

# The Not-Yet of Gender Equality

The Representation of Gender in Dystopian Literature

Master thesis

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*Processus cum figures, figurae in processu.*

*The process is made by those who are made in the process.*

Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (1954)

*History proves what we have been in the past, we could be again.*

Margaret Atwood

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## Introduction

Who are we? Where do we come from?

Where are we going? What are we waiting for?

What awaits us?

(Bloch 3)

These are the questions that are at the heart of utopian and dystopian fiction. One of the best known dystopian works of 20<sup>th</sup> century western literature is George Orwell's *1984*. The famous first words of the novel inform the reader already that the answer to the question "what awaits us?" isn't a positive one. The month that is known as the announcement of spring – and therefore change – is not warm, as "It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen", the number that is often regarded as the symbol of bad luck (Orwell 1). Orwell presents indeed a grey, hopeless future with an inescapable regime governed by the tyrannical Big Brother. The novel, published in 1948 closely after the second world war, is interpreted by many critics as a warning against the power of totalitarian regimes, such as those of Stalin and Hitler (Bloom, *Bloom's Guides: 1984*, 44). Orwell himself stated: "I believe... that totalitarian ideas have taken root in the minds of intellectuals everywhere, and I have tried to draw these ideas out to their logical consequences", which illustrates the novel's power on the level of analogy between the novel and the history of events in the reality (qtd. in Bloom, *Bloom's Guides: 1984*, 44). Barnita Bagchi also emphasizes this point in her work *The Politics of the (im)possible: Utopia and Dystopia Reconsidered* (2012), in which she states that "there has always been a transaction and exchange between utopia [or dystopia] as imaginative possibility and as a real-life actualization" (4). She also argues that "some of the most pressing intellectual, social,

political and cultural topics of our time are illuminated, when approached through rich concrete universals embedded in utopian [or dystopian] texts” (5).

It is therefore not accidentally that the question “Is it the *1984* of our time?” pops up whenever a new dystopian novel is analyzed by literary critics. This was also the case when Margaret Atwood published her dystopian novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* in 1984. Atwood presents as well a future state in which totalitarianism is taken to its extremes, only now to oppress women in particular. Atwood sees her own novel as “an imagined account of what happens when not uncommon pronouncements about women are taken to their logical conclusions” (Atwood, 1998). As many critics pointed out, Atwood’s novel is certainly in many ways similar to *1984*, but as this thesis will show, *The Handmaid’s Tale* reveals as well what Orwell’s work lacks, namely an eye for gender politics and the use of different self reflexive narrative structures. I argue therefore that anyone who addresses the work of Orwell without mentioning Atwood’s work or vice versa, presents a partial vision of both novels.

Unfortunately, this is the case in almost all the reviews and essays written on the more contemporary dystopian novel *The Circle* (2013) by Dave Eggers. There is not one critic who fails to mention in what ways this novel relates to *1984*. *The Circle* tells the story of a company, similar to real companies such as Facebook and Google, that slowly becomes a world dominating totalitarian cooperation which restricts anyone from having privacy; which led American critics to write for example that *The Circle* is “a timely and potent appendix to *1984*” (Lev Grossman in *Time*), that “Big Brother isn’t the government: it’s a Google-like, Facebook-like tech behemoth, called the Circle” (Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*), and that any resemblance to Orwell’s *1984* is entirely intentional (Carolyn Kellog, *LA Times*).<sup>1</sup> There is

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<sup>1</sup> These quotes are taken from an overview of all the reviews written on *The Circle*, composed by Roderick Nieuwenhuis in *NRC Handelsblad*, see bibliography.

however not one critic who mentions the novel's relations to *The Handmaid's Tale*, or a critic who at least reflects on the question of how gender is represented in *The Circle*. This is remarkable, as it is generally acknowledged that utopian and dystopian literature are characterized by the possibility to imagine social, sexual, and symbolic relations differently, and to make readers aware of their perception of the present world they live in (Sargisson 227). Utopias and dystopias are therefore both critical analyses of existing conditions, as visionary formulations of alternative possibilities (Ni Dhuill 150). It was Ernst Bloch who brought this understanding of utopia and dystopia to the front, with an emphasis on hope as the driven force behind imagining other worlds:

[Hope] requires people who throw themselves actively into what is becoming, to which they themselves belong. It will not tolerate a dog's life which feels itself only passively thrown into What Is, which is not seen through, even wretchedly recognized. (14)

Bloch's understanding of utopia is highly important and useful for feminists, as utopia's possibility to change the reader's perspective of the world means for feminists inevitably the possibility of changing a world in which gender inequality and women's marginalization exists. Utopianism is therefore to be found in many feminist theories and ideas, for example in the concept of gender as a social construction, which carries the implication that it is possible to remake gender identities and gender relations. Caitríona Ní Dhúill argues however in "Engendering the Future: Bloch's Utopian Philosophy in Dialogue with Gender Theory", that Jacques Lacan's reinflection of the term subject, away from notions of autonomy and self identity and towards the notion of subjection, the condition of begin subjected to language, discourse and other systems and regimes, highlights the fact that the conditions under which the subject might fashion her own identity, are not themselves of the subject's choosing (151).

Utopian and dystopian fiction imagine alternative languages, discourses and other systems and regimes and foreground therefore precisely how their characters construct their identity, gender being a major part of this identity. Reading through the lens of gender and utopia causes one to “find their assumptions about women and men disrupted, as one learns about power, privilege, authority, point of view and ‘otherness’, and leads to reconsideration of almost everything humans do with or say to one another” (Fisher xxxi). In this thesis I will therefore close-read the three dystopian novels *1984* by George Orwell, *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood and *The Circle* by Dave Eggers, to see where the texts do or do not imagine gender in an alternative way. Do the texts imagine for example the presence of multiple genders, or is there a world possible that goes beyond the notion of gender? Are the text imagining gender relations otherwise than binary hierarchical, or are masculinity and femininity continue to be understood as mutually constituting binary, but are they presented in a context where this traditional opposition becomes self-questioning, parodic, opaque, diversified or unstable (Ní Dhúill 147)? In order to answer these questions, I will first go deeper into the terms utopia, dystopia and utopianism, using Ernst Bloch’s theory on utopia and several works on feminist utopianism and utopias by Angelika Bammer, Ruth Levitas and Lucy Sargisson, followed by three close-readings of each novel in which I examine how the novels fit into the dystopian tradition, if and how they imagine gender differently and how the novels relate to each other.

## Chapter 1

### The Imagination of Possible Alternatives

#### *Theoretical Framework*

The term utopia is difficult to explain, as its meanings are both various and contested in academic discourse. Most utopian studies consider Thomas More's book *Utopia* (1516), referring the Greek word Ouk-topia (no place) as well as to Eu-topia (good place), as the starting point of utopia as a literary genre (Bagchi 1; Vieira, 4). Consequently, utopia is widely understood as an imagined, perfect society or wishfully constructed place which does not and cannot exist. It has been historically defined by four characteristics: 1) the content of the imagined society (i.e., the identification of that society with the idea of "good place"), 2) the literary form into which the utopian imagination has been crystallized, 3) the function of utopia (i.e., the impact that it causes on its reader, urging him to take action) and 4) the desire for a better life, caused by a feeling of discontentment towards the society one lives in (Levitas xii; Vieira 6).

Ruth Levitas, author of the influential works *The Concept of Utopia* (1990) and *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society* (2013), notes that historically, utopian theory and scholarship focussed firstly on the form and content of utopia and considered utopia therefore to function as blueprints for the perfect society, filled with detailed plans and an agenda of what the ideal world should look like (xvii). This perspective implies that utopian novels always contain a certain fixed goal and a sense of closure, which has caused critics to point out that ideal societies inevitably lead to authoritarianism, tyranny and totalitarianism to achieve and maintain the ideal (Levitas 103). As a result, a strong sense of anti-utopianism arose.

