George Orwell's 1984, Part 2: Crash Course Literature #402

Crash Course: Literature
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===== Intro =====

Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course Literature, and today we're going back to the future that is now past; to George Orwell's *1984*, which imagines a terrifying world in which every human activity is recorded and monitored.

"How unpleasant would that be?" he said staring into a camera lens.

So as mentioned in our previous episode, the Newspeak language created in *1984* was intended to make speech, as nearly as possible, independent of consciousness. In an episode of Crash Course Psychology, my brother Hank defined consciousness as "our awareness of ourselves and our environment." I would add that consciousness also explains our ability to examine the experience of life and the feeling of emotions.

So can the structure of human speech actually be independent of human consciousness? Well, today we're going to explore whether language is imposed on us from the outside, or whether it's an innate feature of humanity. I'm also going to talk about how this novel was perceived when it was published in the actual 1984, and how people think about it today, and we'll go ahead and make some connections between Orwell's novel and our current society's really confusing relationship with truth and surveillance.

Yeah, we can still criticize surveillance society, that's not a Thought Crime. Yet.

(intro music)

So in *1984* Orwell's protagonist, Winston Smith, works in the records department of the Ministry of Truth, in Newspeak known as "Minitrue." He adjusts financial and weather forecasts so that Big Brother's predictions are always retroactively correct. He also removes references to "un-persons" or "vaporized" political dissidents, and he rewrites history so that Oceania appears to have always been at war with East Asia, or with Eurasia; it changes depending on shifting alliances.

The central tenant of Ingsoc, the version of English socialism practiced in Oceania, is that the past is mutable, that it has no objective existence, and exists only in written records and in human memories.

===== Newspeak =====

Orwell writes: "The past is whatever the records and the memories agree upon. And since the party is in full control of all records and in equally full control of the minds of its members, it follows that the past is whatever the party chooses to make it."

So Winston writes mainly in Newspeak, this version of English with grammar and vocabulary designed to narrow the range of thought. The idea is that without the language to express dissent, political crimes, both in thought and deed, will become impossible. But quickly, before we get into the chicken-and-egg problem of language and thought, I want to pause to ask you to think about this novel's relationship to memory. Now we know from neuroscience that each time a human memory is accessed, you're remembering it anew; there's no, like, spot in your brain containing that memory, it is formed each time you have it. And that means that your past really is shaped by your "now", and that at least, to some extent, the Party is right when it says that telling people what they remember does change their memories.

So the Party is manipulating a real structural feature of the human brain, as we learned in our discussion of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's One Hundred Years Of Solitude, "what matters in life is not what happens to you but what you remember and how you remember it."

Okay, so with that noted, let's turn back to thought. So, many experts have explored to what extent our ability to think is dependent on language. In the late 1920's, for instance, the ethnolinguist Edward Sapir began talking in academic circles about his theory that the structure of the language a person uses determines how they perceive and categorize experience. When his student, Benjamin Whorf, began publishing in the 1950's, this theory became known as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis.

Then in the 1960's, Noam Chomsky questioned the premise of this theory, arguing that humans are born with an innate knowledge of grammar that forms the basis for language acquisition. By 1994, Steven Pinker was arguing that language is a basic instinct, and that the ability to understand, manipulate, and add to it based on one's own experience is an expression of one's humanity. In fact he wrote a book called *The Language Instinct*.

But before any of those theories were published, Orwell was also thinking about the relationship between instinct and language. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

===== Thought Bubble: Instinct =====

The word "instinct" appears 31 times in *1984*. Winston is a creature of instinct, and his strongest instinct is to survive; "To hang on from day to day and from week to week, spinning out a present that had no future, seemed an unconquerable instinct, just as one's lungs will always draw the next breath so long as there is air available."

Winston instinctively understands that his society is inhumane.

"It might be true that the average human being was better off now than they had been before the revolution. The only evidence to the contrary was the mute protest in your own bones, the instinctive feeling that the conditions you lived in were intolerable and that at some other time they must have been different."

So to Orwell, there are human instincts toward generosity and survival, and even liberty, but Orwell is always aware of how dangerous human instincts can be, particularly when manipulated by a totalitarian state. For example, the Party transforms an innate fear of death into mob violence.

"For how could the fear, the hatred, and the lunatic credulity which the Party needed in its members be kept at the right pitch, except by bottling down some powerful instinct and using it as a driving force?"

It also transforms the survival instinct into a form of self-repression. Crimestop is the ability to cut off one's ideas as though by instinct at the threshold of any dangerous thought. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

But of course, those thoughts are only dangerous because the government might kill you for having them. But, and I think this is critical, writing in Newspeak and participating in Party rallies alone doesn't alter Winston's consciousness that much, and it doesn't seem to change his instincts. He's still able to love Julia, and in little ways able to live his own life-life.

But then eventually Winston *does* betray his girlfriend Julia, and he comes to believe that he *should* repress his thoughts, so ultimately he loses his sense of self, but not, I would argue, entirely because of Newspeak. Mostly because of torture.

===== Consciousness, Or Lack Thereof =====

In the end, his consciousness cannot survive being threatened with having his head put in a cage filled with hungry rats. That is when Winston breaks down and wishes that Julia would receive this punishment in his place. And by betraying Julia, he loses his ability to love and loses faith in his own humanity. And then, after Winston has psychologically broken, he starts to *think* in Newspeak.

