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# MAKE PRESENTISM GREAT AGAIN

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A thesis submitted to the University of  
Huddersfield in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of MA by  
Research

The University of Huddersfield

16<sup>th</sup> January 2020

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## **Acknowledgements**

First and foremost, I would like to thank God, the Almighty, for enabling me to complete my research successfully.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my research supervisor, Dr David Rudrum for providing invaluable guidance throughout the course of my research. His vision, motivation and dynamism have deeply inspired me. It has been a great privilege, honour and pleasure to work and study under his guidance.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to my parents for their continued love and support and my friends and family for believing in me. Lastly, a special thanks to my dear friend Aaliyah who has been a strong pillar of support throughout this journey.

## Abstract

This thesis is concerned with bringing to light the importance of presentism - an approach to literary studies which has been heavily maligned by critics in the past. Presentism, which has developed from literary critical forms of historicism, “explicitly evok[es] the present concerns that motivate a desire to reread old literature” (Egan 2013: p.39) by theorising “the critic as temporal mediator who owns up to constructing meaning” (Gajowski 2010: p. 674). Amidst the 2016 presidential victory of Donald Trump, the sales of three books sky-rocketed, signalling a correlation between despotisms of the past and adaptive totalitarianisms of the twenty-first century. George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Bertolt Brecht’s *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* and Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, each gained a newfound relevance in the weeks just after Trump’s victory. In my thesis, I will focus on how the rediscovery of a novel, a play and a philosophical text is fundamental in understanding the essence of cult leadership in an age of fake news. Moreover, I will analyse how Trump’s presidency has moved the discourse of authoritarianism from the distant past to the centre of American politics.

## Contents

Introduction	6
Chapter 1: <i>Nineteen Eighty-four</i> and Presentism	21
Chapter 2: <i>The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui</i> and Presentism	41
Chapter 3: <i>The Origins of Totalitarianism</i> : Presentism gone wrong?	62
Conclusion	78
Bibliography	81

## **Introduction to Presentism**

The purpose of this thesis is to address the relevance, urgency and practicality of an (often forgotten and misunderstood) approach to literary studies known as presentism in relation to the current political landscape of America. This study will look at Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Bertolt Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, (each of which offers a scathing critique of fascist authoritarian governments) through the critical lens of presentism. This approach will help me decipher why each of these texts that were written in the mid twentieth century burgeoned with popularity amidst Donald Trump's 2016 presidential victory, and what lessons they teach us about twenty-first century American politics, and the resurgence of totalitarianism in more subtle and new forms. Although no literary text can be a perfect analogy for the complex events playing out in contemporary American politics, these historical works of differing genres, offer a deeper insight into recurring political and societal trends, as well as demonstrate that these events are not unprecedented. In relation to this, Paul Gilroy notes that "elements of fascism appear in new forms", especially as "the living memory of the fascist period fades" (2000: p. 145-6). In my thesis, I will also focus on how the rediscovery of these literary texts is fundamental in understanding the essence of cult leadership in an age of fake news. Moreover, I will analyse how Trump's presidency has moved the discourse of authoritarianism from the distant past to the centre of American politics.

This thesis will look closely at three texts whose rise in popularity is datable directly to the election of Donald Trump in 2016. Each of the texts; *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1948), *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (1941) and *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) were written in the mid twentieth century making this an interesting case for presentism. The texts are at the edge of living memory but none of these texts are contemporary literature. Equally, none of the texts can be rendered historical, in the sense of a bygone age. The time frame that this

thesis will be looking at poses an interesting challenge to presentism itself. Furthermore, this thesis engages with three different genres: a novel, a work of philosophy and a play, each of which has a very different relationship to presentism, thereby, strengthening the practical applications of the approach.

Before I begin to dissect the approach, it is important to clarify that presentism can refer to a philosophical position, that is “the view that only present things exist” (Hinchliff 1996: p. 123) or refer to a critical strategy of literary interpretation. I will be looking at the latter definition in my study. Presentism which has developed in response to literary critical forms of historicism, “explicitly evok[es] the present concerns that motivate a desire to reread old literature” (Egan 2013: p.39) by theorising “the critic as temporal mediator who owns up to constructing meaning” (Gajowski 2010: p. 674). This approach to literature removes the exclusive power of interpreting literary texts from the context of their original production by prioritising a reader’s or spectator’s temporal, political, social, and geographical contexts.

As presentism diverges from traditional methods of literary interpretation and (some may argue) repudiates historicism, many critics fail to see the purpose of this approach. This is chiefly due to the abiding legacy of nineteenth century “empiricist historian” Leopold von Ranke “who insisted on the centrality of primary sources” (Egan 2013: p.38). Taking this into consideration, “historians have striven for an ideal of scholarship that seeks to understand the past in its own terms rather than applying to it the standards, concepts, and norms of the present” (p. 38). Holding this as an ideal, presentism has been met with harsh criticism by many historians. For instance, Barrish (2005) remarks that “[u]sed pejoratively, ‘presentist’ refers to criticism perceived as blithely and unselfconsciously projecting a critic’s [or reader’s] own political or social concerns onto the literature of an earlier period” (p. 19). Barrish clearly disapproves of naïve or mindless presentism, a practice wherein a critic unreflectively uses the terms of the present to interpret the past. However, this practice is inevitable as critics unknowingly or otherwise always place present judgements, morals or interpretations on



works of the past thereby distorting them. Therefore, no matter how combatively historicist critics want to deny, their search for historical objectiveness will always be muddled by their own unthinking presentist agendas. A vital distinction between the unthinking presentism that is loathed by historicist scholars and what I call critical presentism<sup>1</sup> (advocated in this thesis) is that critical presentism teaches a political lesson, thereby bringing political value back to literature. This type of presentism draws parallels between the past and present for a call to action in the present moment; ultimately, the mode here is advocacy.

Another detractor of presentism, John Holbo (2008) asserts that presentism “means nothing” as it fails to have any practical application in the real world due to its favouring of “historical injustice” (p. 1097-1098). Contrary to this view, presentism does not favour ‘historical injustice’, but rather seeks to re-examine the relationship between the past and the present, which according to new historicists is antagonistic and turbulent. This is largely due to their belief that the historical accuracy of a past event is hindered by the reader/critic’s present and hence they evade “the question of why past texts still matter and how they speak to us now” (Felski 2011: p. 577). In relation to this, Rita Felski points out,

Time is not a tidy sequence of partitioned units, but a profusion of whirlpools and rapids, eddies and flows, in which objects, ideas, images and texts from different moments swirl, tumble, and collide in ever-changing combinations and constellations” (2011: p. 578).

This highlights that making the present an enemy of the historical past is not only unproductive but also nonsensical as “pastness is part of who we are, not an archaic residue, a regressive force, a source of nostalgia, or a return of the repressed” (p. 578).

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this thesis I will refer to presentism as the hermeneutic practice popularised by Shakespeare scholars Hugh Grady and Terence Hawkes, however, as this thesis focuses heavily on the political consequences of re-reading certain literary texts, the methodology I will employ is what I will term “critical presentism”.

Perhaps before delving into the field of hermeneutics to explain the onset of presentism (as a mode of literary analysis), it is important to highlight the theory of temporality in relation to the approach. “Time or temporality are important ordering principles for the majority of the theoretical approaches” namely cultural materialism, new historicism, historicism, new materialism and presentism (Lewis 2014). But how are the theories of temporality linked to this novel approach to literary interpretation? And how does presentism restructure the relationship between the past and present? In recent times, with the growth of new approaches to literary criticism, there has been a renewed interest in the study of the past; for instance, new historicism has interpreted and understood literature on the basis that it was created in a particular historical moment. In hopes of understanding literature through its own cultural context, new historicism saw literary texts “feature prominently in the social processes themselves” (Veenstra 1995: p. 174). Whereas presentism considers the impact of the present moment on the interpretation and study of antecedent literary works. In contrast, temporality examines the flow of time and the interweaving and defining of the present, past, and future. Time has been thought of as infinite in the western world – a straight line that ebbs and flows, infinitely or linearly. A measure of progress, the linear advancement of civilisation. The future is yet to be and the past has already occurred. The words of Bertrand Russell convey this outlook, as he states: “the present contents of my mind have an order, which I believe to be correlated...with the objective time-order of events to which my recollections refer” (1962: p. 12). In this sense, time is given “an overly and overtly ideological significance as a variable which follows a predictable, developmental path heading towards the Hegelian end of history” (Bemben & Front 2014: p. 16). However, if we think about this carefully, this is a gross simplification as we do not experience time in this manner. For Heidegger, we do not simply exist in time, but we are time, we think about time all at once, merging the present, past and future together. Heidegger states,

Temporalising does not signify that ecstases come in a “succession”. The future is not later than having-been, and having-been is not earlier than the present.

Temporality temporalises itself as a future which makes present in a process of having been (1962: p. 401).

Furthermore,

history does not possess any metaphysical, substantive reality. Thus, in this image, the pattern of history is not superimposed or pre-established, but rather emerges out of [an] intermeshed plurality of events. Such a pattern is not treated as unique or singular, but rather emerges as the combined product of multiple sequences.... [it] is open-ended and contingent, allowing alternative scenarios (Sztompka 1991: p. 71).

This disrupts and distorts the traditional linear perception of time by suggesting that the past, present and future are all jumbled up in human experience and therefore occur simultaneously. Thus, it is fitting to say that the theor[ies] of temporality engage with the “perception” of time.

Hence, to revisit my earlier point, new historicism which accuses presentism of grave historical injustice, is actually guilty of treating works of literature and art only as cultural signs of their own time, like declining matter buried in the past. Its preoccupation with capturing the past objectively, “conspicuously fails to answer the question of how [and why] texts resonate across time” by “bracket[ing] rather than resolv[ing] the problem of temporality” (Felski 2011: p. 575). Also, while New Historicism remains fervent in its desire ‘to speak with the dead’, “most of the work produced under this rubric remains closer to diagnosis than dialogue, generating the sense of an unbridgeable distance between past texts and present lives” (p. 577). This is partially a result of viewing the past as fixed or embedded in time rather than as an entity that can be “revisited, repeated, surrounded, protected, recombined, reinterpreted and reshuffled” (p. 578). Presentism on the other hand, engages with theories of temporality to the closest degree. This is done through the approach’s acknowledgement that our experience of time is

not linear. To put it simply, a reader/critic's experience of a text will continually be influenced by some earlier time period. Russell West-Pavlov, a professor of English, also addresses temporality in relation to literature. He acknowledges that literature is "a fictive construct, an artifice which, in playful re-working of the putatively factual givens of reality, may point us to, indeed participate in the plethora of temporalities subsisting under the threshold of an all-embracing and coercive time" (2013: p. 10). This raises an important question – are literary texts fixed in time or can they exist simultaneously in the past, present and future? Terence Hawkes proposes that:

...at their most compelling, literary works do seem able to break free of the past, to leap across centuries and speak directly to us... They do so, it is said, by virtue of their access to a sphere that manages somehow to float freely above and beyond the material dimensions of time and place, whilst remaining to a greater or lesser degree untouched by them (2002: p. 141).

Correspondingly, the surge of interest in books about totalitarianism around the inauguration of President Donald Trump suggests that literary texts should not remain trapped in the conditions that dominate over them since their birth, or that their meanings be limited or determined ultimately by their relation to other texts of the same moment. In fact, literary texts with their extreme versatility have proven to be pertinent to situations that come after them. Alfred North Whitehead suggests that "time is a continuous stream of occurrences" (1920: p. 172), and similarly, literature (inherently), debunks the myth that time adheres to the virtues of chronology and progression. Therefore, conversations about temporality cannot be isolated from literary dialogue, whether it be new historicism, new materialism, or presentism.

While presentism has only recently been established as a literary approach, it has long been employed as a way of interpreting literature<sup>2</sup> before it was welcomed into the field of

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<sup>2</sup> It also has a longer and more obvious history in scholarship on Holy Scriptures.

hermeneutics. Although some of its ancestors, like Jan Kott, predate new historicism, presentism began as a “reaction” to new historicism which in turn was a “reaction” to “text-centred schools of criticism such as New Criticism”<sup>3</sup> and many of the formalist approaches of the twentieth century. As Parvini puts it, “the immediate climate in which new historicists found themselves was dominated by formalism, be it the New Critics, the structuralists or the emerging deconstructionists. So much of the early theoretical talk from Stephen Greenblatt and the others focuses on their departure from formalism” (2012: p. 82). Thus, like presentism, “new historicism has built into it the very concept of reacting to something else” (2012: p. 82). New historicism which was founded by Stephen Greenblatt in the 1980’s deals extensively with the relationship between texts and their sociohistorical contexts. The approach is based on the assumption that a literary text is a product of the place, time and the circumstances of its composition. Consequently, new historicism stresses the importance of contextualisation and intertextualisation, as it revisits the past in order to re-examine the social, historical and cultural factors that influenced the reading and writing of literary works. One of the main differences between new historicism and earlier forms of historicism is that “new historicism views the text as a participant in a historical or political process that it ‘reconceives’. In the words of new historicist, Louis Montrose, this approach is interested in ‘the historicity of the text and the textuality of history’” (Quinn 1999: p. 217). The text was no longer autonomous and became intertwined with the society that it mirrors. This differs from presentism which despite viewing society as a crucial part of the interpretive process, gives precedence to the society of the reader. Today, when reading works by George Orwell and Hannah Arendt, or watching contemporary productions of Bertolt Brecht’s plays an individual is bound to be influenced by their society. Would Stephen Greenblatt’s perspective indicate that someone with little familiarity with Orwell, Brecht or Arendt, or was not well versed in the history of totalitarianism could not appreciate and enjoy their respective works? On the contrary, the

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<sup>3</sup> Poetry Foundation. (2019). New Historicism. Retrieved from <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/new-historicism>

unexpected upsurge in the sales of three books in the wake of Donald Trump's presidency demonstrate otherwise.

Nonetheless, new historicism has proved to have great hermeneutical value as its extensive research on the past has allowed for fruitful interpretations of texts in relation to non-literary texts and historical documents of the period. According to David Schalkwyk, new historicism's:

historicist demands mean that literary analysis must be based on the archive; and its "new" method, arising from analogical rather than causal reasoning, provides it with the capacity to produce an inexhaustible variety of apprentice projects that fulfil the professional requirements of scholarship, interpretation, and the demand for the new (2005: p. 2).

It is important to note, however, that the very factors which make the approach institutionally striking have generated repetitiveness and predictability of outcome. "It has also tended to marginalise the margin even further, as critics who do not have easy access to archival material have found it difficult to answer to its demands of history and context" (Schalkwyk 2005: p. 2). On the other hand, new historicism is noteworthy because it inspired Shakespeare scholars like Hugh Grady, Terence Hawkes, and Evelyn Gajowski to bring to light and discuss an alternative view that does not generate repetitiveness or predictability of outcome, and that is presentism.

Before engaging with previous research on presentism in literature, it is important to clarify that the majority of work conducted under this approach has been done in Shakespeare and Neo-Victorian studies. Throughout the chapters I will explore why this is significant and why it has largely been ignored in other fields of literature. Half a century before post-modern critics like Terence Hawkes and Hugh Grady popularised presentism as a hermeneutical approach, certain elements of presentism had already existed. For instance, Jan Kott, a Polish

intellectual, in his book *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, looked at the many apparent presentist aspects in Shakespeare's writing, making Kott a modernist precursor of the postmodern approach. In one example Kott analyses a scene from Shakespeare's *Richard III* and suggests that it "should be interpreted through our own experiences...One must see it in the cruel time when all moral standards are broken..." (1966: p. 44). Kott demonstrates that a text cannot be separated from the reader/critic's worldview as for him Shakespeare is reconstructed and redefined by every new era: "a Shakespeare that can be made to speak in many times transcends all time" (p.45). This emphasises the crucial relationship between text, reader and audience in the interpretation process. Additionally, the response to a literary text varies between different epochs as readers and writers are affected by continuous changes in economic, political, geographical and social events. This is one of the central tenets that presentism advocates.

