

Surveillance, Power, and the Loss of Freedom in George Orwell's *1984*

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ABSTRACT

George Orwell's *1984* is one of the most powerful dystopian novels of the twentieth century, presenting a terrifying world where surveillance, political power, and psychological control destroy the very possibility of human freedom. The novel portrays Oceania as a totalitarian state ruled by the Party under the symbolic authority of Big Brother. Through telescreens, hidden microphones, spies, and constant monitoring, the Party converts private life into a public spectacle of obedience. This research paper examines how surveillance becomes the central instrument of power in *1984* and how it gradually erases personal freedom, independent thought, emotional intimacy, and moral resistance. Orwell shows that political domination is not maintained only through physical violence but also through the control of language, memory, history, and consciousness. The Party's invention of Newspeak, its rewriting of the past, and its doctrine of "doublethink" demonstrate how power functions by limiting the human capacity to think freely. Winston Smith's struggle against the Party represents the individual's desire for truth, love, and selfhood in a world designed to crush all forms of dissent. However, his final defeat reveals the frightening success of totalitarian power when it enters the mind and reshapes human belief from within. The novel therefore becomes a warning against political authoritarianism, ideological manipulation, and the misuse of technology for social control. In the contemporary world, where digital surveillance, propaganda, and data-based monitoring have become major concerns, *1984* remains deeply relevant. Orwell's vision reminds readers that freedom is not lost suddenly; it is slowly destroyed when truth is manipulated, privacy is violated, and citizens are trained to accept power without question. Thus, *1984* continues to serve as a critical text for understanding the relationship between surveillance, power, and the fragile nature of human freedom.

Keywords: Surveillance, Power, Freedom, Totalitarianism, Big Brother, George Orwell

INTRODUCTION

George Orwell's *1984* is one of the most disturbing and powerful dystopian novels of modern literature. Published in 1949, the novel imagines a future world in which political authority has become absolute, truth has been destroyed, language has been reduced, and individual freedom has almost disappeared. Orwell presents Oceania as a totalitarian state ruled by the Party under the symbolic and terrifying figure of Big Brother. In this world, citizens are not merely governed; they are watched, corrected, disciplined, and mentally reconstructed. The slogan "Big Brother is watching you" becomes the central principle of social life, reminding every citizen that there is no private space left outside the reach of power.

The central concern of *1984* is the destruction of freedom through surveillance and psychological control. Orwell does not present surveillance as a simple political technique. He shows it as a complete system of domination that enters the home, the workplace, language, memory, emotion, and even the unconscious mind. The Party's power does not depend only on police, prisons, or torture chambers. It depends equally on fear, propaganda, social suspicion, historical falsification, and the control of thought. Through telescreens, microphones, informers, and the Thought Police, the Party creates an atmosphere in which every citizen begins to monitor himself or herself. In such a society, surveillance becomes internalized. People are not only watched by the state; they also learn to watch their own gestures, facial expressions, words, memories, and desires.

The tragedy of Winston Smith, the protagonist of the novel, lies in his struggle to preserve a private self in a world that refuses privacy. Winston wants to remember the past, love freely, think independently, and believe that truth exists beyond political control. His rebellion begins quietly, with a diary and a sentence: "Down with Big Brother." This small act is dangerous because it represents independent consciousness. In Oceania, freedom begins not with public protest but with private thought. The Party therefore seeks not merely obedience but inner surrender. It wants citizens to love

Big Brother, not simply obey him. This article examines how Orwell's *1984* represents surveillance as an instrument of power and how that power gradually destroys freedom, truth, identity, and human dignity.

Surveillance as Political Control

Surveillance is the foundation of political power in *1984*. The Party controls the citizens of Oceania by creating a condition in which they are constantly visible to authority. The telescreen is the most important symbol of this system. It transmits propaganda, monitors behaviour, and reminds individuals that they are never alone. Unlike ordinary television, the telescreen works in both directions: it speaks to citizens and watches them at the same time. This destroys the boundary between public and private life. The home, which is usually regarded as a place of personal safety, becomes an extension of the state.

