Religious Authoritarianism and/ or 'Instrumentarian' Technical Surveillance: *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *1984* (1949)

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Abstract

The present paper employs two literary and several theoretical lenses to scrutinise the question of social control – the literary lenses being Margaret Atwood's dystopian fictional narrative, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), of a theocratic society called the Republic of Gilead, and George Orwell's *1984* (1949), on a totalitarian state, while the theoretical texts include Henry Giroux's *Against the New Authoritarianism* (2005), Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1995), Bernard Stiegler's *Automatic Society I* (2016) and Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveilance Capitalism* (2019). This coupling of literary works of art and theoretical texts is not arbitrary, but proceeds according to Jacques Rancière's principle, that the interpretation of works of art should be carried out in the field where they converge with contemporaneous theory which resonates with them thematically, which is the case here, and to which one may add Rancière's own aesthetic-philosophical theory. The point of this interpretive exercise can be stated in terms of Hans-Georg Gadamer's tripartite hermeneutic 'circle', namely understanding, interpretation and application, where the first two phases of the 'hermeneutic experience' mark those of implicit interpretation (understanding) and explicit interpretation, and the latter the moment of (temporary) 'completion' of the process, when the first two are 'applied' to the interpreter's own situation. In this case, the latter amounts to the concrete situation of socio-economic and political domination of people's lives (including the interpreter's) by so-called neoliberalism in the rhizomatically structured 'network society' (Castells 2010), the latest phase of which Zuboff theorises as 'surveillance capitalism'. The interpretive grid which emerges in the course of this exercise enables one

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to arrive at a literary illumination of two successive (and not unrelated) historical phases of social control – one, exemplified by the United States under George W. Bush as president, which resonates strongly with the fictional society of Gilead, and two, the present global situation under 'surveillance capitalism', which resonates strongly with Orwell's *1984.* This approach – which yields interpretive fruits – juxtaposes these classic literary texts with the theoretical texts in question, illuminating authoritarian social control and its instrumentarian counterpart under 'surveillance capitalism' as uncovered by Zuboff.

Keywords: aesthetic, Atwood, authoritarian, Orwell, instrumentarian power, surveillance capitalism, technology, totalitarianism

> *'Nolite te bastardes carborundorum'* ('Don't let the bastards grind you down') (Margaret Atwood in *The Handmaid's Tale*, 1985).
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> The telescreen received and transmitted simultaneously. Any sound that Winston made, above the level of a very low whisper, would be picked up by it, moreover, so long as he remained within the field of vision which the metal plaque commanded, he could be seen as well as heard. There was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment. How often, or on what system, the Thought Police plugged in on any individual wire was guesswork. It was even conceivable that they watched everybody all the time. But at any rate they could plug in your wire whenever they wanted to. You had to live – did live, from habit that became instinct – in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinized (George Orwell, in *1984*, 1949).
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> Totalitarianism has discovered a means of dominating and terrorizing human beings from within (Hannah Arendt, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* 1951).

> The digital realm is overtaking and redefining everything familiar even before we have had a chance to ponder and decide. We celebrate the networked world for the many ways in which it enriches our capabilities and prospects, but it has birthed whole new territories of anxiety, danger, and violence as the sense of a predictable future slips away (Shoshana Zuboff, in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* 2019).

Introduction: Literature, Theory and Interpretation

Ordinarily, when one reads a novel, one's understanding of it is the outcome of the interaction between the 'world' it conjures up – whether in realistic or variously fantastical terms – and one's own, personal 'world', or framework for understanding the experiential realm in which one lives. This is unavoidable, and is one of the cornerstones of philosophical hermeneutics, for example that of Hans-Georg Gadamer (2004). In other words, all people understand, or interpret, new and unfamiliar experiences in terms of what is familiar, which (in its turn) is the outcome of all the experiences one has had until that point in one's life, combined with the reflections on these experiences that one has engaged in. In the process earlier experiences are revised, corroborated or modified by later ones. This is known, in hermeneutics, as 'the hermeneutic circle' (Gadamer 2004: 268-272). When one approaches a novel, or other literary text, through the 'lens' of a specific theory, the latter mediates and focuses the general experiential framework on the part of the reader, without cancelling it in the process. In other words, such a theory becomes the intellectually foregrounded part of the experiential framework one employs in understanding the literary text(s) in question.

With this in mind, it is worth noting Jacques Rancière's suggestion, that art – including literature – and theory meet in a mutually illuminating manner where making sense of the extant world is concerned. In his words (Rancière 2011**:** 31): 'The simple practices of the arts cannot be separated from the discourses that define the conditions under which they can be perceived as artistic practices'. This clearly does not mean that *any* theory would do. One has to examine commensurate philosophical or (social-) scientific theories that resonate 'horizontally' with specific literary texts (Rockhill 2011: 5), understood as literary 'partitions of the sensible'. The latter phrase makes the

role allocated to the arts in social reality intelligible. This pivotal phrase in Rancière's work – the 'partition (or distribution) of the sensible' – is well-known. Broadly, it means a specific manner in which the sensible world is configured, structured, and framed regarding what is perceptible, visible, audible, sayable and recognisable (culturally as well as politically). Rancière clarifies its meaning in this way (2013: 7):

> I call the distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it. A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts. This apportionment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution.

For anyone familiar with discourse theory, it would be apparent that Rancière has extended its field to include the domain of the perceptible, which implicates the arts in general insofar as they constitute explorations of the sensible realm, whether visually, auditorily or via figural means such as metaphor. 'Discourse' here refers to the discursive-linguistic sphere in and through which people become subjectivised, or become subjects. That is, discourse theory shows that meaning and power (empowerment as well as disempowerment of the subject) are linguistically aligned; for example, patriarchal discourse as instance of the 'discourse of the master' (Lacan 2007; Olivier 2012), empowers masculine subjects at the cost of other genders, who are systematically 'written (or spoken) out' of language as worthy subjects. The 'distribution of the sensible', for Rancière, therefore encompasses discourse in the customary sense as well as non-discursive qualities of the arts *and* of social and political space such as visibility and audibility, and amounts to the recognition that the arts are not innocuous when it comes to power, or the political; on the contrary, a scrupulous analysis of artworks such as paintings and novels will reveal that they 'partition the sensible domain', no less than politics does, along lines of inclusion and exclusion. This is even true of architecture (Olivier 2014).

