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## The Art of Seeing: The Dystopian and Utopian Visions of Aldous Huxley

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### Abstract

This paper explores the multifaceted intellectual journey of Aldous Huxley, focusing on his unique ability to "see without eyes," literally, through his recovery from near-blindness and metaphorically, through his prescient social and political observations. It contrasts Huxley's prolific and opinionated nature with the reticence of his contemporary, E.M. Forster. The analysis delves into Huxley's early materialist critiques of Religion and technology, exemplified by *Brave New World*, and his later turn towards Eastern spirituality, culminating in *Island*. The paper examines his insightful, though sometimes controversial, views on India, as presented in *Jesting Pilate*, and his concerns about the dehumanizing effects of technology and totalitarianism. It further discusses his engagement with counter-culture and psychedelic exploration, highlighting his "perennial philosophy." Ultimately, the paper portrays Huxley as a visionary who challenged conventional thinking and offered profound, often prophetic, insights into the human condition, even in the face of personal adversity.

**Keywords:** Aldous Huxley, Brave New World, Colonisation, India, Demo-Dystopia, Blindness

### Introduction

"In any audience for the ballet, there is someone with a bad leg who knows an awful lot about dancing."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> James, Clive. "Aldous Huxley Then and Now." *New Yorker*, Mar 17, 2003



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Clive James's knower-of-dance metaphor for Huxley in the above quote sums up Huxley's personality and grit. Forster and Huxley are compatriots and contemporaries, the latter a junior by a decade and a half, and the two are as different as sloth and squirrel, or let's say, silence and quarrel. Forster does not like to talk about politics directly, but through intimate interaction between his characters, Huxley cannot help but have an opinion about every social or political matter he encounters. Forster wrote only six novels – four in a flurry between 1906 and 1910; *Maurice* in 1913 but did not have the will to publish it for its volatile homosexual content; and *A Passage to India*, which took a dozen years to reach its denouement in 1924. So, by the First World War, Forster, in his mid-forties, was a broken man – he continued writing essays but had no more stories to tell and lived another for half a century. On the other hand, Huxley's zest and unrest are unnerving – his fictional works count up to fifty, and there is a prolific amount of commentary in various other forms. Forster was a reticent, private, withdrawn, mysterious man, while Huxley was a man of the *mehfil* – he regaled people at the dining table, the wine-ing, and the whining parties across the globe.

### The Living Encyclopedia of Britannica

Huxley is a high hustler – calling attention to his intelligence, diligence, and sheer breadth of learning. He had an opinion on anything and everything – from the faults in the architecture of the Taj Mahal, through saying Kashmiris are 'dirty,' to lampooning Stalin, to anger against Gandhi's assassination, to the problem of population explosion. To show off his learning, or inadvertently, he had what Clive James calls "a macaronic tendency to drag in an untranslated quotation" from various European languages into his writing. It is famous that he could talk about any subject at a gathering. James says, "God-like in his height, aquiline features, and omnidirectional intelligence, Huxley was a living myth. He was the myth of the man who knew everything." And there were counter-myths. A legend tells that at a party, a guest noticed that all the topics Huxley argued about mellifluously started with the same alphabet. So he went and checked and found that all the topics were listed in Encyclopedia Britannica. Though a joke, the counter-myth is still a testimony to Huxley's prodigious memory and fruition of the phrase "encyclopedic memory." The foundation of that joke, though, is that Huxley did carry a slim encyclopedia while traveling to fill in the interstices of his time.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



