

THE MIRROR AS A REPRESSION MECHANISM IN 1984'S DYSTOPIAN IMAGINARY

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***Abstract:** A mirror is supposed to be a faithful reflection of the image projected on it. Although the image rendered should be reliable and only contribute to the reflection of reality, this is not always the case. This paper seeks to identify the mechanism by which what is mirrored does not actually render reality and to outline the path between the imaginary and the real in George Orwell's dystopian novel 1984. The objectives of the present paper are to highlight some of the elements that contribute to the consolidation and maintenance of the totalitarian system and to analyse how their presence in the novel gives a double meaning to the actions, that of the real and that of the dystopian imaginary.*

***Keywords:** mirror, repression, dystopian imaginary, 1984, paperweight, room 101*

1 Introduction

In George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984*, the concept of the imaginary plays an essential role in shaping the oppressive society depicted. In 1984, the ruling Party sought to control and manipulate every aspect of its citizens' lives, including their thoughts and perceptions.

One of the Party's most potent tools for controlling the people's minds is the concept of the imaginary, which is embodied in the character of Big Brother. Big Brother is presented as an all-seeing and omnipresent figurehead of the Party worshipped and revered by the citizens. The Party promotes an intense cult of personality around Big Brother, constantly reminding the population of his watchful gaze and infallibility.

Dystopian literature vividly portrays unfortunate events from the future, the past, and, most disconcertingly, the present. The journey from envisioning a new world to distorting the old one is surprisingly straightforward, leading to the eventual acceptance of the new reality because „Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past”¹ Moreover, a more rapid and dangerous step could be guided by a new slogan such as „He who controls the language controls everything”. Language is power, and power is language when a totalitarian regime is imposed. The most effective way to keep the spirit of fear and obedience high is by exercising control over the thoughts and reactions of individuals. It is, therefore, essential to highlight the characteristics of a totalitarian regime, their overlap with the dystopian world and how they interconnect and blur the fine line between reality and imagination. Our aim is to trace the relationship between the real and the

¹ George Orwell, *1984*, London, Penguin Books, 2000, p. 117.

imaginary and highlight elements of the dystopian imaginary in George Orwell's novel *1984*. The inspiration for this novel lies in George Orwell's experience as a direct observer who had the opportunity to live the Communist revolution in Russia. He was also one of the volunteers in the Spanish Civil War against the fascist government. At first, he fell prey to the deceptive trappings of socialist values. However, he changed his beliefs about this value system after seeing first-hand what the deification of ideas such as justice and fairness can entail in times of famine, hard labour, the inner turmoil of the individual and political repression. His experience and analysis of the communist regime were fundamental in writing the political dystopia *1984*. In this novel, he revealed the true face of totalitarian dictatorship: the endless hypocrisy of speeches (Two Minutes Hate) and the well-known cynicism of promoting values and principles of the supreme good. Orwell emphasised an idea in one of his essays that it would always be much more encouraging to listen to a human voice than fifty gramophones playing the same tune all over again.

Moreover, George Orwell firmly believed in his idea of a world heading towards an era of dictatorship - totalitarian rule- and that freedom of thought would be a deadly sin and later perceived only as something odd, unknown or obsolete. Therefore, the individual's autonomy could be perceived only as a habit of the past or a memory. Almost 75 years after its publication, the novel *1984* still succeeds in bringing Orwell's warning intention back to the attention of generations of readers and alerting their critical sense because „the sleep of reason produces monsters.”². Consequently, a close reading of the novel helps decipher some key elements in the novel. Furthermore, we can disjoint the aspects borrowed from reality and the imaginary.

2 Dystopian imaginary

Jean-Jacques Wunenburger³ distinguishes the concept of imaginary from that of image or imagery and concludes that imaginary refers to a collection of creations, whether existing in mind or materialised in various art forms, such as paintings, drawings, photographs, and expressed through linguistic devices like metaphors, symbols, and stories. These creations come together to construct coherent and dynamic structures to reveal a symbolic function that combines multiple meanings, either proper or figurative.

