TRAVELING TO MODERNISM’S OTHER WORLDS
Huxley’s Brave New World and Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four
Alexandra Peat
Franklin University Switzerland

Abstract

This article discusses two popular late modernist works, Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World and George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four. It argues that the formal and thematic complexity of both works has been overlooked because of an understandable, but ultimately rather myopic fixation on their gripping ideas and frightening political messages, and puts them back in the context of modernism, seeing them as part of a body of late modernist works engaged in questions of travel and transnational encounter. The article situates Huxley and Orwell’s novels in the socio-cultural context of the 1930s and 1940s, figuring the dystopian impulse as a reaction to a time of global upheaval and uncertainty. By understanding these novels as examples of travel fiction, we become more attuned to the kinds of complex ethical questions they ask regarding how to view both other worlds and other people.

Keywords: anthropology, dystopia, Aldous Huxley, late modernism, George Orwell, travel fiction

Look, stranger, on this island now.———W.H. Auden (1991)

Our critical understanding of modernism as an elitist or “difficult” literature concerned only with aesthetic matters of formal innovation has in recent years been challenged, particularly by studies that reimagine modernism as transnational and multicultural. The arrival of the “new modernisms” over 15 years ago allowed scope for a greater historical and geographical breadth,
and opened up a space for a critical examination of various modernist styles and approaches, from the postcolonial to the middlebrow. Yet, despite the ever-expanding margins of modernism, some works remain on the fringes of the modernist canon. This paper re-examines two critically neglected late modernist works, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* ([1932] 2007) and George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* ([1949] 1990).

Given the continued popular prevalence of both these novels, it seems perhaps surprising to deem them “neglected.” However, Huxley and Orwell’s most famous novels are most commonly read as examples of the dystopian genre, not placed in the context of modernism. They have been critically disregarded because of their chronological belatedness as late modernist works, the ongoing segregation of genre fiction, and their very popularity, victims of what Sean Latham terms the “constitutive fiction that modernism is staked on a ‘great divide’ between elite and mass culture” (Latham 2009: 126). In the place of any binary construction, Latham posits a modernist culture formed of various groups negotiating a complex set of relations. Thus, the dystopian genre is not the only relevant classification for Huxley and Orwell’s works. These novels’ preoccupation with strange new worlds and foreign encounters also suggests important affinities with transnational modernism, a diffuse but interconnected body of literature that shares a concern with the makings of the modern world and the problem of how to live in it. Such a context opens up fresh interpretations of *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: for Huxley and Orwell the move to dystopia is a journey that incites new ways of seeing both familiar and unknown spaces, and encourages, in the process, various and complex kinds of political and ethical engagement.

As modernist critics tend to overlook *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, they seem silently to endorse Krishan Kumar’s judgment that utopian and anti-utopian novels are “not very distinguished for their aesthetic qualities as works of literature” (1987: ix). These popular, “teachable” novels appear regularly on reading lists, in courses on science fiction and dystopia, and in such varied departments as political science, urban studies, world history, psychology, the history of science, and pharmacology. Yet their very pervasiveness directly correlates with modernist criticism’s skepticism about them, thus supporting Leonard Diepeveen’s argument that “difficulty has become the necessary condition for canonization” (2003: 214). Modernism must be “difficult,” the received thinking goes, and difficulty,
both formal and conceptual, cannot be part of a popular package. Nonetheless, just as the expansion of modernist studies has provided new room to explore hitherto forgotten works, so too can it allow us to revisit those that have been lost in plain sight, to see with fresh eyes what we assume we already know well enough. Huxley and Orwell’s only superficially simple narratives in fact employ an array of modernist literary techniques (including multiple point of view, internal monologue, intertextuality, and non-linear narrative structures). Furthermore, gaps and moments of narrative breakdown or inconsistency in each novel indicate not so much weak writing as what Jessica Berman terms “moments of alternate logic” where “defamiliarization works on several levels at once” to encourage narrative estrangement and subsequent re-evaluation (Berman 2011: 3). Berman valuably draws attention to how modernist narrative technique bridges ethics and politics; she notes that “what Paul Ricoeur calls the realm of ‘as if,’” functions as a space where “the world can be both described and redescribed and where new possible worlds make ethical and political claims on our understanding of this one” (2011: 5, 7). Brave New World and Nineteen Eighty-Four are commonly read as unsophisticated “message” novels, even though readers tend to disagree about what the messages exactly are. However, rather than espousing simplistic bumper-sticker ethics—“fascism is evil” or “down with consumerism”—the novels’ fictional, unfamiliar worlds are spaces for ethical exploration. The dystopia is perhaps the ultimate “as if” realm, and the other possible worlds imagined by Aldous Huxley and George Orwell are less places of escape or retreat, than sites of imaginative intervention.

