***Short communication***

**Inversion of realms: critical considerations of cultural conundrums in the work of Sheldon S. Wolin, Hannah Arendt and Ray Bradbury**

*Abstract*: This texts seeks to uncover the intellectual meanderings the broader thread that explores and links the concepts of totalitarianism, its inversion and the power of critical thinking in popular culture. Drawing on the writings of Sir Francis Bacon and Hannah Arendt read through the prism of one Ray Bradbury’s short stories, this text seeks to uncover some of the cognitive features of public perception as stimulated through fiction.

*Keywords*: totalitarianism, consumer society, critical thinking, English literature, fiction, philosophy of literature

**Introduction**

Grounded in the musings of Sir Francis Bacon on the ‘helps for the intellectual powers’ mediated through Habermas’ concept of communication in the public space, this text is concerned with analysing the concepts of inverted totalitarianism in the work of Sheldon S. Wolin in comparison with Hannah Arendt’s reflections on the materialisation of our conscience of perceived reality as human beings partake in the events that comprise life outside one’s own mind and beyond one’s own immediate life and private sphere as identified in a text by Ray Bradbury.

The underlying instrument of inquiry being examined in this paper is how reason and imagination can be exploited for the distribution of power for certain interest groups and this depends on the use and misuse of ideas and the kind of language that transmits the key tenets of the ideas in question and how they are translated in practical action through the application of knowledge of certain ideas and ideologies. Additionally, the manner in which reason is dependent on the strength and nature of the articulation of its forms also features as an important avenue of discussion of this paper.

**Communication and cognition in the public realm**

The materialisation of one’s conscience is not an accidental act and this process involves a number of facets, one very important aspect of which is the role played by what Jürgen Habermas has referred to as the ‘public sphere’. He has described this as ‘a network for communicating information and points of view’ which are seen as ‘streams of communication’ that are ‘filtered and synthesized in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specific public opinions’ (Habermas, 2012: 360). Such a process takes place within a context known as the ‘lifeworld’ which provides the medium as much as the public sphere provides the occasion in conjunction with the means of communicative action through natural language. Taken together, these elements give form and function to the ability to comprehend what Habermas calls ‘everyday communicative practice’ (Habermas, 2012: 360).

A common reserve of known discourse practices and cultural norms can be found in the above mentioned “lifeworld” and within this community repository it is possible to locate ‘specialized systems of action and knowledge’. On closer examination of Habermas’ assertion, one finds that the public sphere can be divided into three main categories; the first is concerned with the general reproductive functions of the so-called “lifeworld” and this includes notions such as religion, education and family which are designed to give form to social reproduction and social integration. The second category pertains to everyday communicative practice including disciplines such as science and notions of morality and art that are purposed with exploring ‘truth, rightness or veracity.’ The final category is tasked with encompassing issues stemming from the emergence of the social sphere brough into existence by communicative action (Habermas, 2012: 360).

Drawing upon the what has been termed ‘topically specific public opinions’, one could argue that the creation of such topics requires not only information, but also rigorous debate of ideas and the question of the sources and functions of such knowledge. For this purpose I wish to examine remarks given by Hannah Arendt in a text titled ‘The Crisis Character of Modern Society’ which appeared as part of the collection *Thinking Without a Banister: Essays in Understanding, 1953-75*. In these remarks, Arendt challenged the interested observer to probe one’s own conscience and reflect on existing bodies of knowledge. She remarked that:

Particular questions must receive particular answers; and if the series in which we have lived since the beginning of the century can teach us anything at all, it is, I think, the simple fact that there are no general standards to determine our judgments unfailingly, no general rules under which to subsume the particular cases with any degree of certainty.

