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## How “Interested” Criticism Fueled the Formulation of Nineteen Eighty-Four’s Cultural Afterlife

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HOW “INTERESTED” CRITICISM FUELED THE FORMULATION OF  
*NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR’S* CULTURAL AFTERLIFE

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
English

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by  
John Cameron Bosch  
December 2021

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Accepted by:  
Dr. Gabriel Hankins, Committee Chair  
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## Abstract

George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* carries a "cultural afterlife" as a result of "interested" criticism, which has a set political/practical barometer or motive. While everyone agrees that the novel presents a frightening dystopia, many also consider it a prophetic piece that illuminates the possible corruption of executive power of a nation thanks to this cultural afterlife; the modern and popular term "Orwellian" resulted from these sorts of analyses and have only escalated in the years since its inception. As a result, within the past decade, multiple scholars, analysts, and journalists have referenced Orwell's novel as a factual representation of this executive power left unchecked, bolstering it as a warning and emphasizing the need to preserve the rights of both free speech and privacy. This sort of criticism became rampant during the era of the Snowden Trials (2013–15) and has not slowed down since. Comparisons and analyses like these could digress into a discussion of some other sociopolitical idea rather than *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the novel, which Orwell argued against. Orwell himself could be classified as a "disinterested" critic, shedding light on the interested criticism performed by the Party and presenting the manipulation and opportunism on display in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. This style of critique is not void of politics or even motivation, in fact, quite the opposite, but his presentation of the fictional texts' use and abuse within the novel is highly reflective of the interested criticism that I just described regarding Snowden. I aim to accomplish a disinterested, Orwellian criticism of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* versus "1984" that is still inherently political, with a focus on the Snowden revelations after 2013.

## **Dedication**

To the ones who provided me the opportunities,  
the motivation that pushed me onward,  
and the lessons that shaped me.

Thanks for getting me here.

Sorry it took so long.

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## ***Nineteen Eighty-Four's Cultural Afterlife***

*Nineteen Eighty-Four: A Novel* (often published as *1984*) was released in 1949 to critical acclaim, its broad and overarching themes of surveillance, privacy, censorship, and absolute power corrupting absolutely resonating with millions to this day. And the influence that this novel has over conversations of government power, primarily in America, cannot be emphasized enough. Seldom can Americans discuss anything regarding executive power without *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or Orwell being brought up in some form or fashion. However, while many believe they discuss *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, they instead discuss “1984,” the novel’s cultural image generated within a certain period. They are not the same, nor are they interchangeable, and various journalists and scholars end up conflating a novel as a fortune teller. One must know the distinctions between *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the novel or “1984” the cultural image to understand how the relationship between the two has ended up influencing modern political discourse.

My argument here looks at the idea of criticism building on philosopher Immanuel Kant and critic Matthew Arnold: “**disinterested criticism.**” Kant coins the term “disinterestedness” in *Critique of Judgment* (1790). He begins by clarifying what makes something beautiful or agreeable: “This is why we say of the agreeable not merely that we *like* it but that it *gratifies* us. When I speak of the agreeable, I am not granting mere approval: the agreeable produces an inclination” (Kant, 432). In essence, calling something “agreeable” rather than “beautiful” means the critique comes from outside of what is being judged, which is the *opposite* of disinterestedness, where “we are not compelled to give our approval by any interest, whether of sense or of reason” (Kant,

434). Furthermore, one can *like* something beautiful, but it does not necessarily need to *gratify* them in any way, for “if a judgment about beauty is mingled with the least interest then it is very partial and not a pure judgment of taste” (Kant, 429).

Arnold expands this idea into the realms of criticism in “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time” (1864). Here, he looks into “interestedness” and how one can utilize it to fulfill some sort of purpose or achieve a certain goal:

Ideas cannot be too much prized in and for themselves, cannot be too much lived with; but to transport them abruptly into the world of politics and practice, violently to revolutionise [sic] this world to their bidding, — that is quite another thing. (Arnold, 689)

This point illuminates how disinterestedness and interestedness differ, and why Arnold opposes the latter. He does not necessarily say that criticism must only be for criticism’s sake, but he pushes for disinterested criticism, for he points out that far too often, many utilize interested criticism for some sort of gain:

And how is criticism to show disinterestedness? By keeping aloof from what is called ‘the practical view of things’; ...By steadily refusing to lend itself to any of those ulterior, political, practical considerations about ideas which plenty of people will be sure to attach to them, ...but which criticism really has nothing to do with. (Arnold 692)

In essence, looking and analyzing practically anything through the lens of “practical considerations” or ideas that have a set barometer or idea outside of itself can limit or even negate the criticism of the work in place of ulterior/political/practical motivations.

Those who fish out the “good” and “agreeable” do not interpret the “beautiful,” for the subjectivity of “beautiful” does not allow for any sort of ulterior/political/practical gain, but the objectivity of what is “good” or “agreeable” can.

