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“In the Place Where There is no Darkness”: Sexuality, Ideology and Space in George Orwell’s *1984*

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ABSTRACT

George Orwell’s dystopian novel *1984* owes its popularity to its figurative reflection of society as prison and to its pertinent illustration of panoptic elements that are of relevance in the contemporary world. Occupying a central place in the novel, the theme of surveillance has been critically assessed by a number of critics as disciplinary and punitive and as assaultive on the right to privacy. Taking its cue from theoretical models of space, the present article offers an alternative reading of the totalitarian state’s appropriation of surveillance and claims that besides intruding into the private domains of the two main characters, the surveillance mechanism sets out to produce the conditions and the sites in which privacy is experienced. Addressing the love affair between Winston and Julia via spatial analyses, the article aims to present a dynamic interpretation of the relations between the governor and the governed, the surveillant and the surveilled.

KEYWORDS

George Orwell; 1984;
sexuality; ideology; space

George Orwell’s novel *1984* depicts a dystopian model of the state apparatus, the eyes of which pursue you all the time: “Asleep or awake, working or eating, indoors or out of doors, in the bath or in bed – no escape” (Orwell 112). The only thing that escapes the ruthless scrutiny is “the few cubic centimeters inside your skull,” and even that, is a doubtful remark for anything suggesting an oddity on the part of the individual, “a nervous tic, an unconscious look of anxiety, a habit of muttering to yourself” could be enough evidence for a punishable offense (Orwell 145). There are few, if any, sites from which Winston Smith can resist the unrelenting surveillance. Keeping a diary away from the inquisitive eyes of the telescreen, namely, keeping the “few cubic centimeters” inside his skull intact is one of the pockets of resistance and sexual pleasure is the other; posited as an alternative to the regulative, puritanical approach of the Party to *coitus*: “The sexual act, successfully performed, was rebellion. Desire was thoughtcrime” (151). On the sexual act’s being a subversive performance against the regime, critics are of the same mind, yet they are at variance on Julia’s, Winston’s partner in “sexcrime,” function in such sensuous

resistance. The critic J. Strachey contends that Julia is no revolutionary romantic, not a comrade to share Winston's utopic mindset, she "just wants some hearty sex, normally mingled with tender emotions" (57). For James A. Tyner, Julia partakes in Winston's clandestine resistance, though her way of resisting the regime is "decidedly different from Winston's in that hers is more practical, more physical, a resistance based on sexuality" (143). Taking these debates to a new level, Graham Good claims that Julia might be a spy, working for the Thought Police and her "white body is a pawn, perhaps offered as a sacrifice leading to a trap. Winston is tempted into playing, but he is already 'mated'" (51). Daphne Patai's critique centers on Winston Smith's commentary on Julia's being a rebel from "the waist downwards" (Orwell 234), and she is convinced that Orwell's portrayal of Julia as pleasure-oriented, egocentric character "evokes yet another female stereotype" (Patai 243).

Drawing upon ideas culled from studies on space, this article offers to read the secret love affair between Winston and Julia as the site in which the Party's *raison d'être* manifests itself in public and private spheres. I argue that the totalitarian ideology does not only monitor and regulate the social spaces but also sets the material and spatial conditions through which privacy is experienced.

The Party maintains a strict hold on sexual relationship and pleasure and it seeks ascendance over sexuality by introducing artificial insemination ("artsem") to eliminate the dangers of sexual enjoyment: "The Party was trying to kill the sex instinct, or, if it could not be killed, then to distort it and dirty it" (Orwell 149). However, the Party's "Records Department," a branch of the "Ministry of Truth," engages in creating "proletarian literature," a whole section called "Pornosec" solely dedicated to produce the most obscene kind of pornographic works with titles like "Spanking Stories," or "One Night in a Girls' School" (210). At first glance, such duplicity may sound contradictory and bizarre, as it seems incongruous for a sovereign power to strictly regulate sexuality and obscenely induce it at the same time. Surely, the target populations of the policies are different; the former procedure aims for a total sexual control of the Party members, the latter for engrossing the proletariat in sexual vulgarity. However, if we expound on the reason why the Party does not practice what it preaches about sex via Michel Foucault's views on the third function of heterotopia,¹ we can make a headway toward understanding the *modus operandi* of the regime in its appropriation and engenderment of spatial determinations.

As Foucault points out, one of the characteristics of heterotopic place is that it is "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (Foucault 25). The four Ministries that constitute the backbone of the government apparatus function on such principle of incompatibility: "The Ministry of Peace concerns itself with war, the

Ministry of Truth with lies, the Ministry of Love with torture, and the Ministry of Plenty with starvation” (Orwell 292). Indeed, the essence of the Party’s ideology depends on suturing and structuring these noncoterminous spaces: “For it is only by reconciling contradictions that power can be retained indefinitely” (292). Thanks to the simultaneous operation of contradictions, the Party is able to maintain its hold on the surveillance of public and private spaces and thus is able to connect the latter’s seemingly invisible and independent activities to the former’s visible and vigilant gaze.