The crisis has often been defined as a breakdown of such rules and standards and this is not because we have become all of a sudden so wicked as no longer to recognize what former times have believed to be eternal verities, but on the contrary, because these traditional verities seem no longer to apply. As Tocqueville noted: **when the past ceases to throw its light upon the future, the mind of man wanders in obscurity.**  (Kohn, 2018: 328)

Quite evidently here, Arendt alerts the reader to the enduring value of historical knowledge and the insights it provides us for future challenges. While we cannot derive any guarantees from that kind of knowledge, it can supply us with a refined sense of perspective and meaningful insights which can be used to gauge the dimensions of existing and future events. Without it, the possibility of forming real insights is reduced very significantly, as she notes:

This does not mean, of course, that the past has ceased to exist and to be relevant, but that it has lost its unquestioned validity. And though I very much doubt that the mind of man must then wander in darkness and obscurity, I must admit that **the future, by the same token, has lost much of its always very precarious predictability**. (…) (Kohn, 2018: 328)

Being in such a position of having some fruitful avenues of insight dissolved leaves us with a severely reduced set of options and this creates further difficulties as we turn to:

Moral truth, be it derived from philosophy or from religion, resembles more the validity of agreements than the compelling validity of scientific statements. These agreements determine the action of all when they have become mores, morality, customs with their own standards of conduct that finally become self-evident. We all know how many centuries it took until men could say that all men are born, that this is a self-evident truth. This, too, is in fact, an agreement; Jefferson said we hold this to be true, and he added the word self-evident in the hope of making an agreement – “we hold” – more compelling. (…) (Kohn, 2018: 330)

Moral truth is frequently a hazardous topic for rigorous minds but does contain many clues as to the contours and motivations of those who resolutely follow religious mores and other social strictures. With the passage of considerable lengths of time, established rules of conduct, both in behaviour and thinking become acceptable standards and thus become seen as natural or indeed, ‘self-evident’. American founding father Thomas Jefferson prudently inserted “we hold” into the American Constitution to demonstrate the nature of the status the clause had and retains as stemming from strong belief which stands little chance of being defeated by disdain or disagreement. It is an enduring symbol of principle.

**Fostering Critical Awareness**

A short story, ‘The Veldt’ by Ray Bradbury serves as a case in point of how writers can contribute to building critical awareness amongst the public. Critical awareness bestows citizens the ability to question apparently “self-evident” truths which may in fact be wrong.

In Bradbury’s short story the reader is presented with a broad portrait of a family consisting of a husband and wife (George and Lydia Hadley) and their two children who live in a modern house with every technological convenience. Such is the level of convenience their home has been modelled under the so-called ‘Happy-life home.’ Bradbury paints a picture of a sleek, smooth, computer-controlled home environment:

‘…this house which clothed and fed and rocked them to sleep and played and sang and was good to them. Their approach sensitized a switch somewhere and the nursery light flicked on when they came within ten feet of it. Similarly, behind them, in the halls, lights went on and off as they left them behind, with a soft automaticity…’ (Bradbury, 2010: 239-240)

Given the strongly-consumerist tinge of the society in which they live, families are pressured to indulge their whims for the latest gadgets, particularly if it is to placate their restless children. Thus, we see that: ‘They stood on the thatched floor of the nursery. It was forty feet across by forty feet long and thirty feet high; it had cost half again as much as the rest of the house. “But nothing’s too good for our children,” George had said (Bradbury, 2010: 240).

Complacency and idleness have replaced schedules and activity in Bradbury’s dystopian technology-dominated world. People are unable to find a suitable role for themselves and fall into a state of disengagement that damages the fabric of the “lifeworld”. Lydia Hadley shares her frustrations in this respect: “Maybe I don’t have enough to do. Maybe I have to think too much. Why don’t we shut the whole house off for a few days and take a vacation?” Her suggestion is quickly met with a meek, if suspicious response from her husband who exclaims: “But I thought that’s why we bought this house, so we wouldn’t have to do anything?” (Bradbury, 2010: 242) Distraction and idleness are the primary objectives of technology for the people.

As the story progresses it gradually becomes apparent that the house contains a high-resolution screen in the children’s nursery whose content reflects the thoughts in their children’s minds, which may be inspired by what they read and other sources of inspiration. Instead as serving as forum to relax and unwind, the parlour represents a distracting-device, even an alternative forum free from the disturbances and inconveniences of the real-world outside.