I treat Brave New World and Nineteen Eighty-Four as travel fictions that reveal the possibilities and perils of journeying, investigate various means of policing and protecting the borders of the nation, and examine models of transnational relations. From Sir Thomas More’s Utopia (1516) on, dystopian fictions have narrated travels to fantastical lands; the tradition of utopian writing is intertwined with the development of travel writing as a genre.³ It is thus neither surprising nor coincidental that Huxley and Orwell wrote both dystopia and travel literature consecutively: Huxley published Beyond the Mexique Bay two years after Brave New World, and Orwell’s Burmese Days and Homage to Catalonia (the latter aptly described by Jessica Berman as an “ironic travelogue” [Berman: 2011, 186]) appeared before Nineteen Eighty-Four. Although Brave New World and Nineteen Eighty-Four have been seen in the context of a long tradition of utopian writing, their the-
matic and conceptual connections with a larger body of late modernist travel narratives—including works by D.H. Lawrence, Rebecca West, E.M. Forster, and Graham Greene—has not been explored. In the cultural and political climate of the 1930s and 1940s, there emerged, as Tim Youngs (2013) suggests, a new narrative self-consciousness about the conventions of travel writing as well as a deep investment in political and social concerns. The context of travel literature thus affords a fresh perspective on the political and ethical engagement of Huxley and Orwell’s novels. Moreover, if we include dystopian fiction in the category of transnational modernism then we glean new insight into both contemporary attitudes towards travel culture and developments in the travel genre.

*Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* do more than follow many of the conventions of the modernist travel narrative. Most important, these works signal the evolution of the genre in the late modernist era; moreover, they ironically comment on the limitations of the travel narrative as a modern genre. If Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia*, a founding utopian text, famously narrates the age of discovery, then the late modernist dystopia recounts the age of the end of discovery. Paul Fussell somewhat nostalgically regards the late 1920s and early 1930s as “the final age” of travel (1980: vii). Writing of the “drastic expansion of mobility” in the twentieth century, James Clifford makes a similar point, albeit with less nostalgia: “there seem no distant places left on the planet,” he notes, so “one no longer leaves home confident of finding something radically new, another time or space. ... The familiar turns up at the ends of the earth” (Clifford 1988: 13–14). The modernist disillusionment with travel as a means of escape or discovery is perhaps best expressed by Lawrence, who articulates with playful irony the popular feeling that “the world has become small and known. ... There is no mystery left, we’ve been there, we’ve seen it, we know all about it. We’ve done the globe and the globe is done” (1924: 29). The travel to imaginary worlds charted by Huxley and Orwell gains a new resonance in the context of late modernism’s literal world-weariness. Here we see that the only possible “new” place is a “no place.” While earlier utopian writing flourished with the possibility of all those new worlds out there for western explorers to discover, the inverse is also true—when new worlds cannot be discovered, then they can be dreamed up in the imaginative spaces of the modernist dystopia. To travel to the dystopian world is to leave the bounds of the “small and known” altogether and to find in the process a new perspective on the globe.
Ironically, the no-place of Huxley and Orwell’s novels is not only a new place but also a familiar one. Thus these works do not simply respond to the anxiety about the end of travel but also comment critically on it, suggesting that home can itself become a new territory to discover. In tune with an age increasingly interested in anthropology and self-ethnography (most notable in the example of mass observation) these books turn a quasi-anthropological eye on a transformed England. As also in Orwell’s *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) and Huxley’s essays of the 1930s, including “Abroad in England” and “Sight-Seeing in Alien Englands,” the novels depict an England that has become strange and foreign (Huxley 1925: 202–204, 1999: 51–64). Orwell’s Winston traverses a devastated London relocated to “Airstrip One” and Huxley’s Brave New Worlders inhabit a London that has been imaginatively and geo-politically swallowed up by the World State. These fictional worlds are distorted reflections of a globalized modern society in which the new is unfeasible and the familiar has become strange and unknowable. Both novels launch into a terrifying imaginary world characterized by disturbing political circumstances and an uncanny mix of foreignness and familiarity. They make the familiar foreign to re-examine it from a new perspective, for, as Orwell himself suggests, “obviously if you invent an imaginary country you do so in order to throw light on the institutions of some existing country, probably your own” (Orwell 2010: 169).

The turn to national affairs signified by the recognizably British setting of both works does not, however, come at the expense of international awareness, for these dystopian novels are neither narrow nor parochial. Rather, England becomes both a contested site as well as a space seen always in relation to a larger world. Orwell’s Oceania and Huxley’s World State are thus not only defamiliarized versions of home, but also versions of home placed in a shifting global stage. In the place of a singular, stable dystopian vision that opposes or reflects our own world, these authors depict a shifting spectrum of alternative worlds and chart a complex web of fictional and figurative relations amongst them. The novels thus question the barriers between divergent geographical and geo-political spaces as well as the line between the dystopias and our own reality.

As Ruth Levitas argues, utopian literature tends to “focus on moments of instability and indeterminacy” (2010: 6), and the very practice of imagining other possible worlds implies a shaky world with an unclear future. I am aware of the contradiction of arguing that for modernists such as Huxley and Orwell the
world was both too known and uncertain. Yet *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* respond to exactly this paradox, which provided fertile soil for the symbiosis of travel narrative and dystopia. Published in 1932 and 1949 respectively, these novels effectively bookend the second of the world wars that both punctuated and came to define the twentieth century. World War II marked the failure of the League of Nations’ (set up in 1919) plans for world peace and the impossibility of upholding old world orders in the modern age. Facing a world unmade that they could not imagine quite how to remake, both works confront the positive and negative specters of possibility. In a letter written shortly after the publication of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell writes, “I do not believe that the kind of society I describe here *will* arrive, but I believe ... that something resembling it *could* arrive” (Orwell 1968: 502). Orwell’s preference for the conditional tense evokes a future up for grabs.

