

Auditory Control in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

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George Orwell (1903-1950) dedicated his literary talent to revealing the evil nature of totalitarianism. In his 1946 essay titled "Why I Write", he declares that "[w]hat I have most wanted to do throughout the past ten years is to make political writing into an art" (5). Written in his later career, the two novels *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) constitute the Orwell we know today for their political and even philosophical significance. The former novel represents the corruption of a socialist revolution into a totalitarian regime in the form of a beast fable. In the latter novel, Orwell presents a society in which the government constantly falsifies historical records and organises a ubiquitous surveillance system to prevent individuals from exercising free will. As Kamio Haruka points out, however, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* presents a more detailed description of the means of control than that in *Animal Farm* (19).

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, several critics devote attention to the social workings of gaze. On top of the privacy control¹, John Strachey sees the functions of pervasive telescreens as a device of mind-control (56). Michel Foucault explains that panoptic surveillance system helps to "induce in the inmate a state of consciousness and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (201). Thomas Horan identifies the mechanism of control by Oceania (one of the three world regions constantly at war in the novel) as synonymous with that of the Panopticon; uncertainty of when or even whether being watched by telescreens or not forces Outer Party members to "make the Party's prescribed behavioural code second nature" (15). In addition, Aiko Watanabe points out that the family unit works as a kind of secondary panopticon to establish a human network of mutual spying (124-25). Consequently, this inescapably extensive observation changes individuals into "malleable objects of control via *self*-regulation and *self*-control" (Byers 201 emphasis original).

Others give special emphasis to an abundance of Orwell's sensory depictions. Azusa Yamaguchi argues that in the novel, the physical senses are controlled by the totalitarian regime (76). Moreover, Anthony Synnott claims that the senses can also be "a medium of

¹ Donald Morris says that the deprivation of people's privacy as "a means of social control" is achieved by various watchers like telescreens, the Thought Police and children (215-18).

control by others” (454). Yet, they merely discuss the sense of smell.

Orwell expansively sharpened his auditory sense through first-hand experience of British colonialism, poverty and the Spanish Civil War, which affects the way he *writes sounds*. In *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), for instance, he describes the noise of bomb explosions and machine-gun fire as “diabolical” (46), “vicious” (61), “devilish” (64) and “hellish” (118) to associate the war situation with evilness. As far as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is concerned, little critical attention has been paid to Orwell’s treatment of the sonic and the aural. Therefore, this paper will analyse the effects of sound imagery in its connection to human control.

More specifically, this paper will mainly discuss the situations of the Outer Party to which the main character Winston Smith belongs. He represents the members of the Outer Party, who are under the most severe sonic influence of telescreens. All the Inner and Outer Party members have telescreens in their homes while privileged people in the Inner Party can turn off their domestic telescreens as they like, the Outer Class members cannot. Thus, there is a class differentiation in relaxing of the auditory control.

The key to understanding the Party’s control over the Outer Party is to understand a conditioned reflex. Orwell already expresses this idea in his 1939 novel *Coming Up for Air*. Hearing “the whistle of a bomb”, the main character George Bowling takes an immediate action to protect himself, which he himself sees as “conditioned reflex”, something that is triggered by the repetition of an external stimulus (Orwell *Coming Up for Air* 232).

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the omnipresence of telescreens repeats the same auditory experience on a daily basis and helps to condition people’s behaviour. For instance, a whistle-like sound gives Winston a disciplinary physical response. In the morning, “an ear-splitting whistle” forces office workers out of their sleep, which is immediately followed by “a piercing female voice” to announce the beginning of the Physical Jerks (Orwell *Nineteen Eighty-Four* 36-37). There is no respite from the loudness of the telescreen. The woman’s fresh and powerful voice triggers a conditioned reflex: “he [Winston] sprang to attention in front of the telescreen” (37). During the Physical Jerks, moreover, his physical movements are strictly commanded by the female voice. Winston is not allowed to even have his mind go wandering.

