her as ‘a robot agent’.” Thus, the administration of L.S.D. (Lysergic acid diethylamide) was the most frequently used practice, which soon dominated many of MKUltra programmes.

L.S.D. is a non-addictive hallucinogenic drug which was first synthesized by Albert Hofmann, a Swiss scientist, in 1938. Hofmann found its psychedelic effect and it was commercially sold by Sandoz Laboratories in 1947. In the 1950s, C.I.A commenced Project MKUltra with the intention to use LSD on its mind control experiment, and “propagated the drug among young servicemen and students”. However, the experiment was eventually halted by the researchers since it was “too unpredictable in its results”.

Before the project was eventually halted due to its unpredictable results, CIA had illegally conducted the test in the street to investigate its prospective effect further. Accordingly, a number of tests were practiced without the subject’s consent. People got unknowingly drugged in their daily lives at the beach, restaurants, clubs, and that way, LSD had spread out from the lab to the young people in the streets.

During that time, American society had been going chaotic. The combination of the assassination of J. F. Kennedy, Anti-communism, Vietnam War, the race riots was about to radicalize the young people who got disillusioned with their government and society. In the meantime, this psychedelic drug had promoted the rise of the hippie movement and subculture which later was named 1960’s Counter culture. Hippie was cultural movement led by the young people, which first appeared in the 1960’s. Its motto was the pursuit of being happy, indifferent to others and outer circumstances, which led to reject the norm of mainstream American life. They were eco-friendly, advocated free-sex, and promoted the use of LSD, a hallucinogenic drug, with the belief that it may expand their own consciousness.

According to the hippies, LSD was the glue that held the Haight together. It was the hippie sacrament, a mind detergent capable of washing away years of social programming. (Jay Stevens - Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream)

Hippies had focused on using LSD in order to create the ability of self-transcendence, which enables them to reach the narcissistic world, liberated from the world they actually live in. Freudianism analyses Narcissism as “libidinal complement to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation” Consequently their concern was concentrated on not the way of the world but themselves solely. Though Hippie movement opposed to the Vietnam War in the name of ‘Love’ and ‘Peace’, it was far from the radical activism. Instead, they held flowers in their hands, carried out non-violent movements against the government. Soon, Hippie movement got criticised due to its passive resistance. Also, their trend of thought caused self-indulgence and escapism of reality. Being drugged by L.S.D., they got caught up in the fantasy of an utopian community, and refused to see the world through realistic eyes.

This shows well how the drug can affect the civilians’ mind and behaviour, bringing critical social consequences. Meanwhile, an interesting conspiracy theory was suggested with regard to this phenomenon. It insisted that C.I.A. had intentionally spread out L.S.D. on the purpose to pacify young citizens who had potential to become radical against the government. According to this, C.I.A. came to contribute to the creation of the 1960’s Hippie movement and the subculture. L.S.D could make “the youthful dissent into passive and nonviolent areas, like addictive, subduing, and consuming substances”.

Such an effect of L.S.D. was proved through the test at Edgewood Arsenal in 1958 which was conducted on soldier volunteers. After being drugged, they kept laughing during the marching and this led to breakdown of
discipline. Similar result was found when British soldiers joined the L.S.D. experiment in 1963. According to the research, “after one hour, one soldier suddenly climbed a tree to feed the birds. The troop commander gave up, admitting that he could no longer control himself or his men. He himself then relapsed into laughter” Indeed, L.S.D. was effective in distracting one’s rational will, making the taker feel high.

An important figure to support this plot theory was “The Grateful Dead”, a rock band representative of the psychedelic era. They played a great role in terms of creating America’s drug counterculture. The band members distributed LSD to the audience, encouraging them to take L.S.D while watching the concert. Later, it turned out that Robert Hunter, the band member, was once an employee of C.I.A’s MKUltra Programme. The band’s song writer John Perry Barlow also admitted in an interview with Forbes magazine that “he spent time at CIA Headquarters at Langley”.

Most of the confidential files regarding ‘Project MKUltra’ were destroyed under the order of CIA Director in 1973, and this still exists as one of the popular conspiracy theories. Whether this is a real fact or not, we should pay our attention to the possibility that a hallucinogenic drug can really be regarded as the government’s controlling method over the citizens. It cannot be also ignored of its potential power that created the 1960’s psychedelic movement.

As Soma did, the government utilised L.S.D. as the technique for mind control. Herein, we can notice Huxley’s keen insight of Social Science. He was already aware that psychiatric control of consciousness, by using pharmacology, could be crucial to authoritarian rule. Here, I cannot help mentioning Huxley’s more developed prophetic statement regarding drugs within the context of Brave New World Revisited.

That a dictator could, if he so desired, make use of these drugs for political purposes is obvious. He could ensure himself against political unrest by changing the chemistry of his subjects' brains and so making them content with their servile condition.

IV.

Within the context of Brave New World, Huxley illustrates how Hypnopædia technique based on brainwashing mechanism and Soma, place the citizens under social controls with diminished humanity. His satirical vision of a future raised awareness of totalitarian control over our lives, which can be possibly promoted by dystopian aspect of technology. When it became a reality, it was much more appalling. Hitler’s elaborate propaganda facilitated a horrible totalitarian regime in history, and "deprived eighty million people of independent thought and subjecting them to the will of one man”. Also, misapplication of drug for Civilian control led to Project MKUltra, which is known as “one of the most shocking C.I.A. programmes of all time”.

In Brave New World Revisited, he insisted “education in the proper uses of language” is required in order to penetrate vicious propaganda. It has been almost 60 years since this statement was made, however, this still sounds to be meaningful and significant to this day. This is because we are living our daily lives under full control of the media, which focus on social propaganda.

Another warning sign on pharmacology enables us to take a look around our society. Though drugs are strictly regulated by law, we can think of those that play a similar role to that of Soma. Television could be a good example. Huxley illustrates the dictator could use “tranquillizers to calm the excited, stimulants to arouse enthusiasm in the indifferent, halluciants to distract the attention of the wretched from their miseries”. In the same context, a negative aspect of Television can be explained. This is the reason why it has been shamefully called as an ‘idiot box’.

Huxley’s warning embodied in Brave New World is still valid nowadays. It helps us to broaden our vision towards the world in which we live in. Most importantly, the lesson gives us an opportunity to think about
whether we are also in the process of social conditioning by an invisible authority. *Brave New World* shows the value of good literature. This is the reason why we take an emphasis on reading the literary classics.