

1984: The Worlds in the Novel and the Movie: A Comparative Study.

Dr. Urja Mankad

George Orwell is the pen-name of Eric Arthur Blair, who was an English writer and journalist, well-noted as a novelist, critic and commentator on politics and culture. George Orwell is one of the most admired English – language essayists of the twentieth century, and is most famous for two novels critical of totalitarianism in general (1984), and Stalinism in particular (*Animal Farm*), which he wrote and published towards the end of his life.

To Orwell, liberty and democracy went together, guaranteeing, among other things, the freedom of the artist. He believed that the present capitalist civilization was corrupt, but that fascism would be morally calamitous. In December 1936, Orwell went to Spain as a fighter for the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War that was provoked by Francisco Franco's Fascist Uprising. In conversation with Philip Mairet, editor of *New English Weekly*, Orwell said, "This Fascism Somebody's got to stop it".

Orwell was a dispassionate witness of his age, passionately involved in social and political issues. This appears to be a contradiction in terms but it is not. It expresses the genuine honesty of a man who fought for his convictions, and yet retained a degree of objectivity in his assessment of a situation or an issue. In an age dominated by political ideologies, he steered clear of them. He often tried to get inside a situation but did not at any stage surrender his right to think and to criticize. Though his political analysis was often naïve, his intuitive grasp of a situation was normally sound. This intuitive understanding of his contemporary world makes it valuable for us; it is because of this quality that his work has transcended the self-imposed confines of political writing to influence the writers and thinkers of the present time.

He was one of those who liked to work from inside a situation – not to identify oneself with it, but to understand it more fully and objectively. Orwell is not, as he has so often been labelled, an idealist. He had a very down-to-earth practical approach and had no sentimentality about issues like war, bombing or poverty. He had an almost ruthless attitude at times – like a surgeon who feels that a drastic measure is required to prevent the disease from spreading. Again, Orwell is not an empiricist, as his stress on external reality may lead us to think. In his opinion, no social phenomenon is independent of human will. He places great value on human freedom and sense of responsibility. But his literary works have been overshadowed by the political content of his writings. Wyndhan Lewis in *The Writer and the Absolute* (London: Methuen, 1952) marked him “almost purely as a political writer”.

It was difficult to ignore Orwell in the postwar period; it is more difficult to forget him nearly so many years after his death. For when we turn to cultural criticism, Orwell’s name inevitably crops up. The sociological concern with popular culture and the contemporary focus on it again takes one to Orwell and his famous works. Language was also one of Orwell’s major concerns. The functions of criticism and the concept of art which takes a moral stance for granted had begun to change with Orwell. He was beginning to distinguish between good art and moral purpose.

Humanistic thought, centred as it is on human nature and the human will to survive, finds expression in Orwell’s work; more specifically so in *Animal Farm* and *1984*; both raise fundamental questions about human nature and the human world. *1984* does not show the end of the World, but end of the moral and fearless world.

The tradition of the non-fictional novel goes back to the eighteenth century, but Orwell recalled its use for the modern world. For him, the value of his ideas lies in the fact that he held on to individualism, when it was out of fashion, and even when there were plenty of other brave causes worth fighting for.

There is, in Orwell’s work, his essays as well as his novels, a strong turning toward the past. To which part, or which side of this double tradition does he relate, and wherein lies his individual talent?

Orwell inherited a great deal from the two strands of the nineteenth century liberal tradition, and responded to the ideas in various forms and in different ways, as a study of his work will show. He took the idea of non-conformism far beyond its original scope and had begun to see the cracks in the concepts related to freedom and equality. He was wary of state control, especially in its non-humanistic attitudes. He was wary of imposition of all kinds even if it was directed towards education or cleanliness. Heir to the tradition he had grown up in, he rejected it by trying to move outside it. More than tolerance he valued feeling, more than survival, he valued freedom, and more than acceptance, he valued truth. All these qualities tied up with courage – moral courage – especially in a world rushing headlong towards the welfare state and totalitarian setups.

Coming to *1984*, “Orwell loved the past, hated the present and dreaded the future”- (Malcom Muggeridge). The most common cliché about Orwell’s *1984* is that it is a ‘nightmare vision’ of the future. *1984* is not only a paradigm of the history of Europe of the last twenty years but also a culmination of all the characteristic beliefs and ideas expressed in Orwell’s works from the Depression to the Cold War. The origins of the novel can be found in Orwell’s earliest books, and its major themes, precise symbols and specific passages can be traced very exactly throughout his writing. Orwell characteristically expresses the poverty and isolation that oppresses the characters in his novels in terms of personal humiliation.