Huxley and Orwell lived through moments of transition and extreme uncertainty. Politically, Stalinism, the Popular Front, Fascism, and the New Deal tendered utopic new models for society. Geo-politically, national borders were drawn or redrawn after both wars (for example, the carving up of the Middle East and Eastern Europe after World War I and of the Axis powers by the 1945 Potsdam and Yalta agreements). Scientifically, developments in atomic science and mechanized weaponry suggested frightening possibilities. As the British Empire declined, the United States and Soviet Union rose, and the League of Nations presented another model for global community. Many of these movements, utopian on a large scale, inspired both hope and disappointment. Huxley was skeptical about “men with well-thought-out plans for improving the world” who turn out to be “more systematically and cold-bloodedly cruel than any others” (2010: 364), and Orwell described the “hangover of the ‘enlightened’ post-war age ... in which every *positive* attitude has turned out a failure” (1968: 585). Echoing such historical disappointment, Wyndham Lewis described his contemporaries as among “the first men of a Future that has not materialized, ... a ‘great age’ that has not ‘come off’” (1937: 256). Yet the move toward the “as if” realm of dystopia, while critical, is not necessarily a conservative retreat from complex contemporary politics. Brave New World and Nineteen Eighty-Four recover doubt as an ethical alternative to the dangerous certainty of utopian world building. Huxley and Orwell’s ambiguous dystopias emerge from the spaces between the unachieved “great age” that Lewis evokes, the potentially more bleak future that might come to be, and the shifting reality of the late modernist world. They are a renegotiation of possibility in the mutable modern world.
Traveling to Modernism’s Other Worlds

These dystopian novels belong to the category helpfully defined by Tyrus Miller and others as “late modernism.” According to Miller, late modernist fiction has lacked “a clearly defined place in the dominant frameworks of twentieth-century criticism” (1999: 7). And genre fiction (like dystopia) from this period has been doubly marginalized. In his 1940 essay “Inside the Whale,” Orwell (1940: 188) suggests the “impossibility of any major literature until the world has taken its new shape,” and the flawed, fragmentary narratives of Brave New World and Nineteen Eighty-Four speak to this impossibility. Both works also negotiate between what Brian McHale, in his discussion of modernist and postmodernist fiction, calls the epistemological and ontological dominants. McHale describes the “dominant of modernist fiction” as “epistemological”; primarily interested in describing the world “modernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions such as ... ‘How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?’ ... What is there to be known?” On the other hand, the ontological dominant of postmodernist fiction provokes such questions as “What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?” (McHale 1987: 9–10). McHale notes overlap between these two dominants, and, following McHale, Tyrus Miller defines late-modernism as part of a “third mode” which “unsettles the opposition between the epistemological and ontological dominations” and creates “breaking points, points of nonsynchronism, in the broad narrative of twentieth-century history” (1999: 12).

As they emerge out of such “breaking points” Brave New World and Nineteen Eighty-Four do more than just respond to a moment of historical uncertainty; they question both the world of which they are a part and the possible other worlds reaching out from it. McHale and Miller invite an approach to reading these late modernist dystopias as purposely unsettling rather than didactic. The imaginative journey to an uncanny dystopian world is thus not the only traveling these novels participate in, for they also precipitate a traveling on the part of the reader who negotiates among multiple possible worlds, simultaneously questioning what there is to be known in the dystopian world and the boundaries between the dystopian world and our own. As Wayne Booth argues, narrative ethics is not only about judging stories and their effects on readers, but also the about “ethics of readers—their responsibilities to stories” (1989: 9). Thinking about Brave
New World and Nineteen Eighty-Four as travel fictions entails that we consider our positionality as readers, our own imaginative journeys to the worlds they depict. The uncanny slippage between the real and the fictional worlds—the “as is” and the “as if”—opens up the future and the narrative possibility of making and re-making worlds, both for bad and for good.

Going Nowhere: Travel in the Imaginary World

Huxley and Orwell’s works share an obsession with foreign peoples and places. Yet they also draw attention to how both the traveler and the travel writer risk falling into simplistic constructions of cultural difference and geographical distance, and, ultimately, they undermine travel’s function as a means of escape. The trope of travel is most explicit in Brave New World, which is structured around Bernard and Lenina’s visit to the Savage Reservation in what was once New Mexico and is now a fashionable tourist retreat for the citizens of the World State. Bernard associates travel with new and exotic experiences, and hopes to escape both his circumstances and the constraints of an unsatisfactory self. While the Reservation is focalized through Bernard’s point of view, his attempt to construct it as an othered space of cultural difference is undermined by Lenina’s instance on pointing out continuities between the Reservation and her home. As Bernard explores the “oppressively queer” mesa, Lenina compares it to the “Charing-T Tower;” when we read of the “remorseless persistence” of the Native American drumming, Lenina whispers “Orgy-porgy” and “it reminds me of a lower-caste Community Sing” (Huxley [1937] 2007: 93, 97). Lenina’s desire for “reassuring resemblance” is less an empathetic attempt to see across cultural differences than an effort to calm her anxiety, but she also unconsciously underlines Bernard’s equally dubious exoticization of the foreign. Her distress and his delight are two sides of the same coin. While Bernard wants to believe that the brave new worlders and the “savages” are “living on different planets, in different centuries,” the differences between the two worlds become increasingly indeterminate (Huxley [1932] 2007: 106). Bernard laments the homogenization of a modern world from which there is no escape. The dystopian world, denuded of genuine cultural variance, is a product of political globalization, reflecting contemporary anxieties about the future of the world after the rise of the global superpower and
Traveling to Modernism’s Other Worlds

