



The Bizarre World of Totalitarianism: Defamiliarization in Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*

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Abstract. Yevgeny Ivanovich Zamyatin (Евгений Иванович Замятин) (1884.02.01-1937.03.10) He is a writer living in silver age of Soviet Union. He is a ship engineer as well. He stands among the writers with the greatest influence laid in Soviet literature after the October Revolution. He is famous in literati circle for his colloquial narrative style and humorous irony. *We* (мы) was completed in 1921, but it was disapproved and banned by the Soviet government. *We* was only publicly published in Soviet Union in 1988. It is a dystopia literature. *We* addresses the ills of totalitarianism. In the form of notes and records, the book dramatizes the life and mentality of various people in a highly digitalized, centrally governed "One State" from the perspective of a model citizen living in a future world. The writing style of *We* directly influenced the later *1984* and *Brave New World* and created the genre of dystopia literature. *We* was written in 1921. And the Moscow Linguistic Circle was founded as early as 1915. It was also the year of the birth of Russian formalist theory. The two has got a certain nexus. In Russian formalist theory, "defamiliarization" is one of the most important tools in the study of literature and art. This essay will demonstrate how *We* used "defamiliarization" to make these aspects - narrative style, names and personalities, objects - distinctive and artistic. The essay is based on Hugh Aplin's translation.

Keywords: Yevgeny Zamyatin, Dystopia We, defamiliarization.

1 Introduction

Yevgeny Zamyatin, in full Yevgeny Ivanovich Zamyatin, (born February 1, 1884, Lebedyan, Tambov province, Russia—died March 10, 1937, Paris, France), Russian novelist, playwright, and satirist, one of the most brilliant and cultured minds of the postrevolutionary period and the creator of a uniquely modern genre—the anti-Utopian or dystopia novel. His influence as an experimental stylist and as an exponent of the cosmopolitan-humanist traditions of the European intelligentsia was very great in the earliest and most creative period of Soviet literature. Educated in St. Petersburg as a naval engineer (1908), Zamyatin combined his scientific career with writing. His epic work later *We* was heavily influenced by formalism which was founded by Moscow Linguistic Circle in 1915 which agreed that literature could (and should) be studied in a scientific manner.

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His most ambitious work, the novel *We*, circulated in manuscript but was not published in the Soviet Union until 1988 (an English translation appeared in the United States in 1924, and the original Russian text was published in New York in 1952). It portrays life in the “One State”, where workers live in glass houses, have numbers rather than names, wear identical uniforms, eat chemical foods, and enjoy rationed sex. They are ruled by a “Benefactor” who is unanimously and perpetually re-elected. Often classed as science fiction, *We* is the literary ancestor of Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949).

2 Formalist Theory

The formalist theory or formalism was centre of the literary theory in Russia in the early 1900. Russian formalism is a movement in literary criticism associated with two inter-related groups of critics emerging around 1914: the members of *Opoyaz* (Society for the Study of Poetic Language) based in St. Petersburg (it is the place where Zamyatin was educated as a naval engineer) and led by Viktor Shklovsky; and the Moscow Linguistic Circle, led by Roman Jakobson and contributing their engagement with Saussure. According to Eikhenbaum, Russian formalism is an “investigation of the specific properties of literary material”. In Jakobson’s definitive formulation, quoted by Eikhenbaum: “The object of study in literary science is not literature but ‘literariness’”. Shklovsky published his essay *Art as Technique* says, “the movement if a kind of manifesto of the Formal method”.

In the aforementioned essay, *Art as Technique*, Shklovsky outlined his concept of great importance -defamiliarization in 1917. He proposed it as a general artistic technique that can be found at work throughout literature, though he concentrated on prose. He sought to address what it was about literary writing that made it literary; this then can be seen as his “formalism”. He also claims in the essay: art makes “the stone stony”. “The technique of art is to make objects unfamiliar”, to delay and impede perception with literary devices. This enables a critical attitude in the reader.

So, *We*, written by Zamyatin in the year when Russian formalism stepped onto the stage and “danced”, clearly embedded traces of formalism everywhere through a serial art technique or literary devices – the tools of defamiliarization. *We* has applied so many literary devices to make familiar objects into something unfamiliar to readers to achieve an artistic and aesthetic effect. Readers encounter a load of obstacles to perceive that and will enjoy an extended enjoyment of *We* because the artistic results are brought up by defamiliarization. Even names of characters, despite the fact that they consist of simple letters and numbers, are defamiliarized as each name is rendered in a special way that help us grab characters’ personalities. So, the next part is going to talk about how these literary devices “defamiliarize” *We*.

