

Theme of Surveillance: George Orwell's 1984 as a Case Study

Researcher Muhammad Munir Abdul Jabbar / Department of English Language / Al-Mansour
University College / Iraq / Baghdad

Abstract

Since the twentieth century, dystopian novels have regularly examined the association between mankind and surveillance. With the advance of technology, especially after the industrial revolution, technological devices were highly employed in surveillance. Surveillance is inherently political as various governmental institutions (agencies) use it to create docile, conformed bodies in order to enhance and sustain their control over individuals. This article attempts to examine the representation of surveillance and totalitarian societies in the dystopian novel *1984*. Through this novel, George Orwell takes each of the anti-utopian characteristics to its extreme to be a debatable topic in literary and social theories for centuries. The totalitarian government in the novel exerts ultimate control over citizens, both mentally and physically through comprehensive and covert surveillance. Panopticism, a theory proposed by Jeremy Bentham and developed by Michel Foucault, is used to examine Orwell's work. to demonstrate how the party's surveillance methods are similar to the Panoptic prison's surveillance system. The main objective of this article is to show how certain elements of Panopticism are able to deconstruct the idea of privacy in George Orwell's *1984* and how internalized surveillance can influence society in general and the psyche of each individual in particular.

Keywords: Orwell, Surveillance, 1984, Big Brother, Panopticism, Jeremy Bentham

1.1 Introduction:

Originally, the word "utopia" came from a Greek word meaning "no place," and today is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "an imagined or hypothetical place, system, or state of existence in which everything is perfect, especially in respect of social structure, laws, and policies" ("utopia" 36620). Utopian literature became prominent during the period of colonization. Colonizers claimed that their main goal is to create an ideal system of utopian features which later proved to be only a pretext to colonize other nations and exploit them. These societies are depicted in literature as dystopian societies (Holliday 2).

The word dystopia has become ubiquitous in our present age which is used interchangeably with "anti-utopia" or "negative utopia" (Claeys 107). As opposed to utopia or "utopia' (good place)", dystopia describes "a fictional portrayal of a society in which evil, or negative social and political developments, have the upper hand, or as a satire of utopian aspirations which attempts to show up their fallacies" (107). It became prominent after the atrocities at the beginning of the twentieth century, heightened by the unprecedented level of destruction and annihilation during World War I (1914-1918) (Melckebeke 16). Dystopian oeuvres awaken people by engendering a debate about various issues that should be solved so that future calamities can be avoided. People must understand that their societies might eventually end like the societies in the dystopian novels if they do not do

anything to impede its occurrence (Westfal 6-7). The civilization depicted in a dystopian novel must have "echoes of today, of the reader's own experience" because describing how individuals live in a bad society in isolation, with no reference to the reader's own environment, is insufficient. (Westfal 6). Dystopian novels usually touch on a few or all of the following themes: pollution of the environment, population growth, cities becoming impoverished, crime, and violence and most importantly constant surveillance by state police agencies.

The amount of surveillance in the media and as a transdisciplinary narrative has been steadily rising. As said by David Lyon, "Since time immemorial, people have 'watched over' others to check what they are up to, to monitor their progress, to organize them or to care for them." (Lyon 22). John Gilliom and Torin Monahan define surveillance as "monitoring people in order to regulate or govern their behaviour" (18). In addition, they emphasized that "our lives as citizens, students, employees, and consumers are fully embedded in interactive and dynamic webs of surveillance", adding that "such transformative changes require a complete reimagining of social life"(vii).

Surveillance has its prominence in governmental institutions and its history is embedded with military and war-related activities. It is intended to get "national security, military supremacy or the defeat of an aggressor" (Lyon 29). In the military, surveillance is utilized for maintaining military discipline to achieve their

overall goals that will result in having effective armies, and the states used it to organize and discipline populations in new ways, with new goals, and with new techniques and methods. This made a great impact on the state and its decisions concerning the enhancement of the working conditions and health services, but it also demolished the individuals' sense of privacy (Kaleta and Sørensen 18).

Through its conceptualization of surveillance, literature provides a different perspective, discussing collective and individual identity, tackling ethical issues and deconstructing ideologies, presenting why people may be subjugated to or stand against surveillance, and describing its futuristic methods and models. Through their variety and inventiveness, dystopian literary works show how the functionality of the capitalist and socialist systems are correlated with the gathering, storage, processing and transmission of personal and collective information (Marks 6).

One of the most well-known dystopian novels that examine how an extremist system utilizes observation to control and oppress folks is George Orwell's 1984. Surveillance is utilized by the Party as a fundamental instrument to subjugate its residents and make them feel disengaged by installing covert and overt devices among standard residents and utilizing family members as spies.

