

Technological Dystopia: Hindered Democratization of Technology in Margaret Atwood's *The Heart Goes Last*

Zhu Minge^{1,a,*}

¹*School of Foreign Languages, Southeast University, Nanjing, China*

a. 220222810@seu.edu.cn

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Margaret Atwood constructs a chaotic and disorderly dystopian society in *The Heart Goes Last*, where the technology is turned into a tool for manipulation, exploitation, and objectification of people. This article attempts to analyze the undemocratic use of technology depicted in the Positron project and the obstacles it poses to the development of technological democracy from the perspective of Andrew Feenberg's critical theory of technology. The article analyzes the undemocratic technology in the book from both the physical and mental aspects, arguing that it strengthens control and surveillance over citizens' bodies and manipulates their mental world, severely violating citizens' human rights. Atwood portrays the social problems resulting from the obstacles to democratization of technology in the book, revealing that undemocratic use of technology brings not well-being but deeper disasters. This rings an alarm bell in the context of rapid scientific and technological development, prompting people to reflect on how to better use technology for the benefit of humanity and promote democratization of technology.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood, *The Heart Goes Last*, Andrew Feenberg, Democratization of technology

1. Introduction

Margaret Atwood, one of the most important Canadian writers, portrays multiple impressive dystopian worlds in her speculative novels such as *Oryx and Crake*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and so forth. *The Heart Goes Last* is another typical dystopian novel that attracts its readers by creating a chaotic and collapsing world and a seemingly orderly and safe town. The novel explores the detrimental effects of technology on individuals and society.

Set in a near future, economic collapse has led to widespread unemployment and social unrest. People start to lose their jobs, houses, fortunes, and eventually a stable and safe life. The story follows the lives of Stan and Charmaine, a married couple struggling to survive in this new world and is forced to live in their small and narrow car. Desperate for stability and security, Stan and Charmaine decide to join a social experiment called the Positron Project. The project promises to provide them an opportunity to live in a comfortable suburban community called Consilience, where a free house and steady jobs are offered as well. However, this is a limited and alternate life – every other month, they must leave their home and serve as prisoners in the Positron prison, while another couple takes their place.

However, as they become trapped in the project, it becomes clear that the technologies utilized are primarily designed to control and manipulate rather than to empower. From surveillance systems to memory manipulation and robotic guards, technology in the novel serves as a tool for maintaining authority and limiting individual agency. Technology is more often than not employed in illegal ways. In Positron prison, illegally abusing of technology includes trafficking human organs and transplants, manufacturing robots for sexual purposes tailored for all kinds of customers even including paedophilia, and brain modification surgery to force a person to fall in love with the first thing they see when they wake up. Through the portrayal of these technologies, the novel raises important questions about the impact of technology on democratization and the potential consequences of its unchecked power.

Studies of *The Heart Goes Last* mainly focus on the themes of utopia and dystopia, panopticon image, power, gender, sexuality, ethics, and identity in the novel. Chinese domestic studies of *The Heart Goes Last* have delved into quite rich and diverse interpretations. In terms of the discussion on Atwood's philosophy of utopia and dystopia in the novel, both Jiao and Hao employ the disciplinary power and panoptic imprisonment proposed in Foucault's pivotal work, *Discipline and Punish*, in their respective works. Jiao argues that the portrayal of a dystopian scene is based on disciplinary confinement with the prison's use of mild but powerful punishment, and such control can be disintegrated by the awakening of people's free will [1]. Similarly, Hao interprets that the society of Consilience/Positron twin city is founded on panoptic imprisonment rather than fair justice, which is not a utopia but a dystopia [2]. The image of the panopticon is more thoroughly discussed in Yuan's article "The Prison Image of *The Heart Goes Last*" and Yuan argues that by putting the prisoners in a state of being "watched" all the time, the panopticon successfully causes a "psychological self-imprisonment" [3]. As for the interpretation of gender and sexuality, Yuan's another article elaborates on the gender dilemma that challenges traditional gender relationships and ethics and causes the following crisis [4]. Xiao and Jiang examine the novel from a feminist point of view focusing on the writing succession and breakthrough of female characters, and believe that through innovating the portrayal of female characters and relationships, Atwood greatly enriches her unique feminist thoughts [5].

