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OPINION

Brave New World (is Here!)

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Status update: Millennials are quite happy with their disconnected modes of staying connected.

Photo: Getty Images

If Orwell's "1984" is a cautionary tale about what we in the capitalist West largely avoided, Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World" is largely about what we got — a consumerist, post-God happyland in which people readily stave off aging, jet away on exotic vacations and procreate via test tubes. They have access to "Feelies" similar to IMAX 3-D movies, no-strings-attached sex, anti-anxiety pills and abortion on demand. They also venerate a dead high-tech genius, saying "Ford help him" in honor of Henry Ford just as today we practically murmur "In Jobs We Trust."

In many ways the book, which was published 80 years ago this winter, has become sci-non-fi. It is still developing, taking on additional richness according to the times in which we read it.

"Brave New World" is a satire set in a unified and peaceful 26th-century "World State" in which a frustrated London loner named Bernard Marx feels unease with the serene functionality of the ingeniously well-ordered society around him. After a chance encounter on vacation, he brings to London a Shakespeare-loving "savage" named John from outside the tech bubble (he grew up untouched by modernity on an Indian reservation in New Mexico) who becomes even more distraught by what has happened to mankind.

The book isn't nearly as political or as outspokenly dire as "1984," so much so that it's easy to picture a young reader saying, "What is supposed to be so bad about all this?" Unlike in the book by Orwell (Huxley's pupil at Eton), in which independence of mind earns you torture and brainwashing, Huxley's freethinkers are threatened with expulsion to a small island (Iceland) — but the joke turns out to be that this isn't really a punishment because all the cool artists and original thinkers wind up together and are much happier in their own hipster enclave. Iceland: the sixth borough.

Like Orwell, Huxley can easily be claimed by left as well as right. Take his jibes at the blockbuster-y "Feelies" (a play on 1932's cutting-edge "talkies"), which in addition to spectacle also offer scents as well as gadgets on the armrests to stimulate touch. The Feelies are a

rush of experience meant to provide shallow diversion for the lowest common denominator rather than art that elevates, and if you think Hollywood movies are dumb now, try not to think about marketplace pressures a few years hence, when more business is coming from China than anywhere else.

People who don't speak English want explosions, not exposition.

Huxley also foresaw a disturbing partnership between the state and capitalism but didn't anticipate how little need for government collusion sophisticated marketers would need to reorder society. In "Brave New World," the state has suppressed all simple sports because they don't require lots of expensive equipment to keep the economy humming. Instead, it relentlessly hypes complicated tech-activities such as "electromagnetic golf." A couple of generations ago, kids might have bought one baseball glove and one bat that would last for years. Today they instead spend hundreds of dollars on Xbox 360s and games that quickly become boring and demand to be replaced with upgraded versions.

Thanks to subliminal messages repeated thousands of times in nurseries while kids sleep, the "Brave New World" characters grow up conditioned to accept a disposable society in which everyone is always hungry for the latest thing and simply discards the old. Huxley would be surprised to see that no such indoctrination is necessary to make people throw away an iPhone that was state of the art three years ago and line up overnight to get a slightly improved version.

Mustapha Mond, the "Controller" who serves as the book's villain, suppresses old books but perhaps unnecessarily. Think about how publishing works in the age of the Kindle and the Nook: Manufacturers and booksellers no longer have any incentive to try to get you to buy pre-copyright books published before 1922. If a fad suddenly developed for, say, Charles Dickens, there'd be no money to be made because readers could simply download his e-books, free, from Project Gutenberg or some other public-interest site. Dickens' bicentennial just passed, by the way: remember the big marketing push to take advantage? Neither do I. Amazon won't be reserving promotional space on its homepage for e-books that earn nothing and it'll be long before the 26th century when all the classics fade into what the literary critic Clive James called "Cultural Amnesia." Soon the only readers of these books will be forced ones (i.e. students) but in the age of Twitter how much longer will that last?

