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Melita Drnasin, Denis Kuzmanović

NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR: THE (IR)RATIONAL DYSTOPIA

The reputation of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* speaks for itself, both in the genre of political dystopia and the mainstream consciousness. People are usually familiar with some of its well-known ideas, like: "Big Brother", "doublethink", "2+2=5" and "Thought Police" even if they have not read the novel itself. Those who did, especially when it was published in 1949, in the tense aftermath of WW2, generally saw the novel as a prophetic, cautionary tale of a very possible future if totalitarianism was allowed to spread unopposed. For later readers, even when the political situation in the West did not slide into tyranny, the novel's feeling of dread remained, and it became not only a by word for totalitarianism but also for many political and social ills of their time. Much of the novel's setting and politics appear plausible and relevant as it is based on real totalitarian societies and is not set in a far-away futuristic society. There is, however, a different dimension to it, revealed after a deeper examination of Oceania's totalitarian oligarchy, and that is irrationality, insanity, or, more precisely, satire, where the Party's oppression seems beyond excessive, even ridiculous; this can undermine its realism and plausibility as a political dystopia. This is mainly due to doublethink, a notion where indoctrinated people are supposed to hold two opposite ideas and believe in both as true, and Newspeak, a government mandated simplified artificial language which is supposed to limit people's very thoughts. Viewed from this perspective, the oppression in the novel becomes implausible, preposterous, unreal. This interplay of realism and irrationality, plausibility and satire, can make the novel simultaneously frightening and comforting, a sort of a conflicting, doublethink experience itself. The purpose of this essay is to investigate if realistic (plausible) or irrational (satirical) elements of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are more dominant; the prevalence of the former would make it a classical political dystopia, as it is generally perceived, while the dominance of the latter would make it a satirical nightmare, where its status as a cautionary tale would be diminished. Through close reading of

the novel's main political ideas, the conclusion this discussion reaches is that the irrational power of doublethink, along with certain other elements, make the novel less convincing as a classical political dystopia due to its dominant satirical aspect.

Key words: totalitarianism; realism; satire; Newspeak; doublethink

1. INTRODUCTION

The reputation of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* speaks for itself; its influence has long ago crossed its literary confines into mainstream, as it seems there are hardly those, whether they read the novel or not, who have not heard of terms like "Big Brother", "Room 101", "doublethink", "Thought Police" or "2+2=5". The power of this nightmarish novel has seeped into public consciousness successfully enough that it is considered the "all-purpose shorthand for not just a grim future but also an uncertain present" and "a vessel into which anyone could pour their own version of the future" (Lynskey 2019: 216; 230). Ever since its publication in 1949, "it has been continuously in print in English from that day to this and has been translated into virtually every European and Asian language. It must be among the most widely read books in the history of the world" (Abbott et al. 2005: 18). One of the definitions of a dystopia is that it depicts "any alarmingly unpleasant imaginary world, usually of the projected future. The term is also applied to fictional works depicting such worlds" (Baldick 2001: 85). Another definition is that it is a "futuristic, imagined universe in which oppressive societal control and the illusion of a perfect society are maintained through corporate, bureaucratic, technological, moral, or totalitarian control. Dystopias, through an exaggerated worst-case scenario, make a criticism about a current trend, societal norm, or political system" ("Dystopias: Definitions and Characteristics"). Here, two phrases are interesting for our topic: *projected future* and *exaggerated worst-case scenario*, which speak of the genre's speculative and satirical aim. One of the reasons why the novel is so memorable and terrifying is how grimy and grounded in reality it seems to be, even in modern times, let alone when it was published in 1949, in the gloomy and tense aftermath of WW2. The novel can be considered "the first fully realised dystopian novel to be written in the knowledge that dystopia was real" (Lynskey 2019: 12), when we consider the revealed horrors of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is more precisely defined as a political dystopia, depicting a society of oppressive political system of totalitar-

ianism. This type of fictional or theoretical society aims to control every aspect of people's lives through severe suppression of personal freedoms, propaganda, censorship and surveillance, and it is a warning against the dangers of unchecked political power ("Dystopias: Definitions and Characteristics"). The novel features elements of realism (or more precisely, naturalism) and satire, as Orwell describes it: "This is a novel about the future – that is, it is in a sense a fantasy, but in the form of a naturalistic novel. That is what makes it a difficult job – of course as a book of anticipations it would be comparatively simple to write" (Davison 2013: 397). More specifically, he views it as

"a show-up of the perversions to which a centralised economy is liable and which have already been partly realised in Communism and Fascism. I do not believe that the kind of society I describe necessarily will arrive, but I believe (allowing of course for the fact that the book is a satire) that something resembling it *could* arrive. I believe also that totalitarian ideas have taken root in the minds of intellectuals everywhere, and I have tried to draw these ideas out to their logical consequences." (Orwell and Angus 1968: 527)

Thus, Orwell sees the novel as a cautionary tale where some features of totalitarian societies could possibly arrive even in democratic countries like Britain if governments were to show signs of unchecked power in the name of security and necessity (Crick 1982). Early reviews mostly saw it as a realistic cautionary tale, or a prediction of a world under Soviet domination (Lee 2001: 26). The fact that many people then saw it as a prophecy compelled Orwell to specifically deny this, calling it instead a warning, a satire, a parody (Lynskey 2019: 236). The novel is considered very much relevant today, as it is invoked with not only authoritarian Russia and China but also democracies such as the United States, if we, for example, consider the Snowden whistle-blowing surveillance scandal and the controversial "alternative facts" phrase uttered in 2017 by one of the officials in the Trump administration. In the latter two examples, sales of the novel rose dramatically (Lynskey 2019), so it is still connected to the perceived erosion of personal freedoms, abuses of political power and disinformation. Our modern technological age also brings mass surveillance, polarization of societies, erosion of truth, misinformation and hate speech through social media platforms, fake news and the dangers of artificial intelligence. When language starts to be controlled from above to restrict critical opinion and empathy, then we can surely be reminded of Orwell's novel ("75 Years of 1984: Why George Orwell's Classic Remains More Relevant Than Ever"). In addition, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* remains widely taught in schools (Rodden 1991) in the context of the dangers of

totalitarianism. All of this contributes to the impression of the novel as mainly a cautionary tale.

