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Surveillance and Escapism in George Orwell's *1984*: Mechanisms of Control and Resistance

Anjali Malik

Research Scholar

&

Anupam Kumar

Associate Professor

SGT University, Gurugram, Haryana

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Abstract

This research examines the intertwined themes of surveillance and escapism in George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984*. Through careful textual analysis, this study explores how the totalitarian state of Oceania employs comprehensive surveillance systems as tools of social control, while Winston Smith seeks various forms of escapism as acts of resistance. The analysis demonstrates that surveillance operates beyond mere physical observation, functioning as a psychological mechanism that reshapes citizen behavior and identity. Simultaneously, Winston's attempts at escapism reveal both the human desire for freedom and the ultimate limitations of individual resistance within totalitarian structures. Drawing on Michel Foucault's panopticon theory and contemporary surveillance studies, this research illuminates Orwell's enduring warnings about technological control and the struggle for human autonomy. The study concludes that *1984* presents a profound critique of how systematic surveillance can eliminate not only privacy but the very possibility of independent thought and authentic selfhood in modern society.

Keywords: George Orwell, *1984*, surveillance, escapism, totalitarianism, resistance, panopticon, freedom

1. Introduction:

George Orwell's *1984*, published in 1949, remains one of literature's most powerful examinations of totalitarian control and human resistance. Written in the aftermath of World War II and during the early Cold War period, the novel reflects Orwell's deep concerns about the potential for technology and political power to crush individual freedom. The book's continued relevance stems from its prescient exploration of surveillance technology and its psychological effects on human behavior.

2. Statement of the Problem:

This study focuses specifically on two interconnected themes within Orwell's narrative: the omnipresent surveillance system that maintains Party control and the various forms of escapism through which Winston Smith attempts to preserve his humanity. These themes are not merely literary devices but profound explorations of power dynamics that continue to resonate in our contemporary world of digital monitoring and data collection.

Winston's observation that "Nothing was your own except the few cubic centimeters inside your skull" captures the central tension of the novel—the battle between external control and internal freedom. This research examines how Orwell portrays this struggle and what it reveals about the nature of resistance under totalitarian conditions.

3. Research Methodology:

This analysis employs Michel Foucault's concept of the panopticon as its primary theoretical lens. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes Jeremy Bentham's panopticon prison design, where guards can observe all prisoners without being seen themselves. Foucault argues that this creates a new form of power where "visibility is a trap" because individuals modify their behavior when they believe they might be watched, even if no actual observation occurs.

Foucault explains that panoptic power "automatizes and disindividualizes power" by making surveillance appear omnipresent while remaining invisible. This theoretical framework helps illuminate how surveillance functions in *1984*—not through constant actual monitoring but through the psychological effect of potential observation. The Party's power lies not in watching everyone all the time but in making citizens believe they are always potentially watched.

Contemporary surveillance theorist Shoshana Zuboff's concept of "surveillance capitalism" also informs this analysis. Zuboff argues that modern surveillance systems extract behavioral data to predict and modify human behavior, creating what she terms "behavioral futures markets." This framework helps connect Orwell's fictional dystopia to real-world surveillance practices.

4. Results and Discussion:

4.1. The Mechanics of Surveillance in Oceania

a. Technological Infrastructure

Orwell's Oceania employs multiple surveillance technologies that penetrate every aspect of daily life. The telescreen serves as the novel's most prominent surveillance device, combining television reception with two-way monitoring. Orwell writes that the telescreen "received and transmitted simultaneously" and that "there was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment."

This uncertainty about when observation actually occurs exemplifies Foucault's panoptic principle. Citizens must assume they are always visible, leading them to regulate their own behavior. Winston reflects on this condition when he notes that "the smallest thing could give you away. A nervous tic, an unconscious look of anxiety, a habit of muttering to yourself—anything that carried with it the suggestion of abnormality."

The surveillance network extends beyond telescreens to include hidden microphones, patrolling helicopters, and human informants. Most disturbing is the recruitment of children as surveillance agents through organizations like the Junior Spies. Orwell describes how "it was almost normal for people over thirty to be frightened of their own children" because children regularly reported their parents for thoughtcrimes.

b. Psychological Dimensions

The Party's surveillance system achieves its greatest power through psychological rather than purely technological means. The concept of "facecrime"—displaying an inappropriate facial expression—demonstrates how surveillance extends to the most minute aspects of human behavior. Citizens must constantly monitor not only their actions and words but their involuntary expressions and reactions.