Furthermore, this daily conditioning of the body is also undertaken in the public field. At lunchtime, Winston has a chat with Syme and Parsons at the canteen of the Ministry of Truth. When a certain time comes, “a piercing whistle” cuts their communication, commanding them to return to work (72). They show exactly the same bodily reaction as Winston’s at the beginning of the Physical Jerks: “All three men sprang to their feet to join in the struggle round the lift” to go back to their office (72). These immediate reactions to

the sharp sound are a sign that Winston and others are perfectly trained to behave as the Party wishes them. There is little escape from the audio conditioning carried out both in private and public.

Apart from the sharp whistle-like sound, telescreens constantly play irritating ambient music to create an auditory space in which the workings of the human brain are, to an extent, jammed. Winston is frequently exposed to background music from the telescreen, with the music becoming intensified. At first, "strident military music" wipes from Winston's mind what he wants to write down in the notebook: "It was curious that he seemed not merely to have lost the power of expressing himself, but even to have forgotten what it was that he had originally intended to say" (10). This causes a temporary disabling of his writing ability without letting Winston realise the harmful effect. Later, Winston's attempt to write is blocked again by the telescreen music: "From the telescreen a brassy female voice was squalling a patriotic song. He sat staring at a marbled cover of the book, trying without success to shut the voice out of his consciousness" (116). This time, Winston is aware of the thought-jamming effect. The song further persuades Winston to stop the act of writing with a more penetrating and aggressive tone of "jagged splinters of glass": "But with the voice from the telescreen nagging at his ears he could not follow the train of thought further" (117-18). Gradually, Winston is driven into a corner by the intensification of sound.

Thus, it is not just the auditory functioning but also other physical activities, particularly Winston's diary-writing, upon which the telescreen sound takes an effect. It is an act of private recording of the past based on his individual experiences. Further, Alan Kennedy regards Winston's writing as more creative: "it is not a matter of recording it at all. In fact, it is a bit like inventing the past, or history, by writing it" (80). But such individual versions of the past are forbidden. The employment of ambient music makes Winston unable to recall his past memories.

On the contrary, the Party builds a collective past by continuously falsifying history to the extent it becomes a perfect fit to the present political situation. A good example of this is fake news. Michael Yeo states that:

[s]tatistics, reports about the war, historical records, and so on, are not simply false; they are lies because they are known to be false. However, the object is not just to propagate facts (or lies) but to propagate values, or value judgements, which the propaganda of fact does indirectly. (52)

Fake news makes people believe in the appropriateness of what the Party is doing. The following quotation exemplifies such a propagation of values:

Day and night the telescreens bruised your ears with statistics proving that

people today had more food, more clothes, better houses, better recreations – that they lived longer, worked shorter hours, were bigger, healthier, stronger, happier, more intelligent, better educated, than the people of fifty years ago. (Orwell *Nineteen Eighty-Four* 85)

This news spreads the notion that the standard of living in Oceania is improving thanks to the Party's successful policy. Such a political mood allows no possibility of criticism against the regime. What is intriguing here is Orwell's expression of "bruised your ears". The Party's propaganda damages the auditory sense and subsequently controls the mind. This also shows the Party's merciless intention to "bruise" people's auditory sense for the sake of sustaining its power structure.

Hence, Winston lives a kind of "no-touch torture" of perpetual noise which leaves "no visible marks on the fleshy surface of a human body" (Cusick 381-83). One problematical consequence of this, however, is that the noisy environment has *acclimatised* Winston to the habitual thought-obstruction. As a result, any sound can act as a stimulus to cause Winston to stop thinking without him realising this, which has become a natural reaction. His brain misperceives natural sounds as the thought-jamming effect of the telescreen. Going into the woods in the countryside, Winston and Julia find a bird and listen to its voice:

[A thrush] began to pour forth a torrent of song. In the afternoon hush the volume of sound was startling. Winston and Julia clung together, fascinated. [...] But by degrees the flood of music drove all speculations out of his [Winston's] mind. (142-43)

Ironically, even the bird's song triggers Winston's conditioned reflex of shutting down his thinking. He unconsciously reacts to the song. Generally, sound is something that exists everywhere in nature. Repetition of a certain auditory experience brings about a huge change in human reaction to natural sound. Therefore, getting away from the city cannot be regarded as a means of resisting the Party's control.

