

The Sexual Passion of Winston Smith (1984)

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There is a vast literature analyzing the political prophecy of George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four. Big Brother, double-speak, telescreens, crimestop, etc. - all applied to our current political situation. The language has become part of our popular lexicon, and as such, has become clichéd through overuse. Blithe, habitual use of language robs it of its power to crack open the safe that hides the realities of life.

There is no doubt that Orwell wrote a brilliant political warning about the methods of totalitarian control. But hidden at the heart of the book is another lesson lost on most readers and commentators. Rats, torture, and Newspeak resonate with people fixated on political repression, which is a major concern, of course. But so too is privacy and sexual passion in a country of group-think and group-do, where "Big Brother" poisons you in the crib and the entertainment culture then takes over to desexualize intimacy by selling it as another public commodity.

The United States is a pornographic society. By pornographic I do not just mean the omnipresent selling of exploitative sex through all media to titillate a voyeuristic public living in the unreality of screen "life" and screen sex through television, movies, and online obsessions. I mean a commodified consciousness, where everyone and everything is part of a prostitution ring in the deepest sense of pornography's meaning - for sale, bought. And consumed by getting, spending, and selling. Flicked into the net of Big Brother, whose job is to make sure everything fundamentally human and physical is debased and mediated, people become consumers of the unreal and direct experience is discouraged. The natural world becomes an object to be conquered and used. Animals are produced in chemical factories to be slaughtered by the billions only to appear bloodless under plastic wrap in supermarket coolers. The human body disappears into hypnotic spectral images. One's sex becomes one's gender as the words are transmogrified and as one looks in the mirror of the looking-glass self and wonders how to identify the one looking back. Streaming life from Netflix or Facebook becomes life the movie. The brilliant perverseness of the mediated reality of a screen society - what Guy Debord calls The Society of the Spectacle - is that as it distances people from fundamental reality, it promotes that reality through its screen fantasies. "Get away from it all and restore yourself at our spa in the rugged mountains where you can hike in pristine woods after yoga and a breakfast of locally sourced eggs and artisanally crafted bread." Such garbage would be funny if it weren't so effective. Debord writes,

The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images...Where the real world changes into simple images, the simple images become real beings and effective motivations of hypnotic behavior.

Thus sex with robots and marrying yourself are not aberrations but logical extensions of a society where solipsism meets machine in the America dream.

As this happens, words and language become corrupted by the same forces that Orwell called Big Brother, whose job is total propaganda and social control. Just as physical reality now mimics screen reality and thus becomes chimerical, language, through which human beings uncover and articulate the truth of being, becomes more and more abstract. People don't die; they "pass on" or "pass

away." Dying, like real sex, is too physical. Wars of aggression don't exist; they are "overseas contingency operations." Killing people with drones isn't killing; it's "neutralizing them." There are a "ton" of examples, but I am sure "you guys" don't need me to list any more.

Orwell called Big Brother's language Newspeak, and Hemingway preceded him when he so famously wrote in disgust in a Farewell to Arms, "I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice, and the expression in vain....Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene..." This destruction of language has been going on for a long time, but it's worth noting that from Hemingway's WW I through Orwell's WW II up until today's endless U.S. wars against Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Libya, etc., there has been the parallel development of screen and media culture, beginning with silent movies through television and onto the total electronic media environment we now inhabit - the surround sound and image bubble of literal abstractions that inhabit us, mentally and physically. In such a society, to feel what you really feel and not what, in Hemingway's words, "you were supposed to feel, and had been taught to feel" has become extremely difficult.

Language, as the Greeks told us, should open up a clearing for the truth (Greek aleitheia, unhiddenness) to emerge so we can grasp the essence of life. And so it is ironically appropriate that Orwell's Winston Smith discovers such essence, not in analyzing Crimestop, his tormenter O'Brien, or Doublethink, but "in a natural clearing, a tiny grass knoll surrounded by tall saplings that shut it in completely" where he secretly meets a young woman who had passed him a note saying she loved him. Away from the prying eyes of Big Brother and his spies, amidst bluebells and a torrent of song from a thrush, they come together almost wordlessly. "Winston and Julia clung together, fascinated" as the thrush sang madly. "The music went on and on, minute after minute, with astonishing variations, never once repeating itself, almost as if the bird were deliberately showing off its virtuosity...He stopped thinking and merely felt." Here the secret lovers affirm their humanity, the truth of sexual intimacy that is the enemy of all abstractions used by the powerful to control and manipulate normal people and to convince them to participate in killing others. "Almost as swiftly as he had imagined it, she had torn her clothes off, and when she flung them aside it was with that same magnificent gesture by which a whole civilization seemed to be annihilated." Reveling in love-making in a free space outside the Party's control, they felt they had triumphed.

But as we learn in 1984 and should learn in the U.S.A. today, "seemed" is the key word. Their triumph was temporary. For sexual passion reveals truths that need to be confirmed in the mind. In itself, sexual liberation can be easily manipulated, as it has been so effectively in the United States. "Repressive de-sublimation" Herbert Marcuse called it fifty years ago. You allow people to act out their sexual fantasies in commodified ways that can be controlled by the rulers, all the while ruling their minds and potential political rebelliousness. Sex becomes part of the service economy where people service each other while serving their masters. Use pseudo-sex to sell them a way of life that traps them in an increasingly totalitarian social order that only seems free. This has been accomplished primarily through screen culture and the concomitant confusion of sexual identity. Perhaps you have noticed that over the past twenty-five years of growing social and political confusion, we have witnessed an exponential growth in "the electronic life," the use of psychotropic drugs, and sexual disorientation. This is no accident. Wars have become as constant as Eros - the god of love, life, joy, and motion - has been divorced from sex as a stimulus and response release of tension in a "stressed" society. Rollo May, the great American psychologist, grasped this:

Indeed, we have set sex over against eros, used sex precisely to avoid the anxiety-creating involvements of eros...We are in flight from eros and use sex as the vehicle for the flight...Eros [which includes, but is not limited to, passionate sex] is the center of vitality of a culture - its heart and soul. And when release of tension takes the place of creative eros, the downfall of the civilization

is assured.