The criminalization of thought itself represents the ultimate extension of surveillance into private mental space. Winston understands that "thoughtcrime was not a thing that could be concealed forever" because the pressure of constant self-monitoring eventually causes individuals to betray themselves through their behavior. This psychological dimension of control proves more effective than any physical technology because it turns individuals into their own surveillance agents.

The Two Minutes Hate sessions serve as both surveillance tools and conditioning exercises, allowing the Party to observe citizen responses while reinforcing ideological conformity. During these sessions, Winston notices that "it was impossible to avoid joining in" despite his private opposition, demonstrating how surveillance creates performative loyalty even among dissidents.

4.2. Winston's Strategies of Escapism

a. Physical Spaces of Resistance

Winston seeks to create physical spaces beyond surveillance reach, beginning with his purchase of a diary. This seemingly simple act represents his first attempt to establish private communication with his future self and potential readers. The diary writing occurs in "the little alcove" in his apartment where Winston believes the telescreen cannot see him, creating what he imagines is a sanctuary for authentic self-expression.

The room above Mr. Charrington's antique shop becomes Winston's most significant attempt at spatial escapism. He describes it as "a world, a pocket of the past where extinct animals could walk." The room's connection to the pre-revolutionary past gives it special significance as a space where different values and ways of being might still exist. Winston and Julia's time there represents their attempt to create an alternative reality governed by love rather than surveillance.

However, these physical escapes prove illusory. The discovery of the hidden telescreen behind the picture reveals that even seemingly private spaces remain under Party observation. This revelation demonstrates the totalitarian system's ability to incorporate apparent resistance into its control mechanisms.

b. Memory as Refuge

Winston's obsession with recovering authentic memories represents another form of escapism. He struggles to remember his childhood, his mother's disappearance, and historical events that contradict official Party accounts. These memory fragments serve as evidence that alternative realities once existed and might exist again.

The photograph of Jones, Aaronson, and Rutherford that Winston briefly possesses represents objective proof of the Party's historical falsifications. His decision to destroy the photograph rather than keep it illustrates the psychological pressure that surveillance creates—even when citizens possess evidence of Party lies, they often eliminate it themselves rather than risk discovery.

Winston's memories of his mother represent his clearest recollection of authentic human relationships that existed before Party control. He remembers her sacrifice and love as examples of values that transcend political manipulation. These memories provide him with standards for judging the present and imagining alternatives.

c. Emotional and Sexual Rebellion

Winston's relationship with Julia represents his most significant attempt at emotional escapism. Their sexual relationship becomes explicitly political because the Party has made private pleasure illegal. Julia declares that "the more men you've had, the more I love you" because sexual experience represents rebellion against Party control over the body and desire.

Their meetings in the countryside and the rented room create temporary spaces where authentic emotional connection becomes possible. Winston experiences these moments as recovery of his humanity: "At this moment he was not even thinking of Julia. He was thinking of his mother." The connection between sexual love and memory of maternal love suggests that intimate relationships offer access to pre-political human experiences.

However, this emotional escape proves vulnerable to the Party's ultimate weapon—torture that forces individuals to betray those they love most. Winston's betrayal of Julia in Room 101 demonstrates that even the strongest emotional bonds cannot withstand systematic torture designed to destroy human solidarity.

4.3 The Dialectical Relationship

The relationship between surveillance and escapism in *1984* is fundamentally dialectical. Each of Winston's escape attempts ultimately strengthens the surveillance system by providing it with more information about his psychology and desires. His diary entries become evidence of thoughtcrime, his secret room serves as a trap, and his relationship with Julia leads to both their captures.

This pattern reveals the Party's sophisticated understanding that total control requires not the elimination of resistance but its management and redirection. O'Brien explains to Winston that the Party allows minor rebellions to occur because they help identify potential dissidents while giving citizens the illusion that resistance remains possible.

The concept of doublethink illustrates how the Party has internalized this dialectical relationship. Citizens must simultaneously hold contradictory beliefs—believing in both Party infallibility and their own secret knowledge of Party lies. This psychological splitting ensures that even private doubts serve to reinforce rather than challenge the system.

O'Brien's revelation that he co-authored the Emmanuel Goldstein book that Winston believed represented authentic opposition demonstrates how the Party creates and controls its own opposition. This manufactured resistance serves to channel dissent into predictable patterns while eliminating genuinely threatening alternatives.