Moreover, in the novel, silence is treated as something that causes anxiety. In Oceania's noisy surroundings, silence is certainly a rarity and an extraordinary thing to experience. Thus, Winston becomes anxious due to the absence of sound. When Winston and Julia visit O'Brien's home, O'Brien temporarily turns off the telescreen. In the absence of any sound from the telescreen, "the room seemed deadly silent. The seconds marched past, enormous" (196). For Winston, the silence is something desperately unendurable. In addition, the passage of time, as he feels, is overwhelming, different from usual. Persistent telescreen sounds generate a rhythm to his daily life. However, the rhythm goes against his natural perception of the passage of time. This prevents Winston from accepting the natural

flow of time. He becomes uneasy even without hearing noise. However much effort he makes in resisting the telescreen sound, his body wants noise.

Once adapted to a certain environment, one cannot avoid the influence of it. In the novel, the Party manages its control over people by designing an auditory space. The totalitarian politics of the Party is based largely on the manipulation of the human adaptive capacity.

Thus, Winston's intimate relationship with Julia can be seen as a reflection of his escapism. Winston receives a love letter from Julia and jumps at the chance of a possible love affair. The couple attempts to have a private world free from state surveillance. At first, they make careful date plans in order to evade monitoring. A room in Mr. Charrington's antique store is the place where Winston tries to secure a safe meeting place. The space becomes a "paradise" (173) to which they can escape from the harsh reality of endless auditory torment.

Both Winston and Julia know that the space is temporal and a mere illusionary world as an escape from reality of the Party's control. Carried away by sexual pleasure, Winston and Julia create an illusionary feeling of being in a different world than Oceania. Understanding the limitation of their own world, they give themselves over to "despairing sensuality" (174).

Winston believes that the room can provide him with psychological relief even when he is not there: "What mattered was that the room over the junk-shop should exist. To know that it was there, inviolate, was almost the same as being in it" (173). At first, being in the room enables Winston to feel relieved from the Party's cruel control. As the number of his rendezvous with Julia increases, the power of the room to bring him relief grows. He succumbs to the mistaken belief that the room can protect him from the Party's merciless control whether or not he stays in the room.

This belief, however, is countered by the Party's continued stimulation of Winston's physical senses during Hate Week. The state of being at war with Eurasia and in alliance with Eastasia is suddenly declared to be the opposite, or more properly, to have been the opposite from the very beginning: Oceania is and has been at war with Eastasia and in alliance with Eurasia. Probably, the purpose of this is that changing the political enemy can refresh people's war-fever and sustain it efficiently. This necessitates rewriting all the publications to fit them into the inverted present political situation. The Party members become severely fatigued with excessive work of this reworking history, which hugely increases Winston's physical sensitivity:

All the blood and lymph had been drained out of him by an enormous debauch of work, leaving only a frail structure of nerves, bones and skin. All sensations

seemed to be magnified. (208)

Then, the Party rubs auditory salt in his wound. Several Hate Week campaigns take an effect of aggressively stimulating the ear. For example, the theme-song of Hate Week has:

a savage, barking rhythm which could not exactly be called music, but resembled the beating of a drum. Roared out by hundreds of voices to the tramp of marching feet, it was terrifying. (171)

There is no avoiding of this kind of animalistic and collective sound as the song is “endlessly plugged on the telescreens” (171). Furthermore, most of the campaigns below are related to sound:

the speeches, the shouting, the singing, the banners, the posters, the films, the waxworks, the rolling of drums and squalling trumpets, the tramp of marching feet, the grinding of the caterpillars of tanks, the roar of massed planes, the booming of guns [...] (209 emphasis mine).

