

Big brother is watching you:the orwellian state and surveillance in the present r...

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In any conversation regarding dystopian literature, there are works that cannot be ignored due to their importance in the landscape not only within the genre, but also within the enormous oeuvre of English literature. Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, where American society has outlawed books and other written works, is perhaps one example. Another would be Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, where the year 2450 is marked by extreme class government, where citizens born into the lower class are enslaved through drugs and other nefarious substances. More recently, the recent spate of young-adult dystopian novels, such as Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* series and James Dashner's *The Maze Runner*, also project future society as one of limited personal freedoms and narrowed libertarian principles.

However, dystopian literature owes a large debt to a single, important work that may be considered a modern classic, among the likes of *Catcher in the Rye* and *The Old Man and the Sea*. This, of course, is George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, published in the aftermath of World War II. Although the eponymous year has come and gone, the specter of governmental control very much akin to the novel's notorious governmental philosophy, *Ingsoc*, still lingers to this day. Among the dangers posed by this ideology, surveillance is the most salient in present society, but the themes that the novel tackles also reveal underlying concerns that may be applied to the contemporary world.

As always, the heart of the matter in discussions regarding dystopia is the relation of the individual with the state (Marks 1477). Often, individuals in dystopian novels such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are depicted as complete subjects that have lost all free will. The power of individual choice has been

deprived from them, and the state has essentially assumed the power to choose on their behalf. What is right or wrong, correct or incorrect, true or false, has already been decided by the government. In this light, the citizen is deprived of the choice in matters of national legislation or policy making. In essence, dystopian literature often depicts government or authority figures as omnipresent totalitarian institutions that have subsumed its citizens - if they may be called that, at all - of the basic human freedoms that we currently enjoy. In Nineteen Eighty-Four, the government - commonly known as Ingsoc, or short for English socialism - utilizes a variety of means to ensure that this status quo is maintained. Propaganda is one of the means by which this purpose is advanced. Under the Ministry of Truth, Ingsoc molds and fashions the truth into which it deems in accordance with current policy objectives. Winston Smith is an employee of this department, and his primary task is that of burning and destroying records that have become inconsistent with current government action. It is surveillance, however, that permeates the lives of Nineteen Eighty-Four's characters. Like propaganda, surveillance is widespread and "normalized" in the modern Orwellian London. Everywhere, there are "telescreens" that serve both as transmitters of information into the home, and as surveillance cameras that report the movements and activities of the people within it. Telescreens both watch and listen to everyone on the streets, and even in their own homes, and barked orders at people when they were slacking in their obedience to Big Brother (Dice 18). These devices are very sensitive, even detecting hints of rebelliousness in facial expressions and whispers. The effectiveness of these devices are described by Orwell, thus:

“ 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. You had to live—did live, from habit that became instinct—in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinized.” (Orwell)

The only escape from telescreens is by going into a crowd, where the citizens are sure that they cannot be heard or observed. The entity in charge of monitoring and reporting the activities seen in these telescreens is the Thought Police, who essentially serve as the executive power of Ingsoc. They have the power to make citizens disappear without a trial or even report of the arrest.

Images of Orwell’s telescreens immediately bring into mind the current proliferation of closed-circuit television in modern society. In 2006, it was reported that over 300 CCTV surveillance cameras were being equipped with high powered microphones that can detect and record conversations from 100 yards away (Dice 18). After 9/11, Chicago began installing a massive surveillance system on city streets, in schools, and even on buses and train tunnels. Interestingly, the Chicago system links private security cameras into their grid. As of 2010, the city had an estimated 10, 000 cameras feeding into their central system. Shortly after 9/11, the United States Department of Homeland Security was created and was charged with coordinating all security and intelligence efforts. Only six weeks after 9/11, the so-called “ Patriot Act” was introduced, destroying all old barriers against abuse of

administrative information-gathering powers (Wagenaar and Boersma 194). With this act, government obtained the authority to demand information from Internet service providers and other companies regarding their customers, to claim voice mail messages using only a search warrant, to search homes without notifying the suspect beforehand, and to use (roving) wiretaps. Moreover, the recent reports regarding the United States' National Security Agency and its continued action in monitoring even the smallest piece of communication between citizens has often elicited remarks that we are slowly becoming a " Surveillance Society".

Undoubtedly, the proliferation of cameras in public thoroughfares, streets, and parks projects a fearful future. However, some commentators and surveillance have expressed their opinion that CCTV programs and other surveillance have at least some merit. It is, for example, widely held that in certain circumstances, it is morally permissible for the State to compel witnesses to testify about past events in criminal trials. The State, however, can only use hindsight to determine what information it is morally permitted to have access to, for it will only become clear in retrospect what information is relevant to solving a crime or judging mitigating circumstances. The State in this case is morally permitted to place its citizens under constant surveillance (Taylor 228). Moreover, in a world perceived as being increasingly unstable and insecure, the desire for security has also concomitantly increased in importance. Surveillance has become a key mechanism for contending with threats of terrorism and crime. Supporters of CCTV programs, moreover, cite how they increase the efficiency of law enforcement bodies in carrying out their executive powers. They argue that

these programs conserve law enforcement finances, while also decreasing officers' reaction time.

Oftentimes, however, these noble ends do not justify the means. While the common thinking regarding surveillance systems is that they are aimed at the detecting the actions of the individual, it also has a more nefarious “chilling effect” within the public sphere. Michael Yeo describes this as “panoptical surveillance”, where an individual's belief that he or she is under inspection will prompt him or her to avoid behavior detection of which would have a penalty (53). This is, essentially, self-censorship. The individual, fearful of the repercussions of a certain action – for example, speaking out against government in a private setting, spreading information that is truthful albeit offensive – censors himself in order to become a normal, productive member of society. In Orwell's London, this was also true: “there was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment you had to live – did live, from habit that became instinct – in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and except in darkness, every movement scrutinized” (5).

The perils of surveillance are upon us, and it has never been more important in the history of modern society to become more aware and protective of our rights as individuals and as citizens of the state. The Constitution, of course, is there to protect us, but this is but a piece of paper if good men refuse to do anything in the face of government oppression. Lest we find ourselves reliving our fictional Orwellian past, we must always be reminded of how important the individual is in our future.

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