Orwell's depiction of surveillance anticipates modern debates on power and visibility. Michel Foucault, in his discussion of the Panopticon, argues that modern power functions most effectively when individuals believe they may be watched at any moment. The result is self-discipline. People begin to regulate themselves because they cannot know when authority is observing them. Foucault writes that visibility becomes "a trap" because the watched subject participates in his own control (Foucault 200). This idea is deeply relevant to *1984*. Winston is not always being directly watched, yet he behaves as if he is. He controls his facial expressions during the Two Minutes Hate, hides his diary carefully, and fears that even a nervous movement may expose his inner rebellion.

The power of surveillance in *1984* lies in uncertainty. The citizen never knows when the Thought Police are listening or watching. This uncertainty produces fear, and fear produces obedience. The Party does not need to punish everyone; it needs only to create the belief that punishment is unavoidable. Surveillance therefore becomes psychological before it becomes physical. It trains citizens to live under permanent suspicion. Even children become agents of the state. The Junior Spies encourage young people to watch their parents and report any sign of disloyalty. In this way, the Party destroys family trust and replaces natural affection with political loyalty.

The surveillance system also removes the possibility of moral courage. In a free society, rebellion may begin through conversation, friendship, or shared dissatisfaction. In Oceania, however, people cannot trust one another. A careless word may lead to arrest. A facial expression may reveal thoughtcrime. A dream may become evidence of disloyalty. Surveillance isolates individuals by making all human relationships dangerous. Winston's loneliness is therefore not accidental; it is politically produced. The Party knows that isolated individuals are easier to control than communities bound by love, memory, and trust.

Power and the Control of Truth

The Party's power in *1984* is not limited to watching bodies; it also controls truth. Orwell presents a political world in which facts are not stable. The past is constantly rewritten according to the needs of the present. Winston works at the Ministry of Truth, where his duty is to alter newspapers, speeches, and records so that the Party always appears correct. Once the records are changed, the previous version disappears. The Party's famous slogan, "Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past," expresses the terrifying logic of historical manipulation (Orwell 37).

The control of history is essential to the loss of freedom. Human beings need memory to judge the present. If the past can be altered, then people lose the ability to compare, question, and resist. The Party understands that political domination requires the destruction of historical consciousness. If citizens cannot remember that life was once different, they cannot imagine that life could be different again. Winston's search for the past is therefore a political act. His fascination with old objects, old songs, and the prole district reveals his desire to recover a world beyond Party control.

Truth in *1984* is not discovered; it is manufactured. The Party decides what is true, and citizens are expected to accept its version of reality even when it contradicts direct experience. If the Party says that Oceania has always been at war with Eastasia, then that statement becomes truth, even if yesterday the official enemy was Eurasia. This is where doublethink becomes essential. Doublethink is the ability to hold two contradictory beliefs and accept both. It is not merely hypocrisy; it is mental slavery. It destroys the individual's capacity to distinguish reality from political command.

Hannah Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism helps clarify this aspect of Orwell's novel. Arendt argues that totalitarian rule seeks to dominate human beings from within by destroying factual truth and replacing it with ideological consistency. In such systems, truth becomes dangerous because it offers a reality independent of political authority (Arendt 474). Orwell dramatizes this danger through Winston's belief that "freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four." This statement is simple, but in Oceania it is revolutionary. It asserts that truth exists outside the Party's will. For the Party, such a belief is intolerable because absolute power requires control over reality itself.

Language, Newspeak, and Thought Control

One of Orwell's most original contributions to political literature is his analysis of language as an instrument of domination. In *1984*, the Party creates Newspeak, a reduced form of English designed to make rebellious thought impossible. Newspeak does not expand expression; it destroys it. Its aim is to remove words associated with freedom, individuality, moral complexity, and political dissent. If people lack the words to express rebellion, the Party believes they will gradually lose the ability to think rebelliously.