With a military mood, these noises overwhelm the social space.

With Winston’s sensations “magnified”, this noisy environment causes a great turbulence in his auditory sense. Winston becomes unable to hear sound in a proper way. For example, the mechanical sound of a clock ticking is magnified as a natural and organic sound of “the insect voice of the clock” (214) in Winston’s disturbed auditory sense. Moreover, Winston becomes “aware of silence, as one becomes new sound” when he pauses to read Goldstein’s book (247). Here, silence neither means a soundless condition nor does it offer relief; it has become *a sound of silence*. It is already associated with a variety of oppressive sounds from the telescreen. Knowing the existence of the room over the junk-shop does not in fact protect Winston from the Party’s auditory control.

Eventually, Winston and Julia are pulled back to bitter reality by “an iron voice” (252) of the telescreen hidden in the room. Winston and Julia “sprang to apart”, and it is “unthinkable to disobey” the orders from the voice (253). The heartless voice now takes control of their bodies, triggering a conditioned reflex. The room loses its special meaning as a paradise of freedom.

Together with a conditioned reflex, sound affects Winston’s body in his torture after being arrested. Unlike the one in Winston’s home, the telescreens in his cell play an audio role by remaining silent (except the prisoners show any suspicious behaviour). The silent situation increases Winston’s uneasiness and anxiety for other sounds.

Hunger is another factor which makes Winston more sensitive to surrounding sounds. Winston is not fed and is driven to starvation in the cell: “But he was also hungry, with a gnawing, unwholesome kind of hunger” (260). The feeling of starvation sharpens his physical senses. Furthermore, Winston’s body is forced to adapt to the foodless situation in

order to survive. This adaptive capacity serves to enhance the auditory conditioning.

Sounds of boots and doors amplify Winston's fear in series in Part 3; he hears (1) the approaching boots of someone, (2) opening the door and (3) entering the cell. The first description of a series of these three sounds is as follows:

There was a sound of marching boots outside. The steel door opened with a clang. A young officer, a trim black-uniformed figure who seemed to glitter all over with polished leather, and whose pale, straight-featured face was like a wax mask, stepped smartly through the doorway. (264)

This series of descriptions seems to entail a military cold-heartedness. Winston begins to grasp that the sound of boots is indicative of something threatening that may occur to him. The door serves to shut out the visibility of the officer approaching. Winston can know only the presence of some threat on the other side of the door, a perception which helps increase his fear. The boots and the door jointly torment him. His anticipation that he is the next victim leads to the arousal of a fear in him:

Once more, there was a sound of boots outside. Winston's entrails contracted. Soon, very soon, perhaps in five minutes, perhaps now, the tramp of boots would mean that his own turn had come. [...] There was another spasm in his entrails; the heavy boots were approaching. (266)

Winston is becoming more and more sensitive to the sound of the boots as he perceives the heaviness of them. What is more, the change from "contraction" to "spasm" alludes to Winston's physical response to the sound becoming increasingly involuntary. This indicates that he is being conditioned through these auditory experiences. Winston gradually becomes unable to control his own body as a psychological impact of fear begins to create a negative bodily stimulus.

Furthermore, an important relationship between physical pain and sound should be noted. First, the unendurable level of pain causes a reshaping of Winston's human senses. Then, a wave of human voices attacks his already reshaped auditory sense, and cripples his willpower to resist the Party's malicious ideology. For example, he gets cruelly lynched by the guards, which is followed by interrogations. His magnified sensations due to physical pain enhance the effect of the following audible torture. The interrogators brutally demoralise Winston and at the same time appeal to his conscience (277-78) in an attempt to convert him. Moreover, by using a pain-inflicting machine, O'Brien numbs Winston's existing senses further and then refutes him cruelly. Being cornered, Winston perceives O'Brien's overwhelming waves of words as "a bludgeon" (305); his voice seems to Winston to be the epitome of physical violence. The auditory sense and the sense of touch are confused here. O'Brien beats Winston down with an auditory bludgeon of words,

forcibly implanting the Party's ideology in him.