Hence, to return to the question of the alignment of art, in this case

literature, with a commensurate theory, it stands to reason that the compatibility of one with the other would pertain to the specific manner in which each may be read as 'distributing the sensible'. Relevant theories have to provide a conceptual grid for understanding the commensurability between the world of the novel and extant social reality, and for understanding the possibility of transforming the social world 'aesthetically' (which simultaneously means 'politically') along the parameters of the 'distribution of the sensible'.

Authoritarianism in *The Handmaid's Tale* and in Contemporary America

Against the backdrop of Rancière's account of the interaction between literature and theory, it will be readily understandable that, when reading Henry Giroux's book, *Against the New Authoritarianism* (2005), let alone his more recent *The Public in Peril – Trump and the Menace of American Authoritarianism* (2018), one is involuntarily reminded of an exemplary literary text on (among others) the theme of (religion-based) authoritarianism: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) – the recent Hulu-television series by the same name (Miller 2017-2019), which is loosely based on the novel, is not my concern here. The latter well-known novel is a riveting narrative of a post-nuclear catastrophe regression to a supposedly biblically founded Republic of Gilead in what is now the United States of America. This literary, futuristic dystopia is hierarchically structured and ruthlessly authoritarian, with women and men strictly divided into (colour-coded) groups or classes, each with its assigned function within the religiously totalitarian state. All of this is justified by the régime in the name of the kind of biblical 'truth' that surpasses individual dissent (or consent, for that matter). I should stress that, although an anonymous critic has (superfluously) reminded me that '*The Handmaid's Tale* is not just about theocracy, it is also about gendered relations of power, of toxic masculinity and the role of the Church and its ideological networks which circulate in social, political and psychic spaces' – something I readily admit – this essay's focus is primarily and explicitly on the question of the novel's portrayal of religious authoritarianism. To be sure, this is interwoven with the themes listed by my critic, but the latter themes are not explored here.

The other text that immediately comes to mind is George Orwell's

Nineteen Eighty-Four (or *1984*, from 1949), of course, although, while being a literary depiction of a totalitarian state, it lacks the religious component. Orwell's *1984* is a well-known literary work, *with* its depiction of the brainwashing society of Big Brother, of Ingsoc, Newspeak (the language designed to inhibit critical thinking), the Thought Police, and constant surveillance of every citizen, monitoring their behaviour (lest they should exhibit signs of discontent, or worse, rebellion). Some readers may possibly remember that the reign of the Party in *1984* signified the political dictatorship that Orwell wanted to identify and warn against with this novel, published on 8 June 1949, and for the publication of which he probably paid with his life by postponing the medical care he urgently needed for tuberculosis at the time to finish writing the novel. In the following section *1984* will be subjected to critical scrutiny in conjunction with a commensurate theoretical text.

Returning to Atwood's Republic of Gilead, in this society the men are either Commanders, Guardians, 'Angels', 'Eyes' (spies) or doctors (in order of seniority), and the women either Aunts, Wives, Econowives, Marthas, 'Jezebels' or Handmaids. The heroine of the story belongs to the latter, red-clad class, the members of which have only one function, namely to breed, or reproduce, at a time when human fertility rates have fallen alarmingly. For this purpose they are assigned, one at a time, to a Commander, who has sex with them regularly, in the presence of his wife — a practice legitimated by a story in Genesis, where Rachel, not being able to bear children herself, entreats Jacob to have one with her maid, Bilhah, to be given to Rachel after being born. In the course of the narrative one witnesses the irrepressible human spirit on the part, not only of Offred (handmaid 'Of Fred', the Commander, just as 'Ofglen' is the handmaid assigned to Commander Glen, and so on), but also in the actions of the individuals (such as Ofglen) who surreptitiously work in a kind of resistance movement known by the code word, 'Mayday' (derived from the French for 'Help me').

Another way to put this is in psychoanalytical terms (Lacan 1997: 24), namely to say that the narrative bears witness to the fact that desire cannot be extinguished on the part of humans, even when they are controlled with an iron fist. 'Desire' here includes sexual desire, but encompasses infinitely more: the desire for rebellion, for instance, in even the most minute, ostensibly trivial things such as Offred wanting desperately to steal something — anything — from the kitchen in the Commander's house, and hiding it in her room, just to give herself the feeling of having a modicum of power. Sometimes, however,

this desire fuses with the desire for rebellion, as when she decides to hide a match in her mattress, in case she should have the guts to set the house on fire one day. Behind this desire, as well as behind that on the part of the members (including, improbably, Ofglen, Offred's shopping partner) of the underground resistance movement ('Mayday'), is the desire for freedom — since time immemorial a driving force behind the actions of people in the most diverse situations of bondage and oppression (recall the well-known rebellion, led by the slave-gladiator, Spartacus, against mighty Rome during the Hellenistic era).

That there should be such a resistance movement in Gilead rings true, in so far as any totalitarian state always spawns its own counter-force; as Foucault (1990: 84) so cannily reminds one, the fact that a discursive régime exists (for example patriarchy), calls into being its own counter-discourse (in this case feminism). Power begets counter-power. Another thing that is persuasive about Gilead is the existence of Jezebel's, where costumed, expendable women (like Offred's friend, Moira, who had escaped from the Centre where the handmaids are trained, before she was apprehended again) are kept to entertain Commanders and male trade delegations in various ways, ranging from hostess-type company to sex — the creation of oldish men who knew that their obligatory intermittent copulation, for reproductive purposes, with their current 'handmaid', would not satisfy their need for variety and excitement. This, too, is characteristic of a religiously puritanical society — recall the Victorian age, where wives were put on a pedestal of putative purity, while sexual satisfaction was sought with 'expendable' women such as prostitutes. This — the availability of a 'club' like Jezebel's in a veritable theocracy — is therefore symptomatic of the futility of religiously inspired political repression in such a paranoid fashion. Because Gileadean society does not cater for some of the most ineradicable human needs and desires, space has to be created for a place such as Jezebel's on the periphery of the 'officially' recognised society. It is an instance of what Julia Kristeva (1997: 153-154; 230-232) calls the 'abject', which is always kept at arm's length, because one cannot disavow it altogether, but cannot really affirm it openly either, lest it overwhelm one with its repulsiveness (for most people, cockroaches would probably occupy the position of the abject, or a corpse would — the paradigmatic 'abject', as Kristeva points out.)