However, Orwell also describes the novel as a fantasy, a satire. His publisher Frederick Warburg called it essentially a horror novel, one of the most terrifying books he ever read, describing Orwell as going even further than the satiric savagery of Swift (Lee 2001). Orwell was by the late 1930s familiar with Stalinist oppression, its personality cult of an infallible leader, contempt for free speech and truth in general, political inquisitions and show trials, arbitrary arrests, denunciations, confessions under torture and overall paranoid atmosphere in society (Lynskey 2019); he included but also in places exaggerated, i.e. satirized those elements in the novel. This satire is also relatable today, for example in the Ministry of Truth's mass production of cheap pornographic, novelistic and musical content for the pacification and dumbing down of the proles; we can certainly find analogies to some aspects of today's pop culture impact on people ("The savage satire of '1984' still speaks to us today"). Political dystopia should feature realism (or plausibility) and the right dose of hyperbole (or satire), as it otherwise would merely be a realistic portrayal of an actual totalitarian society (Howe 1983). Thus, some degree of exaggeration is to be expected. However, the novel is mostly seen and is set in public consciousness as a prophetic, cautionary tale, also symbolized by the term "Orwellian" which is used in plenty of real or fictional authoritarian or totalitarian contexts, and is essentially defined as "characteristic or suggestive of the writings of George Orwell, esp. of the totalitarian state depicted in his dystopian account of the future, Nineteen Eighty-four" ("Oxford English Dictionary"). This indicates that the oppression depicted in the novel is realistic, convincing, believable, and that the motivation and goals of the government are, although grossly immoral, still rational. But what if the novel's satirical side is prevalent, making the narrative grotesque, nightmarish, so irrational and over the top that it even becomes darkly comical, and also comforting, because it is impossible to see it realized? Indeed, the Party's very motivation can be perplexing for readers and the protagonist himself, who wonders in a secret diary entry on its ultimate goal: "I understand HOW: I do not understand WHY" (Orwell 2003: 135). Once readers absorb the initial impact of morally reprehensible depictions of surveillance, propaganda and oppression, they may ask a simple question: why does the oppression appear so extreme and ridiculous, far beyond any pragmatic or necessary measure? In other words, does the Party act rationally in its pursuit of ideology, power and control, or is it so extreme as to become irrational, even insane? Could such a regime be sustainable, even for a decade or so, without descending into chaos and madness? If the

novel is too much of an exaggeration of the horrors of totalitarianism, so much over the top that it becomes a dark joke, then its power as a literary symbol against future oppression is significantly diminished since it is difficult to take it seriously. This dynamic between realism and satire is what gives the novel its power, as it can achieve “strongest effects precisely at the moment when the balance teeters between minimal credence and plummeting disbelief. For at such a moment we ask ourselves: can things really go this far?” (Howe 1983: 8), but is this dynamic balanced? This is where we finally come to the main question of this discussion: is the novel more convincing as a cautionary tale (as it generally seems to be perceived), or a satire; as a rational political dystopia, or an irrational political fantasy? Additionally, do the cautionary and satirical aspects exist in harmony, or does one overpower the other? Accordingly, this essay will examine the relationship between the novel’s plausible and satirical dystopian elements through various aspects of the Party’s tyranny, such as surveillance, censorship, intimacy, propaganda, everyday oppression, and finally, the ideas of Newspeak and doublethink.

2. SURVEILLANCE AND CENSORSHIP

Surveillance in Oceania is primarily conducted through the use of telescreens which are required to be in every apartment and are also omnipresent in public spaces. They are two-way transmitting devices which can also pick up any sound above a whisper, and the only way to escape its gaze is to be outside of its large field of vision, or to be in complete darkness when in bed. A citizen has no way of knowing if the Thought Police is watching and listening all the time, and they certainly have the option to plug into a telescreen any time they want. It does not seem plausible that the Party is constantly watching all the citizens due to sheer manpower needed for this, but the sense of paranoia they induce makes the citizens believe they do. The flaw of this surveillance system is that a person knows when he is being monitored, and the person on the other side can misinterpret, neglect or forget so much mundane data received (Abbott et al. 2005). As Winston knows, a citizen has to assume the facial expression of quiet optimism, if not cheer, when facing the telescreen in order to reflect how happy life is in Oceania. Showing frustration, dismay, pessimism or anxiety is considered a *facecrime*, which could get one imprisoned or worse. One would assume that private life hardly exists in Oceania, but interestingly, citizens have a small space in their apartment outside of the telescreen’s field of vision where they can be alone; this is what Winston exploits when writing in a secret diary, which is of course a pun-

ishable offense. Why such a totalitarian government does not require apartments to be completely covered by telescreen vision is strange, unless we think of it as a lure for people to engage in private, i.e. rebellious activities. In any case, the manner and level of surveillance in Oceania is appropriately exaggerated and seems plausible, unless we believe Goldstein's book where everything, from people's words, actions, characteristic body movements, words uttered in sleep, and facial expressions when alone, are intensely scrutinized. Quite literally, a "Party member lives from birth to death under the eye of the Thought Police" (Orwell 2003: 303). What is puzzling here is the very low level of surveillance on the proletariat, who make up 85% of Oceania's population. Apparently, it takes just a few agents of the Thought Police to move among them, spread false rumours and eliminate those few capable and intelligent enough to potentially pose a future threat (Orwell 2003: 124). Generally speaking, though, this technological surveillance and its overall invasion of privacy is definitely relatable in our time (Taylor 2024).