My interest in disinterestedness, so to speak, came from an unlikely source: Twitter. In January of 2021 Incumbent Senator of Missouri Josh Hawley’s publisher, Simon & Schuster, cut ties with him by refusing to publish his latest work, leading to them canceling his contract with them. He addresses the “woke mob at @simonschuster”, saying that their actions “could not be more Orwellian” and “a direct assault on the First Amendment” (Hawley). In the same month, former First Son Donald Trump Jr. retweeted Bloomberg reporter Jennifer Jacobs, who posted her story on Former President Trump’s Twitter ban: “We are living Orwell’s 1984. Free-speech [sic] no longer exists in America. It died with big tech and what’s left is only there for a chosen few.” Hawley and Trump Jr.’s respective tweets prompted *The New York Times*’ Jennifer Szalai to delve into this throwing around of Orwell’s work, as well as other terms and plot beats from the novel to suit certain political ideologies. In Szalai’s article “How ‘Orwellian’ Became an All-Purpose Insult,” she targets Hawley and Trump Jr., specifically:

You don’t need to have read “1984” to grasp why someone is calling something Orwellian, even if you disagree with the assessment. But someone who hasn’t read the book may be more susceptible to the manipulation of the term. Hawley, Trump Jr., and others on the right deploy the word to complain about “cancel culture,” but the novel itself isn’t so much a treatise on free speech absolutism as

it is a warning about the degradation of language and the potency of lethal propaganda. (Szalai)

The adjective “Orwellian” resulted from these sorts of comparisons between the novel and the current political climate, thus the novel becomes “an all-purpose epithet, a go-to accusation” against ideological opponents (Szalai). “Orwellian,” in the eyes of Hawley and Trump Jr., describes an opposing force (usually political) that exercises some sort of force or rule against their cause or argument: “But the periodic invocations of ‘Orwellian’ generally have less to do with the specifics of the text than with the writer’s noble sheen — Orwell as a stalwart man of the left who was never seduced by the extremes of either side” (Szalai).

The overuse of the term “Orwellian” (a dying metaphor, according to Orwell himself) indicates that *Nineteen Eighty-Four*’s influence has gone beyond the confines of some cautionary tale in a uniquely frightening dystopian nation; this, in turn, builds upon “1984,” which becomes a powerful tool and adjectival figure used for many purposes. The comparisons made by Hawley and Trump Jr. do not necessarily correlate current events with *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. They instead use the novel to shape their opinion on recent events and developments as objective beyond their political parties, rather than the other way around, by presenting rather basic correlations as an indication of factual evidence of things to come. They generate yet another interpretation of “1984” rather than *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In this case, “1984” presents a morose image of America that could easily come to pass. According to them.

Outside of Trump Jr. and Hawley’s readings, many accomplished journalists and critics exhibit this very type of “interested” criticism in that their judgments of the novel come purely from a place of practical application. Some of them present that they are motivated by the very “ulterior motive” that Arnold describes. But do these tweets exhibit interested criticism? Well, one must keep in mind that preventing any sort of modern cultural aspects from seeping into the various analyses of practically every piece of art in existence remains a futile effort. An analysis of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* published in 2021 can stick to the themes, characters, and time when Orwell penned it as close as it possibly can, but the culture surrounding the analysis’ formation will shape it, this very thesis just another one of these analyses among thousands. With this in mind, the ties that Orwell creates between the reality of 1949 and the reflection of that reality within the text itself generate a unique opportunity of engaging with the politics of any era. That makes practically *any* sort of criticism political. The difference lies with how many utilize politics when crafting the critique. The politics that surrounds the novel only *inspires* disinterested criticism, whereas interested criticism is *shaped* by the politics of the era. In other words, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* can inspire how we perceive modern politics, while “1984” shapes how modern politics and the novel tie together.

One can argue that Szalai demonstrates how politics inspired her thoughts on the novel’s themes, which means that her idea of “1984” does not necessarily come from the novel. While introducing the controversy that resulted in this article, she writes that the “voter integrity” argument is “more Orwellian” than anything that Trump Jr. or Hawley argue because it relies on the disenfranchisement of minorities (Szalai). Now, she may

not explicitly say “the voter integrity argument reflects an ‘Orwellian’ mindset” as they have, but she subtly applies a very modern political issue to the novel. No matter the accuracy, the validity, the intention, or the subtlety, she presents her idea of “1984” in this article, as they posted their ideas of it on Twitter. But labeling the comparison here interested is dishonest because she does not explicitly emphasize that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* predicts or even alludes to voter integrity. This one basic association does not explain how “1984” takes shape thanks to actions presented in the novel, nor does it claim that events of the novel will, definitively, happen. Szalai accurately points out that “Hawley was taking part in the long tradition of invoking Orwell’s name as a cudgel for settling scores and scoring points,” which is not her intention here. She only highlights that voter integrity reflects an “Orwellian” idea, a term that she refutes as overused anyway.