It is also important to clarify that many theoretical debates on presentism have been vexingly restricted to discussions about historical fallacy, largely as a result of one of presentism's firm detractors, Herbert Butterfield. In his 1931 book: "Whig interpretation of history" Butterfield conveys that he sought out to "evoke a certain sensibility towards the past, the sensibility which studies the past 'for the sake of the past'" without being hindered or distracted by present concerns (Ashplant & Wilson 1988: p. 10). In other words, "over the past few decades, the historiographical discussion of the role that presentism plays has gradually become dominated by anti-presentist methodologies" (Spoerhase 2008: p. 49). This negative press surrounding presentism is not only misguided but also simplistic because there is an unarguable distinction between the unthinking and mindless presentism which historicists vehemently criticise, and the critical presentism employed in this thesis. The latter has an overarching political purpose. For instance, an example of mindless presentism in Shakespeare's plays can be exhibited through modernising a character's garb, changing their dialect or even "modern(ising) the spelling, which seems like a Presentist activity" (Egan 2013: p. 41). However, an example of critical presentism would be "to provide new critical insights to specific realist works... [and

also] to develop fresh interpretative and political leverage over present-day” issues and topics (Barrish 2002).

Hugh Grady, a firm proponent of presentism has stated that presentism is not a single method approach but is as broad as the various approaches that are operating in conjunction with it. Grady states:

We [Grady and Hawkes] agreed from the beginning that presentism ought to be presented as a ‘big tent’, incorporating many different specific critical methods and tactics. We thus tried to avoid too close a description of method or a call to narrowly follow either of our specific approaches (2014: p. 12).

The idea of many presentisms correlates with the idea that there is not only one Shakespeare to interpret but rather Shakespeare is recreated and redefined by every new period. According to Grady there is no “authentic Shakespeare” (1991: p. 3) as the original Shakespeare is long gone, and readers and critics since then will not be able to understand *that* Shakespeare.

In traditional forms of historicism facts are deemed to be the principle talisman capable of warding off the fallacy of presentism. Yet, Hawkes proposes that to limit history “to a series of isolateable, untheorized ‘facts’, or neutrally analysable ‘texts’, is in any case unproductive” (2002: p. 3) as facts or texts cannot speak for themselves. This does not mean that texts or facts do not exist, but rather, they are devoid of any apparent status and meaning until they are placed in a particular discourse that fulfils a certain agenda by imposing their own framing requirements. This is why reading Shakespeare historically (while important in certain respects), cannot be the only way of reading Shakespeare as “We choose the facts. We choose the texts. We do the inserting. We do the perceiving. Facts and texts, that is to say, don’t simply speak, don’t merely mean. *We speak, we mean, by them*” (p. 3). This further reiterates that presentism is not only important, but it is inevitable as we cannot step beyond



our time and it cannot be drained from our experience. In a sense, then, a critically informed, self-aware presentism has the virtue of honesty.

Terence Hawkes, whose rendition of presentism looks at the ways in which works of the past have an active influence on the events of the present, best relates to my study of presentism. Hawkes argues that past works could even have the potential to alter the present moment and the reception of them. Brecht's *Arturo Ui* is a stellar example of how we experience a literary work in the present as Kate Flaherty points out: "a performance is not a self-contained entity ...it is permeable to its contexts, and...the meanings it creates are generated through encounters with living culture" (2011: p. 8). This is evident from Akoja theatre's transcultural adaptation of *Arturo Ui* which uses Brecht's political philosophy to advise its audience on how to resist dictatorship by challenging "dominant discourses on the rise of dictatorship and capitalism in Pakistan" (Kayani & Termizi 2017: p. 16). This relates to 2017 adaptations of *Arturo Ui* which through their portrayal of a fascist demagogue, can be applied to the cultural landscape of contemporary American politics. Terry Teachout makes the relevance of *Arturo Ui* to the present moment patently clear: "You needn't believe in historical inevitability to have predicted that the election of Donald Trump would lead in short order to a New York revival of 'The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui'" (2018).

And while presentism through theatre, conveys the political value of older literary works back to the present moment, Adrian Streete urges us that "Presentism seems to have an over inflated sense of the political efficacy of the critic. A play may well be a particularly effective vehicle for realising social change but with the best will in the world, the pages of Shakespeare Quarterly are not" (2008: p. 406). Though we should be careful of exaggerating the social impact of literary criticism, nevertheless, presentism does give critics a certain authority that comes from the advantage of hindsight. This means the critic can uncover truths and argue, without vanity, the larger significance and implications of historical works, which are clearer to the critic than the author themselves. Also, as drama is a necessarily public form of literature,

for the sake of balance, this thesis will be engaging with a novel and a philosophical essay too. This in turn will show that presentism is a viable approach to literature as it also takes into consideration non-fictional texts.

David Sweeney Coombs and Danielle Coriale ask, “what if by insisting on the recognition of the past’s difference from the present, we’ve made it more difficult to conceptualize why studying the past matters for the present?” (2016: p. 87). But does presentism actually insist on the recognition of the past’s difference to the present? On the contrary, presentism advocates that we identify and produce connections between the past and the present moment because we are frequently and unconsciously presentist. Namely, it contends that meaning can only be created at the point of consumption in the present. It is through understanding and conceptualising these continuities that we will be able to identify and expose social prejudices, injustices, taboos, and other conventions. Perhaps it might even help us ensure that history does not repeat itself or at the very least, patterns of injustice do not take on new forms. The irony of presentism is that the three texts became remarkably popular amidst the rise of a new demagogue showing us that we do not learn anything from history as it keeps repeating itself.

Like Shakespeare scholars, neo-Victorian critics, too, are interested in investigating the relationship between the past and the present. However, there is a slight difference as neo-Victorianism also embraces texts and films set in the Victorian era, but written in the present day, so they can reflect critically on how the present sees the Victorians. Nonetheless, neo-Victorian works are also “inherently presentist” as they are fixed “in the contemporary contexts of their production as they recreate the past with historical hindsight” (Kohlke 2018: p. 1). As presentism has become a crucial aspect of the “neo-Victorian project” due to “its exploration of the dialectical relationship of past and present between the shifting poles of nostalgia and

rejection, historical influence and resistance, continuities and difference, cultural legacies and change” (Kohlke 2018: p. 2), it has provoked significant controversy amongst defenders of traditional historicism. This group of critics argue that instead of appreciating historical texts, objects or situations as autonomous, presentists tend to overlook this historical uniqueness and privilege readings that rationalise their own contemporary beliefs (Kohlke 2018). However, this is not accurate as Christine L. Krueger states: “no matter how vociferously we protest our postmodern condition, we are in many respects post-Victorians, with a complex relationship to the ethics, politics, psychology, and art of our [...] Victorian precursors” (2002: p. xi). Equally, Heilman and Llewellyn notice how “...‘the Victorian’ has become a homogenised identity – even a signifier – in contemporary culture” (2010: p. 3). This justifies the drawing of analogies between nineteenth century and now and equally, invalidates the prevailing argument that presentism is an analytical blind spot or a historical fallacy.

While Shakespeare and Neo-Victorian studies have dealt with the issues and the discernment of presentism’s many operations, scholars of other literary periods have avoided the approach altogether. One of the reasons for this is the term carries pejorative undertones as many believe that the past should not be studied to advance any agendas, but rather for its own sake. As Alexandra Walsham points out “At root it is a term of abuse, a slur conventionally deployed to describe an interpretation of history that is biased towards and coloured by present-day concerns, preoccupations and values” (2017: p. 213). This view does not take into consideration that the historian’s strive for objectivity is at best a self-delusion. As Jenkins remarks:

Even the most perfunctory understanding of conventional historical method, properly analysed in a postmodern way, will show that the historian, no matter how well trained he might be, can never really know the past, as the gap between the past and history is an ontological one, one that in the very nature of things cannot be bridged (1991).

Thus, presentism proposes an alternate and more honest approach which states that since we cannot escape our present, there is no harm in admitting that any study of the past will inadvertently be coloured by a reader/critic's issues and dispositions. Furthermore, Gabriel Egan uses the analogy of Shakespeare to foreground the importance of the approach, he states: "To treat past meanings as utterly isolated in their own time mistakes the nature of human communication, since if the chasm were unbridgeable then we could make no sense at all of Shakespeare's works" (2013: p. 40). Egan also points out that presentism's motivation and desire to re-read older literature is one of its many strengths as it allows modern readers "to discover resonances that it could not have had for its first audiences or readers, because these only became possible as a consequence of what happened between then and now" (2013: p. 39).

At the most rudimentary level, any engagement with antecedent literary works foregrounds (the issue of) temporal distance. For instance, "the greater temporal gap between Renaissance/Tudor and postmodern societies accentuates the difficulty of interpreting antecedent cultural products solely within the historical contexts of their original conception, production and reception" (Kohlke 2018: p. 4-5). My study, however, does not pose these same restrictions as my texts are no more than seventy years old. The analogies drawn between the events of Orwell, Brecht and Arendt's lifetimes and the present day are more defensible as there is no "risk of reductive conflation of historically distinct, complex cultures into trans-historical sameness" or historical injustice (Kohlke 2018: p. 4). The presentism that I am employing in my study is not 'unknowing' or 'unaware' but rather it is 'critical' and as Barrish (2005) states: "[critical presentism] seeks new ways of reading specific literature of the past... not only in but with the social present—and of doing so self-consciously and also productively" (p. 19). Similarly, my goal is to pronounce the active influence of past literary texts in today's social and political climate.

Overall, the purpose of this study is to bring back the value of presentism in literature by re-examining the turbulent and antagonistic relationship between history and the present moment. While presentism has broadly been seen by historicists as a pejorative for the flawed understanding of the past in terms of the present, this thesis will aim to counter this view and show that it is indeed a positive form of political literary/cultural scholarship rather than a negative form of historical inquiry. The real tension between presentism and historicism lies not in the historicist's battle for objectivity by destroying the frame of the present, but rather in the historicist's yearning to understand the world and the presentist's motivation to change it. "There are different goals: the historicist wants knowledge, the presentist justice. The historicist wants to be a scientist, the presentist a politician" (Wilson 2019). Thus, any discourse that pits history against presentism in order to further a strictly "historicist" agenda, muddies the goals of each approach respectively as they are not at odds with each other. No good historicist should be repelled by the idea of relevance and no presentist should consider historical contextualisation an irrelevance. To make presentism critical means asking how the approach helps us shape continuities between the past and present and appreciate that the past is still "at work in the exigencies of the present" (Coombs & Coriale 2016). How else to explain the sudden fluctuation in sales of three books from the twentieth century, at a time of grave political upheaval. George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and Bertolt Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* all of which explain the conditions that give rise to political autocracy and fascist demagogues, form the basis of a critical stance whose engagement with sensitive issues will not help the reader/critic 'speak with the dead', as new historicism's great advocate Stephen Greenblatt urged, but rather it will aim, ultimately, to talk to the living and hopefully transform our future.

## **Chapter 1: *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Presentism**

The resurgence of George Orwell's dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has newfound and dire political implications in the Trump era, where a discourse of totalitarianism and mass government surveillance has shifted the discourse of an authoritarian past from the borders to the centre of American politics. Amongst the many factors contributing to the recent public appetite for the dystopic classic, political uncertainty seems to be at the top. The novel was not merely bought once or twice after Donald Trump's inauguration, but rather sales of the book soared making it number 1 on Amazon's best seller list in the week after Trump's inauguration. According to Nielsen Bookscan, Orwell's book "sold 47,000 copies in print since Election Day in November" (England 2017). The sudden popularity of the novel for John Seaton is quite painful, as he states:

What you had previously thought you read at a cool, intellectual distance (a great book about "over there", somewhere in the past or future) now feels intimate, bitter and shocking. Orwell is writing of now when he writes, "Every year fewer and fewer words, and the range of consciousness always a little smaller" (2017).

Correspondingly, Adam Gopnik remarks that "Trump's lies, and his urge to tell them, are pure Big Brother crude, however oafish their articulation" (2017). The sudden rise in sales of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a response to Trump's ridiculous attempts to sway "public opinion" by spreading "'alternative facts' throughout the presidential campaign" and "since his election victory in November 2016" (Rodden 2017). This is further demonstrated by John Rodden who remarks:

His tall tales grew, if anything, even more Bunyanesque during his first week in office, including his outlandish claims of mass voter fraud; he contended that he lost the popular vote in the November election because three million votes were cast illegally. Trump maintains that millions of illegal immigrants prevented him

from winning the popular vote, that the science behind climate change is a hoax perpetrated by the Chinese. (2017: p. 217).

“In a review of a new book by Bertrand Russell”, Orwell himself stated that “it is quite possible that we are descending into an age in which two and two will make five when the leader says so”, further suggesting that it is “quite easy to imagine a state in which the ruling caste will deceive their followers without deceiving themselves” (Gleason et al 2005: p. 75). This is clearly in existence today with the tyrannies imposed by Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump on their nations. We are now living in a post-factual world where the widespread dissemination of false information or “fake news” is used to prevent the public asking difficult questions. A time when beliefs hold more weight than the actual truth. This was made succinctly clear when Kellyanne Conway, one of president Trump’s advisors, used the Orwellian phrase “alternative facts” when being questioned about the press secretary’s false statement about the attendance figures at Trump’s inauguration. This may well have triggered the ensuing spike in sales of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Although Orwell never witnessed the policies of the twenty-first century or the rise of the internet in his lifetime, his message has been considered prophetic by many who have drawn parallels between the dystopian society of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and our own. As Gleason notes: “Orwell’s metaphors have been expanded beyond his initial portrayal of a Stalinist nightmare-state to include all worrisome accumulations of influence, authority or unreciprocal transparency” (2005: p. 225). First published in 1949 and imagining a future society governed by totalitarianism, Orwell’s dystopian classic tells of horrors that have proven to be not entirely fictional. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell imagined a bleak and demoralising world in which authoritarianism reigned, individualism was dead, and history and reality were alterable. Today, digital technology, rather than Orwell’s analogue telescreens, enable both government and corporate surveillance “exceeding in reach and complexity even the totalitarian state imagined in Orwell’s dystopian account” (Giroux 2015: p. 108). So, what does this mean for

our world? Is Donald Trump Big Brother, simultaneously omnipresent and finite? Are our only options submitting to the security of unthinking orthodoxy or risking re-education through torture? This chapter will try to answer these questions by using presentism to understand why Orwell resonates when new patterns of authoritarianism emerge. Additionally, this chapter will argue that contemporary manifestations of autocracies no longer require graphic displays of power. Instead, the administration of surveillance and suppression by oppressive systems, dissolves the once cherished notions of agency into blatant expressions of narcissism, making people contented with their servitude.

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* has managed to escape the binding chains of context and return to the inescapable present of its readers and critics. This is primarily due to the fact that the novel's chief message sparks debate on universal issues of modern humankind such as liberty, individualism, agency and power. As Christopher Hitchens points out, "By living and writing as he [Orwell] did, he discredited the excuse of 'historical context' and the shady alibi that there was, in the circumstances, nothing else that people could have done" (2002: p. 13). This suggests that literary texts, with all their autonomy, should not be considered historical artefacts, but rather applauded for the meanings they bring to life through the hermeneutic encounter. The resonance of Orwell's words in today's society can also be depicted by the surge of popularity they have gained amongst a new post-Cold War generation. For instance, Iraqi writer Hassan Abdulrazzak commented in 2014: "I'm sure George Orwell didn't think: 'I must write an instructive tale for a boy from Iraq,' when he wrote 1984...But that book explained Iraq under Saddam for me better than anything else before or since." (Ricks 2017: p. 80). Equally, in the same year, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* became an extremely popular symbol of protest in Thailand amongst anti-government protestors. Even passengers with Philippine airlines were advised in an in-flight magazine not to carry a copy of Orwell's novel lest they be mistaken for protestors. Some of the tips read: "'carry your passport (or a copy) with you at all times", "avoid wearing red t-shirts, which are association with a group opposed to the military



government”, and “don’t carry George Orwell’s dystopian novel ‘1984’. You don’t want to be mistaken for an anti-coup protestor.”” (Smith 2014). These examples affirm Orwell’s totemic status. *Why Orwell Matters*, a 2002 book written by Christopher Hitchens, questions why a writer from over 60 years ago is still one of the most controversial and endorsed figures of our time. The answer to why Orwell matters today is a simple one; Orwell matters because his work is not merely a cultural symptom of the twentieth century, nor is it confined to the historical circumstances in which it was first produced. Instead, it is fluid and transcends the trivialities of context in order to “question the progress narratives that drive conventional political histories” (Felski 2011: p. 575).