Censorship is constant in Oceania, and it reaches such satirical extremes that people do not know with certainty that they live in 1984 or some other year. At first glance, Winston's job at the ironically named Ministry of Truth where he alters historical record at the Party's directive makes perfect sense for such a regime. Newspapers, books, leaflets, posters, pamphlets, films, cartoons, photos, and periodicals are all constantly rewritten and reissued by an army of Outer Party members like Winston. The purpose is to show that the Party is never wrong in its domestic or foreign policy predictions or achievements, as there is an "original" written record to "prove" it. This has been seen in historical totalitarianisms such as Nazi Germany but especially in Stalinist Russia, where the Communist Party had exclusive rights to truth. For example, its members who fell out of favour were routinely airbrushed out of official photos, and data of their birth, education and service were erased from records, as if they never existed. But in Oceania things go even further in that most of the "corrected" statistics had no practical application in the first place, no relation to reality whatsoever. Thus, absurd data is replaced by equally absurd data. We may ask what the point of this censorship is, because it is redundant to replace one meaningless lie for another. Goldstein in his exposé offers a reason for this: a party member has to be cut off from the past and have no standard of comparison to see how absurd this is; they have to truly *believe* that this task, and life in Oceania in general, is meaningful and good. The Party always has to project infallibility; no correction of course or policy can ever be admitted because that would be a sign of weakness, hence the endless censorship. In addition, Party members who censor records have to *remember*

that reality corresponds to the newest update of the past and deliberately *forget* that any censorship took place; this is called *doublethink* in Newspeak. Accordingly, as “no documents are kept, not even Party members are able to remember the truth after it has been changed into a fact. In this way, a political discourse established on nothing but made-up facts will eventually become reality, as the Party, being the institution that exerts the most power, controls discourse” (Kühl 2009: 45). However, it is precisely doublethink which makes the whole concept of censorship meaningless, because if people believe whatever the government says and do not rationally think about what is said, then they do not need altered facts to reflect that; nobody is going to check the official record to match what is said, and even if they did, its existence could simply be ignored or considered a sabotage. As Goldstein says, the mental gymnastics here is quite simple: “All that was needed was an unending series of victories over your own memory. ‘Reality control’, they called it” (Orwell 2003: 76).

The Party’s quest for control goes even further as they try to censor people’s very thoughts through the concept of Newspeak. It is an artificially simplified language designed to limit the range of human vocabulary, and by extension, thoughts and consciousness itself. Thus, people will not be rebellious because of inability to even think in that manner; thoughts themselves become the Party’s intellectual property, so to speak. What the Party does not seem to take into account with Newspeak is that it is reducing intellect and effectiveness of its own members, including leaders, in every aspect of human behaviour, not just in potentially rebellious thinking. They have to target language, thinking and consciousness in general, not just their specific features, in order for Newspeak to work. So bizarrely, the Party is deliberately crippling itself, and it is hard not to consider this a satire of typical totalitarian megalomania for control. Even for a government as powerful as the Party, it is impossible for them to surveil and control Party members’ every word spoken in private and in secret, not to even mention the proles who are under no duress to use Newspeak at all because the Party knows it would be impossible to enforce it; thus, Newspeak is “theoretically ill-founded and inherently impracticable” (Fowler 1995: 226). As much as the Party can control official communication, the language itself can become, for those dissatisfied with the government, an “effective instrument of challenge, developing naturally and largely outside the reach of governmental and artificial control” (Ibid.). It can also be noted that the novel’s Appendix, which represents the Party’s plan to eventually replace the English language with Newspeak, is written in normal English, not Newspeak, and also in past tense; the implication is that this impractical language control experiment failed, and the world of Oceania with it (Atwood 2011: 129). Or-

well himself experienced censorship even in democratic Britain during his wartime work for the BBC, as the government restricted and modified information for security reasons and maintaining public morale. Thus, Newspeak and censorship represent “a satire on existing practices, drawing them out to absurd extensions” (Fowler 1995: 183).

