AN APPROACH TO GEORGE ORWELL'S 1984 VIA LACAN AND SOJA'S THIRDSPACING

Clementina Alexandra Mihăilescu
Assoc. Prof., PhD, "Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu

Abstract: The paper expands upon Orwell's novel simply and suggestively entitled "1984" as the extreme representation of social and political alienation caused by communism regime in Eastern European countries. From a methodological point of view, we will turn to good account Lacan's psychological model based on depicting the three registers of human reality. The first one, the imaginary will be approached in terms of the spectacular, the second, the symbolic, will be tackled in terms of meanings attached to those things around us, while the third, the real will be focused on the meaninglessness and the absurdity of the world we live in. Soja's Thirdspacing, the space of experience, simultaneously real-and-imagined, actual – and –virtual, which arises from the Firstspace of objects and the Secondspace of thought, will be closely examined and commented upon in connection with Orwell's novel. Soja's Thirdspacing will be analyzed as embodied in the organized crimes of moral wounds and neglect depicted in the novel.

Keywords: Orwell, Lacan, Soja, imaginary, symbolic, real, alienation, totalitarianism

George Orwell, whose real name is Eric Blair, was born in Bengal, educated at Eton and joined the Loyalist forces in the Spanish Civil War. His novel "1984" is one of the darkest descriptions of Eastern totalitarianism. Since the premises of Orwell's dystopia were his knowledge of the Soviet Union and communism in the countries where it took over and since his main concern was to reveal the consequences of such a totalitarian system, he forsaw its evolution in a future England, in the period of "Ingsoc" (English Socialism). For such frustrating experiences to be psychologically interpreted in terms of the socially and politically alienated individual who experiences the diminishing of his defence mechanism against all types of psychological pressures, a "credible detector" could be constructed from Lacan's psychological model.

Lacan claims that there are three registers of human reality: the imaginary, the symbolic and the real. The imaginary is approached in terms of the "spectacular" (60), the symbolic is referred to in terms of the meanings attached to those things around us, while the real "would represent precisely what is excluded from our reality, the margin of what is without meaning and which we fail to situate or explore" (60), that is, in terms of the meaninglessness, of the absurdity of the world we live in.

Closely related to this three registers is Lacan's famous discourse entitled "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalism". The discourse clarifies the confusion between speech and language. Language is "an abstract structure", while speech implies a speaker and a listener. Speech generates meaning, gives the speakers recognition of his or her desires, and an identity (in the symbolic order). We assume that the ethical dimension of Lacan's theory arises from the symbolic register. When an object or a situation (e.g. a social or political context) loses its meaning, the respective object or situation looks as if it were "mysterious" and

BDD-A24687 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:57:14 UTC)

"uncanny". Hence, Lacan's statement "I live where I do not think, and I think where I do not live". This statement perfectly applies to the world described by Orwell in "1984".

Lacan also claims that "symbolic structures", for instance the Communist Party or the Communist State from Orwell's novel, "which are not consciously perceived, can organize and govern the workings of a society, and, indeed, the mind of the individual" (70). Last but not least important, Lacan assumes that a "symptom" may be literally regarded as "a word trapped in the body" (51) or, "in the mind" as it is the case with Orwell's characters. Lacan adds that "the unconscious turns words into tormenting thoughts and compulsions" (52).

We can relate Orwell's tormenting background present in the novel both to pure literary history whose final object of study is either "the specific literary text in its own right or the general concept of history" (Huizinga, 65) or to cultural history which the same Huizinga opines that it is concerned with objects, and yet it permanently turns back "from those objects to the world in which they had a place" (65). Moreover, the objects of cultural history are identified by Huizinga as standing for various forms and functions of civilization present in the history of peoples and of social groups. As such forms have further consolidated into "cultural figures, motifs, themes, symbols, concepts, ideals, styles and sentiments" (65), Huizinga claims that each of them can become the object of specialized humanities. He concludes saying that "even so they remain objects for general cultural history as long as they are viewed as tableaux in the great world-drama" (65).

Huizinga also specifies that specialized disciplines understand cultural forms isolated from actual events, while cultural history always views them" in the thick of events" (65). Huizinga does special justice to linguistics which, due to its shift from the "external morphology of the Junggrammatiker to semantic questions – and thus to the internal morphology of the expression of "thought" (65) has become an integral part of the humanities, and, as such, philosophy, law and history will have to become better acquainted with it. It is precisely this "internal morphology of thought" which seems to be Orwell's concern within the novel "1984". Orwell's literary approach to the political diagram of the communism regime will be interpreted by us as "a case of Thirdspace". Edward W. Soja's central argument of Thirdspace was that there is another way of thinking about the social production of human spatiality that incorporated both Firstspace (space of objects) and Secondspace (that of thought) while at the same time enlarging the purpose and complexity of the geographical or spatial imagination.