Ernst Bloch focussed mainly on the fourth characteristic of utopia – desire - in his foundational work *The Principles of Hope* (1954). He wrote on the idea of *docta spes*, informed



or educated hope, and posited the existence of an utopian impulse; an anthropological given that underpins the human propensity to long for and imagine a life otherwise (Bloch 7; Levitas 5). The origins of this impulse, or “utopianism” in general, lie, according to Bloch, in the human experience of a sense of hunger, loss and lack: a deep sense that something is missing (Bloch xxix; Levitas 5). Bloch writes:

The world is full of propensity towards something, tendency towards something, latency of something, and this intended something means fulfillment of the intending. It means a world which is more adequate for us, without degrading suffering, anxiety, self-alienation, nothingness.(18)

Crucially, Bloch argues that this lack cannot be articulated other than through imagining its fulfillment; everything that reaches to transformed existence is, in this sense, utopian (Bloch 18; Levitas 5). Utopianism is to be found in a medicine, technology and architecture, but Bloch considers art, music and literature to be particularly utopian, as the “whole of art shows itself to be full of appearances which are driven to become symbols of perfection, to be a utopianly essential end” (14). Bloch compares art to a laboratory where events, figures and characters can presuppose possibility beyond an already existing reality, which leads him to develop one of the most important terms in his work, the anticipatory consciousness (11). This term is explained as a consciousness of possibilities that have not yet been – but could eventually be – realized (Bloch 13; Bammer, 3). Bloch stresses that this consciousness operates in the field of hope and that hope therefore should not be regarded as an emotion only, but more essentially as directing act of a cognitive kind (12). The anticipatory consciousness creates distance from what Bloch calls “the darkness of the lived moment”,

For without distance, right within, you cannot even experience something; not to speak of representing it, to present it in a right way which simultaneously has to provide a general view. In general it is like this: all nearness makes matters difficult, and if it is too close, then one is blinded, at least made mute. (11)

Within the anticipatory consciousness operates thus the central idea of the “not yet”, which carries the double sense of not yet (but expected, a future presence) and still not (a current absence and lack) (Bloch 14; Levitas 6). In Bloch’s words, the not-yet-conscious is a “relatively still unconscious disposed towards its other side, forwards rather than backwards. Towards the side of something new that is dawning up” (11).<sup>2</sup> The not yet operates at two levels: the subjective, individual not-yet-conscious, the essentially creative preconscious utopian impulse, that which is on the verge of coming to consciousness, and the objective, external condition of the world, the not-yet-become (Bloch 11; Levitas, 6).

The not-yet-conscious makes the process of imagining other worlds possible, which led to a much broader understanding of the concept utopia and utopianism. As Bloch points out that “to limit or even so much as orient our concept of the utopian to Thomas More, would be like reduce electricity to the amber from which it gets its Greek name and in which it was first noticed” (15). Instead of seeing utopia as a blue print of an ideal world, Bloch showed how utopia is rather a process based on hope and desire, imagined by humans who are driven by a lack of something and the dreams of overcoming the lack of that something. This different understanding is also to be found in contemporary work on utopia, for example in Barnita Bagchi’s *The Politics of the (im)possible: Utopia and Dystopia Reconsidered* (2012), in which

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<sup>2</sup> Bloch emphasizes that the not-yet-conscious is something that never has been conscious before, so it is not for example “something forgotten, something rememberable that has been, something that has sunk into the subconscious in repressed or archaic fashion” (12). This argument shows Bloch’s criticism of Freud’s emphasis on trauma and nightmares about a repressed past.

utopia is understood as a resonance, a mode and a perspective at once. Bagchi argues in addition that the Greek word *topos* (place) as well refers to classical Greek rhetoric to a standardized method of constructing or developing an argument (1). Fatima Vieira emphasizes in “The Concept of Utopia” (2010) that desire is the most important characteristic of utopia and that utopia therefore has to be seen as a “matter of attitude, as a kind of reaction to an undesirable present and an aspiration to overcome all difficulties by the imagination of possible alternatives” (7).

### **Feminist Utopias and Utopianism**

Understanding utopia differently has been especially important for feminists, as women were not only kept out of the tradition of the utopian genre, but utopianism also appeared to be both crucial for and in some ways similar to feminism. Angelika Bammer stresses some important points on the history of women and utopia in her work *Partial Visions: Feminism and Utopianism in the 1970's* (2003). She notes for example that a) scholars and critics focused mainly on utopias written by men, and that b) by reviewing the images of women throughout the history of utopia – “wives, mothers and helpmates who, happily and submissively, provide domestic and sexual services” - it becomes evident that women were hardly better off in utopia than in reality, and that those who wield power in the real world continued to do so in utopia, while others, in positions of servitude, remain equally unacknowledged and invisible in both (13). Women *did* write literary utopias, especially since the late seventeenth century with Margaret Cavendish’s *The Blazing World* (1666) as perhaps the best known example, but as Bammer states, many of the utopias produced by women in the following centuries have been ignored or dismissed as

unworthy of attention by serious utopianists (21).<sup>3</sup> Bammer even claims that the first utopia ever was not More's *Utopia*, but *City of Ladies* (1404) written by Christine de Pizan (152).

Because of Bloch's new understanding of utopia, all texts that offer new conceptual paradigms and force readers to review established ways of looking at things got to be considered as utopian and essential to an active utopian tradition (Levitas 8). Changing the way of how one sees the world means for feminists inevitably changing the world in which gender inequality exists and women are marginalized. As Levitas states: "Both feminism and utopianism set themselves as antitheses to the existing order of things" (95). Besides Angelika Bammer and Ruth Levitas, several other scholars – all influenced by Bloch's work – wrote on utopia as a process and the relationship between feminism and utopianism, such as Lucy Sargisson in *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism* (1996), Alessa Johns in "Feminism and Utopia" (2010) and Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor in *Postmodern Utopias and Feminist Fictions* (2013).

Johns distinguishes three reasons why utopian imagination is crucial for feminists: 1) Gender equality has never fully existed, so it must be imagined if it is to become a subject of conscious thought and discussion, 2) given the limited political, economic and social clout of feminists, they have sought out cultural modes, especially artistic and literary representations, as the most eligible means of making a different future comprehensible to the largest possible audience, and consequently, 3) utopia has given feminists a socially viable course of discursive and ideological deviance (175). In light of this thesis, I would like to stress the importance of this last aspect, as both Bammer and Sargisson emphasize as well. Bammer uses theory by Fredric Jameson to stress that the emancipatory potential of utopias is not to be found on the level of

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<sup>3</sup> Some examples of literary feminist utopias from different times are Mary Astell's *Serious Proposal* (1694), Sarah Scott's *Millenium Hall* (1762), Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892), Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915), Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974), Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), Johanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975) and Octavia Butler's *Lilith's Brood* (2000).

representation, but on the level of discursive practices, by what Jameson calls “post-representational”:

Defined in terms of process (...) enunciation, productivity, such texts [utopias] undermine the reified concept of the text as a product to be consumed as is and force us to think critically not only about what we think, but how we have learned to think”.

(Jameson qtd. in Bammer 15).