3. INTIMACY

In terms of intimacy, the Party strictly regulates sex and family matters for its members. Should a man and a woman fall in love and form a relationship, their loyalty and passion would be directed toward themselves, not the Party. Such people behave unpredictably and it is hard to manipulate them if they are not fixated entirely on the government. Sexuality is also tightly regulated and repressed, as it can otherwise lead to romantic feelings and a desire for private life outside the Party; therefore, *ownlife*, as it is called in Newspeak, is forbidden. Furthermore, being sexually active can induce positive energy and mood, and the government wants to pervert and direct that energy elsewhere, as Julia says: “They want you to be bursting with energy all the time. All this marching up and down and cheering and waving flags is simply sex gone sour. If you’re happy inside yourself, why should you get excited about Big Brother and the Three-Year Plans and the Two Minutes Hate and all the rest of their bloody rot?” (Orwell 2003: 203). For the Party, sex is not meant to be enjoyed but is allowed exclusively for procreation: “Sexuality was carefully confined; it moved into the home. The conjugal family took custody of it and absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction. On the subject of sex, silence became the rule” (Foucault 1978: 3). People are conditioned from an early age through the Junior Anti-Sex League organization to repress the sexual urge and see it as a duty that must be endured for Oceania’s well-being. Through constant exposure to anti-sexual propaganda in schools and organizations, young people are manipulated to replace their natural human emotions and desires with fanaticism and loyalty to the Party. Women are especially affected by this, with the example of Winston’s ex-wife Katharine, a devoted member of the Party. On the same night every week, she used to pressure Winston to engage in sexual activity completely devoid of intimacy, solely to fulfil their obligation of procreation. Unable to produce a child, Winston and Katharine agree to separate, which is in those circumstances allowed by the State. In a world where a person has to risk their life to have a sexual relationship outside marriage, Winston and Julia dare to do just that. They know it is dangerous to show emotions even in private, but,

discarding common sense, Winston and Julia decide to rebel and follow their desires, which means having feelings for each other but also feeling hatred toward the Party. Indeed, Orwell “had already made the love affair sufficiently explicit; he had shown that, in this system, sex itself becomes political” (Bloom 2007: 37). Julia’s rebellion is strictly self-centred, driven by personal pleasure. She only pretends to adhere to the Party’s brain washing and does not allow its ideology to control her and thus continues to seek enjoyment and pleasure. While Winston says Julia is “only a rebel from the waist downwards” (Orwell 2003: 232), his rebellious motivations come from longing for the past before the Party’s rule, as memories from the old world evoke a nostalgic desire for today’s non-existent freedom. Their sexual encounters create a strong connection between them, and their common feelings of repulsion toward the Party make them interdependent by giving them a sense of companionship and providing a degree of escapism. They are aware of their inevitable capture by the Thought Police and are eventually imprisoned in the Ministry of Love, where they are subjected to physical and psychological torture. O’Brien in Room 101 leverages Winston’s phobia of rats to persuade him to betray her, as it is stronger than his love for her and hatred for the Party; Julia does the same. In such an ordeal, his survival instinct overpowers any other emotion and he wishes for Julia to take his place in suffering, which is a human response: “Nothing in the world was so bad as physical pain. In the face of pain there are no heroes” (Orwell 2003: 339). After being “reformed”, Winston and Julia unexpectedly meet after being released and now dislike each other. The Party does not just crush their love but turns it into antipathy and them into loyal residents of the state.

Contrary to sexual restrictions within the Party, proles are allowed freedom in matter of sex and love. In fact, they are even allowed to enjoy pornography which the Party itself mass produces to keep them docile and distracted. Although association with prostitutes is forbidden for Party members, many occasionally indulge because it is easy to avoid being caught, and if caught, it leads to short imprisonment but not vaporization. The real crime is promiscuity between Party members, thus all the prostitutes are among proles. Proles are also entitled to freely choose a person to marry. Genuine affection and sexual desire are a common purpose for prole marriages, as they have the privilege to consummate it for pleasure, along with reproduction. So free expression of love, affectionate physical gestures, and sexual desire are a natural part of their everyday life. It is strange that in totalitarian Oceania 85% of the population can love and enjoy themselves freely. It can be argued that the Party does not consider the proles dangerous and worthy of oppression in this (but also in other re-

gards, as they are spared excessive surveillance and propaganda), but it makes the world more dangerous for people who actually have more power, such as Party members themselves. In any case, the Party's attempts to direct people's frustrated sexual energy into passion for the regime seems plausible. This does not require doublethink, just manipulation and propaganda.

4. PROPAGANDA

Propaganda is of course an unavoidable aspect of any totalitarian government, and Oceania does not disappoint here. The Party places all its failures on Emmanuel Goldstein, their proclaimed nemesis, once a revolutionary but now a traitor. People need a single enemy, a face they can vent all of their frustration and anger towards, and regularly scheduled Two Minutes Hate provide just that. One would normally wonder why the supposedly infallible government cannot defeat just one man, one organization, but fear and brainwashing answers this question. Whenever there is Goldstein's image on the screen, Party members as a reflex shout abuse and curses, either from actual fanaticism or pretence. On one such occasion, Goldstein's image appropriately turns to that of a sheep, as if the regime mocks its own subjects who bleat at it vigorously, then into a Eurasian soldier, the Party's current enemy but soon an ally. Finally, to the crowd's relief, the image then morphs to that of Big Brother himself, as if to sardonically say that there is no difference between an imagined enemy, a (supposedly) real enemy, and their saviour; it is all one big lie. One person actually utters a prayer and soon the group breaks into a chant praising their lord and saviour Big Brother; in lieu of an actual religious experience, this is the closest thing Party zealots are allowed to have. The worst of this propaganda is seen in the viciousness children acquire from relentless brainwashing in school and during extracurricular activities, processions, hiking, marching, playing with dummy rifles, etc. Because of their inexperienced and impressionable minds, they are easily conditioned to hunt the regime's imagined enemies everywhere, especially at home, their own parents living in terror of them. Hardly a week passes by in Oceania without the newspapers praising the latest case of these 'child heroes' denouncing their own parents. Readers can recall the fate of Winston's neighbour Parsons, the most stupidly loyal Party member, who gets denounced by his daughter for supposedly uttering rebellious words in his sleep. Brainwashed Parsons cannot remember if he did but believes it and praises his daughter for doing her patriotic duty. What is very likely, and tragic, is that Parsons does nothing wrong and is sent to his death by his own brainwashed, fanatical daughter.