Foreign studies of the novel also concentrate their interpretation on the dystopian and panoptic images in the novel with deploying Foucault's philosophical thoughts. Reese proposes that Atwood is depicting Foucauldian "heterotopias" rather than utopia or dystopia and enriches the study by studying queer identity reflected in the work [6]. While Barbara examines the power relations of the panoptic prison and discipline's effects on the dystopian society [7]. Also studying the dystopian theme in the book, Monika finds out the work constructs the nightmarish through its reconfiguring of "corporate America" [8]. Focusing more on the literary nature of the work, Howells conducts a genre revisit on the work and decides that it is dystopian speculative fiction mingled with fantasy and Gothic horror [9]. Although these studies involve the discussion of technology in the novel, few of them dig deep into how technology plays an important role in affecting society either in either positive or negative way. This article aims to delve into Atwood's portrayal of technology through the lens of Andrew Feenberg's critical theory of technology.

Andrew Feenberg's idea of technology is developed upon the concepts of Marcuse and Constructivism that technology is not neutral but is a form of power and is loaded with values. Feenberg argues that technology is not simply a tool or instrument, but rather a socially and politically constructed entity that embodies specific values, interests, and power relations [10]. Therefore, technology is not neutral but it is deeply interwoven with political and social powers. Andrew Feenberg contends that the design of technology plays a pivotal role in shaping the social and political framework of contemporary societies. Feenberg argues that technology should be designed and implemented in a way that empowers individuals and promotes democratic decision-making. He

advocates that the need for democratic control and participation in technological decision-making [11].

Employing Feenberg's critical theory of technology, this article intends to argue that the technology portrayed in *The Heart Goes Last* greatly hinders democratization. The undemocratic use of technology severely violates the human rights of the residents, manipulates their mental states, and enhances control and surveillance. The article tries to examine how the democratization of technology is impeded from both physical and mental levels.

2. Surveillance and Exploitation of Body

While the Positron Project initially offers stability and security to its participants, it gradually becomes clear that the technology employed serves the interests of the project's leaders rather than promoting democratization. The control exerted by surveillance systems limits individuals' freedoms and privacy, hindering democratic decision-making and free will within the community. The residents' lack of influence over the project's policies and operations suggests a lack of empowerment in their relationship with the technology. Feenberg has absorbed Marcuse's idea and pointed out that the (capitalist) technological system is not universal, but reflects special class interests [10]. In the dystopian society in the novel, technology is monopolized by the authority which ignores democracy, and technology is used in a way to hinder the democratization of technology.

One of the most prominent technologies employed by the Positron Project is advanced surveillance systems. Atwood molds the Positron prison following the form of a panopticon proposed by Jeremy Bentham in 1791, a mode of surveillance that leaves little private room for the prisoners to generate a sense of being watched in their minds so as to lessen the prisoners' unwanted behavior. Although it seems that only the prison is under close monitoring, which is reasonable according to social norms, the panoptic mode actually covers the whole town. Not only Positron prison is equipped with the advanced monitoring system, but every inch of Consilience is also installed with spyware devices to supervise the behavior of its residents. Therefore, with the monitoring technology, the authority of the project turns the whole town into a panopticon.

Within the confines of the project, Charmaine and Stan, and other residents in this project have lost their privacy, constantly monitored in their every move. Their private life is transparent to the authority. Cameras are installed in every corner, and every conversation is wiretapped. There's no secrecy in the project for the project's authorities are able to track and record their actions at all times. The authority even "reminds" the residents to behave well and not cross the line:

Now Ed has put on a fatherly frown. "Some of you," he says, "and you know who you are – some of you have been dabbling in digital experimentation. You all know the rules: phones are to be used for personal intercommunication with your friends and loved ones, but no more. We take boundaries very seriously here at Positron! You may believe you're engaging in private entertainment, and that your attempt to invade the private space of others is harmless. And so far no harm has been done. But our systems are very sensitive; they pick up even the faintest of unauthorized signals. Disconnect now – again, you know who you are – and we will take no action [12].

Here Ed warns the residents of the consequences of disobeying and misbehavior and restates the boundary of personal communication. The sentence subject "you" can be anyone or everyone in the project which means that self-censorship is necessary for everyone. "We will take no action" sounds more like an implicated warning of future punitive measures rather than a merciful let-off. With promising "limited freedom" and highlighting how powerful and sensitive the monitoring system is, Ed, the leader of the authority, is on the surface reminding of but actually coercing the residents that they are under strict surveillance and they should be satisfied with the level of freedom given to them.

