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THE CHILD AS INDEX OF CONTROL: TOTALITARIAN CONSCIOUSNESS AND MECHANISMS OF SURVEILLANCE IN DYSTOPIAN FICTION (ISHIGURO, BURGESS, MCCARTHY, ATWOOD)

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Abstract: In dystopian fiction the child is rarely a marginal figure. Because childhood is the period in which a self is formed, it is the first territory a totalitarian order seeks to occupy and the last one it can fully secure. This article examines how the figure of the child articulates totalitarian consciousness and mechanisms of control in four Anglophone dystopias: Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005), Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), read alongside its sequel *The Testaments* (2019). The study combines close reading with a comparative-typological method. It draws on Foucault's theory of disciplinary power and biopolitics, Althusser's concept of interpellation, Arendt's account of totalitarianism and Agamben's notion of "bare life". Five analytic categories were applied to each text: the child's institutional site, the mode of control, the narrative perspective, the form of internalisation, and the space left for resistance. The analysis identifies four distinct models. Ishiguro presents the *pedagogical-biopolitical* child, raised for organ donation and governed through a curriculum of half-knowledge. Burgess presents the *behaviourist-corrective* child, whose adolescent violence becomes the pretext for the state's conditioning of the will. McCarthy presents the *post-state ethical* child, who survives the collapse of all institutions and becomes the last bearer of moral law. Atwood presents the *reproductive-proprietary* child, a resource the regime confiscates, redistributes and indoctrinates. Across all four texts the child functions as an index of control: the degree to which a regime has colonised childhood measures the depth of its totalitarian ambition. The same figure also marks the limit of that ambition, since each novel locates its residual hope in a child's capacity for memory, choice or care.

Keywords: dystopia, childhood, totalitarianism, biopolitics, surveillance, interpellation, Ishiguro, Burgess, McCarthy, Atwood.

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1. Introduction

Totalitarian power, in its literary representation, is never satisfied with controlling adult behaviour; it aims to manufacture the consciousness from which behaviour springs. For this reason the child occupies a strategic position in dystopian fiction. Childhood is the stage at which language, values and self-perception are formed, and therefore the stage at which a regime can install its categories most deeply. The Hitler Youth and the Soviet cult of Pavlik Morozov, the boy celebrated for denouncing his father, are historical reminders that twentieth-century dictatorships treated children as both instruments and targets of ideological work.

The classical dystopias already registered this. In Zamyatin's *We* (1924) children are raised by the state's "Child-Rearing Factory"; in Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) infants are conditioned to hate books and flowers before they can speak; in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) the Parsons children, enrolled in the Spies, eventually denounce their own father. These episodes established a lasting topos: the child as the regime's most perfect product and most dangerous informer.

Later dystopias complicate this topos. They no longer show only the indoctrinated child but also the child as biological material, as a correctional subject, as the survivor of a world without institutions, and as property. Scholarship on dystopia has examined control, surveillance and resistance at length (Moylan, 2000; Baccolini & Moylan, 2003; Claeys, 2017), and the individual novels studied here each have a large critical literature. Yet comparative studies that treat the child figure as a *systematic* lens on control across different dystopian modes remain rare. Criticism of *Never Let Me Go* tends to focus on clone ethics and care (Whitehead, 2011; Black, 2009); criticism of *A Clockwork Orange* on free will and language; criticism of *The Road* on apocalypse and fatherhood (Cooper, 2011; Kunsa, 2009); and criticism of Atwood on gender and reproduction (Howells, 2005). The child as a shared structural element across these texts has received less attention.

This article addresses that gap. Its aim is to identify how the figure of the child articulates totalitarian consciousness and mechanisms of control in four novels by Ishiguro, Burgess, McCarthy and Atwood, and to build a typology from the comparison. It poses three research questions:

1. **RQ1.** Through which institutional and discursive mechanisms does each regime attempt to shape or appropriate the child?
2. **RQ2.** How does the narrative perspective (the child's own voice, a retrospective adult voice or an external focaliser) affect the representation of internalised control?
3. **RQ3.** What possibilities for resistance, if any, does each text locate in the child, and what does this reveal about the limits of totalitarian power?

The working hypothesis is that the child functions in all four texts as an *index of control*. The extent to which a regime has captured childhood measures the depth of its domination, while the child's residual capacity for memory, choice or care marks the point where domination fails.