Jameson occupies himself with the concept of utopia in many of his works. In his reading of Louis Marin’s *Utopiques: Jeux D’espaces* (1973), “Islands and Trenches: Neutralization and the production of utopian discourse” (1977), Jameson proposes indeed that the literary utopia should not be seen as a representation, but as “a reflection of our own incapacity to conceive utopia in the first place” (21). The reason why we cannot achieve utopia ourselves is, according to Jameson, a result of the systemic, cultural and ideological closure of which we are all “in one way or another prisoners” (20). In order to overcome these systemic, cultural and ideological dimensions, Jameson argues that they need to be “neutralized”; they should be imagined as if they no longer carry meaning, which is precisely the function of the utopian form (5). To Jameson, utopia is therefore rather a praxis that forces the reader to reflect on one’s thinking process in imagining an alternative world than a representation of what the perfect world should look like (6).<sup>4</sup>

Sargisson stresses a similar point, as she emphasizes the importance of the construction of meaning in utopia as well. She argues that meaning is constructed by a complex a hierarchical

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<sup>4</sup> Jameson: “It is possible to understand the Utopian text as determinate type of praxis, rather than as a specific code of representation, a praxis which has less to do with the construction and perfection of someone’s ‘idea’ of a ‘perfect society’ than it does with a concrete set of mental operations to be performed on a determinate type of raw material given in advance which is contemporary society itself, or rather, what amounts to the same thing, to those collective representations of contemporary society which inform our ideologies just as they order our experience of daily life” (6).

system of binary oppositions and, according to Sargisson, utopian thought attempts to transgress this system and to open new conceptual spaces for exploration and exploitation in projects of emancipation (227). In other words:

The utopian feminists escape the restrictions of patriarchal scholarship. New and inventive languages can best be imagined and employed in a new space, as can different social, sexual, and symbolic relations. (Sargisson 41)

I think this perspective on utopia as thought-experiment shows why utopianism is important for feminism, despite of the opinions of several theorists who are critical towards feminist utopianism and utopianism in general. Theorists such as Sally Kitch for example, proposed “post-utopian feminist thought” that favours what she calls “realism over imagined improvements” (11). In her work *From Utopianism to Realism in American Feminist Thought and Theory* (2000), she argues that “without utopianism, feminism can more readily recognize contingent truths, inevitable conflicts and complex motivations and loyalties, as it addresses the problems it can name. Realistic feminist thought can embrace the serendipity and vagaries of human life, identity, relationships, and institutions” ( 12). Realism could indeed shed a light on the “serendipity and vagaries of human life”, but I believe that if one really wants to make a change, one needs to step out of the systems and languages that are responsible for (re)producing precisely that what one wants to change. Sargisson also observes that because utopia is explicitly imaginative, it has been devalued in the schools of political theory and philosophy as escapist, fanciful and, above all, unscientific in disciplines which favour rational debate, logical argument and serious scholarship (41). She notes that, ironically, the words that are used to depreciate utopianism, are those which Western binary thought designates ‘femine’ as opposed to the

rationality of masculine, “scientific debate” – I think this is important to bear in mind in light of the construction of meaning, feminism and utopia (Sargisson 42).

### **Dystopia: the Janus Face of Utopia**

Equally important for utopianism is the existence of the dystopia, often explained as the opposite meaning of utopia. Other than in the traditional understanding of utopia, however, the word “dystopia” does not have the same double meaning (good place and a no place in utopia) in it, as the greek “dys” only refers to “bad”, “abnormal” or “diseased” (Vieira 16). If one thinks in opposite terms, dystopia should then be a place which *can* be found, as the word dystopia does not explicitly refer to “no place”. Vieira however, points out that if utopia was commonly seen as “too good to be practicable”, then dystopia was “too bad to be practicable” and thus still a place that is nowhere to be found (Vieira 16). In this light, dystopias have the same critical function as utopias and are, according to Bagchi, inseparately connected to each other:

The double burden of awareness entailed in the term utopia lead to every successful conceptualization of utopia having as its janus face a dystopia: one (wo)man’s utopia is often another’s dystopia, and vice versa (2).

Both utopia and dystopia present alternative worlds, but they do have different characteristics. Amin Malak considers Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We* (1921), Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) and Orwell’s *1984* as the classical works that have formed the dystopian tradition, as all three novels describe a “patteren of life on frugality, conformity, censorship, corruption, fear and terror. In short, the usual terms of existence enforced by totalitarian states” (10). Malak then articulates five different characteristics which define not only these three classical works, but the dystopian literary tradition in general: 1) power, totalitarianism and war; dystopias essentially deal

with power and show how power functions efficiently and mercilessly to its optimal totalitarian limit, 2) dream versus nightmare and fantasy versus reality; dystopias carry the narrative one step beyond our reality as a warning of what might could happen, 3) Binary oppositions; dystopias dramatize the enternal conflict between individual choice and social necessity, a conflict that is influenced by binary oppositions such as emotion and reason, intuition and science, tolerance and judgement, etcetera, 4) Characterization; dystopias prelude advancing, positive, assertive characters that might provide the reader with consoling hope, but are however often miserably ineffectual when contending with ruthless overwhelming powers and 5) ideology and possibility; dystopias are ideological novels that engage the reader in (...) a theoretical discourse, whereby a range of thematic possibilities are posited and polarized against each other (Malak, 10-11). This last characteristic is similar to the transgressive function of utopia; the possibility to step outside the existing discourses and create new ways of thinking. These characteristics are in particular useful to see how other literary works, such as *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Circle*, fit into or alter this tradition. Dystopias essentially deal with the same "What if?" question as utopias, but present negative possible answers to this question. This, however, does not imply that dystopian fiction contradict utopian thought forms, as these negative imaginable alternatives provide not only the horizon for the critique of the now, but also for hope of possibilities to prevent negative events from happening. Dystopian writing is thus inevitably utopian as well.

### **Alternative Representations of Gender**

This thesis is grounded on the feminist notion of gender as socially constructed, creating gender inequality with women as the marinalized group.<sup>5</sup> Whithin this notion, stereotypes play an

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<sup>5</sup> The notion of gender as a social construction arose in the 1990's during third wave feminism. It has its grounds in the believe that gender has its origins in the development of human culture, not in biology or procreation. People therefore *do* gender: "Individuals learn throughout their lives what is expected, see what is expected, act a react in



important role, which are generally understood as learned, widely shared, socially validated general beliefs about categories of individuals, based on hierarchical binary oppositions, which are powerful and enduring and often maintained as self-fulfilling prophecies (Turner-Bowker, 461). So, stereotypes play a great role in the process of reproducing gender and there are many scholars who analyzed the presence of female stereotypes in the history of literature, from myths to biblical texts and classical literary works. Deconstruction, defined as a strategy of disruption and transformation with regard to every and any kind of essentialism, is therefore often used by feminists to challenge traditional definitions of gender and analyze the opposition male/female as cultural construct that gives precedence to the masculine and marginalizes the female (“Deconstruction and Feminism”). According to Bammer, deconstruction is in some way not only similar to feminism, but also to utopianism, as they all share an agenda for change. They relate to each other because:

As long as we continue to speak, think, write, and even fantasize, as we have been taught to do within existing cultural paradigms, we will recreate the very structures within which we are always already configured. (Bammer 59)

This deconstruction method scrutinizes the processes through which the sexed and gendered subjects come to be and shows how individuals learn throughout their lives what is expected, see what is expected and react in expected ways, causing them to construct and reproduce their gender identity at the same time (Lorber 20). Ní Dhúill argues however that exact reproduction is never possible, only approximate, and it is therefore in the fault lines between one generation and the next, one historical moment to the next, that possibilities for transformation for the

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expected ways, and thus simultaneously construct and maintain the gender order” (Lorber 12). Influential feminists who wrote about the social construction of gender and gender difference are for example Judith Butler, Sandra Lipsitz Bem, Judith Lorber, Rebecca Walker, Anne-Fausto Sterling, Susan Faludi, Kathy Davis and Susan Farrel.

formulation of alternatives can be received (145). This thesis will, therefore, not use a deconstructional method but will look forward into the future and focusses instead on the transgressive function of utopia in relation to gender and questions if and how the discussed dystopian novels present gender and thinking about gender in an alternative way.

## Chapter 2

### How To Be A Woman in Oceania

#### *Close-reading George Orwell's 1984*

“Power is in tearing human minds to pieces and putting them together again in new shapes of your own choosing. Do you begin to see, then, what kind of world we are creating? It is the exact opposite of the stupid hedonistic Utopias that the old reformers imagined,” explains O’Brien, one of the characters in Orwell’s *1984* (211). This quote illustrates perfectly how utopia and dystopia are not only inseparably connected to each other, it also stresses an important point about the construction of meaning and utopianism. Utopianism is considered to be transgressive, as it offers the possibility to imagine new discourses. Therefore, utopianism enables readers to think differently. Power is however *everywhere*, to speak in terms of Michel Foucault, and thus also embodied in every new discourse that is created or imagined as “power is exercised within discourses, in the ways in which they constitute and govern individual subjects” (Foucault qtd. in Schrift, 140). The new discourse in Orwell’s *1984* shows how this power can be used to deliberately create the opposite of utopia and how this power is not a means, but an end: “One does not establish a dictatorship in order to safeguard a revolution; one makes the revolution in order to establish the dictatorship. [...] The object of power is power” (Orwell 208).

