

Neil Walsh, 'Books I've been avoiding', in <http://www.sfsite.com/fsf/2004/rk0401.htm>, accessed 18/3/2014

On one hand, I wonder why I'm even making the effort here. I mean, there's probably nothing I could say about 1984 that hasn't been said before. As SF classics go, this is likely going to top the list. Not that it's the best, but that it's the best-known. It's one of those rare SF novels that is indisputably SF and still gets read by people who never read SF. And then on the other hand, I surely cannot be the only one who couldn't be bothered to read this "significant modern classic" back in high school or whenever. So maybe I can provide a tiny bit of insight for those of you who have never cared in the least what high-brow literary critics or university professors have had to say about 1984.

1984 is an iconic novel, a towering monument of dystopian literature. That much is clear. But it should be remembered that, like any good speculative fiction/science fiction, it never attempted to make accurate predictions about the future. Orwell was clearly not, in 1948-49, predicting what the world would be like in 1984; he was merely commenting on (or speculating about) totalitarianism taken to extremes. When he wrote 1984 (the book), 1984 (the year) was still 35 years in the future. Probably he had no idea at the time of writing that his little book would become so important and that it would still be read long after the eponymous year had come and gone. But what a lame title. I understand he originally considered calling it "The Last Man in Europe" which would have been a far better and more meaningful title. If I were an editor and I saw this new manuscript come across my desk today, the first thing I would do would be to suggest the author find another title. How about, for example, "We Are the Dead"? Or maybe "Oranges and Lemons." Or what was wrong with "The Last Man in Europe"? As a title, 1984 doesn't really tell the prospective reader anything. OK, maybe in 1949 it told the reader that it was going to be a futuristic kind of book, but it sure doesn't say much today. The author makes a point early in the novel of emphasizing that Winston doesn't know for sure if it really even is 1984 or just somewhere in that ballpark, and yet Winston works in the Ministry of Truth with newspaper articles dated from 1983 and 1984. If they date the newspapers, you'd think that surely people would know what year it was. Except, we quickly learn just what it is Winston does with the newspaper articles, which makes his doubt about the precise year a little more understandable. In that sense, I suppose 1984 would have been an adequate ~ perhaps even a clever ~ title in 1949. But it was not going to be an enduring title.

The more important question, though: is it an enduring novel? Is it, in fact, worthy of all the hype it has received over the past 60 years? Well, to begin with, it has certainly had an impact. Even though I had never previously read it, I had heard of and understood the concepts of Big Brother, Doublethink, Doubleplusungood, and the Hate directed at a person (possibly fabricated) who was not just an enemy, but THE enemy of the state. It's the kind of story that has permeated our culture to the degree that you don't have to have read it to know about it. In the same way, I grew up in a household of atheists, never went to church or Sunday school or read the bible as a kid, but by the time I was 9 I knew all about Noah's ark, Adam and Eve, and the crucifixion and resurrection. There's simply no avoiding certain cultural icons. I'm not saying that Orwell's 1984 is as big or as influential as the Bible, but in a similar way, you just can't avoid hearing about Big Brother and learning that it's a reference to intrusive surveillance ~ whether or not you ever read the book. So at least in that sense, I think it's pretty indisputably had an impact.

But is it any good?

Actually, yes. It's still a good read, still quality literature, still excellent speculative fiction. It's not flawless, but then very little is. Most people I know who more or less worship Tolkien still skip over entire sections of *The Lord of the Rings* when re-reading their beloved classic (the songs, for many; about 60 pages of Sam & Frodo slogging through the swamps, for others). And similarly, over the years whenever I happened to mention I was considering picking up *1984* and finally reading it, people would say "when you get to the point in the novel where the guy reads the book, just skip over that." Well, I finally understand what they mean. The biggest flaw I think is "the book." It's about two thirds of the way through the novel when you get this awkward info dump. Except you've already figured it all out by this point, so it's just 30 pages of boring.

Apart from that 30-page section that could have been almost entirely cut, it is really a very good book. It's obviously somewhat dated (for example, hidden microphones can't be hidden in a stand of young saplings because of course a microphone would be too big to hide in such a skinny tree!), but it's all too easy to see parallels between the novel and the world evolving around us. Obviously, at the time of writing, Orwell had Stalinist Russia in mind. There are also echoes of Nazi Germany. The message, of course, is not that Communism is bad, but that Totalitarian Regimes of any kind are bad ~ Russia, at the time, was just the emerging bad guy (from the Western perspective). I said earlier that Orwell wasn't trying to make accurate predictions about the future. He wasn't. He may have been issuing warnings, however. And it wasn't long before the Ingsoc Party methods and ethics of this very disturbing novel echoed uncomfortably in America under McCarthyism. The cool thing about *1984* is that you can still hear the resonances of Orwell's novel in the world around us today ~ and it's just as frightening right now as it ever was. That, I think, is what makes it a viable and vibrant classic. It has and will undoubtedly continue to endure.

From 1984 to One-Dimensional Man:

Critical Reflections on Orwell and Marcuse

By Douglas Kellner

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For one thing, Orwell misses the rise of what Foucault calls "normalizing" disciplinary power and what Lasch calls the "therapeutic" or paternalistic social and state apparatus. {17} That is, contemporary capitalist societies utilize a wide array of social welfare programs and agencies, schooling, and institutions and techniques such as psychotherapy, mental institutions, prisons, and media to socialize individuals and to suppress deviancy. Deviant behavior in capitalist societies is thus more likely to be reshaped by techniques of behavior control rather than Big Brother's boot-in-the-face.

In fact, capitalist societies seem to be able to exert social control without having to control every facet of life through their use of normalizing, disciplinary, media and cultural power (though one should not overestimate the amount of "freedom" it allows to individuals). On the other hand, power in capitalist societies is, as Foucault argues, diffused through different institutions, disciplines, and discourses that often function in much more subtle and complex ways than in the repressive societies of Orwell's nightmare.

Furthermore, and perhaps most crucially, Orwell misses the rise of the technological society in his grim vision of the future in 1984. Against those who celebrate how Orwell's supposed prophecy anticipates social trends, I would argue that Orwell really did not anticipate the extent to which technological innovation in computers, the media, automation, and new technologies would transform industrial societies. Against those who praise Orwell's prescient vision of our present and future, I would argue that he really fails to anticipate the rise of our consumer, media, and technological society. Thus while Orwell might well be read as an acute social critic of the trends toward totalitarianism emerging out of the industrial society of his day, he is better read, I believe, as a critic of the most repressive socio-economic systems of his own epoch than as a prophet of the future. That is, Orwell is better read as a critic who provides powerful indictments of repressive totalitarianism, and warnings about what might happen if certain trends and phenomena continued in the future rather than as a theoretical and political guide to present-day social and political realities. For he envisages only one aspect of a future whose modes of domination are more complex, sophisticated, and heterogenous than those pictured by Orwell.

In fact, I believe that there has been a misplaced emphasis on celebrating Orwell as a social prophet rather than as a critic who provided warnings about what might happen rather than projections of what would happen. In a letter to an American correspondent, part of which I cited earlier, Orwell emphatically stated that: "I do not believe that the kind of society I describe **necessarily** will arrive, but I believe (allowing of course for the fact that the book is a satire) that something resembling it **could** arrive. I believe also that totalitarian ideas have taken root in the minds of intellectuals everywhere, and I have tried to draw these ideas out to their logical consequences." {18}