1.2 Panopticism:

Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) was one of the most important philosophers throughout the eighteenth century, with noteworthy contributions in numerous fields. In 1791, he published a proposal of an innovative reformist model which was later called the Panopticon, a type of prison building. The word Panopticon means to see everything. According to Bentham, it is “A new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind” (qtd in Sheridan 11). The Panopticon is:

A ring-shaped building. In the middle of this tower is a tower perforated with large windows that open on the inner face of the ring. The external building is divided into cells, each of which exceeds the entire thickness of the building. These cells had two windows, one opening inwards, facing the windows of the central tower, and the other external allowing daylight to pass through them. (Sheridan 11)

The primary goal of the Panopticon is to control which is maintained by the constant feeling that the supervisors were watching with imperceptible eyes. There is no place to hide and no place to have privacy. They do not know if they are being watched or not, but assuming they are, obedience is the prisoners' wise choice (Kleij 13).

Additionally, Bentham believed that the panoptic plan might likewise be applied productively to any sort of institution where people should be under supervision, such as “prisons, industry houses, and labour houses, slums, hospitals, and

schools” (Story 133). This new design is considered as a "great and new invented instrument of government" that would allow one person to control a large number of subordinates and to be ‘the only effective tool of correctional administration’” (Strub 41). The panoptic eye secures “the restoration of morals, the preservation of health, the revitalization of industry, and the dissemination of education”, all through a simple idea of architecture (41).

Michel Foucault (1926- 1984), a French philosopher and historian, is one of the most influential and controversial scholars of the post-World War II era. The association between power and knowledge and how it can be employed as an element of social control within societal institutions is the basic element that his theory deals with. He presents some strong supporting arguments for the case that Bentham’s Panopticon is a paradigm for the current societies. The exploitation of vulnerability and uncertainty that accompanies the unobtrusive and constant supervision that exists in modern society acts as a means of subordination and control of the population (Benvenuto).

According to Foucault, Bentham’s panopticon is significantly an authentic shift, from the eighteenth century onwards, in techniques for social control (Storey 137). This is a movement from punishment, the imposition of a code of conduct through a horrifying display of power like public hangings and torment, to discipline which imposes standards of conduct through surveillance. Exceptional discipline to one

of generalized surveillance... the formation of what might be called in general the disciplinary society" is the change that is taking place" (Foucault 209).

In Panopticon, the inmates never know whether they are being watched or not, and as a result, they learn to internalize the surveillance as though they are constantly watched. Therefore, the inmate will exercise discipline over himself as "he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (Foucault 203). Foucault extended the idea of the panopticon into a symbol of social control that stretches out into regular day-to-day existence for all residents, in addition to those in the jail. He contends that social citizens constantly absorb authority, which is one method that established organizations and norms obtain power. For instance, an individual may stop his car at a red light though there are no other vehicles or police present. Despite the fact that there are not really any repercussions, the police are an internalized authority. Individuals will generally comply with regulations since those rules become self-imposed. (203).

According to Foucault, the panopticon system represents the "disciplinary network of society" that can be "seen not only in prisons but also in the capitalist enterprise, military organization, and a multitude of state-run institutions. It does not wait for offenders to act, but classifies and situates before any 'event', producing not 'good citizens' but a 'docile deviant population'" (Lyon 72). Even though the prisoners believe they are in charge of their own behavior and that they

are the ones choosing to abide by the rules set forth by their own systems, in reality, they are under a number of psychological pressures that are designed to promote their collaboration with the system. By doing this, students increase their self-awareness and likelihood of making behavioral changes on their own without assistance from others. (Sheridan 18).

2.1 Surveillance in 1984

It is possible to conduct surveillance from top to bottom. The surveillance process in this case is global and political, with the primary objective being the gathering, archiving, and examination of personal data. These are the tools that a surveillance society employs.

. Moreover, the process of monitoring can be conducted not only by the few observing the many, as the authorities and institutions controlling the citizens, but by having the citizens monitoring each other (Dilmaç and Kocadal 5). One of the most significant developments in state power history is the creation of technology that can transmit and receive data simultaneously, allowing for the use of propaganda and surveillance. The film 1984 clarifies that the primary distinction between the all-seeing, all-controlling Party and “tyrannies of the past” is that the latter were content “to regard only the overt act and to be uninterested in what their subjects were thinking” (Orwell 235). This lack of curiosity is explained not by a lack of politeness but rather by the fact that “in the past no government had the

power to keep its citizens under constant surveillance” (235). What made it not just possible but conceivable for government to extend its reach beyond “the overt act” to “what their subjects were thinking” was the development of technologies not available to tyrannies in the past, technologies of surveillance to keep “citizens under constant surveillance” and technologies of propaganda to constantly bombard them with messaging to “manipulate public opinion” (Yeo 57).