Winston Smith, the protagonist of *1984*, introduces the reader to Oceania, a state in the far future, where the political system INGSOC is dominant, with the mysterious Big Brother as Party leader and O’Brien as Inner Party member. The Party holds power over society through constant surveillance and by oppressing its citizens sexually. The main method to oppress its citizens is “thought control”, which operates through the discourse of Newspeak, a language designed in order to remove all shades of meaning from the existing languages, keeping only the

words that reinforce the dominance of the Party: “Don’t you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thought crime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it” (Orwell 40). An important aspect of Newspeak is doublethink, which refers to simultaneously accepting two contradictory beliefs as true.<sup>6</sup> The three main slogans of the Party’s ideology are examples of doublethink: “War is peace”, “Freedom is slavery” and “Ignorance is strength” (Orwell 81).<sup>7</sup>

The Party also uses Newspeak to rewrite history, as “the most effective way to destroy people is to deny and obliterate their own understanding of their history” (Orwell 90). Without a reliable official record, Smith’s way of thinking about his own situation is sabotaged. Reading an old history book, Smith thinks for example:

How could you tell how much of it was lies? (...) The only evidence to the contrary was the mute protest in your own bones, the instinctive feeling that the conditions you lived in were intolerable and that at some other time they must have been different. (Orwell 58)

Without understanding his own history and having evidence of other times, it is hard for Smith and the people in Oceania to be critical and resist the system they live in. The Party’s slogan is therefore that “who controls the past, controls the future. Who controls the present, controls the past” (Orwell 27). *1984* shows how people can be controlled and marginalized by enabling them to have a history and/or a language of one’s own, which are also inevitably two major themes

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<sup>6</sup> Smith states that one even needs to “double think” in order to understand the use of doublethink: “To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them, to use logic against logic, to repudiate morality while laying claim to it, to believe that democracy was impossible and that the Party was the guardian of democracy, to forget whatever it was necessary to forget, then to draw it back into memory again at the moment when it was needed, and then promptly to forget it again: and above all, to apply the same process to the process itself” (Orwell 27).

<sup>7</sup> Doublethink is also part of the way the Party is divided in different ministries. The Ministry of Peace concerns itself with war, the Ministry of Truth with lies, the Ministry of Love with torture and the Ministry of Plenty with starvation; “These contradictions are not accidental, nor do they result from ordinary hypocrisy: they are deliberate exercises in doublethink” (Orwell 28).

within feminism. These themes however, came only into being during the rise of second wave feminism – rewriting women’s history became an important topic in the 1960’s, women and language in the 1970’s – while Orwell already illustrated the importance of these themes in 1948, the year in which *1984* got published.<sup>8</sup>

The constant surveillance in Oceania, Big Brother watching everyone through camera’s and telescreens installed everywhere, is in some ways as well related to the notion of the male gaze, another concept that became prominent within feminism during the second wave. Jonathan Schroeder states that “to gaze, implies more than to look at – it signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze”, which is illustrated in *1984* (Schroeder 208). It was Laura Mulvey however who coined the term “male gaze” in her influential essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), by stating that women are the ones who are mainly the object of the gaze. Mulvey introduced this concept in relation to film, but other feminist critics continued in showing that the male gaze was indeed present in all other kinds of cultural expressions, considering it to be a form of androcentrism. Although men and women are *both* gazed at in *1984*, Orwell illustrates adequately how powerful surveillance and gazing as methods are and how it both objectifies and controls people. In addition, the citizens of Oceania are indeed gazed at by the *man* Big Brother, which leaves no questions of who is as well in power in the society of *1984*.

Another aspect of *1984* that could be related to feminism, is the corresponding appearance of men and women in Oceania; women do not wear make-up, have “boyish hair” and are dressed in the same “shapeless, blue Party overalls” (Orwell 112). Men and women looking

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<sup>8</sup> An example of a feminist theory that occupies itself with language is *Écriture Féminine*, a theory that is originated in France during the early 1970’s and developed by foundational theorists such as Hélène Cixous, Monique Wittig and Julia Kristeva. The term *Écriture Féminine* is coined by Cixous in her influential essay ‘The Laugh of Medusa’ (1975) and means literally “women’s writing” but relates specifically to the inscription of the female body and female difference in language and text (Showalter, 180).

the same and women not being forced by society to look attractive and live up to certain ideal images, could be seen as utopian for some feminists. Women being treated the same as men is a strategy that is related to the sameness/difference debate within feminism, in which feminists who strive for sameness emphasize the similarities between the sexes, are opposed by feminists who stress the differences between sexes (Capps 65). These feminists take case for a differential treatment, as forms of sex-bias legislation would, by offering women additional rights and privileges, create a more level playing field (Capps 65). Orwell's emphasis on the sameness of women and men would certainly not be considered utopian for the feminists on this side of the debate and the different opinions illustrate thus as well how one (wo)man's utopia, can be another (wo)man's dystopia.

### **Orwell's Women: Emotional, Passive and Easy Manipulated**

Orwell thus touches upon several themes that later became important within feminism. These examples show that *1984* is not only an important novel because of its classical dystopian features, but also because it illustrates how it is in fact just a small step from writing about having power over humans in general towards writing and thinking about having power over a particular group of people, such as women. It is however important not to regard *1984* as a fundamental influence for feminism or to state that *1984* is a feminist work, as the examples should be seen in the context of the narrative which on the contrary does not question the position of women at all. Close-reading *1984* with regard to the representation of women and gender, shows that Orwell, despite his progressive ideas and humanist intentions, had a blind spot for gender politics and that *1984* is essentially male centered, just like most of his non-fiction work (Bail 215; Patai 860). The most prominent evidence of this is that all the women in the novel are primarily seen and defined in their relation to men and their biological, primordial

role, precisely what Anne Ferguson considers in *Images of Women in Literature* (1973) to be one of the most important characteristics of female stereotyping (12).<sup>9</sup> The women in the novel are therefore the stereotypical mothers (Smith's mother), wives (Smith's wife Katherine) or sex-objects (Smith's lover Julia) and not as much else.

Smith's mother's actions are highly stereotypical, as "she did everything that was needed. She cooked, washed, mended, made the bed, swept the floor, dusted the mantelpiece, (...) nursed his young sister" (Orwell 127). His mother is as well stereotypical "female", as she is presented as emotional instead of rational: "She was not an unusual woman, who was also not very intelligent, but she did possess however "a kind of nobility, a kind of purity" (Orwell 169). Orwell thinks of his mother as noble because she died sacrificing herself out of love for him. Smith sees his mother therefore as some kind of symbol of how the world should be, as "such things, he saw, could not happen today. Today there were fear, hatred, and pain, but no dignity of emotion, no deep or complex sorrows. All this he saw in the eyes of his mother" (Orwell 24).

Stereotypical behavior is certainly not the sole privilege of Smith's mother. In fact, all the women in *1984* are represented as passive, not intelligent and easy to manipulate. This is for example evident in Smith hating his wife Katherine because she follows the rules of the Party religiously without questioning anything: "She [Katherine] had without exception the most stupid, vulgar, empty mind that he had ever encountered" (Orwell 51). According to Smith, women in general are to be hated, as "it was always the women, and above all, the young ones, who were the most bigoted adherents of the Party, the swallows of slogans, the amateur spies and nosers-out of unorthodoxy" (Orwell 8). Smith gets himself nevertheless into a relationship

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<sup>9</sup> "Women in every age have been seen primarily in their biological, primordial role. They have been viewed as mother, wife, mistress, sex object – their roles in relationship to men" (Ferguson 12).

with his co-worker Julia. She is against the Party and although she is thus not like other women, she is also not presented as intellectual – she for example falls asleep several times when Smith discusses the Party’s ideology – and seems to be revolting against the system mainly because she wants her own sexual needs to be satisfied (Orwell 122). Smith does not think highly of her and calls her “a rebel from the waist downwards” (Orwell 122).