Orwell felt he had to frighten people into a painful recognition of the dangers that threatened their very existence. His statements about *1984* reveal that the novel, though set in a future time, is realistic rather than fantastic, and deliberately intensifies the actuality of the present: Orwell writes that *1984* is a novel about the future, that it is in a sense, a fantasy, but in the form of a naturalistic novel; it is intended as an expose of the perversions to which a centralized economy is liable, and which have already been partly realized in communism and fascism. Totalitarian ideas have taken roots in the minds of intellectuals everywhere and I have tried to draw these ideas out to their logical sequences.

Irving Howe asserts, “It is extremely important to note that the world of *1984* is not totalitarianism as we know it, but totalitarianism after its world triumph”. It would be more accurate to say that *1984* portrays the very real though unfamiliar political terrorism of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia transposed onto the landscape of London in 1941–44.

In “*Prophecies of Fascism*” (1940) Orwell discussed the idea of a hedonistic society and rejected it because he felt that a ruling class which thought principally in terms of a “good time would soon lose its vitality”. A ruling class, he felt, has got to have “a strict morality, a quasi – religious belief in itself, a mystique”.

To some extent, the ruling class in *1984* has a sense of this quasi – religious belief in itself, a belief that it will continue, that it can do no wrong. Power is the objective of all political activity, and to maintain themselves in power political leaders are prepared to go to any extent. Feelings, emotions, human relationships do not come into the picture at all.

1984, as its title indicates, is Orwell’s vision of the future awaiting humankind. The scene is England, now known as “Airstrip One”, which forms part of “Oceania”. Orwell paints a detailed and vivid picture of the telescreen civilization under the dictatorship of Big Brother. Everything is controlled, which is itself controlled by the secret Inner Party. The Party’s three slogans are:

- *War Is Peace*
- *Freedom Is Slavery*
- *Ignorance Is Strength*

All government apparatuses are concentrated into four Ministries: The Ministry of Truth concerns itself with education, news, and the arts – all boiling down in practice to propaganda; The Ministry of Love maintains Law and order, largely through the dreaded Thought Police; The Ministry of Plenty keeps everyone down to the barest necessities of life, continually announcing increases in rations which are actually reductions; and the Ministry of Peace is occupied with war.

A ceaseless, pointless war goes rumbling on, a war in which Oceania is in alliance with Eastasia against Eurasia – at least that is the statement put out by the Ministry of Truth; however, nobody feels certain about anything any longer– and it is fairly clear that only four years previously Oceania had been in alliance with Eurasia against the common enemy, Eastasia. By the end of the book the situation has switched back.

The novel presents Orwell's final treatment of the themes of social revolution and progress; it is a grim warning to the twentieth century civilization, a vision of the terror that could invade our world if all the implications of totalitarianism were put into practice. Orwell paints a vivid picture of a soulless 'brave new world'. He says that he does not believe that the kind of society he describes will necessarily come into existence, but something resembling it could arrive. He argues that before writing off the totalitarian world as a nightmare that can't come true, it may be remembered that in 1925, the world of today would have seemed a nightmare that could not come true. The novel is clearly a prophetic nightmare of events in the future.

The inferno atmosphere is convincingly created and maintained throughout. But besides painting a picture of the probable future that awaits mankind, Orwell principally fantasizes the fate of an already entrenched Communist dictatorship under Stalin, though in its last section, Hitler's Germany with its ghoulish anti-Semitic holocaust is invoked as a parallel movement in tyranny. In fact, the whole atmosphere could only have been visualized by a writer of this century, Post-Russian Revolution, Post-Spanish – Civil War, Post – Second World War for the horror of 1984, is experienced and not manufactured. In the words of Harold Rosenberg: "The tone of the post war imagination was set by Orwell's *1984*: since the appearance of that work, the 'dehumanized collective' haunts our thoughts".

1984 was recognized at once as a work of impressive and haunting imaginative power. Today it is acknowledged as one of the seminal works of the 20th century, a novel which ranks with Camus', *The Plague* and Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* as a searching commentary upon our

time. Had Orwell written nothing else, it would have still ensured him a permanent place in literary history.

Alan Kennedy challenges the received wisdom that *1984* presents the lust for power as an absolute, incorrigible desire for the experience of power itself.