Given its title, when one first starts reading it, you don't expect it to be the mesmerising novel it turns out to be, not least because of the resonance

between the 'fictional' future dystopian society it constructs and recent, as well as current developments in certain parts of the world – which is unsurprising, given the effects of globalisation, particularly as far as the so-called 'information (or network) society' is concerned (Castells 2010). Although, as far as the potential of information networks for diverse forms of social control is concerned (more on this below, in the discussion of Orwell's *1984),* these developments extend far beyond the United States to countries such as Brazil, Hungary, Britain, Russia, Turkey and – despite some fundamental differences in governance structures – China and North Korea, I shall here concentrate on the resonance between the fictional Gilead and the contemporary United States, given the salient intra-fictional connection between the two. (The same applies, largely, to my interpretation of Orwell's *1984.)* It seems fairly clear to me that Atwood conceived of the narrative of this award-winning novel on the basis of a projection of what she perceived in the 1980s already to be the potential threat of such a totalitarian theocratic state. It is one of the ironies of history and literary fiction that Atwood set her tale of theocratic authoritarianism in what was then and is today the United States of America; given the balance of worldviews in the 1980s between the United States of America and the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics, one might have expected it to have had the latter as its fictional context, were it not for the absence of the religious element in the USSR. Didn't Ronald Reagan glorify the liberties of 'minimal government' American democracy in his speeches of the 1980s — including his first inaugural speech of 1981 and his well-known 'Evil Empire' speech of 8 June, 1982, presented to the British House of Commons, where he eulogised the freedoms of American democracy, in contrast to the oppressive totalitarianism of the Soviet Union? Reagan (1982) stated explicitly that '...we see totalitarian forces in the world who seek subversion and conflict around the globe to further their barbarous assault on the human spirit'. Who could have anticipated that Reagan's political conservatism, coupled with its religious counterpart (neither of which seems very prominent in the speeches referred to earlier; in fact, they are downplayed) would, by the early 21st century, have burgeoned to such an extent in the USA that one of its leading intellectuals, Henry Giroux, could describe it as 'the new authoritarianism'? Among Giroux's trenchant descriptions of the United States under the Bush administration is the following (2005: 1):

> Embracing a policy moulded largely by fear and bristling with parti-

> san, right-wing ideological interests, the Bush administration took advantage of the tragedy of 9/11 by adopting and justifying a domestic and foreign policy that blatantly privileged security over freedom, the rule of the market over social needs, and militarisation over human rights and social justice.

This excerpt resonates with the theme of Atwood's dystopian novel, except perhaps for the reference to the 'rule of the market'. But of particular relevance for Atwood's futuristic vision of an America under totalitarian religious rule is the following excerpt from Giroux's book (2005: 6-7):

> President Bush sees no irony in proclaiming in one speech after another, largely to selected groups of conservatives, that he is a 'born again' Christian, all the while passing legislation that: weakens environmental laws such as the Clean Air Act; opposes a United Nations resolution to fund global Aids education and prevention; undermines the stability of Medicare; wages a budget war against disadvantaged children; denies millions of poor working adults a child tax credit; squanders the federal surplus on tax cuts for the rich; and increases corporate welfare to the tune of $125 billion, just as he decreases social benefits for millions of Americans, especially those who are poverty-stricken, old, young, and disabled.
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> Religious fundamentalism appears to be growing in the United States and the movement has received an enormous boost from those in power who think of themselves as 'chosen'. At the same time, this mounting religious fervour, with its Manichean division of the world into the modalities of good and evil, remains inhospitable to dissent and reinforces a distinctly undemocratic view of patriotism. The slide into self-righteousness and intolerance appears to be on the rise in American life as politicians and moralists lay claim to an alleged monopoly on the truth, based on their religious convictions — an outlandish presumption matched only by disdain for those who do not share their worldview.

What one could easily overlook, however, no matter how unlikely the link between Reagan's ostensibly democratic, freedom-promoting policies and the new authoritarianism referred to by Giroux may be, is the economic factor. The

reason why conservatives like Reagan and his contemporary in Britain, Maggie Thatcher, scaled down government, was to 'free' the market (that is, neoliberal economics) from what they saw as restrictive government interference. Religious authoritarianism and neoliberal market economics may seem to make strange bedfellows, but the match is not really that surprising if one remembers that, as Giroux points out, these wealthy conservatives tend to think of themselves as 'chosen' anyway, in religious terms, and it is but a short step from there to the belief that they are also destined to be at the top of the economic food chain.

The development from Reagan's America to that of George 'Dub'ya' Bush is therefore quite intelligible; the event of 9/11 in 2001 merely hastened the emergence of a new America where the connections between religious conservatism, authoritarian government and a ruthless market economy have been increasingly obvious. If this is kept in mind, Atwood's Gileadean society in a future dystopian America does not appear to be all that impossible, let alone improbable. Atwood gives one hope, however, with the (fictional) 'Historical Notes' that she appends after the end of the narrative events in Offred's life (Atwood 1985: 239-250). These historical notes recount events set in the late 22nd century, at a meeting of an historical association convention's symposium on 'Gileadean studies', where the 'discovery' of an artifact known as 'The Handmaid's Tale' is the subject of a lecture by one of its members. This artifact is not in written form; the novel by Atwood is supposed to be the transcript of the artifact(s), comprising a collection of audiotape-recordings on which 'Offred' appears to have recorded her story after she had managed to escape from the Commander and his household. One never learns 'Offred's 'real' name, although one might surmise that it is one of the names the handmaids whisper to one another in the old gymnasium where they slept (Atwood 1985: 9): 'Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June'.