2. Materials and Methods

The corpus consists of five novels by four authors. They were selected because each represents a different mode of dystopia and a different relation between the child and power, while all four authors write in English and belong to the post-war canon.

Table 1. Research corpus

Author	Novel (first ed.)	Dystopian mode	Principal child figures

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Author	Novel (first ed.)	Dystopian mode	Principal child figures
Anthony Burgess	*A Clockwork Orange* (1962)	Near-future authoritarian welfare state	Alex (15) and his gang; the "droogs" of chapter 21
Margaret Atwood	*The Handmaid's Tale* (1985); *The Testaments* (2019)	Theocratic totalitarianism (Gilead)	Offred's lost daughter; Agnes and Daisy (Nicole); Baby Nicole
Kazuo Ishiguro	*Never Let Me Go* (2005)	Counterfactual biopolitical society (England, 1990s)	Kathy H., Ruth, Tommy and the Hailsham students
Cormac McCarthy	*The Road* (2006)	Post-apocalyptic collapse of the state	"The boy"; the little boy he glimpses; the infant on the spit

The two Atwood novels are treated as one unit, since *The Testaments* develops from the inside the child-rearing system that *The Handmaid's Tale* describes from outside. Classical dystopias (Zamyatin, Huxley, Orwell) serve as a reference background but are not objects of analysis.

The analysis rests on four complementary theories of power.

- Disciplinary power and biopolitics (Foucault, 1977; 1978). Power that works through institutions such as the school, the prison and the clinic, producing "docile bodies" through surveillance and normalisation, and power that manages life at the level of population. This frame is applied to Hailsham, the Ludovico Technique and Gilead's reproductive system.
- Interpellation (Althusser, 1971). Ideology recruits individuals as subjects by "hailing" them; schools are the dominant ideological state apparatus. This frame explains how children come to recognise themselves in the identities the regime assigns.
- Totalitarianism (Arendt, 1951). Totalitarian rule seeks to transform human nature itself and to destroy spontaneity, the capacity to begin something new. Arendt links this capacity to natality, which makes the newborn a political problem for any total regime.
- Bare life (Agamben, 1998). Life that can be killed without the killing counting as a crime, included in the political order only through its exclusion. This frame is applied to the clones and to the children of *The Road*.

The study also uses childhood studies, particularly the argument that "the child" is a cultural construction shaped by adult needs (Ariès, 1962; Rose, 1984), and Edelman's (2004) critique of the child as the guarantor of a political future.

The study combines close reading of the primary texts with a comparative-typological procedure. Each novel was read against five analytic categories:

1. **Institutional site:** where the child is shaped (school, prison/clinic, family, household, or no institution at all).
2. **Mode of control:** the dominant technique (pedagogy, conditioning, ideology, confiscation, violence, scarcity).
3. **Narrative perspective:** whose voice and memory frame the child.
4. **Internalisation:** how far the child accepts the regime's categories as its own.
5. **Resistance potential:** what forms of refusal, memory or ethical action the child retains.

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The results of each reading were then compared to derive a typology. Quotations from the primary texts are kept short and are given by chapter or part rather than page, as editions vary. The study is interpretive and does not claim statistical generalisation.

3. Results

The five analytic categories produced four distinct configurations of the child and power. They are presented below in the order of the typology rather than of publication, moving from the most institutionalised form of control to the least.

Hailsham is an idyllic boarding school, and that is precisely its function. The students are clones raised to supply organs; their lives are planned to end in "completion" after a series of donations. Power here is not exercised through visible violence. It works through the ordinary devices of a school: timetables, weekly medical checks, prohibitions on smoking, art lessons, collections and "Exchanges".

In Burgess *A Clockwork Orange* the behaviourist-corrective child Alex is fifteen when the novel begins. His world contains a failing family, a school he ignores, the State Jail and finally the clinic where the Ludovico Technique is applied. Unlike the Hailsham students, Alex is not produced by the state; he is the product of its absence. His violence and his invented argot, *Nadsat*, mark a youth subculture the adult world can neither read nor govern.

In *The Road* there are no institutions at all. The state, the school and the economy have vanished after an unnamed catastrophe. The boy, born after the disaster, has never known the old world. This makes the novel a limit case for the present study: it shows what remains of control when the controlling apparatus itself has disappeared.