“The novel wants to demonstrate that the lust for power is an absolute, an ultimate and therefore ultimately inexplicable desire. It is all mastering, and irreducible to reason. Power is desired for its own sake since power lust is inexplicable, then it doesn’t make sense to try to make sense of the ways in which the power – hungry, seek to maintain their power”.

The weapons and inventions of Oceania, which show no material progress since 1949, are familiar and conventional: truncheons, and microphones, dictaphones (speak – write) and two – way television “telescreens”. When Orwell tries to be more sophisticated and imaginative about such things, he is rather unconvincing, as when police patrols snoop into windows with helicopters, and concealed microphones in the vast country side not only pick-up but also recognize voices. “Orwell fascinates East Europeans through his insight into details they know well”, writes Czeslaw Milosz; “They are amazed that a writer, who never lived in Russia should have so keen a perception into its life”.

Now let us have a look at *1984* as a movie. I have taken in comparison a movie by Michael Radford and also a television play made by B.B.C. Talking about the film first, Sonia Brownell, Orwell’s widow, owned the film rights to the famed novel. Shortly before her death in 1980, Brownell eventually agreed to allow the film to be produced only under the condition that no futuristic special effects be used.

The glowering(angry), ever-watchful visage of Big Brother was provided by Bob Flag, a non-professional who was cast in the role after answering an open-casting call by the filmmakers in London. The character casts were:

John Hurt as Winston Smith
Richard Burton as O'Brien
Suzanna Hamilton as Julia
Bob Flag as Big Brother
John Boswall as Emmanuel Goldstein
Phyllis Logan as The Telescreen Announcer (voice)

Production of the film occurred in and around London from April to June 1984. Some scenes were shot on the actual days noted in Winston Smith's diary (for example: April 4, 1984) as well as at some of the actual locations and settings mentioned in Orwell's novel.

The film is dedicated to the memory of Richard Burton, as this was his last role (he died in Switzerland two months before the British premiere). As locations for a contemporary vision of totalitarian Britain, the practical use of famous historical sites around London like Alexandra Palace and the Battersea Power Station appear to have been intended in a somewhat satirical manner.

The opening scenes of the film showing the Two Minutes' Hate were filmed in a grass-covered hangar at RAF Hullavington near Chippenham in Wiltshire. The famous disused Battersea Power Station in Wandsworth served as the façade for the Victory Mansions; and the Beckton Gas Works in the Docklands of Newham were used as the setting for the proletarian zones. The pawnshop exterior, a pub scene and a scene with a prostitute were filmed in Cheshire Street, in London's East End, an area Orwell had visited and commented on in his first book, *Down and Out in Paris and London*. The canteen interiors were filmed in a disused Co-op grain mill at Silvertown.

In contrast, the idyllic, dreamlike "Golden Country", where Winston and Julia repair for their first tryst and which recurs in Winston's fantasies, was filmed in the southwest county of Wiltshire at a natural circle of hills called "The Roundway", near the town of Devizes. The scenes on the train were shot on the Kent and East Sussex Railway.

The story of *1984* revolves around the lead character Winston's life in a world split by three superpowers. Oceania and its government called Ingsoc; Eastasia and its culture of death-worship; Euroasia and its neo-bolshevism form of society. All three nations are dystopias that represent what Orwell thinks could be the result of extremist political ideas.

Michael Radford had quite a lot of work to do; both as a screenplay author and as a movie director. The movie *1984* is an acceptable popcorn movie by modern standards. The feeling of the Orwellian dystopia called Oceania is spot on. Roger Deakins handled the cinematography in style. Initially he preferred to shoot the movie in black and white but luckily the distributor (Virgin films) botched that idea. Deakins then decided to run the whole movie through a colour saturation filter. The filter flirts with the environment of the book. Overall the visual interpretation of the novel is fine. However there were two things that irritated. One thing is that all of Oceania's citizens are Caucasian. There is not a single coloured person even though the telescreen speaks about Oceania's military actions in India.

In the novel different races are represented and emphasized as a common denominator between the three superpowers. The other thing noticed seems small and insignificant. They've changed Ingsoc's "salute" or "sign", call it whatever you want, from the traditional fascist fist salute to an X, formed by crossing ones forearms. The fascist sign was one of the many small albeit important symbols Orwell incorporated into his novel. The changing of small things such as the salute distances the world of Oceania from reality. The original meaning of the symbols was to put a political theorem into the spotlight. Take a look at the title. *1984* is a subtle hint towards 1948; the end of World War II.