Such is the Party's corrupt influence that they taint the very basis of society, family itself, and that sacred relationship among humanity, between parents and children.

The constant propagandist blaring of false statistics and data how the citizens have better lives, food, working conditions, education, health, etc. is effective because there is no standard of comparison due to the Party's monopoly on the past and the isolated nature of airstrip One (Britain); no citizen can go abroad and make a comparison. The biggest example of this totalitarian propaganda is when the name of the enemy is abruptly changed during the height of Hate Week festivities. All over London posters of a menacing Eurasian soldier appear, and it just so happens that at this time enemy bombs are exploding more often and killing more people than usual. Readers would be reasonable in assuming that either the Party leadership is allowing the enemy attacks to increase by being deliberately lax in their defence, or that they orchestrate these attacks themselves to make the people hate the Eurasian enemies even more. At the very pinnacle of delirious hatred, the regime's public speaker is handed a note in the middle of his speech and immediately announces a 180-degree policy change where suddenly Eastasia is the enemy and Eurasia an ally. Instantaneously, "[w]ithout words said, a wave of understanding rippled through the crowd" (Orwell 2003: 266). The existence of enemy Eurasia posters and banners is immediately attributed to Goldstein's saboteurs and secret agents. We can consider this event an obvious satire of the historical totalitarian propaganda ceremonies, with the people here being more damaged with non-stop propaganda and doublethink insanity, but there is a reasonable explanation of the crowd instantly accepting a major change like this: some do it out of actual fanaticism, but others out of fear and pretending. For example, Julia, a young member of the Outer Party, does not care about its politics, ideology or propaganda, and she does not even believe that the war is actually happening; it is all the government's lie to keep people afraid. Whatever Party politics concerns her life in the present, she privately questions it; anything else she does not think about. She considers it normal that a lot of people secretly hate the Party but only obey because of fear. If there are more young people like Julia, then the number of people who pretend is perhaps not insignificant. Regarding the absurdity of the Hate Week change of alliances, it is therefore plausible that a lot of people are just taking the path of least resistance, trying to have some joy in their life, like Julia. As for the Party's professed ideal world, it is nothing in particular, just a "nation of warriors and fanatics, marching forward in perfect unity, all thinking the same thoughts and shouting the same slogans, perpetually working, fighting, triumphing, persecuting – three hundred million people all with the same face" (Orwell 2003: 128). The reality

is a deteriorating, smelly, decaying city with underfed people shuffling about and doing useless, absurd work. A Party member is paradoxically “free” and not free at the same time: “He has no freedom of choice in any direction whatever. On the other hand his actions are not regulated by law or by any clearly formulated code of behaviour. In Oceania there is no law” (Orwell 2003: 303). So Oceania is strong in propaganda of hatred, fanaticism and aggression but has no concrete, specific written set of ideals, rules, laws or vision. People are arrested and vaporized simply because somebody at the top arbitrarily decides that they might commit some future crime. Also, a Party member is supposed to unconsciously, or instinctually know what the correct behaviour is, despite no laws, as doublethink brainwashing does not allow rational thinking. This is developed through mental training from childhood where the desired outcome is an individual who is “unwilling and unable to think too deeply on any subject whatever” (Orwell 2003: 304).

5. OPPRESSION AND DOUBLETHINK

As mentioned before, oppression in Oceania has a lot in common with the historical period of Stalinism in particular, especially when it comes to purges and show trials, but here disappearances are more common, the fate of those people forever unknown. Winston himself knew about thirty people in his life, including his parents, who simply vanished. Public disgracing, confessions and trials ostensibly happen for the reason of destroying the regime’s enemies, but Winston suspects that it simply happens “because purges and vaporisations were a necessary part of the mechanics of government” (Orwell 2003: 90). The oppression focuses mostly on Party members, who are expected to always be doing something with their free time, such as some communal recreation, joining some patriotic organization, etc. Walking by yourself, enjoying occasional solitude is suspicious, as it indicates a taste for *ownlife*. Proles, as said before, are left mostly in peace as long as they work and breed. In a government system of professed collectivism, the Party claims that they liberated the proles from capitalist exploitation but at the same time considers them inferiors, little more than animals which are “left to themselves, like cattle turned loose upon the plains of Argentina” (Orwell 2003: 124). Crime flourishes in prole quarters of London, but it does not matter as it happens amongst themselves. For such a totalitarian place, the Party’s slogan that “Proles and animals are free” (Orwell 2003: 125) is strangely true and, in a way, utopian. The proles even get to go on occasional holidays, as Winston encounters a large family in a train visiting relatives in the country, possibly also buy-

ing some black market butter. It does not sound too bad, being a prole. In contrast, Party members are discouraged of singing a tune or whistling, as it smells of unorthodoxy, of “dangerous eccentricity” as Winston calls it. In Stalinism, the situation was quite different, as the working classes, after the purges of old Bolsheviks and intelligentsia, were massively recruited into the high party positions to fill the void, and were at the same time subject to state terror more than other classes; in fact, they were the majority of the Gulag population (Claeys 2017: 434).