Surveillance cases are divided into two main types: comprehensive and covert. Comprehensive monitoring is internal self-monitoring. Out of the belief that one is being watched, one observes himself to avoid violations whose discovery would be harmful. Covert surveillance operates on the opposite belief: the belief that one is in a private, unsupervised place; therefore, he acts and thinks freely which make it possible for an unexpected spy to discover what one really believes (Yeo 54). Orwell's application of panopticism was nearly free of such restrictions, in contrast to Bentham's, who was totally dependent on a particular environmental design. Bentham's concept is more connected to the concept of comprehensive monitoring than the covert, surreptitious surveillance. In *1984*, the two types of surveillance exist. Big Brother represents the all-seeing system that watches everything in public spaces. Moreover, Orwell emphasizes that Big Brother's eyes and ears can even reach the private realm that Bentham leaves. It is

" extremely risky to let your mind to wander while in a public setting or near a screen " (Strub 42).

Bentham's theory and Orwell's use of panoptical control theory in 1984 align very well.

The telescreen functions as the Panopticon's observation tower:

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. There was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment. (Orwell 5)

Any feeling of privacy is destroyed by the telescreen. Even though it was unbreakable and could broadcast propaganda nonstop, its primary purpose was to act as an audio-visual spying tool under the direction of Thought Police. One was placed conspicuously in each room, at each workstation, throughout the hallways, and at the focal points of the area. These constantly surveilled rooms are like the cells in Bentham's Panopticism.

The telescreen creates a sense of invasion of privacy and raises the possibility of a more serious infraction: the taking of a person's personal information and sending it to a remote inspection facility where it may be kept and reviewed indefinitely, if needed. (Strub 44). It is hard to conceal from the Telescreens because of the way they have been installed in their homes. This is also a key component of the

Panopticon idea. Similar to how the protagonists in 1984 are unable to escape the telescreens, prisoners were unable to escape the tower's all-seeing eye. They are compelled to act in a certain way, and if they don't, the Party may penalize them.

Instead than trying to stop individuals from speaking or acting, like Panopticism does, covert surveillance looks at what people actually believe by watching what they say and do while they are not allowed to think that they are in a private setting. As a result, it functions and is only successful if the subject of the observation holds a belief that differs from the belief required for the observation as a whole. Apart from the official Police Patrols that patrolled the streets, looking through people's windows without permission—even from helicopters looking into upper-story windows—everyone was expected to spy on others and report to the authorities, the Thought Police, any behavior that suggested ideological weakness. Any weakness of this kind would be immediately seen as antiparty sentiment. (Strub 44).

Its all-seeing ability was far more sensitive than the Panopticon's ability to control minds: one knew that even the existence of a forbidden thought ("thoughtcrime") could be detected, betraying the person with a small gesture or grimace ("facecrime"), or with more subtle emotional signals of guilt like changes in breathing or heart rate "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. Winston kept his back turned to the telescreen. It was safer; though, as he well knew, even a back can be revealing” (Orwell 6-7).

Winston's struggle doesn't begin until he starts writing these words in his diary "DOWN WITH BIG BROTHER" (٢٣) repeatedly. Winston refers to his current situation as “the age of Big Brother”. He wants to destroy this oppressing system of constant surveillance that abolishes his fundamental rights of freedom and privacy. In this system, Youngsters are taught to spy on their parents and report any deviations from the norm, turning them into junior spies: “The family has become in effect an extension of the Thought Police. It was a device by means of which everyone could be surrounded night and day by informers who knew him intimately” (168). Winston’s neighbour has experienced this personally. When he was young, he reveals, he had surveilled his uncle and presented a report about him to the Party.

Winston leases a room above Mr. Charrington's antique store, where he first meets O'Brien and then Julia. Both Mr. Charrington and O'Brien are part of the Inner Party's Thought Police. The latter worked in disguise as the owner of an antique store, collecting information about people who visit the shop (Dilmaç and Kocadal 12). O'Brien's “ultimate power, the power to break Winston, depends on

his direct access to levels of Winston's mind he himself cannot reach" (Pittock 148). These two spies succeed in penetrating Winston and Julia's minds to understand whether they have internalized the Bug Brother's surveillance system or they are committing a thought crime. Winston learns in the final chapter of the book that O'Brien is a part of the party's covert structure. As a result, the Thought Police prisons Winston in the Ministry of Love.

