



James L. Halperin,
The Truth Machine:
A Novel of Things to Come,
Ballantine Books, NY, 1996.

The book can be downloaded for free from: <https://coins.ha.com/information/ttm.s>

The “truth machine” is such a natural nickname for the polygraph that when an examiner sees it as book title, reading it becomes a must. Judging by the title, one would expect the author to be a polygrapher, psychologist or jurist but surprisingly the author James L. Halperin is an American businessman specialising in numismatics (the study or collection of currency, including coins, tokens, paper money, and related objects) who even wrote a textbook on how to grade coins (*How to Grade U.S. Coins*), which the grading standards were ultimately based on.

The author’s profession is not the only surprise, as the book is not even directly related to polygraphy. It is a science fiction novel, or Halperin’s version of *1984*. Yet, the philosophy that stands behind the novel, albeit with a potential to leave us examiners unemployed, is closely related to our profession and daily practice, that is unveiling the truth behind the lies.

The book was presumably written in July 2050 in Dallas by a computer named Intel 22g (a contextual processor with 22 billion instructions per microsecond) CP-TL-Mos from the series 2046, especially designed for reportage”, and describes the latest 50 years in human history and the personal history of the inventor of the ultimate lie detector offering 100% accuracy. The need to invent such an instrument developed after violent crime became number one political issue in the US and led to the Swift & Sure Anti-Crime Bill that guaranteed previously convicted violent criminals a fair trial, a quick appeal, and subsequent immediate execution. To prevent abuse of the law, a fool-proof, 100% accurate instrument had to be invented and manufactured.

The book tells the story of Randell Peterson “Pete” Armstrong who was five years old when his younger brother was kidnaped and murdered by an ex-convict just released from the prison, and this despite a psychiatric evaluation that he would murder again as soon as he is at large. On recovery of his brother’s body. Pete addressed an FBI agent in charge of the case and wondered “He [the psychiatrist] *knew* Reece [the kidnapper and assassin] was still dangerous. Couldn’t *he* keep him in jail?” This results in a following conversation: “Once someone is sentenced, as long as they don’t break any more laws, we can’t hold them in jail any longer than the courts tell us to.” “Even if they might *kill* someone?” “We have to assume a person’s rehabilitated until they do something wrong. Otherwise people could stay in jail forever just because someone else *disliked* them.... The problem is, we never know for sure who’s a threat and who isn’t. We can’t keep everybody in jail just because they *might* be dangerous. We can’t predict what people will do because we can’t read their minds.” This is what triggered the 5-year-old-young genius Pete to invent a fool-proof “Truth Machine”. The idea became operational when Pete was 12 and already a freshman at Harvard. At the time a classmate asked him “What do you think would happen if scientists built a machine that could tell with absolute certainty if a person was telling the truth? [...] But this machine would have to be so precise that it could be used as conclusive proof of guilt or innocence in our court system. Today our ability to lie actually threatens our survival. [...] Deceit is a major instrument and a major cause of war. Sociopathic dictators, who have always used war to amass power, could never wage war without lying to their populaces. And without deceit, honest conflicts become easier to resolve because each side’s statements are believed by the other.” A classmate who opposed the idea said: “Evolution probably favors the ability to lie effectively. [...] It’s human nature to lie at certain times. [...] You can’t change human nature in one generation just by changing the rules.” To which Pete responded “I think you *can*. [...] We do adapt to reality. [...] Lying is just an easy way for people to get what they think they want. I bet we can teach people not to lie by taking away the payoff.”

The concept of the “truth machine” was in the focus of attention of the crime prevention vision of the US President and of a law that promised riches to its developer. Upon graduation from Harvard, Pete established a company that concentrated on developing the “truth machine”. By the time it went public, it worked on programmes to aid the legal system and society in general, and to support financially the development of the “truth machine”.

In 2024, after almost two decades of research and development, the “truth machine” officially known as the Armstrong Cerebral Image Processor (ACIP) or SCIP (scan cerebral image patterns) become operational, and was soon integrated into the legal system. The notion behind the instrument was that “each human brain has its own wave patterns, as unique as the DNA. While the patterns change continuously, certain aspects remain constant, particular to the individual”. Unlike in case of the polygraph, the examinee is interviewed and questioned without the use of a structured test. Upon deception a red light blinks and a bell rings.

Once operational, the use of the “truth machine” expanded beyond the criminal justice system. Shortly, and this might be a spoiler, everyone seeking a job or applying for any kind of license has to pass the “truth machine” test. Eventually, people wear their “truth machines” constantly, thus eliminating being lied at. The impact of the invention is tremendous and – as lying has now become impossible – it affects all phases of life from crime via human interpersonal relations and politics to basically every aspect of life. The author fantasises on a future utopian world that most of Americans would like to live in, despite certain tough laws and regulations.

Unlike the dark futuristic world portrayed in *1984*, Halperin’s future world drifts on pink clouds and from the 2016 perspective seems exceedingly optimistic and naïve, yet who knows: humans are adaptable.

Last but not least; although it belongs to the sci-fi, the book has traits of a whodunit and a surprising ending, but... there have been enough spoilers.

Tuvya T. Amsel