Dystopia is an imagined or designed futuristic universe in which dictatorial, corporate, bureaucratic, technical or moral control is used to maintain oppressive social control and the false appearance of a utopian society. The novel *1984* presents the elements of a political dystopia, which, when deciphered in reverse, highlights a totalitarian state's characteristics. We can decipher the outline of two pyramids

² *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (1799) is a painting by the Spanish painter Francisco Goya, created for allegorical purposes to express the turmoil of the individual, but which later and to this day has come to give rise to a linguistic expression, often interpreted as a wake-up call as to the importance of individual and collective freedom alike without being left to chaos and fear in the face of a totalitarian ideology.

³ Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, *Imaginarul*, în „Caietele Echinox”, disponibil la <http://caieteleechinox.lett.ubbcluj.ro/?p=3620>, accesat în data de 26 ianuarie 2023.

oriented in reverse. The former is based on the principle of decentralisation, so that at the top of the latter are the Ingsoc principles evoked by the „person” of Big Brother, followed by the Inner Party (the officials) and the Thought Police (the enforcers of continuous surveillance), and only then the Outer Party (citizens who are not party members, but who must feel the idea of inclusion in the “party”). The second pyramid is oriented from the bottom up, with Winston Smith (the seemingly physically frail but emotionally and psychologically strong protagonist) at the opposite pole to Big Brother, followed by the Brotherhood (not sure if they exist and if they are a real opponent to the regime), and then the Proles (representing the only population group that might have a real chance of overthrowing the system, but who need a boost in awareness).

In our attempt to distinguish the imaginary from the real, we have chosen to accept that the dividing line between the real and the unreal is an almost inscrutable one in some situations, as Wunenburger points out, for even by putting opposites face to face: the real and the unreal, we cannot fully distinguish „whether an imaginary content cannot have some degree of reality in space or time.”⁴ Therefore, we will take a close-up look at some of the symbols present in the novel to reveal their symbolic function and the relationship between the real and the imaginary within them. We will focus on Big Brother, institutions, history and language regarding the system level.

3 Big Brother

Nonetheless he does not make a material appearance and might not seem to exist, Big Brother, perceived as the ruler of Oceania, is the most influential figure in the novel. „On each landing, opposite the lift-shaft, the poster with the enormous face gazed from the wall. It was one of those pictures which are so contrived that the eyes follow you about when you move. BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU, the caption beneath it ran”.⁵

The projected image of Big Brother is ubiquitous, from the printing of coins to the constant broadcasting on TV screens at all times of the day. This image haunts Winston throughout his life and fills him with both hatred and fascination. This contradictory feeling is inspired by the fear and amazement that can be impressed on the individual by contact with such power. Big Brother is a symbol par excellence of the cult of the dictator, who envelops the masses with a sense of mystery mixed with fear and the idea of familiarity or even family - 'brother'. The relationship of closeness is exploited on various levels, both by creating the idea of permanent physical contact or closeness and on a psychological level.

This relationship of familiarity is reinforced by the pseudo-security of institutions that seem to operate based on a principle of subsidiarity of the law, like an ordinary democratic regime. The four ministries: the Ministry of Peace, the Ministry of Plenty, the Ministry of Truth and the Ministry of Love maintain the appearance of a

⁴ Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, *Imaginarul*, în „Caietele Echinox”, *disponibil la* <http://caieteleechinox.lett.ubbcluj.ro/?p=3620>, accesat în data de 26 ianuarie 2023, para. 9, our translation.

⁵ George Orwell, *1984*, London, Penguin Books, 2000, p. 5.

system based on the principles of good faith and the greater good through the proliferation of a positive meaning of their activity, primarily through the false impression created by their names and descriptions. Thus, they operate like a veil covering the fact that, in reality, it is the Ministry of Peace that wages all wars, the Ministry of Plenty controls and minimises rations for the population, the Ministry of Truth deals with propaganda in favour of the dictatorship, and the Ministry of Love deals with the arrest and torture of dissidents. The strengthening of name abstraction is also achieved by the ambiguous diminutives they received in Newspeak: Minitrue, Minipax, Miniluv and Miniplenty. The amalgamated feeling of safety and fear is also conferred by the imposingness of their buildings and their architectural structure and position, strategically placed, disguising the fact that they are like poles of resistance and control of the city.