Szalai’s article and numerous articles like it contribute to the actual impact that interested criticism and “Orwellian” has over modern politics. More importantly, these articles provide a look at the **cultural afterlife** of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, i.e., the work’s ongoing “life” as the sociopolitical atmosphere’s values, belief systems, etc. evolve. Journalists Pauline Mackay and Murray Pittock wrote on famed poet Robert Burns back in 2011, when “a taxonomy of private and domestic Burns-related objects produced during the same period” was discovered (150). One piece of memorabilia, a snuffbox, presents a look into the attitudes of Burns at the time compared to today, “Indeed, while Burns’s [sic] biographers often express disapproval of the poet’s masculine appetites and association with drinking culture ... souvenirs such as this [snuff box] positively

celebrate them” (Mackay and Pittock, 155). After delving into both Burns’ and Lord Byron’s histories through their memorabilia, they present this takeaway:

But we also hope that the foregoing discussion has demonstrated that, just as it is fascinating, indeed invaluable, to draw comparisons between writers and their texts, it is also valuable to examine their cultural afterlife, propelled by memorabilia, and draw comparisons between the way in which the memory of such writers manifests itself in the public consciousness and is ultimately shaped by the public’s perceptions, which themselves are often generated in dialogue with the statues and objects through which writers are commemorated. (Mackay and Pittock, 160–61)

Though they mention and discuss memorabilia here, the public perception of any kind of work — alongside the creator themselves and what they stand for during and after their time — will always have a direct influence when analyzing any of its contents.

Orwell purposefully blurs fact and fiction within the novel. He rides this line between the events presented in the novel and the ideologies that shape multiple totalitarian regimes, alongside the tragedies that resulted from their reign. This makes distinguishing *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and “1984” more difficult, but that only reiterates the importance of this distinction, especially when critics and scholars compare the novel to a standard (interested criticism) that offers a different kind of critique with a focus on the culture surrounding the work instead of the work itself. In essence, “1984” was almost built from the ground up from “interestedness.” This idea of what the novel says, what it represents, embodies this political and practical criticism of the novel *Nineteen*

*Eighty-Four*. Throughout the centuries after Arnold, there has been less and less disinterested criticism as he defined, in its place critiques and analyses that are written for the sake of some grander concept, a barometer of a specific idea, what Kant would call what is “good” (or what we esteem) (434). As I demonstrated throughout this whole section, “1984” is not *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, only a byproduct of the novel itself and its complicated history. One can call *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the novel, “beautiful”; “1984,” the concept, concludes how and why the novel is “good” and/or “agreeable” for one reason or another.

### ***Nineteen Eighty-Four’s Background***

The allegorical portrayal of a tyrannical government Orwell created in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was not only purposeful but also essential. Back in 1997, Emeritus Professor of History Phillip Deery covered why Orwell crafted the novel the way he did in his article “Confronting the Cominform: George Orwell and the Cold War Offensive of the Information Research Department, 1948–1950.” Orwell wrote the book in order “to steer an independent political course between his repudiation of Stalinism and his distaste for Capitalism,” which would require “a stable balance between public action and personal integrity,” since he didn’t want to deal with the stigma of “committing himself to the politics of change and found the personal price of public involvement too high” (Deery, 234). *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a politically motivated novel, no argument there, but the political motivation involved publishing it in Cold War Russia, a country that practiced an ideology that Orwell fundamentally and vehemently disagreed with, Stalinism.

Back when Orwell penned the novel, the Information Research Department (IRD), “the top-secret propaganda department of the British Foreign Office created in early 1948”, allied with him (Deery, 219). They shared some of the same pragmatic goals, considering “Orwell, since the late 1930s, sought socialist ends through democratic means” (Deery, 234). So, to both subtly present a totalitarian regime and avoid drawing any attention to himself concerning his political leanings, he wanted it to be as general as possible:

The concepts that went to the heart of Orwell’s thinking — his commitment to intellectual liberty, his respect for the dignity of every human being, and his understanding of the nature of power — seemed inconsistent with his willingness to expose people, not openly but in confidential notebooks. (Deery, 221)

As for the Party, the totalitarian government that acts as *Nineteen Eighty-Four*’s main source of conflict, I mentioned that he creates the fictional government with the aforementioned generalities applied to one nation, idea, or group, and Biographer D. J. Taylor confirms this in *Orwell: The Life* (2003) when he describes what Orwell’s goals when he created the Party:

Any military regime at war with its neighbours will commit acts of cruelty and spread false intelligence. A totalitarian regime does these things to sustain something integral to itself, to wield power for its own sake. As it calls into question the historical justification on which this power is based, objective knowledge must be destroyed, and the means to destroy it lie in language. (Taylor, 465)

In the above paragraph, Taylor describes the Party. Not Nazi Germany, or the USSR, or North Korea, just “The Party.” John Rodden, the Senior Editor of the journal *Society*, gives an apt description of both the novel and its purpose in his article “Warfare, from Cold to Cyber” from October 2015, “a caricature of what Orwell feared the Western democracies could become in his time” (405). Orwell succeeds in crafting a dystopia that, through vivid imagery and description, leaves no room for privacy, free will, or even the slightest indication of free-thinking; it taps into the fears of those not only in America but also many other free nations. Oceania’s setting is, to put it bluntly, an overly intrusive, soulless hellhole the millions who live within it must endure every single second of every day.