The auditory torture culminates in Room 101. O'Brien makes Winston hear:
an outburst of squeals from the cage. It seemed to reach Winston from far away.
The rats were fighting; they were trying to get at each other through the partition.
He heard also a deep groan of despair. That, too, seemed to come from outside
himself. (328)

Certainly, the squeals of rats are the most distasteful sound for Winston. As the cage comes nearer, he tries to escape psychologically. He lets himself fall deep into desperation to secure a psychological distance from the horrible sound to the extent he feels remote even from his own despairing groan.

O'Brien lies to Winston that the cage door will open when the second lever is pressed. This lie leads Winston to expect the rats charging at his face when he hears the lever click again. Winston hears "another metallic click" and understands that "the cage door had clicked shut, and not open" (330). The mere "metallic click" has a symbolic significance for Winston. Eventually, he accepts that it is "that click" produced by O'Brien that salvaged him from the desperate situation without knowing it.

After being released, Winston habitually visits the Chestnuts Tree café and listens to the telescreen as if it is entirely of his own will. It is the same café where Winston once saw Rutherford, Aaronson and Jones, traitors of Oceania, after their release. The café serves as a space to keep released thought-criminals in loose control auditorily. Despite no disturbance from any whistle or telescreens (338), the metallic and slightly irritating quality of "a tinny music" (88, 331) keeps jamming their critical thoughts. Also, what Winston calls "a yellow note" reminds them of their guilt, keeping them unmotivated to disobey again.

Furthermore, Winston attains extreme responsiveness to the telescreen sound after being released. Whatever happens to the telescreen attracts his attention:

The music from the telescreen stopped and a voice took over. Winston raised
his head to listen. (333) [...] The telescreen was silent for a moment. Winston
raised his head again. The bulletin! But, no, they were merely changing the
music. (339)

At first, Winston's reaction is directed to the voice itself. In the second instance, however, it is the silence which actually draws his attention. To Winston, sound and sound of silence are indistinguishable. In addition, Winston's emotions waver according to what comes from the telescreen: "Winston's heart *stirred*. That was the bulletin from the front; *instinct* told him that it was bad news that was coming" (333 emphasis mine). The telescreen news affects the deep level of Winston's instinct. He has been changed into a mere object that is

easily controllable by sound.

As O'Brien asserts to Winston that "in this place [Ministry of Love] there are no martyrdoms" (290), Winston is eventually deprived of the right to *choose* to die as an escape from his soundful surroundings. His "blissful" daydream of being vaporised by the Thought Police (342) reflects his repressed desire to gain autonomy of his own body. Winston gives up the autonomy to Big Brother, which is a necessary sacrifice for loving him. Samuel Hynes indicates that Orwell took "privacy, decency and the human spirit" as significant values (19). However, it is not to the mental affairs that Orwell gave focus. In "Looking Back on the Spanish War", he prioritises "the physical memories, the sound, the smells and the surfaces of things" in his experiences of the Spanish War (216). Also, an analysis of the sound imagery as demonstrated above can illuminate his inexplicit, yet high regard for the human body. Orwell warns the reader about how seriously the values of the physical senses can be endangered under a totalitarian regime.

The issues of the Party's control should be understood through sound-effects. The technology of telescreens enables the Party to modify Outer Party members' auditory experiences and perception on a daily basis. The Party controls their hearing, and by doing so the Party controls their existence. This discussion poses a high relevance to the world today. As Michael Bull finds, sound pervades urban space as "intrusive" as that of cars and televisions for its multiplicity and amorphousness (73-74). Our age is witnessing exactly the same situation as Oceania, where silence has ceased to be an ordinary experience.

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