Within the "third" perspective, the thirdspace is that of experience where the town or any other urban or less urban area "is investigated as fully lived space, a simultaneously real-and-imagined, actual-and-virtual, locus of structured individual and collective experience and agency" (https://2113humtheresnospacelikehome.wordpress.com/soja/).

Following Soja's ideas (https://2113humtheresnospacelikehome.wordpress.com/soja/), we posit that the "language-objects" present in Orwell's novel belong to the first space can be related to what Huizinga called "external morphology". It also establishes the transition towards the Secondspace, that of thought or, in Huizinga's terminology, of the "internal morphology of thought" (65). Since "logos" (the thinking part) is always associated with "pathos" (feelings) it appears only natural to focus on the negative feelings related to the political war, that the tyranical and undemocratic leaders employ as "the soft organs of anxiety".

The word "anxiety" opens the door to Kelly psychological constructs that undergo changes on both the intuitive and logical perceptual planes. On the emotional plane, where a person finds himself in a state of anxiety, Kelly claims that his "superordinate construct" is either too tight and impermeable generating accurate yet irrelevant predictions or too loose and hardly

BDD-A24687 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:57:14 UTC)

organized to offer significant guidance as regards future actions. Kelly also argues that a person does not only perceive changes within his or her personality he also undertakes actions within a socially determined role.

The unusual unpoetic space created by Orwell can be decoded via Soja's concept of Thirdspace, simultaneously real-and-imagined, actual-and-virtual. The Thirdspace actually arises from the Firstspace of objects and the Secondspace of thought. The material charge of the Firstspace is embodied in the organized crimes of wounds and neglect. The morally wounded people can be regarded as standing for "the horizontally leveled human nature" (Bachelard, 56), being brain-washed and artificially fed by the tyranical authorities, who themselves perform significant social roles.

Little by little, the novel is opening up "the scope and complexity of spatial imagination", and space is no longer exterior but interior, being conceived in the mind of the author himself who diagnoses the ingsoc society depicted in his literary contribution rather as a really sick world not as a virtually compensatory projection of the postwar moral and political crisis.

The crisis seems to have reached a climax through the image of the telescreen present in every room which can, at best, be dimmed, yet never completely shut off. Being always watched, you have to observe attentively your face, your lips, your gestures and your thoughts. The keyword in Orwell's novel which can be associated with Lacan's theory, "the telescreen" equates with a surveillance device and propaganda tool present everywhere so that everybody is totally deprived of his or her privacy, the Party keeping everybody and everything under control. One way of controlling people is poverty (no sugar, not enough electricity, no coffee, no chocolate, no clothes). On the other hand, the most powerful members of the inner Party enjoy all the economic privileges.

So, the telescreen is that word "trapped" in the body and mind which unconsciously generates constant fear of being seen or heard, even by one's close relatives (husband, wife, one's children).

Orwell devises another sinister word "thoughtcrime" which stands for any type of mental rebellion against the party, such as gestures, countance, even a whisper, while sleeping. The Thought Police is the institution which has cancelled all privacy, all Orwell's heroes are "doomed" to belong to the Party.

The symptoms associated with the above-described issues (which we know and remember too well) are helplessness, hopelessness, immense sadness, humiliation and "utter despair" (Vianu, 29).

Everything is dominated by "Big Brother", whose face is that "of a man of about forty-five, with a heavy black moustache and handsome features", watching everyone all the time. Even if no one has never seen or heard Big Brother, he is the leader of the Party who must be obeyed and worshipped. The Party members have to look like Big Brother, which means to wear blue overalls, to love him and to fanatically hate all the enemies that Oceania is at war with (Fantasia or Eurasia).

Following Lacan, Big Brother can be regarded as "the ego in the mirror phase", its task being that of maintaining a general appearance of coherence and completeness, the more painful because it is experienced under such bleak circumstances. All the citizens of Oceania, or, almost all, can be regarded likewise, as "falsifying egos" (29), as egos of the mirror phase, because they experience a false experience of their apparent coherence, (living, in paranoia, a sort of mental decomposition). Moreover, their babies are bound to similar images, their identity depending on how they assume their parents' words. Their identification with the "ideal" ego, which in Lacan's

BDD-A24687 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:57:14 UTC)

terminology stands for the image, through the heard speech, creates a "kernel of insignia they are unconscious of". Consequently, children "spy on" and "betray" their parents, because they all belong to the Spy Organization. Under such circumstances, they all experience alienation in the register of the image. Since language blocks identity due to the fact that the citizens of Oceania find no place in a "structure which is abstract, and, as such, intrinsically alien" to them, we assume, following the same Lacan, that they also experience "alienation in the register of language" (73).