I mean, consider this stream of non-conscious narrative: "the mind should develop a blind spot whenever a dangerous thought presented itself. The process should be automatic, instinctive. Crimestop, they called it in Newspeak."

So the initial use of Newspeak might be *part* of Winston's journey toward the lack of consciousness, but it's the physical and psychological torture that really take him there. And with that in mind, we can turn to the question of whether words actually matter. I mean, can good language or good books enhance the human experience? I believe so, and I think Orwell must have believed so, too, or else he wouldn't have written *1984*.

And as we talked about in the last video, we know that free expression survives within the logic of the novel because the *appendix* is written in standard English. It also refers to the totalitarian government in the past tense, so we know that humanity eventually triumphs over oppression and oppressive language.

Free thought and free speech endure! Great! But Orwell doesn't actually tell us how those victories were won.

One minute Winston is in love with Big Brother, the next minute: appendix in standard English.

But that hasn't stopped readers from trying to use *1984* to diagnose and solve problems unique to their times. Like when *1984* was first published, TIME Magazine claimed that "any reader in 1949 can uneasily see his own shattered features in Winston Smith, can scent in the world of *1984* a stench that is already familiar."

Other early reviewers at the time read *1984* as an attack on British socialism. In a letter to a friend, Orwell explained that the novel "is not intended as an attack on socialism or the British Labor Party (of which I am a supporter) but as a show-up of the perversions to which a centralized economy is liable and which have already been partly realized in communism and fascism."

===== Orwellian =====

In the years after the book was published, readers began associating Orwell's name with the form of oppression that he critiqued.

Surveillance? Quite "Orwellian!" Propaganda? Also Orwellian, but actually ANTI-Orwellian!

In 1983 a TIME Magazine journalist tried to re-appropriate the term "Orwellian" to make it signify "the spirit that fights the worst tendencies in politics and society by using a fundamental sense of decency." But of course that was a failure; if you Google "Orwellian" today, you'll find a long list of ways it has been applied to various misuses of government power.

Poor Orwell. Not since Dr. Frankenstein has someone so often been inappropriately alluded to.

And then of course, there's the question of *our* "today", and whether it resembles the Oceania of *1984*. In terms of politics, neither the U.S. nor the U.K. look much like Oceania. Whatever you think of our elected officials, they are *elected*. In fact, a higher percentage of people on Earth *today* live in democracies than did in 1949, or for that matter 1984.

So it's actually been a pretty good seven decades for democracy, but there are some similarities between contemporary life and the future that Orwell imagined. For instance, our time has some pretty serious issues with the dissemination of objective fact, like there's a good reason that Stephen Colbert's word "truthiness", meaning a truth that wouldn't stand to be held back by fact, was chosen by the American Dialect Society as the word of the year in 2005. Propaganda, both subtle and overt, continue to distort social and political discourse around the world.

And then there's the issue of surveillance. In Oceania, the government places microphones and tele-screens in public spaces and private homes, and the tele-screen is this addictive content provider. It broadcasts news and weather reports, and interactive exercise videos. It detects sounds above a whisper, and movement within its field of vision, and in Winston's apartment it can be dimmed, but never turned off completely. Creepier still, there was "...no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment."

===== Twitter/Instagram, Etc. =====

Today, we too have audio and video surveillance in shops and airports and public parts of big cities, and also in our homes. And this loss of privacy is a trade-off that we have made for increased security and convenience.

But also, think about how much of your own life and your consciousness also exists out there in the personal information that you willingly post online. We have Snapchat and Instagram and Twitter and Pinterest and Tumblr and WhatsApp and LinkedIn and YouTube, and I think we still have Google Plus!

And if you're waiting for me to denounce social media, I'm not gonna. These are amazing ways to publish your thoughts, from the sublime to the ridiculous. We indicate our preferences by liking and swiping and re-posting and commenting. We tag all the wonderful places that we visit and show everyone what we ate while we were there. Social media is fun, it's awesome, I'm in favor of it!

But...have you ever actually *read* the privacy policy of each service that you use?

There's no question that something is lost when you choose to make any part of your own life public. Winston can't turn off his tele-screen; many of us *choose* not to turn ours off, exposing a lot of our own lives to surveillance, and I believe that *does* ultimately shape our lives. It's certainly not a *1984*-level control of the private self, but it is worth considering.

In our era, for those of us lucky enough to live in democracies, Big Brother is not a totalitarian government able to alter the consciousness of its citizens through various forms of torture. Instead, Big Brother is each of us.

We are watching each other, in the best ways and the worst ways.

Does this distract from our physical bodies, our animal desires, our bonds with real-life family and friends, our impulses to help others, you know, that business of being conscious and human? Or does it ultimately enhance our humanity?

I don't know, but I don't think time spent considering those questions is wasted, and that's Orwell's true genius: the questions that he asked in 1949 about a hypothetical 1984? They're timeless.

What is the nature of humanity, which social orders best allow humanity to flourish, which oppress it nearly beyond recognition, and what is the role of language in literature in liberating the oppressed?

===== Conclusion =====

Keep asking those important questions, and you will be Orwellian in the most heroic sense of the word. Thanks for watching. I'll see you next time.

(credits and end music)