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SO ARE WE LIVING IN 1984?

Since last week's revelations of the scope of the United States' domestic surveillance operations, George Orwell's "Nineteen Eighty-Four," which was published sixty-four years ago this past Saturday, has enjoyed a massive spike in sales

(<http://gawker.com/amazon-sales-of-george-orwells-1984-shot-up-7-000-thi-512603930>). The book has been invoked by voices as disparate as Nicholas Kristof

(<https://twitter.com/NickKristof/status/342769970251448320>) and Glenn Beck. Even Edward Snowden, the twenty-nine-year-old former intelligence contractor turned leaker, sounded, in the *Guardian* interview in which he came forward, like he'd been guided by Orwell's pen. But what will all the new readers and rereaders of Orwell's classic find when their copy arrives? Is Obama Big Brother, at once omnipresent and opaque? And are we doomed to either submit to the safety of unthinking orthodoxy or endure re-education and face what horrors lie within the dreaded Room 101? With Orwell once again joining a culture-wide consideration of communication, privacy, and security, it seemed worthwhile to take another look at his most influential novel.



"Nineteen Eighty-Four" begins on a cold April morning in a deteriorated London, the major city of Airstrip One, a province of Oceania, where, despite advances in technology, the weather is still lousy and residents endure a seemingly endless austerity. The narrator introduces Winston, a thirty-nine-year-old man beset by the fatigue of someone older, who lives in an apartment building that smells of "boiled cabbage" and works as a drone in the Ministry of Truth, which spreads public falsehoods. The first few pages contain all the political realities of this future society: the Police Patrol snoops in people's windows, and Thought Police, with more insidious power, linger elsewhere. Big Brother, the totalitarian figurehead, stares out from posters plastered throughout the city, and private telescreens broadcast the Party's platform and its constant stream of infotainment. Everyone simply assumes that they are always being watched, and most no longer know to care. Except for Winston, who is different, compelled as if by muscle memory to court danger by writing longhand in a real paper journal.

Thinking about Edward Snowden on Sunday, it wasn't much of a leap to imagine him and his colleagues working in some version of Oceania's Ministry of Truth, gliding through banal office gigs whose veneer of nine-to-five technocratic normality helped to hide their more sinister reality. Holed up in a hotel room in Hong Kong, Snowden seemed, if you squinted a bit, like Orwell's protagonist-hero Winston, had he been a bit

more ambitious, and considerably more lucky, and managed to defect from Oceania to its enemy Eastasia and sneak a message to the telescreens back home. In fact, at one point in his interview with the *Guardian*

(<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/jun/09/edward-snowden-nsa-whistleblower-surveillance>), Snowden could be channelling the novel's narrator, or at least delivering a spirited synopsis of the book:

If living unfreely but comfortably is something you're willing to accept, and I think many of us are, it's the human nature, you can get up every day, you can go to work, you can collect your large paycheck for relatively little work against the public interest, and go to sleep at night after watching your shows. But if you realize that's the world that you helped create, and it's going to get worse with the next generation, and the next generation, who extend the capabilities of this sort of architecture of oppression, you realize that you might be willing to accept any risk, and it doesn't matter what the outcome is, so long as the public gets to make their own decisions about how that's applied.

Are we living in “Nineteen Eighty-Four”? The technological possibilities of surveillance and data collection and storage surely surpass what Orwell imagined. Oceania's surveillance state operates out in the open, since total power has removed any need for subterfuge: “As for sending a letter through the mails, it was out of the question. By a routine that was not even secret, all letters were opened in transit,” the narrator explains. This sounds like an analogue version of what Snowden describes: “The N.S.A., specifically, targets the communications of everyone. It ingests them by default.” That seems like a safe operating assumption about e-mails, texts, or telephone calls—even if a person is not saying anything interesting or controversial, and even if no one is actually monitoring our communication, the notion that one's personal digital messages would remain inviolably private forever, or that they would not be saved or stored, was probably naïve. Regardless of the actual scope of the government's snooping programs, the notion of digital privacy must now, finally and forever, seem a mostly quaint one.