in what Roland Robertson (1992: 183) defines as the “struggle-for-hegemony” phase of globalization (mid-1920s to late 1960s). While seeming sympathetic to such fears, the novel does not allow Bernard’s approach to go unchallenged: the juxtaposition of different perspectives shows how travelers can seek either familiarity or strangeness, for each always coexist. Lenina and Bernard’s jostling divergent viewpoints disallow a comfortable or stable perspective on any single space. Their travel leaves them in limbo because they can neither fully enter the Reservation nor leave the World State behind. Huxley thus depicts the Reservation and the World State as two distinct but constitutive and closely related parts of the same world. He disallows any easy ethical judgements on this world or simplistic comparisons between the Brave New World and our own reality.

While there is little literal travel in Nineteen Eighty-Four, Orwell’s Oceania, like Huxley’s World State, defines itself in opposition to a constructed other—the alternate enemies Eastasia and Eurasia. The enemy is consistently understood in explicitly racial terms as a single story of dangerous strangeness, like that evoked by the propaganda poster that appears “all over London,” depicting “the monstrous figure of a Eurasian soldier, three or four metres high, striding forward with expressionless Mongolian face and enormous boots” (Orwell [1949] 1990: 156). Propaganda depends on narrow racial stereotypes, a practice condemned by Orwell who decried imperialism’s “endless emphasis on the differences between the ‘natives’ and yourself” (2010: 435). For the citizens of Airstrip One “foreigners” are “a kind of strange animal” that they receive only “a momentary glimpse of” in “the guise of prisoners”, “little yellow men in shabby greenish uniforms [...] squatting, jammed close together” with “sad Mongolian faces” (Orwell [1949] 1990: 122, 121). The prisoners are paraded through London as prizes of war and exotic souvenirs of another place, tamed and brought home for consumption. Yet these brief, pre-packaged images of the foreign alert Winston to a world beyond his narrow frame of experience, albeit one that he glimpses only partially as he struggles to read beyond officially sanctioned messages. When Winston watches a passing convoy, he fixates on the “sad Mongolian faces” of the prisoners of war who “gazed out over the sides of the trucks” (Orwell [1949] 1990: 121). With limited ability to see from another’s point of view, Winston can only describe the gaze as “utterly incurious,” yet the scene marks a potential perspectival shift as Winston at least begins to question what the eyes of the prisoners see. Winston and Julia clasp hands
as the convey passes; in a vaguely romantic fashion, Winston imagines what “colour [Julia’s] eye were,” but he meets instead the “mournful” eyes of an aged prisoner (Orwell [1949] 1990: 123). The moment of romantic connection between Winston and Julia is thus complemented and complicated by Winston’s momentary ocular link to the foreign prisoner and the ethical responsibility that comes from meeting the gaze of an other. In the background of the parade of prisoners, the purportedly romantic relationship (never entirely convincing) is placed in the broader context of Winston’s struggle to see from the point of view of another person and to cross imaginatively the borders of difference. Orwell, like Huxley, critiques the dystopian state’s attempts to create counterfeit images of otherness that are either frighteningly or attractively exotic, and, at the same time, regrets the loss of meaningful difference. All these characters long for an authentic alternative to their constricted worlds, and the possibility of difference becomes a metaphor for imaginative freedom. Orwell’s Winston achieves a flawed, fragmented but nonetheless significant connection that evades or transcends the prescriptive and xenophobic official model of intercultural communication.

The depiction of Huxley’s “savages” and Orwell’s enemy aliens evokes modernist forms of visual spectacle and is indebted to emerging theories of ethnography and anthropology. As Carey Snyder (2007: 662–696) points out, Huxley was reading ethnographers such as Margaret Mead and Bronislaw Malinowski while writing Brave New World, and, according to Patricia Rae (1999: 71–102), Orwell became familiar with non-expert anthropology when working on The Road to Wigan Peer and Down and Out in London and Paris. In a discussion of modern literature Huxley describes reading in quasi-anthropological terms, suggesting how the “God’s eye view of the novelists who really know, or pretend to know, exactly what is going on in the minds of their characters,” has been replaced by “the traveler’s-eye view of the stranger who ... can only infer by their gestures what is happening in their minds” (1925: 204). Huxley emphasizes the gap between seeing and knowing, and both these novels question ethnographic authority or, at least, ethnographic practices that are most concerned with pinning down truth or reading too simplistically into the minds of strangers or strange lands. They do so in part through central characters that resemble anthropological participant-observers in their struggle to understand both other worlds and themselves, and they also encourage their readers to adopt the traveler’s-eye view of the engaged but uncertain stranger.
Traveling to Modernism’s Other Worlds