3 Narrative Style

The narrative style of *We* is note or record. *We* contains 40 records. It is narrated in the first person by a philosopher-mathematician, Δ-503, who has had pretensions of becoming a poet in the past.

This first person view and the record style is first way to defamiliarize the discourse as it seems to be told by a diary written by a person. The form equips the whole discourse an ability to immerse readers into the story full of things that have not yet existed in the reality which makes them difficult to be understood. “Distributed cognition accounts of immersion in fiction and in real world are closely associated with defamiliarization.”^[1] *We* states objects that are new and unfamiliar to the readers and the first-person record draws or pulls the readers into the unfamiliar world. The pen and words of Δ-503 are the eyes of our readers to see the defamiliarized, curious the One State world.

There’s an analogy. It’s just like us playing a first-person VR game. They all apply first person because it intensifies horror effect. Compared with the third-person games, first-person ones are more efficient to have players scared. In first-person games, we are the operators of the characters. We see things through eyes, not from the sky or from behind. So, the first person can achieve a greater effect of “immersion”. It’s the same with *We*. It is now the One State and vicissitudes there and then in the year unknown that we readers are seeing, witnessing and experiencing on our own.

The first-person narration itself is not unfamiliar to readers. Countless novels with first-person narration are passed from readers’ eyes to others. Nevertheless, the first-person view in *We* escalates readers’ “immersion” activity and make readers “a sympathetic and unwittingly perceptive observer of his world”.^[2] We can pull out the “horizon merger” theory to explain that. Gadamer emphasizes the horizons between readers and the discourse in front of their eyes – horizon merging. They should maintain a proper distance or a gap. Not too close, not too far. And the gap between readers and the discourse will be fulfilled by reader’s interpretation to merge the horizon. Then, hermeneutic circle will be completed. That’s what exactly the first-person narration of *We* is doing. The first person, or, we can affirm to say, this sort of defamiliarization of narration, takes readers’ horizons to the front of Δ-503 or, we can also say, *We*’s horizon. And the distance between these two is fair. Not too far because *We* borrows things readers know in daily life, which are readable and can be recognised. For instance, letters like Δ, I, S, R; nouns like Integral, Benefactor, *We*, etc are recognised by and familiar to readers. However, the distance between these two horizons is not too close because letters and nouns previously mentioned are given with particular meanings and context that readers are not familiar. The reader will think in their mind: is this One State familiar to us or similar to the reality? The answer is a clear no.

So, it needs act of reading as Wolfgang Iser has proposed to make that gap closer and merge the horizon. But the distance cannot be too far or remote. Remember defamiliarization is completed because it makes familiar things not familiar. If *We* uses second-person or third-person narration to present the world full of objects that people 1920s would never imagine and were completely unfamiliar with, though they would be clear and objective, the distance between readers’ horizons and the discourse’s

horizon would be exceedingly remote, which means events and things in the novel would be harder to be apprehended, harder to be understood. Then it is not defamiliarization. It's "utterly-un-familiarization". Interpretation may not go on fluently. Hermeneutic circle won't be accomplished. So, it is crucial that the first-person diary or record brings readers' horizons to the We's and defamiliarizes readers' horizons to maintain a proper gap or distance in-between. We manages to crush the readers original thought of reality and make them "enter" the One State to experience with Δ-503.

Then, Δ-503 alternates present and past tense as he explains his situation or various cultural items to his imagined readers and actual events that have befallen him in the period between diary entries. The purpose of the diary is to help denizens of other planets to accept allegiance to the One State and adopt its uniform way of life. However, it is the intention of the record, not the exact end of the record. Through the record, we have seen the dramatic change of Δ-503. Loyalty- suspicion – have a soul – rebellion – brainwashed and loyal again. So, it all backs to the original point, like a circle. But through the last description of the One State, we have known that the One State may fall. It is in chaos then. So, the style of record not only defamiliarizes the world in reality, but also defamiliarizes the traditional style. It's a circle, an uneven circle as Δ-503 has made so many surprises during his journey "through his record". In the beginning, he is a firm follower of the Benefactor. And he will never expect that he will suspect himself and the One State in the future. When he suspects, he doesn't expect that he will have a soul and rebel against the Benefactor later. And when he rebels, he knows he may be punished but doesn't predict that he will be brainwashed. These surprises, un-expectations of Δ-503 or the plot also surprise us constantly. This is the exact the effect of record style – truthfulness, brought by defamiliarization.