The only character who strives to integrate such images into the symbolic register, that is into the cultural and linguistic networks he feels attached to, is Winston Smith. He can be related to Soja's Thirdspace of experience through the fact that he works for the Ministry of Truth, referred to as Minitruth in Newspeak, the new, official language of Oceania. This Ministry is preoccupied with concealing reality. Most of those employed there have to rearrange old articles and documents, bringing them up to date, by eliminating the contradictions between past and present details. Memory is deliberately annihilated. All these things are well-known to us. And yet, we have to admit that Orwell exaggerates as no organization can destroy man's innermost refuge – his soul.

The Ministry of Truth exists alongside with other three ministries: the Ministry of Peace, mainly concerned with war, the Ministry of Love, meant to maintain law and order, and the Ministry of Plenty, responsible for economic issues. Their names according to Newspeak are: Minipax, Miniluv and Miniplenty. All these names reveal a paradoxical reality in the sense that the activities which take place inside them have nothing to do with those words.

Since the distortion of truth is their main achievement, Winston feels overwhelmed with lying and decides to commit the highest offence possible and to open a diary. He starts writing it on the 4th of April 1984, when he is thirty-nine years old. He is aware of the fact that this is the only alternative to survive in such a world where any democratic, anti-communist thoughts directed against the Party and Big Brother would bring about death or forced labour in the labour camp.

This anti-democratic society is divided into main groups: the Party members and the "proles". The proles are uneducated, misinformed, poor and obedient. Nevertheless they are freer than the Party members who have to take part in the daily "Two Minutes Hate", in order to prove their fanatic loyalty to Big Brother.

Emmanuel Goldstein, besides Winston, has also taken "a place in the symbolic world" (46), in Lacan terminology, which means that he has left "the world of the image" (46) and has symbolically entered Soja's Thirdspace of experience. His betrayal is shown on the screen where he is presented as the Enemy of the People. Once a Party leader, Emmanuel "betrayed" (Vianu, 30) it and vanished after having denounced dictatorship and after having demanded freedom of speech, of the press and last but not least of thought, pretending that the revolutionary ideals have been totally disregarded.

The Thought Police was hunting the spies, Emmanuel and Winston being included in this category. Winston keeps on striving to hide his thoughts, gestures, feelings. Feelings are forbidden, marriages should be loveless. In fact, Winston, although married, is merely separated from his wife, not divorced. His strongest form of protest consists in falling in love with Julia. She is twenty-six and lacks any knowledge about a different type of society. Winston thinks of the previous capitalist society, dreams of it, clings to the past, hoping that this will help him to survive. Winston and Julia start meeting. They rent a small room in the prole area, thinking that no one could ever spot them. They are wrong as everyone around them was a member of the Spy

BDD-A24687 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:57:14 UTC)

Organization, even the kind looking old man who rent them the room and who sold Winston the book for his diary. The small rented room was also provided with a telescreen to spy on them, which was hidden behind a picture.

Moreover, when just for once, he discloses his secret thoughts and emotions to O'Brien, a colleague of the Inner Party, who pretended to be a conspirator against the Party, he is caught, tortured, till "utter annihilation" (Vianu, 32). Actually, both Winston and Julia are politically and mentally reformed beyond recognition. When they meet in the last pages of the novel they behave like two robots, politely ignoring each other.

While experiencing the slow brain-washing, Winston keeps writing in his diary, without knowing who or how to address: "To the future or to the past, to a time when thought is free, when men are different from one another and do not live alone – to a time when truth exists and what is done cannot be undone, from the age of uniformity, from the age of solitude, from the age of Big Brother, from the age of double think-greetings".

The image created by Orwell is that of the totalitarian system and his modernity arises from having mingled literature with journalism and political theory. Such a combination coloured by literary ingredients created a frustrating, haunting and saddening atmosphere beyond speech. In spite of his warning, till 1990, nobody from the communist countries succeeded in doing anything about it, sadly ends Vianu her approach to Orwell′s novel.

Works Cited

Bachelard, Gaston, Poetica spațiului, Pitești, Paralela 45, 2003

Huizinga, Johan, History, The Middle Ages, The Renaissance, Essays by J. Huizinga, Meridian Books, 1959

Lacan, Jacques, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis. Hogarth Press Ltd., London, 2004

Orwell, George, Nineteen Eighty-Four, A Novel, 1949….

https://2113humtheresnospacelikehome.wordpress.com/soja/

Vianu Lidia, British Desperadoes at the Turn of the Millenium,Liternet Publishing House,2005,

BDD-A24687 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:57:14 UTC)