Nicholas Murray's biography of Huxley (2003) offers insight into Huxley's psychological angst against destiny. He was prodigious as a school student but had gone almost blind by the time he was sixteen. And yet, he put in eight hours of reading every day with a magnifying glass on all sorts of subjects – literature, science, history, politics. James says, "Against the odds posed by his comparative indigence and absolute injury, Huxley had given himself a magnificent preliminary education."<sup>3</sup> The teenager challenged destiny and John Milton's stoic<sup>4</sup> When the latter went blind at the age of fifty and wrote - "And that one talent, which is death to hide, lodged with me useless...they also serve who stand and wait."<sup>5</sup> Huxley was neither a believer nor did he have the time to wait. Like a blindfolded archer who has downloaded the entire map in his dreams, Huxley shot his arrow from nothingness to nothingness, as F Scott Fitzgerald would have said.<sup>6</sup> It would also be interesting to compare the fictional Dick Helder's situation in Kipling's *The Light That Failed* with that of the honest Milton and Huxley. Dick, the prodigious war artist who has learned his art through indigence and poverty, becomes famous and then goes blind. After he raves, he decides to go back to 'Soudan,' where the war is and where his journalist friends are, and is shot dead by the enemy just as he reaches his friend in the desert. The end of Helder's "eye" is also the end of his "I." Huxley, born in 1894; the reader of all things, must have read this 1890 novel and the Milton poem and scoffed at both of them.

### **The problems of Religion and technology**

Huxley's intellectual journey is even more fascinating. In his early career, He saw Religion and technology as problems for the world. Needless to say, *Brave New World* (1932) is a product of the latter. The prophetic work stares us in the eye today, with Huxley chuckling

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Amor Fati.

Amor fati is to love one's fate and accept one's condition stoically. Nietzsche popularized the phrase.

<sup>5</sup>Milton, John. "On His Blindness." 1673

<sup>6</sup>Fitzgerald uses this phrase "like an arrow shot from nothingness to nothingness" in his essay "The Crack-Up."



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and saying, "I told you so." The World State of Huxley's demo-dystopia is perfect with no hair out of place – the machines tutor humans to get over their vulnerabilities – there is manipulation of psychology to make them more effective, there is sleep learning – an effective assembly line of productive and also selectively eugenically reproductive humans. Huxley is a seer who can see that eventually, it would be humans serving machines rather than the other way round, and he can read in dark war clouds of the First World War, the message of human annihilation written by their hubris now in the avatar of technology. Simultaneously, Huxley was a bitter critic of religious superstition and practices and held the view that Indians could throw away the British, but for the fatalism and inequity enshrined in their Religion. In this, Huxley is quite a visionary materialist critic, seeing the economic collusion between capitalism and conservatism of Religion. However, later, much concerned with the dehumanization created by the wars and new technology, Huxley turns to Eastern spiritual practice. These ideas are condensed in his last novel, *Island* (1962), in many ways. In *Those Barren Leaves*, Huxley says that he was brought up "in the simple faith of nineteenth-century materialism; a faith untroubled by doubts and as yet unsophisticated by that disquieting scientific modernism which is not turning the staunchest mathematical physicists into mystics."

An interesting strain that connects the two dissimilar figures, Forster and Huxley, is their shared unhappiness over the standardization created by democracy and the violence that became a feature of political democracy worldwide. Forster was dismayed at the lack of sensitivity and the proliferation of violence. At the same time, Huxley could not understand why people could not see what he could see clearly – though Huxley understood structures of inequity and privilege very well. He was, however, concerned at the multiplication of *mobile vulgus* and that they would take over the "patrician order." James says he even had the percentages worked out: "0.5 percent were in the club, 99.5 percent were outside the rope...The best we can say for him is that he did not fall for Fascism." James discusses the context of Huxley's time, when "not liking dictators qualified him as a progressive in a period when George Bernard Shaw saluted Hitler as an exemplar of creative energy and H. G. Wells nose-dived to the foot of Stalin's throne."<sup>7</sup> Huxley was too smart to fall for totalitarianism,

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<sup>7</sup>For this discussion, see James, Clive. "Aldous Huxley Then and Now." *New Yorker*, Mar 17, 2003



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and he saw that, in Clive James's words, "a totalitarian solution to the anomalies of mass society was worse than the problem." In *Ends and Means* (1937), Huxley questions means, a point so often missed, and in *Point Counter Point* (1928), he paints the persona of a fascist. Huxley knew the clouds that were gathering and that clouds would gather in a distant nuclear cloud. And so, he could see through the Soviet regime and what was happening in Italy and Germany reasonably early in the day.