The state of confusion and ambiguity is, however, perpetual due to the phenomenon of rewriting history and language. The establishment of the new language, Newspeak, facilitates the process of nullifying critical thinking and abstracting historical concepts to the point where individuals can no longer distinguish between historical and fabricated truth. Usually, history should be a form of memory and the most powerful guarantee of justice.

The moment a state reaches the point of no longer having history, that state no longer exists or is a dictatorship. In the context of the novel, Oceania exists; therefore, it is a dictatorship. Rewriting history step by step results in total control because: „Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past”.⁶

Moreover, the decrease in linguistic means: „Don't you see the beauty of that, Winston? (...)You don't grasp the beauty of the destruction of words. Do you know that Newspeak is the only language in the world whose vocabulary gets smaller every year?”⁷ shows that the effect is even more disruptive and annihilates the reaction power of individuals by inhibiting critical thinking, and even the perception of immediate reality, without being able to talk about the perception of a historical past.

„They could be made to accept the most flagrant violations of reality, because they never fully grasped the enormity of what was demanded of them, and were not sufficiently interested in public events to notice what was happening. By lack of understanding they remained sane. They simply swallowed everything, and what they swallowed did them no harm, because it left no residue behind, just as a grain of corn will pass undigested through the body of a bird”.⁸

The only protection against the regime is self-censorship by eliminating attempts to question everyday events and keeping the sensation of numbness, and cancelling the rationale. Those who have moments of consciousness and awareness are “rewarded” with vaporization, a form of censorship or total self-cancellation.

The mass of citizens does not even perceive the acts of dissent. Hence, with few exceptions, they do not even notice the taking of positions in the face of propaganda and manipulation, whether overt or less overt.

However, essential meanings are also hidden behind seemingly common or trivial objects: the paperweight, the diary, the TV screen, and 'Room 101'. All these

⁶ George Orwell, *1984*, London, Penguin Books, 2000, p. 224.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 25.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 142.

symbols hide coded meanings besides how they are perceived in their use by the people and overturn the principle based on which the human is par excellence the holder of free will and the one who unequivocally possesses the discernment and ability to reason, to understand what is happening to him and to translate it all through various forms of language.

4 The paperweight

At its origin, the paperweight was created for utilitarian and artistic purposes. In the Orwellian context, it is an object that is challenging to identify by the average individual, and only Winston can perceive it as meaningful. In this way, the paperweight represents a portal between the new and the old world.

„The soft, rainwatery glass was not like any glass that he had ever seen. The thing was doubly attractive because of its apparent uselessness, though he could guess that it must once have been intended as a paperweight. It was very heavy in his pocket, but fortunately it did not make much of a bulge. It was a queer thing, even a compromising thing, for a Party member to have in his possession. Anything old, and for that matter anything beautiful, was always vaguely suspect.”⁹ The old object mirrors the stability and beauty of a completely unknown past. It is an anchor that has become detached and acquired the status of a shipwrecked object. The existence of this object and its simple perception opens the way to certainties that deserve to be explored and investigated closely.

The concept of the mirror can be identified in different moments throughout the novel regarding Winston, who is the only one who can fully perceive (up to a certain point) the effect of the ideology and its installation as a common belief without it being placed in the light of a microscope.

5 The diary

Another way to identify a hidden mirror is the one of Winston Smith, namely his diary. The diary is the protagonist's only form of emotional discharge, although he knows it represents disobedience, criminal thinking and rebellion. Nevertheless, from the reaction of astonishment before the discovery of such an object to that of trust in it, it was necessary to go through some initiatory stages similar to those discovered and used by Lacan and Freud. Winston is captivated by the beauty of the diary as an object, by the possibility of touching it, of rebelling by owning it and only then mustering the courage to reflect on it, and this courage to become a habit. The diary becomes his hidden mirror in the recesses of his subconscious and the only apparent act of investigation, to give the right to reply to his internal observer and, above all, to record these actions.

„He wondered again for whom he was writing the diary. For the future, for the past for an age that might be imaginary. And in front of him there lay not death but annihilation. The diary would be reduced to ashes and himself to vapour. Only the Thought Police would read what he had written, before they wiped it out of existence and out of memory.”¹⁰

Therefore, the diary is both a symbol of consciousness and awareness, of memory and of recording events for posterity. The diary becomes the double mirror, one

⁹ George Orwell, *1984*, London, Penguin Books, 2000, p. 44.