4 Names and Bodies of Characters

A special word needs to be said about the "names" of the personages in the book and the way they have been rendered as they defamiliarize our normal concept of names. The names work as forms that reflect character's bodies and personalities, as Zoë Roth ^[3] argued, "Form molds elements into an outward shape whose organic wholeness retains a close connection to the figure of the body."

All inhabitants of the One State are known by a letter (vowels for women, constants for men). What is certain is that in the Russian text, the names were from various alphabets: I, S and R are from the Latin, Д, Ф and Ю from the Cyrillic, as the other two are from the Greek -Δ and Φ; the final letter used, O, is common to all these three alphabets.

S-4711 is for a long time the most ambiguous character of them all, a member of the One State's secret police, yet possibly also associated with its opponents; nonetheless, the decoding of his name is perhaps the most straightforward. His letter reflects his physical form and his serpentine nature; the letter is, furthermore, the chemical symbol for sulphur, traditionally associated with the Devil and hell. But his malodorous, dangerous essence is belied by the 4711, recalling the celebrated brand of eau de Cologne

known by that name from the 1880s onwards. Finally, he is also reminiscent of the mathematical \int , the symbol for integration, a consistent motif throughout the book.

The narrator's childhood friend R-13 is a poet, whose "Negroid lips" immediately link him for the Russian reader with Pushkin. The letter P (rho)- which, back in the Latin alphabet, is Pushkin's initial letter. Also, the R is a mirror image of the Russian letter Я (ya)- which means "I". Hence R-13 can be seen as the opposite of the first-person narrator, or as an alter ego, his other half, the poetic antithesis to his mathematical self.

The fact that both narrator and R-13 have sexual relations with O-90, thus forming an triangle explicitly referred to in the novel. That's why the narrator's number has got an triangle: Δ . Also, Δ has a significant mathematical meaning: it represents the difference operator, effecting a change or difference between mathematical values – and thus has come by extension to represent change in general, on medical charts, for example. Δ does give more mathematical interest up to our narrator of the records as a mathematician. Then, as the novel unfolds, the import of this meaning of change rapidly becomes evident to the reader. Abovementioned chain: loyalty- suspicion – have a soul – rebellion – brainwashed and loyal again is the change of Δ -503.

Not only is Δ -503 engaged in an initial sexual triangle with R-13 and O-90, he quickly becomes involved in a second and more complex one when the seductive I-330 appears in his life. She could not be more different to the comfortable O-90, whose whole being is epitomized by the roundness of her name. I-300, as well as being another antithetical alter ego "I" for the first-person narrator, has the same stinging effect as the iodine that the letter I stands for in chemistry; she is as sharp of the letter; and its phallic form is, moreover, suggestive of her "masculine", assertive nature, to which all the men around her are "femininely" subservient. Not that the ideological importance of her female antithesis, O-90, should therefore be undervalued. Her letter is, after all, the universal one, common to all the alphabets involved in the novel; it is the chemical symbol of the element oxygen, vital for life; it is the round shape of the world and the shape of the never-ending line of eternity- all features related to her life-affirming quality. And it is tempting to interpret her number visually too, the spermatozoon of the 9, and the 0 of the egg reflecting her desire for motherhood and the continuation of humankind, no matter what the cost. The 330 associated with I might be seen as recalling the date of the foundation of Constantinople, a rival to the dominant power of Rome; but it could equally be regarded as another visual signal, the representation of female erogenous zones, to emphasize the importance of sex in human life and its ability to undermine the rational.

The novel's third woman, IO, can be seen to be a combination of the other two women, I and O; sure enough, both the maternal instinct and the sexual instinct are aroused in her by her dealings with Δ -503.

The one other named character never actually makes an appearance, but is discovered by the narrator as his rival in another triangle with I-330 (who has also had sexual relations with R-13 and others), this is Φ , who, like IO, is given no number. Another visual combination of the I and O, but this time linked, not separated, the letter is perhaps suggestive of sexual union, and gives a hint of the true nature of I-330's always ambiguous relations with the narrator Δ -503, the mathematician-engineer obsessed by

the power of the rational; for the lower-case version of the letter is the symbol for the golden ratio and symmetrical shape, used for centuries by artists and architects in endowing their designs with pleasing proportions. Such symmetry is reflective of “the symmetry of our bodies and our environments” as Turner pointed out ^[4]. and his number would therefore be impossible to give, for the golden ratio is an example of that bane of Δ -503’s life – the irrational number.