### **If I were an Indian Millionaire...**

Nora Satin does not deal with Huxley's biographical details or his complex intellectual or psychological make-up but focuses on his views about India, his rejection of Religion as the root of problems in India, and his later inclination toward spirituality. Satin counters Huxley's ideas – that the idea of "karma" infused a certain fatalism and resignation amongst Indian people – with metaphysical arguments as the Bhagwadgita emphasizes the action without taking into account the fruit of such action, etc. It is interesting to see a political dialogue between an author and critic negotiated through metaphysical argumentation. Both speak from their context – Huxley, from his Victorian materialist context (of which he is a bitter critic), wondering how tradition still holds in India, with many of its regressive elements like untouchability. Satin, on the other hand, takes a nativist approach to defend the Indian situation philosophically. On the one hand, it is illuminating to get into the details of the views of Huxley and Satin's counterpoints. This exposition also gives us a broad view of the writer in question. However, it is counterproductive for a literary critic to delve into metaphysical counterpoints – much of it would be evident to anyone from within the tradition. Also, Satin reduces Huxley's later quest for spirituality to "Indian tradition," – which encompasses a plethora of traditions. In this political reclamation of tradition, she misses out on the Buddhist inclinations that the later Huxley has. However, criticism within the confines of text was a convention in Indian academia in the 1970s, and thus Satin's material is to be looked at for its richness, not its contextualization, as later became the trend in criticism.

David Higdon tells in *Wandering into Brave New World* (2013) that Huxley had no interest in science fiction as late as 1929<sup>8</sup> In his essay "Spinoza's Worm," Huxley says that

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<sup>8</sup> See Higdon, David Leon. *Wandering Into Brave New World*. Rodopi: Amsterdam, 2013. P1



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his experience of "a book about the Future " was "boredom and exasperation."<sup>9</sup> The same sentiment that Utopia is boring and most people would die of boredom and the remaining "would simply die of spleen" – is mouthed by a character in *Those Barren Leaves* (1925). Huxley undertook a nine-month-long journey across the world in which he visited nearly fifty cities and in which he visited four parts of the world – India, South East Asia, the native lands of South West America, and the glitzy urban centers of the USA. This travel to four different worlds would become the foundation on which Huxley would build his Utopian novel *Brave New World* (1932). His biographer, Nicholas Murray, says that *Jesting Pilate* (1926) offers "simulating lucubrations" but is not profound in "its sounding of other cultures," and Peter Firchow calls it "a travelogue of a man in search of truth but too pressed to stay for a definite answer."<sup>10</sup> This is much later criticism from the time of Satin's work, but one gets the same sense in Satin's analysis without putting it in this form. Instead, as pointed out, she defends Indian tradition and theological texts. She says that the ideas of concepts like Karma have been distorted in practice, and therefore, India suffers. In effect, Huxley is not profound in "sounding of other cultures," and Satin turns to being an apologist of tradition instead of contextualizing the turmoil in Huxley's heart brought about by colonialism, wars, and the rise of technology and war machinery. Jerome Meckier, in "Prepping for *Brave New World*" (2001), reviews the first two volumes of Huxley's complete essays.<sup>11</sup>, (brought out in 2000) shows how Huxley was vocal throughout the twenties about "Fordism"—that Henry Ford's factories would spread like cancer across civilizations ("Wander Birds"), how people would be dumbed down by "more bad fiction" and more cinemas, and so on.

Satin tells of the tourist gaze of Huxley, how he wanted to absorb the experience of India like a sponge, and how he has an opinion about everything: "He talks of sacred cows, the migratory birds, the elephant ride, and the serpent nibbling the sun during the solar eclipse; at the same time, he writes of the sacred and holy *sadhus*, the Indian youth who stepped out of the university into a vacuum, the women, the *Thakur* of Rajasthan and the Indian

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Meckier, Jerome. "Prepping for Brave New World: Aldous Huxley's Essays of the 1920s." *Utopian Studies*, 2001, Vol. 12, No. 2 2001. Penn State University Press. pp. 234-245