Equally, much of Orwell’s literary fame is accredited to his political satire *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which also gave rise to the ubiquitous adjective ‘Orwellian’. On this matter, John Rodden remarks: “so there is Orwell and “Orwell,” with the latter representing the towering totem invoked by ideologically motivated (or ill-informed and careless) observers to bolster whatever arguments they seek to advance” (2017: p. 217). The term today has become synonymous with any idea, situation or societal condition that denotes authoritarianism, more specifically describing the manipulative and deceptive use of language. Additionally, the term has now become tantamount to surveillance (as in the use of ‘Big Brother’ as a title for a reality TV show). The term Orwellian will be applied throughout this chapter to demonstrate how the line between different types of surveillance (corporate/state) has indefinitely become blurred in the twenty-first century. Indeed, it is difficult to study any contemporary political discourse without encountering this term. This all ties back to why Orwell’s work remains fervently read in today’s popular culture: relevance. *Nineteen-Eighty-Four’s* relevance lies not only in the fact that it is a political satire that closely mimics today’s political uncertainty, but also because it teaches us how individualism is a revolutionary force against totalising schemes of governance. In other words, individuals, are less likely to have perverse thoughts when they are immersed in their community, as opposed to when they are in solitude (Fludernik 2017). The idea of

individualism collapsing in the face of totalising forces converges with Jeremy Bentham's proposal of the "panopticon", an institution of control in which inmates were placed under potentially continuous observation by wardens without them knowing so. This works in a manner where occupants are not constantly under watch, but that "the persons to be inspected should always feel themselves as if under inspection" (Bentham 1995: p. 43). The regime in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* employs this method of social control to ensure that party rebellion is kept at bay. Thomas Cushman and John Rodden state that "we are reminded that *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, not only as a literary work but also as a sociological blueprint of totalitarianism, still has much to teach us in interpreting our present experience of modernity" (2015: p. 3). Hence, the discourse of totalitarianism that has been propelled in the age of Trump is a good place to start asking questions about why and how patterns of authoritarianism are still being repeated.

In a fitting irony, Donald Trump's first official day in office was on January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2017, coinciding with the 67<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of George Orwell. Regarding the link between the rediscovery of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Donald Trump's presidency, Stefan Kyriazis writes "Donald Trump was predicted in George Orwell's 1984 and sales of the book rocket over comparisons with doublespeak, crimestop, alternative facts and reality control" (2017). Orwell not only predicted the ascent of autocratic leaders but also predicted the rise of government surveillance as evident in his dystopian society where "citizens live in an atmosphere of mistrust and extreme surveillance" (Tyner 2004: p.133). An example of this is the Thought Police's constant watch over its citizens as they possess the power to "plug in your wire whenever they wanted to" and "watch everybody all the time" (Orwell 2000: p. 6). This method is employed to ensure total social control, not just of behaviour but even thought. In the same way, Trump's America is also guilty of spying on its citizens as Michelle Alexander (2013) states the need to be "connecting the dots between the NSA spying on millions of Americans...and the spy programs of the 1960s and 1970s". A more profound link between

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Trump is established by Emma King who used Donald Trump's tweets to rewrite the first chapter of George Orwell's dystopian novel. King states that this project "creates a juxtaposition between Donald Trump's tweets and the narrative of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to suggest the parallels between the themes of the book and Trump's rise to power" (2017).<sup>4</sup> This mirrors Harold Bloom's opinion, who despite speculating "in 1987 that Orwell's novel threatened" to turn into a "period piece", later acknowledged the timelessness of his work by stating that "we are driven back to what makes 1984 a good bad book: relevance" (1988: p. 4).

Contrary to this, some critics have taken the bold and unartistic message of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to mean that Orwell's work has an expiration date. For instance, Richard Rorty believes that Orwell's novel is "a good example of what Nabokov thought of as 'topical trash'" and that it "will be widely read only as long as we describe the politics of the twentieth century as Orwell did" (1989: p. 169). Rorty finds further fault with Orwell's description of an objective reality in the novel.<sup>5</sup> He goes on to note that Orwell 's only concern is to "sensitise an audience to cases of cruelty and humiliation which they had not noticed" and that only a "raving metaphysical Realist, ...could find that prospect frightening" (Gleason et al 2005: p. 88-89). Similarly, for Richard Epstein, the relevance of Orwell's novel died with the end of the Cold War, as he states: "1984 will continue to be read, but, over time, read more and more as a period piece" (2005: p. 69). Indeed, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is being read more and more if college rankings and sales on Amazon are any indication. In fact, the book has become so popular in recent

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<sup>4</sup> King, E. 1984 by @realdonaldtrump (2017). Accessed 31 March, 2019, <http://emmaking.net/index.php?/projects/1984-by-realdonaldtrump/>.

<sup>5</sup> Rorty's highly idiosyncratic reading of 1984 has been challenged by James Conant. See his 'Freedom, Cruelty, and Truth: Rorty versus Orwell', in Robert B. Brandom (ed.), *Rorty and his Critics*, Malden MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, pp. 268-343. For an overview of their debate, see Ingeborg Löfgren, "Two Examples of Ordinary Language Criticism: Reading Conant Reading Rorty Reading Orwell – Interpretation at the Intersection of Philosophy and Literature" in *New Directions in Philosophy and Literature*, eds. Ridvan Askin, Frida Beckman, and David Rudrum. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019, pp. 258-278.

years that due to high demand, Penguin, one of the largest publishing companies in the world was unable to print enough copies in the aftermath of Trump's election victory. Rorty's claim that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* fails to describe our current political situation ignores the fact that Orwell was writing to warn against the rise of future despotic governments and in turn to prevent his dystopia from coming true. But did he succeed? The monolithic regime of Big Brother is constituted on a fundamental prohibition: "The Party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears. It was their final, most essential command" (Orwell 2000: p. 91). This has become increasingly prevalent in the twenty-first century, more specifically with the rise of Donald Trump, whose sinister rhetoric is about more than just "discrediting traditional sources of facts and analysis or collapsing the distinction between the truth and lies, it is also about undermining the public's grip on evidence, facts and informed judgement" (Giroux 2017: p. 890). Can Orwell's work still be considered topical trash? Otherwise put, if it remains topical after seventy years in print, is it really 'trash'?

Political life in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* centres around the denial of external reality as the Party has a monopoly on facts and language. "In the end the party would announce that two and two made five, and you would have to believe it" (Orwell 2000: p. 92). This makes Winston's revolutionary politics all the more commendable: "Truisms are true," Winston acknowledges, "hold on to that! Stones are hard, water is wet, objects unsupported fall towards the earth's centre" (p.92). More specifically, Winston says that in the face of social and political oppression, freedom of speech becomes a rising political issue. "Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four. If that is granted, all else follows." (p. 93). In relation to this, James Conant suggests that "The more totalitarian the scenario one inhabits, the greater the number of beliefs one will have that are likely to be both warranted and unacceptable to one's peers" (2000: p.102). Problematically, this has also become a rallying cry for Trump Supporters. In response to Facebook, YouTube, and Spotify taking down controversial web pages that were operated by Alex Jones, a Trump supporter and conspiracy theorist: Trump

took to twitter to rant. He stated in the tweets: “Too many voices are being destroyed, some good & some bad, and that cannot be allowed to happen. Who is making the choices, because I can already tell you that too many mistakes are being made...” (Trump 2018). Equally, on another occasion Trump requested his supporters in Kansas City to disregard the information they receive from the mainstream news, stating: “Just remember, what you’re seeing and what you’re reading is not what’s happening...” (Trump 2018). Problematically, Trump supporters want the freedom to say that two and two make five when it suits them, but also want to use this freedom for hate speech, too. This suggests the importance of presentism at a time when democracy is viewed as an abstract concept, as it asks us to view the past with a critical gaze in order to make a difference to the present (Coombs & Coriale 2016: p. 88). Far from adopting complacency, critical presentism offers us the opportunity to learn from history in order not to repeat it. This will undeniably help us envision better and more prosperous futures to the many totalitarian nightmares that have been rebirthed with the spectre of Trump.

Today, Trump has become notorious for spreading his post-truth, alternative-fact, double-think politics. Trump’s rise to power has brought back into conversation the growing struggle for truth. The creation, subversion and manipulation of truth as seen in mainstream media and news outlets and more recently in the world of social media calls into question how politicians sublimate the truth by the propagation of selective reporting.

Within this media eco-system the line between fact and fiction, truth and lies, good and evil, collapsed, opening the door for an audience that could be both easily misled and was willing to suspend their belief in facts, evidence, and reasoned arguments (Giroux 2018: p. 4).

Phrases like these could well have been lifted from the dust-jacket blurb of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Equally, “Trump and his campaign’s seemingly calculated, intractable and surprisingly effective use of blatant non-truths” (Chin & Kaye 2017) function as tools to mobilise his

supporters. For instance, “catering to the notion that whites are under siege, Trump employs a rude, bullying, humiliating, and hate-filled discourse to breathe new life into the forces of white supremacy, hyper-masculinity, and a bellicose nationalism” (p. 3). This bears a striking similarity to the daily, public “Two Minutes Hate” expressed in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, in which members of the Outer Party of Oceania proclaim their deep disgust and hatred for the enemies of the state after watching a film about them. In one instance, “people were leaping up and down in their places and shouting at the tops of their voices in an effort to drown the maddening bleating voice that came from the screen” (Orwell 2000: p. 17). Donald Trump mentioned Hillary Clinton’s name at a re-election campaign in Cincinnati: “Do you remember when Hillary used the word ‘deplorable’?... Deplorable was not a good day for Hillary. Crooked Hillary. She is a crooked one,” he said (Frazin 2019). Following this, Trump supporters were quick to chant ‘Lock her up!’ imitating the “Two Minutes Hate” frenzy. The chaotic spectacle illustrated by Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has hauntingly come to pass under the Trump administration, at a time when “66 percent of Republicans are blindly loyal to Trump and utterly supportive of his view of the world as a combat zone that should be viewed with deep hostility” (Giroux 2019: p. 715). Emboldening violence throughout the States, Trump’s divisive rhetoric has motivated a number of hate crimes in the US, where “victims have described being targeted by perpetrators who explicitly reference Trump during the attack” (Rushin 2018). For example, an incident occurred in Boston where two men, on returning home from a Red Sox game approached a sleeping, homeless Mexican immigrant at the train station. “They proceeded to beat the man with a metal pipe, urinated on him, and used racial slurs during the attack. When police apprehended the men shortly thereafter, one of them told the arresting officer ‘Donald Trump was right. All these illegals need to be deported’” (Clauss 2016).

Unsettlingly, the current state of democracy hangs in the balance with Trump’s ongoing efforts to make America great (and white) again. Trump’s hate speech which “has targeted Muslims, any unauthorized immigrants and other people of color has been followed by a surge of white

supremacy, anti-Semitism and increasing acts of violence against individuals and groups considered other in the United States” (2017: p. 891). In regard to this, Chauncey DeVega notes:

Since the election of Donald Trump in November, there have been almost 1,000 reported hate crimes targeting Muslims, Arabs, African-Americans, Latinos and other people of color. At this same moment, there have been terrorist threats against Jewish synagogues and community centers as well as the vandalizing of Jewish cemeteries. These hate crimes have also resulted in physical harm and even death (2017).

More recently, on 15<sup>th</sup> March 2019, insidious terror attacks took place during the Friday prayers in two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. The perpetrator who callously “murdered 50 people and injured 50 more” stated that Donald Trump was his cultural hero. “Trump is a symbol of renewed white identity and common purpose”, wrote the terrorist in his manifesto (Apen-Sadler 2019). The terrorist had also live-streamed the first attack at Al Noor Mosque on Facebook Live. In response to the Christchurch shooting, Trump downplayed the threat that white supremacist violence poses in the United States and around the world, stating that “I think it’s a small group of people that have very, very serious problems” (2019). In actuality, “white supremacist propaganda efforts nearly tripled last year from 2017” and in the United States alone, white supremacist violence “rose 182 percent to 1,187 cases. That’s up from the 421 reported in 2017” (Woodward 2019). Not only this, but anyone who publicly “questions authority or engages in undesired political speech is a potential terrorist threat, this government- corporate partnership makes a mockery of civil liberties” (Boghossian 2013: p. 23). This parallels with the ideology of the despotic government in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, in which the population is controlled by “fear, rage, triumph and self-abasement” (p. 306). They also envision a world where “Always, at every moment, there will be the thrill of victory, the sensation of trampling on an enemy who is helpless. If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face – for ever” (p. 307). This vision of the future is not far off

with the current state of democracy. In fact, “the future looks bleak, especially for youth as they are burdened with debt, dead-end jobs, unemployment, and, if you are black and poor, the increasing possibility of either being incarcerated or shot by the police” (Giroux 2017: p. 4).

Moreover, the focus of Orwell’s political thought in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* centres around the threats of absolute political power on keeping the liberal tradition alive. Instead of simply documenting instances where the state has abused its power to control the masses, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* demonstrates how the increasing support of an anti-democratic public foundation (that is circulated by means of fearmongering and consumption) is what keeps tyrannical institutions in power. This is clearly exhibited under Trump’s administration in which racism and white supremacy have come to be “major ideological force[s] for establishing terror as a powerful weapon of governance” (Giroux 2017: p. 892). In Orwell’s novel, the last vestige of the liberal tradition is Winston Smith, an average 39 years old records editor, who rebels against the government policies of Ingsoc and the ever-watchful Big Brother. Through the character of Winston, Orwell shows us that the total power of an oppressive institution *can* be threatened by a single dissident who is able to mock its duplicity and challenge its beliefs by acknowledging that there are viable choices and possibilities outside the oppressive system. But is Orwell suggesting that one man’s courage and rebellion is enough to prevent the rise of a tyrannical organisation? In the penultimate chapter of the novel, O’Brien says to Winston: “If you are a man, Winston, you are the last man. Your kind is extinct...Do you understand that you are *alone*? You are outside history, you are non-existent” (Orwell 2000: p. 309). In this instance O’Brien is clearly highlighting the futility of Winston’s rebellion against the party encouraging him to give up his pursuit of autonomy and freedom and embrace the spectacle of Big Brother and the values of Ingsoc. But how do we apply the lessons from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to our current political climate that has systems similar to those that were operating in Oceania?



To begin with, it is important to discern that while the most overt form of surveillance in the novel are those everpresent telescreens, permanently intruding into the once private life of an individual:

Always the eyes watching you and the voice enveloping you. Asleep or awake, working or eating, indoors or out of doors, in the bath or in bed – no escape. Nothing was your own except the few cubic centimetres inside your skull. (Orwell 2000: p. 31-32).

The modern example is a little more subtle. The current state of corporate espionage and government criminality have become blurred to such an extent that it has become impossible to address state violations of privacy without connecting them to the broader corporate apparatuses that make such abuses of power possible. As Giroux clearly points out:

The state and corporate cultural apparatuses now collude to socialise everyone into a surveillance regime, even as personal information is willingly given over to social media and other corporate-based sites as people move across multiple screens and digital apparatuses. It is no longer possible to address the violations committed by the surveillance state without also analysing this broader regime of security and modification (2015: p. 108).

For instance, the 2018 Cambridge Analytica scandal took the civilian fear of corporate/state surveillance to new and distasteful lengths. Cambridge Analytica an English political consulting firm, (which had invested at least 15 million dollars in Donald Trump's presidential campaign) had improperly harvested data "from the Facebook profiles of more than 50 million users without their consent, the figure which later went up to 87 million" (Solon 2018). This was carried out through apparently innocuous personality quizzes. This became increasingly problematic when experts showed their concerns that this data was being used to gain an unfair advantage in targeting voters. And while it is true that Facebook was "being investigated

by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) for violating a 2011 consent decree... the processes exposed by the...Cambridge Analytica controversy reflect a severe challenge to US privacy law, which is sorely deficient” (Isaak 2018). Ironically, following the news, the President of the European Parliament took to twitter to address the scandal: “Allegations of misuse of Facebook user data is an unacceptable violation of our citizens’ privacy rights. The European Parliament will investigate fully, calling digital platforms to account” (2018). This scandal makes it clear that the line between state and corporate surveillance is blurred in the twenty-first century. Similarly, it shows how surveillance has become a defining presence in modern culture whereby Big Brother is no longer just a figure of totalitarianism but has become emblematic of a tyrannical and ongoing surveillance.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, the revelations of state criminality and corporate spying by whistle-blowers like Edward Snowden, Chelsea Manning and Jeremy Hammond, provide new meaning to Orwell’s prophecy. Ariel Dorfman suggests that: “Surveillance, in any land where it is ubiquitous and inescapable, generates distrust and divisions among its citizens, curbs their readiness to speak freely to each other, and diminishes their willingness to even dare to think freely” (2014). The authoritarian nature of modern surveillance technology is underestimated in today’s age where individual privacy is voluntarily sold to keep up with a celebrity and market-driven consumerist culture. In the same manner, state surveillance has also become an integrating feature of society with intelligence organisations like NSA, CIA, FBI, DIA and NRO possessing the means to monitor criminals, enemies of the state and political activists whenever they choose to. In some cases, corporate and state surveillance work hand in hand to spy on huge masses of people.<sup>7</sup> For instance, “the CIA is investing in several tech companies that focus on social media data mining and surveillance. The companies, which provide unique tools to

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<sup>6</sup> For a view that says digital surveillance is worse than telescreens see Lessig, L. (2005). On the Internet and the Benign Invasions of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In A. Gleason, J. Goldsmith, & M. C. Nussbaum (Eds.) *On Nineteen Eighty-Four : Orwell and Our Future*. (pp. 212-222) . New Jersey : Princeton University Press.

