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THE CONTRADICTION BETWEEN PAST PRESENT AND FUTURE IN FICTIONAL PLOTS OF GEORGE ORWELL- A CRITICAL STUDY

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Abstract

For the purposes of this study is *The Contradiction between Past Present Future in Fictional Plots of George Orwell*, the researcher will refer to him as George Orwell, as this was his literary name. The relationship between the past, present and future shapes our understanding of the world around us. Whether it is the perceived consequences of past events, the urgency of present concerns, or the challenges of real or imagined futures, the structures of time intersect with and inform our sense of ourselves in myriad ways. 'Care for the Future: Thinking Forward through the Past' affords an opportunity for researchers in the arts and humanities to explore the dynamic relationship that exists between past, present and future through a temporally inflected lens.

Keywords: Past events, Present concerns, Care for theFuture, Fictional Plots, George Orwell, legacy, heritage, and progress

Introduction

George Orwell is the pen name for Eric Arthur Blair, a writer, essayist, novelist, political activist and literary critic who was born on June 25th, 1903. Although he was born in India, he moved to England with his family when he was still a baby. Although he was extremely intelligent and did well in school, he was not able to go on to university because it was too expensive. Orwell was devoted to politics and was particularly interested in issues such as class, social stratification, and power. Such was his devotion to the issue, that he was known to purposely live beneath his means to great extreme, such as not wearing warm clothes in the winter time, or refusing to display normal table manners.

During the 1930s, Orwell worked hard to establish himself as a writer. His first fictional work, *Burmese Days* was published in 1934, followed by *A Clergyman's Daughter* in 1935. In 1936, he briefly set his writing skills aside: and volunteered to fight in the Spanish Civil War on the side of the Republicans. He believed that the working class needed to rise up above, and was considered a revolutionary socialist. He hated the idea of totalitarianism. During this war, he suffered a shot in the neck and almost died.

In 1940, George combined his political savvy with his gift of writing and went to work against World War II, fighting for freedom by writing propaganda for the BBC. His wartime experiences inspired him to write the two books which he would go down in history for: *Animal Farm* and *1984*. The book *Animal Farm* is a satirical look against totalitarianism regimes, using talking animals to create an allegory. *1984* also looked closely at themes such as freedom, government, and society. In the late forties, George was growing weaker and weaker, and suffered from many chest infections. He passed away on January 21st, 1950, and is remembered as one of the greatest writers of the century – and his gravestone makes no mention of his famous pen.

On the one hand, the past is all around us. The very phrase 'warnings from history' is a call to safeguard the future by looking vigilantly to the past. By the same token, the future's uncertainties weigh heavily upon the past, and turn us back to history for insights into the age in which we live. Moreover, just as a concern for past can help us to reflect on the present, so, too, a lack of faith in the present can encourage us to retreat into idealized or romanticized pasts. On the other hand, there is a sense that we are entering a moment when the very notion of

history as an effective guide to the future is in question. Faced with the challenges of global poverty, resource scarcity, and the consequences of the dramatically narrowing gap between the West and 'the rest', can the future any longer be perceived simply as an outgrowth or extension of the past? If not, what are the dangers of reading history backwards to gauge its implications for the present? Is it possible to write histories that do not in some sense envisage a future, or which forgo the future as the implicit vantage point from which events are described as 'past'? The arts and humanities are uniquely placed to address these questions.

The 'Care for the Future' theme will encourage critical reflection upon the concepts that are used to join together past, present and future – including memory, legacy, heritage, and progress; upon different creative, artistic and literary modes of engagement with the past and the passage of time; and upon different emotions evoked by reflecting on the past – such as denial, forgetting, trauma, nostalgia, mourning and celebration. George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is regarded by many within the literary world and beyond as the single most influential dystopian work of our time. Despite its apparent specificity of time, the longevity of the text has prevailed with conceptual elements of the text permeating society since its publication in 1949. Terminology such as "Big Brother", "doublethink", "Newspeak", "Room 101", not to mention "Orwellian" and "1984" itself, have become commonplace within everyday vocabulary. Literary critics have tended to concentrate their analyses of the text upon Orwell's polemically political themes, such as totalitarianism, constraints on the freedom of the individual and governmental surveillance, therefore, neglecting to appreciate or fully understand the paradoxical nature of the text in terms of its historical content and context. Dystopias in general can be seen as engagements with the present and past as they attempt to postulate alternative, bleak futures. A successful dystopia, and indeed dystopian literary adaptation, should allow the reader (or audience) to glimpse a potential fictional future through the

juxtaposition of an existing historical framework and an actual present. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and its adaptations.