Gilead is built around a fertility crisis, so the child is its central resource and its ideological justification. In *The Handmaid's Tale* the child appears mostly as an absence: Offred's daughter was taken from her when the family tried to escape and was given to a regime-approved household. Children are born through the ritual of Birth Day and are immediately handed to the Commander's Wife. Infants with defects are labelled "Unbabies" and disappear.

The central mechanism is the regulated release of knowledge. The guardians tell the children what they will become, but always slightly before the children can understand it. Tommy's later formulation, which Miss Emily effectively confirms, is that they were "told and not told" (Part 1). This produces what may be called *pre-emptive interpellation*: by the time the children grasp the meaning of "donor", the word has already become part of their identity. In Althusser's terms, the school hails them as donors before they can refuse the name. Miss Lucy's attempt to tell them the truth plainly is treated as a breach and she is dismissed, which shows that the system depends on half-knowledge rather than ignorance.

The state answers juvenile delinquency with technology. The Ludovico Technique combines a nausea-inducing drug with films of violence, conditioning Alex to become physically sick at the thought of aggression. Because Beethoven's Ninth Symphony accompanies one film, he also loses his love of music. This is control aimed not at behaviour but at the will itself, and so it embodies Arendt's description of totalitarianism as the attempt to eliminate spontaneity. The prison chaplain voices the novel's moral objection: a person who cannot choose good is no longer fully human (Part 2, ch. 3).

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Control does not disappear; it becomes raw and decentralised. The roving bands of cannibals reproduce, in miniature, the logic of totalitarian biopolitics: people are kept in cellars as living stores of food, and the charred infant on a spit (late in the novel) is the most extreme image of the child as consumable matter. Here Agamben's bare life is literal. Even the father's protection includes coercion: he teaches the boy how to use the last bullet on himself if they are captured. The child lives under the absolute authority of scarcity and fear.

Atwood shows three linked mechanisms. The first is *confiscation and redistribution*: children are removed from "unfit" mothers and placed in loyal families, a practice modelled on historical cases such as the abductions under Argentina's military dictatorship. The second is *erasure of memory*: when Offred is finally shown a photograph of her daughter, the girl is in a white dress and no longer knows her. The third, developed in *The Testaments*, is *gendered education*: girls attend schools such as the Vidala School, learn needlework and obedience, are not taught to read, and are married to older Commanders at thirteen or fourteen.

The most disturbing finding is the total absence of escape. No student tries to run away. Fences, guards and punishment are almost unnecessary, because the boundary has been moved inside. The students police one another through gossip and shame and accept rumours, such as "deferrals" for couples in love, that ask the system for mercy instead of contesting it. Foucault's "docile body" here becomes a docile consciousness.

Alex's first-person Nadsat narration forces the reader to adopt his language. This creates a disturbing complicity and at the same time a linguistic resistance: the state can recondition his reflexes but cannot recondition the language in which he tells his story.

The third-person narration stays close to the father, while the boy remains largely silent. When he speaks, his questions keep returning to one point: are we still "the good guys"? The boy has no memory of the pre-catastrophe world, and the narrative registers how the vocabulary for that world fades. The child is outside the language of the old order and therefore outside its ideology.

The Handmaid's Tale gives us the mother's perspective on a lost child. *The Testaments* adds the voices of two daughters: Agnes, raised inside Gilead, and Daisy, who learns she is the famous "Baby Nicole" smuggled to Canada and used as a propaganda symbol by both sides. This shift lets Atwood show internalisation from within. Agnes believes the doctrines she is taught, and her disillusion begins only through personal experiences of abuse and her friend Becka's suffering.

Kathy H. narrates at thirty-one, as a "carer" who will soon begin donating herself. Her calm, precise and apologetic voice is itself evidence of the regime's success: she describes her own sacrifice in the vocabulary given to her. Readers learn the system mostly through what Kathy does not say.

Hailsham was a *humane* project; its art collection was meant to prove that clones had souls. This is the novel's darkest irony: liberal reform does not challenge the harvesting, it only decorates it. Resistance therefore survives only in memory, attachment and art. Kathy's dance with a pillow to the song "Never Let Me Go", imagined as holding a baby that clones can never have, is the novel's emblem of a childhood that knows its loss without being able to name it. In Agamben's terms, the Hailsham students are bare life raised with every comfort except a future.