<sup>7</sup> Many of these abuses happened under Obama but have been carried on under the Trump administration.

mine data on Instagram and Twitter, are receiving funds through the CIAs venture capital firm, In-Q-Tel, according to a document obtained by The Intercept” (N/A 2016).

The purpose of surveillance is not only to collect data but also to use this data to exert social control. The rise of consumer culture and computing have in the twentieth century brought about some qualitative changes of surveillance so that it has become more networked, ubiquitous, focused on everyday life and consumption and organised in real time (Fuchs et al 2017: p. 412).

This shows that the prevalence of surveillance in everyday life has made citizens negligent over their privacy, and although it is not everywhere yet, its presence has become a normalised feature of modern life. In June 2013, Edward Snowden a former CIA contractor, with the help of *The Guardian*, revealed information about how the “American National Security Agency (NSA) and the British Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) were conducting widespread secret surveillance of the public” (Branum 2014: p. 200). Snowden, who was responsible for one of the biggest breaches of classified documents, received a warm embrace from mainstream media for revealing that these organisations were operating “large-scale internet and communications surveillance systems such as Prism, XKeyscore and Tempora” (Fuchs et al 2017).

According to the leaked documents, the National Security Agency (NSA) in the PRISM programme obtained direct access to user data from seven online/ICT companies: AOL, Apple, Facebook, Google, Microsoft, Paltalk, Skype, Yahoo! (The Guardian, 2013a)...Snowden also revealed the existence of a surveillance system called XKeyScore that the NSA can use for reading e-mails, tracking Web browsing and users’ browsing histories, monitoring social media activity, online searches, online chat, phone calls and online contact networks and following the screens of individual computers (Fuchs et al 2017: p. 142).

This incident received high media coverage whilst also having a substantial political impact. This was carried out by opening discussions about public awareness of surveillance, and “exposing a conflict between the rights of citizens to privacy and the security threat posed by the release of classified documents” (Branum 2000: p. 200). Orwell had already opened this debate in the latter half of the twentieth century by demonstrating the harms of unchecked government power on law abiding citizens. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* remains a stellar example of how a society which does not value privacy as a civil quality and fundamental right, cannot be considered a successful and healthy democracy. The extreme transgressions of individual privacy in the novel signal something more menacing than the loss of civil rights. “For Orwell, the loss of privacy represented a moral and political offence that clearly signalled the nature, power and severity of an emerging totalitarian state” (Giroux 2015: p. 109).

Ironically, the age of thriving technological progress has commodified privacy for the most nefarious purposes. As Giroux points out:

...mobile devices and applications now track people’s locations, while Internet providers use social messaging to pry personal information from their users... and physical surveillance of individuals’ movement is constant, evident in the ubiquitous presence of video cameras...from streets, commercial establishments and workplaces to the schools (2015: p. 110).

Today, in America, “the security regime works against a growing number of individuals and groups, ranging from immigrants and low-income minorities to the chronically unemployed who are considered disposable” (Giroux 2015: p. 116). Now that we are living in a corporate surveillance state that abuses its power to control the masses, whistle-blowers like Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden bring vitalised urgency to the issues of government spying by displaying the same revolutionary politics as Winston Smith. This shows the pertinence of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* today as Orwell’s book remains “a description of the epistemology that

underlies successful resistance to the kinds of “totalitarian scenarios” that proliferated, as facts and as threats, in the political life of the past century” (Clune 2009: p. 31).

In the year 1984, Apple launched the Apple Macintosh computer, Docutel/Olivetti introduced Olivetti PC, and “Hewlett-Packard and its new LaserJet printer set record sales and profits for Silicon Valley companies” (House 2012: p. 32). These new inventions were intended to ease and improve the quality of life, as Spurgeon, when referring to the Apple Macintosh comments: “this execution famously anticipated the demolition by digital media...and the associated social relations of Orwellian thought control” (2009: p. 149). But did it really? It’s more apt to say what was once considered a “realistic novel” began to turn into a real-life documentary ironically around its namesake year, 1984. In the novel, it can be seen that Orwell “selects the elements in his own world that seem to pose the greatest threat to liberty and dignity and then extrapolates these factors into a future where they are completely triumphant” (Beauchamp 1984: p. 4). For instance, in the novel Winston describes a “voice [that] came from an oblong metal plaque like a dulled mirror”, which sounds like a description of Siri on an I-phone (Orwell 2000: p. 4). Aptly, in the year 1984 the world’s first commercially mass-produced mobile phone was launched by Nokia which weighed 5kg and required a car to charge it. Orwell contemplated the dangerous consequences of totalitarianism in his own time. In one instance he stated:

Totalitarianism has abolished freedom of thought to an extent unheard of in any previous age. And it is important to realise that its control of thought is not only negative, but positive. It not only forbids you to express – even to think – certain thoughts, but it dictates what you shall think, it creates an ideology for you, it tries to govern your emotional life as well as setting up a code of conduct (Orwell & Angus 2000: p. 135).

According to Orwell, not only would tyrannical systems of government allow totalitarianisms to thrive unchecked in future societies, technology would also be a driving force. “For Orwell... the electronic media are ugly, oppressive, mind-numbing—the enemies of quiet and the wreck of civilisation” (Huber 1994: p. 35). Regarding communications technology, Orwell stated in the novel:

The invention of print, however, made it easier to manipulate public opinion, and the film and the radio carried the process further. With the development of television, and the technical advance which made it possible to receive and transmit simultaneously on the same instrument, private life came to an end (2000: p. 235).

Equally, in 1984, the computer market was dominated by IBM, which controlled the vast majority of the industry, and was deemed a very conservative operation. IBM was known colloquially as ‘Big Blue’ which Apple, in the Ridley Scott’s genius Super Bowl advertisement alluded to as ‘Big Brother’. This sprung from the idea that IBM, one of the world's biggest corporations, is a mindless, faceless, totalitarian entity, driven by groupthink. Before showing the preview of the commercial, Steve Jobs said:

It is now 1984. It appears IBM wants it all. Apple is perceived to be the only hope to offer IBM a run for its money. Dealers initially welcoming IBM with open arms now fear an IBM dominated and controlled future. They are increasingly turning back to Apple as the only force that can ensure their future freedom. IBM wants it all and is aiming its guns on its last obstacle to industry control: Apple. Will Big Blue dominate the entire computer industry? The entire information age? Was George Orwell right about 1984? (1984).

In 1993, Apple once again launched a campaign that portrayed Big Blue as Big Brother. This time it was done to “promote Apple’s Macintosh computers in a part of the world where IBM

and IBM-compatible personal computers are dominant" (N/A 1993). This is deeply ironic as Apple, is now dominating the technology market. In 1984, Apple boasted that thanks to them, "1984 won't be like '1984'", when in fact, what they did in 1984 laid the groundwork for today's 1984. With Apple's invention of Siri, a "personal intelligent software assistant that uses a natural language interface to interact with the user and execute their requests" issues of privacy were once again flagged (Park et al 2012: p. 1439). For instance, as stated by Kagan: "If Apple is going to have Siri read voicemail messages, transcribe [and] convert them into text messages, this raises lots of red flags around privacy" (2015). Orwell gives us a similar technology in the novel known as "speakwrite", which is a dictation machine used by Winston to transcribe speech into text. How can we then not give Orwell (a man who had no familial education in science) credit for warning us of the dangers caused by the likes of Siri, Amazon Echo and Ask Google?

Additionally, just like Apple, Facebook, Google and Yahoo are among the companies linked to the secret spying program called PRISM. Eliza Watt states: "The NSA's PRISM enables direct access to the customer data from nine internet firms, including Google, Microsoft and Yahoo" (2017: p. 774). This allows US government officials to excavate private information about individual users directly from their datacentres. "Facebook and Google are at the service of the US security bodies and the US uses the cyberspace to its interests" (2013), stated Mohammad Hassan Asafari, a member of the board of the parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Commission. This is deeply concerning as intelligence organisations now occupy the world of major corporations, thereby making privacy a cherished notion of the past. Henry Giroux remarks that "Formerly defended as a key democratic principle that ensures citizens' autonomy from the state, the right to privacy has now been reduced to the right to participate, anonymously or otherwise, in the seductions of a narcissistic consumer culture" (2015: p. 156). Equally, Roger Essay states that "Instead of technology being a tool in service of humanity, it is humans who are now in service of technology. We have placed social media

on a pedestal, and now worship it blindly, regardless of the damage it is causing our society” (2019). Aside from the growing corruption caused by powerful technologies, used by elite corporations and governments to spy on people, what has become prevalent in a post-Orwellian world is how regimes trivialise the use of surveillance by converting it into a form of cheap entertainment. “This is evident in the pedagogical messages behind reality TV shows such as *Big Brother* or *Undercover Boss*, which turn the event of constant surveillance into a voyeuristic pleasure” (Steuer 2010). These shows which originally began as social experiments made surveillance acceptable and celebrated. The panoptic surveillance carried out in *Big Brother* is similar to that in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where individuals are constantly being monitored. A ubiquitous surveillance. In the novel, Winston states:

There was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment ... You had to live—did live, from habit that became instinct—in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and except in darkness, every movement scrutinized (Orwell 2000: p. 5).

By contrast, twenty-first century digital surveillance “works not to prevent speech or action, as panopticism does, but to detect what people really think or believe by surveilling their speech and action when they are disinhibited in the (illusory) belief that they are in a private setting” (Yeo 2010: p. 54). Winston is a victim of doublethink, as he is cautious of his behaviours when he is in range of a camera or around a telescreen. He disguises his real thoughts by displaying orthodox submission. Yet, when Winston believes that he is away from the ever-watchful eyes of Big Brother, he exposes “the secret recesses of his heart”. In the novel, surreptitious surveillance helped in exposing Winston and Julia’s unorthodoxy. Similarly, TV shows like *Big Brother* would have a higher success rate if they utilised surreptitious surveillance where they did not use cameras. This would produce the most authentic behaviour. Some may even argue that surreptitious surveillance is present today with the government spying on individuals through their mobile phones.



Overall, this chapter explores the radical potentialities of using a presentist lens to understand why texts should not be placed in a historical box. This is because historical context is not a stable ground for deconstructing texts, as texts which are interpreted solely based on historical context lose their autonomy as literary subjects. In my study, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* becomes so much more than a novel about insidious lies and authoritarian projects of domination: the novel places a mirror to our current society and warns what will happen if things don't take a drastic turn. By focusing on the urgency of now and the political, social and geographical ideologies of the present reader, a more productive reading of the text can occur which can at the very least contribute to changing attitudes. Giroux states that in the midst of such political uncertainty and inflammatory rhetoric perpetuated by president Trump, education needs to be the driving force that obliterates racist and white supremacist ideologies. Giroux states the need for

progressives to make education central to politics itself in order to disrupt the force of a predatory public pedagogy and common sense produced in mainstream cultural apparatuses that serve as glue for the rise of right-wing populism (2017: p. 905).

Additionally, the revelations from the Snowden Affair caution us to be more vigilant of surveillance today. Especially, as Snowden himself stated in 2014 that: "Nineteen-Eighty-Four is an important book...Time has shown that the world is much more unpredictable and dangerous than that." Thus, what we can decipher from the disclosed documents from whistle-blowers and the corruption caused by corporate/state espionage is to rethink some of the assumptions of surveillance in the twenty-first century. To be aware of how a corporate-state surveillance poses threats to individual privacy and therefore, possesses a dangerous power that surpasses even what Orwell imagined in the totalitarian state of Oceania. We have moved way beyond telescreens and "quaint" microphones in bushes, what we have today is a

ubiquitous surveillance carried out frequently through notebook webcams, TVs, video cameras and network microphones in mobile phones.

But while Orwell cannot be blamed for not foreseeing the consequences of the so-called information revolution, it is also worth recalling that, like Max Weber or Hannah Arendt, Orwell saw surveillance as in part an outcome of a relentless rationality expressed in bureaucratic procedures (Lyon 2015: p. 140).

If we want to go looking for the reasons why *Nineteen Eighty-Four* became popular in 2016, maybe we should go back to the year 1984.

## **Chapter 2: The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui and Presentism**

Bertolt Brecht is widely recognised as being one of the most influential playwrights of the twentieth century. For Stephen Unwin, Brecht is notable for revolutionizing the art of theatre itself. Unwin has remarked that Brecht developed “into the most influential stage director and theatrical innovator of the twentieth century” (2014: p. 25). Brecht’s 1941 parable play: *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, however, was not at first ranked among the playwright’s most notable works. The play chronicles the rise of mobster Arturo Ui as he takes control of the city’s cauliflower trade. In the play, Brecht retells the story of Hitler’s rise to power in Germany as an allegory, substituting Hitler, and other historical figures and events with settings and characters taken from the underworld in 1930’s Chicago. Hitler becomes Arturo Ui, a ruthless gangster who partners up with a group of businessmen and the Trust to help boost the city’s greengrocers trade. Brecht used an incongruous gangster setting as it would help create some distance from the real historical incidents and make the familiar strange.

*Arturo Ui* was only staged a handful of times during the twentieth century with the 1968 Broadway production (following the Broadway premiere in 1963) being one of the last major productions of the play. On the topic of *Arturo Ui* being performed on Broadway, Westgate

states: “revived in 1968, it lasted two weeks before closing” (2007: p. xii). In 2016, however, the presidency of Donald Trump ignited a newfound appreciation for Brecht’s forgotten masterpiece, “with not just one but three downtown theater companies independently staging productions, all within a few blocks of one another in the East Village” (Kilgannon 2016). Not only this, but the presidency sparked a worldwide interest in Brecht’s satirical play, with productions by Donmar Warehouse in London, The Classic Stage Company in New York and Sydney Theatre Company in Australia, each addressing the threat that the rise of a fascist dictator poses to keeping the democratic tradition alive. Moreover, Lyra Theatre introduced a short trailer for an adaptation of Brecht’s play which juxtaposed Trump’s quotes from his presidency with Arturo Ui quotes. One example is at [0.25] when Ui says: “I speak the way I feel. My unschooled tone of voice, my manly way of calling a spade a spade – these things are held against me” (p. 90). Shortly after at [0.28] Trump announces that “I have no strategy. You want to know what my strategy is? Honesty. I say it like it is.” This provides one of the best examples of why Brecht is relevant now more than ever in the age of Trump. Therefore, it’s apt to say that we owe the rediscovery of Brecht’s play to Trump, as Arturo Ui, a savage manipulator and dictator with fascist tendencies, presents astonishing similarities to President Donald Trump. Prior to the election of Trump as President of the United States “the Greek chorus from both the left and right loudly proclaimed that Donald Trump was a fascist or neo-fascist. Pundits and journalists across the ideological spectrum compared Trump to Hitler and Mussolini or referred to him as an unbridled tyrant” (Giroux 2017: p. 21). And as Hannah Arendt describes them in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, citing Conrad “These men were hollow to the core, reckless without hardihood, greedy without audacity and cruel without courage...” (1967: p. 189).

Brecht titled the play: *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* showing that the rise of a dictator is not inevitable. In fact, the entirety of Trump’s presidential campaign and election victory demonstrates that his victory was unusual and unexpected. This is mainly due to the fact that

being an unhinged former Reality TV star, Trump lacks experience in elected office, has policy positions that diverge from the traditional Republican (e.g. on social security) and espouses discriminatory behaviour and speech so brazenly. “His negative representations of racialized immigrant groups were one of the most controversial aspects of the campaign, leading to frequent accusations of racism” (Subtirelu 2017: p. 323). Also, more recently, four US democratic congresswomen of colour were the subjects of Trump’s racist tweets which admonished them to “go back” to their “crime infested” countries (Trump 2019). Throughout Brecht’s life and work, he had “demanded that all artistic action, especially his own, be useful: not only practical and applicable for the people who make up its public, but also relevant to them in their respective times” (Glahn 2014: p. 7). Consequently, in these new adaptations the message is clear: how can we resist the white supremacist, Islamophobic, bigoted rhetoric of tyrannical leaders like Trump who have taken the reins of power? Brecht’s theatre is politically interventionist in the way that it highlights contradictions in society and finds new ways of synthesising them. Presentism, similarly, posits its audience as the active agents that can change the status quo or at least be aware and resist the tyrannies of a cruel society. This chapter will take a closer look at the importance of presentism in relation to the rediscovery of Brecht in the age of Trump. This chapter will also contemplate whether it matters that we examine Brecht’s play primarily in terms of its meaning in the afterlife of its production, in the twenty-first century.