Based on abovementioned analytical interpretation on the nexus between respective name and the personality each according character contain, we actually should not underestimate the artistic effect defamiliarization has created in the We. Even petty names that we all know and are familiar to us; that are composed of letters and numbers can in fact trouble us understanding the personalities of characters in the novel without a thorough analysis and an effortful interpretation. So, it prolongs our perception of the aesthetic effect of this novel, which is one of the effects of defamiliarization of We.

5 Objects and Totalitarianism

This part will analyse the objects of several “defamiliarized” objects and explore totalitarianism taste in them.

First, we must acquaint ourselves with totalitarianism. Totalitarianism is a concept for a form of government or political system that prohibits opposition parties, restricts individual opposition to the state and its claims, and exercises an extremely high degree of control over public and private life. A totalitarian regime is an ideocracy which has not yet reached the aims implied by its supreme values, and which tries to pursue them with the spiritual and secular power available after it has gained domination of a state.

In this novel, the One State, apparently, practices totalitarianism over its people (or numbers) by highlighting the concept of “we”. “I shall merely attempt to record what I see, what I think – more precisely, what we think”. “And I – we, a group of four, are one of the countless waves in this mighty stream. To my left, O-90 (if it had been one of my hairy ancestors writing these a thousand years or so ago, he would probably have referred to her with this ridiculous word “my”) ...” The concept “we” has been defamiliarized for the purpose of constructing the ideocracy of the totalitarian One State. We talk, do, think as One. We are one. This concept has eliminated individual characters for the sake of totalitarianism. So, “we” is no longer the concepts of a collective of people and “one” an individual that readers use daily advertently or inadvertently; that are familiar to readers because when it comes to differences, “I”, “You” are preferable. In the One State, differences between people are not allowed to be stressed and be talked about because we are one. “It’s because nobody is ‘one alone’, but ‘one of’. We’re so identical...” However, the collective uniformity is illusionary. “Although the One State’s transparent architecture produces a sense of unity, it actually divides the numbers with innumerable glass walls” ^[5]. Δ -503 assumes that all residents submit themselves to official ideology as everybody lives in accordance with the Time Tablet. In fact, he was surprised at O-90’s divergence from the One State’s orthodoxy. The psychological differences inside residents still exist, which sow the seeds of the betrayal at the end of the story. Therefore, “we” and the country’s name “the One State” are

defamiliarized to achieve a greater artistic effect: directly expose what totalitarian regime is like.

So is the dominator of the One State – the Benefactor. According to the dictionary, a benefactor is “a person who gives money or other help to a person or an organization such as a school or charity”, who is supposed to have nothing to do with totalitarian dominance. Clearly, here this term is defamiliarized. The Benefactor practices ideocracy that everybody is happy in the One State. “He is power that brings happiness through the destruction of freedom.”^[6] It is his totalitarian regime that brings happiness; it is his design to make everything in the One State “mathematical” that brings happiness. So, he orders to build the rocket “Integral”. It will soar up into the outer space. “A feat still more glorious falls to you: to integrate by means of the glass, electric, fire-breathing INTEFRAL the endless equation of the universe. It falls to you to subordinate to the beneficent yoke of reason the unknown beings living other planets, possibly still in the savage state of freedom. If they do not understand that we bring them mathematically infallible happiness, it is our duty to force them to be happy.” So, the Benefactor makes every number (people) in the One State “happy”. He also wants to make beings outside the planet “happy”, too. How “beneficent” he is. No wonder he gives him the title “Benefactor”. However, the fact that he practices totalitarianism which controls residents in every way seems hardly beneficent.

This book is pervaded by mathematics. The rocket’s name is “Integral”. People in the country are called with numbers. Nearly, every record written is accompanied by several terms in mathematics like “X”, “THE IRRATIONAL ROOT”, “A TWO-DIMENSIONAL SHADOW”, etc. That denotes the defamiliarization of mathematics in the novel. The One State is highly mathematical country which believes mathematics, rationality, reason can bring happiness to the whole “we”. Also, each person is numbered, not named, which symbolizes the loss of individuality. So, in this novel, mathematics is defamiliarized for ideocracy.