Language is central to freedom because thought depends on words. A rich language allows human beings to make distinctions, express emotions, challenge authority, and imagine alternatives. Newspeak works in the opposite direction. It reduces vocabulary, simplifies grammar, and eliminates ambiguity. The Party does not want citizens to think deeply; it wants them to repeat approved slogans. Words such as "freedom," "justice," and "truth" become either meaningless or politically dangerous. The destruction of language becomes the destruction of consciousness.

Syme, one of Winston's colleagues, understands the purpose of Newspeak clearly. He explains that the aim is to narrow the range of thought until thoughtcrime becomes impossible. His enthusiasm reveals the frightening intellectual logic of totalitarian power. The Party does not simply censor speech after it occurs; it redesigns language so that forbidden ideas cannot be formed. This is a more advanced form of censorship. Traditional censorship removes dangerous statements. Newspeak attempts to remove the mental conditions that produce dangerous statements.

Orwell had already expressed concern about political language in his essay "Politics and the English Language." He argues that political language often becomes a tool for hiding truth, defending violence, and making lies sound acceptable. According to Orwell, corrupted language can corrupt thought because vague, mechanical, and dishonest language weakens moral judgment (Orwell, "Politics" 356). *1984* transforms this essayistic argument into fictional form. Newspeak is the final stage of political language: a language created not for communication but for obedience.

The slogans of the Party—"War is Peace," "Freedom is Slavery," and "Ignorance is Strength"—show how language is turned against reason. These slogans do not persuade through logic. They train the mind to accept contradiction. They make citizens comfortable with absurdity. Once people accept that words can mean their opposites, political authority becomes free to define reality as it wishes. The result is not merely confusion but submission. When language loses truth, freedom loses its foundation.

The Loss of Private Life

Freedom depends on privacy. A person must have some inner and outer space beyond political inspection in order to think, love, remember, and choose. In *1984*, the Party destroys privacy almost completely. The telescreen watches citizens in their homes. The Thought Police monitor behaviour. Children report parents. Neighbours observe one another. Even sleep and dreams become dangerous. Under such conditions, the self has no protected space in which to grow.

Winston's diary is important because it creates a private space. The act of writing allows him to speak to himself and to an imagined future reader. It is an attempt to preserve individuality in a society that demands ideological uniformity. Yet the diary is also a sign of danger. Winston knows that writing in it may lead to death or imprisonment. This reveals the depth of Party control: even private reflection becomes a political crime.

The relationship between Winston and Julia is another form of resistance because it creates a private bond outside Party control. Their love affair is not only sexual; it is political. The Party attempts to regulate desire because uncontrolled desire creates loyalty beyond the state. Julia's body becomes a site of rebellion because she refuses to allow the Party to control her pleasure. Winston's love for Julia gives him a temporary sense of freedom. In the rented room above Mr. Charrington's shop, Winston imagines that he has found a space outside surveillance. The room becomes a fragile symbol of privacy, memory, and human warmth.

However, this private space is an illusion. The hidden telescreen behind the picture proves that the Party has been watching all along. The betrayal of the room is one of the novel's most painful moments because it destroys Winston's belief that any protected space remains. The Party's power lies precisely in this: it allows Winston and Julia to feel free for a time only to reveal that their freedom was always monitored. Their intimacy becomes evidence against them. Their love is turned into a trap.

David Lyon, in his studies of surveillance, notes that modern surveillance is not only about watching; it is about sorting, managing, and shaping human behaviour through information (Lyon 14). This idea helps illuminate Orwell's vision. The Party gathers information not merely to know what citizens do but to control what they may become. Surveillance is therefore productive as well as repressive. It produces obedient subjects, fearful families, suspicious neighbours, and emotionally damaged individuals. It creates a society in which the normal human need for privacy appears criminal.

Fear, Torture, and the Destruction of the Self

Although surveillance controls daily life in Oceania, the Party ultimately depends on terror. Those who resist are arrested, tortured, and psychologically broken. The Ministry of Love is the place where the Party completes its work of domination. Its name is deeply ironic because it is a place of pain, fear, and human destruction. Yet from the Party's perspective, the name is appropriate: the aim is to make the prisoner love Big Brother.

