Either directly or indirectly, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has affected a generation's perception of where the world is heading. It has called into question a whole range of 'progressive' ideologies, and focused attention on the manipulation of people through techniques as blatant as physical torture and as subtle as the conscious distortion of language. It has been called a novel, a political pamphlet, a horror story, an expression of the author's personal prejudices derived from his frustrating and often contradictory life-style. There are many who would see the book as a culmination of Orwell's writing, not merely in the sense of it being his last work, but also that it offers a prophetic critique of the human condition.

Relevance to Today

Firstly it is not necessary to believe that Orwell expected that the world he was describing would inevitably follow from the tendencies he noted in the immediate post-war period. At the same time, as Raymond Williams remarks, As an intransigent enemy of every kind of thoughtcrime and doublethink, Orwell is still very close and alive.

Secondly, to make a direct assertion, it is a book about power, the totality of power, a future exactly the 'opposite of the hedonistic Utopias that the old reformers imagined."

But always — do not forget this, Winston — always there will be the intoxication of power, constantly increasing and constantly growing subler. Always, at every moment, there will be the thrill of victory, the sensation of trampling on an enemy who is helpless. If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face — for ever (p.215).

'Hedonistic Utopias' remind us of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, which has often been compared to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In a review of E. J. Zamyatin's book *We* (another 'futuristic' novel) which Orwell wrote in 1946 (*In Front of Your Nose*, pp.95-99) he criticises Huxley for not understanding the power drive in human nature. It is a useful exercise to investigate the fundamental bases of Huxley's utopia and see how they compare with Orwell's apparent assertions about the nature of man. Just as useful is to look at what Orwell himself said earlier in his 1936 book, *Road to Wigan Pier*, on the same subject. 'Orwellian world', '1984 nightmare', 'Big brother is watching you', have become incorporated into our language — somewhat ironically, given Orwell's views on
linguistic trickery. They are often used by writers and journalists when commenting on a particular social phenomenon. The concepts have been directly trans-ferred to television and film, often with controversial results, especially given the fact that such media were conceived as potentially dangerous by Orwell himself. Dramatic productions ranging from the spoof-series The Avengers to the far more frightening Callan and The Guardians have been outstanding successes for television and have their germs in Orwell’s insights. Lindsay Anderson’s If, the expose of the authoritarian-totalitarian nature of the public school system and by implication the society in which such an institution survives, and Clockwork Orange, Stanley Kubrick’s interpretation of Anthony Burgess’ own and much later conception of the ‘Or-wellian nightmare’, demonstrate a direct relationship with the kinds of things that are ‘central to Nineteen Eighty-Four. Other films with direct political statements such as Z. State of Siege, and Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion all have their roots in the power-totality of Oceania. Such series and films are extremely valuable in realising the implications of what Orwell was saying.

Totalitarianism vs Socialism

In a very important article ‘Why I Write’ published in 1946 Orwell wrote:

Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written directly or indirectly against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism (An Age Like This, p.15).

With even more specific intent in the last months of his life he wrote:

My recent novel is not intended as an attack on socialism or on the British Labour Party (of which I am a supporter) but 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 (In Front of Your Nose, p.564).

Orwell is not concerned with the dangers of socialism gone wrong, but with any society which discards common decency and makes power and the pursuit of power an end in itself. Certainly, as does Animal Farm, Nineteen Eighty-Four demonstrates the perversion of socialist ideology (‘All animals are equal but some are more equal than others’) which Orwell had noted as early as Road to Wigan Pier. There he pointedly attacks socialists in part two of the book. He amplifies this in Homage to Catalonia after experiencing communist betrayal of the socialist cause in Spain. One only has to turn to Orwell’s correspondence upon return from Spain, reprinted in An Age Like This, to see how strongly he felt on the subject. However it is worth noting that in ‘Goldstein’s book’, crucial to the understanding of Nineteen Eighty-Four, it is revealed that the three superpowers, Eastasia, Eurasia, and Oceania (ominous ring when glancing at the present state of international relations) while purporting to offer different social ideologies were actually identical. Something quite different from a mere diatribe against socialism in general or the Soviet state in particular is clearly intended. Orwell was bitterly opposed to Stalinism and the perversion of socialism in Russia; he had been from the mid-thirties and as such was one out against other British left-wing intellectuals. But the real evils lie elsewhere.

