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PREVIEW

SALVE REGINA UNIVERSITY

ALDOUS HUXLEY AND THE HUMAN COST
OF TECHNOLOGICAL PROGRESS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF HUMANITIES
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES

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DECEMBER 1998

UMI Number: 9918180

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GRADUATE SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines Aldous Huxley's criticism of modern technological progress through an analysis of six of his novels that span four turbulent decades of the twentieth century. The thesis of this study is that these examples of Huxley's fiction demonstrate a constant concern for the power of technology to influence human values and that the authentic test of technological progress is the degree to which it aids or hinders society in its humane development. From his early novels that satirized the frivolous lives of the English upper class to his more probing works of anti-utopian themes, Huxley questioned a culture obsessed with materialism and a blind belief that the advance of technology will lead humanity to a higher and happier existence.

The six novels fall into three divisions. *Antic Hay* is an early novel of social criticism that depicts the aimless or self-absorbed cultural elite following World War I. *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan* and *Time Must Have a Stop* are novels that expose the folly of materialism. Huxley's three futuristic novels depict worlds that can result if technology is allowed to progress unchecked, ostensibly for the betterment of humankind. *Brave New World* shows how mental conditioning and drugs can produce a mindless society devoid of human values. In *Ape and Essence* a nuclear war causes mankind to degenerate into ruthless animals. Only in *Island*, the most idyllic of these utopian novels, has humanity learned to accept those technologies that promote human advancement and to

discard all others.

Eastern thought became an important feature of Huxley's response to modern materialism. His personal letters and essays of this period also help elucidate the views found in his fiction—a distinguished series of imaginative novels that explore the dilemmas of modern culture in relationship to technology.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Overview

This study will examine the twentieth century English novelist Aldous Huxley as a trenchant critic of modern technological progress. Both a popular writer and an intellectual luminary, Huxley became a persuasive voice in protest against contemporary materialism and a future world dominated by science. His novels helped shape an awareness of what he saw as an inexorable trend toward technological power that would lead to the dehumanization of humankind.

Huxley's creative years must be viewed against the temper of his times and his distinctive social background. His writing career began in Europe in the hectic years after World War I and continued in America through the Atomic Age following World War II. While his early novels satirized the frivolous lives of the English upper class in the twenties, his later fiction would focus on more probing moral issues and ethical dilemmas associated with the human quest for meaning and fulfillment.

Huxley had grown up in an age fascinated by a procession of new scientific marvels. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had become characterized by an increasing confidence in scientific progress and a fascination with inventions that promised a better life. Industrialization, a higher standard of living, medical breakthroughs—all such improvements encouraged the optimistic belief that applied technology would ultimately solve all human woes.

This buoyant outlook was reflected in the popular literature of the period.

Jules Verne in the nineteenth century gained international fame for his fictional prophecies of fabulous scientific inventions that were to come. By the turn of the century in England, H. G. Wells, a student of Huxley's grandfather, was acclaimed in his writings as a passionate advocate of the coming dominance of science in everyday life. The popularity of the emerging genre of science fiction originated with these imaginative predictions of technological wonders that would transform the world.

This general optimism was shattered for many Europeans when World War I introduced such technological marvels as poison gas and the machine gun that destroyed millions of lives. World War II brought even greater technological horrors such as the Nazi gas ovens, and the added threat of nuclear annihilation raised stronger doubts about the inevitability of continual advances through science. Social critics and moralists with the benefit of hindsight began to recognize that technological progress could exact a very high price for the illusory promise of a perfect world awaiting humankind. Following World War I popular thinkers such as Oswald Spengler, the German philosopher and historian, warned that, along with the power to control nature, a contrary social tendency toward disorder or disintegration—what had been termed entropy—could result in the collapse of Western civilization (1962, 216-220).

The comfortably optimistic world of the nineteenth century thus swiftly came to confront the brutality of world wars, worldwide economic depression, and the menace of communism and fascism in the twentieth century. With individual freedoms on the decline and rapid technological changes in the work

place alienating the masses, common humanity simultaneously felt controlled, trapped, and helpless. Creative artists of the time like Picasso, Stravinsky, Eliot, and Joyce responded with a modernistic creative movement that broke with tradition and produced innovative and often disturbing forms of aesthetic expression.