Internalisation is physical rather than ideological. Alex does not believe in non-violence; his body simply refuses violence. The regime's later reversal of the treatment, for electoral reasons after his suicide attempt, reveals the political cynicism behind both the cure and the uncure. Meanwhile, his

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former gang members Dim and Billyboy become police officers. The state absorbs youthful violence rather than abolishing it, giving it a uniform.

The striking result is that the boy internalises not the law of the road but an ethical law he seems to carry within himself. He insists on sharing food with the old man Ely, pleads for mercy for the thief, and is haunted by a little boy he glimpses and cannot help. The father's phrase "carrying the fire" becomes the name for this inner law.

The children of Gilead are interpellated through religion, which presents domination as divine order. Yet internalisation is never complete. Agnes's access to literacy, through her training as an Aunt, gives her the reading of hidden records and thus the truth about the regime.

Burgess's final chapter 21, omitted from the first American edition and from Kubrick's film, matters greatly for this study. At eighteen, Alex grows bored with violence and imagines having a son. Burgess (1986) defended the chapter as essential: moral change must come from within, through growing up, not from conditioning. The child's capacity for *development* is thus presented as the only legitimate alternative to state control. Yet Alex also predicts that his son will repeat his mistakes, so the cycle of youth and correction continues.

In McCarthy the child becomes the antithesis of totalitarian consciousness rather than its product. Gradually the roles reverse: the father teaches survival, but the son teaches the father, and the reader, what survival is for. When the father dies, the boy is taken in by a family with children, which suggests that a community based on care may still be possible. Critics have read this ending in religious and messianic terms (Cooper, 2011). This article reads it politically: where every structure of domination has collapsed into predation, the child represents the minimal condition of a non-totalitarian human order, the refusal to treat another person as bare life.

In *The Testaments* the children raised by the regime become the agents of its collapse: Agnes and Daisy carry the evidence of Gilead's crimes out of the country. Atwood thereby reverses the Orwellian topos of the child-informer. The child the regime has stolen becomes the child who testifies against it. The framing "Historical Notes" in both books, set in a post-Gilead academic future, confirm that the regime did not last.

3.1 Comparative summary

Table 2. Comparative typology of the child figure

Category	Ishiguro	Burgess	McCarthy	Atwood
Type of child	Pedagogical-biopolitical	Behaviourist-corrective	Post-state ethical	Reproductive-proprietary
Institutional site	Boarding school (Hailsham)	Family, prison, clinic	None: the road	Household, school, Red Centre
Dominant mode of control	Regulated knowledge; pre-emptive interpellation	Aversive conditioning of the will	Scarcity, violence, cannibal predation	Confiscation, religious indoctrination, gendered schooling
Child's value for power	Organs (body as resource)	Order (threat to be neutralised)	Food (bare life)	Fertility and legitimacy (heir and

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Category	Ishiguro	Burgess	McCarthy	Atwood
				symbol)
Narrative perspective	Retrospective first person of the controlled child	First person of the delinquent child, in Nadsat	Close third person on the father; the child mostly silent	Mother's voice, then daughters' testimonies
Degree of internalisation	Near-total; no escape attempted	Somatic, not ideological	Minimal; child holds an inner ethical law	Strong but breakable through literacy and abuse
Resistance located in the child	Memory, love, art (without revolt)	Maturation and free choice (ch. 21)	Compassion, "carrying the fire"	Testimony; exposing the regime

4. Discussion

4.1 Mechanisms of control (RQ1)

The four texts confirm that dystopian power approaches the child along two axes. The first is *formation*: shaping the child's consciousness through schooling, conditioning or religious instruction (Ishiguro, Burgess, Atwood). The second is *appropriation*: treating the child's body as a resource, whether as organs, fertility or food (Ishiguro, Atwood, McCarthy). Ishiguro and Atwood combine both axes, which is why their regimes appear the most complete. Burgess's state works only on formation, and only after the child has already escaped it. McCarthy's world retains only appropriation, stripped of any ideology.

This suggests a refinement of Foucault's distinction between disciplinary power and biopower. In these novels the two meet in the figure of the child: the same young person is at once a subject to be trained and a body to be used. The more completely a regime unites these two operations, the less it needs visible coercion. Hailsham has no guards, whereas Burgess's state needs prisons and laboratories, and McCarthy's predators need chains.