The novel takes place in a fictional setting, from one character’s perspective, Winston Smith, a citizen of Oceana, told in the third person. His intentions are undoubtedly noble: freeing himself from the shackles of the very restrictive reality that surrounds him and his fellow countrymen. His pursuit of the truth occurs under wildly different circumstances than practically any other American whistleblower and said circumstances all take place in a frightening caricature of a totalitarian government. So, when discussing the novel’s inherently political origins, Orwell himself describes his best work as political in “Why I Write,” first published in 1946:

Good prose is like a windowpane. I cannot say with certainty which of my motives are the strongest, but I know which of them deserve to be followed. And looking back through my work, I see that it is invariably where I lacked a political

purpose that I wrote lifeless books and was betrayed into purple passages, sentences without meaning, decorative adjectives and humbug generally. (Orwell)

Obviously, the work is political, but *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was never *shaped* by the politics of when it was written, but instead *inspired* by it.

The over-the-top technological advancements, haunting industrial aesthetic, and the large figurehead himself Big Brother constantly staring down at the masses cultivate an unsubtly creepy dystopia — a caricature if you will. Oceania only takes inspiration from various totalitarian countries, but it does not fully represent any specific one. Any ideological comparisons can only be tangential realistically because it does not make any explicit reference to a specific ideology, either. Is Oceania nationalistic? Communist? Fascist? The answer is yes. As I said, disinterested criticism still has a political edge to it in the sense that the politics of the time will shape the analysis, but simple historical correlations do not necessarily have to have political *motivation* despite the motivation which led to the novel's creation.

In addition, the Party practically embodies censorship, one could say to a ridiculous degree. Beyond the concept and implementation of Newspeak, they write, detail, and fabricate whatever ideas they fancy, and they can ensure the masses believe anything and everything that they want them to believe, no matter how ludicrous ( $2+2=5$ ) to solidify their absolute power. Its corruption is no secret to Winston (an employee of the Ministry of Truth) and quite a few others, so to maintain their status as a “Ministry of Truth,” they must have the most advanced security to maintain this censorship of information. Winston elaborates:

Every record has been destroyed or falsified, every book has been rewritten, every picture has been repainted, every statue and street and building has been renamed, every date has been altered. And that process is continuing day by day and minute by minute. History has stopped. Nothing exists except an endless present in which the Party is always right. (Orwell, 141)

For instance, the Party convinces Oceania which nation (Eurasia and Eastasia) they are warring with and have always warred with, depending on the Party's needs (Orwell, 37). Many would say the American government would go to war for their own interest and convince the people that war is the correct course of retaliation, and they have. But in this case, it involves eliminating entire histories, wiping them clean, with nothing else existing to challenge those histories, an impossibility even back during the novel's release. So, considering what I have written on the novel's world and plot thus far, how does any of this correlate one to one with contemporary American politics?

One can discover and root out correlations that do not necessarily rely on a political motivation; they could compare something to American politics (as Szalai did with voter integrity) rather than saying "This use of censorship is an example of tactics taken from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*" or even "This use of censorship takes inspiration from the events of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*." But the numerous comparisons made between modern political discourse and its relation to "1984," alongside the "Orwellian" events that shape it (modernized telescreens, the creation of a faux-Newspeak, two added to two equaling five, etc.) can reinforce the belief that Orwell "predicted" the dystopian future to come in 1949. But said prediction of this dystopian future is only a byproduct of

interested criticism. The commentary here is disinterested because the reader finds it clear that these actions are abhorrent, but Orwell never outright or even implicitly states that this provides a look into any sort of politics of his time, much less of today. He purposefully works with general themes in his work with the intent to create a story reflective of those themes. Again, “1984” was built from political criticism, which may not necessarily reflect Orwell’s goals. It primarily concerns something far broader in scope and can easily be abused, even to the extent that said criticism goes against what the novel stands for. Orwell strived to prevent this sort of interestedness from seeping into his writing. The “Orwellian” is inherently “Un-Orwellian.”

### ***Nineteen Eighty-Four’s Relation to Snowden***

One does not have to look far to better understand how rampant interested criticism has become in modern political discourse, as well as its impact. From 2013–2015, Former Computer System Administrator and self-proclaimed whistleblower Edward Snowden leaked heaps of classified information to the public concerning the National Security Agency (NSA) and their use of wiretapping as a method of surveillance. As the subsequent trials were underway and more and more classified information became known to the public through Snowden, many Americans feared that these findings indicate that the American government would eventually turn into a modernized vision of Big Brother, who themselves worked to censor all documents to meet their needs (as Winston describes).

Snowden did not ignite *Nineteen Eighty-Four’s* impact on criticism, necessarily, but did offer an occasion for scholars, analysts, and journalists, and especially politicians

to refer to the novel in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Naturally, after multiple leaks from him alongside other whistleblowers on the US government's actions and controversies within the 2010s, sales for the novel skyrocketed, partially thanks to these scholars, analysts, etc. utilizing interestedness for political motivation, which only stoked the fires. It has since become one of if not *the* tool to use when any subject regarding fears of surveillance, privacy, and censorship arises in conversation. In response to the Snowden Affair, many brought up *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to argue whether or not America would become the destitute, totalitarian nation of Oceania. They bolstered the novel as a warning that security agencies such as the NSA and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) as well as corrupt politicians that actively fight against the rights of both free speech and privacy in their self-interest. More so, they must outright remove the government from power, for if not, America will evolve into this scarily totalitarian regime, one that strips its citizens of their individuality and free will. Orwell's fictional dystopia will become a reality... or so they claim, claims that persist to this day.