Meanwhile, words, as Amy Davidson points out

(<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/closerread/2013/06/the-nsa-verizon-scandal.html>), are manipulated by the three branches of government to make what might seem illegal legal—leading to something of a parallel language that rivals Orwell's Newspeak for its soulless, obfuscated meaning. And, indeed, there has been a hint of something vaguely Big Brotherian in Obama's response to the public outcry about domestic surveillance, as though, by his calm manner and clear intelligence, the President is asking the people to merely trust his beneficence—which many of us might be inclined to do. Even Winston, after all, learns to love Big Brother in the end.

Still, all but the most outré of political thinkers would have to grant that we are far from the crushing, violent, single-party totalitarian regime of Orwell's imagination. In one of the more chilling passages in the novel, the evil Party hack O'Brien explains, "We are not interested in those stupid crimes that you have committed. The Party is not interested in the overt act: the thought is all we care about." The N.S.A., on the other hand, is primarily interested in overt acts, of terrorism and its threats, and presumably—or at least hopefully—less so in the thoughts themselves. The war on terror has been compared to Orwell's critique of "the special mental atmosphere" created by perpetual war, but recently Obama made gestures toward bringing it to an end. That is not to say, of course, that we should not be troubled by the government's means, nor is it clear that the ends will remain as generally benevolent as they seem today. But Orwell's central image of unrestrained political power, a "boot stamping on a human face—forever," is not the reality of our age.

While it's tempting to hold the present moment up beside Orwell's 1984, the book is more than a political totem, and overlooking its profound expressions of emotion robs it of most of its real power. Some novels have both the good and bad fortune of being given over to wider history, inspiring idiomatic phrases that instantly communicate a commonly understood idea. Through this transformation, books become blunt and unsubtle, losing something of their art. We might call it the Catch-22 of "Catch-22," or, in this case, of "Nineteen Eighty-Four."

"Nineteen Eighty-Four" is not simply a cold counterfactual. Instead, it is a love story between Winston and Julia, a younger member of the civil service, and, like many great novels, some of its high points can be found in the minor moments shared between these two characters. Their first real meeting, because of its implicit danger, is one of the more breathtakingly romantic scenes in modern literature—a mixture of lust and decorum like something out of Austen. In the office hallway, Julia slips Winston a piece of paper, a dangerous act. Filled with nervous excitement, he returns to his desk and waits a full eight minutes to look at it. When he does, the words appear as a jolt: "I love you." They arrange to meet in a crowd in order to remain anonymous. Among a mass of people, standing close, their hands touch. A love affair follows—they go to the countryside, like Adam and Eve attempting to push their way back into Eden. Later, they keep a small flat. The Party's stamping out of sex is an essential mode of control. But love, it seems, may exist in a place beyond the government's reach:

They could lay bare in the utmost detail everything that you had done or said or thought; but the inner heart, whose workings were mysterious even to yourself, remained impregnable.

But, in the end, even that place can be found—love is also a political act, and so it must be destroyed, and Orwell uses its dissolution as final, terrible evidence of the scope of oppression. Winston and Julia are broken by the Party, forced to inform on each other and, later, made to live on with the memory of having done so. The two meet a final time, and share a muted exchange, akin to one of the clipped, inarticulate breakup scenes from Hemingway, in which, bruised by heartache, no one can quite think of the right thing to say. Julia explains that by denouncing Winston, she has somehow obliterated him:

“And after that, you don’t feel the same toward the other person any longer.”
“No,” he said, “you don’t feel the same.”

Were this just a novel, rather than ideological novel with an aim to warn and instruct, it might have ended here, in ambivalence, leaving out the clever and rather heavy-handed turn of Winston’s final conversion. If so, its political utility might be less clear, but we would be left instead with its artistic force and mysterious inner workings.

Photograph by Christopher Anderson/Magnum Photos.