On one occasion George and Lydia go looking for their children and wander into the nursery parlour for that purpose. They are immediately greeted with a hyper-realistic scene from the African bush, referred to here as ‘the Veldt’. Such is the power of the technology sustaining the images, sounds and smells, the artificial environment appears to be as real as the outside world. A foreboding sense of danger begins to envelope the couple as the scene of a pair lions seeking refreshments at some distance changes to the lions’ approach at speed as if to attack them. Reaching safety with only moments to spare, the exasperated couple are disturbed by their experience and attempt to reassure themselves:

“Walls, Lydia, rmember; crystal walls, that’s all they are. Oh, they look real, I must admit – Africa in your parlour – but it’s all dimensional superactionary, supersensitive color film and mental tape film behind glass screens. It’s all odorophonics and sonics, Lydia. Here’s my handkerchief.” (Bradbury, 2010: 241)

Discerning readers will realise how immersive this artificial experience is, but will also note just how effective it is in fooling its users into believing – even if just for a few moments – that what it depicts is actually real. This delusion causes a gradual breakdown in judgement and creates a fluid boundary between fantasy and fact, where one could easily be mistaken for the other. Wendy and Peter – the couple’s children are depicted as being completely addicted to the parlour. Drastic action has to be taken by the parents to regain control over their children’s emotions and free-time, with the only effective option remaining that of imposing a temporary ban on using the facilities:

As for the nursery, thought George Hadley, it won’t hurt for children to be locked out of it awhile. Too much of anything isn’t good for anyone. And it was clearly indicated that the children had been spending a little too much time on Africa. That sun. He could feel it on his neck, still, like a hot paw. And the lions. And the smell of blood. Remarkable how the nursery caught the telepathic emanations of the children’s minds and created life to fill their every desire. The children thought lions, and there were lions. The children thought zebras, and there were zebras. Sun – sun. Giraffes – giraffes. Death and death. (Bradbury, 2010: 243)

The powerful apparent realism of the parlour presents a disturbing picture of the dangers of technology and just how harmful it can be in indulging the worst of human tendencies including violent ideations. Such is the scale of dysfunctional thinking caused and worsened by the parlour in the children, they are unable to overcome their addition to it. Eventually, the situation comes to a head and they demand access to the parlour room. Once again, they are met with a refusal and they trick their parents into entering the facility and bar their escape. The reader is given a sketch how matters conclude:

Mr. and Mrs. George Hadley beat at the door. “Now, don’t be ridiculous children. It’s time to go. Mr. McClean’ll be here in a minute and…”

And then they heard the sounds.

The lions on three sides of them, in the yellow veldt grass, padding through the dry straw, rumbling and roaring in their throats.

The lions.

Mr. Hadley looked at his wife and they turned and looked back at the beast edging slowly forward, crouching, tails stiff.

Mr. and Mrs. Hadley screamed.

And suddenly they realized why those other screams had sounded familiar.

 (Bradbury, 2010: 252)

The author later reveals more details which leaves the reader in little doubt as to the terminal fate of the once-happy couple. It would seem that the children have been overcome by their addiction to technology and this has caused them to rebel in the most savage manner possible. Bradbury offers readers a sobering reminder of the acute dangers of allowing technology too great a role in our lives. Past practice offers lessons for the future.

**The cultural ballast of contemporary values**

Arendt was no stranger in defending the value of learning from the past. She was also quite cognisant of the fact that a crisis of confidence has caused a rift between generations and different elements of society. In a discussion with John H. Knowles, MD, president of the Rockefeller Foundation in 1972 in the company of fellow panellists Paul Freund, Irving Kristol and Hans Morgenthau, Arendt cautioned against complacency. She observed that:

We can no longer afford to take that which was good in the past and simply call it our heritage, to discard the bad and simply think of it as a dead load which by itself time will bury in oblivion. The subterranean stream of Western history has finally come to the surface and usurped the dignity of our tradition. This is the reality in which we live. And this is why all efforts to escape from the grimeness of the present into nostalgia for a still intact past, or into the anticipated oblivion of better future, are vain. (Kohn, 2018: 439)