The interestedness in these sorts of readings emphasizes their own beliefs and prevents their own "1984," ergo the politics shaping their takes on the novel. Various social media hashtags soon followed: #Orwell, #1984, #FreeSpeech, #Censorship, and #Orwellian. The hashtags camp one end of the political spectrum against the other, each side attempting to weed out and criticize some sort of resistance to speech, action, freedom, etc. The Snowden controversy became another notable period within the cultural afterlife of "1984," meaning it has transformed into something far beyond just a novel thanks to decades of analysis and interpretation. Snowden currently lives in

Moscow, exiled from America, and has yet to be pardoned. Despite that, he managed to evade both capture and criminal charges, and his findings inspired further investigation into the NSA. Josh Gerstein of POLITICO reported back in September of 2020 that the organization's methods of wiretapping have been deemed illegal by the 9<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court of Appeals. Snowden's findings have influenced both the public opinion of these government-run security agencies and the belief that these organizations need to hold themselves accountable for their actions.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Winston's affair with Julia, his reading of the book, and even the occasional wandering thought were small victories against the Party. And yet, despite everything, he ended up tortured into believing the truth to where he could say with confidence that "He loved Big Brother" (Orwell, 262). The Party would not only prevent these leaks from leaving the Ministry of Truth but also have an entire procedure and specialized devices in place to ensure that they remain undisclosed. So, one can only make tangential comparisons to Snowden himself rather than claim that Snowden repeats Winston's story. Yet despite the support for Snowden from multiple Americans, praising him for his bravery in putting everything on the line to reveal this sensitive information, many refuted and still refute Snowden's claims. He has become such a controversial figure that the vast majority of Americans have a strong opinion on the morality and rightness of his actions. The leaks had many arguing whether Snowden's actions were justifiable to maintain transparency and holding this and other nation-states accountable, making him the hero, or corrupt and selfish by evading his duties and responsibilities, possibly putting various innocent lives at risk with what he has exposed, making him the

traitor. The culture surrounding “1984” becomes far more popular and confused with the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* thanks to the political paradigm relating to Snowden’s decisions.

Journalist Christina Nolan decided to judge Snowden and his actions more objectively in “The Edward Snowden Case and the Morality of Secrecy” from *The Catholic Social Science Review*, written in 2017. She explores whether Snowden can be truly justified in his actions utilizing Christianity. She offers three options for “labeling the decision to reveal secret information”: 1) civil disobedience, 2) armed resistance, or 3) war (Nolan, 292). She labeled Snowden’s actions as an act of war and elaborates on why:

The just conduct of war differs from the decision to embark in war, and men are obliged to work for the elimination of war altogether. ...As such, the decision to embark on whistleblowing could be considered, metaphorically, an act of war and certainly should not be entered lightly. (Nolan, 294)

She elaborates further on practically every facet of Snowden’s decision: him, his safety, his legitimacy, and his intentions; the NSA’s reaction and responses; the short- and long-term effects of Snowden’s decisions, etc. But before “labeling” his decision to leak private information, she suggests an idea regarding the earlier conversation on privacy:

We can all empathize with the opposing needs: to keep some news (even if truthful) to ourselves so as to protect certain parties (such as loved ones); or to reveal information in the interest of public transparency or the common good. How do we assess these conflicting duties? Snowden was privy to secret

information. When we have privileged access to information, we have an obligation to carefully consider what to do with that knowledge. (Nolan, 291–92)

The various allegations and judgments against Snowden only emphasize Winston’s plight, since he is more “moral” out of the two, who ended up tortured relentlessly, while Snowden not only lives in relative comfort but also maintains his status as someone trustworthy, a champion of free speech, which many have put into question. Nolan ends her article with a judgment of Snowden’s actions for herself, bringing in the impact he’s made on government surveillance through a series of questions:

He wanted transparency. His stated cause was the stoppage of the collection of private data. He achieved that. His stated intent was to reveal the data. He achieved that. Was his cause just? Was his intention right? The key point here is whether or not the NSA’s collection violated fundamental rights, a point which remains arguable and undetermined. (Nolan, 305)

She also mentions how Snowden could have — intentionally or not — pushed the US government into creating better protocols when it comes to withholding information (304–05).

But others did not consider any of Snowden’s actions the least bit noble as Nolan did. Journalist Tarzie details these absolute opinions in “Edward Snowden, Frenemy of the State” also published in 2017, using the films *Enemy of the State* (dir. Scott, 1998) and *Snowden* (dir. Stone, 2016) to highlight the portrayal of whistleblowing by Hollywood and compare that portrayal with legitimate whistleblowing. Though the article quite passionately questions Snowden and his legitimacy, it does provide this

straightforward and unbiased point on the discourse surrounding Snowden himself and the actions he has committed:

For this crowd [“his apostles”], there is but one correct opinion to have about Snowden, which is that he is a rebel hero striking at the heart of the intelligence behemoth. For their reactionary counterparts ... the correct opinion is that he is a traitor. There are no other possibilities. (Tarzie, 351)

Tarzie follows this point with arguments against Snowden and his actions, such as his partiality of the CIA (363) and (eventually) the NSA (367), as well as highlighting the vastly disproportionate treatment of him compared to fellow whistleblower Chelsea Manning (371–75). The article mainly seeks to combat Snowden’s credibility, but it also questions the perpetuated belief that anyone who seeks to stand up against inherent corruption does so in the pursuit of freedom and peace, and anyone who would disagree with this notion is either willfully ignorant “sheeple,” feeding whatever the powers that be tell them, or that everyone should vindicate the leaker for their stance against “the enemy.” And to many, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* carries this same belief even though Orwell already sealed Winston’s tragic fate before the novel’s end, unlike Snowden who is presumably in good health and even acts as the president of the Freedom of the Press Foundation.