In the review previously mentioned Orwell says of Zamyatin’s We

What Zamyatin seems to be aiming at is not any particular country but the implied aims of industrial civilisation.

If one consults We it can be seen that Nineteen Eighty-Four owes much to this predecessor. It seems that a fear of the implications of any industrial society is central to Orwell’s thought. In Road to Wigan Pier he had already written with sensitivity, insight and disgust in reference to the industrial wasteland of northern England. He had discussed the idea of mechanization and progress and concluded

The sensitive person’s hostility to the machine is in one sense unrealistic, because of the obvious fact that the machine has come to stay. But as an attitude of mind there is a great deal to be said for it. The machine has got to be accepted, but it is probably better to accept it rather as one accepts a drug — that is, grudgingly and suspiciously. Like a drug, the machine is useful, dangerous and habit-forming. The truer one surrenders to it the tighter its grip becomes. You have only to look about you at this moment to realize with what sinister speed the machine is getting us into its power (p.178).

Individuality

Orwell’s pre-war novels Keep the Aspidistra Flying and Coming up for Air had perceived the difficulties of maintaining individuality in an industrial state. Perhaps of greatest significance in predetermining the message of Nineteen Eighty-Four was his reaction to the American James Burnham’s book The Managerial Revolution. In a review of this published in 1946 Orwell wrote:

For quite fifty years past the general drift has almost certainly been towards oligarchy. The ever increasing concentration of industrial and financial power; the diminishing importance of the individual capitalist or shareholder; and the growth of the new ‘managerial’ class of scientists, technicians and bureaucrats; the weakness of the proletariat against the centralised state; the increasing helplessness of small countries against big ones; the decay of representative institutions and the appearance of one party regimes based on political terrorism, faked plebiscites etc. all these things seem to point in the same direction (In Front of Your Nose, p.209).

See how appropriate this quotation is when asking what Nineteen Eighty-Four is all about.

Other questions you should explore are: Is it useful to distinguish between ‘capitalist’ and ‘socialist’ regimes? Are there other criteria by which we could distinguish societies from each other? It would be useful to ask yourself what is an ideal society and what is its opposite. Refer back to the concept of utopia. There has been much talk in Australia of the growth of bureaucracy and there
English press of both conservative and radical hue, provide the foundations for the insights he presents in the previously quoted articles. These experiences explain the importance Orwell gives to Newspeak in Nineteen Eighty-Four and his implication there that the manipulation of language provides a key to the understanding of how a totalitarian system survives. Doublethink is a concept which is crucial to understand if one is to perceive what Orwell is trying to say. Integral to the concept is the falsification of history, something that Orwell had already had much to say on owing to his Spanish experiences. With biting irony he makes this Winston’s central task at Minitru (The use of the word ‘mini’ here is an ironic antecedent to the way our society has debased the adjective. You can validate this statement by making a list of terms which contain it).

Think of the drive behind organisations such as the IRA or the PLO. What motivates people to join? Do they resemble comrade Ogilvy?

Examples such as these might bear no obvious relation to Nineteen Eighty-Four. Yet think of the development of language and the creation of new words to ‘explain’ the technological explosion since the Second World War. The four ministries in Oceania were Minitru, Minipax, Miniluv, and Miniplenty. Their real concerns being perhaps the most frightening example of doublethink. If you consider these in conjunction with the lying statistics on production in Oceania, the false reports of victories, the whining exhortations to work harder, the psychological imbalance of the ‘two minute hate’, and above all the grim command to love Big Brother, the impact of the Orwellian nightmare crystallises. Unfortunately, sociological observation demonstrates that the nightmare is not unreal.

The concept of a continuing war, analysed superbly in Goldstein’s book as being basic to Oceania and to all totalitarian societies (There must be an enemy: if not, create one) and the destruction of self, exemplified by the philosophy of Oceania’s ‘rival’ state, Eastasia (again outlined in Goldstein’s book) are the triumphant insights of the book. It can be argued that Nineteen Eighty-Four, unlike the comparative writings of Wells and Huxley, is a central contribution to the understanding of ‘realpolitik’; is, in a sense, a work of deep sociological significance under the guise of a novel.