Critically aware citizens are invited to think carefully about the practice of selective recollection of events and air-brushing history leaving behind only what is regarded as positive. Doing so, it is claimed, is prejudicial to society in the long-term since fervent denials of certain events or periods will eventually fail and the harm caused further augments the disintegration of tradition. A transparent and comprehensive acknowledgement of such events creates the possibility that future generations are not necessarily doomed to repeat the same mistakes due to ignorance and due to foolhardy attempts to consign inconvenient facts to the belly of black-hole. We know from reasoned empirically-inspired accounts from specialised physicists that not event light can escape blackholes scattered throughout the cosmos, it is possible to detect x-rays escaping from such celestial bodies. Similarly, while propaganda and ignorance may mask the existence of the knowledge of certain inconvenient facts, their presence in history eventually manifest themselves beyond the borders of the site of their original confinement and whose effects cannot be ignored.

Ultimately, an appeal must be made to each individual to build and defend their own values. As Arendt so right noted: ‘values are personal, like spirt. They cannot be manipulated or engineered’ (Kohn, 2018: 439). This, however, does not guarantee that ‘contours and motivations’ of people’s behaviour will not change over time due to certain experiences and circumstances. Therefore, there are eras and situations in which it is advisable to create a safe haven for discussion and participation to make it possible to bring about a renewal of values. Bradbury’s thrust of imagination in ‘The Veldt’ permits interested observers to grasp the suffocating nature of all-encompassing technology on the human experience. This story offers readers a meaningful opportunity to confront what have termed ‘certain inconvenient facts’ and an opportunity to explore ways of overcoming the ‘site of their original confinement’.

**Expression of values through democratic means?**

A public discussion about values frequently involves the participation in debates about official policy during the course election campaigns as part of the democratic process. This may well be one of the most common manifestations of public debate on the political nature of the state and the wider implications this has for the community at national and international level. We can see this logic sustained in the work of the late Sheldon Wolin in what he termed ‘fugitive democracy’ which he asserted has to with ‘a project with the political potentialities of ordinary citizens, that is with their possibilities for becoming political beings through the self-discovery of common concerns and of modes of action for realizing them’ (Wolin, 1994: 100).

In an ideal world, where democracies function within normal limits with reasonable actors driving its operations, it is possible and commonly observed that political agency is generally tasked with the organization of power with security of the state occupying a preeminent position in the list of priorities. Such a function also entails supervising the promotion and operation of systems that protect the well-being of citizens, deliberation on social conflicts, the sanctioning of rule-breakers and the general maintenance of society as a whole. *It is at this point which we can detect the crystallization of a cultural conundrum or perhaps a political contradiction that involves a balancing act for the state in its role as protector of the general well-being as against its role as promoter of a dynamic political systems that incentivises competition in both the commercial and political arenas.*

Seeking to apply a remedy to ameliorate this contradiction, the state promotes policies that stimulate the political education of its citizens to create a situation whereby they are suitably aware and inculcated with ‘the virtues of loyalty, obedience, patriotism, and sacrifice in wartime’. All in all, this has the effect of merging self-interest with the power of the state which in turn diminishes citizens’ interest in active participation in political affairs (Wolin, 1994: 102). Over time, the connection between the citizenry and the political decision-making process becomes ever more remote in a manner Wolin described as a situation whereby:

Voting merges into a fluent process whose illusory connection with the demos is prolonged by the periodic election of senators and representatives and by the continuous commentary manufactured by the media. The result is an illusion of perpetual political motion launched initially by democratic elections. Meanwhile a parallel politics of process – legislative, administrative, judicial, and military – flows continuously of its own accord. (…) (Wolin, 1994: 103)

Wolin’s observation leads us to the conclusion that if such a process is left entirely unchecked, citizens are effectively reduced to mere spectators in a supposedly democratic system where their interests are generally superficially mentioned but materially ignored. As citizens are increasingly distanced and distracted from the meaningfully deliberative-process of official policy making, corporate interests are faced with fewer obstacles to promote their own agenda and the opportunities to present their objectives to law-makers. Wolin further elaborates on the exact nature of what issues face the citizens in their attempts to represent their own interests as against corporate demands on the central state:

