
George Orwell As A Political Writer

George Orwell (1903-1950) was an English novelist, critic and essayist who is best known for developing a writing that was interested in social awareness, by pointing out inequality, injustice and by promoting anti-totalitarian views. Regarded as one of the best political writers of the twentieth century, if not the best one, Orwell stated himself in some of his essays that the aim of his writing was political: 'What I have most wanted to do throughout the past ten years is to make political writing into an art. My starting point is always a feeling of partisanship, a sense of injustice'[footnoteRef:1]. He acknowledged the innovations of his predecessors and contemporaries, but he also pointed out the urgency to write about politics, which is to write about the problems of the society: 'But what is noticeable about all these writers is that what 'purpose' they have is very much up in the air. There is no attention to the urgent problems of the moment, above all no politics in the narrower sense. Our eyes are directed to Rome, to Byzantium, to Montparnasse, to Mexico, to the Etruscans, to the Subconscious, to the solar plexus — to everywhere except the places where things are actually happening.'[footnoteRef:2] [1: George Orwell; Sonia Orwell, Ian Angus (eds.), *George Orwell: An Age Like This 1920-1940: The Collected Essays, Journalism & Letters, Vol 1*, New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968, p.6.] [2: *Idem.*, p.508.]

One of his most well-known novels, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949 in newer editions), published in 1949, is one of the best examples from Orwell's oeuvre which can sustain the argument above. In this novel, Orwell developed a critique of totalitarian systems by creating a dystopian fictional world in which the government controls each and every aspect of people's lives. Terms such as 'Big Brother', 'Thought Police', and many others became nowadays points of reference when talking about totalitarianism and overly intrusive governments.

Some of the novel's central themes are that of surveillance and control. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, these themes manifest themselves in the falsification of history, control of thoughts, simplification of language, and other techniques that are particular in the way that they condemn a specific system, that is totalitarianism but are also universal because they cannot be ascribed to a certain form of totalitarianism. The critique is to be pointed at the system as a whole, no matter what form it takes. Although the novel was not written outside of a context and as the critic Bernard Crick argues, it should not be read outside of it: '*Nineteen Eighty-Four* is misread if not read in the context of its time – around 1948: a postwar world brutally and arbitrarily divided into spheres of influence by the great powers; the atom bomb exploded; and the fictive London of Winston Smith a recognisable caricature of the actual postwar London that Orwell had walked, and that this author can vividly remember.'[footnoteRef:3] [3: John Rodden (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p.146.]

Many interpretations were attributed to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, most frequently a critique of the URSS and of Stalin as the Big Brother is assigned to the novel, and concepts from the novel, such as doublethink can sustain this thesis: 'Doublethink is virtually a translation of the Russian 'dvoeverye'. Of dozens of examples which might be given, the most obvious is Soviet elections.'[footnoteRef:4]. However, such an interpretation is limiting, Orwell has rejected it himself in more than one instance and a more suitable read of the novel is that of satire, 'but a

general difficulty with satires is that they depend greatly on contemporary references which time can erode or misconceive, and warnings depend on plausibility in the circumstances of the day (now often misunderstood, underestimated or re-imagined).^[footnoteRef:5] Orwell might have drawn inspiration from actual totalitarian systems, but the innovation of his novel consists in the fact that his satire can always be actualized, without being limited by a single interpretation. Big Brother is a brother which only watches over his siblings, but which does not help them, the telescreens are surveillance mechanisms and that can be said about television and screens in general today, because as much as they share information with the watchers, they also gather information about them in order to better control them, and those are only two examples of the exemplary satire that Orwell delivers and that is still actual today. [4: Idem., p.130.] [5: Idem., p.148]

Winston Smith stands in Orwell's novel as a collective character, he can substitute any person, be it male or female, that lives in a totalitarian regime (or a very highly state-controlled one) and that asks him/herself what is one's life in such conditions and what can one do. The issue of human life in a highly disciplined world was specifically addressed by Michel Foucault in his book from 1975, twenty-six years after Orwell's novel, 'Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison'. As a philosopher, social and literary critic, Michel Foucault (1926-1984) developed during his lifetime many theories which became pillars in areas such as sociology, critical theory, cultural studies, and many others, but his work on discipline and control can be put in relation with Nineteen Eighty-Four in order to better understand how Orwell's fictional dystopia is not so far away from the reality in which we are living, a point which supports the argument that Orwell is a highly skilled political writer, an actual one and that his novel is closer to universalization and actualization than it is to a concrete system. To prove that this comparison is pertinent, some elements taken from Nineteen Eighty-Four will be analysed in relation to concepts developed by Foucault in his book.

