

Is There a Place Without Darkness Under Surveillance? A comparative Study of George Orwell's 1984 and Liu Cixin's the Mirror

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ABSTRACT

George Orwell's *1984* is one of the most influential English novels of the 20th century. It is not only a political fable but also a science fiction novel with prophetic nature. Liu Cixin's *The Mirror* is included in the collection of short stories *Time Immigration*, which successfully links reality and shows the connotation and beauty of science. Although the two works are both imaginative sci-fi works and they seem to be nonsense and absurd, they profoundly reflect the social reality and have a certain vigilant effect on the entire human society. This article explores the relevance of the two works and the warning to human society from the perspective of the reality of the two works, the political theme, and the elements of surveillance. Under the high-intensity seamless monitoring and restraint, even if the people in this society are highly self-conscious, and the darkness cannot be hidden anymore, will the future be definitely bright?

Keywords: *George Orwell, 1984, Liu Cixin, The Mirror, Science-Fiction, Surveillance*

1. INTRODUCTION

As a famous British satirical novelist in the 20th century, George Orwell recorded the society under totalitarianism with his keen insight and sharp writing based on his life experience at the bottom of the society in *1984*, the works portrays the suffocating living state of human beings in a totalitarian society which alerts the world to prevent it from being reality.

There are five periods of Orwell's reception in mainland of China: early transmission before 1950, politically-wrong writer after the founding of PRC, the banned writer in 1980s, anti-totalitarian writer in 1990s, and now a highly valued writer [1]. There used to be a time when *1984* was considered dangerous and provocative and was therefore banned by many countries which are not all considered to be "totalitarian", besides, China is also one of these countries. With the domestic conditions changing, Chinese scholar's attitudes towards *1984* have also undergone great changes. As its value and importance are gradually dug out during the 70 years after its first edition, *1984* now is honored as one of the most influential literary classics.

V. S. Pritchett called Orwell the "wintry conscience" of our generation and Jeffery Meyers further took it as the title of the autobiography *Orwell: Wintry Conscience of a Generation*. As this book was transmitted into China, domestic scholars began to explore value of Orwell's thought. Lin Xianzhi, a Chinese literary critics, believes that Orwell's writing is "loyal to his conscience" and is the real "personal writing" [2].

Liu Cixin, one of the representative writers of Chinese science fiction, is well known for his *The Three Body Problem* which won the 73rd Hugo Award for Best Novel. His award has created a new era in Chinese science fiction literature. His awards also is also a landmark event that Chinese science fiction is recognized by the world, thus triggering an enduring discussion and research on this novel thereafter. It's undeniable that his novel series are successful, moreover, his short stories are equally excellent enough to deserve further research and thinking. As a sci-fi writer, Liu Cixin showed a strong interest in traditional sci-fi novels and writers, moreover, he has mentioned few times in the interview that George Orwell, the famous dystopian writer, was also one of his favorite writers. He appreciates Orwell's *1984* for it reflects reality through a science-fiction way which he thinks is a virtue of a novel. After reading *1984*, Liu finds a different perspective and angle for observing the world and society and therefore constructing a fantasy world in his own book. It's hard to tell whether Liu has written this novel under the influence of Orwell's *1984*, but it's sure that the two novels share some similarities to some extent, which is exactly what the article is discussing about.

2. Surveillance in the Two Novels

Of the most prominent features in the two novels, the element of surveillance can be the most catching one that we could not neglect it. Related to this element, both stories unfold themselves in a particular political context, which makes them fascinating and gripping. Our analysis

starts from the political context in the two novels and then go to the subject of surveillance.

2.1. Political Context in Two Novels

The stories in two novels happens in special political situation, which is mainly a highlight reason that explains the necessity of surveillance in two works.

In Liu's *The Mirror*, Song Cheng, a righteous young man in supervisory commissions with great fidelity to execution of duty and ethics, was imprisoned for discovering the corruption of his superiors. If it was not the participation of Bai Bing, who accidentally found the technology of the "mirror", Song Cheng would certainly become a victim. His superiors, the law enforcers broke the law and committed the bribery. The powers and duties that the law gave him was to protect the people, yet became the convenient tools and protective umbrella for him to do illegal things. Lu Wenming, secretary of the Provincial Discipline Inspection Commission, also forgot the sacred duties and became an accomplice of corrupt officials. The deputy-level post recruitment doctoral form is in the form, the procuratorate and the anti-corruption bureau treat the case differently. The news media lacks understanding of the legal elements, but is greatly touted. The journalist's occupation is the first loss, the relationship network, the human network, the corruption network to the society. Deep penetration, and so on, corruption of the entire society, all show the appearance of careful observation and criticism. Because of the existence of the mirror, their crimes cannot be hidden anymore and they got their due finals in the end. *The Mirror* closely combines the anti-corruption and detective theme in reality with the high-tech physical fantasy, not only showing superb sci-fi creativity, but also reflecting the current social problems and concerns, which resembles the writing pattern of 1984.