Because Julia and Winston cannot permanently escape Oceania, but can only tryst, they succumb to Big Brother's mind control and betray each other. Their sexual affair can't save them. It is a moment of beauty and freedom in an impossible situation. Of course the hermetically sealed world of 1984 is not the United States. Orwell created a society in which escape was impossible. It is, after all, an admonitory novel - not the real world. Things are more subtle here; we still have some wiggle room - some - although the underlying truth is the same: the U.S. oligarchy, like "The Party," "seeks power entirely for its own sake" and "are not interested in the good of others," all rhetoric to the contrary. Our problem is that too many believe the rhetoric, and those who say they don't really do at the deepest level. Fly the flag and play the national anthem and their hearts are aflutter with hope. Recycle old bromides about the next election when your political enemies will be swept out of office and excitement builds as though you had met the love of your life and all was well with the world.

But understanding the history of public relations, advertising, propaganda, the CIA, the national security apparatus, technology, etc., makes it clear that such hope is baseless. For the propaganda in this country has penetrated far deeper than anyone can imagine, and it has primarily done this through advanced technology and the religion of technique - machines as pure abstractions - that has poisoned not just our minds, but the deepest wellsprings of the body's truths and the erotic imagination that links us in love to all life on earth.

In "Defence of Poetry," Percy Bysshe Shelley writes:

The great secret of morals is love; or a going out of our nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasure of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination.

We are now faced with the question: Can we escape the forces of propaganda and mind control that run so very deep into American life? If so, how? Let's imagine a way out.

Orwell makes it very clear that language is the key to mind control, as he delineates how Newspeak works. I think he is right. And mind control also means the control of our bodies, Eros, our sex, our physical connections to all living beings and nature. Today the U.S. is reaching the point where "Oldspeak" - Standard English - has been replaced by Newspeak, and just "fragments of the literature of the past" survive here and there. This is true for the schooled and unschooled. In fact, those more trapped by the instrumental logic, disembodied data, and word games of the power elite are those who have gone through the most schooling, the indoctrination offered by the so-called "elite" universities. I suspect that more working-class and poor people still retain some sense of the old language and the fundamental meaning of words, since it is with their sweat and blood that they "earn their living." Many of the highly schooled are children of the power elite or those groomed to serve them, who are invited to join in living the life of power and privilege if they swallow their consciences and deaden their imaginations to the suffering their "life-styles" and ideological choices inflict on the rest of the world. In this world of The New York Times, Harvard, The New Yorker, Martha's Vineyard, The Washington Post, Wall St., Goldman Sachs, the boardrooms of the ruling corporations, all the corporate media, etc., language has become debased beyond recognition. Here, as Orwell said of Newspeak, "a heretical thought...should be literally unthinkable, at least as far as thought is dependent on words. Its vocabulary was so constructed as to give exact and often very subtle expression to every meaning that a Party member could properly wish to express." The

intelligently orthodox, he adds, must master the art of “doublethink” wherein they hold two contradictory ideas in their minds simultaneously, while accepting both of them. This is the key trick of logic and language that allows the power elites and their lackeys in the U.S. today to master the art of self-deception and feel good about themselves as they plunder the world. In this “Party” world, the demonization, degradation, and killing of others is an abstraction; their lives are spectral. Orwell describes doublethink this way:

To tell deliberate lies while genuinely believing in them, to forget any fact that has become inconvenient, and then, when it becomes necessary again, to draw it back from oblivion for just so long as it is needed, to deny the existence of objective reality and all the while to take account of the reality one denies – all this is indispensably necessary. Even in using the word doublethink it is necessary to exercise doublethink. For by using the word one admits one is tampering with reality; by a fresh act of doublethink one erases this knowledge; and so on indefinitely, with the lie always one leap ahead of the truth.

It may sound silly to say, but language, as its etymology tells us, begins with the tongue (Latin, lingua). And the tongue is a bell, tolling out its meaning. Indeed, all language springs from the body – is body language. And when language becomes abstract and devoid of blood, it becomes etiolated and unable to convey the truth that is the mystical body of the world. It becomes a viper’s tongue, dividing the “good” people from the “bad” so the good can eliminate the bad who have become abstractions.

When Winston Smith and Julia hid in the arbor and for once felt free and alive as they fucked – despite its transitoriness – Orwell was suggesting something that his dystopian novel denies is possible: that we can escape our own 1984 in 2018 by returning to fundamentals. Whitman told us that if anything is sacred it is the human body, and he sang “the body electric.” This is the task of artists: to sing the words that tell the truth the propagandists try to deny.

James Joyce writes in *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*:

Welcome, oh life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.

Perhaps we should add: in the smithy of our souls and bodies. His fellow Irishman, William Butler Yeats, brings us down to earth with the words:

Now that my ladder’s gone/I must lie down where all the ladders start/In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.

“Yes I said yes I will Yes.”

 [Debord -- Society of the Spectacle](#)

 [George Orwell -- 1984](#)

<http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/49885.htm>

Inverse Times Open Publishing. <http://inversetimes.lingama.net/news/story-135.html>