O'Brien is the most important representative of Party power. He is intelligent, calm, and terrifying because he understands power not as a temporary political tool but as an end in itself. He tells Winston that the Party seeks power for its own sake. This is one of the darkest ideas in the novel. The Party does not claim to create happiness, justice, or social progress. It wants domination. It wants to control reality, bodies, minds, and emotions. O'Brien's philosophy reveals that totalitarian power is not satisfied with external obedience. It must conquer the soul.

The torture of Winston is designed to destroy his independent self. At first, the Party attacks his body. Then it attacks his mind. Finally, in Room 101, it attacks his deepest fear. The purpose is not simply to extract confession. Confession alone is not enough. The Party wants Winston to betray Julia emotionally and spiritually. When Winston cries, "Do it to Julia!" he loses the last inner loyalty that separated him from the Party. His love, which once represented resistance, is broken.

Erich Fromm, in his afterword to *1984*, observes that Orwell's novel is a warning against a society in which human beings become mentally and emotionally powerless before systems of control. Fromm argues that the novel's terror lies not only in physical oppression but in the possibility that people may lose the capacity for independent feeling and thought (Fromm 318). Winston's final condition confirms this fear. He is not merely defeated; he is remade. At the end of the novel, he loves Big Brother. This is the final loss of freedom: not imprisonment, not death, but the destruction of the desire to be free.

Big Brother and the Symbolism of Absolute Power

Big Brother is one of the most powerful political symbols in modern literature. He may or may not exist as an actual person, but his symbolic power is unquestionable. His face appears everywhere: on posters, coins, telescreens, and public spaces. His gaze represents the permanent visibility of the citizen before the state. Big Brother is not simply a ruler; he is the image of total authority.

The genius of the Party lies in making Big Brother both feared and loved. Citizens are taught to see him as protector, father, leader, and judge. This emotional manipulation is essential to totalitarian control. The state presents itself as the source of safety while creating the danger from which citizens seek protection. War, scarcity, propaganda, and fear all strengthen dependence on Big Brother. The more frightened citizens become, the more they cling to the authority that oppresses them.

Big Brother also destroys individuality by becoming the centre of collective identity. Citizens are not encouraged to develop personal values, memories, or loyalties. Their emotional energy must be directed toward the Party. The Two Minutes Hate is a ritual designed to control feeling. Anger, fear, excitement, and loyalty are organized by the state. Even hatred becomes political property. Citizens do not hate freely; they hate whom the Party tells them to hate.

This manipulation of emotion is central to the loss of freedom. Freedom is not merely the right to vote or speak; it is also the ability to feel honestly. In Oceania, emotions are managed by propaganda. Love is redirected toward Big Brother. Hatred is directed toward Emmanuel Goldstein. Fear is attached to thoughtcrime. Sexual desire is regulated. Family affection is weakened. Friendship is dangerous. The emotional world of the citizen is colonized by the state.

The Proles and the Possibility of Freedom

Winston believes that hope lies in the proles. The proles form the majority of Oceania's population, yet the Party does not control them as strictly as it controls Party members. They are allowed ordinary pleasures, family life, popular songs, and small markets. Winston sees in them a natural human vitality that the Party has not completely destroyed. He believes that if they become conscious of their strength, they may overthrow the Party.

However, the proles remain politically unaware. They suffer, work, consume entertainment, and continue their lives without organized rebellion. Orwell does not romanticize them completely. They possess human warmth and freedom from intense ideological control, but they lack historical awareness and political organization. Their freedom is partial and unconscious. Winston's hope in the proles is therefore both meaningful and tragic. It shows that human life continues beneath totalitarian systems, but it also shows that survival alone is not resistance.