The reader roots for Winston because he is the obvious protagonist. He seeks to create a more free and just society, making the tragedy of his downfall that much more cutting and frightening. But even the Snowden case goes beyond whether he is a hero, a traitor, or even a plant. This lack of knowledge on Snowden’s true nature or intent is not

necessarily on purpose, nor an inherent flaw of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but to those who politics shape the reading of the novel it does bolster it as a legitimate argument for leaking government secrets, to release censored information. By doing so, it can inspire others to become a beacon of truth, etc. And yet nothing has changed. While neither Snowden nor Winston accomplished anything when combatting the corruption of their respective nation-states, Winston inspired political reform through the very novel that he comes from, in a sense. Snowden's name has become synonymous with government leaks and the fight for freedom of information, but he failed to create any *real* reformation aside from some new laws put in place to protect the rights of citizens. No major overhaul of the internet and technology as a whole, or even how Americans think about technology, ever happened, and Snowden and other critics formed these comparisons just to expose the NSA. The comparisons never prompted them to think about how and why we continue to invest in a space beyond government oversight or marketization.

Ultimately, interested criticism formed the comparisons, blurring *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and "1984". Critiques and analyses are not just about the novel anymore, now they present how society operates, what we esteem, what is "good." And this is not a "good" thing. Alex Woloch, the author of *Or Orwell* (2016), writes on Orwell's style of critique. He says Orwell believed that "Squarely political work might be, ironically, a major blind spot of the often subtle, politically articulated frameworks of contemporary criticism" (3). One could say this description can align with the principles of disinterested criticism. Orwell subtly applies a political platform and principles to his

stories, but not a political platform. Thusly, if Orwell were to write a novel building off the principles of interested criticism, readers would end up sifting through what he used to write: “lifeless books.”

### ***Nineteen Eighty-Four’s Cultural Conversation***

An instant of this sort of parsing out these comparisons comes from Orwell scholar John Rodden (who I quoted earlier when referring to the caricature of the Party), someone who uses *and* abuses the novel in the aforementioned 2015 article “Warfare, from Cold to Cyber.” Woloch mentions that Rodden often mocks the idea of “What would Orwell say about [insert modern issue here] today?”, coining the acronym WWGOD (What Would George Orwell Do?) (5) and “has produced a canny sequence of criticism that never reads Orwell directly but rather reads him through the (varied, passionate, opinionated, compulsive) ways he has been read” (32). However, Rodden still performs interested criticism, not so much with what he considers Orwell might think about Snowden and government surveillance, but more so with what Orwell unintentionally foresaw with *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. What fascinates me about this interested criticism lies with the topic he touches upon, one that the novel itself never really dedicates too much time to, technology; he decides to delve into the advancement of modern technology and how it compares to the technology utilized by the novel’s antagonists that Orwell crafts.

Considering how politically charged technology became during the Snowden controversy, this comes as no surprise. Around half of his article delves into the Western world and the over-reliance of technology, that “our glistering hardware and magical

software entrances us like a spellbinding utopian dream,” and “Our power lust proves insatiable — and disempowering” (Rodden, 406). I elaborated on earlier the Party’s use of effective fictional technologies, most famously the telescreen. However, Orwell crafts them solely to emphasize the power of The Party’s surveillance, considering that “for seven years the Thought Police had watched [Winston] like a beetle under a magnifying glass,” and how effective their censorship tactics were, to where “Even the speck of whitish dust on the cover of his diary they had carefully replaced” (Orwell, 245). He makes no other commentary with the universe’s tech outside of presenting the Party’s power. Rodden takes very generalized themes from the text and expands it to such a degree to where what he says no longer involves the text itself, specifically when discussing Orwell’s use of technology and its significance.

After delving into his fears of technological warfare, Rodden then deconstructs the various regimes and ideals that Orwell took inspiration from when crafting *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, clarifying the distinction between them and emphasizing that “We too need to maintain such balance, which includes the judicious use of political and historical analogies. Equating the War on Terror with the Cold War is also misconceived” (Rodden, 408). I cannot emphasize this point enough regarding modern readings of the text, how the novel takes inspiration from various ideologies while not capturing any specific one. But then he starts his final section with the following:

*We* need to keep ‘Watching Big Brother,’ ever on the alert for abuses by our own government and our own geopolitical “side.” Yes, we need to keep watching Big Brother even as he (or it) watches us. We need to keep our eyes on *them* as they

keep their telescreen eye on us. If we value the freedoms that represent the cornerstone of a democracy, watching Big Brother is indispensable to expose the perils to freedom and privacy — before we lose them. (Rodden, 409)

Not only does the formatting of the text here and during the cybersecurity portions make Rodden come off as a stereotypical conspiracy theorist (which I assume he very much is not), but, once again, he takes *Nineteen Eighty-Four* — a book he knows a great deal about — and uses it to generate the aforementioned “call to action” against the powers that be as Winston attempted to against Big Brother, thus abusing the novel in the process. His push to rebuke the government using the same tech-based methods as the opposition becomes both a surprise and not at the same time.