This also explains a historical shift in the dystopian child. In Orwell, the indoctrinated child serves the regime as a spy against adults. In the later texts the child is no longer mainly an *agent* of control but its *object and material*. Control has moved, in Foucault's terms, from the sovereign's eye to the management of life itself. Contemporary concerns about genetic technologies, reproductive politics and the datafication of childhood give this shift a clear present-day resonance.

4.2 Perspective and internalised control (RQ2)

Narrative perspective proved to be decisive. The more the story is told from inside the child's own consciousness, the more visible internalised control becomes, and the more disturbing the effect on the reader. Kathy's calm voice and Alex's Nadsat are both products of their systems: one shows complete acceptance, the other complete rebellion, yet both speak in the regime's or the subculture's language. By contrast, McCarthy keeps the boy largely external and silent, which preserves his moral opacity; we see his goodness but are never shown how he came to have it. Atwood moves from the

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mother's perspective to the daughters' testimonies, and in doing so turns the child from an absence into a witness.

This finding supports Rose's (1984) argument that the child in literature is always partly constructed by the adult who writes or remembers it. The retrospective first person in Ishiguro and the testimonial form in Atwood both show an adult reconstructing childhood, and both use this distance to expose how early and how invisibly the regime's categories were installed.

4.3 The child as the limit of totalitarian power (RQ3)

All four texts locate some form of resistance in the child, but the forms differ sharply. They can be ordered along a scale from passive to active:

1. **Memory without revolt** (Ishiguro): the child preserves love and memory but never contests the system.
2. **Maturation** (Burgess): moral change comes through growing up and free choice, not through rebellion.
3. **Ethical refusal** (McCarthy): the child refuses to treat others as bare life, even at personal risk.
4. **Testimony** (Atwood): the child acquires knowledge and uses it to bring the regime down.

Arendt's concept of natality helps explain this pattern. For Arendt, every birth introduces the possibility of a new beginning, which is why totalitarian rule must try to control birth and upbringing. The four novels dramatise this argument: each regime tries to neutralise natality, by cloning, conditioning, consuming or confiscating, and each novel nevertheless preserves a remainder of it.

The article's findings also qualify Edelman's (2004) critique of the child as the emblem of "reproductive futurism". Gilead is precisely such a regime, legitimising its tyranny in the name of children and the future. Atwood shows that the sacralisation of the child can itself be a totalitarian strategy. Ishiguro shows the opposite case: children denied a future altogether. The meaning of the child is thus politically ambivalent. It can sanctify power or expose it, depending on whether the child is treated as a symbol or as a person.

4.4 Limitations and further research

The study is limited to four Anglophone authors and to interpretive close reading; its conclusions are not statistically generalisable. Film adaptations, which significantly altered two of the texts (Kubrick's omission of chapter 21 and the Hulu series of *The Handmaid's Tale*), were excluded. Further research could extend the typology to young-adult dystopias such as Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (1993) and Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* (2008), where the child is also the implied reader. A comparison with dystopian traditions in other languages, including Russian and Central Asian literatures that inherited the Soviet experience of child ideologisation, would test whether the four types hold beyond the Anglophone canon.

5. Conclusion

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The comparative reading of Ishiguro, Burgess, McCarthy and Atwood confirms the working hypothesis: in dystopian fiction the child is an index of control. The degree to which a regime has colonised childhood, through schooling, conditioning, confiscation or consumption, measures the depth of its totalitarian ambition.

The study makes three contributions. First, it proposes a four-part typology of the dystopian child: pedagogical-biopolitical (Ishiguro), behaviourist-corrective (Burgess), post-state ethical (McCarthy) and reproductive-proprietary (Atwood). Second, it shows that control over the child operates along two axes, the formation of consciousness and the appropriation of the body, and that regimes uniting both need the least visible force. Third, it demonstrates that narrative perspective determines how internalised control is represented, with first-person child narration producing the most unsettling picture of consent.

The same figure that measures the reach of totalitarian power also marks its limit. Kathy's memory, Alex's maturation, the boy's compassion and the daughters' testimony each preserve what Arendt called natality: the capacity to begin again. Read together, these novels suggest that dystopian literature returns to the child not to lament innocence but to locate the place where control, however complete, cannot entirely close.

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