Huxley and Orwell use the trope of cinema to explore complex models of seeing and to critique the simplistic construction of other as spectacle.\textsuperscript{8} Their use of film speaks to the growth of the entertainment industry in the period and the particular popularity of documentary and quasi-anthropological films. Mark Wollaeger contends that “by the late thirties, British critics considered documentary films to be the most highly developed genre in England” (2008: 224). Cinema going (like reading) became a kind of armchair traveling where the viewer confronted and consumed images of otherness. Orwell’s Winston travels imaginatively when watching a “very good” film about “a ship full of refugees being bombed somewhere in the Mediterranean” ([1949]1990: 10). This film recalls wartime newsreels and propaganda films. It is also the first entry in his diary where his critical engagement with the war film resembles a perverted attempt at travel writing or, in its record of the minutiae of daily life, the auto-ethnographic style of mass observation, both examples of the increasing popularity of documentary in the 1930s and 1940s. Cinema going as a window on a new world is undermined as Winston’s view is hemmed in by the narrow frame of propaganda vision (Orwell’s characters always see the world through some kind of frame—television screens, windows, or even spectacles). The horrifying war film transforms the Mediterranean from a clichéd place of glamour and touristic escape into just another dead end place where life is grim and people get hurt. Yet, while the cinema is an empty promise of a new world, it prompts a narrative dislocation that affords Winston a look back at himself, a moment of self-reflection and, finally, a turn to creativity, in the form of the journal.

There are similarities between the film Winston sees and Huxley’s “feelies.” John attends a documentary on the Reservation in a geography classroom: as he learns the dubious lesson that “a savage reservation is a place which ... has not been worth the expense of civilizing,” the “young Etonians” beside him “fairly shou[t]with laughter” which seems to mock the educational pretence as much as it does the “savages” (Huxley [1932] 2007: 141). John also watches *Three Weeks in a Helicopter*, a loose adaptation of Othello that shows “stereoscopic images” of “a gigantic Negro and a golden-haired young brachycephalic Beta-Plus female” (Huxley [1932] 2007: 146). For Mario Varrichio, feelies are an “internalized component of the political apparatus” that frame and model the citizens’ lives (Varricchio 1999: 101). John’s own life is turned into *The Savage of Surrey*, a quasi-anthropological feelie played “in every first-class feely-palace in Western Europe” (Hux-
Pain equals profit and violence delivers thrills: the rich, technically detailed descriptions of close-ups, hidden microphones, and “feely effects” (Huxley [1932] 2007: 223–224) suggest, as Varrichio argues, the “metamorphosis of personal tragedy into a spectacle for the masses” (1999: 101). John also resembles that popular contemporary hero Tarzan, Lord Greystoke—a supposedly civilized modern man lost to and then rescued from “wild and savage abandon” (Burroughs [1912] 1976: 81). *The Savage of Surrey* satirizes the popular film adaptations of Edgar Rice Burroughs’s Tarzan books series (12 Tarzan films were made between 1932 and 1948 as well as serials such as *The New Adventures of Tarzan* [1935], filmed on location in Guatemala) and through this the contemporary consumer of popular culture’s desire for ever new images of the foreign. In a move toward domestic ethnology, the “Savage” is now located in England’s Home Counties and is, moreover, a curiously in-between character who belongs both to the Reservation and the World State, both to the contemporary world he must live in and the lost past he reveres. John is what Lesley Harman describes as “an inside actor with an outside glance;” his in-betweenness means that he can distance himself from but still retain some membership in the community and, for Harman (1988), such “discursive strangeness” is the hallmark of the modern ethnographer. John functions as both an avatar for the foreignness of the Reservation and a mouthpiece commenting on the strangeness of the World State. Yet for the Brave New Worlders John’s “savagery” is increasingly marked by his belief in romance, family, and Shakespeare (beliefs that would presumably resonate with those of the novel’s contemporary readers), rather than his experiences in New Mexico, showing how cultural binoculars can turn on common English cultural values and see them as strange and foreign. Moreover, Huxley’s narrative eye remains firmly on the rapacious consumer of pornographic ethnology rather than its object; in an ironic twist, he holds the “ow’s and aie’s” of an audience who laugh at cultural difference and see pain as “a fascinating horror” up to the reader’s own judging eyes (Huxley [1932] 2007: 146, 227). Huxley focuses the narrative gaze in multiple directions simultaneously: we look at the Brave New Worlders looking at John, we look at John looking back at the World State, and, ultimately, we are prompted to look at how we ourselves are looking at the textual world.