Puritanism

There are other things about the book which are less satisfying. Some critics have made much of the plagiarism which Orwell indulged in and cite both Jack London’s The Iron Heel and Zamyatin’s We as providing several of the basic ideas for Nineteen Eighty-Four. Certainly Orwell had respect for both authors and there are facets which seem to link his book directly with these earlier works. London’s concept of totalitarianism, despite the fact that it was written well before the naked horror of Stalin and Hitler, shows an understanding of the nature of power which Orwell was to use. The idea that the
thirst for power can transcend ideology was borrowed, but in a positive way (note again ‘Goldstein’s book’ and O’Brien’s thoughts on the subject). Zamyatin seems to have provided Orwell with another important concept, the extreme ‘puritanism’ of a totalitarian power. In We people lived in glass houses and hence were continually under scrutiny by the guardians (shades of the ‘thought police, with their non-fictional equivalents in the Gestapo and K.G.B.). In Nineteen Eighty-Four there is an element of love in Winston and Julia’s relationship, which has implications for the survival of the Oceanic state. Not until Winston betrays Julia will O’Brien relinquish his hold on him. In the final pages when Winston meets Julia in the twilight zone before his final capitulation to the ‘love’ of Big Brother, it is the fact that they both betrayed each other that is emphasised. It is not only the emotional links that Orwell talks about but the physical act of sex itself which might have disastrous implications for the regime:

Scores of times she had done it; he wished it had been hundreds — thousands. Anything that hinted at corruption always filled him with a wild hope. Who knew, perhaps the Party was rotten under the surface, its cult of strenuousness and self-denial simply a sham concealing iniquity. If he could have infected the whole lot of them with leprosy or syphilis, how gladly he would have done so. Anything to rot, to weaken, to undermine. He pulled her down so that they were kneeling face to face (p.103).

Later the act of intercourse with Julia is seen by Winston as a ‘political’ act. This aspect of their relationship is important in the book and is emphasised further by Orwell when, in the anti-sex league and the two-minute hate, he almost seems to be attempting a ‘sado-masochistic’ interpretation of the nature of power and dehumanisation. Though if this is the case there is not enough evidence to suggest he ever came to grips with the implications he appears to offer.

The third part of the book, written when Orwell was dying, has fallen under criticism for the lack-lustre nature of its writing, something Orwell himself admitted in one of his last letters. There is something less than satisfactory about Room 101, indeed of the whole Miniluv experience, but it is offset by some remarkable dialogue between O’Brien and Winston, especially the ‘two and two equals five’ episode which because of its very simplicity pinpoints the essentials of Orwell’s concern.

In the characterisation of the book there are arguable weaknesses. Most characters are two-dimensional (but why not, given the nature of the society?) and Winston stands out as a notable exception if only because we are allowed to know him better. But we can justifiably ask ‘does it matter?’ when faced with the last three sentences of the book.

But it was all right, everything was all right, the struggle was finished. He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother (p.103).

If you comprehend the significance of these few words, Nineteen Eighty-Four becomes a great and frightening book. Michael Kane

As Conor Cruise O’Brien has observed, we are near enough now to 1984 to see that the world then will not be very like Orwell’s imagining of it.

Judah Waten.

ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

BOOKS

E. J. Zamyatin, We, Penguin.
Aldous Huxley, Brave New World, Penguin.
Joseph Heller, Catch 22, Cori.
Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Gulag Archipielago, Fontana.

In addition Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels makes a fascinating comparison with Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four and Animal Farm.

Hannah Arendt’s books On Totalitarianism and On Violence remain the best works for a background to the emergence of totalitarianism. A knowledge of modern European history and of political philosophy is extremely useful not only for Nineteen Eighty-Four but for all of Orwell’s works.

FILMS

If: O Lucky Man; Z: State of Siege; Investigation of a Citizen above Suspicion; Catch 22: A Clockwork Orange; The Rise and Rise of Michael Rimmer; The Damned; Zabriskie Point. All touch on aspects which are directly related to the issues raised by Orwell in his nightmare utopia.

WHAT DO THEY GOUZE EYES OUT WITH, SIR?