In the imaginary future society in 1984, the dictator pursues power as the ultimate goal, humanity is completely killed by power, freedom is completely deprived, and thoughts are severely restrained. 1984 is set in Oceania, the world divided into three superpowers—the Oceanic States, the Eurasian States, and the East Asian countries. This three-power division of the world was based on an ideologically determined balance of power, with all three forces keeping similar totalitarian political structures and social class. The war between the three countries continued, the internal social structure of the country was completely broken, and all of them were highly centralized, changing history and changing language such as creating "Newspeak", breaking the family and other extreme means to clamp people's thoughts and instincts, using the "telescreen" monitoring and controlling people's behavior. According to Deutscher, Orwell drew upon specific events of the Second World War, and especially the "Yalta conference" [3], in that Orwell was "convinced that Stalin, Churchill, and Roosevelt consciously plotted to divide the world, and to divide it for good, among themselves, and to subjugate it

in common." [4] This proves that Orwell is apparently making the argument that totalitarian in any form is wrong no matter what the political pattern is. Besides the political settings, there remains another similar factor in both stories, that is surveillance.

2.2. The Writing of Surveillance in Two Novels

Surveillance is an important commonality between the two novels.

For the hero of 1984, if there is one constant in the life of Winston Smith, it must be surveillance. From morning until night the "eyes" of Big Brother watched him for the poster is anywhere. Besides, the whole society is under the surveillance of the "telescreens", the instrument that simultaneously receives and sends information about the party and observing the individual's every move. The eyes of telescreen are always following you whenever you are asleep or awake, working or eating, indoors or out of doors, in the bath or in bed, and you can never escape. There are few or no sites in which one can totally avoid from this kind of relenting surveillance. The only thing that can avoid cruel scrutiny is "only a few cubic centimeters in your skull" [5]. But you can not totally trust your brain for you will be in danger if you don't pay attention to disguise your expression and let your thoughts wander when you were in any public place or within range of telescreen. Every smallest thing could give you away even a nervous tic, an unconscious look of anxiety or a habit of muttering to yourself—all those things that seems to be abnormal should be hidden. In any case, to wear an improper expression on your face was itself a punishable offense, which is a called "facecrime" [5] in Newspeak. That's why Winston and Julia need to find a place like refugee in the "Golden Country", where Winston and Julia could meet and have a love affair. But soon, At the end of the novel, Winston, and his lover Julia are arrested in their secret hiding place by the Thought Police who have been observing them from a hidden telescreen. Winston and Julia's being arrested proved that their refugee was not that safe and they seemed to be unable to escape from the surveillance. Why does a country take no pre-emption action while it is so obsessed with surveillance? The answer may once again lie in the special and contradictory functions of power, which cleared the boundaries between permits and prohibition, law and illegality, normality and abnormality that violate their own simultaneously producing desired criminals.

In *The Mirror*, there is also a kind of surveillance technology called computer simulation technology, which can reflect reality like a mirror can do. The superstring computer operation in this paper is powerful enough to simulate the creation of different universes and all the things in the future. Therefore, the model of the universe we are in is also simulated, using this model, the past and the future will be exposed to the people who control the computer just like being mirrored, the world is finally transparent, and all darkness will have nowhere to hide.

In the mirror era, the mirror technique was firstly only applied to the judiciary, and then penetrated into every corner of social life. But gradually, human society developed more and more slowly to the final stagnation. The first thing that was stagnant was culture for humanity was as pure as a clear water and there was nothing to describe and express, so literature and then the whole human art stagnated and disappeared. Next, science and technology have also fallen into complete stagnation. In the end, the earth was exhausted and the land was desertified. Human beings still have no technical ability to carry out space immigration, and they have no ability to develop new resources. 5,000 years later, everything has slowly ended. It is the mirror that caused the world's destruction. The basis of the evolution of life, mutation, is precisely caused by DNA errors. The same is true of society. Its evolution and vitality are based on the impulses and desires that deviate from the main line of morality. There is no fish in the clear water, so a society that never fails morally is actually dead.

In this way we can see, as technological tools for surveillance, the role of both the "telescreen" and the "mirror" are to monitor some people to achieve a desired purpose to prevent "crimes", under this purpose, the two ones are constantly working and cannot be switched off without permission of someone.