The first intersubjective exchange between Winston and Julia takes place in the Records Department, in a location under the strict regulation and surveillance of Ingsoc, for “there was no place where you could be more certain that the telescreens were watched continuously” (188). After a week since the first contact, “In the low-ceilinged canteen, deep under ground” Winston and Julia meet again whispering over their meals for a rendezvous (132). The Victory Square, “full of telescreens,” is chosen as the meeting point (194). The Square is used as a parade ground for mass demonstrations, and as a site for public executions of prisoners of war. In other words, it stands for the sovereign rule of the party and it is a symbol through which the party’s power is displayed in full and in which the will of the totalitarian regime joins with that of the masses. As a convoy of Eurasian prisoners passes before him, Winston squeezes “his way forward into the heart of the crowd” and finds himself “within arm’s length of the girl” (195). Julia, “with a sort of military precision” briefs Winston on the details of the next venue “in a natural clearing, a tiny grassy knoll surrounded by tall saplings that shut it in completely” (200). Free from the surveillance of the telescreens, and the brutal chauvinism of the Victory Square, nature provides a backdrop for sexual freedom “he pulled her round so that they were breast to breast; her body seemed to melt into his,” and for seditious acts “It was a blow struck against the Party. It was a political act” (205–207). Here, it can be claimed that in contrast to Ingsoc’s hegemony over public and private spaces and its territorial control on sexuality, nature, as an independent and unregulated entity, functions as an alternative geopolitical milieu. Yet, Winston and Julia decide to meet in the woods one last time and then find another secret location as, following Julia’s reasoning, “It’s generally safe to use any hide-out twice” (207).

This new location, however, turns out to be a trap, read stage, set by the notorious Thought Police. An undercover agent, Mr. Charrington, running a junk shop in the proletariat district, encourages (though allusively) Winston to rent the bedroom above his shop. Speaking with “so delicate an air” that almost fades his existence and makes him “partly invisible,” Charrington stresses the significance of privacy one needs from time to time (217). At this point, it is feasible to direct the question why a state so obsessed with surveilling its subjects allows (even solicits) for a space of sedition and does not act

pre-emptively? The answer may lay once again in the peculiar and contradictory function of power that establishes the boundaries between what is permitted and what is prohibited—licit and illicit, normal and abnormal, etc.—and inherently harbors the conditions for its own infringement as it simultaneously generates the desire for transgression. Such desire though, in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's words, is "never an undifferentiated instinctual energy, but itself results from a highly developed, engineered setup rich in interactions" (237). On the part of the Party, the crucial step in the production of this desire is to offer paraphernalia that would orient Winston and Julia in a network of subversion and reaffirmation. Goldstein's book, a copy of which is lent to Winston by the senior inner Party member O'Brien, operates in such dialectic fashion; it is "a compendium of all the heresies" and a collaborative work of the inner Party members, including O'Brien the tormentor (Orwell 100). Likewise, the diary in which Winston writes down his anger and rebellion against the Party is sold to him by Mr. Charrington, the agent. As for the objects in the room above the shop—"a strip of carpet on the floor," "a picture or two on the walls," a "slatternly armchair," "an old-fashioned glass clock," "an enormous bed"—they are arranged in such a way "as though the room were meant to be lived in" (177). As a matter of fact, one can argue that it is the intended atmosphere of privacy for Winston to experience, to "sit in a room like this, in an armchair beside an open fire with your feet in the fender and a kettle on the hob, utterly alone, utterly secure, with nobody watching you, no voice pursuing you, no sound except the singing of the kettle and the friendly ticking of the clock" (177). For Henri Lefebvre, visible boundaries and impenetrable walls—"rooms, bedrooms, gardens, and houses" appear as separate, private enclosures, which in reality are part of "an ambiguous continuity" with "social spaces" (87). No matter how private, isolated, and opaque Mr. Charrington's bedroom might seem, it is still connected to and a fundamental part of other spaces where the Party reigns supreme. Rats, Winston's childhood phobia, that scurry across the bedroom are the sign of such permeability with other controlled spaces, and unfortunately, rats foreshadow the terrible torture Winston suffers in the torture room 101. The paperweight, the object for Troy Place to symbolize Winston's "control over the present" (108), could be taken as another example of interconnected (superimposed) space encapsulating, "in a tiny world with its atmosphere complete" Winston's and Julia's lives "fixed in a sort of eternity at the heart of the crystal" (Orwell 227).

Once the paperweight is smashed by the Thought Police storming into the bedroom, the room above the shop is connected to and replaced by the room 101 in the dreaded, windowless Ministry of Love. At this juncture, the meaning of the oft-repeated phrase "in a place where there is no darkness" is finally revealed for it is in the terrifying torture chamber secrets, suppressed fears, and desires are unearthed from the recesses in Winston's mind (183). O'Brien,

by tapping into Winston's biggest fear, his fear of rats, and by dragging "the rats that were on the other side of the wall" (358) into light, eventually breaks Winston's defiant and rebellious mind and after that point he is able to "convert him," "capture his inner mind" and "reshape him" until no alcoves of prurient feelings and no beams of mutinous thoughts are left standing in Winston's identity and in their stead, an unconditional love for the Big Brother is emplaced (330). Thus, Winston's and Julia's bodies become the final contested sites over which the regime seeks to establish total control, and conformity.

After finishing Orwell's novel, one could have the impression that the Party succeeds in establishing and completing its dominion, leaving no quarter of resistance in its wake. However, rereading the novel's conclusion and seeing Winston and Julia seated at a table in Chestnut Tree Café might tell us otherwise as Winston's feelings are still "overwhelmed by a desire not so much to get away from Julia as to get back to the Chestnut Tree Café" (366). Anthony Stewart reads "this desire to see the world in more than one way" as Party's ultimate failure and I second his thoughts that no matter how tightly controlled, regimented, partitioned, and surveilled a society is, there will always be blind spots whence to counter the hegemony of an oppressive state (141).

Note

1. Michel Foucault introduced the concept of *heterotopia* in 1967 and it was not until 1984, shortly before his death, that his thoughts on space were published under the title "Des Espaces autres" in the French journal *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité*. Two years later the English translation was published with the title "Of Other Spaces" in *Diacritics* journal. Foucault's main argument is that in almost every culture and society there are "other spaces" that function as counter or alternative sites to the existing spatial structures. Though incomplete and inconsistent at times, the essay on heterotopia was influential in Edward Soja's and Kevin Hetherington's works.

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