4.4 Contemporary Relevance

The surveillance and escapism dynamics portrayed in *1984* illuminate contemporary concerns about digital privacy and social media. Modern

surveillance capitalism operates through voluntary participation rather than overt coercion, but achieves similar results by collecting behavioral data to predict and modify individual choices.

Social media platforms function similarly to Orwell's telescreens by encouraging users to share private information while subjecting them to constant observation and behavioral modification through algorithmic manipulation. The promise of connection and self-expression—forms of digital escapism—becomes the mechanism through which surveillance operates.

The concept of "surveillance capitalism" described by Shoshana Zuboff shows how contemporary systems extract behavioral data to create what she calls "behavioral futures markets." Like the Party in *1984*, these systems aim not just to observe behavior but to modify it in predictable directions.

The rise of facial recognition technology, predictive policing algorithms, and social credit systems in various countries demonstrates how Orwell's fictional surveillance methods have become technological realities. The psychological effects remain similar—individuals modify their behavior based on the possibility of observation and judgment.

4.5 Critical Analysis

The genius of Orwell's portrayal lies in his recognition that effective surveillance operates primarily through psychology rather than technology. While the novel's telescreens and microphones seemed fantastical in 1949, the more profound insight concerns how the possibility of observation changes human behavior and self-perception.

Winston's ultimate defeat occurs not through external force but through the destruction of his capacity for authentic emotion and thought. His final declaration that he "loved Big Brother" represents not mere submission but the elimination of the psychological foundation necessary for resistance. The Party's victory is complete not when Winston obeys but when he genuinely cannot conceive of alternatives.

The novel's pessimistic conclusion suggests that individual resistance may be insufficient against systematic surveillance and control. However, the very existence of Winston's initial rebellion—and the reader's identification with it—implies that the human capacity for recognizing oppression persists even under totalitarian conditions.

The relationship between truth and power explored in the novel remains relevant to contemporary discussions about "alternative facts" and the manipulation of information. Winston's job at the Ministry of Truth, constantly revising historical records, anticipates current concerns about how digital information can be altered and how public understanding can be shaped through information control.

4.6 Implications for Human Freedom

1984 raises fundamental questions about the relationship between privacy, autonomy, and human dignity. The novel suggests that the elimination of private space—both physical and psychological—ultimately destroys the possibility of authentic selfhood. Without spaces beyond observation, individuals cannot develop independent thoughts or genuine relationships.

The Party's slogan "Freedom is Slavery" represents the inversion of values that surveillance enables. By defining freedom as the elimination of choice and responsibility, the Party makes submission appear liberating. This rhetorical strategy remains relevant to contemporary political discourse where surveillance is often justified as protection and freedom is redefined as security.

Winston's fate illustrates how surveillance can eliminate not just privacy but the very concept of a self that exists independently of external observation. The novel's most disturbing insight may be that sufficient surveillance can destroy the psychological foundations necessary for resistance, making rebellion literally unthinkable.

However, the novel's enduring power suggests that Orwell's warnings continue to resonate with readers who recognize the value of privacy and autonomy. The reader's horror at Winston's fate implies the persistence of values that surveillance seeks to eliminate, suggesting that the human capacity for recognizing oppression may be more resilient than totalitarian systems assume.

5. Conclusion

This analysis has demonstrated how surveillance and escapism function as interconnected themes in *1984*, revealing the complex dynamics between control and resistance under totalitarian conditions. Orwell's novel provides enduring insights into how surveillance operates not merely through technological observation but through psychological mechanisms that transform individuals into agents of their own control.

The various forms of escapism that Winston attempts—physical spaces, memory, emotional connection—represent universal human needs that persist even under extreme oppression. However, the novel's tragic conclusion demonstrates that individual resistance may be insufficient against systematic efforts to eliminate privacy and autonomy.

The dialectical relationship between surveillance and escapism in the novel illuminates how totalitarian systems can incorporate resistance into their control mechanisms, transforming rebellion into a means of identifying and eliminating dissent. This insight remains relevant to contemporary discussions about digital surveillance and the ways that technologies promising connection and freedom can become instruments of control.

Orwell's masterpiece ultimately serves as both warning and testament—warning about the dangers of unchecked surveillance power while testifying to the human values that make such warnings necessary. The novel's continued relevance suggests that the struggle between surveillance and freedom remains a defining feature of modern political life, making Winston's story as urgent today as when Orwell first imagined it.

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