Rather than juxtaposing “primitive” and “modern” culture in such a way the former is seen to be either an authentic, redemptive alternative or an
Traveling to Modernism’s Other Worlds

inferior antecedent to the latter, Huxley creates a complex network in which both are part of the same world. The Savage Colony is spatially cut off from the World State by an electric fence that “march[es] on and on” (Huxley [1932] 2007: 90). Carey Snyder (2008: 179) suggestively reads this fence not only as a dividing line but also as an aesthetic frame for the “savages” who are consumed in the touristic vision. Snyder (2008: 176) calls Brave New World an “antiadvertisement for ethnological tourism,” and a parody of the “inter-war mania for Southwest Indians” and the commensurate rise of the Southwest as a tourist destination. While she convincingly argues that Huxley is not “particularly interested in transcending cultural barriers,” Huxley does have something significant to say about the construction and nature of those barriers, and, most importantly, does not allow the western spectators the protection or privilege of remaining in an “empowered position” outside the frame of vision (Snyder 2007: 679; Wollaeger 2009: 83). Hence, the fence between the Savage Reservation and the World State is also a shaky mirror that reflects Bernard and his world back to him in uncomfortable ways. The encounter with another part of the world here, as in Orwell, troubles the easy distinction between self and other; it also prompts what Melba Cuddy-Keane has identified in relation to modernist globalization as “a self-reflexive repositioning of the self in the global sphere” (Cuddy-Keane 2003: 546). These novels thus set up a complex debate about societies (both intra- and extra-textual, both fictional and real), their relationship to one another, and the various possible ways of attempting to see, understand, and live in them.

Uncanny Englands

Brave New World and Nineteen Eighty-Four share a deep irony—travel to other lands takes the characters nowhere sufficiently new, but, on the other hand, the home has become strange and foreign. Although the novels destabilize the categories of home and abroad, they nonetheless do not dismiss the possibilities of travel altogether. Rather, they model travel that precipitates imaginative engagement with the world rather than retreat from it, suggesting that it is not so much that travel has “ended” in the globalized modern world, but rather that new ways of understanding travel must be found. Travel like this does not necessitate leaving the home behind, but rather realizes that home cannot be left behind, and thus affords new per-
Alexandra Peat

spectives on both foreign and familiar spaces. As *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* model travel as an imaginative mode as much as a physical activity, they also imply a way of reading the images of otherness that the reader finds herself confronted with in the fictional world, hence exploring multiple different approaches to travel in a modern era that seemed to be both exhausting and exhausted by the globe.

A “proxy” character eases entry into these fictional worlds (Huxley’s Bernard and Orwell’s Winston). A familiar narrative device in utopias and travel fiction, such proxies are tour guides to the novels’ worlds, thus figuring the reader as a tourist who visits the dystopia, perhaps for cheap thrills. As the proxy characters become increasingly unsuitable guides, we become more self-conscious about our position as literary tourists. Huxley’s novel begins by inviting sympathy with Bernard, the unsatisfied outsider who exposes the tarnished reality of the supposedly perfect World State, but the generally contemptuous and self-aggrandizing Bernard is hard to like and, halfway through, the novel changes allegiances to John the Savage. Such a switch throws into doubt which character to trust and whose story to valorize. It also defamiliarizes a world to which we were just beginning to become accustomed, showing it from a fresh perspective and through a different frame. John’s view is not, moreover, the last word of the novel; he is almost as biased and limited as Bernard, following clichéd romantic ideas of love and freedom translated half-baked from an old copy of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (Huxley [1932] 2007: 113). Orwell uses the device of the proxy in similar ways. We see Ingsoc through Winston’s eyes, but come to read beyond his limited perspective, realising that we know more than him, particularly as he clings to dreams of a “vanished, romantic past” and longs to establish O’Brien as his redemptive hero (Orwell [1949] 1990: 178). On one level, the very insufficiency of these heroes affirms a flawed humanity in a mechanised dystopian world; on another level the reader’s inability to remain attached to a heroic protagonist entails that the narrative becomes less a single bond between reader and character and more a complex web of competing loyalties. Moreover, as the would-be heroes flatly fail in their quests to rebel, we become self-consciously aware of our own narrative desires, particularly our need to believe in heroes and happy endings, and our longing for successful revolution and resolution. In these stories that refuse to settle, narrative defamiliarization prompts a continual ethical questioning of both
Traveling to Modernism’s Other Worlds

what to trust in these strange fictional worlds and what the reader seeks from fictional travel.

*Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* share a central narrative tension. As both travel narratives and dystopias, the texts are torn between two contradictory impulses: spectacle and story, description and narration. A utopia is, by definition, a no place, a static world suspended in space and outside of history. Huxley and Orwell’s dystopian societies have achieved a nightmarish stasis and homogeneity. The planetary motto of *Brave New World* is “Stability,” and the society parodies progress by consuming endlessly just to stay in one place. Similarly, the rule of Big Brother’s Party in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is described as “immortal,” “an endless present,” and “for ever” (Orwell [1949] 1990: 274, 280, 281). Narrative desire is profoundly at odds with these dystopian visions, for the novel form depends upon movement, change, and progress. Each novel thus wavers between depicting the static world of the dystopian society and driving the narrative forward. The dystopian society’s anxious insistence on destroying literature in both works is, moreover, not only an attempt to erase the potentially incendiary ideas that literature contains, but also a metafictional comment on the redemptive nature of narrative possibility. When, for example, Orwell’s Winston commits “impudent forgeries” at the Records Department, he is horrified not so much by the official lies or by people being killed, but by the abolition of “the past” and thus the possibility of future change. While, in *Brave New World*, the Controller affirms his complicity with state policy by declaring that “history is bunk,” waving away thousands of years of history as though “he had brushed away a little dust” (Huxley [1937 2007: 29). The need for historical narrative speaks to a desire to imagine the self, the present moment, and the world as part of a larger story. In both works, the creation of history recaptures a lost past and thus opens up the future.