The article keeps flip-flopping on its topics: Orwell’s beliefs and the recognition of the novel as a work of pure fiction; equating the intricacies of cyberterrorism to the Party’s “blink-and-you’ll-miss-it” usage of technology; a deep history into Orwell’s beliefs and how they shaped the novel; ending with a final push to the readership that the values we hold dear must “be maintained and defended” by any means necessary, and that our democracy “will not sacrifice the fundamental principles on which both our civic integrity as a nation and our basic human dignity rest” (Rodden, 409). He signals this fight for freedom but never highlights the risks that come with it, something that even O’Brien did when discussing The Brotherhood to Winston (Orwell, 156–180). Honestly, the whole article feels unfocused and confused, trying to combine too many subjects into one with a final point that motivates others to risk their lives and a criminal record for the sake of combatting “forces that would conspire to destroy our liberties” (Rodden, 409).

But Orwell writes “forces” within the novel (the telescreen the most prominent and iconic) as flat-out impenetrable and considering both the advancements in technologies over seventy years later and the analogies made within the novel regarding intense surveillance. Ironically, Nolan’s series of questions on whether some of Snowden should have leaked his findings and why they were linked anyway suddenly turns Rodden’s call to “watch the Watchmen” so to speak into a declaration of war.

Through comparing the novel to what he finds “good” (what he esteems to be right or just), Rodden ends up pushing his belief in a surveillance conspiracy, and we must respond to said conspiracy with swift retaliation. He does not simply like the story, finding it “beautiful” (though he most certainly would), but he also believes in its supposed call to action. Surprisingly, in this same article quoted earlier regarding the background of the novel, while describing the fears of a cyber-terrorism attack, he mentions that “Orwellian forecasters surveying the cyberscape fret about the ever more imaginable nightmare of possible cyber war” (406). Rodden makes clear his usage of the novel as a tool for political gain, which embodies what Arnold describes as interested criticism; his analysis of Orwell’s work replaces his thoughts on the work itself with a goal in mind, as members of the Party did with their literature. His views and fears of modern surveillance shape how he views the novel, rather than influencing his deconstruction of it. When put side by side, the novel and its history are barely tangential to his comments on government surveillance and hacking. He ends up contributing to the “1984” idea that has shaped how the novel is *esteemed* rather than how *liked* it is.

How does disinterested criticism differ from what Rodden writes? Henry A. Giroux demonstrates this sort of criticism by alluding to how the Party's methods of surveillance compared to the surveillance methods of the modern-day in "Totalitarian Paranoia in the Post-Orwellian Surveillance State," published in 2014. He begins his article with the mention of Snowden alongside fellow whistleblowers Chelsea Manning and Jeremy Hammond, the revelations they shared to the public giving "new meaning — if not revitalized urgency and relevance — to George Orwell's dystopian fable *Nineteen Eighty-Four*," expressing his fears of "the new surveillance state," whose technology "far outstretch anything Orwell portrayed and pose a much greater threat to both the personal privacy of citizens and the control exercised by sovereign power" (Giroux, 109). He expands on how the technologies that these various organizations utilize create a truly dark future:

The Orwellian nightmare exposed by the revelations of Snowden, Hammer, Manning and others provides only a small window into the workings of the NSA and the global surveillance state and says very little about the other 16 massive intelligence agencies, including the CIA, FBI, and the Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency. (Giroux, 122)

He elaborates on this fear of living within what he describes as a "surveillance state" thanks to the myriad of new technologies, specifying certain groups/sects of society that they could target and punish wrongfully, specifically those marginalized in some fashion (by race, class, etc.) (Giroux, 129), or the government appealing to corporate interests

(123); the use of surveillance contributing to corporations and the selling products as well.

So how does the novel portray its own “surveillance state”? According to Winston, it could be “terribly dangerous to let your thoughts wander” around the telescreen because it could detect nervous tics and mutters, or actions that convey disobedience: “In any case, to wear an improper expression on your face ... was itself a punishable offense. There was even a word for it in Newspeak: *facecrime*, it was called” (Orwell, 60). He goes so far as to keep his back from the telescreen, “but even a back could be revealing” (10). Beyond that, the telescreen, though the most popular device from the story in pop culture, is only a single method of surveillance used; even before he addresses the telescreen, he describes the helicopter that would snoop through citizens’ windows (9–10). Much later, when O’Brien quietly describes how The Brotherhood works to Winston, he warns that joining the organization means he “will get no help”, and he will continue to live the rest of his life in Oceania “without results and without hope” (160).