From the perspective of the 'historical' study of the tapes' narrative, therefore, the Republic of Gilead no longer exists, and extant society appears to be looking back at a time of authoritarian, political oppression beyond the need for which humanity has developed. Rather than ending on a pessimistic note, then, this clever literary device (the 'notes') induces optimism about the prospects of society outgrowing the apparently deep-seated need for some form of 'absolute' (because theocratic) societal control. Whether Atwood's implicit optimism is justified, only time will tell, but Giroux and others' assessment of existing global political and economic conditions is not reassuring. A compara-

tive discourse-analysis along the axes of power-relations, made visible by Rancière's analytical lens of 'the distribution of the sensible', yields interesting results. Compare the excerpts from Giroux's work, above, with the following one from Atwood's novel, where Professor Pieixoto, one of the researchers who studied the tapes and edited their transcription, referring to the narrator on the tapes ('Offred'), remarks (1985: 243):

> We held out no hope of tracing the narrator herself directly. It was clear from internal evidence that she was among the first wave of women recruited for reproductive purposes and allotted to those who both required such services and could lay claim to them through their position in the elite. The regime created an instant pool of such women by the simple tactic of declaring all second marriages and nonmarital liaisons adulterous, arresting the female partners, and, on the grounds that they were morally unfit, confiscating the children they already had, who were adopted by childless couples of the upper echelons who were eager for progeny by any means. (In the middle period, this policy was extended to cover all marriages not contracted within the state church.) Men highly placed in the regime were thus able to pick and choose among women who had demonstrated their reproductive fitness by having produced one or more healthy children, a desirable characteristic in an age of plummeting Caucasian birthrates, a phenomenon observable not only in Gilead but in most northern Caucasian societies of the time.

In the excerpts from both texts there is clear evidence of a social and political hierarchy, where those on the higher rungs of the ladder presume to decide on the fate of others, which decisions are enshrined in certain 'policies' or rules that effectively relegate those who are excluded from the echelons of the hierarchy to the status of raw material for the reconstruction of society according to the authoritarian, or even totalitarian, vision of the empowered elites. What Giroux, above, labels the 'religious fervour, with its Manichean division of the world into the modalities of good and evil' in contemporary America, as well as 'the slide into self-righteousness and intolerance [that] appears to be on the rise in American life as politicians and moralists lay claim to an alleged monopoly on the truth, based on their religious convictions', clearly applies to the fictional Gileadian society as well, the 'authorities' in

which – as one can discern in the above excerpt from Atwood's novel – did not hesitate to wield well-nigh absolute power over those lower on the social and political power-structure. Then there is a conspicuous compatibility between particularly Atwood's evocation of the appropriation of (female) bodies by the agents of power, and Michel Foucault's (1990:142-143) conception of 'bio-power' which, according to the latter (in a theoretical text that interacts eloquently with Atwood's literary one), was increasingly evident in what became the pervasively exercised disciplinary regimes that took the place of traditional forms of sovereignty in Britain, Europe and the United States from about the second half of the eighteenth century:

> … For the first time in history, no doubt, biological existence was reflected in political existence; the fact of living was no longer an inaccessible substrate that only emerged from time to time, amid the randomness of death and its fatality; part of it passed into knowledge's field of control and power's sphere of intervention. Power would no longer be dealing simply with legal subjects over whom the ultimate dominion was death, but with living beings, and the mastery it would be able to exercise over them would have to be applied at the level of life itself; it was the taking charge of life, more than the threat of death, that gave power its access even to the body. If one can apply the term *bio-history* to the pressures through which the movements of life and the processes of history interfere with one another, one would have to speak of *bio-power* to designate what brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life.

However, the 'knowledge-power' in question in contemporary America and in fictional Gilead cannot be divorced from the vaunted 'truth' accessible only to those who subscribe dogmatically to a certain ideology, as shown in Giroux's (2005: 7) reference to '...an alleged monopoly on the truth, based on their religious convictions' on the part of American politicians and moralists, and in Atwood's (1985: 243) novel, by the indications that the children of 'fertile' women were taken from their mothers by the regime '...on the grounds that they were morally unfit'. Regardless of the fact that, in the latter case, the 'knowledge' at stake was spurious, 'bio-power' was indeed what the agents of authoritarian Gileadian power exercised over the bodies of those unfortunate

individuals who were subject to it by virtue of their designated station in society, such as the handmaids in particular, given their crucial role in repopulating the dwindling society. However, it was also exercised over the bodies of anyone who resisted or thwarted the regime in any way, even if such individuals were among the highest ranks, such as commanders. In fact, in the 'historical notes' (Atwood 1985: 248) it is suggested that Commander Waterford may have been such a person because of having harboured 'a subversive', possibly 'Offred' herself. This suggests that the 'distribution of the sensible' in Gilead, which was rigidly exclusionary regarding the power-relations among the different, 'Biblically' designated groups, was sometimes subjected to arbitrary 'redistribution', even where members of the ruling 'class' were concerned, depending on whether they satisfied the rigid requirements of conformity or not.