The reasons for the Party’s oppression are outlined in the forbidden book (supposedly written by the Inner Party to entrap potential rebels) by Emmanuel Goldstein. They are simultaneously sensible and absurd, as the book depicts a world of three superpowers who fight one another for no ideological reason, but simply to keep their populations artificially impoverished by destroying the surplus of labour. One would think that these governments could simply destroy that surplus by dumping it into the ocean, or burying it in a hole somewhere, but apparently, the society needs to be emotionally invested in a war, in a state of actual fanaticism, even though these leaders at the same time know the war is a hoax. Also, if the majority of the Party is brainwashed constantly, and the proles are not important, they could simply believe to be in a war without the government actually engaging in it, but the Party leaders brainwash themselves as well. Party members are expected to be simultaneously competent and intelligent (to a point) to keep the war machine running but also ignorant, credulous fanatics (Orwell 2003: 280). The economies of these superpowers are self-sustainable, but they fight in a controlled conflict over a disputed, neutral territory which is rich in valuable minerals and slave labour, even though they do not need either to keep them in power, as the labour surplus is destroyed anyway. The three superpowers, who alternately change alliances, engage in a tacit agreement to fight a limited war but at the same time are stockpiling nuclear weapons to conquer one another when the time comes. They do not seem to realise that nuclear confrontation means mutually assured destruction. The totalitarian governments of Oceania, Eurasia and Eastasia want to keep their population poor in order to preserve a hierarchical society; otherwise people, if the wealth was abundant and equally distributed, would demand more rights and equality, which is supposedly the very point of a collective society Oceania styles itself to be. Essentially, the totalitarian leaders want to preserve their privileged status at the top of the hierarchy by engaging the population in a perpetual warfare to keep them uneducated, poor and occupied; this makes sense from their perspective, as they do not want to share their power. Goldstein describes the classes in Oceania’s collective society, with upper (Inner Party), middle (Outer Party)

and lower (proles) with corresponding privileges between the first two, which are apparently not that pronounced. Inner party members are supposed to live relatively austere lives but actually have large flats, servants, luxury food, private cars and helicopters. Outer party members have somewhat of a better living standard compared to the submerged masses, the proles (Orwell 2003). But as we have seen, in a topsy-turvy world of Oceania the high and middle classes persecute themselves the most, with even the Inner Party members subject to vaporization, while the proles are mostly left alone. The Party replenishes its ranks (depleted by arbitrary arrests, tortures, imprisonments and executions) through a process where a person from any class, sometimes even among the proles, takes a membership exam by the age of 16. What these exams consist of, who evaluates them and how objectively, is unknown. Party membership is not hereditary in principle, as there is supposedly no nepotism, corruption and favouritism. Rather progressively for a nightmare totalitarian system, there is no racial or ethnic discrimination within its ranks. However, why would anyone sane want to be in the Party at all, considering the persecution that goes on in it? Sensible people would much rather be proles, who have a higher degree of freedom. The answer to this question is brainwashing, where candidates are conditioned to consider membership in the Party as the highest honour, but those who are still sane and only pretend to believe in propaganda can simply fail the exam and avoid the Party. As to the relationship between Inner and Outer Party members, there is some sort of interchange where the weaklings from the former are excluded (vaporized) and the latter are sometimes allowed to advance. But why would the Inner Party accept competition from the lower ranks? Would they not want to keep power for themselves? As mentioned, since there is no nepotism and hereditary tendencies, in principle at least, the Party might even consider recruiting new ranks from the proles (Orwell 2003: 301). But how useful would these recruits, considered little more than animals, be if they wallow in poverty, filth, crime and stupidity, as the reputation of the proles is in the eyes of the elite?

Perhaps the most striking element in this government structure is the level of fanaticism and delusion further up the ladder. Normally, one would expect that the Inner Party leaders cynically and pragmatically exploit their gullible followers. These leaders know the truth they have to twist, the facts to constantly alter because they make their decisions accordingly, and they also know that the war is waged for false purposes. But for Goldstein, the leaders are in fact the most hysterical and fanatical in their hatred for the enemy because they neutralize the truth with doublethink. As said, they are engaged in carefully prolonging the war as long as possible but are at the

same time actually strategizing and stockpiling nuclear weapons for the purpose of imminent conquest of the other two superpowers. More specifically, their ultimate mutually exclusive goal is to keep the status quo but also conquer all of earth and extinguish all independent thought, including within themselves. So the leaders are the most insane and manipulated of all, and they consciously do it to themselves more than they do it to others, since the latter do not know the truth. Such is the rot and insanity of doublethink that its effects are the most powerful at the top. So how plausible is it that these insane leaders will practice restraint and caution with so many nuclear bombs at the ready? But even if the Party does not suffer from doublethink, how likely is it that this stalemate of three superpowers possessing nuclear powers will last? The three sides can for now tacitly agree to wage their meaningless perpetual war, but what is to stop paranoia, ego and desire to dominate to ruin such harmony? What is to stop Oceania, for example, to attack first and try conquering the other sides before they do it to them? One could point out that the USA and Soviet Union, two superpowers with nuclear weapons, engaged in a Cold War for almost fifty years with no direct confrontation, but the former was not a totalitarian society but a democracy, and the Soviet Union oscillated between a totalitarian and strict authoritarian state (consider the Soviet thaw after Stalin's death and the period of Perestroika and Glasnost in the 1980s), so both were able to practice restraint when necessary. With not two, but three nuclear totalitarian superpowers, despite the degree of exaggeration that dystopian genre brings, a lasting cold war in the novel seems not only implausible but impossible. On top of everything else, the leaders of *all three* governments are delusional and insane, as "all three powers are simultaneously aware and unaware of what they are doing. Their lives are dedicated to world conquest, but they also know that it is necessary that the war should continue everlastingly and without victory" (Orwell 2003: 286).