Starting from Jeremy Bentham's idea of the Panopticon, 'A new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind, in a quantity hitherto without example: and that to a degree equally without example, secured by whoever chooses to have it so, against abuse.'^[footnoteRef:6] Foucault describes the Panoptic system on which prisons are shaped as such: 'This enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded, in which an uninterrupted work of writing links the centre and periphery, in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead - all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism.'^[footnoteRef:7] This description works perfectly in the context of Nineteen Eighty-Four, in which the four Ministries take control of each and every aspect of life, under the reign and surveillance of Big Brother, the all-powerful leader of Oceania. In the novel, the monitoring is done with the help of 'telescreens', devices that are always watched by the Thought Police. 'The telescreen received and transmitted simultaneously. Any sound that Winston made, above the level of a very low whisper, would be picked up by it, moreover, so long as he remained within the field of vision which the metal plaque commanded, he could be seen as well as heard. There was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment.'^[footnoteRef:8] again, this description of the telescreens works exactly with how Foucault describes the system of discipline: 'the perfect disciplinary apparatus would make it possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly.'^[footnoteRef:9] [6: Jeremy Bentham; John Bowring (ed.), The works of Jeremy Bentham. Vol. 4 (Panopticon, Constitution, Colonies, Codification), Edinburgh, William

Tait, 1843, p.39.] [7: Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison, New York, Vintage Books, 1995, 2nd edition, p.197] [8:] [9: Michel Foucault, op.cit., p. 173]

Another important point is the reality of being watched. In the novel, it is not made clear if Big Brother was a real person, Winston cannot even remember when he first heard that name. There was also an impossibility of knowing when a person was watched or if it was watched at all through the telescreens. This is important because it is one of the main mechanisms of the Panoptic system: 'to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power.'[footnoteRef:10]. By this, Foucault means that the main purpose of the system is to make people believe that they are always watched even if they are not, so they live in a constant state of paranoia, afraid of doing something that might be against the system, and such is the case in Nineteen Eighty-Four also. [10: Michel Foucault, op.cit., p. 201]

One of the main concepts of Foucault is that of power-knowledge: power and knowledge directly imply one another [...] 'These power-knowledge relations' are to be analysed, therefore, not on the basis of a subject of knowledge who is or is not free in relation to the power system, but, on the contrary, the subject who knows, the objects to be known and the modalities of knowledge must be regarded as so many effects of these fundamental implications of power-knowledge and their historical transformations.[footnoteRef:11] This concept is again relevant in the context of the novel when thinking about how history is created and recreated. In Nineteen Eighty-Four, Winston works at the Ministry of Truth, and his task there is to modify historical documents whenever that is needed in order to coincide with what the party says: "All history was a palimpsest, scraped clean and reinscribed exactly as often as was necessary. In no case would it have been possible, once the deed was done, to prove that any falsification had taken place." [footnoteRef:12]. This is a case of power-knowledge relations where knowledge can be understood only in relation to its historical transformations, or more importantly, in relation to its historical falsification. [11: Ibid., p. 27-28] [12:]

The examples provided above are just a mere introduction to the complex relations that a comparison between the fictional world of Orwell and the philosophical and historical analysis of Foucault give birth to. However, they constitute a base which points at how Orwell succeeded to create a pertinent critique of totalitarianism and of discipline, without being himself a philosopher or a theoretician. This can be seen as a quality, because the effectiveness of Orwell's book also comes from its form. The fictional world which he creates is real enough for the reader to be able to draw comparisons with real-life totalitarian systems while also being accessible, it does not need technical and philosophical terms that are used in critiques such as Foucault's.

By not using concrete examples in his depiction of Winston's world, Orwell succeeded to put himself among the great novelists of world literature, that of whose work transcends their space and time or to use another term from Foucault's vocabulary, their age and geography, a characteristic that is even more remarkable when thinking about the highly political implications that Nineteen Eighty-Four has. Orwell's novel can be put in any context of totalitarianism and it still works, but its universality should be also taken as a warning, a warning which says that no matter the form, any totalitarian regime is in the end, a catastrophe which even when it does not necessarily kill humans, it kills the humanity that differentiates this species from others.