Winston is incarcerated in the Ministry of Love, and this is another location where telescreens are used extensively to watch and record human behavior. The prison cells are equipped with "four telescreens, one on each wall" (106). This makes it possible for the Thought Police to continuously observe the inmates and, as a result, modify their behavior as needed. This is made clear when Winston reaches into his pocket to take out a piece of bread and a voice on the telescreen cries out: "6079 Smith W! Hands out of pockets in the cells!" (106). This quotation highlights the idea that the telescreens serve two purposes: they allow the regime to broadcast propaganda or commands while also keeping an eye on and monitoring its populace. (Kaleta and Sørensen 18).

Additionally, propaganda intended to sway public opinion and win over complete compliance is displayed on the Telescreens. The ultimate goal of these telescreens is to brainwash people into disliking any notion of resistance. Though it is so hard for Winston to accept the nonsense of the system like when they try to

convince him that sometimes "two and two... are five. Sometimes they are three. Sometimes they are all of them at once. You must try harder. It is not easy to become sane" (119), he ends up being a docile, brainwashed citizen. At the end of the novel, he writes "in large clumsy capitals: FREEDOM IS SLAVERY, Then almost without a pause he wrote beneath it: TWO AND TWO MAKE FIVE" (133). Moreover, he starts to "exercise himself in crime stop" as he repeats "'the Party says the earth is flat', 'the party says that ice is heavier than water' and trained himself in not seeing or not understanding the arguments that contradicted them" (134).

The claim made by Roger Paden that "there is little surveillance" in 1984 is supported by the following:

"There seems to be little in the way of data gathering or record keeping. There is no mention of any universal testing or of physical examinations" (270). However, Paden's claim that surveillance has to be connected to documented observation completely undervalues the hazardous impact of covert and ubiquitous forms of monitoring in Big Brother's society. Winston is ensnared in an arrangement where 'the perfection of power... render[s] its actual exercise unnecessary... the inmates... [are] caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers" (Foucault 201). Party members' collective actions during the Two-Minutes Hate show that they are aware of their prominence. The partygoers start

yelling and violently moving their bodies as a show of their love for Big Brother, creating an oddly animalistic scene. Their innate behavior, when they leap, still seems to be controlled “up and down in their places”, refusing to break their rigid formation (Orwell 17). This type of controlled mass panic is promoted by the Party, but only in its designated, proper space. The Two-Minutes Hate also has an oddly dehumanizing quality, as one party member who wishes to remain nameless notes. “The little sandy-haired woman”, stands with “her mouth... opening and shutting like that of a landed fish” (17). She speaks without using her voice; instead, her mouth moves mechanically, like a response that has been preprogrammed. Due to the sneaky nature of surveillance “there is a breakdown in individuation, brought about by a fear of difference” (Rook 18).

Conclusion:

In many ways, the Panoptic model proposed by Jeremy Bentham applies to the society of *1984*. Bentham presented a prison model where one supervisor, in a central watchtower, can watch the prisoners all the time, but the supervisor cannot be seen by the inmates. As mentioned earlier, Foucault also reinforced the idea of having surveillance being internalized inside the inmate so he will constantly watch himself. The novel highlights several key components of the surveillance regime, including the presence of Big Brother, telescreens, spies, thought police, historical fabrication, Newspeak, and doublethink. The citizens of Oceania cannot

know if and at what time they are being monitored by the Party, because they have doubts about the number of times the Party watches each telescreen. The anonymity of the observer's identity in the Panoptican system and Oceania is exactly what makes such a model successful, as Foucault argues. Therefore, the sense of privacy in Oceania is almost non-existent, as the party can arrest citizens just for the appearance of suspicious facial expressions or thoughts. Through their covert surveillance, the Party engenders the belief that the individual is in an unsupervised place, and thus acts and thinks freely which enables an unexpected spy to discover what one actually believes.

1984 presents a gloomy, dark picture of what a society could look like if a totalitarian government uses comprehensive and covert surveillance on a larger scale for the purpose of control. Because of his need for solitude, Winston makes the error of entrusting someone else with his thought crimes. Winston never feels as though he can fully express his own thoughts or deeds without fear of being caught by the Thought Police. Winston fell victim to the system because he trusted someone else to be accused of committing a thought crime because he was unable to fully express his own opinions or behaviors without getting detained by the Thought Police.