Huxley and Orwell insist on the redemptive nature of narrative possibility. They challenge their respective dystopian society’s closed and unchangeable visions with traveling narratives that remain both open and open to debate. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Winston finds hope in his diary and in the words of the old rhyme about the bells of London, “Oranges and Lemons.” When O’Brien provides the “last line” that Winston has been searching for, this moment of narrative completion ominously foreshadows the end of Winston’s own rebellious journey (Orwell [1949] 1990: 186). Winston and Julia’s eventual capture is, significantly, coined in terms of repeti-
tion: Winston, Julia, and an “iron voice” behind them each echo the words, “we are the dead.” This disembodied authoritative voice orders the couple to “make no movement,” their enforced physical stasis paralleling a narrative that also has ground to a sudden halt (230). The novel itself struggles against coerced narrative closure: Goldstein’s “Book” appears mid-novel to interrupt the narrative flow and distract from the central story of Winston’s attempted rebellion; the appendix on Newspeak then disrupts the novel’s closure. The appendix is written, Thomas Pynchon (2003: xxiv) notes, “consistently in the past tense as if to suggest some later, happier moment in history,” and thus reinserts the dystopian state into the flow of history. These seemingly odd narrative choices complicate the novel’s generic—as well as narrative—status. The “Book” borrows from James Burnham’s *The Managerial Revolution* (1941), a treatise on the future of capitalism, and the appendix pretends Winston’s story is history, thus establishing a dialogue among text, paratext, and intertext, as well as between fiction and non-fiction. Although Orwell’s novel ends with Winston’s seemingly complete capitulation to the foreclosed party line, narrative possibilities emerge in the spaces of dream and imagination, and “strange worlds dredged up from the unconscious” (Plank 1995 23). Even when he anticipates his own death in the bleak final moments of the novel, Winston remains an imaginative traveler who voyages in his mind to unachieved alternative utopias formed by memories that float into his mind and the “blissful dream” of escape through death (Orwell [1949] 1990: 311).

*Brave New World* is similarly resistant to narrative closure. The repeated intertextual references to Shakespeare and descriptions of the feelies constitute alternative narratives that comment critically upon or allow insight into the monologic discourse of the state. These embedded narratives also reintroduce the question of genre. John mourns a lost “high” culture, but he likely does not completely represent Huxley’s feelings. Indeed his viewpoint is complemented and challenged by that of Mustafa Mond (an unsympathetic character but one whose viewpoint is not dismissed) who, speaking of *King Lear*, wonders “where would Edmund be nowadays? Sitting in a pneumatic chair, with his arm round a girl’s waist, sucking away at his sex-hormone chewing-gum and watching the feelies” (Huxley [1937] 2007: 208). While the novel most overtly critiques venal popular art that only seeks empty entertainment and profit, even the highest of art can be manipulated and misconstrued, and John’s slavish adherence to inappro-
appropriate Shakespearean models troubles the division between high and popular art. For Huxley, genre relates to the ethical and aesthetic purpose of art—to entertain, to educate, to provoke, or to transcend. John’s misuse of Shakespeare as a self-help manual also warns against a particular kind of reading practice, implying that we should not follow John’s bad example and see *Brave New World* simply as an anti-manifesto for the modern world.

When John demands “the right to be unhappy” (Huxley [1937] 2007: 212), he claims the right to a narrative trajectory that has not already been decided for him by the state. His suicide in the final pages of the novel indicates his surrender to the circular stasis of the Brave New World. Here, as in Orwell, narrative closure takes a spatial form: Winston sees himself trapped in a “white-tiled corridor” (Orwell [1949] 1990: 311), and John’s body swings, “slowly, very slowly, like two unhurried compass needles ... north, north-east, east, south-east, south, south-south-west; then paused, and after a few seconds, turned as unhurriedly back towards the left” (Huxley [1937] 2007: 229). However, this suicide is also John’s last-ditch attempt to carve out his own narrative in resistance to the state story, primarily to achieve tragic status in a world that no longer has any conception of tragedy as a genre. For Huxley’s characters as for Orwell’s, hope takes the form of a narrative impulse.