The so-called problem of contemporary democracy is not, as is often alleged, that the ancient conception of democracy is incompatible with the size and scale of modern political societies. Rather it is that any conception of democracy grounded in the citizen-as-actor and politics-as-episodic is incompatible with the modern choice of the State as the fixed centre of political life and the corollary conception of politics as continuous activity organized around a single dominating objective, control of or influence over the State apparatus. (…) (Wolin, 1994: 111)

Thus, it is becoming ever-clearer, that there is a significant deficit in terms of influence and understanding between the citizen and the state, particularly in the case of the United States, which is the context that the late Sheldon Wolin constructed his analysis. It would appear that there is an inverse relation dynamic at play between the public and private interest; as the priority of the latter reach the ascendency the former sees further erosion in importance and impact.

While we can highlight a decline in the quality of democracy in the Western world, the general conditions of governance in this part of the world remain under the control of voting populations. On this matter, David and Yongjun (2024) opine that despite the increasing deterioration in the quality of democratic institutions up until 2023, the majority of the world’s countries can continue to be regarded as democratic in nature. They also cite a 2018 report from Freedom House which examined the then state of democracies around the world in which it was noted that the state of the world’s democracies were regarded as being “in retreat” for the thirteenth consecutive year (David and Yongjun, 2024: 225).

The Freedom House report thus demonstrates that the possibility and actual occurrence of a deterioration and reduction in the incidence of democracy across the world is a real phenomenon. It would seem likely that the only real safeguard against preventing and indeed reversing such trends is the establishment and defence of a strong civil society which provides a hospital environment for critically aware citizens and encourages debate and discussion. Examples of this include the operation of civic groups that encourage debate of public issues and they have the function of creating a situation whereby they supply ‘an organizational counterweight to strong state authority by giving citizens space to collectively organize without the state’ (David and Yongjun, 2024: 226). Discussing groups facilitate the building of critical awareness and there are numerous examples of the application of reading groups that encourage greater levels of literacy which build critical thinking skills in order to further the development of this so-called ‘organizational counterweight.’ Many authors have dealt with critical topics such as the over-dependence of people on certain comfort behaviours such as overconsumption of certain pleasures, ethics and the role of technology in the quality of life of human beings.

**Inverted totalitarianism: usurpation of traditional safeguards**

In a well-received book titled *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* published at the beginning of the last major world-financial crisis in 2008, Sheldon Wolin issued a stark warning of allowing corporate interests to completely dominate the agenda of the state that would ensure the degradation of the structures of accountability in western liberal democracies. Wolin (2017) affirms that:

An inverted totalitarian regime, precisely because of its inverted character, emerges not as an abrupt regime change or dogmatic rupture but as evolutionary, as evolving out of a continuing and increasingly unequal struggle between and unrealized democracy and an antidemocratic that dare not speak its name. Consequently, while we recognize familiar elements of the system – popular elections, free political parties, the three branches of government, a bill of rights – if we re-cognize, invert, we see its actual operations as different from its formal structure. Its elements have antecedents but no precedents, a confluence of tendencies and pragmatic choices made with scant concern for long-term consequences. (Wolin, 2017: 213)

The public interest, specifically that of ordinary citizens is seen to decline under such a regime even though its transformation is gradual and thus not immediately noticeable. In the face of declining participation and reduced influence, public expectation and understand of democracy becomes far more malleable and ultimately controlled as the education system is privatized or as Wolin put it:

From a democratic perspective the effects of privatization are counter-revolutionary; but from a capitalist viewpoint they are revolutionary. Privatization of education signifies not an abstract transfer of public to private but a takeover of the means to shape the minds of coming generations, perhaps to blend popular education and media culture so as to better manage democracy. (…)

(Wolin, 2017: 213)