Women lacking intelligence, being passive and easily manipulated justifies Smith to be aggressive, to victimize them and to expect women to sacrifice themselves. This is present in the scene where Smith, as a little boy, demands to get all the food there is. Smith’s mother marginalizes herself and her daughter by taking for granted that “the boy should have the biggest portion” (Orwell 127). Although Smith’s mother did give him the biggest portion, it still was not enough and Smith takes it all, knowing that he was starving his mother and sister; “but he could not help it; he even felt that he had the right to do it. The clamorous hunger in his belly seemed to justify him” (Orwell 127). Other examples are Smith imagining pushing his wife Katherine from a cliff and his desire to attack Julia, before he knew she was against the Party:

“I wanted to rape you and then murder you afterwards. Two weeks ago I thought seriously of smashing your head in with a cobblestone. If you really want to know, I imagined that you had something to do with the Thought Police” (Orwell 94).

The people in *1984* are sexually oppressed by the Party: love is forbidden and sex should be a matter of procreation only, because the sex instinct creates a world outside the Party’s control. Within this sexual oppression however, there is an emphasis on restricting women from having enjoyable sex, whereas sex for men is regarded as something that still has to be done from time to time. Prostitutes are more or less allowed and accepted; “consorting with prostitutes was forbidden, of course, but it was one of those rules that you could occasionally nerve yourself to



break. It was dangerous, but it was not a life-and-death matter” (Orwell 50). Women are expected not to care about sex at all and remain “pure”, which is evident in the passage in which is explained why only women can work at the porn department of the ministry, because

men, whose sex instincts were less controllable than those of women, were in greater danger of being corrupted by the filth they handled. ‘They don’t even like having married women there’, she [Julia] adds. Girls are always supposed to be so pure.<sup>10</sup> (Orwell 102)

The similar appearance of men and women is a result of the imposed sexual oppression, as the sex instinct must be avoided and women are therefore forbidden to look attractive in any way. From this perspective, this concept is not feminist at all, since it affects women the most as they are the ones that need to change, instead of men who’s sex instinct is considered to be natural. When Julia and Smith meet in secret to have sex, Julia does wear make-up and perfume mentioning that she will get silk stockings and high-heeled shoes as well, because she is determined “to be a woman, not a Party comrade” (Orwell 112). Being a woman thus implies looking sexually desirable for men, by masking one’s face with layers of make-up and wearing uncomfortable clothes that accentuate one’s figure. When Julia puts make-up on in front of Smith, he indeed notes that “the improvement in her appearance was startling. With just a few dabs of color in the right places she had become not only very much prettier, but, above all, far more feminine” (Orwell 112).

Close-reading *1984* shows that Orwell imagines new, inventive languages, as well as different social relations and is therefore transgressive. However, he does not imagine new gender and sexual relations in a different way. The female characters are seen a from male-

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<sup>10</sup> The Porn Ministry produces porn for the proles, the lowest class of Oceania, in order to keep them calm and content.

centered perspective and therefore presented primarily in their biological, primordial role. Women are expected to be pure and not to care about sex, whereas men's sexuality is considered as natural. Women are less intelligent, emotional, passive and easy to be manipulated, which justifies men to treat women with misogyny and be aggressive towards them. In addition, as Paul Bail points out as well, it can be stressed that all the female characters are not developed, as they all do and say very little in the narrative, and that the "serious concerns of politics and male camaraderie" are foregrounded (216). One could argue that every imagined world in which gender is presented unequally is always a dystopia – at least for women – but it is especially dystopian when the representation of gender does not differ in any way from how it is to be found in the real world. If Orwell had only dramatized, decreased, or turned the binary hierarchical structure slightly around, the narrative would have forced the readers to think more critically about what one thinks of gender identities and gender relations and simultaneously about how one has learned to think about these relations. This close-reading shows that whenever someone refers to *1984*, one should not only mention that the novel is a warning of totalitarianism and the misuse of power, but also that the novel is a warning of how one can be blind of gender politics and the marginalization of women.

## Chapter 3

### Perspectives of Gender and Misogyny

#### *Close-reading Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale*

Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* was published in 1984, precisely the year in which the world was "anxiously looking for examples of the Orwellian prophecy to come true" and it therefore seemed as if Atwood would present a text that took over where Orwell's *1984* left off (Gulick 1). Comparisons of Atwood's dystopian novel and Orwell's *1984* were therefore inevitable and written in a large extent; both Amin Malak and Angela Michelle Gulick argue for example that Atwood's work clearly contains a lot of elements that are part of the long-standing dystopian tradition based on Orwell's work. I argue, however, that Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* transgresses the dystopian tradition as well; not only because of Atwood's feminist aim of her different representation of gender, but also because of her use of other narrative techniques that foreground the way meaning is constructed in the dystopian world she presents.<sup>11</sup>

*The Handmaid's Tale* tells the story of protagonist Offred. She is an inhabitant of the future state Gilead, which replaces the United States of America. Gilead is a totalitarian dictatorship in which women are oppressed and their status is explicitly determined by their reproductive capabilities. Where Orwell's blind spot for gender politics is visible in the way his female characters are stereotypical presented in relation to their biological roles, it is Atwood's aim to foreground how both men and women are defined by their gender, how one gender is in power over the other, and how gender is not natural, but constructed and reproduced. This is for

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<sup>11</sup> The narrative techniques that Atwood uses are considered to be post-modern, while Orwell's work is considered to be modernist and Egger's work to be post-post-modernist (although there is still debate on this term in the academical field). Although it would be interesting to compare the novels in light of these tendencies, I will not go into this topic in this thesis.

example evident when Offred says: “I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it's shameful or immodest but because I don't want to see it. I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely” (76), “Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfill the expectations of others, which have become my own” (78) and “I wait. I compose myself. Myself is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born” (80).

In Gilead, there is a strong hierarchy present among women: at the top, there are the upper-class, barren wives, who are married to the Commanders; there are Aunts, who educate all the women in Gilead; handmaids, who need to bear children for the wives; Martha's, responsible for the households; and the “unwomen”, women who are banned from Gilead and work in colonies or as prostitutes in forbidden clubs. Women are in Gilead, just as in *1984*'s Oceania, thus mostly mothers, wives and sex-objects. Atwood however, plays with the stereotypical understanding of those roles. The mothers, wives and sex-objects in Gilead differ strongly from those in *1984*. It is for example hard to define which women in Gilead are the actual mothers in the classical, stereotypical understanding of this role. Offred is a mother, as she already has a daughter and is, as a handmaid, trying to get pregnant. She cannot however take care of her daughter, and when she gets a new baby, that child is taken away too and given to one of the wives. The handmaids function therefore not so much as mothers, but rather as breeding machines, or as “two-legged wombs” (Atwood 149). The child belongs then to the wives, but the Aunts are the ones who are responsible for the raising and education of children. The stereotypical tasks of a mother are thus divided and performed by a group of different women.