The proles are important because they reveal that the Party's greatest fear is consciousness. The Party controls its own members more strictly because they are closer to power and therefore more capable of ideological rebellion. The proles are neglected because they are not considered intellectually dangerous. This division shows how power operates

through class, knowledge, and political access. The Party does not need to control everyone in the same way. It controls different groups according to their perceived threat.

Winston's statement that "if there is hope, it lies in the proles" expresses his longing for collective freedom. Yet the novel ends without such hope being realized. Orwell leaves readers with a bleak vision: the possibility of freedom exists, but it remains unorganized, unconscious, and distant. This bleakness is not a weakness of the novel. It is part of Orwell's warning. Freedom cannot survive automatically. It requires memory, courage, solidarity, language, and truth.

Contemporary Relevance of *1984*

Although *1984* was written in the context of twentieth-century totalitarianism, its relevance has continued to grow. The novel speaks powerfully to contemporary anxieties about surveillance, propaganda, digital monitoring, political manipulation, and the erosion of privacy. Today's world is not identical to Orwell's Oceania, but the questions raised by the novel remain urgent. Who controls information? How is public opinion shaped? What happens when citizens are constantly watched? Can freedom survive when privacy disappears?

Modern surveillance often appears softer than Orwell's telescreens. It may come through smartphones, cameras, data collection, social media, facial recognition, and algorithmic monitoring. Much of it is justified in the name of convenience, security, efficiency, or entertainment. Yet Orwell's warning remains relevant because the central issue is not only technology itself but the relationship between technology and power. Surveillance becomes dangerous when information about citizens is used without accountability, when privacy is weakened, and when people begin to censor themselves because they feel constantly visible.

Propaganda in the modern world also makes Orwell's novel relevant. The Party's control of truth may seem extreme, but contemporary societies also face misinformation, political spin, media manipulation, and the rewriting of public memory. Orwell teaches that truth is fragile. When facts become subordinate to power, freedom becomes unstable. A society that cannot agree on factual reality becomes vulnerable to authoritarian control.

The idea of Newspeak is also relevant in the age of slogans, simplified political language, and emotionally charged media discourse. When language becomes narrow, aggressive, or deceptive, public thinking suffers. Orwell reminds readers that the defence of language is part of the defence of freedom. Clear language helps preserve clear thought. Manipulated language prepares the mind for manipulated politics.

However, *1984* should not be read only as a prediction of technological dictatorship. It is also a moral and philosophical warning. Orwell asks what happens when human beings surrender their responsibility to think. He shows that tyranny succeeds not only because rulers are powerful but because citizens are made fearful, isolated, confused, and obedient. The novel therefore challenges readers to protect truth, privacy, memory, and independent judgment.

CONCLUSION

George Orwell's *1984* remains one of the most important literary explorations of surveillance, power, and the loss of freedom. Through the world of Oceania, Orwell shows how totalitarian authority destroys freedom by controlling not only public behaviour but also private thought, language, history, emotion, and memory. The Party's system of surveillance creates fear and self-censorship. Its control of truth destroys historical awareness. Its invention of Newspeak limits thought. Its attack on love and privacy removes the foundations of human individuality. Finally, its use of torture breaks the self and replaces personal loyalty with love for Big Brother.

Winston Smith's tragedy is the tragedy of the individual under absolute power. His desire for truth, memory, love, and freedom makes him human, but the Party's machinery is designed to crush exactly these qualities. His defeat reveals the most frightening aspect of totalitarian domination: the state does not merely silence rebellion; it seeks to make rebellion psychologically impossible. The final horror of *1984* is not that Winston is killed, but that he survives as a person who has been inwardly conquered.

The novel's continuing relevance lies in its warning that freedom is never permanently secure. It can be lost gradually through fear, propaganda, surveillance, linguistic corruption, historical falsification, and emotional manipulation. Orwell teaches that political freedom depends on the defence of truth, privacy, independent thought, and human solidarity. *1984* is therefore not only a dystopian novel but also a moral document. It asks readers to recognize the signs of domination before they become normal. It reminds us that the struggle for freedom begins with the courage to think, remember, speak, and love beyond the command of power.

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