Under such circumstances, the process and notion of democracy itself becomes a mere pale imitation of its former self since its participates are largely indoctrinated and the final outcome heavily conditioned by corporate interests promoted through mass-media contexts such as television, newspapers and online webcasting. Broadcasting and video content inevitably acquire more and more power to transmit content and inculcate values across large tracts of the population – which we see illustrated clearly in Bradbury’s work - over great distances directly controlled not by the state, but by private enterprises who frequently ally themselves with particular causes. It is under these circumstances that spectacle itself becomes the driving force of the metanarrative: events happen, but no particular message other than the need for some kind of ‘security’ is discussed which is then used to further condition public opinion.

In a text titled ‘Intentional Ignorance and It’s Uses’, Noam Chomsky highlights a number of inconsistencies and contradictions of established public policy priorities in the United States at the onset of the new millennium. An example of the scale of the power now enjoyed by the centralised superstate (i.e. the USA) is its ability to impose its own value system on international states far from its own borders. Certain well-known historical events are appropriated by ruling authorities to manipulate public opinion in order to create more agreeable conditions for the propagation of its preferred policy, particularly in the area of military intervention in other nations. Chomsky recalls the remarks of former Czech-president Vaclav Havel, in the *New York Review of Books* in June 1999 in which he stated: “The “enlightened efforts of generations of democrats, the terrible experience of two world wars, and the evolution of civilization have finally brought humanity to the recognition that human beings are more important than the state.” This view was largely idealistic but has since been manipulated by governments for their own ends under the premise that the “idealistic New World (is) bent on ending inhumanity” and in this task they are joined by their British allies. Within such a system of logic, the “enlightened state” has been freed from outdated rules of conduct which now permits it to use military force where it “believes it to be just” particularly when modern notions of justice demand that they punish “the defiant, the indolent and the miscreant” who are justly regarded as “the disorderly elements” of the world. Such a cause is taken to be noble and thus no meaningful justification is even required and those who seek explanations are quickly vilified for such insolence (Arnove, 2008: 300).

**Recovery of critical faculties?**

Where can dissidents of the official line and those who disagree with such unforgiving hegemonic narratives seek inspiration to challenge a seemingly impenetrable argument? The issue of the abuse of power and the attempt to control public opinion, is not, of course, a new problem. Dissidence and disagreement have persisted for as long as organised public structures have been in existence. Combating such an inhospitable narrative would benefit from a reading of Sir Francis Bacon’s *The Advancement of Learning, Book Two*. Bacon offers a number of observations that serve as advice to those who wish to penetrate the armour of a seemingly invincible agency. Unsurprisingly, the possession of knowledge plays an important part in this strategy, as Bacon observes:

For the Method of Tradition, I see it hath moved a controversy in our time. But as in civil business, if there be a meeting and men fall at words there is commonly an end of the matter for that time and not proceeding at all; so in learning, where there is much controversy there is many times little enquiry. For this part of knowledge of Method seemeth to me so weakly enquired as I shall report it deficient.

Method hath been placed, and that not amiss in Logic, as a part of Judgement: for as the doctrine of Syllogisms comprehendeth the rules of judgment upon that which is invented, so the doctrine of Method containeth the rules of judgment upon that which is to be delivered; for judgment procedeth Delivery as it followeth Invention. Neither is the method or the nature of the tradition material only to the use of knowledge, but likewise to the progression of knowledge, the wisdom of the Tradition is that which inspireth the felicity of continuance and proceeding. (…)

(Vickers, 2008: 233)

Bacon recognises the central role played by the effective deployment of sophisticated vocabulary which makes it possible to probe systems of thinking and penetrate the logic of arguments. Effective deployment of sophisticated language coupled with appropriate logic informs good judgement and ultimately creates conditions for the creation of new ideas that further new goals. Much value can also be derived from existing older bodies of knowledge and this can provide a sound basis for new departures. Bradbury’s ‘The Veldt’ – as a short story, offers a succinct text that time-restricted and distracted citizens could indeed find the occasion to read and be made aware of certain dangers of a society overly-dominated by technology.