Evidently, in an authoritarian regime bio-power is exercised in a relentless manner – something that is also reflected in Giroux's text, quoted above, where he suggests very specific lines of exclusion in the way the 'sensible' realm was 'distributed' under George W. Bush's presidency. What else can one make of his reference to Bush's opposition to 'a United Nations resolution to fund global Aids education and prevention', to his destabilisation of Medicare, his economic war 'against disadvantaged children' and his decrease of 'social benefits for millions of Americans, especially those who are poverty-stricken, old, young, and disabled'? This is an exemplary instance of bio-power, wielded mercilessly against the bodies of the less fortunate who, in Bush's America, were the economically vulnerable, and which is indeed still the case in Donald Trump's America, as Giroux (2018) shows in his recent text on American authoritarianism under Trump. Early in the text (2018: 2-3) Giroux writes:

> As market mentalities and moralities tighten their grip all aspects of society, democratic institutions and public spheres are being downsized, if not altogether disappearing. As these institutions vanish—from public schools to health-care centers—there is also a serious erosion of the discourses of community, justice, equality, public values, and the common good. This grim reality has been called a 'failed sociality'—a failure in the power of the civic imagination, political will, and open democracy. As the consolidation of power by the corporate and financial elite empties politics of any substance, the

> political realm merges elements of Monty Python, Kafka, and Aldous Huxley. Mainstream politics is now dominated by hard-right extremists who have brought to the center of politics a shameful white supremacist ideology, poisonous xenophobic ideas, and the blunt, malicious tenets and practices of Islamophobia.

Again, we witness in Giroux's evocation of the current situation in America the characteristic manner in which the sensible world is being reorganised along rigidly exclusionary, cratologically authoritarian lines, which here issues from someone who is – or at least used to be – a wealthy businessman; hardly a person whom one would expect to be ruthlessly authoritarian as far as the well-being of *all* American citizens is concerned. And yet, looking at all the institutions and democratic practices (among them the most vulnerable in a society that is increasingly, and relentlessly, structured according to the mercilessly abstract logic of the market) listed here by Giroux, it is undeniable that this does represent a novel, market-based, neoconservative kind of authoritarianism. This is confirmed on an almost daily basis in media reports about what one might call Trump's 'authoritarian executive excesses' across a wide spectrum, which adversely affect the lives of millions of people across the globe, economically and politically. In this respect, as discursively depicted by Giroux, his 'presidency' – where Trump is arguably unworthy of such an office in a putatively 'democratic' country – interacts interpretively with the authoritarian regime in Atwood's novel, where each lends greater conceptual comprehensibility to the other. This much is emphasised by Giroux's (2018: 4) observation, which reads as if it could just as well apply to the dystopian social landscape of Atwood's Gilead, that:

> Trump has redefined government as the enemy of economic and social justice and in doing so has created a number of cabinet positions that will run what might be called ministries of repression and injustice. The United States has become a war culture and immediate massive forms of resistance and civil disobedience are essential if the planet and human life is going to survive.

The lesson that emerges from staging this convergence between art (literature) and theory should not be lost on anyone. Just as Giroux's texts have the effect, on the part of readers, of looking at Atwood's novel with new, contempora-

neously informed eyes, so, too, reading the former's perspicacious political-philosophical analyses of present-day America in the light of *The Handmaid's Tale* is a salutary reminder that authoritarianism comes in many dystopian forms, and is not confined to the 'aesthetic' sphere of the arts. The aesthetic and the political here mutually illuminate each other, which is made possible by the fact that both participate in the '(re-)distribution of the sensible'.

Social Control through Technical Surveillance

George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* (or *1984)*, first published in 1949, is paradigmatic in its representation of social control through multifarious surveillance. *This is evident* from its depiction of the totalitarian, brainwashing society of Big Brother, with the all-powerful Ingsoc (the 'Party'), Newspeak (the language designed to inhibit critical thinking), the dreaded Thought Police, and the constant surveillance of every citizen, via technical mediation (the 'telescreen' in every home and other frequented places), as well as surreptitious observation of (that is, spying on) citizens' actions by agents of the Party, monitoring their behaviour (lest they should exhibit signs of 'thoughtcrime', or worse, outright rebellion). Orwell's novel bears witness to his insight into the true character of totalitarianism, of which Shoshana Zuboff (2019: 337), referring to Hannah Arendt's magisterial study of this (at the time unprecedented) phenomenon, remarks: 'Essential to totalitarianism was the deletion of all ties and sources of meaning other than 'the movement''. Consider the following extract from *1984*, in which signs of such a 'movement' abound *(1949: 4-5):*

> The blackmoustachio'd face gazed down from every commanding corner. There was one on the house-front immediately opposite. BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU, the caption said, while the dark eyes looked deep into Winston's own. Down at street level another poster, torn at one corner, flapped fitfully in the wind, alternately covering and uncovering the single word INGSOC. In the far distance a helicopter skimmed down between the roofs, hovered for an instant like a bluebottle, and darted away again with a curving flight. It was the police patrol, snooping into people's windows. The patrols did not matter, however. Only the Thought Police mattered.

There are several indications here of pervasive surveillance in the world Winston inhabits: the prying police helicopter, the more fear-inspiring (albeit invisible) Thought Police, and, although it is not actively spying on citizens, the metonymic reminder of the omnipresence of totalitarian power, embodied in the ubiquitous image of 'Big Brother', at once avuncular and reassuring as well as menacing. It reminds one of the prison designed by Jeremy Bentham in the 18th century – the 'Panoptikon' – where wardens had visual access to all inmates in their cells on a continuous basis from a central tower, so that the latter tended to act *as if* they were being observed all the time, that is, by monitoring their own behaviour (Foucault 1995: 201):

> Hence the major effect of the Panoptikon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers.

Big Brother's omnipresent gaze has the same effect in Orwell's projected dystopian society, as one can infer from his description (Orwell 1949: 7): 'Winston turned round abruptly. He had set his features into the expression of quiet optimism which it was advisable to wear when facing the telescreen'. This sinister technical apparatus, perhaps more than anything else in *1984*, accords with Bentham's principle, 'that power should be visible and unverifiable' (Foucault 1995: 201). Like the central prison tower, it is constantly visible while, at the same time, those exposed to its Cyclops eye can never tell whether they are actually being observed. One of the differences between surveillance in *1984* and what has come to pass as advanced electronic surveillance today, however, is that this principle of Bentham's is no longer universally valid; today, power is mostly *invisible* and *unverifiable*. This may be gathered from a short article that resonates with Shoshana Zuboff's recent book on 'surveillance capitalism' (2019; discussed below), where Robert Bridge (2019) spells out the pertinence of Orwell's *1984* for the present global situation:

> In the very first pages of the book, Orwell demonstrates an uncanny ability to foresee future trends in technology. Describing the protagonist Winston Smith's frugal London flat, he mentions an instrument called a 'telescreen', which sounds strikingly similar to the handheld 'smartphone' that is enthusiastically used by billions of people around the world today. Orwell describes the ubiquitous device as an '*oblong metal plaque like a dulled mirror'* affixed to the wall that '*could be dimmed, but there was no way of shutting it off completely.'* Sound familiar? It is through this gadget that the rulers of Oceania are able to monitor the actions of its citizens every minute of every day. At the same time, the denizens of *1984* were never allowed to forget they were living in a totalitarian surveillance state, under the control of the much-feared Thought Police. Massive posters with the slogan 'Big Brother is Watching You' were as prevalent as our modern-day advertising billboards. Today, however, such polite warnings about surveillance would seem redundant, as reports of unauthorized spying still get the occasional lazy nod in the media now and then.
>
> In fact, just in time for *1984*'s anniversary, it has been reported that the National Security Agency (NSA) has once again been illicitly collecting records on telephone calls and text messages placed by US citizens. This latest invasion of privacy has been casually dismissed as an '*error'* after an unnamed telecommunications firm handed over call records the NSA allegedly '*hadn't requested'* and '*weren't approved'* by the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court. In 2013, former CIA employee Edward Snowden blew the whistle on the NSA's intrusive surveillance operations, yet somehow the government agency is able to continue – with the help of the corporate sector – vacuuming up the private information of regular citizens.

In the light of Bridge's remarks, if anyone observing the global political landscape today might conclude that Orwell's fears of a totalitarian future were unfounded – after all, how many totalitarian political dictatorships can one identify today? North Korea, and perhaps Iran's theocratic variety? – such people need to remind themselves that the pervasive surveillance that is central to *1984* need not be tethered to an easily identifiable Big Brother or Thought Police. It can assume multiple different, unexpected guises — such as the one that Bernard Stiegler unmasked in his book, *Automatic Society I* (2016), where

he summarises its current incarnation in these words (2016: 19):

> The rise of so-called 'social' digital networks brought with it a new kind of economy, based on personal data, cookies, metadata, tags and other tracking technologies through which is established [...] *algorithmic governmentality.* lt was this context, too, that saw the rise of 'big data' — that is, those technologies connected to what is referred to as high-performance computing – which utilizes methods derived from applied mathematics, placing them in the service of automated calculation and forming the core of this algorithmic governmentality.

The use of the term, 'governmentality', with its Foucaultian echo, signals the fact that these digital networks are actively involved in a process of 'rule', that is, of governing human behaviour in the 21st century, and in a manner that makes the bi-directional surveillance technology of which the 'telescreen' in *1984* is a nodal point, seem crude and unsophisticated. Whenever one visits a website such as those of banks, internet shopping companies or international news websites (to mention only a few), one is told that the site 'uses cookies' for 'a better online experience', or something to that effect. What really happens, is that the 'cookies', which are algorithmic entities monitoring users' online behaviour, register, and predict, how the company behind it may profit from one's online presence. One should keep in mind that an algorithm is a rule-based process of calculation (of the 'if...then' variety) which is triggered by certain actions, such as visiting certain websites, or buying particular merchandise online, to create the calculated anticipation that one's future actions would follow more or less the same pattern. And if this sounds harmless because of its financial-economic character, it becomes less so when the link between money and power is kept in mind. The net result of the information-revolution that has culminated in the present state of affairs is that the big data-mining companies – Google, Facebook and Amazon foremost among them – have amassed financial wealth and power that even governments find intimidating, as shown by the recent report (BBC News 2018), detailing the prodigious fine (€4.3-billion) imposed on Google by the European Union's Competition Commissioner, Margrethe Vestager, who displayed an awareness of the increasing need to control large technology companies 'misusing data and failing to respect citizens' rights'. Apparently (BBC News 2018) YouTube, Twitter and Facebook also had to face evidence of allowing their

internet platforms to be (ab-)used for the manipulation of voters' actions.

To add to the validity of Stiegler's diagnosis, simultaneously resonating with, and corroborating the accuracy of Orwell's 'fictional' anticipation of such a state of affairs in *1984*, Harvard professor Shoshana Zuboff recently published a forceful indictment of current social conditions with the revealing title, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism – The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (2019), pertaining to the agencies responsible for what appears to be a new, if almost invisible, totalitarianism, which the vast majority of people therefore fail to recognise as such — in fact, they willingly embrace the way that these powerful agencies rule their lives in a virtually 'total' manner. She defines it in a revealing way right at the beginning of her book (The Definition):

> '**Sur-veil-lance Cap-i-tal-ism**, **n**.
> **1**. A new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales;
> **2**. A parasitic economic logic in which the production of goods and services is subordinated to a new global architecture of behavioral modification;
> **3**. A rogue mutation of capitalism marked by concentrations of wealth, knowledge, and power unprecedented in human history;
> **4**. The foundational framework of a surveillance economy;
> **5**. As significant a threat to human nature in the twenty-first century as industrial capitalism was to the natural world in the nineteenth and twentieth;
> **6**. The origin of a new instrumentarian power that asserts dominance over society and presents startling challenges to market democracy;
> **7**. A movement that aims to impose a new collective order based on total certainty;
> **8**. An expropriation of critical human rights that is best understood as a coup from above: an overthrow of the people's sovereignty.'