Doublethink, this underlying principle of oppression, can be more fully understood in two Newspeak words, *crimestop* and *blackwhite*. The first represents the mental process (conditioned from one's youth, later to become unconscious, instinctual) of stopping logical, reasoned thought when it conflicts with the Party directive, which Goldstein calls 'protective stupidity'. The second word means continuous, moment-to-moment adjusting of a person's mental process when they not only proclaim but also actually *believe* in an idea which goes against common sense or previous facts, based on what the Party wants in that moment. A person so has to forget that they ever believed in something opposite, until the next moment comes when they have to perform this adjustment again. So, for example, if the Party shows you the colour

black and tells you it is white, you not only verbally agree with that but actually also believe it, and forget that you ever believed black was actually black. In other words, doublethink requires its victims to perform this mental battle while also forgetting that it is taking place, and the Party does not have to justify anything of its policies since people were not supposed to remember previous changes (Stewart 2003). Such is the madness of Winston's interrogation when O'Brien shows him four fingers, and after punishing him for telling the truth in seeing four, O'Brien says: "Sometimes, Winston. Sometimes they 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" (Orwell 2003: 355). Another absurdity of the interrogation process is when O'Brien reveals that the tortured prisoners, who become so traumatized, brainwashed and broken in body and spirit that they go insane and "willingly" accept and worship Big Brother, the very symbol of the power who abused them in the first place, are soon shot. So the Party goes through all that trouble of surveillance, arresting, torturing and "re-educating" a person, reconstituting out of them a passionate, however broken, believer in the regime, only to then destroy them. They could simply execute people they want as the end result is the same, without the waste of time, manpower and resources. So why do they do it? Because, as O'Brien says, "[i]t is intolerable to us that an erroneous thought should exist anywhere in the world, however secret and powerless it may be" (Orwell 2003: 360). All of this is connected to the Party's ultimate motivation, and that is simply power for the sake of power, oppression for the sake of oppression, as O'Brien memorably says, "If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face – for ever" (ibid. 376). It seems that a cliché of absolute power corrupting absolutely applies here, but the added dystopian exaggeration, which becomes satire, is that the people in power deliberately act irrational and consciously make themselves insane, and drag the rest of society, if not the world, down with them. It never happened in historical totalitarian societies that leaders deliberately made themselves insane, because that is not even possible.

It could be argued that there were historical precedents to this madness, namely during the paranoid 1930s in Soviet Russia. Indeed, when one reads how insane the situation was, it is tempting to think that the Party's irrationality was not satirical, but realistic. Due to the disastrous Soviet economic policies, the government constantly needed to uncover "enemies" to scapegoat; everyone could be arrested, from the highest party officials to the poorest peasant. At that time everything under the sun was suspicious: being gloomy in public meetings, not clapping enough or too much after political speeches, using sarcasm, making jokes, meeting other people on the street,

merely reading about enemies of the state in the official newspapers, having a family member or an acquaintance who was previously arrested, etc. Schoolbooks and banknotes were increasingly purged as authors and finance ministers were denounced, and people pretended not to notice their co-workers who disappeared, not even glancing at empty desks. But there was method in this madness: party officials in charge of uncovering state enemies were desperate to find them anywhere anytime, as they themselves might end up imprisoned or worse for not being zealous enough in their duty. So quotas of enemies to be persecuted were introduced arbitrarily and needed to be met; some officials even held quotas in reserve in case the government became even worse in their persecution mania, so that they could appear patriotic at all times, but they were doing it out of fear and self-preservation, instead of fanaticism like in the novel (Claeys 2017). They did not care to brainwash those arrested intoloyal followers like Oceania's Party does; the victims were simply deported (if they were lucky), imprisoned or executed. People under torture confessed to the most outlandish imaginary crimes, which the prosecutors of course knew, but confessions had to be extracted, quotas fulfilled and enemies punished: "The act of confession, even only to an interrogator, satisfied the public demands of the concept of the hypertransparent society" (Claeys 2017: 154). There were rational reasons why the Soviet government behaved in this manner, as many of its leaders, the Old Bolsheviks, were themselves persecuted, tortured, exiled, imprisoned and executed by the monarchist regime. Thus, paranoia and constant sense of panic was therefore deep-seated and ingrained into their psyche as they constantly feared conspiracies from the start of their reign. Also, "the Bolsheviks' minority mentality and popular hatred of privilege and oppression fused in promoting violence" (Claeys 2017: 173). They were so used to a world of lies, intrigue, violence and ruthlessness that they embraced fanaticism, sectarianism and groupishness. Once they got in power, they not only continued but pushed such behaviour to the extreme, which culminated in the Great Purge period from 1936-1938, a terror which Stalin himself eventually reined in when he realized that the state was becoming too weak in the upcoming struggle with Hitler's Germany. He actually had real enemies, although nowhere near the magnitude he believed, both internal and external (Trotsky and Hitler respectively) and was only briefly allied with relatively ideologically different powers (Nazi Germany and the Allies) for reasons or *realpolitik*. Oceania, by contrast, has long-term tacit agreements with ideologically similar powers for no ideological reason. Thus, unlike the ideologically devoid Oceania leaders who operate purely on power for the sake of power, Stalin, however powerful he was, remained a committed Bolshevik to the end and really be-

lieved in building a Communist utopia in Russia and abroad (Smith 2014: 132). Hitler was also ideologically driven with his racial Darwinist theories and Aryan utopia (Fest 1992: 120). None of this is present with O'Brien, the only Inner party member we get to somewhat know in the novel. The only extreme to go to after these two dictators (and future ones, like Mao and Pol Pot, also fanatics) and their crimes is worship of power itself, something which does not convincingly explain the Party's empty fanaticism unless we view it as satirical. Instead of striving for some sort of utopia, the Party spends its time persecuting pitiful individuals like Winston, whose only crime is having a secret diary and an affair and who represents no threat to the regime whatsoever. Thus the initially realistic and plausible dystopian world of Oceania becomes satire, a dark fantasy, a nightmare.