Surely, though, Huxley got the class determinism wrong? He envisioned mass-produced, lab-developed fetuses being manipulated so that the resulting babies would possess the ideal intelligence level for their future jobs — just enough to execute, not too much to feel frustrated or bored.

Again, even without a central scheme, and five hundred years ahead of Huxley's schedule, the outcome is depressingly familiar. Books like Charles Murray's "Coming Apart" have explored how class differences perpetuate and even harden: today two Stanford grads meet at Davos or Google, marry and produce more of same, whereas even a generation ago the classes mingled more: When people weren't as mobile, a male executive was more likely to have married his neighbor or secretary. On the other side of the class divide, now that there's no particular stigma to being a single parent, there is a similar feedback loop. You have kids out of wedlock, which means you drop out of school, which means you're poor, which means your kids follow suit.

Huxley was onto some notions that have only recently been developed in cognitive science and psychology. His characters have all their needs taken care of, enjoying excellent health, reasonable work schedules and lots of gadgets and entertainment. His is a wealthy society. It's also a highly collectivist one; cloning has created large groups of identical people working side by side.

David Brooks's book "The Social Animal" ruminates about "limerence" or harmony with another individual or a group. He writes about a soldier who felt a profound sense of well-being while doing drill and ceremony in unison with a large group, about how people in conversation quickly mimic one another's mannerisms and even about how women living in close quarters tend to synchronize menstrual cycles. We crave belonging. The citizens of Huxley's society look around, see people exactly like themselves, and feel comfortable and secure. There's no need for a crushing totalitarian Big Brother at the top because at the bottom, everyone feels like siblings.

Yet "The Social Animal" also describes how bad we are at predicting what will make us happy (we think that if we struck it rich we'd relax on a desert island — did Steve Jobs do that?). When asked to imagine a formula for bliss, Brooks writes, "people vastly overvalue work, money, and real estate. They vastly undervalue intimate bonds and the importance of arduous challenges."

The cycle of challenges confronted and mastered, the flow of meaningful work, has largely been taken away from Huxley's world citizens. They face no significant hurdles: Everyone gets all the sex they want and (thanks to subliminal training) no one even fears death. And yet everyone seems to be popping a lot of stress-relieving soma pills. People have become like the famous depressed Central Park polar bear who became listless because he didn't have to work to catch his dinner. One of Huxley's better jokes is the chatty dictator Mustapha Mond's solution to the abolition of stress: "We've made V.P.S. treatments compulsory."

V.P.S.?

“Violent Passion Surrogate. Regularly once a month. We flood the whole system with adrenin. It’s the complete psychological equivalent of fear and rage.”

John the Savage falls for a perky ultramodern girl, but as she obligingly unzips her clothes for him he becomes despondent and flees. It’s too easy. People dropping their pants isn’t love. Compare the dismal reports you hear from campuses that meaningless hookup culture and midnight booty-calling have replaced romance and courting. Women whose grandmothers marched for sexual liberation wonder why they can’t find a man willing to commit. Huxley foresaw that this soul-hollowing effect would follow from making sex purely recreational.

In his climactic encounter with Mond, John the Savage argues, “I don’t want comfort. I want God. I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness. I want sin.”

Replies Mond, “You’re claiming the right to be unhappy.”

Mond thinks John is being absurd, but think about all the ways people go out of their way to make themselves miserable. They run marathons. They climb Everest. They leave cushy jobs to launch risky start-ups. Paradoxically, wealth and security create more and more yearning for extreme conditions. You didn’t see 20,000 people lining up to run marathons in the Great Depression. Life itself was sufficiently difficult.

Nearly 50 years after he died (the same day as JFK), Aldous Huxley continues to caution us that a happyland free of intimate bonds and arduous challenges is actually a dystopia. He quotes “King Lear” to explain why our IMAX 3D and iWhatever’s aren’t going to make us happy: “The gods are just and of our pleasant devices make instruments to plague us.”

Mike’s grade-A logic

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