Beyond that is challenging the authority and the consequence is severe. Setting a vague line and utilizing powerful technology as a method of tight surveillance and coercion, the authority has narrowed the delegation of the decision-making process among those who have access to the monitoring system – within an extremely small group of people. This constant surveillance instills a sense of fear and paranoia, effectively inhibiting any dissent or independent thought. It creates an environment of self-censorship, where individuals are afraid to express their true opinions or challenge the authority's directives. This erosion of privacy and personal autonomy is a stark reminder of the dangers that arise when technology is used as a tool for control rather than empowerment.

Moreover, technology is utilized in the Positron Project to exploit and commodify individuals. The project offers participants a seemingly ideal life within the confines of the gated community. Compared with the harsh and chaotic world outside, here they are provided with jobs, housing, and a sense of security whereas such a dream “utopia” comes at a cost. Octavia Butler also depicts a similar plot in her dystopian speculative novel *Parable of the Sower* – walled towns founded by mega-sized companies. For those who work in the town, their salary can be used to pay for the expense of living and consumption. However, the hidden trap is that the salary is lower than the prices of commodities they purchased so they always owe debts to the company, which is actually a modified and more insidious form of slavery. Similarly, Consilience is a town where the residents are facing unequal rules and hideous prices that they are forced to pay. Rather than turning people into slaves, the Positron project shifts its residents into prisoners. Participants are required to live an alternate life: between a month of comfortable living within the community and a month of imprisonment in the Positron prison. This cycle of imprisonment and release serves to maintain control over the individuals, forcing them to comply with the project's demands in order to secure their temporary freedom.

On exploiting the human body, Atwood even takes a step further: the prisoners are forced to be the supply of organs:

“Suppose I told you about the income from body parts? Organs, bones, DNA, whatever's in demand. That's one of the big earners for this place. It was going on in other countries first, and they were making a killing; that aspect was too tempting for Ed.” [12]

With Jocelyn revealing the inhumane truth of the Positron project to Stan, the seemingly safe and sound city and stable life is immediately shattered. It becomes clear that residents are under the tyrant control of the authority. The prisoners in the Positron Project do not willingly or knowingly agree to have their organs harvested. Instead, they are coerced into participating in the project under sugar-coated pretenses. They are led to believe that they are contributing to a utopian society, with no knowledge of the organ trafficking scheme. Their lack of consent and knowledge further demonstrates the ethical violations inherent in organ trafficking. Technology, in this case, is used not only to control but also to profit from the exploitation of individuals, highlighting the dangers of a system that is autocratic without democracy.

3. Control and Manipulation of Mind

In the novel, technology is not only used to exploit and control the human body but also used to manipulate and control the mind of the participants.

The project utilizes censored propaganda to shape the participants' beliefs and attitudes. In the digital age, technology offers an array of tools and platforms that can be used to disseminate propaganda and manipulate individuals on a massive scale. Music, TV programs, and movies on TV or other channels are all strictly selected. “The fifties was chosen for the visual and audio aspects,

because that was the decade in which the most people had self-identified as being happy.” [12] And the slogan of Consilience is “CONS + RESILIENCE = CONSILIENCE. DO TIME NOW, BUY TIME FOR OUR FUTURE.” [12] All the propaganda is aiming to cover the filthy truth of the Positron project and convincing the public that the project is trying to bring them happiness while it merely brings manipulation and exploitation.

Through carefully selected messages disseminated through various mediums, the project intends to control people more easily by brainwashing them. By constantly saturating participants in these messages, the project aims to create a sense of loyalty and adherence to its values, manipulating their thoughts and perceptions. In this way, the authority of the project consolidates its autocratic control without other voices to judge or question its rules for everyone agrees with

Furthermore, the leaders of Consilience, Ed and Jocelyn, experiment with a procedure called “Neurogenesis,” which is the process of erasing and implanting memories with a harmless disguise, “She’ll blot out my memory, that’s likely their idea of grief therapy” [12]. Charmaine simply believes that it is some kind of psychological therapy as the propaganda said rather than an illegal modification of their brains for they have no control over what to be erased or even worse what could be implanted into their brains. And surely the authority or the social group that enjoys the interests has made use of such “convenient” brain procedure to fulfill their own desires and lusts:

“Bots can’t hold a real conversation,” says Budge. “Even the best of them. Today’s tech isn’t there. But higher up the income scale, the customers want something they can show off to their friends; something less like, less like –” “Less like a brain-dead trash bunny,” says Stan. What’s Budge leading up to?