Further progress can also be made with sufficient courage to recognise flaws and imperfections and to move beyond them, where:

Another diversity of Method there is, which hath some affinity with the former, used in some cases by the discretion of the ancients but disgraced since the impostures of many vain persons, who have made it as a false light for their counterfeit merchandises; and that is, Enigmatical and Disclosed. The pretence whereof is to remove the vulgar capacities from being admitted to the secrets of knowledges and to reserve them to selected auditors, or wits of such sharpness as can pierce the veil. (…)

(Vickers, 2008: 234)

Bacon suggests with good reason that committed observers should seek to challenge seemingly consistent accounts of things and delve deeper in search of more complete answers. It is only with such an abiding commitment coupled with the ability to recognise and reject falsehoods that true progress in acquiring meaningful and useful insights can happen. Indeed, logic and language must be put to maximum use since:

The duty and office of Rhetoric is to apply Reason to Imagination for the better moving of the will. For we see Reason is disturbed in the administration thereof by three means: Illaqueation or Sophism, which pertains to Logic; by Imagination or Impression, which pertains to Rhetoric; and by Passion or Affection, which pertains to Morality. And as in negotiation with others men are wrought by cunning, by importunity, and by vehemency; so in this negotiation within ourselves; men are undermined by Inconsequences solicited and importuned by Impressions or Observations, and transported by Passions.

Neither is the nature of man so unfortunately built, as that those powers and arts should have force to disturb reason, and not to establish and advance it: for the end Logic is to teach a form of argument to secure reason, and not entrap it. (…)

 (Vickers, 2008: 238)

George Hadley’s attempt to recover some kind of reason and release from a drowned-out existence of entertainment and excitement in ‘The Veldt’ manifests itself where he remarks: ‘…And the whole damn house dies as of here and now. The more I see of the mess we’ve put ourselves in, the more it sickens me. We’ve been contemplating our mechanical, electronic novels for too long. My God, how we need a breath of honest air!” (Bradbury, 2010: 250).

Ultimately, Bradbury’s appeal for clear, unimpeded thinking can be allied with Bacon’s sensible appeal to make the best use of art of eloquence in coalition with reason to supply the imagination with sufficient material to fashion the necessary ideas that can then be fruitfully applied to a myriad of circumstances and problems. We must, however, exercise a due degree of restraint and caution lest emotional passions overcome our faculties of investigation that rely so heavily on logical inference.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, I wish to turn once more to Hannah Arendt in her discussion of ‘The Public and the Private Realm: the common’ in her well-known work *The Human Condition*. Arendt offers a powerful warning of the power of the public realm on private life:

What makes society so difficult to bear is not the number of people; involved or at beset not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to related them and to separate them. The weirdness of this situation resembles a spiritualistic séance where a number of people gathered round a table might suddenly through some magic trick, see the table vanish from their midst, so that two persons sitting opposite each other were no longer separated but also would be entirely unrelated to each other by anything tangible. (…) (Arendt, 2018: 52-53)

The cultural conundrum we now face is the proliferation of technology that favours and encourages solitary life: gaming as an individual in a virtual world, digital devices which distract each individual as they devour the contents of their screens to the detriment of ordinary conversation in the company of others. Arendt’s allusion to the sudden loss of a table – a previously powerful symbol of unity of a family over a meal or friends in a social setting has now been radically reduced to negligible proportions. Our humanity is being increasingly diluted and thus atomised individuals are easier to distract and manipulate. The narrator in The Veldt notes the strange feeling of when people finally switch off their electronic devices and this can be a dramatic shock to the system: ‘…It felt like a mechanical cemetery. None of the humming hidden energy of machines waiting to function at the tap of a button’ (Bradbury, 2010: 251).

The challenge is to find ‘anything tangible’ that can reactivate a sense of social connectedness and critical awareness of our inverted realms so that we may perhaps seek a return to what Bacon noted ‘to apply Reason to Imagination for the better moving of the will.’ Perhaps only then will we find ourselves in a position to reverse the inversion and clobber the conundrum.

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