In Scene 8 of *Arturo Ui*, a warehouse fire takes place which is modelled after the notorious Reichstag fire hoax of 1933.

Hitler promptly claimed that the fire had been set by Communists, and in doing so succeeded in frightening the conservative German President, Paul von Hindenburg, into granting the national government wide ranging emergency powers to limit freedom of speech, to ban public meetings, to arrest individuals who threatened security (Nathans 2014).

And as Daniel Greener notes, “The Reichstag fire is perhaps the most infamous example of fake news” (2018). For over 80 years there has been much controversy surrounding the Reichstag fire which “handed the Nazis a pretext” to subvert “the democratic Weimar constitution through the emergency ‘Reichstag fire decree’” (Hett 2015: p. 199). This also led to the suspension of several constitutional protections on civil rights. “Since the 1960’s there has been a consensus among historians that the fire was set by Marinus van der Lubbe, a twenty-four-year-old Dutch journeyman stonemason supposedly acting alone—with no Nazi involvement. Few historians, however, have been inclined to investigate the motives behind the development of this single-culprit narrative” (Hett 2015: p. 199). The incident allowed Hitler to seize absolute power and has therefore led later historians to investigate the motive behind the lone-culprit theory. Ex-Nazis laid the claim that van der Lubbe acted alone, while former resistance fighters and victims of Nazism stressed Nazi involvement. Ultimately “the Nazi regime clung to the story that van der Lubbe had acted on behalf of Communists despite the verdict in the trial” (2014). The Reichstag fire incident is still a matter of dispute today, in the twenty-first century. The various contradicting narratives of the Reichstag fire demonstrate that the use of disinformation and propaganda to obscure the truth is not modern but has been prevalent long before ‘fake news’ was popularised by Trump to counteract the negative press coverage about himself during the elections. Brecht’s play tackles the issue of fake news but outwardly places full responsibility on Ui and his gangsters. The scene of the warehouse fire trial shows the corruption of the judicial system as objective truth is abandoned and reversed in favour of dictatorial powers. For instance, in scene 8, Hook, the vegetable dealer states he had seen Mr Giri “Just before the fire. He passed through the room with four men carrying gasoline cans” (p. 57). This statement is later revoked when Hook is beaten up by the gangsters. It is important to clarify that while no one has attempted the scale of deception as the Nazis in the post-truth era, altering, challenging and manipulating the truth remains a compelling ploy today. “Just think of how Donald Trump countered the accusation that he was spreading “fake news” by making the term his own - turning the charge on his accusers, and even claiming he’d coined it.” (Tinline 2018). The United States is not the early Soviet Union,

or Weimar Germany, but as Eric Vuillard has noted in *Order of the Day*, “great catastrophes often creep up on us in tiny steps” (2018). Equally, George Orwell’s concern with the spreading of post-truth (abandonment of objective truth) in the twentieth century is highlighted in his essay “The Prevention of Literature”. Orwell remarks: “Everything in our age conspires to turn the writer...into a minor official, working on themes handed down from above and never telling what seems to him the whole of the truth.” He further goes on to suggest that the doctrines of totalitarianism “are not only unchallengeable but also unstable. They have to be accepted on pain of damnation, but on the other hand they are always liable to be altered on a moment’s notice” (1946). Nowadays, a simple tweet can be deleted at a moment’s notice.

In late 2018, John Doyle from The Classic Stage Company in New York staged a revival of Brecht’s play with Raul Esparza cast in the title role of vindictive gangster Arturo Ui. When asked about playing the title role, Esparza remarked: “Arturo was a gangster in Chicago in the 1930’s. Arturo was also a guy maybe just right off the street here in New York and Arturo is probably Adolf Hitler. And the show functions on all three levels at once” (2018). In a performance review for the same play, Frank Scheck from The Hollywood Reporter, stated: “audiences don’t need to be hit over the head with Donald Trump allusions. Sadly, they come to mind all too easily. And in case they don’t, Brecht himself obliges with the warning of the play’s final line: “The bitch that bore him is in heat again”” (2018). The last line of Brecht’s play holds chilling resonance today, at a time when extremist movements and fascist leaders are on the rise. A time when language has been emptied of meaning in a society that unabashedly abandons the truth in favour of obstinate lies, resulting in the crippling of “individual agency and political sovereignty of the people” (Hendricks 2017). A time when propaganda is used to steer masses of impressionable people into the blind devotion and support of fascist demagogues. In fact, Trump’s supporters are becoming more and more like neo-Nazis and sometimes it is hard to distinguish between the two. As Matthew notices:

You cannot divide them, those neo-Nazis and Trump, and not only because those with Hitler quotes on the back of T-shirts were chanting “Hail Trump” (as if using

the English rather than German pronunciation would cunningly disguise their intent). You cannot divide them from Trump because Trump is their enabler, just as they are his (2017).

Trump, however, is not a Nazi but a neo-fascist who employs a belligerent nationalism, delivers way too much power to the police, advocates white triumphalism and in his language and discourse, regularly slanders any opponent who exposes the Big Lies he uses to advance his constituency. A famous example of this is demonstrated in Trump's controversial involvement in the incarceration of five young men of colour accused of raping a jogger in Central Park in 1989. The five men were coerced into confession by the authorities. During this time, Trump "took out a full-page ad in four New York newspapers" which urged the authorities to "bring back the death penalty" (McMahon 2019). Although all five men "were not only exonerated by DNA evidence after serving many years in jail, but were also awarded a wrongful conviction settlement, which ran into millions of dollars", Trump still maintained his stance calling the settlement a disgrace. Trump also implied that "the Central Park Five were guilty of a crime for which they should not have been acquitted in spite of the testimony of convicted felon Matias Reyes, who confessed to raping and attacking the victim" (Giroux 2017: p. 893). This issue was revisited again in 2019 with the Netflix documentary *When They See Us*. Director, Ava DuVernay noted that this was also an opportunity to reflect on the corruption of the American justice system. In response to the documentary Trump stated:

You have people on both sides of that. They admitted their guilt. If you look at Linda Fairstein and if you look at some of the prosecutors, they think that the city should never have settled that case. So we'll leave it at that (Trump 2019).

This parallels with Ui, who disguises his mischievous and callous actions in the pretence of protecting the city. For instance, in scene 4 of the play, Ui appears to Dogsborough as a man who is earnest to clear his name and protect the vegetable trade:

I have been very much maligned, my image

Blackened by envy, my intentions disfigured...

the vegetable trade needs protection. By force if necessary

And I'm determined to supply it" (p. 30-31).

Both Trump and Ui masquerade their malicious intentions with the façade of protecting their city/country. And "Brecht, who saw his theater as a call to action, would want audiences to view Ui as a satire of the self-proclaimed 'protectors' sprouting up like weeds all over the globe" causing disarray and alarm (Stewart 2018).

Brecht wrote *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* in Helsinki, Finland in 1941 when he was waiting for an American visa. Brecht had envisioned *Arturo Ui* to be a large scale, theatrical event for the American stage. He was captivated by the American setting, more specifically with Chicago since writing his third play *In the Jungle*. Creating an exotic world of gangsters allowed Brecht to establish some distance between his characters and audience. "Conceived with a view to the American stage – Brecht did not envisage any German-language production at the time" (Willett & Manheim 1981: p. viii). This was because Brecht had assumed that the German public were not ready to face the derision and irony of his portrayal of Adolf Hitler. Nonetheless, *Arturo Ui* was not first performed for an American audience but performed in Stuttgart, West Germany, in 1958 after Brecht's death. The play is written almost entirely in iambic Pentameter making the form overtly Shakespearean. In scene 6 of the play a Shakespearean actor is hired to help Ui present himself effectively in front of his audience and the use of blank verse helps to picture Ui's abhorrent manoeuvres in the grand style. "The incongruity of high style and base action gives rise to what Heinemann calls 'the deadly clowning' in the play" (Fischlin & Fortier 2014: p. 126). This makes the gangsterism of Ui appear all the more horrific and vile. The scenes of the play are also littered with quotes and echoes of many of Shakespeare's famous works like *Richard III* and *Julius Caesar*, the latter also enjoyed a huge wave of rediscovery thanks to Trump, both in London and in New York



City. (The Bridge Theatre's production, adorned with red baseball caps, was one of the must-see plays of 2018). In the beginning of the play the announcer states, regarding Arturo Ui: "Doesn't he make you think of Richard the Third?" (Willett & Manheim 1981: p. 6). This displays that the vicious character of Ui can be translated in any social and historical context. Although Brecht never saw the performance of *Arturo Ui* on stage, he was very specific about the way he thought it should be performed:

In order that the events may retain the significance unhappily due them, the play must be performed in the grand style, and preferably with obvious harkbacks to the Elizabethan theatre... Pure parody however must be avoided, and the comic element must not preclude horror. What is needed is a three-dimensional presentation which goes at top speed and is composed of clearly defined groupings like those favoured by historical tableaux at fairs (Unwin 2015: p. 177).

Brecht wanted his play to be performed in the grand style so that the focus of the play would remain on Brecht's political message, rather than on its connections with history. After all, Brecht loathed the "romantic view of history" that was rampant in bourgeois society; "his intention was to destroy the aura of greatness surrounding dictators, statesmen, politicians, who were often no more than political criminals" (Fischlin & Fortier 2014: p. 126). Appropriately, the political message of *Arturo Ui* is reaching far and wide in the twenty-first century with many adaptations depicting that the play's chief purpose is not to caricature historical figures, but to make a difference to the audience wherever they may be. This is vital today as we are now living in an age where the bulk of society is forced "to accept certain assumptions" about the way it should be governed (Unwin 2014: p. 191). And while some would say that it is impossible to develop a justification let alone a type of theatre that challenges these superficial conventions, "Brecht would insist that we have no choice but to try. And that's the nature of his challenge to those of us "born later"" (Unwin 2014: p. 191). Hence, it is no surprise that Trump's presidency sparked a renewed interest in Brecht as the actions of the president have on numerous occasions been akin to one of the worst fascists

in human history, Adolf Hitler. “The Trump presidency has made use of the Hitler card even more pronounced. Such comparisons have not just increased in frequency and intensity, however. Serious ones are now even being made by leading experts on Nazi Germany” (Taschka 2018). In this respect, presentism transforms what historicists deem as an ‘analytical blind spot’ or an ‘inadvertent error’ into a productive and purposeful practice.

The resurgence of Brecht in the age of Trump reveals similarities between Brechtian theatre and presentism as an approach. Both defamiliarize their subject material and present it in a new light which is ultimately designed to get the audience to reflect on it and ponder over its relevance in their daily lives, in the here and now. For instance, in the prologue of *Brecht On Theatre* (1949) titled: “A Short Organum for the Theatre”, the arguments put forth for what makes a good theatrical performance correspond with the basic tenets of presentism which disengage from the process of history-making in order to comment on the audience’s present condition. Brecht states that our longing to go back and recreate ancient stories in the present, exactly as they occurred, is causing “our whole way of appreciation...to get out of date” (p. 3). He argues:

What kind of release is it at the end of all these plays (which is a happy end only for the conventions of the period — suitable measures, the restoration of order), when we experience the dreamlike executioner’s axe which cuts short such crescendos as so many excesses? We slink into *Oedipus*; for taboos still exist and ignorance is no excuse before the law...The feelings, insights and impulses of the chief characters are forced on us, and so we learn nothing more about society than we can get from the ‘setting’ (p.7).

This strangely coincides with presentism which argues that it is not shrewd to assume that a theatre which ignores the issues of the present moment can be entertaining let alone successful. Also, simply knowing how context influences a literary piece does in no way

indicate the real intentions of the author and it certainly does not explicate why centuries after a literary work has stopped being relevant to the temporal period, is still viewed as a masterpiece by readers who value the text's significance in their lives.

Additionally, while many critics have established that one of the key problems with presentism is that it “presupposes an informed audience with a comparatively high level of historical knowledge and sophistication” (Kohlke 2018: p. 1), the recent revivals of Brecht's *Arturo Ui* illustrate that you do not need to be educated on the historical events to appreciate and understand the message being conveyed in the adaptations. This is primarily because Brecht himself says that his play strays from historical objectivity and secondarily, because the signs in the play tell you all the history you need to know as the play goes along. For instance, Lyra Theatre, a non-for-profit theatre company based in New York City, staged a production of *Arturo Ui* in 2016 with the hopes of raising awareness of political demagogues closer to home. The article: *The Play That Predicted Trump - Brecht's Arturo Ui* conveys:

This election is redefining what it means to run for President of the United States.

In such a volatile moment, everyone has an opinion, no one is content, and the country is in a state of unrest. With *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, Lyra Theater is launching our inaugural season this fall with a show that gives this generation of artists a platform to comment directly on the most timely issue of the year (2016).

Remarkably, the one minute forty-four second trailer of the production (which was mainly released for crowdfunding purposes), was made up of clips showing blatant parallels in the speech of *Ui* and Trump.<sup>8</sup> One example is at [1.06] when Arturo Ui states “Are you with me? And let me add in passing that he who is not with me is against me and will only have himself to blame for any consequences” (p. 69). This hauntingly mirrors what Trump declares at [1.14]

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<sup>8</sup> Theater, L. [LyraTheater]. (2016, August 16). *The Play That Predicted Trump - Brecht's Arturo Ui* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a5mjNcK6w9o>

“You are going to have problems, the likes of which you’ve never seen, unless Donald Trump becomes your president. Believe me, believe me”. As the play is staged for an American audience around the time of the presidential elections, it is clear the purpose of the production is to engage with the American demographic and hence, a deep understanding of Hitler’s Reich is not needed to appreciate the message of the play. Presentism, according to Norman Holland accentuates “narrative’s circular tendency” wherein “identity recreates itself” because as readers [or theatregoers] we selectively “use the literary [or filmic] work to symbolize and finally to replicate ourselves” (1975: p.342). This, however, differs from Brechtian theatre as Brecht is not merely holding a mirror to society but rather, he is trying to get his audience to see our situation differently so we can change it. This is also the beauty of Brechtian theatre. Brecht wanted his plays to be understood as commenting on the audience’s society and inevitably recognising the contradictions present in it. This is what makes Brecht a good case study for presentism. Indeed, Brecht’s best-known plays are arguably exercises in critical presentism, getting people to see links between (for example) the biography of Galileo, or a story set in the Thirty Years War, and the situation in the here and now.

After the world premiere of *Arturo Ui* in 1958 in Stuttgart, West Germany, the play was cogently criticised by Siegfried Melchinger who deemed it a “beautiful miscarriage” also complaining that “Brecht had failed to show how a majority of them had voted Hitler into power” (Willett & Manheim 2009: p. xxx). Many others at the time also felt that the ensuing history made Brecht’s satirical play naïve, if not deeply problematic, arguing that he gives “far too crude a historical analysis: Hitler was involved in something much more complex than simply a struggle for economic advantage and his ultimate ambitions cannot be subjected to the kind of rational analysis that Brecht preferred” (Unwin 2015: p. 175). In response to this Brecht stated:

Ui is a parable play, written with the aim of destroying the dangerous respect commonly felt for great killers. The circle described has been deliberately

restricted; it is confined to the plane of state, industrialists, Junkers and petty bourgeois. This is enough to achieve the desired objective. The play does not pretend to give a complete account of the historical situation in the 1930s (Willett & Manheim 1981: p. 109).