On a similar note, one can consider the topic of racism closely relevant to Orwell’s work in that totalitarianism and the number of surveillance tools at the disposal of the powers that be (or rather very modernized and better-realized technologies) warrants discussion:

...there is a growing indifference, if not distaste, for politics among large segments of the population ... purposely manufactured by the ongoing operations of political repression against intellectuals, artists, non-violent protesters, and

journalists on both the left and right. Increasingly, as such populations engage in dissent and the free flow of ideas ... they are considered dangerous to the state and become subject to the mechanizations of a massive security apparatuses... (Giroux, 128)

But this sort of surveillance differs from what Orwell creates, as he demonstrates Winston's complete lack of agency and comfort by warning him how hopeless his situation is:

You will work for a while, you will be caught, you will confess, and then you will die. Those are the only results that you will ever see. There is no possibility that any perceptible change will happen within our own lifetime. (Orwell, 160)

Within the story, any deviation from a rigidly impossible standard of living will result in punishment by being reported at best, physically and psychologically scarred at worst, and the Party replaces every single solitary fact with a language created specifically to dumb down the masses, to the point where Orwell caps off the book with an appendix regarding that topic, which he has to present for readers to understand what words like "Minitrue" and "Newspeak" in the novel meant (263–273). I disagree that technology will escalate beyond what the novel has created, despite the various advancements in today's surveillance technology, so it will come as no surprise to me if (most likely when) anyone else leaks classified information from the US government; becoming a regime as advanced and organized as the Party in surveillance and censorship would require decades of carefully planned maneuvers and leaks like the one Snowden revealed will only slow this process.

The various topics that Giroux discusses are all contemporary issues plaguing modern political discourse and applied to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* without necessarily claiming the novel's central themes can happen in the real world, as Orwell did with Stalinism, even though that particular ideology was the foundation of the novel's creation, to begin with. At no point does Giroux say America's power will lead to the surveillance methods of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (ironically contributing to the idea that "1984" has become), but rather that these surveillance agencies indicate the severity of surveillance presented in the novel. In other words, his reading of the novel certainly inspires his discussion on technology and surveillance but does not necessarily shape his vision of what technology the modern government would use.

I have pointed out the differences between what Giroux writes and the novel's story to present that he, unlike Rodden, exhibits disinterested criticism in that he never ties his political argument to the novel itself. His commentary on the work does not present his argument for him, he only applies aspects of the novel to better present what he argues. There lies no real political agenda here when it comes to the use of the novel. Giroux pushes a politically motivated argument, yes, but does not abuse the novel by using it as a tool for political gain or pushing some sort of narrative, which makes the commentary disinterested. It seems more likely that Orwell wished to think beyond the political platform. The article is a prime example of the use — but not necessarily abuse — of the novel in that his tangential and summarized the discussion on surveillance he describes as "Orwellian" bolsters and validates his argument without tying into the novel's discussion and implementation on surveillance.

With disinterested criticism, Giroux utilizes the novel to illustrate a correlation between its themes of surveillance and how they apply to modern conversation. With interested criticism, Rodden uses the novel as something to bolster a politically motivated action. One can make certain abstract parallels between some key quotes and/or events of the novel and the American government's tactics of surveillance, privacy, and censorship, as Giroux accomplished. Considering Orwell never includes his political arguments against Stalinism in the novel, both he and Giroux can be looked at as a style of a disinterested critic.

## Conclusion

My argument boils down to this: interested criticism has had such an impact on *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that it would generate something like "1984" as part of its cultural afterlife. Fear, distrust, and a lack of privacy became rampant during the Snowden era, and that escalates with fiction depicting and wrestling with those themes. The journalist, politician, analyst — basically anyone with a certain political goal — take *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and present that as inherent proof that America will become the fictional dystopia that Orwell created, pushing that a purposefully generalized concept will become a tangible reality. These sorts of "proofs", in turn, generated more and more arguments that the novel was so far ahead of its time that it predicted the very techniques utilized by the government today, which could be and certainly was taken advantage of, and that practice continues to this day. With the lack of disinterested criticism, mostly due to those either disagreeing that it contributes to the overall conversation or outright disbelieving any criticism is, in fact, disinterested, modern readings of the text have

become everything Arnold and even Orwell argued against. One could even make the parallel of the use and abuse of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in the present day and the use and abuse of information that the Party commits within the Ministry of Truth.

As for how my argument came to fruition: Orwell fought for freedom. He acted as a socialist, liberalist personality in a world where fascism was fading, with Stalinism on the rise; he stood against extremism, be it right or left-leaning. With Snowden's status as a freedom fighter in opposition to the powers that be in a politically polarized world, I figured I could generate some parallels between him and Orwell, regardless of Snowden's attitude towards extremism. The parallels I point out would ideally contribute to the disinterested claim that the novel's cultural afterlife would morph into the doomsday belief that many perpetuate today through interested criticism. However, I had difficulties tying *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Snowden together, given how recent and complex the Snowden trials are. So, did I create this disinterested, Orwellian critique of his own novel framed within the world of American politics c.2013–2015, as I had intended? Difficult to say. Nevertheless, in the end, I strive to protect not only Orwell's voice but also every creator's voice, and not to police criticism (interested or disinterested) but to prevent his and many other writers' voices from the abuse of others that seek or wish to consolidate their power/influence. I hope that this argument contributes to the conversation of criticism and how any one of us can prevent something so essential from becoming a power tactic.

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