Reveal the interplay between historical contexts, from the 1940s in which Orwell penned his seminal text, to the time of the adaptation(s) and the imagined future, based on both past and present: "To the future or to the past, to a time when thought is free, when men are different from one another or do not live alone – to a time when truth exists and what is done cannot be undone. From the age of uniformity, from the age of solitude, from the age of Big Brother, from the age of doublethink – greetings!"

Nineteen Eighty-Four belongs to a specific chronological moment, which is evident from the title of the text itself. There has been speculation over Orwell's choice of title and its relevance to the contents. Supposedly an inversion of 1948 and actually titled as text rather than numerals (possibly an attempt to separate the title from the year), the text has become the dominant dystopian canonical text within contemporary society. It can now be seen as marking the past rather than the future but still has relevant connotations to today's society and any future society.

The landscape painted by Orwell is that of post-war Britain, with scenes of a city, "Airstrip One" (possibly a reference to the opening of Heathrow Airport in 1946 and Orwell's concern with the globalization of England), undergoing degradation and extreme poverty. "The country of Oceania emerges as one of three super states following the end of war but Orwell indicates that war is perpetual – a reference to the end of the Second World War and the commencement of the Cold War. Rationing is still prevalent, as is political propaganda, which is used to coerce the individual into mass conformity. The iconic emblem of Lord Kitchener is transformed into the intimidating, ever present image of *Big Brother*".

The lapse in time between the text and the adaptation is also critical to the success of the adaptation. Adaptations of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* will at any one time be dealing with several different time periods: the year of publication of the text and therefore, its historical context, 1948/1949, the years prior

to Orwell's writing, 1930s/1940s, the year of the adaptation, the years beyond the text, the years beyond the adaptation and so on. The adaptor needs to ensure that all time periods are presented in a logical way to enable the audience to understand plot and narrative. Michael Anderson's adaptation appeared on cinema screens a mere seven years after the publication of the text, therefore, presenting a potential future that was not altogether futuristic. Relating to this issue is the relatively short time period in which the *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is located. Despite being supposedly futuristic, the linearity of the text is evident. The only deviations from this are Winston's recollections of the past and his day-dreaming of the "Golden Country". Orwell does provide the adaptor with a plethora of visual metaphors, which are easily transferable to the screen but frequently these are scenes which are drawn out, for example, Winston's torture towards the end of the text.

The adaptation utilises the deliberate slow pacing employed by Orwell, which in the era of the fast-paced "action" film can be somewhat frustrating. The audience is constantly expecting a climax, which Radford duly provides with the Thought Police interrupting Winston and Julia, as they stand naked in the room above Charrington's shop.³⁷ However, as stated previously, Radford adheres to the time constraints imposed within the text as a long drawn out "third chapter" ensues. Unlike Anderson's adaptation, the linearity of the film is interspersed with flashbacks and flash forwards. We see Winston's recollections of the past, which are mostly gruesome, with images of his mother being devoured by rats, and visions of a potential, idealistic future with images of the Golden Country and "the place where there is no darkness".^{38,39} The "present" tense of the film becomes a disjointed assortment of references to past and future fantasy resulting in the disappearance of any historical resonance to the "real" present (that of 1984). As Wheeler states: "From this opening caption, the film signals its intent to disrupt the paradigms of classical relativistic notions of reality, most usually rendered in four dimensions: three of space and one of time. The time of day is pointlessly specific in terms of minutiae, but the

film can be seen to be every-where and every-when within a hundred year period.

Gilliam's *Brazil* may be considered a loose adaptation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* but it appears to be the most relevant to its period of production and beyond. Anderson's 1956 adaptation is predominantly relevant to its own period of production, especially considering its proximity to the publication date of the text and Radford's 1984 adaptation can be regarded as a "cultural artifact" when considering the passage of time from the publication date of the text to the production date of the adaptation. It appears that past, present and future cannot be constructed within the literary adaptation without some, if not excessive deviation from the precursor text. As Palmer states: "We can only look backward at an era saturated with the importance of history. But we cannot connect to that evoked past moment through the workings of illusionism; the postwar era cannot find a real space in the film, cannot come to life for us again."

Conclusion

Literary critics have tended to concentrate their analyses of the text upon Orwell's polemically political themes, such as totalitarianism, constraints on the freedom of the individual and governmental surveillance, therefore, neglecting to appreciate or fully understand the paradoxical nature of the text in terms of its historical content and context. Dystopias in general can be seen as engagements with the present and past as they attempt to postulate alternative, bleak futures. A successful dystopia, and indeed dystopian literary adaptation, should allow the reader (or audience) to glimpse a potential fictional future through the juxtaposition of an existing historical framework and an actual present. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and its adaptations reveal the interplay between historical contexts, from the 1940s in which Orwell penned his seminal text, to the time of the adaptation(s) and the imagined future, based on both past and present.

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