The narrative desire to open up the plot mirrors the protagonists’ desire for the freedom to tell their own stories and thus change their worlds. As these dystopian societies attempt to erase the individual stories and the very individuality of their peoples, the novels disallow such efforts through the use of heteroglossia and narrative plurality. In the opening of *Brave New World* the Director’s excited description of his perfect world is disrupted by the thoughts and words of screaming babies, Bernard’s open contempt for state policy, and Lenina’s barely suppressed anxiety about monogamy. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Winston’s rebellion takes the form of exploring alternative plots—for example, the love story—and of paying attention to other narrative voices. Some of these voices emerge only in fragmentary snatches of narrative, such as the song that a “red-armed” washerwoman sings outside Winston and Julia’s secret room: “*They sye that time ’eals all things, / They sye ou can always forget; / But the smiles an’ the tears across the years / They twist my ’eart-strings yet!*” (Orwell [1949] 1990: 148). Storytelling preserves memories across time, and Winston recognises something “slightly unorthodox, a dangerous eccentricity” about singing a counter-nar-
rative, no matter how innocuous it might sound. He finds hope too in the proles who have been left alone enough to preserve their own stories (72). Such fragmented voices, snatches of song, and half-remembered poems do not consolidate into fully formed counter-narratives, but their very fragmentary nature suggests a possible mode of resistance to the homogeneous, dystopian narrative. In a foreword to *Brave New World* written in 1946, Huxley imagines a “third alternative” for his savage: “between the utopian and the primitive horns of his dilemma would lie the possibility of sanity ... in a community of exiles and refugees from the Brave New World, living within the borders of the Reservation” (Huxley 2007: xix). Huxley’s choice of the in-between space of the border offers a new way of seeing travel, for the border is the space between states, between home and abroad that opens out into two directions simultaneously. The notion of the border also gives the unfulfilled impulse towards alternative utopias fresh resonance. Writing of the modernist utopia, Jay Winter proposes “sceptical, minor utopias,” redefining the utopian as an “exploratory, ubiquitous, and multiform” impulse rather than an ideology (Winter 2006: 2). The events of the first decades of the twentieth century showed how dangerous utopias could be when they took material form; the unachieved utopian impulse then is not a failure but an embrace of the ethical value of uncertainty.

Both *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* end with an abrupt reversal of perspective, focusing on the faces of the fallen, would-be heroes. As the central characters turn from focalizer into spectacle, we are made uncomfortably aware of our interpretative position in relation to the textual world. Huxley’s final paragraph is an almost cinematic shot of John swinging from a noose; Orwell’s last scenes show Winston smiling beatifically up at the mural of Big Brother, his lips luridly “purple” and his features “thickened.” The visual focus on these characters’ downfall is uncomfortable, precisely because the novels repeatedly warn against turning people into spectacle. In this way, the narrative journey provides a window on the strange dystopian land and then, in a final twist, turns our gaze back onto our own world and ourselves. The novels’ attention to the ethics of seeing ultimately raises questions about our own perverse attraction to the dystopian vision, our desire to lose ourselves in stories of nightmarish other worlds, worlds that, we hope, have nothing to do with our own.

Dystopias are, Northrop Frye asserts, “not intended as a replacement world, but as a way to see the existing world more clearly” (1965: 336). At
Traveling to Modernism’s Other Worlds

once frighteningly foreign and worryingly close to home, Huxley and Orwell’s dystopias offer no consolation or easy escape, but neither do they function straightforwardly as fictional mirrors. Rather, like the characters whose stories we follow, we negotiate among multiple, overlapping worlds, thus examining what our world is, was, and might become. While each novel communicates certain ethical messages (the danger of unchecked science, the horror of totalitarianism), as modernist travel fictions they both also suggest a way of understanding ethics not simply as “taking a stand” but rather as becoming attuned to otherness and understanding the limits of mistaking any single perspective for the whole. The authors eschew didactics, proposing diversity instead of hegemony, productive uncertainty in the place of absolutism. Such a model of multiplicity can help also re-evaluate the novels themselves, for they have been kept for too long in too narrow a box. Brave New World and Nineteen Eighty-Four can be viewed through multiple lenses, as science fiction, late modernist works, or popular fiction. I have argued here that they are also travel fictions and to see them as such affords new insight into their troubled and troubling depictions of a foreignness that is both longed for and feared. Nonetheless, it is perhaps equally true to name them fictions that travel, both across the bounds of genre and through the multiple possible worlds that they imaginatively evoke.

Notes

1. There are multiple possible examples of such new approaches to modernism, including Susan Stanford Friedman’s engagement with the idea of “postcolonial modernities” (2006: 425–443), and the growing body of work on the “middlebrow,” including Erica Brown and Mary Grover’s Middlebrow Literary Cultures (2011).
2. Both novels’ continued cultural power is evident in countless Hollywood movies from Ridley Scott’s Blade Runner (1982) to Andrew Niccol’s Gattaca (1997); Nineteen Eighty-Four has been named the second most popular book of the century and was recently voted the number two novel on Facebook (the number one book was Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings; see Foden 1997). You can watch television shows called Big Brother or Room 101, and, in Toronto, you can get your chocolate fix from a shop called Soma.
3. I use “utopian” to mean “no place” thus encompassing fictional imaginings of both perfect and nightmarish worlds.
6. See, for example, Kumar who calls dystopia, a “variety of conservatism” (1987: 10).
7. The impossibility of travel as escape is prefigured earlier in the novel when Bernard takes Lenina on another journey, out to look at the sea (Huxley [1932] 2007: 78). Here his desire to travel somewhere new with Lenina emotionally is similarly stifled by her behavior; then later, the threat of being sent to a sub-center in Iceland that haunts Bernard throughout the novel becomes null and void when we realise that nothing much is different in Iceland.
8. Both authors had strong opinions about the art of cinema. In essays like “Silence Is Golden” and “Pleasures,” Huxley expresses some horror at the “organized distraction” of the cinema where the audience, “need only sit and keep their eyes open” (2000: 2:225–256). Orwell worked at the BBC and Mark Wollaeger (2008: 225–225) notes Orwell’s despair at the “faked” state of cinematic art in wartime.

References

Traveling to Modernism’s Other Worlds