In the 1920's, at the height of this artistic ferment, Aldous Huxley would emerge as a gifted young satirical novelist with a distinguished family background. He was heir to a lineage of intellectual brilliance, social concern, and creative talent. Huxley's Victorian forebears were particularly noteworthy. His grandfather, Thomas Henry Huxley, was the controversial nineteenth century iconoclast who championed Darwin's theory of evolution. On his mother's side he descended from the noted Victorian educator Thomas Arnold; the poet Matthew Arnold; and Mrs. Humphry Ward, a widely read novelist whose themes dramatized the crisis of faith that afflicted Victorian society.

These family influences would affect, positively or negatively, Huxley's own attitudes as a writer. Radically opposed to his grandfather's faith in scientific progress, he would also seek through his imaginative fiction to warn society of the consequences of its folly and the need to reform. In this respect, Huxley seems to have inherited an idealistic family strain that repeatedly led him to warn society of the errors of its ways. This idealism was to manifest itself later in an almost mystical search for spiritual reality—a search that was to take some rather unusual turns.

Huxley's own education was typical of an upper-class English youth of his

day: an exclusive private school and a leading university. While a successful student at Eton, he was, however, struck with an eye disease that caused temporary blindness and plagued him with poor eyesight for the rest of his life. The early death of his mother and his brother's suicide surely contributed to Huxley's philosophical view of the transitory and fragile state of human existence.

Unable to pursue a medical career as he had hoped, Huxley was determined to follow the family's literary tradition. By the early 1920's, he had his first success as a novelist, and authorship became his way of life. During his lengthy career, he wrote short stories, novels, essays, travel books and historical studies. Huxley emigrated to California in 1937, and there he associated with talented members of the Hollywood film community. His own later writings would reflect some of the more esoteric manifestations of California culture.

While Huxley's impressive literary output explores many social, ethical, and religious themes, one of his most salient and recurring propositions is that unchecked technological dominance is destructive of human values. Huxley's fiction would come to expose a world obsessed with material values where physical progress actually represented in human terms a state of regression. Technological power was, according to Huxley, meaningless and destructive unless it enhanced the idealistic goals of humane advancement.

Huxley's approach to the problems of technology is that of a creative artist. While it is generally accepted that authentic literature should not be overtly didactic, serious fiction cannot be divorced from the dilemmas of real life. Through myth and allegory, literature has traditionally offered instructive insights

on the human condition. Modern novels can also confront us with concrete moral contentions, and then describe personal human responses to life's challenges that involve the reader both intellectually and emotionally. They engage our feelings, and this engagement enriches our understanding of the meaning and purpose of life.

Huxley's incisive analysis of modern ills is in keeping with a strong literary tradition. Social criticism has always been a theme of imaginative writing. Classical authors such as Aristophanes and Horace first employed satire and irony to laugh humanity out of its follies. The critical mode was later adapted by such acerbic commentators as Jonathan Swift, of whom Aldous Huxley may be seen as a modern counterpart. Other well-known novelists as diverse as George Orwell and Alexander Solzhenitsyn have used their narrative art to decry social injustice—real or potential. Far from writing pure propaganda, these authors have produced authentic literature that has also profoundly affected public attitudes. It could further be claimed that these imaginative artists have been more influential than many contemporary philosophers and social thinkers because their books are more widely reviewed, publicized, and read. Huxley's granduncle, Matthew Arnold, had indicated that serious literature should expose the best and the worst of life for critical discernment. Aldous Huxley was to take this advice very seriously by brilliantly rendering imaginative tales probing diverse aspects of the human condition.

Any reader of Huxley will quickly recognize that here is a writer with a strong point of view. The failure in human fulfillment depicted in his fiction is

evidence of the human cost of technological progress. To Huxley and the proponents of his perennial philosophy—wisdom of the ages that recognizes a divine reality sustaining the physical world—the question of whether material progress is important or even possible is not of primary significance. What is crucial for Huxley is the degree to which any technological change aids or impedes society in the achievement of its ultimate human destiny. Since his own early imaginative focus on this issue, a host of ethical and social commentators have subsequently explored various aspects of the impact of technology on modern life. Some of these views help substantiate his creative insights on the growing influence of technology on human culture.