2.3. The Differences Between Two Novels on Surveillance

The mirror reflects a real world, in this way, everything is transparent and nothing can escape from its recording, thus creating a transparent world where the evil can not be hidden. All human beings will face a mirror, everyone's every move can be accurately found in the mirror. No crime can be hidden. Every sinful person will inevitably face the final judgment. It is "an era without darkness" and the sun will shine everywhere, so that human society will turn to be as clear as crystal. There, all the fog that hangs over history and reality will be the only important thing. Everything, no matter in the light or in the dark, in the past or at present, will be naked in the broad daylight. In that world, light and darkness will have to go on an unprecedented big duel, which lead the world to fall into chaos. But the final result is a bright victory. Do you know where the power of darkness comes from? It comes from the darkness, that is, the concealment from it. Once exposed to the light, its power disappears, such as corruption, and so on. And your mirror is the glare that completely exposes all darkness.

And in 1984, for Orwell, a totalitarian system predicated on surveillance also served to maintain discipline. Written in the 1930s and 1940s, Orwell came to an age to be clearly aware of the two totalitarian movements how to bring about direct threat to personal freedom by fascism and Stalinism. "The Nightmare of 1984" made an imagination of the complete victory and realization of totalitarianism in an unfree, unequal and unloving society.

Orwell, however, realized the extent to which capitalism undermined individual freedom. The poor are not free, and they certainly do not have the same right to self-determination as the rich. But it's not that judicial and transparent, besides, it's not as objective as the "mirror".

Within the spaces of 1984 surveillance produces a highly disciplined, ranked society. While in 1984, Orwell's concerns regarding the abuse of power, the denial of self, and the eradication of both past and future continue to "resonate" in contemporary discussions of politics and society [6]. In this totalitarian society, people's history can be erased. Not only human's death, but also social death can be removed without remains. Thus, in 1984, it was of crucial importance for exercising power and regulating society to control knowledge and even history. Winston, working in Truth Records Department, is very proficient in this process for one of his main jobs is to rewrite history and change "facts". However, the most incredible thing for him is complete control over the past as if the party hold the past in hand.

There is another important feature of telescreen that the mirror does not have, that is the randomness of the surveillance.

As Strub elaborates on this state, although the state has extensive surveillance and police resources, the arrests seem to be "randomly" and therefore cannot be done in a "certain" place or time [7]. And Orwell described, "there was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment." [5] When and how often or on what system would Thought Police switch to anyone's wire was guesswork. This also illustrates another thing that the telescreen is not always working. And Orwell mentioned that it can also be artificially switched off when Winston and Julia visit O'Brien. This is also a strong evidence proves that the means of surveillance is serving for the totalitarian class. But for the mirror, this kind of surveillance is worse than saying that it just constrains the privileged class.

3. CONCLUSION

Back to the question of title: is there a place without darkness under surveillance? The answer could be clear: no, at least in the two novels, surveillance failed to wipe out darkness. A mechanically completely transparent social form cannot exist, at least in the human world. In addition, logically speaking, the computing power required by this technology is infinite, and the computer with such ability also has a total amount of material, so it is impossible for computer to calculate unlimited data, let alone predict the future. The gap of ability and reality always exists.

In 1984, Winston had once thought of the relationship between O'Brien and him, and he was not sure if anyone had said "we shall meet in the place where there is no darkness" [5] to him. Ironically, when he was arrested and detained in the prison of Ministry of Love, where was windowless and surrounded with "glittering porcelain" [5], he met O'Brien, who was to give him a trial. This might

not be a bright end for him. And in *The Mirror*, the extinction of the whole human society also shows that the future in that world is not that bright as it supposed to be. The disillusioning realization is the two novels was not a science fiction prophecy but a powerful warning of the danger to human freedom inherent in the use of technology to achieve and maintain political power.

Goodman argues that evidence suggests Orwell is correct in predicting: the growth of totalitarian regimes, the appearance of Double-think, a “denial of objective reality,” communication in a form of Newspeak, a delicate “rewriting” of history, Big Brother cults, continuous warfare, breakup of families, erosion of personal privacy, and an increase in public hangings[8]. 1984 is a scorpion of the future story, which is aimed to express popular forms of emotion mainly related to contemporary society. This can be seen as the myth of cultural defense that a few people resist the new barbarians. George Orwell often considers himself to be one of the few cultural guardians.

Although Liu Cixin thinks that perspecting reality and dissecting humanity is not the task of science fiction, the creation of *The Mirror* is still fiction that is tightly linked with reality. It shows new sci-fi creativity that can satisfy some unconventional reading effects. In reflecting the depth and breadth of reality, science fiction works can reach the level of mainstream literature. The author thinks that excellent science fiction does not need to work in reality, but it makes the reality clearer. Science fiction literature does not distance itself from reality.

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