What she is writing about here are the very agencies that rule (or at least fundamentally influence) most of people's lives today (Turkle 2011): Facebook, Google, Amazon, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram …. How is this

possible in the 'free democracies' of the 21st century (which seem to be a far cry from the totalitarian landscape of *1984*), you may ask, and why does the functioning of these hugely popular, internet-based sites amount to what may *appear* to be a kind of totalitarianism? I stress 'appear' because Zuboff (2019: 331) quickly disabuses us of the idea that this newly dominant 'instrumentarian power' is synonymous with the historical phenomenon of totalitarianism (in Italian and German fascism, for example):

> When scholars, civil society leaders, journalists, public figures, and, indeed, most of us speak out courageously against this new power, invariably we look to Orwell's Big Brother and more generally the specter of totalitarianism as the lens through which to interpret today's threats. Google, Facebook, and the larger field of commercial surveillance are frequently depicted as 'digital totalitarianism.' I admire those who have stood against the incursions of commercial surveillance, but I also suggest that the equation of instrumentarian power with totalitarianism impedes our understanding as well as our ability to resist, neutralize, and ultimately vanquish its potency. There is no historical precedent for instrumentarianism, but there is vivid precedent for this kind of encounter with an unprecedented new species of power.

In what follows this passage she elaborates on the differences between the 'instrumentarian power' of surveillance capitalism and the kind of power historically wielded by totalitarianism, and, of course, in Orwell's narrative of *1984*. It is interesting to compare these two depictions – Zuboff's and Orwell's – in terms of a Rancièrian discourse analysis, oriented according to the parameters of power-relations embedded in the 'distribution of the sensible', as explained earlier. To illustrate 'what instrumentarian power is *not*' (Zuboff 2019: 332), she discusses totalitarianism in Stalin's Russia, Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy, and makes this succinct pronouncement (2019: 334):

> That totalitarianism was a new species of power had confounded its analysis from the start, as both its Russian and German variants swept through those societies, challenging the foundations of Western civilization. Although these totalitarian regimes began to take root years before World War II – first in Russia in 1929 with Stalin's

> ascension to power and then in Germany in 1933 with Hitler's installation as chancellor—they eluded systematic study until the end of the war. Analysis was impeded in part by the sheer mystery and perpetual movement of the whole enterprise: the secret plans executed by secret police, the silent complicities and hidden atrocities, the ceaseless transformation of who or what was up or down, the intentional torsion of facts into anti-facts accompanied by a perpetual deluge of propaganda, misinformation, euphemism, and mendacity. The authoritative leader, or 'egocrat', to use the French philosopher Claude Lefort's term, displaces the rule of law and 'common' sense to become the quixotic judge of what is just or unjust, truth or lie, at each moment.

Apart from the uncomfortable jolt of recognition that her allusion to the 'authoritative leader, or "egocrat"' in the context of 'misinformation' and 'mendacity' sends through one – what better description of Donald Trump is there than 'egocrat'? – what does this passage tell us about totalitarian power-relations in terms of the 'distribution of the sensible'? (How this compares to the structure of 'power-relations' under surveillance capitalism will be demonstrated below.) First, historically, totalitarianism was a disruptive, novel manner of organising social space according to the hierarchy (etymologically, from 'rule of the priests') of the subordinated, ideologically controlled populace and the agents of totalitarian power, who were themselves always shrouded in secrecy and subject to the power emanating from the charismatic leader, so that any deviation from the strict implementation of 'his' (arbitrary) decisions would immediately be met with ruthless punishment. Second, the sensible realm – what actions were tolerated and could, or could not, be performed there – was constantly subordinated to unpredictable (and fluctuating), secret directives on the part of the (partly invisible, partly identifiable) agents of the totalitarian state. Although there was no doubt about the 'distribution of the sensible' as far as power-relations were concerned, it was nevertheless rendered uncertain, to a certain degree, as far as the parameters governing social behaviour are concerned – even the most successfully (ideologically) interpellated members of society could never be sure whether their enthusiastically subservient actions in support of the totalitarian ruler would always be guaranteed to be seen as orthodox ('conforming to correct opinion'), nor whether individuals with whom they interacted were just ordina-

ry citizens, or perhaps agents of the 'Party'. With this in mind, comparing the following two passages from *1984* with Zuboff's, above, shows the correspondence between the two texts in terms of the manner in which the sensible realm is cratologically organised in and through these texts (Orwell 1949: 24):

> It was always at night—the arrests invariably happened at night. The sudden jerk out of sleep, the rough hand shaking your shoulder, the lights glaring in your eyes, the ring of hard faces round the bed. In the vast majority of cases there was no trial, no report of the arrest. People simply disappeared, always during the night. Your name was removed from the registers, every record of everything you had ever done was wiped out, your one-time existence was denied and then forgotten. You were abolished, annihilated: VAPORIZED was the usual word.

And (1949: 32):

> Winston had never been able to feel sure—even after this morning's flash of the eyes it was still impossible to be sure whether O'Brien was a friend or an enemy. Nor did it even seem to matter greatly. There was a link of understanding between them, more important than affection or partisanship. 'We shall meet in the place where there is no darkness,' he had said. Winston did not know what it meant, only that in some way or another it would come true.

These excerpts from the two roughly contemporaneous texts (considering the futuristic aspect of *1984*) – one literary, the other theoretical – demonstrate, again, the intellectual value of juxtaposing them according to Rancière's precept: each benefits from the light that the other shines on it. Returning to Zuboff's claim, that totalitarianism – and this goes for the way it is characterised in *1984* (and to a certain extent in *The Handmaid's Tale*), as well as in the theoretical texts referred to – differs from the currently emerging 'instrumentarian' power, it is worth recalling Bridge's (2019) remark, quoted earlier, where he compared the 'telescreen' in *1984* with the 'strikingly similar...handheld 'smartphone' used by billions of people around the world today'. Orwell's 'telescreen', insofar as it marked the visible nodal manifestation of a technological surveillance network, may therefore be seen as anticipating the global 'instrumentarian' power of the present.