The final line of Brecht's quote is a great defence against many of presentism's critics who argue that "presentism" means relatively more historicist injustice than historicism, or it means nothing" (Holbo 2008: p. 1098). And while a lot of historicism's defenders believe that texts should be understood and interpreted in their own historical contexts, Brecht makes clear that his play does not "pretend" to give an accurate account of historical incidents. An example of this could be seen in scene 12 of the play with the depiction of Ignatius Dullfeet, a newspaper editor of Cicero, as a rather cautious man: "Frankly, if this merger with the Trust

Should mean importing the ungodly bloodbath

That plagues Chicago to our peaceful town

I never could approve it" (p. 82). This is not a very accurate representation of the historical Engelbert Dollfuss, Chancellor of Austria, who was a "militaristic autocrat...yet it served Brecht better, in the fictional world of *Arturo Ui*, to portray him in a different, contrastive light to *Ui*" (Barnett 2014: p. 183). So, does this mean using Brecht's play to understand the current political turmoil is unproblematic? One of presentism's detractors suggests that "a term like 'presentism' has no sense unless these notions are admitted to have practical application" (Holbo 2008: p. 1098). In relation to *Arturo Ui*, naïve spectators of the play may be inclined to making a set of fairly obvious connections between fiction and reality. However, in Brechtian practice the focus should be on the ways in which a play diverges from historical accuracy because it does something interesting with the historical material. Rather than offering unified connections between fiction and reality, Brecht utilises history as a source and develops it into scenes that have more to say about historical processes and their contradictions, in turn having practical application in the real world. Brecht felt that a play that blindly recreated

historical events alone, ceased to work as an independent piece and therefore had no real relevance to the current time. Brecht wanted to counteract the bourgeois worldview and used contradiction to illustrate his disdain. For example, in the play, Giri wears the hats of those who he has killed as a twisted demonstration of his power and ambition. In scene 6, Givola tells Ui that Giri collects “The hats of people he’s rubbed out. And running around with them in public. It’s disgusting” (p. 47). Formal hats were typically worn by the bourgeoisie in the twentieth century and thus Brecht uses this to show the corrupt nature of the middle class. Similarly, Ui’s behaviour in scenes 10 and 11 demonstrates ongoing class conflict. In scene 10 Ui stands by Roma and calls him “my oldest friend” (p. 70). In the next scene Ui has Roma shot. The contradiction between Ui’s support for Roma and the assassination of Roma in the next scene highlights the shifts between loyalty and power, rather than narrating historical events. At times, Ui is connected to his roots and honours Roma as a trusted friend but his internal struggle with personal ambition and social status is proven to be much stronger.

Theoretically the exposure of contradiction does two things in Brecht’s philosophy.

First, it undermines the totalizing claims of bourgeois ideology and secondly, it allows the object to be placed in the truly rational (i.e. dialectical) context (Squiers 2014: p. 111).

Hence, those critics that argue that Brecht’s play is historically inaccurate or greatly downplays the abominable acts of the Nazi party by comparing them to overgrown mobsters, should consider that his play is allegorical. “*Ui* is a blasting attack on the banal irrationality which can lead in certain circumstances to psychopathic government” (Willett & Manheim 1981: p.xx).

Brecht’s plays and theories continually grapple with questions on how to represent the political on stage. The Brechtian acting method was developed to separate an actor’s emotions and thoughts from the character that they were playing. The goal of the theatre was not to “depict individuals directly or realistically, but instead posits an approach where the actor... presents

his character to the audience rather than attempting to become that personage” (Bayer 2014: p. 378). This is opposed to the Western theatrical tradition which heavily criticised by Brecht, “designs on the spectator’s emotions which tend to prevent him from using his head” (Liu 2011: p. 65). According to Brecht, in this theatre “the sensations, insights and impulses of the chief characters are forced on us, and so we learn no more about the society than we can get from the setting” (Willett 1959: p. 169-70). Hence, Brechtian theatre ensures that the play tells an audience more about the situation and the nature of power and the social forces that work to bring demagogues into existence, rather than solely developing the characters psychologically in order to connect them to historical figures. This process of alienation or estrangement (known as *verfremdungseffekte*) emphasises the spectator’s rational and critical ability of observation. In this manner, Brecht’s plays proceed with objectivity and argument rather than the spectator’s subjectivity. This is a recurring feature of Epic Theatre. Also, before each scene, the audience is told what will happen in order to cut out any suspense; “The Announcer steps before the curtain. Large notices are attached to the curtain...” (Willett & Manheim 1981: p. 5). This is done to put the audience in a position of analysing and interpreting the play for a deeper, richer meaning instead of focusing heavily on the narrative events of the plot. This allows the audience to worry about *why* something happens instead of *what* will happen. Brecht did not want his audience to relate to the performance, but rather wanted his audience to be able to politically comment on the messages of his performances and engage with questions about historical causation. This gives Brecht’s plays a didactic value. One way this is done in Brechtian theatre is allowing the actors to change on stage to remind the audience that these actors are playing characters and merely telling a story. In essence, Brecht wanted his audience to be reminded that the play is a dramatic performance and therefore it is merely a representation of reality and not reality itself. The method was created to enable a deeper insight in the way a society and politics work with a goal of altering them. As Barnett suggests:

By pointing to instability and impermanence, Brecht wanted to show that the world *could* be changed. As such, Brecht's is a fundamentally political theatre because it asks audiences not to accept the status quo, but to appreciate that oppressive structures can be changed if the will for that exists (2014: p. 3).

Thus far, we have concentrated on the script of Brecht's play, exploring how his allegory of the rise of Nazism parallels the rise of Trump. Additionally, for Brecht, the physicality of the character is also of equal importance. Brecht coined the term *Gestus* to highlight an actor's "gestures", but this term also encompasses any sign of social relations, intonation, and facial expression. Meg Mumford offers a definition in regard to the actor: "*Gestus* entails the aesthetic gestural presentation of the socio-economic and ideological construction of human identity and interaction" (2015: p. 29). In scene 6 of the play, Ui learns a completely new *Gestus* in order to appeal to his subjects whereby Ui's personality is reconstructed in front of the audience. "...I've been given to understand that my pronunciation leaves something to be desired. It looks like I'm going to have to say a word or two on certain occasions, especially when I get into politics, so I've decided to take lessons. The gestures too" (p. 44). Ui hires an actor to educate him on the proper etiquettes of walking, talking and eating. This new *Gestus*, however, makes Ui's speech and mannerisms appear to be unnatural and rehearsed. Ui is unable to maintain this façade for long as he slips back into his old ways upon encountering trouble. For instance, in scene 13, Ui conveys:

"My origins –

Never have I denied that I'm a humble

Son of the Bronx – are held against me...

My uncouth tone, my manly way of calling

A spade a spade are used as marks against me" (p. 90).



This is an important feature of Brechtian theatre as it allows the audiences a metatheatrical reflection on the power of acting. The body is no longer a neutral or individual entity, but actively depicts its connections to its social surroundings. In Ui's case, his *Gestus* betrays him as his gestural repertoire changes according to the situation that he is in. "Ui oscillates between taking the initiative (as in scene seven when he believes his speeches will succeed in intimidating the grocers) and having to react by resorting to violence once again. This tension undermines Ui's autonomy" (Barnett et al 2014: p. 187). In the same manner, Trump's physicality and gestures which usually include pointing the finger, the finger-and-thumb circle and air pointing are usually heavily criticised. Simply put: Trump, like Ui, tries to cultivate the *Gestus* of a political leader, yet fails spectacularly. One instance was during a speech in November when "he used his free hand to steady a small Fiji bottle as he brought it to his mouth. Onlookers described the movement as "awkward" and made jokes about hand size". Equally, on another occasion: "there was an incident of slurred speech. Announcing the relocation of the American embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem—a dramatic foreign-policy move—Trump became difficult to understand at a phonetic level" (Hamblin 2018). Upon winning the presidency, Trump's speeches became more and more "replete with large bodily gestures, Big Lies, hysterical charges, and dramatic repetitions." Trump's strange gestures and speech are not intended to rationally articulate any political agenda. But rather, they are intended to "draw energy and direction from the anger of its audience" (Connolly 2017: p. 28).

In the book *Shakespeare in the Present*, Terence Hawkes quotes Kierkegaard: "The dialectic of repetition is easy, for that which is repeated has been – otherwise it could not have been repeated – but the very fact that it has been makes the repetition into something new" (2002: p. 132). Similarly, for Brecht, imitation was not a failure but rather an art. Although the words 'copying' and 'imitation' are commonly associated with a lack of vision or creative independence, Brecht sought to rethink this practice by making the practice of repetition and imitation productive and not just reproductive. He notes: "Copying is a critical appropriation of

the original. One has to know why one is copying, and in understanding the reason, one is selective and emphasises certain qualities in order to say something specific” (Barnett et al 2014: p. 178).

Equally, throughout Brecht’s career as a playwright he stressed the importance of separating text from performance seeing them as mutually antagonistic. Brecht followed this principle chiefly because he felt that the more a production was controlled, the less impact it is likely to have on its audience. (Barnett 2014). Brecht states:

Just as the actor no longer has to persuade the audience that it is the author’s character and not himself that is standing on the stage, so also he need not pretend that the events taking place on the stage have never been rehearsed, and are now happening for the first and only time (1948: p. 10).

Hence, Brecht’s role as a director was to engage the audience by activating them through the stagecraft (Barnett 2014). Audience members were no longer just observers witnessing the play, they were participants in the dialogue, and by this token the performance was presentist. As Margaret Eddershaw states: “Brecht’s notion of sporting theatre also acknowledges the audience as a participant, an *educated* participant, in the event” (2002: p. 22). This is opposed to reading a novel like Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which is read in solitary and is more passive. Theatre performances are by nature more conducive to presentism because they can easily update the play text through choices of casting, costume design, set design, and props, and this in turn engages the audience in different ways from traditional productions. After all, presentism advocates that meaning is generated through a text’s encounter with living culture. And while it is true that modern authoritarian governments are not in the same league as Hitler’s Reich, modern autocracies hauntingly mirror the mindless violence and brutality that is able to flourish unchecked under police regimes. Despite some critics arguing that the objects of Brecht’s parable play are dead and neither their ignorant imitators nor their surviving

followers are able to recreate anything remotely close to the Nazi crimes, the leadership of Trump, and more recently Boris Johnson and the array of populist leaders across Eastern and Southern Europe, bring with them a "realisation that our own society's violence might one day be paralleled by a rebirth of Fascism on the grand scale" (Willet & Manheim 1981: p. xx).

Hugh Grady in *Modernist Shakespeare* wrote: "all interpretation bears within it the imprint of the moment of history in which it was undertaken but equally, the past only takes on meaning through the inescapable present." (1991: p. 2). Hence, the director's vision of representing a historical moment not only in a classical sense but also with regards to modern issues allows the audience to interact, learn and apply the lessons to their own lives. This is chiefly because the play holds up a mirror emphasising distortions from a rational and moral order. This has definitely come into play with Trump "who deploys a viscerally embodied language of sexist, racist, and xenophobic hate that has the potential to turn the bodies of Muslims, women, immigrants, minorities, and other Others into vulnerable territory in a war" (Gokariksel 2016: p. 80). On the relationship between politics and theatre, Gorchakov noted:

[Politics] is an integral part of our life now. This means that the director's horizon includes the government's structure, the problems of our society. It means that we, the directors of the theatre, have much more responsibility and must develop a broader way of thinking (1968: p. 16).

John Doyle raises these issues in his adaptation by portraying "Ui" in a manner that patently mimics Donald Trump:

We laugh at his personality flaws and poor grammar as we watch him slowly but surely take over everything...This "big white chief" promises to restore "law and order," and he's upfront about the price of this transaction. He doesn't respect institutions or norms or principles, only power. And in that respect, the bulk of human history is firmly on his side (Stewart 2018).

In line with the teachings of Brechtian theatre, John Doyle uses the stagecraft to point to the “contradictions in social reality” by “presenting that reality in a type of heightened realism”. (Barnett 2014). For instance, the setting and the characters are recognisable, otherwise defamiliarization would not occur. As Stewart points out the production “occasionally escapes the bonds of its rigid text” bringing the surface parable closer to contemporary life than to the historical events which it represents, as “Ui seem[s] intimately familiar to anyone who feels helpless to resist the rapid shifts in a world gone mad” (2018). Many of the theatre reviews for this production were favourable amongst critics with Ben Bartley from *The New York Times* stating: “The eight ensemble members here are delightfully resourceful. You could even imagine this version of Arturo Ui winning the flinty heart of its author for its imaginative interpretation of the Brechtian dictates of style and sensibility” (2018). Equally, David Finkle from the *New York Stage Review* remarked that “Doyle's wanting to throw shade on the Trump administration is clear and commendable” (2018). Additionally, Robert Hofler's review of the play is littered with allusions to the current President as he notes:

Esparza's Arturo Ui keeps his eyes wide shut, plus he exudes rank stupidity. The character's most violent harangues, and there are many, often spring from the campiest of retorts. One moment, Esparza is stuck wallowing in Arturo Ui's seemingly playful narcissism; the next, he's a fire-breathing monster in full command. It's a magnificently indulgent performance (2018).

Equally, it is important to note that issues of gender and race are tackled in recent revivals of Brecht's play. These issues highlight an interesting point: although Donald Trump's supporters largely consists of male white supremacists, they also include women and minorities. This also speaks to the diversity aspect as women and minorities who were once overlooked in Brecht's theatre are now placed front and centre, destabilising the patriarchal norm. Lauren Nussbaum stated that “Brecht tended to use women as ‘demonstration objects’ and that his ‘drama fails to take concerns of women's liberation into account” (1985: p. 218). This displays

that while Brecht urged his audience to perceive the “changeability of society” regarding things like capitalism, he was still oblivious to any change in women’s condition. The 2017 production by Liam Castellan saw Ui portrayed by a female who wore a Trump-style blonde wig. For the director, gender was not a big issue; “though the play is structured for men’s roles, this production is composed of 13 women and two men...putting women in masculine roles works for the play.” (Gudus 2017). Another production by the Donmar Warehouse in 2017 saw black actor, Lenny Henry (who is also a household name) take the lead as Ui. This production spoke to the racist angle. Henry himself commented stating:

Why do things get made? Who’s in charge? Usually the gatekeepers in charge want to make things about people that look like them, which is a natural thing to do. Which leaves out a whole bunch of other stories. The wider industry needs to think in terms of creating a space where everybody can get a chance to represent...In 21st-century storytelling all bets are off: anybody can do anything. We’re all storytellers. And when is everybody else going to catch up with that? (Rees 2018).

These examples suggest that the play has the capacity to be adapted and interpreted in so many ways through production and performance, each highlighting a separate aspect of the play’s new relevance in the twenty first century. Moreover, having a black actor and a female play the role of a character that is modelled after Hitler and mirrors Trump is very important because it shows us that Trump’s followers are not limited to white males.

Throughout Trump’s presidency there have been multiple calls for his dismissal from a number of politicians voicing their concerns over Trump’s mental health. “It’s not normal behaviour. I don’t know anybody in a position of responsibility that doesn’t know if they’re being rained on. And nobody I work with serially offers up verifiably false statements on an ongoing basis” remarked Oregon Representative Earl Blumenauer (2017). This mirrors Ui who offers up

verifiably false statements in order to preserve his power. For instance, he tells Dockdaisy that he is saddened by the murder of her husband when in reality he ordered the killing: "Mrs Bowl, my sympathies. This lawlessness // This crime wave's got to stop" (p. 54). Equally, Paul Krugman noted that "He [Trump] is more ignorant about policy that you can possibly imagine...he's just doing a clumsy job of channelling nonsense widely popular in his party..." (2017: p. 167). Trump's presidency has exposed a core myth of liberalism: one that affirms that liberal subjects are rational subjects. Rationality has publicly been derided under the Trump administration. Trump's blatant attempts to challenge and attack facts and science-based reasoning have reached a level that "political appointees have shut down government studies, reduced the influence of scientists over regulatory decisions and in some cases pressured researchers not to speak publicly" (Plumer & Davenport 2019). A prime example of Trump's battle with rationality is his ignorance about climate change: "It used to not be climate change. It used to be global warming. That wasn't working too well, 'cause it was getting too cold all over the place" (Trump 2018). It is not surprising that Trump's lies are swallowed by his followers given the fact that Trump has made clear on numerous occasions that his subject is not the rich or the well-educated. But rather "the working guy" who Trump believed "would elect me. He likes me. When I walk down the street, those cabbies start yelling out their windows" (1990). This parallels with Brecht's *Ui* who states: "I'm not trying to convince professors // And smart-alecks. My object is the little man's image of his master" (p. 45). The eerie similarities between Trump and *Ui*'s speech help convey an important message; the play is continually shifting in relation to modern times, that is, the play is still in motion.