6 Defamiliarization of Bodies and Spaces

In Zamyatin’s *We*, the alienation impressively rises from the very harsh bodily and spatial regulations under a totalitarian regime which the novel depicts. The novel points out the use of certain means like glass architecture, standardized uniforms, and public rituals that distort the person’s relations with his own body and the spaces he/she lives in, thus, isolating the person more. These means show the method of totalitarianism, which does not stop at changing the people’s deeds but changes their very perception of themselves and the world around them as well.

Transparent society which is all-seeing is the main idea behind the glass architecture in *We*. The buildings constructed out of glass in OneState stand for the total stripping off of people’s privacy and individuality. Comparing the very openness of these buildings which leave no way for any deed or any man to escape the watchful eye, to the panopticon described by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*^[7], proves that what is represented by the glass structures is just a modern version of the panopticon. The panopticon is the place where people are in the constant feeling of possibly being

watched, thus leading them to the ultimate control and behavior modification by the state, which they themselves now have to enforce. Similar to this, the glass architecture in *We*, guarantees that even under the watchful eye of a glass building, a person's private space does not exist and there are no places for the individual to hide and be him/herself. The architecture itself turns into a device for disciplining, a never-ceasing sign that the individual's body is not the individual's own but a part of the big state machine.

The uniform exemplified by the *yuny* is one point that not only estranges the body from the personal identity but also alienates the body further. The *yuny*, a dull and uniform garment, is a destroyer of distinctions between individuals, and therefore it reduces humans to mere numbers within the system. This resembles the Foucault's idea of "docile bodies" that are formed by social institutions in order to be compliant to given roles. In the One State society, the uniformity of outward appearance is the reason why human bodies are not distinguishable from one another, thus, the totalitarian society which has suppressed the individual desires and identities for the sake of collective conformity is mirrored in that. The *yuny* isn't just a wear; it's a concrete example of the totalitarian regime's domination over the body, reinforcing the subjugation of personal autonomy.

The use of public rituals like synchronized marching and daily routines which are in accordance with the Table of Hours to show how the body is controlled in space through these rites is the next point made by this essay. These rituals turn the people into machines in terms of their movements, thus depriving their bodies of any voluntary actions and making them only the executors of discipline. Using phrases typical of Foucault, one might say that these rituals create the "disciplinary society" where every feature of the individual's life is under strict control, including the individual's physical actions and even thoughts. In the novel, characters are under the strict control of performing in public in such a way as to demonstrate order, and as a consequence, personal freedom gets almost non-existent. The bodily rituals, joined by the glass walls and uniforms, serve as instruments for the state to take the last remaining portion of the body, that which still belonged to the individual, and transform it into mere functions of the state.

The operation of alienating the body and controlling the space in this way is the highlight of the totalitarian regime's message that they do not want to control only the people's actions but also their very perception of reality. The individual no longer has the privilege of free navigation within his/her own body or space. Instead, his/her movements are under control, his/her body is exposed to close watch, and his/her space is nothing but a trifling extension of the state's authority. Taking into consideration Foucault's views, we find that the alienation is done with the aim of creating 'docile bodies' which can be controlled and manipulated with ease.

Therefore, in the novel *We*, the transparent architecture, the uniformed garments, and the public ceremonies are means of estrangement that the dictators use. With these means they tighten the control of the regime over the body and space in the most absolute way, thus the people become to realize all the time their position in the social hierarchy. The outcome is a society in which human beings are deprived of their personalities, are transformed into bodies which are under the control of the authorities and are regulated, and these bodies exist only to satisfy the needs of the state. The

disempowerment of the body and the confinement of space are the main factors through which one can comprehend the operation of totalitarianism in Zamyatin's dystopia, and these factors are a very frightening depiction of how power can determine and dominate the core of human life.

7 Conclusion

We is a one of the perfect model to use formalism to interpret a certain discourse since We has practised the defamiliarization of the Russian formalism with skills. "His work helps us to understand this period of Russian literature and history and serves as a broader lesson for humanity." (Durst, 2020) Through a thorough analysis, we can easily see the artistic effect and beauty of literature in the glimpse of We. We has done so much innovation because of such a great defamiliarization. It gives us an unfamiliar book name as We; it gives us an unfamiliar narrative style; it gives us an unfamiliar way to render characters' names; it gives us unfamiliar objects to show totalitarian regime and his criticisms over the Soviet Union's governance.

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