Works Cited

- Benvenuto, Melissa. "Foucault: The Eye of Power." *Set Adrift on Theoretical Bliss*, 14 Sept. 2001, <https://setadrifthontheoreticalbliss.wordpress.com/2012/04/04/foucault-the-eye-of-power/>.
- Claeys, Gregory. "The Origins of Dystopia: Wells, Huxley and Orwell." *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, edited by CLAEYS, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 107–134.
- Dilmaç, Julie A., and Özker Kocadal. "Exchanging Glances with Big Brother: Diffuse Surveillance in Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four and Today." *Sciences Et Actions Sociales*, no. 12, 2019, pp. 1–23.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Vintage Books, 1977.
- Gilliom, John, and Torin Monahan. *Supervision: An Introduction to the Surveillance Society*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2013.
- Holliday, Casey. "'The Reality Of Utopian And Dystopian Fiction: Thomas More's Utopia And Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale.'" *University of Mississippi*, 2014, pp. 1–144.
- Kleij, Janneke ten. "Technology Sees All: Surveillance and Control in 1984 and the Circle." *Utrecht University*, 2017.
- Kaleta, Emilie, and Ida Johanne Skall Sørensen. "The Representation of Surveillance Society in Dystopian Novels and Contemporary Society." *Aalborg University*, 2020.
- Lyon, David. *The Electronic Eye: The Rise of Surveillance Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004.
- Marks, Peter. "Imagining Surveillance: Utopian Visions and Surveillance Studies." *Surveillance & Society*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2005.

- Melckebeke, Stefanie Van. "Young Adult Dystopian Literature Didactic Benefits of Its Use in the English Subject Classroom in Norway." *Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences*, 2018, pp. 1–85.
- Orwell, George. 1984. London: Penguin Books, 2003.
- Paden, Roger, 'Surveillance and Torture: Foucault and Orwell on the Methods of Discipline', *Social Theory and Practice*, vol. 10, no. 3, 1984, pp. 261-271.
- Pittock, Malcolm. The Hell of Nineteen Eighty–Four. *Essays in Criticism XLVII*: 143-164. Oxford Journals Web 18 Dec. 2009
- Rook, Olivia. "Surveillance, Regulation and Selfhood in George Orwell's 1984 (1949) and Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale (1985)." *INNERVATE Leading Student Work in English Studies*, vol. 8, 2016, pp. 14–28.
- Storey, John. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012.
- Strub, Harry. "The Theory Of Panoptical Control: Bentham's Panopticon and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*." *The Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 25, 1989, pp. 40–59.
- Sheridan, Connor, "Foucault, Power and the Modern Panopticon". Senior Theses, Trinity College, Hartford, 2016.
- "Utopia." *Oxford Dictionary for English*, Edited by Angus Stevenson, 3rd ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 36620–36620.
- Westfal, Jill. "Dystopias in the Rear-View Mirror." *Luleà University of Technology*, 2010.
- Yeo, Michael Terrence. "Propaganda and Surveillance in George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four: Two Sides of the Same Coin." *Global Media Journal*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2010, pp. 49–66.

مفهوم الرقابة السياسية: رواية جورج اورويل ١٩٨٤ نموذجاً

الباحث محمد منير عبد الجبار / قسم اللغة الانكليزية / كلية المنصور الجامعة / العراق / بغداد

المستخلص

انشغل الادب الروائي الخاص بتصوير المدن البائسة ومنذ القرن الثاني عشر بموضوعه الرقابة التي تفرضها السلطة على عامة الناس والتي اصبحت سمة ملاصقة لحياة الشعوب من اجل فرض نظام السلطة وضمان عدم الاعتراض عليه. يتناول البحث الحالي موضوع الرقابة الذي تفرضه الانظمة الشمولية على الشعب في رواية جورج اورويل ١٩٨٤، حيث يتناول اورويل في هذه الرواية جوانب الرقابة المتعددة في مداها الاقصى وتأثيرها على حياة الشعوب ليصبح كل جانب موضوعا جدليا قائما بذاته لقرون عدة. فالرواية تصور لنا كيف تقوم السلطة الشمولية بمراقبة شاملة ومستترة على المواطنين بشقيها الجسدي والفكري. ولغرض دراسة هذا الموضوع بشكل مستفيض ومنظم، فان الدراسة تتبنى نظرية الشمولية التي اقترحها جيريمي بينثام وطورها ميشال فوكولت. وفقا لهذه النظرية يقارن البحث بين اساليب الحزب الحاكم في رواية اورويل الخاصة بالرقابة على المواطنين وبين مراقبة السجناء في معتقلهم. ويبين البحث على نحو مضطرد كيف ان كل جانب من جوانب الرقابة يؤثر سلبا على خصوصية الافراد ونفسياتهم والمجتمع بصورة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: جورج اورويل. المراقبة. ١٩٨٤. الابن الكبير. العمومية. جيرمي بينثام