7. CONCLUSION

After all is said, it is perhaps appropriate to think of the novel as a doublethink experience, simultaneously evoking terror and comfort. The nightmare usually comes from that first unforgettable reading experience, especially for young readers, as books read in youth stay with us forever, as Orwell said (Lynskey 2019: 11). Of special note is the frighteningly plausible scenario of corrupting people's intimacy and brainwashing of children and youth, where doublethink is not even necessary to make them victims of the Party's corrosive influence. However, on repeated readings that originally potent nightmare may become less and less plausible and finally unbelievable, so dark that it becomes ridiculous, too satirical: "1984 can hurt you a single time, and most likely when you are young. After that, defensive laughter becomes the aesthetic problem" (Bloom 2007: 3). Here Bloom was referring to Orwell's apparently weak narrative and representation of human personality or moral character, but the impression is still the same if viewed from a politically satirical viewpoint. Basically, "the first two-thirds of the novel explain through exaggeration what had already happened in Europe, while the last third suggests what could happen if every conceivable limit were removed" (Lynskey 2019: 185). But if every limit is removed, this is when plausibility weakens and satire dominates, and the more one thinks of Oceania, the more the feeling of irrationality increases. Because, after all, where can one go beyond totalitarian fanaticism? Only to absurdity, insanity, power for power's sake, contradiction, irrationality; a behaviour Inner Party members are devoted to. Doublethink is the rotten foundation on which they built a dystopian house of cards, a power structure so inhuman and insane that it is the most satirical aspect of the

novel, which pulls it away from its perception as a cautionary tale, thus making the novel's general reputation an ironic one.

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TISUĆU DEVETSTO OSAMDESET ČETVRTA:* **(I)RACIONALNA DISTOPIJA*

Sažetak:

Reputacija Orwellovog romana *Tisuću devetsto osamdeset četvrta* govori sama za sebe, kako u žanru političke distopije, tako i u općoj kulturi. Ljudi su obično upoznati s nekim najpoznatijim idejama, poput: „velik brat“, „dvomisli“, „2+2=5“ i „misaona policija“, čak i ako nisu pročitali sami roman. Oni koji jesu, posebno onda kada je objavljen 1949. godine u napetom poslijeratnom vremenu, općenito drže da je roman proročka, upozoravajuća priča moguće budućnosti ukoliko bi se totalitarizmu dozvolilo da se razmaše bez otpora. Za novije čitatelje, čak i kada politička situacija na Zapadu nije skliznula u tiraniju, osjećaj straha koji proizilazi iz romana ostaje te je isti postao maksima kako za totalitarizam, tako i za mnoge političke i društvene nevolje njihovog vremena. Dosta političkih ideja romana su realistične i uvjerljive budući da su temeljene na povijesnim totalitarnim režimima te da radnja nije smještena u daleku futurističku budućnost. Međutim, postoji još jedna dimenzija koja proizilazi iz dubljeg promišljanja o oceanijskoj totalitarnoj oligarhiji, a ona je iracionalnost, ludost, ili, bolje rečeno, satira, gdje tlačenje Partije kao da nadilazi krajnost pa postaje čak i crnohumorno. Sve ovo može narušiti opću percepciju romana kao realistične i uvjerljive političke distopije. Primarni razlog ovome je politički koncept dvomisli, koji se sastoji od toga da indoktrinirani ljudi posjeduju i istovremeno vjeruju u istinitost dvije suprotne ideje, te Novogovor, nametnuti umjetno ogoljeni službeni jezik kojemu je cilj smanjiti sami doseg ljudske misli. Promatrano iz ove perspektive, ugnjetavanje u Oceaniji postaje nestvarno, besmisleno i nemoguće. Ovo međusobno djelovanje realizma i iracionalnosti, uvjerljivosti i satire, može učiniti čitanje ovog djela istovremeno uznemirujućim i utješnim, što je, prigodno, neka vrsta dvomislenog dojma. Svrha ovog eseja jest istražiti da li u romanu dominiraju realistični ili satirični elementi. Ako je prevaga na prvotnom, onda se roman može smatrati klasičnim primjerom političke distopije; ako je nadmoćan potonji element, onda se stječe dojam da je roman svojevrsna crnohumorna satirična noćna mora, a samim time je status političke distopije, tj. upozoravajuće priče znatno umanjen. Kroz detaljno razmatranje glavnih političkih ideja *Tisuću devetsto osamdeset četvrte* se dolazi do zaključka da moć iracionalne ideje dvomisli, uz određene druge elemente, čini roman manje uvjerljivom političkom distopijom zbog njegovog dominantnog satiričkog aspekta.

Ključne riječi: totalitarizam; realizam; satira; novogovor; dvomisli

Authors' addresses

Adrese autora

Melita Drnasin

independent researcher

melita.drnasin@hotmail.com

Denis Kuzmanović

University of Mostar

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

denis.kuzmanovic@ff.sum.ba