‘One achievement of the Anglo-Saxon race,’ said Tristram, ‘was parliamentary government, which eventually meant government by party. Later, when it was found that the work of government could be carried on more expeditiously without debate and without the opposition that party government entailed, the nature of the cycle began to be recognized.’ He went to the blueboard and yellow-chalked a large clumsy ring, ‘Now,’ he said, swivelling his head to look at his pupils, ‘here is how the cycle works.’ He marked off three arcs. ‘We have a Palagian phase. Then we have an intermediate phase. His chalk thickened one arc, then another. ‘This leads into an Augustinian phase.’ More thickening, and the chalk was back where it had started. ‘Pelphase, Interphase, Galphase, Pelphase, Interphase, Gcupphase, and so on, for ever and ever. A sort of perpetual wail. We must now consider what motive power makes the wheel turn.’

He faced his class seriously, beating one palm against the other to clean the chalk off. ‘In the first place, let us remind ourselves what Pelagianism stands for. A government functioning in its Pelagian phase commits itself to the belief that man is perfectible, that perfection can be achieved by his own efforts, and that the journey towards perfection is along a straight road. Man wants to be perfect. He wants to be good. The citizens of a community want to co-operate with their rulers, and so there is no real need to have devices of coercion, sanctions, which will force them to co-operate. Laws are necessary, of course, for no single individual, however good and co-operative, can have precise knowledge of the total needs of the community. Laws point the way to an emergent pattern of social perfection — they are guides. But...
because of the fundamental thesis that the citizen’s desire is to behave like a good social animal, not like a selfish beast of the waste wood; it is assumed that the laws will be obeyed. Thus the Pelagian state does not think it necessary to erect an elaborate punitive apparatus. Disobey the law and you will be told not to do it again or fined a couple of crows. Your failure to obey does not spring from Original Sin; it’s not an essential part of the human fabric. It’s a mere flaw, something that will be shed somewhere along the road to final human perfection. Is that clear? Many of the pupils nodded; they were just curious whether they understood or not. Well, then, in the Pelagian phase of Pelphase, the great liberal dream seems capable of fulfillment. The sinful acquisitive urge is lacking, brute desires are kept under rational control. The private capitalist, for instance, a figure of top-hatted greed, has no place in a Pelagian society. Hence the State controls the means of production, the State is the only boss. But the will of the State is the will of the citizen, hence the citizen is working for himself. No happier form of existence can be envisaged. Remember, however, said Tristram, in a thrilling near-whisper, remember that the aspiration is always some way ahead of the reality. What destroys the dream? What destroys it? Oh? He suddenly bigdrummed the desk, shoving in crescendo. Disappointment. Disappointment.

‘The governors,’ he said, in a reasonable tone, ‘become disappointed when they find that men are not as good as they thought they were. Lapped in their dream of perfection, they are horrified when the seal is broken and they see people as they really are. It becomes necessary to try and force the citizens into goodness. The laws are reasserted, a system of enforcement of those laws is crudely and hastily knocked together. Disappointment opens up a vista of chaos. There is irrationality, there is panic. When the reason goes, the brute steps in. Brutality.’ cried Tristram. The class was at last interested. ‘Beatings-up. Secret police. Torture in brightly lighted cells. Condemnation without trial. Finger-nails pulled out with pincers. The rack. The cold-water treatment. The gouging-out of eyes. The firing-squad in the cold dawn. And all this because of disappointment. The Interphase.’ He smiled very kindly at his class. His class was agog for more mention of brutality. Their eyes glinted, they goggled with open mouths.

‘What, sir?’ asked Bellingham, ‘is the cold-water treatment?’

‘But,’ went on Tristram, ‘the Interphase cannot, of course, last for ever.’ He contorted his face to a mask of shock. ‘Shock’, he said. ‘The governors become shocked at their own excesses. They find that they have been thinking in heretical terms — the sinfulness of man rather than his inherent goodness. They relax their sanctions and the result is complete chaos. But, by this time, disappointment cannot sink any deeper. Disappointment can no longer shock the State into repressive action, and a kind of philosophical pessimism supervenes. In other words, we drift into the Augustinian phase, the Cusphaze. The orthodox view presents man as a sinful creature from whom no good at all may be expected. A different dream, gentlemen, a dream which, again, outstrips the reality. It eventually appears that human social behaviour is rather better than any Augustinian pessimist has a right to expect and so a sort of optimism begins to emerge. And so Pelagianism is reinstated. We are back in the Pelphase again. The wheel has come full circle. Any questions? What do they gouge eyes out with, sir?’ asked Billy Chan.