The wives and the sex-objects are as well presented in a distorted way. The wives are the women with the highest status in Gilead, as they are married to the Commanders, and therefore

freed from all tasks a woman could have. There remains nothing for them to do to make their lives meaningful and they are unable to please their men in any way. The handmaids function as sex-objects for men in Gilead as being an “object” is already evident in their names. The handmaids are given new names that are compositions of the word “Of” and the name of the Commander’s to whom they belong; Offred’s name thus indicates that she is a possession of her Commander Fred. Although their most important function is having sex with the Commanders, the handmaids do not look sexually desirable, as they are used for procreation only:

We are for breeding purposes: we aren't concubines, geisha girls, courtesans. (...) There is supposed to be nothing entertaining about us, no room is to be permitted for the flowering of secret lusts; no special favors are to be wheedled, by them or us, there are to be no toeholds for love. (Atwood 149)

It is argued by several feminists that stereotypical representations of women illustrate how women are expected to play multiple, contradicting roles at the same time, which causes both stress and anxiety and results inevitably into failure (Ferguson 12). In Gilead however, women help one another, “each performing her appointed task. Why expect one woman to carry out all the functions necessary to the serene running of a household? It isn't reasonable or humane” (Atwood 175).<sup>12</sup> Gilead could therefore be seen as an utopian place for women; there is a strong women’s culture in which women stand out for each other and in which women do not have to play contradictory stereotypical roles at the same time. Women are also not expected to look sexually desirable for men, porn does not exist and there are extreme punishments for men who rape women. Looking at these general characteristics of the new regime, it seems as if Gilead is

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<sup>12</sup> Women doing “everything” is now regarded as something that belongs to the lowest classes of women in society, such as the econowomen in Gilead, who are “not divided into functions. They have to do everything; if they can” (Atwood 36).

indeed a paradise for women, especially when it is compared to Offred's former life. The novel contains several flashbacks to the pre-Gilead time and there are as well references to the past in Aunt Lydia's speeches, for example when she shows porn-movies from the 1970's, presenting "women kneeling, sucking penises or guns, women tied up or chained or with dog collars around their necks, women hanging from trees, or upside-down, naked, with their legs held apart (...)"(Atwood 130). Aunt Lydia comments: "Consider the alternatives. (...) You see what things used to be like? That was what they thought of women, then" (Atwood 130). The past is, just as in *1984*, an important and powerful tool for the regime to influence how Gilead's contemporary world is perceived and to control both the present and the future.

Aunt Lydia also explains that there is more than one kind of freedom, the "Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it" (Atwood 20). In Gilead, women are free from a lot of negative practices from the pre-Gilead world, but they do not longer have the freedom to make their own choices or deviate from the opposed standards. Having "freedom from" is therefore rather a dystopian notion for women in Gilead than utopian. Not having the "freedom to" is as well connected to having a language and a history of one's own. Offred only has her own memories to rely on and to compare her current situation to, as women in Gilead are forbidden to read or write. It is therefore impossible for women to understand their own history properly or to be remembered: "We [women] were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print" (46). It makes it impossible to gather knowledge as "knowing was a temptation. What you don't know, won't tempt you" (Atwood 162). It makes it impossible to leave a mark, to express one's thoughts or feelings or to have any form of power: "The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the words it

contains” (196). And, as Offred herself is highly aware of, being unable to read or write makes it impossible to have perspective:

The illusion of depth, created by a frame, the arrangement of shapes on a flat surface.

Perspective is necessary. Otherwise there are only two dimensions. Otherwise you live with your face squashed up against a wall, everything a huge foreground, of details. (...)

Otherwise you live in the moment. Which is not where I want to be. (117)

Gilead’s power controls all aspects of public and private life, wherever possible, and is made prominently visible. The regime for example, who based its ideology on puritan beliefs, made sure that its citizens are reminded of this ideology at any time, as all the names of titles for peoples and places are drawn from the Bible.<sup>13</sup> Power is also exercised through surveillance. Offred is constantly watched or feels as if she is being watched, which is reinforced by the presence of mirrors in many rooms, experienced by Offred as if those are “watching eyes” too.<sup>14</sup>

This kind of surveillance that is also present in Orwell’s *1984*, could be interpreted as a reference to Michel Foucault’s notion of the panopticon that is based on the structure of prisons with a central watchtower from where every prisoner can be watched constantly. In *Discipline and Punishment* (1975), Foucault analyzes the architectural structure of the panopticon as the

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<sup>13</sup> Guards are called Angels; soldiers are called Angels of the Apocalypse and Angels of Light; the training center where handmaids are indoctrinated are called Rachel and Leah Centers; cars named Chariots, Whirlwinds, and Behemoths drive the streets, and stores are called Milk and Honey, All Flesh, Lilies of the Field, Daily Bread, Loaves and Fishes (Gulick 105). The idea of the handmaids is directly taken from the bible as well, as the first words of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, other than the title and the dedications, consist of an epigram in which the reader is told the biblical story of Rachel, who, unable to conceive her own children, said to her husband Jacob, “Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her, and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her” (Genesis 30: 1-3 as qtd. in Gulick, 26). This results in certain rituals in Gilead; for example when the handmaids have sex with the commanders, the handmaids lay between the legs of the wives; and when the handmaids give birth, the wives sit behind them with their legs around the handmaids, literally recreating the biblical story of Rachel.

<sup>14</sup> Examples of this are: "There remains a mirror, on the hall wall.... I can see it as I go down the stairs, round, convex, a pier-glass, like the eye of a fish, and myself in it. like a distorted shadow..." (19), "I descend the stairs, a brief waif in the eye of glass that hangs on the downstairs wall" (91), "I see the two of us...in the brief glass eye of the mirror as we descend" (281).

paradigm of a controlled society in which power is maintained through visibility (Schrift 143). The central watchtower in the panopticon has blinds at the window or is a one-way mirror, ensuring that the prisoners never know if they are watched or not; the prisoners therefore become self-policing. Mirrors therefore also reflect and reinforce the notion of humans watching themselves and therefore controlling themselves: they become their own guards (Schrift 123). The power of surveillance in Gilead is however mostly exercised by men and is, other than in *1984*, an explicit reference towards the Male Gaze, as Aunt Lydia teaches women that “To be seen – to be *seen* – is to be... penetrated” (25).

### **Women’s Hate of Women and White Male Dominated Records of the Past**

Atwood still presents gender in a binary hierarchical way, although the gender politics in Gilead affect women even more negatively. It makes the reader aware how this way of understanding gender marginalizes women and it foregrounds how typical dystopian characteristics affect women in a different way than men. This makes Atwood’s novel a feminist dystopia in particular. In addition, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is not only transgressive because it imagines gender relations differently by dramatizing the hierarchical binary oppositions on which gender is based, but also because it goes beyond the dystopian tradition. This is evident in the fact that *The Handmaid’s Tale* is feminist, but simultaneously a critique of feminism and therefore self-reflexive. Both Moira, Offred’s best friend, and Offred’s mother are, pre-Gilead, presented as feminists who believe that living solely with women would solve many of the problems women were currently facing (Gulick 10). Atwood makes it however evident in her novel that women do not automatically feel loyalty towards one another. For instance, Barbara Ehrenreich, who posits in “On Feminist Dystopia” that the real dystopian threat in Gilead comes not from male but from female control and that “Gilead is the evolution of a new form of



misogyny, not men's hatred of women, but as women's hatred of women" (79). In other words, the male-dominated power structure relies on women to regulate one another and enforce social standards (Ehrenreich 79). As Offred says to Moira: "there was more than one way of living with your head in the sand and that if Moira thought she could create Utopia by shutting herself up in a women-only enclave, she was sadly mistaken" (Atwood 121). Pre-Gilead, Offred often disagrees with both Moira and her mother about their feminist ideas, and Offred's mother keeps reminding her, to Offred's irritation, of the struggles feminists had to overcome to get women in the position they now are:

You young people don't appreciate things... you don't know what we had to go through, just to get where you are. Look at Luke slicing up the carrots. Don't you know how many women's lives, how many women's bodies the thanks had to roll over us to get that far? (Atwood 131)

Offred only begins to understand the importance of her mother's feminism when Gilead starts to arise, banning all women from employment and freezing their financial assets, causing them to be entirely independent of men. Offred then realizes that her relationship with her husband Luke has changed: "Something had shifted, some balance. (...) We are not each others anymore. Instead, I'm his" (153). Atwood thus shows that women themselves can be blind of gender politics as well and that they only realize the existence of those gender structures when they change for the negative.

