

# The Power of the Gaze: Seeing and Being Seen in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *The Handmaid's Tale*

**Camilla Irene Fauskanger Davidsen**

---

**Abstract:** One of the central themes in George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) is the power of the gaze. Set in a futuristic and totalitarian society, the two novels demonstrate how the gaze, the notion of seeing and being seen, alternately works as a method of empowering and disempowering. The thesis uses Michel Foucault's book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (first published in 1975; first translated in 1977 by Alan Sheridan), Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (first published in 1975) and Irene Visser's article "Reading Pleasure: Light in August and the theory of the gendered gaze" (1997) as its main theoretical framework. It is within this framework of empowering and disempowering gazes that these two novels provide the foundation for a literary analysis of the gaze. The focal point of this analysis is to show how the gaze can both empower and disempower the protagonists within the futuristic totalitarian regimes they are bound to live in. The thesis will further discuss how power as a theme can be taught to students at VGS-level in the Upper Secondary School using George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a background text. Personal development is a significant part of the education. This includes knowledge about societal issues, which might affect the pupils' everyday life. *The Nineteen Eighty-Four* themes of surveillance, totalitarianism and governmental control are present day issues which need to be brought to pupils' attention and discussed. These themes are relevant for the pupils' understanding of the world today. Within this framework, the didactic work promoted in this thesis is based on Orwell's novel and considers the general aims and competence aims

presented in the Knowledge Promotion Reform 2013 and the English Subject Curriculum 2013. The focus of the didactic project is both to work with a literary text and the basic skills reading, writing and oral skills as well as to discuss present day issues in light of the novel, which affect the pupils' lives.