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politicians." Satin tells how Huxley was amused at the idea of "sacred" in India wherein the "sacred cows" roamed about ubiquitously but nothing was done to prevent cruelty toward these animals, or for their upkeep. Huxley is indeed a seer into the future, and it is interesting to see the sacred cow occupying the political mainstream. However, their literal condition remains pathetic even as their symbolic value soars to a jingoistic frenzy.<sup>12</sup> Satin shows how Huxley noticed the great inequity in society – with it being cheaper to hire men to pull carts than oxen. He saw the unemployment problem amongst educated youth and the grit of Rajasthani women carrying pots on their heads for miles with "princely grace." In short, Huxley's 1920 sounds much like 2020. *Jesting Pilate* gives us deep insights into the roots of today's politics of India, mainly because it is an outsider's gaze. Satin quotes from texts like "Uncle Spencer" and *Point Counter Point* to demonstrate how bitterly critical Huxley was of the Anglo-Indian government and the British people in India. He also wonders how such a pompous, inefficient government could survive in India- and in answer to that, he says that "Superiority in India is a question of epidermis." With that, he sums up the postcolonial situation of India - the inferiority complex and internalization of racism that's crept into the social fabric. He understands the internal hegemony of caste, too, only too well. In Huxley's opinion, India would throw out the British merely by non-cooperation – which again is a seer's vision. Within a decade of his arrival, that is where India's politics would be headed toward.

For Huxley, the root problem in India was "spirituality," which would have to be thrown away if India wanted freedom. This is also reminiscent of Swami Vivekananda's popular exhortation of the youth to play football instead of praying in temples. He was astounded by the melee of people dipping in the Ganga river during an eclipse. Ironically, Huxley later turned to spirituality to balance the void created by materialism, which he had always known. Later criticism attempted to contextualize the genesis of the dark Utopia/demo-dystopia of *Brave New World* and the political idealism and later turn of Huxley toward spirituality, as pointed out.

<sup>12</sup> There are multiple news reports about the lack of funds at cow shelters despite a lot of politics around cows and the resultant abysmal state of the animals at these shelters. See, for example, "Delhi has no time for 'holy' cows dying in shelters." Hindustan Times, Aug 11, 2016

URL: [Life of the bovine: Delhi has no time for 'holy' cows dying in shelters | Hindustan Times](#)





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Here is how Huxley sums up his essay on the eclipse in Benares:

"To save the sun (which might, one feels, very safely be left to look after itself), a million Hindus will assemble on the banks of the Ganges. How many, I wonder, would assemble to save India? Immense energy, which might liberate and transform the country if turned into political channels, is wasted in the name of imbecile superstitions. Religion is a luxury that India, in its present condition, cannot possibly afford. India will never be free until the Hindus and Muslims are as rabidly enthusiastic about their Religion as we are about the Church of England. If I were an Indian millionaire, I would leave all my money for the endowment of an Atheist mission."<sup>13</sup>

Huxley's cynicism about Indians being busy with useless activities differs significantly from Kipling's civilizing mission. There is a seminal difference between Kipling and Huxley – the former dealt with the "white man's burden," whereas the latter dealt with the existential burn on humanity itself. The intent is different – Huxley's thought is like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), wherein he shows how "things fall apart" with oppressive practices of both the colonizer and the colonized. Huxley's vision is raw in most daily observations about India; he is succinct wherever he has prior context. He says in *Jesting Pilate* that the English had never been oppressed, so they never needed to turn back to history to look for glory. On the other hand, both the Irish and the Indians, subjugated by England, had to/invent glory in history. He goes on to say:

"Over the last thirty or forty years, a huge pseudo-historical literature has sprung up in India, the melancholy product of a subject people's inferiority complex. Industrious and intelligent men have wasted their time and their abilities in trying to prove that ancient Hindus were superior to every other people in every activity of life. Thus, each time the West has announced a new scientific discovery, misguided scholars have ransacked Sanskrit literature to find a phrase that may be treated as a Hindu anticipation of it..."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>See Baker, Robert S. and James Sexton, eds. *Aldous Huxley, Complete Essays. Volume 1:1920-1925*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000.