Technology and Human Culture

The term *technology* is derived from the Greek words *techne* (art/craft) and *logia* (study/discourse), and it may be defined as the practical application of science or systemized knowledge to human affairs. In the modern world, it could properly be applied to just about any phenomenon (Winner 1992, 10). From political and economic systems to the assembly line and computerization, technology is certainly omnipresent and touches on all aspects of life. While the general public may view these scientific applications as wholly beneficial, contemporary scholars tend to offer different opinions on technology's nature and ultimate influence. Ian Barbour, for example, views technology as assuming three distinct roles in modern society: liberator, threat, and instrument of power (1993, 3). Modern technology has enhanced human control and power over nature far beyond the realm of imaginative science fiction. At the same time, the social

changes caused by the ongoing stream of technological marvels have been so rapid and profound that humanity feels threatened—not only by the pace but also by the unintended consequences that subvert the advantages of many of these technological systems.

With modern automation and computerization in the workplace, for example, have come the alienation and isolation of the employee, the loss of creative individual craftsmanship, and a depersonalized society that destroys the self-esteem and career satisfaction so necessary to the individual. While technological advances may be a product of human ingenuity, the very systems developed to extend humanity's power often appear to operate autonomously beyond human control (Ellul 1964, 135-136; Winner 1992, 28). Research has demonstrated that for every technological innovation there have been unwelcome and unanticipated side effects of a harmful nature. Pollutants in the air and water, ozone depletion, hazardous waste, acid rain, and a vanishing wildlife are but a few of the survival threats created by industrial technology. When to all of this is added the doubtful implications of biogenetics and the continuing danger of nuclear extinction, the possibilities of technology as a threat is very real.

Modern technology has broader implications in the fields of statecraft and finance. In the seventeenth century, Francis Bacon, the English philosopher, statesman and essayist, declared that scientific knowledge was power. Bacon was aware that technology as an instrument of power had the potential to determine the economic and political might of a given nation (1955, 537-538). A

passion for profit promoted by technological know-how had raised nations to positions of economic superiority over poorer neighbors. Capitalistic democracies have particularly fostered consumerism and spread the belief that human happiness and well being depend on a never-ending and ever-expanding sale of available products and services. Advertising technologies that now extend worldwide have only intensified this materialistic attitude.

In terms of military weapons, technology has also created terrible dilemmas for the modern world. For a half century of Cold-War tensions between the USSR and the United States, modern technology presented the greatest threat to human survival in the nuclear arms race. With the collapse of the Soviet empire this technological menace has not, however, disappeared, as several countries in unstable areas of the world continue to build nuclear arsenals. At the same time, the sale of the latest conventional arms throughout the globe has fueled bloody nationalistic conflicts, and these tensions further demonstrate the need to curb all these weapons perfected by modern technology.

Methodology

This study is based on an analysis of a series of Huxley's novels that specifically demonstrate the development of his attitude toward technology in relationship to modern society. Reference to other books by the author will further illuminate his ideas, but these major examples from his imaginative works represent the most compelling evidence of his creative insight. This representative group of six novels by Aldous Huxley—from his second work published in 1923 through his last novel published in 1962, the year prior to his

death—covers the full maturation of his ideas.

In earlier literary studies, the word *technology* was associated with Aldous Huxley largely in reference to *Brave New World*, the best known of his novels. The characteristic feature of this dissertation, however, is that a modern definition of technology has been applied to a range of Aldous Huxley's novels that span a period of four decades. Through this process, a pattern evolves that encompasses the author's entire literary career—a pattern of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis toward the goal of integrating a critical assessment of all technologies in order to recognize their essential role, for good or evil, in human achievement. This approach contributes to an understanding of Huxley's literary genius. By focusing on this theme that is so relevant to modern society, it will demonstrate how the author sought the development of a humanly centered relationship to technology.