“Let me put it to you,” says Budge. “Suppose you could customize a human being through a brain procedure.” “How do you mean?” says Stan. “They use lasers,” says Budge. “They can wipe your attachment to anyone previous. When the subject wakes up she imprints on whoever’s there. It’s like ducklings.” ... “So, shorthand: choose a babe, give her the operation, stick yourself in front of her when she’s waking up, and she’s yours forever, always compliant, always ready, no matter what you do. That way nobody feels exploited.” [12]

Such brain surgery enables those who are not satisfied with sex robots but want a completely obedient sex slave who can have conversations with them to turn anyone targeted by them into a “brain-dead trash bunny” [12]. Some people even voluntarily sign up for the procedure to get rid of their miserable life and their desperate option is filtered as “waking up” rather than “signing up” for “that way there’s more freedom of selection” just for the so-called clients do not want someone who is willing to sell themselves [12]. This is one of the most extreme examples of the technology used for the commodification of humans through mind manipulation.

The exploitation of humans is not considered as “exploited” for the victim’s mind is altered and modified as totally compliant to the first person they see. This technology allows “the clients” to maintain control over the residents and manipulate their perceptions of reality, reinforcing control and inequality. As a result, free and lower-class people are stripped of their human rights and even the autonomy of controlling their own minds. They are degraded to “something they can show off to their friends,” “something better than trash bunny.” [12] This technology ultimately hinders democratization, as it grants the project leaders the power to control their perceptions and experiences. By altering memories, technology denies the agency of people to shape their own identities and undermines the possibility of authentic participation in democratic processes. Overall, the undemocratic use of technology with propaganda and psychological manipulation amplifies their reach, impact, and potential for manipulation. Without the necessary knowledge and democratic

participation in the technology, people can become less watchful of the danger of the authority and more vulnerable to be controlled and manipulated

4. Conclusion

As a dystopian speculative novel, *The Heart Goes Last* serves as an alerting alarm, emphasizing the potential consequences of unchecked and undemocratic technological power in a society. The novel presents a world where technology is used not to empower but to suppress and exploit. Through the Positron Project, Atwood depicts how the abuse of technology can hinder democratization by invading privacy, manipulating memories, restricting movements, and commodifying individuals. They are designed and implemented to maintain control, limit individual agency, and reinforce power imbalances. This highlights Feenberg's argument that technology must be critically evaluated and designed to prioritize empowering individuals and promoting democratic decision-making rather than being instruments of control and exploitation. It serves as a reminder of the importance of maintaining ethical boundaries when utilizing technology and the need for vigilance in safeguarding individual freedoms and democratic values. The analysis of technology's influence in the novel prompts readers to thoughtfully consider the role of technology in their own lives and society. It encourages them to actively strive for a future that is fairer and more democratic.

References

- [1] Jiao, J. (2021). *A Study on Dystopian Writing in The Heart Goes Last from the Perspective of Disciplinary Power*. Dalian University of Foreign Languages.
- [2] Hao, J. (2023). "Interpretation of Utopian Society in *The Heart Goes Last*." *Journal of Heihe University*, 14, 120-122.
- [3] Yuan, X. (2016). "The Prison Images in *The Heart Goes Last*." *Journal of Hunan University of Science and Technology(Social Science Edition)*, 19, 44-48.
- [4] Yuan, X. (2016). "Gender Dilemma in *The Heart Goes Last*." *New Perspectives on World Literature*, 3, 56-63.
- [5] Xiao, S., Jiang, L. (2017). "Adherence and Breakthrough - On Margaret Atwood's View on Female in *The Heart Goes Last*". *Journal of Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics(Social Sciences)*, 19, 76-80+84.
- [6] Reese, E. (2020). *Attractive Oblivions: Identity, Queer Theory, and Heterotopias in Ari Aster's Midsommar and Margaret Atwood's the Heart Goes Last*. Youngstown State University.
- [7] Barbara, M. (2019). "Margaret Atwood's *The Heart goes Last*: Panopticism, Discipline, Society, and Utopia." *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory*, 5, 79-90.
- [8] Monika, K. (2019). *Dystopic Reconfigurations of Corporate America: Margaret Atwood's "The Heart Goes Last"*. *Journal STUDIA UNIVERSITATIS BABES-BOLYAI PHILOLOGIA*, 64, 255-264.
- [9] Howells, C. (2017). "True Trash: Genre Fiction Revisited In Margaret Atwood's *Stone Mattress, The Heart Goes Last, And Hag-Seed*." *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 11, 297-315.
- [10] Feenberg, A. (1991). *Critical Theory of Technology*. Oxford University Press.
- [11] Feenberg, A. (1995). *Alternative Modernity*. University of California Press.
- [12] Atwood, M. (2015). *The Heart Goes Last*. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.