Overall, this chapter addresses a key component of presentism, which is that performance as an unfettered entity, will always have the privilege of replicating the issues and concerns of an earlier epoch while also maintaining contemporaneity to the present day. By assimilating the political dogma expressed in Brecht's *Arturo Ui*, we can make comparisons with our own political situation irrespective of the temporal gap. Equally, by asserting that the past was essentially like the present and making the concerns of the past our concerns allows us to

draw feasible conclusions and lessons from writers like Orwell and Brecht and, as we are about to see, Arendt.

### **Chapter 3 The Origins of Totalitarianism: Presentism gone wrong?**

“A typical characteristic of totalitarian movements”, writes Hannah Arendt in her 1951 book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, “is the startling swiftness with which they are forgotten and the startling ease with which they can be replaced” (2017: p. 399).<sup>9</sup> This statement sheds light on the unpredictability of movements motivated by totalitarian fantasies but also denotes that totalitarianism, as many once believed, is not a soul crushing phenomenon of the past but is callously taking up new reigns in the present. Arendt’s political masterpiece has become a founding text in post-colonial studies as it provides an in-depth analysis of the various circumstances that gave rise to totalitarianism in the twentieth century. According to Bruehl, reading TOOT is akin to “visiting a museum where there is a giant mural of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries”, as the book “has richer insights on the topics it engages than shelves of other volumes” (2006: p. 34).

In TOOT, Arendt treats totalitarianism as a unique social and political system and evaluates the historical circumstances of its two prime manifestations, Stalin’s Russia and Nazi Germany. She begins her analysis by highlighting the preconditions that propagated anti-Semitism in Europe in the nineteenth century and thereafter, links the emergence of totalitarianism in the twentieth century to the rise of anti-Semitism, racism and imperialism. “Race thinking, rather than class-thinking”, she insists, “was the ever-present shadow accompanying the development of the comity of European nations, until it finally grew to be the powerful weapon for the destruction of those nations” (2017: p. 161). This statement bears

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<sup>9</sup> Arendt, H. (2017). *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Milton Keynes : Penguin Classics. All subsequent references will be to this edition, will be abbreviated to TOOT and page numbers will be included parenthetically.

great significance today, at a time when race-thinking combined with bellicose nationalism has activated a militarised war culture in the United States, posing a grave threat to democracy. It comes as no surprise then, that a Jewish, female, political theorist, who wrote extensively about the seeds of totalitarianism and the Nazi and Bolshevik crimes in the fifties, suddenly became a bestseller just weeks after Donald Trump's election victory. From a presentist viewpoint, the resurgence of Arendt would ascertain that history is not moving forward. The dynamism of its temporality, speaks to the past but also beyond its moment, anticipating future discourse. Amidst the news of Trump's presidency, "tweet-size nuggets of her warnings about post-truth political life have swirled through social media" (Stonebridge 2019). Zoe Williams also points out, "commentators have been referencing the work since Donald Trump's election in November but rarely has this spurred so many people to actually buy a copy" (2017). Admittedly, the text has not reached the popularity of levels of Brecht or Orwell. This could be due to the fact that philosophical works are not as widely read as fiction. Nonetheless, the increase in sales shows a newfound appreciation for texts that explicate our current situation. As Roger Berkowitz states, since the elections, sales of *TOOT* have spiked "at one point rising 16 times above its usually robust sales" and "writers and pundits have made frequent references to Arendt's 500-page masterpiece in the pages of *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, and *The New York Review of Books*" (2017). And as unsettling as it may be, Arendt's posthumous popularity coincides with the growing anxiety amongst the American public. A population that once believed, like Arendt, that its constitutional principles were immune to the perils of totalitarianism is now struggling to grapple with the fact that its leader "promises to defend the country from all manner of others, to purify it: Muslims banned, Latin Americans walled out" in the name of making America great again (Gokariksel 2016: p. 79). The slogan "Make America Great Again" mimics historically fascist-tinged slogans like "America First", which advocate a dangerous nationalism and appeal to the "authoritarian ideals and policies that offer fraudulently a sense of reassurance and certainty", which is the essence of totalitarian government (Giroux 2017: p. 891). This is not to say that America is currently under totalitarian rule as that would be an exaggeration. "He [Trump] has not mobilized [total] terror,



concentration camps, arbitrary arrests, secret police, and a party apparatus that rises above the state — all of which were essential parts of Arendt’s description of totalitarianism in power” (Berkowitz 2017). While mass deportation of undocumented immigrants is vindictive and callous, it cannot be equated to genocide. And while Trump has not overtly offered “anything like a racial, antisemitic, or Islamophobic justification for slavery, expulsion, or genocide, his flirtation with those on the alt-right who do make such justifications is supremely dangerous”. (Berkowitz 2018). Therefore, it is also complacent to suppose that what is currently taking place under Trump’s administration does not in any way resemble totalitarianism.

President Trump has repeatedly asserted he leads “a movement like the world has never seen before.” He has shown a willingness to assert his personal control over reality. And he has positioned himself as a Janus-faced figure who can present one version of reality to his followers and another version to the outside world. These are all characteristics Arendt attributes to leaders of totalitarian movements (Berkowitz 2018).

When Hannah Arendt died in 1975, she was not renowned for TOOT, but better known for coining the phrase “the banality of evil” and more controversially, for her reporting of the trial of Adolf Eichmann, one of the leading figures of the organisation of the Holocaust. Yes, a small number of critics and admirers were knowledgeable of her works, but she was scarcely considered one of the greatest political writers of the twentieth century. This could have been a result of Arendt’s Jewish, immigrant background or the fact that being a woman rendered her work overlooked by the white-male dominated political canon. It wasn’t until much later that her works were translated into dozens of languages giving her worldwide prominence. “*The Origins of Totalitarianism* was not translated into French for almost twenty years. Only when the French intellectual climate had been changed...did scholarship on Arendt begin to proliferate...” (Bruehl 2006: p. 41). Why? because “after 1989 with the collapse of the Soviet Union it seemed as though the specter of totalitarian systems had gone for good. There were

still dictatorships, but they were shabby affairs in countries too poor to support a Nazi-style bureaucracy” (Mason 2019). The possibility of the resurgence of that brutal and inhumane form of totalitarianism that plagued the mid-twentieth century, destroying every notion of personal autonomy through omnipresent terror, was extremely low and so people did not need a yardstick to judge whether events of their time would lead to totalitarian rule.

However, more recently, with the initial stages of Donald Trump's presidency, references to her works have circulated social media and greeted conferences with a newfound relevance, implying the sinister beginnings of an adaptive totalitarianism. Arendt is relevant now, because she outlines the structure of thinking that makes dictatorships possible. But maybe her relevance comes with a price. An avid political writer who placed “race-thinking and racism” as the fundamental cause of “the destruction of the European system”, unfortunately “harboured her own deep racial prejudices, especially when writing about Africans and people of African descent” (Owens 2017: p. 405), as we shall see.

Moreover, many historians have also agreed that Arendt does not give a clear reason as to how the Nazis came to power, nor does she explain why totalitarian ideologies triumph. “As scholars’ divergent interpretations suggest, the organising principles of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and the status of the origin in it are far from clear” (Kang 2013: p. 139)<sup>10</sup>. Instead she says to herself: “There is an abyss between men of brilliant and facile conceptions and men of brutal deeds and active bestiality, which no intellectual explanation is able to bridge.” (Aschheim 2001: p. 98). This chapter will be exploring what challenges this proposes for the study of presentism and whether the rediscovery of Arendt's work is a mistake. This chapter will also be questioning whether presentism can be a viable approach to literature when applying the approach to philosophical prose.

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<sup>10</sup> See Steven Aschheim, “Nazism, Culture, and *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: Hannah Arendt and the Discourse of Evil,” *New German Critique* 70 (1997)

In a section of TOOT subtitled “A Classless Society”, Arendt describes the reception to Brecht’s *Dreigroschenoper*, a play that was performed in pre-Hitler Germany. In the play, Brecht presents “gangsters as respectable businessmen and respectable businessmen as gangsters” (Arendt 2017). With this play, Brecht hoped to shock the audience by blurring the line that differentiates respectable men from corrupt gangsters. But surprisingly, a play in which the criminality of Weimar society was exposed was not met with shock or horror, but rather delight. In response to the play, Arendt states that the German bourgeoisie “could no longer be shocked; it welcomed the exposure of its hidden philosophy” and “the elite applauded because the unveiling of hypocrisy was such superior and wonderful fun” (2017: p. 439). In this instance, Arendt makes clear her contempt for the elite’s response to the revelation of their hypocrisy. This is primarily because “one of the most under-acknowledged elements of totalitarianism identified by Arendt is the rise to political and social power of a corrupt business and governing class as well as a class of intellectuals that find corruption funny rather than outrageous” (Berkowitz 2017). “In this sense the bourgeoisie’s political philosophy was always ‘totalitarian’” (Arendt 2017: p. 441). What would Arendt have to say about a president who repeatedly abandons respectability in favour of spreading conspiracy theories under the guise of exposing hypocrisy?

Arendt’s TOOT suggests a continuity between the methods used to circulate propaganda in the twentieth century and now:

The object of the most varied and variable constructions was always to reveal official history as a joke, to demonstrate a sphere of secret influences of which the visible, traceable, and known historical reality was only the outward façade erected explicitly to fool the people (2017: p. 437).

Similarly, in the Trump era, politics has turned into a spectacle for entertainment purposes. Satire programs like *The Daily Show* where “the self-proclaimed elite celebrate and laugh at the exposure of the obvious hypocrisy of businessmen who are gangsters and politicians who are businessmen” are now commonplace (Berkowitz 2017). It is ironic however, that the same highly politicised satire programs that poke fun at politicians and businessmen are actually educating the youth and encouraging people to participate in politics. “Research by Moy et al. (2005) has shown that viewing late-night political comedy is positively related to voting intention.” Additionally, “work by Hoffman and Young (2011) suggests that viewing political satire and parody...is positively related to political participation” (Becker 2013: p. 348). With the growing scepticism of cable news networks like Fox news, CNN and MSNBC, the popularity of satirical programs has risen in the last decade. “Comedy central estimates the nightly audience for [*The Daily*] Show’s first run at 1.2 million people” (Baym 2005: p. 260). It has unfortunately become clear that political satire programs are doing a more effective job of reporting the news than most of the actual news outlets, despite a fraction of the experience and budget. “A 2012 Pew study suggested many cable news viewers were less informed than those who watched no news at all, suggesting it’s not too difficult to beat many modern news outlets at their own game when the standards bar is set ankle height” (Bode 2014). The main purpose of journalism is to deliver the truth and accurately inform the nation. Over the years, this is something that has increasingly been lost with a selective he said, she said reporting and fake news outbursts that obliterate the truth in favour of upholding an unoffensive balance.

Moreover, Arendt’s explanation of how totalitarianism floods through mass media and democratic institutions via sympathisers proves relevant today. Through them, she argued the movements “can spread their propaganda in milder, more respectable forms, until the whole atmosphere is poisoned with totalitarian elements which are hardly recognizable as such but appear to be normal political reactions or opinions” (2017: p. 480). Today’s mainstream media ecosystem makes it easy for fascists “of the alt-right [to] spread their lies, via the so-called alt-lite websites such as Breitbart into the mainstream channels like Fox News” (Mason 2019).

As a result, programs like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* have come to reinvent political journalism by means of “unearthing the truth” and “doing a better job explaining complex issues” than cable news networks (Bode 2014). Collectively, these programs play a significant role in shaping the public agenda and influencing public opinion across the United States. The positive impact of political satire shows today, is something that the cult of Arendt could never have anticipated. However, some may argue that Arendt has been proven right: that the cynicism and sneering of political satire has emptied all idealism out of politics and paved the way for leaders like Trump by lowering the tone of debate to cheap, knowing jibes. On the other hand, Arendt feared that the rise of an intellectual class of people that were cynical of corruption would “let themselves be seduced by totalitarian movements” (2017: p. 444). This is disproven today, as satirical shows, hosted by intellectuals, offer an alternative and modern form of political education, a more balanced form of journalism and are not in any way endorsing totalitarian political philosophy.

On the other hand, when Arendt describes the bourgeoisie’s hidden philosophy as ‘totalitarian’, Trump’s repeated attempts to dissolve the truth in favour of alternative facts comes to mind. Professor Schaal notes that under the Trump administration she is “worried about the use of evidence in making policy. The fact there could be a conversation about alternative facts is deeply concerning. We need to base policy on facts” (Johnston 2017). But what characteristics made Donald Trump a striking political candidate to his followers? According to a study by Shamir et al “Followers must perceive that the leader espouses values similar to their own, satisfies some need or deficiency” and “engages followers’ self-concepts” (1993). During the elections, a fundamental characteristic that appealed to Trump’s followers was the promise of restoring what America has lost;

In his announcement speech, he asserted that China beat the U.S. in trade deals, in his next line he observed: “I beat China all the time. All the time.” To this, the audience applauded and chanted, “We want Trump! We want Trump!” In closing

that speech, he said, “If I get elected president, I will bring it back bigger, and better, and stronger than ever before, and we will make America great again (Reicher & Haslam 2017).

And while many Americans were shocked and “alienated” by Trump’s “unconventional, bombastic, and even degrading” rhetoric towards “many social groups (i.e., women, immigrants, Muslims, those with physical disabilities...”, “others gravitated toward him as a leader who self-identified as a political outsider, and as such could draw on his prior business experiences to improve the state of the nation” (Carsten et al 2019: p. 181-182). Arendt highlights the necessity of a mass (not a mob) in the rise of a dictator: “totalitarian movements are possible wherever there are masses who have acquired the appetite for political organisation” (p. 407). This statement accurately describes Trump supporters as they can be perceived as acquiring the “appetite for political organisation” (p. 407). According to Arendt, masses are those people who cannot integrate into “any organisation based on common interest, into political parties or municipal governments or professional organisations or trade unions” (p. 407). Today, the majority of Trump supporters are defined by their absence of college degrees, lack of political voices and a willingness to “wage an interior war against outsiders” (Thompson 2016). And as Arendt pointed out, new methods of political propaganda can easily be used to indoctrinate a group of people that lack ambition, education and political awareness.

During the presidential elections, Trump also used fear of extremism to appeal to his followers. One particular area of uncertainty “that was salient in the 2016 election” was “the perceived threat of social groups” (p. 181). This did not end with Trump’s political campaign as he continues to drive the irrational fear that Islamic fundamentalism threatens to eradicate democracy of the United States and minorities threaten the hopes of restoring what America has lost. His language is equally constructed in such a way that his negative representations of racialised immigrant groups (propaganda) are overlooked by supporters, allowing them to construct a distorted narrative about the America that Trump will make great again. “This form

of rhetoric extols the notion that America has an exceptional mission in the world but is falling short” due to foreigners and outsiders “and therefore needs to change to fulfill its original vision” (Reicher & Haslam 2017). This type of rhetoric is also built on the idea that the nation’s failings are linked to matters with power and wealth and the “depredations of others rather than the weaknesses of the in-group (that is, his supporters)” (2017). In a similar respect, Arendt mentions that “Hitler’s speeches to his generals during the war are veritable models of propaganda, characterised mainly by the monstrous lies with which the Fuehrer entertained his guests in an attempt to win them over” (2017: p. 448). This demonstrates that in totalitarian movements, the followers are infallible, and the blame always lies elsewhere. Moreover, Trump on numerous occasions has boldly claimed that the rise of unemployment in the States is a result of foreigners:

Our real unemployment is anywhere from 18 to 20 percent. Don't believe the 5.6.

Don't believe it. That's right. A lot of people up there can't get jobs ... because there are no jobs, because China has our jobs, and Mexico has our jobs (Reicher & Haslam 2017).

In this manner, Trump appears to his supporters as the only one willing to expose the hidden truths that other politicians cover up or shy away from. This hauntingly mirrors what Arendt noticed in the twentieth century: “The propaganda of the totalitarian movement... serves to emancipate thought from experience and reality; it always strives to inject a secret meaning into every public, tangible event...” (2017: p. 618). According to this, isn’t it more worrying that a successful, democracy is capable of producing a leader like Trump? Stalin and Hitler were the “products of state-dominated economies that hit crisis; they led subservient and poorly educated populations, which had been trained by generations of factory work and military conscription to obey the hierarchy above them” (Mason 2019). However, today, the United States is a nation that is filled with educated people and a tradition of democracy going back to 1776. The beginnings of an adaptive totalitarianism in a country like the United States is something Arendt could never have imagined when writing the script of TOOT.