The television play by B. B.C. is shot as a black and white movie, therefore it appears more gloomy and depressing. Again, the military environment is made more subtle by the hypnotized behaviour of the citizens. The body language and facial expressions are bold and clear here. Although both the productions have tried their best to create the

bleakness of the novel, the description in the novel makes the atmosphere more undesirable.

Later in his life, Orwell became a fervent supporter of social democracy or “socially responsible reforms made through a democratic process”. He was battling against fear of communism from the public and a common misconception of his time that totalitarianism could never occur in England. Simply put, he was warning the public that totalitarianism and censorship could occur in any age, any country and from any form of government. At the end of World War II, Britain was in that position, hence the 1984/1948 hint in the title.

This leads to the greatest flaw in the transition from the novel to film. The main thrust of their respective storyline is different. Apart from that several other social and political issues were brought up and debated in different ways.

The movie seems inferior in comparison as if its main theme were forbidden love. The story focuses on the relationship between Winston and Julia. The disillusioned party members, the plight of the proles, Julia’s background, the emotionally gripping discussion between O’Neil and Winston when the couple decides to join the fake brotherhood and many other events of the book are completely left out of the movie. What remains is an empty shell called a “movie”.

The following are some of the observations while comparing the novel with the film:

- The character of Winston in the novel is that of an intellectual who, in first half of the novel, could win the trust of the inner party as a faithful citizen who later turns traitor. However, when we watch the movie and the television play, from the very beginning we see him as a man constantly seeking an opportunity to escape the ever ghastly and monotonous job of rewriting history.
- The character of Julia overshadows all the characters in the novels, movie and the television play.

- The constantly watching eyes of the Big Brother are felt more strongly while reading the novel than while watching the movie and television play.
- In the Parsons scene at the beginning of the novel, the description of the children, their games and their reading of history make us pity them but in their adaptation in the movie as well as television play, it is difficult to digest that they spy on their own parents.

For the movie's ability to recreate the novel properly, *1984* stands uniquely in a different form without losing its original meaning and subtle messages. As a standalone movie meant to entertain and appease its audience it may get more ranking. As a reviewer said "It's ideal for a night of somber viewing". But it does not make you think in the same way as the book does. It is an extremely faithful adaptation, and the additions are interesting and well-considered. But the problem of the last half of the book is only accentuated in this movie.

There's poor old Winston, on the rack, getting tortured. And there's nasty old O'Brien, talking to him, about how necessary it is to obey Big Brother and about Room 101. The description of Winston being tortured in the novel is hair-raising and that scene in the movie is equally dreadful.

The reading of the "The Theory and Practices of Oligarchical Collectivism" is more comprehensible in reading rather than seen in the movie and the play. Even Richard Burton's delivery of a famous line from the book can't save half of the two hour movie.

The film has bright moments, but somehow it simply did not capture interest or gain respect.

George Orwell made no secret of the fact that his great novel *1984* was not really about the future but about the very time he wrote it in, the bleak years after World War II when England shivered in poverty and hunger.

In a novel where passion is depicted as a crime, the greatest passion is expressed, not for love, but for contraband that is strawberry jam, coffee and chocolate. What Orwell feared, when he wrote his novel in 1948, was that Hitlerism, Stalinism and conformity would catch hold and turn the world into a totalitarian prison camp.

Most stunning of all is the film's production design, by Allan Cameron, and Roger Deakins photography, from which all the colours of sunlight have been drained. Except in Winston's occasional dreams or memories, when everything is bathed in an eerie golden glow, the world of this *1984* is uniformly blue-grey and beige. It's as if the state, which declared that "War is Peace," "Freedom is Slavery" and "Ignorance is Strength," had vaporized the primary colours.

In both the movie and the television play, the description of the proletariat area does not seem subtle as in the novel.

If the viewers have not read the novel before watching the movie or did not have any idea about the theme of the movie, they would neither enjoy it nor understand its undercurrents. The viewer, who is well-versed with the theme as well as the satiric tone of the novel, will be able to grasp the treatment of the movie which has its roots in the novel.

In a nutshell, the movie by Michael Radford is a tree that has grown vertical without developing the expansion of its branches; the television play by B.B.C. has made the reading almost compulsory. While there are certain alterations expected and accepted when the medium of expression changes, the novel is still a banyan tree which has innumerable branches each having its own place and root.

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- www.youtube.com for the movie trailers
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- * Dr. Urja Mankad is Assistant Professor at V.V.P. Engineering College, Rajkot. (Guajrat)