Throughout Huxley's literary career, he was always warning society about the human cost of technological progress. He cautioned his readers that the harm caused by manipulating nature far exceeded the benefits achieved, a concept under close evaluation in our contemporary age. Huxley believed that humanity's overweening pride in its new powers and its blind trust in technological progress would invariably have to be paid for in human suffering. He wrote narratives that specifically questioned whether humanity was progressing toward or regressing from an ultimate goal. Ethical, moral, and social issues relating to the subject of technological dominance in modern society are debated strongly in these novels. The relevance of key personal letters and

essays written by Aldous Huxley in the period of each novel provide further evidence of the author's views. The sheer volume of writings by Huxley in a variety of genres required a focus on specific novels and essays, but this is not to claim that the writings selected are Huxley's greatest works, nor are these books the only ones concerned with technological progress. It is likewise evident that Huxley employed other themes in his writings, but these topics are only introduced here when relevant.

The first novel to be examined in this study may be categorized as a novel of social criticism wherein Huxley employs satire or comic criticism to castigate the multiple social failings of his age. The next two novels maintain the satiric approach, but here the characters come to the realization that their pride, sensuality, and trust in material progress leave them devoid of spiritual worth. The final three narratives may be generally labeled science fiction. The first two books project a future world that will result if technology continues at its present pace to exert greater control over humankind. Since the future depicted in both stories is far grimmer than twentieth century Western culture, they may be classified as dystopian novels—a variation on utopian fiction that describes a highly unfavorable future world. Huxley's final novel offers a synthesis of these conflicting themes by positing the possibility of a better world if a limited technology and a humane aspiration could achieve a harmonious union.

A brief review of these six key novels will indicate how they will be linked to the central theme of this study. In the early novel *Antic Hay*, the young Huxley offers his initial view of the human cost of technological progress by depicting a

group of talented individuals who are alienated from meaningful lives by their materialistic obsessions. Reflecting in both tone and theme the spiritually shattered, disillusioned populace of Europe after World War I, *Antic Hay* is a modernistic rendering of a world filled with selfish people who have no clear conviction, who are either barren of humane ideals or fail to act on them. The literary tone of the book matches the aimless mood of the early poetry of Eliot and the disillusionment reflected in the fiction of Fitzgerald and Hemingway in the 1920's. This was the lost generation that wandered through life, forgetful of their past, unaware of their present possibilities, and unsure of their future.

Huxley built the novel around a young talented teacher who abandons an academic career on the strength of a frivolous invention by which he hopes to make his fortune. In London he encounters a series of characters similarly pursuing illusory goals. He frequents restaurants, galleries and pubs, interacting with fakes and frauds, a mass of humanity who are both purposeless and mindless in their pursuits. Each character epitomizes to some degree Huxley's view of the divided, restless self that is oblivious to what is meaningful in life. With all past values lost, the tragic image of unemployment and poverty only occasionally impinges on the trivial pursuits of the protagonist's social circle. No clear resolution is offered at the end of the novel, and the reader is left with a sense of despair and hopelessness in the very center of the vast and technologically powerful British Empire.

After Many a Summer Dies the Swan was written by Aldous Huxley a short time after his arrival in America in 1937, and here the social criticism is

sharper and more savage than in *Antic Hay*. With war threatening in Europe, the novel's tone reflects a sense of impending danger and the author's frustration with a society that was still preoccupied with the distractions of a materialistic, mundane, and self-centered world. The novel focuses on a party of guests who assemble at an eccentric millionaire's estate and who serve as a microcosm of a civilization that has lost its sense of direction. The millionaire's quest for eternal life by physical rather than spiritual means thus becomes Huxley's satiric symbol of the world's misguided use of technology

In this later novel, Huxley does, however, propose a response to the hedonist's vain search for a technological solution to the fear of death. A homespun sage provides whole chapters of insightful instruction on the good life in contrast to the materialistic obsession with technological progress. These lengthy monologues had increasingly become a feature of Huxley's fiction, but the style is so witty and original that they are seldom obtrusive, and generally readers find these reflections integral to his themes. Huxley has, however, been regarded by some literary scholars as a novelist of ideas who emphasized his philosophical opinion over plot and characterization. Even his own best critic, Huxley was to acknowledge that his fiction did not always maintain a perfect ratio between narration and exposition.