While it is easy to draw seeming parallels and continuities between the structures of dictatorships outlined by Arendt in *TOOT*, in the twentieth century, and the formation of neo-fascist dictatorships today, it ceases to become a productive practice when considering the many historical conjectures in Arendt's narrative. Raymond Aron's "principle objection" to *TOOT* was "what he took to be Arendt's unfortunate deviation from the historical path" (Kang 2013: p. 142). While some of Arendt's harshest critics "misrepresent the context of some of her claims", they are largely correct in asserting that Arendt's political thought is littered with sweeping generalisations and inconsistencies (Owen 2017). Chiefly her tendency to "lump together regimes of varying stripes under a single category while ignoring...the specific historical circumstances from which these regimes emerge" (Stanley 1987: p. 179). Equally, Arendt disregards "the past history of ideology [and] she largely ignores the histories of past despotisms" (p. 178). Therefore, Arendt's largely exaggerated opinion of totalitarianism's unique and unprecedented character is something that is contested by many post-colonial scholars. For one, W.E.B. Du Bois famously wrote,

there was no Nazi atrocity – concentration camps, wholesale maiming and murder, defilement of women or ghastly blasphemy of childhood – which the Christian civilization of Europe had not long been practicing against colored folk in all parts of the world in the name of and for the defense of a Superior Race born to rule the world (Owens 2017: p. 409).

Whether or not one agrees with Du Bois, the fact that concentration camps are not uniquely characteristic of the Third Reich cannot be disputed<sup>11</sup>. For example,

On the eve of the Second World War, when a British ambassador to Germany protested Nazi camps, Herman Goering rebuffed the criticism by pulling out an

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<sup>11</sup> Though concentration camps have several pre-Nazi precedents, extermination camps do not.



encyclopedia and looking up the entry for concentration camps, which credited the British with being the first to use them in the Boer War (Jewell 2003: p. 1).

This clarifies that Britain invented the concentration camps during the Second Boer War. This creation would later be seen as the blueprint of totalitarianism. During this time, Herbert Kitchener, a British Army officer, initiated plans to:

flush out guerrillas in a series of systematic drives...with success defined in a weekly 'bag' of killed, captured and wounded, and to sweep the country bare of everything that could give sustenance to the guerrillas, including women and children ... It was the clearance of civilians (Pakenham 1979: p. 493).

These vicious crimes mirror the description of terror in totalitarian movements put forth in TOOT: "terror becomes total...no free action of either opposition or sympathy can be permitted to interfere with the elimination of the 'objective enemy'" (2017: p. 610). But the terrors unleashed on the Boers are largely downplayed by Arendt to accommodate her questionable view that the atrocities committed by the British Empire paled in comparison to the Soviet and Nazi crimes of the twentieth century. Not only this, but Arendt also "suggested that Boer racism was different, even justifiable, because of the character of the peoples it was directed against. 'African savages...had frightened Europeans out of their wits'" (Owens 2017: p. 411). It is also notable that Arendt's criticisms of America during the Vietnam war were largely based on the lies told in its propaganda, rather than on the military tactics that derived directly from Kitchener's.

Additionally, the most notorious incident of Arendt's racism was in 1957, in her "Reflections on Little Rock". In this essay, Arendt discussed the front-page image of a black girl, Elizabeth Eckford, as she walked through a mob of white protestors attempting to enter the newly desegregated Little Rock Central High School. (Stonebridge 2019). Arendt argued that Eckford

should not be carrying such a political burden at her age and that education was a social and largely private matter. The writer Ralph Ellison replied that all black children in the south carried a political burden from the day they were born whether they or their parents liked it or not” (Stonebridge 2019).

In this instance, Arendt “inevitably failed to translate the essentially historical and power-laced distinctions between social, political, public and private into normative categories applied to public education” (Owens: 2017: p. 418). Despite her intellectual competence and philosophical insights on one hand, and her own troubling experiences with discrimination as a Jewish woman on the other, Arendt failed to understand the problem of anti-black racism in the United States and the methods black people used to combat it. She stated that “negro violence” in America is only “political to the small extent that it is hoped to dramatize justified grievances, to serve as an unhappy substitute for organized power” (1968: p. 24). Patricia Owens outlines a key problem in Arendt’s political thought:

The problem extends from her first book, in which she traded in horrific racial stereotypes about Africans, to her late public policy interventions, in which she disparaged African Americans, all the way to her effort to theorise a new form of post-totalitarian politics, which relied on a distorted historical and political analysis of settler colonialism, slavery, and racism in the United States (2017: p. 405).

These problematic statements compromise the integrity of Arendt’s work.

Another equally horrifying spectacle of the early-twentieth century was the Herero and Nama genocide. “Between 1904-1907 German military forces committed a genocide against the indigenous Herero and Nama people in their colony of German South-West Africa, now Namibia” (2019).<sup>12</sup> This led later historians to question whether “Wilhelmine colonization and

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<sup>12</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. “HERERO AND NAMA GENOCIDE.” Bibliographies. <https://www.ushmm.org/collections/bibliography/herero-and-nama-genocide>. Accessed on [21st September 2019].

genocide in Namibia influence[d] Nazi plans to conquer and settle Eastern Europe, enslave and murder millions of Slavs and exterminate Gypsies and Jews?" (Madley 2005: p. 429). And while Arendt's TOOT looked at how European Imperialism led to the proliferation of later totalitarianisms, "she stopped short of tracing how colonialism influenced Nazi leaders and their policies" (p. 429). For instance, the intent behind killing indigenous people in their own lands

which occurred through battle; through starvation and thirst in the Omaheke Desert; and through forced labor, malnutrition, sexual violence, medical experiments and disease in concentration camps—was to rid the colony of people viewed as expendable and thus gain access to their land.<sup>13</sup>

This parallels with the methods used by the Nazi invaders in the occupied countries of Eastern Europe. In a section of TOOT subtitled "Total Domination", Arendt makes clear that the intent behind the Nazi concentration camps was "not only to exterminate people and degrade human beings, but also serve the ghastly experiment of...transforming the human personality into a mere thing" (2017: p. 574). Putting to one side the indisputable uniqueness of Auschwitz, there have nevertheless been various instances in history, long before the modern totalitarianisms of Stalin and Hitler, where the human personality was debased and demolished before an oppressive regime. Arendt's view of totalitarianism's horrible originality has also been disputed by other writers who believe that totalitarianism has deeper roots. Peter Baehr, in his critique of totalitarianism notes:

totalitarianism is a perverted outgrowth of the Martin Luther-sanctioned authoritarian state, or an exaggerated legacy of tsarist intolerance. Or it might be argued that "totalitarian dictatorship" is ancient, prefigured in the Spartan state or the Roman imperial regime of Diocletian (2005: p. 2343).

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid

“If historical uniqueness is of importance, then Arendt’s critics are right to attack her use of the term” (Stanley 1987: p. 197) as she only applies her theory to two political systems of the twentieth century, Nazism and Stalinism. Thus, “a single counterexample would appear sufficient to satisfy the standards of falsification” (p. 197).

Arendt’s conclusion claims that “beginning, before it becomes a historical event, is the supreme capacity of man; politically, it is identical with man’s freedom” (2017: p. 629). And indeed, origin moments are important to her work, because they repudiate the mechanistic patterns of historicist thought at the time: “Arendt claimed that history as a discipline had become so wedded to theories of structural causation that it had little room for contingency and uniqueness” (Baehr 2002: p. 804). The problem with this line of thinking, however, is that its emphasis on unique origin moments means it struggles to explain how history seems to come full circle in the rediscovery of a work like TOOT. As Hawkes puts it, “literature has often been valued for its capacity to capture the supposed ‘essence’ of some prior period or epoch” (2002: p. 141). In a sense, Arendt’s work cannot account for how it does this. In turning away from historical patterns, it cannot explain its newfound relevance, hence it cannot explain its own success. This would suggest that a certain amount – or rather, a certain kind – of historicism is deeply implicated in presentist thinking.

In my previous chapters, I have argued against looking at historicist modes of interpretation in order to focus on how a fictional text (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*) is received by a critic in the present. This is largely due to the fact that fictional texts do not lose agency if they are stripped from their historical contexts. Indeed, texts do not speak at all “until and unless they are inserted into and perceived as part of specific discourse which impose their own shaping requirements... we choose the facts” (Hawkes 2002: p. 3). However, with regards to TOOT, a philosophical text that intermingles political theory, history

and psychology, the relevance and importance of the text to the present is directly connected, at least in part, to its historical claims. This begs the question—can we have presentism without historicism? In a certain respect, presentism considers a text autonomous from the historical and cultural circumstances in which it was produced and therefore, prioritises its reception in the critic's present. In this case history is not a vital concern. Additionally, the majority of work studied under this banner is fictional as it was popularised as a hermeneutic approach by Shakespeare scholars Hugh Grady and Terence Hawkes, whose initial concern was to “recognise the permanence of the present's role in all [their] dealings with the past” (2007: p. 3). Of course, these scholars agree that placing the burden of historical context on theatrical plays that are open to interpretation is not justified. Yet, even Grady argued that “a purely presentist approach, in which ‘history becomes a blank screen on which are only projected the shadows of the present’ is as unsatisfactory as that of the traditional historian...” (1996: p. 7-8). The ‘presentism vs historicism’ debate becomes a lot less straightforward once we recognise that there are texts where the history not only matters but holds the key to their ongoing afterlife in the present.

As against this, it could be argued that Hannah Arendt herself has written an essentially presentist work in *TOOT*. Alexandra Walsham has stated that “At root [presentism] ...deployed to describe an interpretation of history that is biased towards and coloured by present-day concerns, preoccupations and values” (2017: p. 213). Indeed, if his claim holds true, then *TOOT* arguably exhibits the main flaws and faults that critics have found in presentist scholarship. That is, Arendt's portrayal of totalitarianism as a radically new phenomenon of the twentieth century is a historically uninformed and naively presentist if not inaccurate depiction of previous histories. After all, Arendt brings so much of her own baggage to her work that her strive for objectivity in narrating historical events is at best a self-delusion. Hence, the chief lesson we can deduce from Arendt's mistakes is that you have to earn the right to be a presentist, through making sure your historical grounding is sound first. Because if the history is invalid, then any valuable judgements made by Arendt become questionable.

Despite all this, Arendt's TOOT has proven to surpass the confines of time as her newfound popularity amongst a post-Nazi generation suggests. Rita Felski asks: "why, in short, are we persuaded that we know more than the texts that precede us? The advantage of our hindsight is compensated for by their robustness, resilience, and continuing resonance" (Felski 2011: p. 579). This is the case with Arendt as she "theorized about the nature of totalitarian societies — how they work, what they prey on, and why they spring up" (Illing 2019). America is not in the throes of totalitarianism yet, "but the preconditions are there, namely a hollow and fractured society full of dislocated, angry people" (Illing 2019). Thus, despite its limitations, Arendt's work serves its purpose as a reminder of what could potentially occur if things do not take a drastic turn.

Overall, while there are some major flaws in Arendt's historical delineation, as well as the inability "to fully escape the discourse of European superiority in which she was trained and acculturated", the fact that her work stood the test of time and became highly popular amidst Trump's presidency suggests that texts have autonomy even when historical context stands against them (Owens 2017: p. 423). It would be easy to write TOOT off as racist, contradictory and vague but there are no unproblematic thinkers. "Franz Fanon held deeply sexist and homophobic views, yet he remains indispensable to critical studies of race and hence non-racist international theory" (p. 423). So, what we must do instead is read TOOT selectively and challenge certain assertions. What Arendt shows us, therefore, is perhaps the most valuable lesson of any of the exercises in critical presentism we have studied so far: that a text from the past can, in many respects, be at quite some variance from the values of the present, and even be so far removed from twenty-first century beliefs as to seem problematic or even reprehensible – and yet still be an important source of insight into the challenges of the present time all the same. Therefore, we must critically engage with Arendt's TOOT, as rejecting her work "may be to miss what Arendt got right, to miss certain things that nobody

else but she had fathomed. It would also forego certain insights that Arendt too was unable to imagine” (Owens 2017: p. 423).

## **Conclusion**

Brecht’s politically interventionist play, Orwell’s vision of a nightmarish future dystopia, and Arendt’s discussion of the haunting spectre of totalitarianism in the mid-twentieth century, all confront us now with a renewed sense of urgency. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four and Presentism*, the focus lies on the many ways that Orwell’s novel resonates when new patterns of authoritarianism emerge. The role of technology and surveillance in creating a rising totalitarian state is clearly foreshadowed in Orwell’s novel. But today, the true extent of how much surveillance is being conducted on civilisation far surpasses anything in Orwell’s wildest imagination, leaning closer to the creation of adapted authoritarianisms. In chapter 2: *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui and Presentism*, the question of Brecht’s renewed interest in the face of a Trump presidency is explored. While closely attached to its times, its satire and allegorical nature give it a long-lasting resonance. More explicitly, it has stirred global anxieties about populism and the resurgence of far-right politics. In Chapter 3, *The Origins of Totalitarianism: Presentism gone wrong?* Arendt’s first major work is explored for its relevance in the afterlife of the totalitarianisms of Stalin and Hitler. But while a spike in the sales of her book amidst Trump’s election depict Arendt’s renewed popularity, her racist views surrounding Africans and her belief in the unprecedented quality of totalitarianism in the twentieth century, challenge the credibility of her historical delineation.

With the election of their first black president, Barack Obama, many US citizens were mistakenly led to believe that the US was becoming a colour-blind, post-racial society. This myth was destroyed when Trump used blatant racist tropes in his presidential campaign to appeal to “white Americans who felt left behind by globalization and the shift to a post-industrial economy” (De La Torre 2018). Furthermore, under Trump, significant harm has been

inflicted on the democratic public sphere. His hateful rhetoric has provoked “society’s darkest impulses...to energize a range of extremist racist and anti-Semitic groups...” (Giroux 2017: p. 891). Not only is his rhetoric divisive, but his trade policies have enabled “mainstream politicians and the financial elite” to live in “a political and ethical bubble indifferent to the problems they have created for millions of Americans” (Giroux 2017: p. 22). But why is this relevant to the study of presentism?

The term presentism has been applied in this thesis to understand the relationship between the renewed interest of three texts amid Donald Trump’s election. What I have discerned from this research is that the approach in literary studies needs to be redefined in order to escape the pejorative connotations it carries in certain historicist circles. To begin with, I have redefined the relationship between presentism and history. I argue that it need not be antagonistic because the goals of each discipline differ; the historian wants to learn about history and the presentist wants to learn from it. The historian strives for pure research and the presentist aims for applied research. That is not to say that presentism is without its flaws. For instance, Arendt in her philosophical work, was unable to integrate the “violent imperial” roots of “racial hierarchies” in “her idealisation of the American republic” (Owens 2017: p. 422). “The consequences have been a deep chasm between her still prescient insights on the conditions of statelessness and the extremely limited resources in her political theory for analysing and resisting white supremacy” (p. 422). Thus, demonstrating her work is not exempt from historical blindness. This further explicates the importance of history in relation to presentism, because if the history is not credible, the work ceases to be fruitful to another time period.

Stanley Fish believes that on the one hand, you have academics “who know everything about the world yet have no say in the way it’s run; on the other hand, you have politicians running the world who know nothing about it” (Wilson 2019). In this thesis critical presentism indicates



a potential new way in which the study of literature can intersect with the political. For Orwell, politics could not be separated from the literary imagination: just look at how ardently Orwell criticises a society that is devoid of truth and liberal politics in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. As Gleason and Nussbaum cleverly put it,

Imaginative literature simultaneously provides a density of fact and a liberation from the factual. The counterfactual helps us to penetrate the world more deeply by focusing our attention on selected aspects of it; by revealing to us what is hidden in ordinary life; and by enabling us to think about the most difficult things without risk or penalty. (2005: p. 4).

Thus, we cannot separate politics from literature the same way we cannot separate presentism from any discussion of history. Perhaps, then, presentism isn't so much a literary theory or a critical method: arguably, it is a heightened state of consciousness, or even a way of being. Certainly, it has implications for both literature and politics that go far beyond the presidency of Donald Trump, or the study of these three mid-20th century texts. Consider, for example, this comment by Hugo Weaving, who took the title role in the recent Sydney revival of Brecht's *Arturo Ui*. Weaving stated:

I'm not going to go down the Trump road because it's sort of too ridiculously obvious. And actually it diminishes both the play and the character, if you just fix the character in a cartoon version of someone - one person we know (2018).

In other words, then, the presentist approach to literature and to culture is one that will reverberate long after President Trump vacates the White House, and long after his administration passes into history.

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