¹⁰ George Orwell, *1984*, London, Penguin Books, 2000, p. 41.

of projecting the self and one of society, keeping the image of the present to be the proof of the past for future generations.

6 The telescreen

Analogous to the omnipresent image of Big Brother, the telescreen is another mirroring object which „received and transmitted simultaneously”¹¹. „The instrument (the telescreen, it was called) could be dimmed, but there was no way of shutting it off completely”¹². At this point, we are in the presence of a pseudo-mirror because there is an obvious contradiction between what it displays and what it should render in reality. This contradiction can be revealed by referring to the Big Brother character, who projects an entirely different message from his real intention, and by referring to the collective character – all the citizens. Regarding the effect of the mirror in front of them, they misplace themselves in front of their real selves and adopt an ideal self, the one projected by Big Brother and through which they identify themselves, without being fully aware of the effects of the message on them. The pseudo-mirror becomes more of a concave lens, a projector whose light can be placed where indicated by the one in control without others being aware of the mirage they are drawn into and can react.

7 The ‘Room 101’

In a connotative sense, ‘Room 101’ is assimilated to a broken mirror. The purpose of this chamber is to torture the interrogated subjects by placing them face to face with their fears and feeding them based on their momentary reactions. At this mirroring stage, reactions are susceptible to authenticity due to one of our primal reflexes, fight or flight. However, things are different because, in this context, the individual can no longer be awakened to reality and saved from primary reactions. In this situation, the subject paralyzes emotionally and gives in to fear. The mirror in which he reflects himself shatters because it puts him in front of an Other that he cannot recognize and who dictates to him to make some decisions contrary to the principles and values the protagonist thought he had, to cancel his conscience and embrace the creed imposed.

The concept of doublethink, introduced by Orwell, means the simultaneous support of two opposing ideas and is a method of manipulating reality through language. Not only is doublethink a form of manipulation, but it is a reinforcement of censorship imposed throughout history. Moreover, doublethink is the purest form of contradiction that grinds the human mind bit by bit. The effect of grinding is a mind intoxicated with ambiguity and uncertainty. Any form of clarity or pure rationality is almost impossible, especially with the constant pressure of the Thought Police approaching and punishment coming. Except for Winston, whose reason is intact, even for intelligent citizens like Syme and dissidents like Julia, a complete understanding of INGSOC is impossible. However, in the end, fragility is the characteristic of what should be the strongest. Intoxicated by the torture, Winston

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 1.

does not have the strength to manifest his authentic personality. Consequently, he faces identity loss and falls prey to manipulation, resulting in betrayal.

8 Conclusions

Nonetheless, a mirror should be a clear reflection of an object or of the self in the case of an individual or of the group in the case of society; it seems that the image may be deformed or detracted from the usual path. The constant distorted image or confusion is possible in this dystopian context due to the subjects' exposure to the Two Minutes Hate and the standardization of the subjects into people who must think and react in a duplicitous way until their proper reactions and thoughts are annihilated. People are obligated to adopt the doublethink system of thinking and to behave as the ruling system imposes. Moreover, they have to accept being the puppets in the spotlight, reflecting only the approved image of their 'casing' as their mirrors do (the telescreen for instance) without being able to render their true (and lost) selves. The mirror projection is only an image, a photograph, without the ability to catch real movements, reactions or insights.

After being intoxicated on a daily basis, it is nearly impossible to still be able to achieve any kind of clarity or pure rationality, especially in light of the Thought Police's relentless pressure and impending punishment. It is hard for anybody to fully comprehend INGSOC; not even rebels like Julia and clever citizens like Syme or immune as Winston are able to resist till the end.

Therefore, in the end, who is supposed to be the strongest proves to be the most fragile. Winston, even if he seems to be the only one whose reason remains intact (except for the antagonist Big Brother), his true personality cannot come through because he is too overcome by the agony and the prolonged uncertainty and fear of showing his real identity and thoughts. Consequently, he faces identity loss and falls prey to manipulation, resulting in betrayal. If the cinematic effect of the mirror is reduced to the features of the simple image, which can be destroyed even more easily, then the individual is silenced, 'vaporised', and erased from the collective memory.

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