Atwood transgresses the dystopian tradition thus in the sense that there is not one "Big Brother"-esque bad guy that is to be held responsible for all the misery in the world. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, men and women suffer both from the regime, although women in a larger extent, and it is not as if men are in any case the enemy: women themselves are as well

responsible for reproducing the system they live in and are sometimes also blinded by the present gender politics. The *Handmaid's Tale* illustrates why feminism is important, but Atwood does not present clear answers of how an ideal feminist society should look like; on the contrary, she makes the reader aware that feminism has its flaws as well and she does not claim to know what is best. The reader sees more than just Offred's two dimensions of what is considered to be "good" and "bad"; instead, Atwoods offers a perspective of several alternatives and their possible consequences.

*The Handmaid's Tale* differs as well from the dystopian tradition because of its ending. It remains for example unclear what happens to both the protagonist and the other characters. At the end of the novel, Offred is taken away but the reader does not know if she is arrested by Gilead's regime or is rescued by the secret underground movement Mayday. In traditional dystopias the protagonist is overruled by the system, despite his/her attempts to change the world for the better. The last chapter "Historical Notes" informs that the Gilead no longer exists, but that Offred lived long enough to tell her story, not by writing but by recording it on several tapes. This last chapter takes place in the far future at an academic conference which presents a lecture on the history of Gilead and Offred's story. The male professor who speaks at the conference, Professor Pieixoto, tells how Offred tapes were not numbered or arranged in a particular order; which means that the arrangement is not only "based on some guesswork and are to be regarded as approximate, pending further research" but also that Offred's story is not told from a female but from a male point of view, the reader does not know if the professors present it the way Offred meant it which implicates that the narrative is told by several unreliable narrators (Atwood 321).

The names of the places of the university where the conference is held, Denay in Nunavit -

which read as 'deny' and 'none-of-it' - could also suggest that the future society chooses to ignore what happened in Gilead:

The place names Denay and Nunavit, may suggest that Atwood is pointing, with disguised horror, to the smug blindness of a society that refuses to recognize, in what Professor Pieixoto terms "the clearer light of our own day", the seeds of sexism that could lead to another Gilead. (Ketterer 212)

Magali Cornier Michael writes in "Freedom Reconsidered: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*" that this final chapter shows how personal narratives, particularly oral ones, have traditionally been devalued in a culture dependent on written and signed documents as well; which explains the professor's trivializing attitude towards Offred's story. Michael states: "This last chapter provides insight into the biases inherent in white, male-dominated records of the past, including how some stories get left out of official histories and how those omissions distort received histories" (Michael 134).

*The Handmaid's Tale* shows, by dramatizing the binary hierarchal oppositions on which gender is based, how gender is not only related to and in part enacted through human reproduction – sex, childbearing, family – but also how it is not reducible to these domains; it is played out in a range of identities, behaviors and practices that are influenced by social, cultural and historical dimensions. By presenting the biased gender relations as even worse, Atwood challenges the conventional understandings of a society's gender norms. Although *The Handmaid's Tale* is a self-reflexive and ambiguous text, which transgresses the dystopian tradition and does not provide any clear answers, Atwood is true to her feminist intentions by imagining gender in such a way that it foregrounds its need for change.

## Chapter 4

### The Future Society of Boy-Wonder Visionaries

#### *Close-reading Dave Egger's The Circle*

Most people would trade everything they know, everyone they know- they'd trade it all to know they've been seen, and acknowledged, that they might even be remembered. We all know the world is too big for us to be significant. So all we have is the hope of being seen, or heard, even for a moment. (Eggers 309)

This desire to be seen is expressed by Mae Holland, the twenty-something female protagonist of Dave Egger's *The Circle* (2013). Living in the nearby future of America, Mae starts working at the Facebook/Google-esque company the Circle. Within the Circle network, it is possible to post online "zings"; updates, photos and videos about one's latest experiences or thoughts, and to interact with others online. The importance of being visible is emphasized by "parti-rank", a participation rank that measures Mae's online activity. Not posting an adequate number of zings every day is considered as deviant social behavior and, more importantly, as bad for the company. The Circle not only feeds and answers Mae's desire of wanting to be seen, the company is also interwoven in every other aspect of life. It develops the SeeChange program, which installs camera's around the world in order to protect people and to prevent negative events from happening. Health meters are given to Circlers in order to prevent diseases or treat them in advance. Children are chipped, which causes the number of rape and kidnapping to reduce with ninety percent. The main argumentation: "Why wouldn't any sane person want those things? And if you have nothing to hide, why be paranoid?" (Atwood, 2013).

The Circle's ideology of visibility and transparency creates a feeling of safety and

significance, instead of the anxious feeling of being controlled, which is present in Orwell's *1984* and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Critics such as Alyssa-Rae Hug argue that social media, both in real life as in Egger's *The Circle*, can be read as Foucault's confessional-turned-panopticon,

in which people expose and put into language (text, pictures, videos, music) their experiences and stories, the process of which makes them subject those experiences to social discourse, to become subjects, to self-police and be policed in terms of social norms and values of those watching from the tower – the confessors, the public, society.

Hug argues that posting online is a form of confession, and by doing this publicly, people enter into a social relationship of watching, surveilling, and policing one another. The main point that Hug wants to stress, and which is evident in Mae's behavior in *The Circle*, is that social media as a panopticon works in two ways: it is characterized by governments and corporations who have the power to occupy "the watch tower", and simultaneously by people's voluntary nature of making themselves visible and their desire to put themselves in the panopticon and watch one-another. Eggers shows that this new notion of surveillance and transparency is not set up by a totalitarian, power hungry bad guy, such as Big Brother in *1984*, but is developed to improve the world for the better. The Circle even claims that it operates from humanist intentions, as Mae's colleague explains to her:

(...) you've seen the signs that say Humans Work Here – I insist on those. That's my pet issue. We're not automations. This isn't a sweatshop. We're a group of the best minds of our generation. Generations. And making sure this is a place where our humanity is

respected, where our opinions are dignified, where our voices are heard - this is as important as any revenue, any stock price, any endeavor undertaken here. (Eggers 47)

The emphasis on humanism is also evident in the fact that the Circle functions more like a community than as a company, which is accompanied by a certain way of life. A good life, as the work conditions at the Circle are optimal: the food is healthy and organic and there are too many fun and obliged leisure activities to choose from. Employees sleep at the company as they do not want to go home anymore. The Circle now *is* there home. Mae is therefore convinced that the Circle is an utopian place:

The best people had made the best systems and the best systems had reaped funds, unlimited funds, that made possible this, the best place to work. (...). Who else but utopians could make utopia? (Eggers 30)

The dystopian Janus Face of this utopia is however not far away. This is for example evident when Mae contributes to the Demoxie program, which forces Circlers to vote, with as only options “yes” or “no” on statements that leave absolutely no room for discussion or nuance, and to make their votes visible for everyone. The Circle’s argument to make voting obligatory is presented as desirable, as they state that democracies function best when all citizens participate in voting, but leads inevitably to a lack of choice and no room for resistance (Eggers 323).<sup>15</sup>

Mercer, Mae’s ex-boyfriend, notices this as well, and tells Mae that: “(...) Like everything else you guys are pushing, it sounds perfect, sounds progressive, but it carries with it more control

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<sup>15</sup> “Of course the votes were public. With actual democracy, a purer kind of democracy, people would be unafraid to cast their votes, and, more importantly, unafraid to be held accountable for those votes”, “The goal is to make sure that everyone who works at the Circle can weigh in on issues that affect their lives—mostly on campus, but in the larger world, too”, “If Demoxie worked, they said, (...) you’ll finally have a fully engaged populace, and when you do, the country and the world will hear from the youth, and their inherent idealism and progressivism will upend the planet” (Eggers 323).