<sup>14</sup>See *Jesting Pilate* p 106-7





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Huxley says that the chemical composition of water and the microbial origin of diseases, espoused by Pasteur and Zeppelin, have all been retro-anticipated by Sanskrit scholars. His view is that this enthusiasm stems out of colonial subjugation – "Such is the melancholy and futile occupations of intelligent men who have the misfortune to belong to a subject race. Free men would never dream of wasting their time and wit upon such vanities. From those who have not shall be taken away even that which they have."<sup>15</sup> A century and a half later, Huxley's words still seem to point at the bull's eye.

### A Return to Utopia

One of the popular quotes of Huxley is that "...the perfect dictatorship would have the appearance of democracy, but would be a prison without walls in which the prisoner would not even dream of escaping. It would essentially be a system of slavery where, through consumption and entertainment, the enslaved people would love their servitude."<sup>16</sup> Huxley, as variously seen, was concerned about the enslavement of humans by technology and thought all his life about this issue. His fictional works parallel his essays, and we have a very interesting journey from *Brave New World* of 1932 to *Island* of 1962 – a swing from a dystopia to a Utopia. The fictional Island of Pala is secluded from a world enslaved by machines and the only hope for humanity.

Jake Poller's recent work, *Aldous Huxley and Alternative Spirituality* (2017) is a dense and fascinating book about Huxley's involvement with counter-culture, the hippie movement, substance use, et cetera. The book delineates the historical and philosophical trajectory of various cults and spiritual movements, as well as Huxley's run-ins with several of them. Once again, as we saw with Huxley in Italy, he was close to believing that a select group of individuals could save the world from the slavery of machines and the machinations

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> This line has been quoted in several books, and the attribution is generally given as Aldous Huxley, 1931. For example, see Chapter 8 of O'Shaughnessy, Nicholas. *Marketing the Third Reich: Persuasion, Packaging and Propaganda*. 2017



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of despots. However, he could always deconstruct his ideas, but he stopped short of it. After wading through Western esotericism and various Eastern ideas, Huxley developed a "perennial philosophy," synthesizing the core ideas that were historically acceptable to all world religions and regions. Eventually, Huxley sought to find what he could not find without, within – and to this end, he started trying the drugs like LSD that the countercultural movements of the 1960s are known for. Patrick Horn says, "Huxley believed human progress results not from an evolutionary leap or paranormal training, but through cultivating existing potential aided by pharmacology."<sup>17</sup> Huxley, apart from being hailed for his visionary ideas, is also much maligned for his hobnobbing with cults, and Horn says that "Poller rescues Huxley from the disdain heaped on his 'synthetic Yoga-Buddhic-Christian religion' and shows the connection between Huxley's experiments in lived ideology as reflected in his creative literary achievements."

Huxley and CS Lewis died on the same day when John F Kennedy was assassinated – Nov 22, 1963 – and the writers' deaths received scant attention because of the political catastrophe of the day. It is true of Huxley's vision that the brave new world of armament corporations had Kennedy eliminated in cold blood for trying to thaw the Cold War.

Let us end this paper where we began – with the problem of "seeing." Huxley threw caution to the winds and dismissed Milton's and Kipling's resignation to the problem of blindness. In his book, *The Art of Seeing* (1942), Huxley tells how he recuperated from keratitis over the years using Dr. Bates's method, which included "sunning of an eye," mental relaxation and refocusing, and not wearing glasses. Sir Stewart, a leading ophthalmologist, dismissed Huxley's book as balderdash. However, Huxley was unstoppable and went from boulder to boulder, dash to dash. It would aptly conclude with what sums up the art of seeing Huxley, "That men do not learn very much from the lessons of history is the most important of all lessons that history has to teach."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>See Horn, Patrick. "Review: *Aldous Huxley and Alternative Spirituality*." *Aries*, Vol 27. Reading Religion. Jul 30, 2020

URL: [Aldous Huxley and Alternative Spirituality | Reading Religion](http://www.ijtell.com)

<sup>18</sup> Huxley, Aldous. *Collected Essays*, 1959



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