In 1944, the novel *Time Must Have a Stop* was published almost concurrently with Huxley's popular compilation of the world's spiritual wisdom entitled *The Perennial Philosophy*. The novel portrays the sharp contrast between the profane and the supernatural views of life. Once again the central

character is an impressionable young man who is strongly attracted to the pleasures of the world. The unique feature of the novel is the parallel between the hero's attitudes and those of his hedonistic uncle who lives abroad. In the middle of the novel the uncle dies suddenly in Italy, and he is condemned to an eternal limbo, unable to detach himself from the material world he loved so much. His nephew's continued sensual pursuits bring him only tragedy and discontentment.

Huxley here again provides a spiritual guide who tries to instruct the unhappy hero. Only after much suffering does he learn that the ultimate purpose of existence lies in the development of human consciousness towards union with the divine. *Time Must Have a Stop* would be Huxley's closest approximation of a religious theme, but his critical approach prevents him from adopting an overtly pious attitude in his fiction. His penchant for biting satire is evident here as in all of his fictional works. Assuming the role of a detached observer, Huxley was to hold a caustic mirror up to the modern world by mocking the human fixation on materialistic goals.

Combining satire with the imaginative medium of science fiction, Huxley wrote of a future world based on the illusion of a technologically perfect utopia. Implicit in Huxley's fiction is the Greek view that human *hubris* or arrogant pride in seeking to control nature would invariably be paid for, one way or another, through an avenging *nemesis* or form of retribution. While never discounting the obvious advantages of science, Huxley came to question the credulous optimism over the marvels of technological progress. In his fictional world, the scientific

wonders derisively fail to enhance the intellectual or moral quality of human life.

In *Brave New World*, Huxley's best known and most widely read novel, the human cost of relentless technology is the total corruption of the human spirit. The story opens six hundred years in the future at a factory where all human embryos are produced and nurtured in glass tubes—a remarkably prescient scene in view of the ethical problems produced by recent genetic engineering. Huxley goes on to detail with great ingenuity all aspects of life in the technological future. Human values and rational conduct have all but disappeared—the residents of this *Brave New World* are little more than automata. Control of natural life now extends to all human functions, emotions, and spiritual aspirations. All family feelings are obliterated, and society is divided by inflexible class and employment levels. Religious, philosophical, cultural, and artistic pursuits commonly called the humanities are banned as disruptive of the soulless, stagnant uniformity of social organization.

Huxley craftily creates a world where sensual pleasures are the only goals of existence. The most tragic aspect of this concept is that six hundred years into the future, the passive residents of this world have no first hand awareness of traditional human experience. The general population are captives of human conditioning except for two key characters: an untutored savage who questions the pleasure basis of this future civilization, and the hero who, suffering from genetic damage, cannot share the common social attitude. Their refusal to accept the programmed, artificial happiness of this *Brave New World* ultimately seals their tragic fate.

The doomsday theme of science fiction became a real possibility after 1945 when the technological threat of nuclear extinction was first generally realized. The destruction of civilization after an atomic strike is the theme of the second of Huxley's works of utopian fiction—*Ape and Essence*. The story, set in the 22nd century, involves an exploratory team from New Zealand that investigates the results of a devastating nuclear attack on North America. Here the few thousand survivors living in Los Angeles are reduced to barbarism, burning books as fuel, robbing graves for clothing, and worshipping a devil. A visiting scientist falls in love with a local woman and together they rebel against the bestial rule and escape to the desert to begin a new civilization.

Their success and the optimistic ending of *Ape and Essence* represent a shift in Huxley's utopian fiction. The desert refuge means an end to all the dangers by which uncontrolled technology threatens humankind physically and spiritually. The dark post-nuclear utopia is more than an ironic projection of the ideal culture that humanity seeks for the future. It is also a warning of what humanity will become if the Western world continues on the present course. Technology has, in this instance, produced a weak, overcrowded and nationalistic civilization, mindlessly bent on its own destruction and unaware that a natural justice exacts retribution. The ardent faith in technological progress that motivated the people of *Brave New World* has now been replaced in *Ape and Essence* by idolatrous worship of an evil god. The essence of humanity has been lost as it regresses to an apelike existence.

Huxley's final writings reflected these deeper spiritual interests on a more