Anthony Burgess

The definition of fascism is a police state wherein the political ascendancy is tied into and protects the interests of the upper class — characterized by militarism, racism, and imperialism.

Soledad Brother, p. 42

BIG BOPPER

In think-tanks all over the world futurologists are pressing their blueprints upon us, and from universities books like The Greening of America find a huge audience eager to be reassured that it is not the Apocalypse but Utopia which is at hand. But no one has come up with anything very convincing as yet. The difficulty is that Utopia tends to look so like the Apocalypse, and already Newspeak and Doublethink are so firmly established that the oracle can in all sincerity assure us that Cruelty is simply the mask of Love, and Violence the Peace that passes all understanding. Perhaps, if today we wish to see what men and women actually think, hope, fear the future is going to look like it is not to the accepted oracles we should look, but somewhere even lower down on the intellectual plane, to television features, especially children’s programmes, for children already really are the future; to popular science fiction and underground newspapers and astrological columns in the popular press. If one examines this vast mass of evidence, one comes away with an image, very vivid but slightly blurred at the edges, of a total acceptance of the infallibility of science combined with an equally total acceptance of the primacy of the irrational in human affairs.

The man of the future is not Big Brother but a combination of the Pop Star and Dr. Who: Pop Star screaming and gesticulating in the kaleidoscope lights on the stage, Dr. Who quietly fiddling away with complicated electronic equipment which gives his voice power and his shape vitality. But what if Big Brother is also waiting in the wings? It would make an irresistible combo.

ENCOUNTER

COUNTY VS OLD

Countless young people are hostile to modern society and to their parents. The fact that, in spite of this attitude, they still expect to be kept by this society and their parents shows their unreflecting infantilism. If progressive infantilism and increasing juvenile delinquency are, as I fear, signs of genetic decay, humanity as such is in grave danger. In all probability, our instinctive high
valuation of goodness and decency is the only factor today exerting a fairly effective selection pressure against defects of social behavior.

The attitude of many of the younger generation towards their parents shows a good measure of conceited contempt but no understanding. The revolt of modern youth is founded on hatred, a hatred closely related to an emotion that is most dangerous and difficult to overcome: national hatred. In other words today’s rebellious youth reacts to the older generation in the same way that a culture group or ‘ethnic’ group reacts to a foreign, hostile one.

It is a very disturbing thought that today’s younger generation is beginning to treat the older one as an alien pseudospecies. This can be recognised by many symptoms. Competitive and hostile ethnic groups are apt to evolve distinctive national costumes . . . Many self-confessed groups of rebellious youths do precisely the same thing, and it is amazing how — in spite of their ostensible rejection of everything military — the habit of wearing uniforms has become firmly established. The various subgroups, beatniks, hippies, Teddy boys, Rockers, Mods, Hell’s Angels, and so on, are to the initiated, just as easily recognisable by their uniforms as were the regiments of the Imperial Austrian Army.

Konrad Lorenz

I’m a very simple person at heart. Perfect love, perfect hate, that’s the insides of me. It means that I’ve divided the world’s people into two categories only. . . . I recognize two distinct types only, the innocent, the guilty.

Soledad Brother, p. 269

FIVE YEARS TO GO.

Vincent Tilsley, playwright, dramatist and creator of the British television series The Guardians, which has been shown in Australia, believes the plot is terrifyingly close to becoming reality.

In The Guardians, Britain is in the grips of a general strike — no water, no electricity, no transport. Nothing — when the Prime Minister calls in a para-military group which successfully breaks the strike. ‘Thanks chaps’, he says when the country is back on its feet, ‘you can go now’. But they don’t.

‘When I wrote the pilot for the series three years ago, I thought the events I was describing were 20 years away’, Mr. Tilsley said. ‘A year ago, I thought it was 10 years off. Now I’m thinking in terms of five years.

‘I’m not saying events will go exactly as the plot did in the 13-part series, but I am convinced the most important theme of The Guardians — that there will be a crippling general strike and this will be broken by a military-type group like the guardians — will happen if present trends are allowed to continue.

The Australian