(...)” (167). *The Circle*, in the end, grounds its beliefs on the totalitarian slogans “Sharing is Caring”, “Secrets are lies” and “Privacy is theft” – which reminds one immediately of Big Brother’s slogan’s instead of an utopian place. Other than Orwell and Atwood, and differing from the dystopian tradition in general, Eggers thus not present how a totalitarian regime functions, but shows us instead how it is both possible for a totalitarian regime to arise and gain power. It shows also how humanist goals could lead to a dystopia, people being “led down the primrose path much more blindly by our good intentions than by our bad ones” (Atwood, 2013). *The Circle* is however typically dystopian in light of the protagonist’s faith: Mae has the potential to make a change, but fails inevitably as she gets overruled by the powers of the dominant system. At the end of the narrative, all the people that deviate from the Circle’s ideology and who tried to warn Mae, such as her ex-boyfriend, her lover, her father, are killed or evicted from the Circle. Mae continues to live happily in the Circle community, despite the fact that it took away all her former loved ones.

### **The Ideology of Three Wise Men**

Although the Circle questions important themes such as ownership and privacy, the narrative tells essentially the story of a woman who naively adopts the ideology of her community, despite of being warned by several *male* characters. This biased representation of gender is in fact present throughout the novel. Although there are some women part of the “Gang of Forty”, the group of most influential and important employees of the Circle, the people who are at the top of the company are the founders, the Three Wise Men.<sup>16</sup> These three wise men, Eamon Baily, Tom Stenton and Ty Gospodinov, are all presented in a positive, strong and powerful way; Baily the “likeable family man”, Stenton the “ruthless business men” and “boy-wonder visionary”

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<sup>16</sup> My own emphasis.

Gospodinov (19).

Within the Circle, it are also men who are the rational programmers that control the technology, whereas women, including Mae, work at departments such as Customer Experience. Katherine Losse stresses in “The Male Gazed: Surveillance, Power and Gender” that working at Customer Experience demands women to be nice, friendly, and emotional available. Mae’s job can therefore be seen as “emotional labor which is at once essential and invisible”, just as the other stereotypical female jobs of being a domestic worker, nanny, housemaid, or hostess (Losse). Men being in control of technology, confirms their position of being in power as well, as technology “refers in the most elemental sense to the development of tools that extend the power of their owners” (Losse). In Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, men are also in control of technology, which makes them able to freeze women’s financial assets. In *The Circle*, this could happen just as easily, as it are men too who are in control of the technology of TruYou, a program that collects everyone’s data, including information about everyone’s financial assets.

Losse argues as well that “surveillance has a long history of affecting ‘the other’ differently than those in power”. This is in particular visible in the scene where Mae has sex with Francis, another Circle-employee, who secretly videotapes both of them. The film is instantly uploaded into the Circle’s Cloud, visible for everyone and impossible to erase. Francis video not only objectifies Mae and abuses her right of privacy, Francis considers it also to be natural that Mae sacrifices herself to improve his status of being a men: “C’mon, Mae. You have to understand how much this means to me. I’m not some stud. This is a rare occasion for me, to have something like this happen. Can’t I keep a memento of the experience?” (Eggers 133). Mae is shocked, but when she addresses this incident, her worries about the film are waved aside, although it is clear that being watched affects Mae, being a woman, differently than Francis.



Margaret Atwood states that publication on social media is in part a performance, as everything “social” that human beings do. According to Atwood, Eggers novel questions what happens “when that brightly lit arena expands so much, that there is no (...) imperfect back stage where we can be ‘ourselves’? What happens to us if we must be ‘on’ all the time?” (Atwood, 2013). In Eggers novel however, there is not only the lack of an “imperfect back stage”; people now have to perform their gender identity in two inseparable worlds: the real one and the online world. Atwood notes as well that Mae’s name could be interpreted as a reference to the make-up brand Maybelline, indicating how the protagonist is masking her “true” face constantly. The question of what it specifically means for women to live in this gender biased society and how it affects them differently than men is however not present and it even seems as if this question is irrelevant, as the women in the Circle are not defined only in relation towards their reproductive capabilities. In fact, this is not of any importance in *The Circle*. Women are also free to decide what they want to do with their own bodies, they can have enjoyable sex, they are not expected to become wives or mothers or to fulfill several stereotypical contradictory tasks at the same, they are educated and allowed to read and write and they have their own bank accounts. It thus seems as if there are no gender politics present, but this close-reading shows that gender is still presented in a hierarchal biased way that does not differ from how it is perceived in the real world today. *The Circle* thus is as well dystopian as it has a blind spot for gender politics and marginalizes women. When anyone says that *The Circle* is today’s *1984*, they are right, although it is perhaps time to realize that a more interesting question would be if a dystopian novel is *The Handmaid’s Tale* of our time.

## Conclusion

This thesis questioned if and how three dystopian novels, that are inseparably related to each other, imagine gender and gender relations in an alternative way, as the theories of Ernst Bloch, Angelika Bammer, Ruth Levitas and Lucy Sargisson illustrate how utopian and dystopian imagination can transform one's perception of the world. Close-reading each novel in relation to utopianism and gender gained me so much material, I could have written just as easily a separate thesis of each novel. Instead, I've chosen to make my thesis comparative to illustrate in how the novels relate to each other in light of this topic.

Analyzing George Orwell's *1984* makes clear why this novel is considered to be as one of the most important works of the literary dystopian tradition. His most important themes, totalitarianism, surveillance and gazing, sexual oppression, history and language, influenced both Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Egger's *The Circle*, and illustrate how power operates in every possible discourse. The themes of surveillance and gazing, history and language became prominent topics of second wave feminism and *1984* illustrates therefore how the means to control people in general, could also be used to have power of a particular group of people, such as women. It is however important not to regard *1984* therefore as a fundamental influence for feminism or to state that *1984* is a feminist work, as Orwell's themes should be seen in the context of the narrative which does not question the position of women at all. Close-reading *1984* reveals that female characters are presented from a male-centered perspective that considers women to be less intelligent, emotional, passive and easy to be manipulated. This view offers a justification for the male protagonist to treat women with misogyny and be aggressive towards them. Orwell's novel does not attempt to question gender relations or to imagine them differently than binary hierarchical. I argue therefore that it should be emphasized more that

*1984* is not only a dystopia as it deals with power and totalitarianism, but also because it contains a blind spot for gender politics and it marginalizes women.

My close-reading of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* shows how the traditional notions of gender are challenged, as the hierarchical biased gender relations are dramatized, which foregrounds how women are negatively affected by them. Atwood's different narrative techniques make her text ambiguous and self-reflexive and therefore even more powerful as a dystopia, and I argue therefore that she transgresses the dystopian tradition as well. *The Handmaid's Tale* does not present any clear answers of what is right and what is wrong or what the perfect world should be like; it offers instead a perspective of several alternative possibilities, without losing its utopian call for change out of sight.

As I stated before, my comparative close-readings of both novels makes evident that one cannot address Orwell without mentioning Atwood or vice versa. I already mentioned how I find it therefore remarkable that there is not one critic who relates as well to Atwood in his/her review of Eggers's *The Circle*. I find it even more remarkable that Eggers, as my close-reading shows, does not question gender relations or imagine them differently and does not use a more inventive narrative strategy that offers multiple perspectives. Eggers presents just a one-sided view of what it means to live in the world of the Circle and ignores the fact that the implications of the present ideology, which maintains the binary hierarchical gender relations, are different for men and women. The protagonist being a woman who does not really seem to be aware of this makes it harder for the reader to truly engage or to identify themselves with her. Although it seems as if women in the Circle are more liberated, we – and with this I mean literary critics specifically – should know better. We should have the urge to send Offred's mother to the Circle, in order to lecture Mae about what women had to go through, just to get Mae where she is and how easy it is for

the ones in power to undo all the progress that is made so far. I think it is equally pitiable that Eggers did not grab the opportunity to question today's gender roles and believes about gender by imagining them differently and that there are no critics who reflected on this in their essays or reviews, as gender equality still only exists in our not-yet consciousness. Lastly, I recall Offred's words again:

Perspective is necessary. Otherwise there are only two dimensions. Otherwise you live with your face squashed up against a wall, everything a huge foreground, of details. (...)  
Otherwise you live in the moment. Which is not where I want to be. (117)

This thesis attempted to offer my perspective on dystopian literature, utopianism and gender, driven by the hope that utopianism will lead one day to a world in which gender inequality does not exist anymore.

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