Conclusion: Authoritarianism, Totalitarianism and Instrumentarian Power

What does this 'instrumentarian' power amount to? In a brief masterpiece of political-theoretical writing, titled 'The Threat of Big Other' (with its play on Orwell's 'Big Brother') Zuboff (2019a: 15-16) succinctly addresses the main issues of her book, linking it to Orwell's *1984*. She reminds readers that Orwell's aim with *1984* was to alert British and American societies that democracy is not immune to totalitarianism, and that 'Totalitarianism, if not fought against, could triumph anywhere' (Orwell, quoted by Zuboff 2019a: 16). People were seriously wrong in their assumption that totalitarian control of their actions through mass surveillance (as depicted in *1984*; recall 'Big Brother is watching you') could only issue from the *state*, however, and she makes no secret about the source of this threat today (2019a: 16):

> For 19 years, private companies practicing an unprecedented economic logic that I call surveillance capitalism have hijacked the Internet and its digital technologies. Invented at Google in 2000, this new economics covertly claims private human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioural data. Some data are used to improve services, but the rest are turned into computational products that predict your behaviour. These predictions are traded in a new futures market, where surveillance capitalists sell certainty to businesses determined to know what we will do next. This logic was first applied to finding out which ads online will attract our interest, but similar practices now reside in nearly every sector — insurance, retail, health, education, finance and more – where personal experience is secretly captured and computed.

Augmenting what was said earlier about the online use of 'cookies' to anticipate users' behaviour, Zuboff informs one that predictive data do not only come from monitoring online behaviour, but from actually directing it, the way Facebook used 'subliminal [online] cues' to influence users' behaviour and emotional states. This formed the basis for analyses of people's feelings which, in turn, enabled marketing agents to elicit certain predictable behaviour when users are most receptive to cues. The worst aspect of this insight is that these 'inventions were celebrated for being both effective and undetectable' (Zuboff

2019a: 16). To add insult to injury, Cambridge Analytica showed that these techniques could be implemented to determine political choice. Hence Zuboff's dire warning (2019a: 16):

> Democracy slept while surveillance capitalism flourished. As a result, surveillance capitalists now wield a uniquely 21st century quality of power, as unprecedented as totalitarianism was nearly a century ago. I call it instrumentarian power, because it works its will through the ubiquitous architecture of digital instrumentation. Rather than an intimate Big Brother that uses murder and terror to possess each soul from the inside out, these digital networks are a Big Other: impersonal systems trained to monitor and shape our actions remotely, unimpeded by law.

The last point is significant — there are (as yet) no laws that govern, and can hence preclude this stealthy, surreptitious control of people's behaviour, which is far more insidious than overt political totalitarian rule, which one can resist, even if it is at the risk of one's own safety, or your life, as Orwell's Winston Smith knew in London, Airstrip One, Oceania. Hence the question: how does one resist this insidious rule of 'surveillance capitalism', and is it at all possible? Zuboff thinks that it is (2019a: 16):

> Surveillance capitalists falsely claim their methods are inevitable consequences of digital technologies. But Orwell despised 'the instinct to bow down before the conqueror of the moment.' Courage, he insisted, demands that we assert our morals even against forces that appear invincible.
>
> Seven decades later, we can honor Orwell's death by refusing to cede the digital future. Like Orwell, think critically and criticise. Do not take freedom for granted. Fight for the one idea in the long human story that asserts the people's right to rule themselves. Orwell reckoned it was worth dying for.

Zuboff's exhortation, that we 'think critically and criticise' is not coincidental. Since at least the ancient Greeks, this has been the vocation of philosophers, personified in the uncompromising figure of Socrates, to encourage people to think and act critically, lest they forfeit their right and the ability to govern

themselves to tyrannical forces of different stripes. Socrates taught us *not* to honour the gods of the polis (city), for those are the politically correct, and therefore false, gods. One has to listen instead to one's *daimon* (conscience), the way Socrates, and today, Shoshana Zuboff has listened to hers. Despite the fact that she is a tenured professor at one of America's (and the world's) most respected universities, and could therefore be expected to 'honour the (digital) gods of the city', she has unmasked them as being false. She is as worthy a thinker to pay heed to as Orwell was – and to do so by translating our understanding of their respective texts into actions that resist the quest for domination, on the part of the agents of instrumentarian power, is simultaneously to show that we have understood Rancière's insight, that the aesthetic realm and the political realm are not mutually exclusive, as modernism falsely claimed. Through the shared capacity to 'distribute the sensible', that is, to organise the extant, social world according to cratological categories of inclusion (of the elites) and exclusion (of those who do not have a comparable part in the exercise of power), both the arts and politics contribute to the never-ending struggle between the agents of hegemonic power (the 'included'), whether of a totalitarian or an instrumentarian kind, and those who can either yield to, or resist that power (the excluded). And if the choice is to resist, one can either do so through the arts, or through theory (as I am doing here), and/ or by participating directly in the political realm – in all of these cases, one would be contributing to the 'redistribution of the sensible' in the name of equality.

In conclusion, I should note that authoritarianism, which was addressed mainly in the first part of this paper in relation to Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and the work of Giroux, is also implicated here, in the context of 'instrumentarian power'. As a constructive (anonymous) critic has reminded me, 'the "new economics" at play [functions] to glue the overwhelming majority of people to their online devices, which are channelling the attention and behaviour of the populace at large in an individualised but ultimately consumer-driven direction via [*inter alia*] the 'cookie' phenomenon [so that] there is little attention left to address some of the extant social issues/ problems'. Recalling George W. Bush's reprehensible authoritarian neglect of the less fortunate members of American society in favour of the wealthy, another way to say this is that the neglect of social suffering-issues today is related to the fact that people's attention is wholly taken up by technical devices, social media, and so on. And this resonates with the aesthetic-political 'distribution of the sensible' in authoritarian social space in Atwood's *The*

Handmaid's Tale (1985), too, where those on the lower rungs of the hierarchy were completely at the mercy of the authoritarian rule of those at the top. That this is paralleled in extant America by the authoritarian power of politicians like Bush and Trump is scandalous, and highlights the implied contrast between what should be a 'distribution of the sensible' along lines of equality in a *supposed* democracy (on the one hand), and its actual hierarchical distribution in a social-political sphere where authoritarian, instrumentarian power is hegemonic. This situation is not restricted to America, of course, but obtains everywhere in global social-political and economic space under the rule of neoliberalism, which – as Zuboff has shown, and Orwell anticipated – is inseparable from instrumentarian power.

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