

## POLITICS AS USUAL: Soma in the electronic age

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

Given the current political climate ? especially in light of Putin's recent huge electoral ?victory? ? I thought it might be worthwhile to re-read all the frightening dystopic novels of my youth ? Aldous Huxley's ?Brave New World? (a favourite), Burgess' ?A Clockwork Orange?, Atwood's ?The Handmaid's Tale? and, of course, the big daddy of them all, Orwell's ?1984?.

Honourable mentions also to Orwell's other masterpiece ?Animal Farm? and Goldring's ?Lord of the Flies?. (As a side note, if you like sci fi and liked Lord of Flies, you would love Robert A. Heinlen's ?Tunnel in the Sky?)

Why the depressing reading list? If you're sensing a theme, it's because I feel right now like we are existing in a bit of a netherworld, where objective reality no longer exists, where facts don't matter and where the winner of a contest ? or an election ? is whomever the powers that be decide it is before the contest is even held.

If there is an election at all, as was witnessed by the decision in China recently to revise their constitution such that the President is president for life?

Putin's electoral ?victory? is another case in point. No real challengers to his campaign for re-election except for those that posed no real threat at all. Actual competition was squelched and silenced in myriad ways, many of them allegedly violent. But, a show was needed, so there were still ?challengers? to his campaign. Must keep up the illusion that folks have a say in the process of governing. And that's what government and leadership is, in many, many parts of the world ? an illusion. We have been taught for generations that everyone is equal, but for most that isn't the case, actually. To quote Orwell's Animal Farm, ?All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.?

Can we be that smug about the sanctity and strength of our own democratic institutions? I'm not so sure. Yes, we all have the right to vote in elections at every level of government. And yes, we have the right to express our political views no matter how ill-informed they may be without fear of being detained or worse. We can put signs on our lawns supporting this candidate or that without worrying about a knock on the door in the middle of the night.

However, participation in these processes, these bedrock democratic processes, is under threat in this all-encompassing digital age. We are being manipulated on a truly massive scale.

There is strong evidence to suggest that voters in the US presidential election as well as Britain's Brexit vote were clearly and directly influenced to vote one way and not another as determined by those that bought access to their personal information.

It was reported this past weekend that a data mining firm used the personal information of literally millions upon millions of people to affect a predetermined outcome in both races. As the president of the data firm said, smirking as he spoke (and I'm paraphrasing), ?facts don't win elections, emotions do?.

That is truly frightening.

We now have elections where the person who seeks to lead through informed, impassioned beliefs loses and the person spouting jingoistic gibberish wins. Why? I think we know the answer. We're being fed a steady diet of junkfood information ?It's easy to swallow, doesn't cost much and there's an awful lot of it ? but it's making us all addled as a consequence.

Soma for the masses indeed?Huxley must be spinning in his grave.