The Seduction of Winston Smith

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**A most unusual seduction**

On the first page of *1984*, Winston Smith is confronted with several posters featuring the face of Big Brother and the famous sentence, “BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU.” This may not seem like a promising way to seduce someone, but the seduction of Winston Smith by Big Brother in *1984* is a most unusual love story. I call it a seduction because Winston’s mind and heart are slowly won over in the aptly-named Ministry of Love. Moreover, in the final scene of the novel, Winston gazes, with tears in his eyes, up at Big Brother on the telescreen. The last sentence of the book states, simply, “He loved Big Brother.”

How does Big Brother seduce Winston Smith? He certainly does not employ stereotypical methods. Big Brother is not particularly sexy, and his incessant angry shouting does not seem calculated to foster adoration. On top of that, Winston never meets Big Brother in person. His only access is through media: posters, stories, and the telescreen. We all know that it’s hard to maintain a long-distance relationship. Long-distance seduction is even more challenging. So how does Big Brother manage it?

**What is seduction?**

To answer this question, I use the theory of seduction first articulated by the philosopher John Forrester (1990, p. 42), who argues that “the first step in a seductive maneuver could be summed up as, ‘I know what you’re thinking.’”[[1]](#footnote-1) By ‘thinking’, Forrester hear means not just calm contemplation but the whole of someone’s inner life: their beliefs, desires, values, emotions, sentiments, and so on. Thus, to say to someone, “I know what you’re thinking” is to assert authority over their inner life. Ordinarily, we assume that our minds are our own to know and express, that there are things about our inner life that no one else has access to, that we are able to keep some things private. A seducer attempts to break down that boundary, to insist that he, too, knows what’s going on inside your head.

The authority that a seducer claims for himself is different from the authority of brute force and coercion. A seducer doesn’t command, “Do what I say because I say so, whether you like it or not.” Instead, a seducer asks, “When you think about it, isn’t this really what you want to do?” Only an enthusiastic affirmation to that question counts as a successful seduction. A seducer thus aims at, requires, even fetishizes consent. The seducer insists that he is better-placed to know what the seducee thinks than the seducee himself is. Such a maneuver cajoles its target: if only you would stop and reflect on it, the seducer suggests, you’d realize that this is what you think. This is precisely the realization that Winston Smith arrives at in the closing scene of *1984*:

O cruel, needless misunderstanding! O stubborn, self-willed exile from the loving breast! Two gin-scented tears trickled down the sides of his nose. But it was all right, everything was all right, the struggle was finished. He had won the victory over himself.

Winston’s struggle is to be the person that Big Brother insists he already is, to shape his own mind to the pattern Big Brother suggests when he says, “I know what you’re thinking.”

In addition, saying, “I know what you’re thinking” presupposes or establishes an intimate bond. Nothing is more bound up with personal identity than someone’s inner life — their thoughts, feelings, emotions, and values. The seducer’s insistence that he knows what the seducee is thinking thus brings the two into close connection.

Beyond that, saying, “I know what you’re thinking” blurs the line between description and prescription, between assertion and imperative. It can function as a self-fulfilling prophecy: I know what you’re thinking, but only because I’ve told you that that’s what you’re thinking — and you accepted what I told you. This sort of self-fulfilling prophecy can work because human agency and cognition are often built up through dialogue and conversation. We find out what we think by expressing it and hearing it echoed back in a way we can accept; we also find out what we think by having thoughts attributed to us and agreeing with those attributions.[[2]](#footnote-2)

But how, exactly, does Big Brother manage to seduce Winston Smith in the narrative of *1984*? To answer this further question, we need to pay attention to the ways in which knowledge, trust, ignorance, and doubt are structured in the story — how Big Brother can say “I know what you’re thinking” and Winston Smith will respond, “Yes, you do.” We need what philosophers call an *epistemology* of seduction.

**The epistemology of seduction**

In the previous section, I asked how Big Brother was able to get inside Winston Smith’s head to such an extent that Winston — who had been tortured by Big Brother’s agents — was seduced into loving Big Brother. I count four methods.

**Watcher, watchers everywhere**

First, Big Brother relies on an extensive network of telescreens, bugs, informants, and Thought Police to learn about almost every detail of Winston’s life. These devices record not only someone’s spoken words but also their facial expression, posture, and other “tells,” which the psychological inquisitors read and interpret. O’Brien, an expert in these methods, puts them to work during his torture of Winston. At one point, Winston thinks to himself, “Then why bother to torture me?” As he does, O’Brien “checked his step as though Winston had uttered the thought aloud,” then says to Winston, “You are thinking that since we intend to destroy you utterly, so that nothing that you say or do can make the smallest difference — in that case, why do we go to the trouble of interrogating you first? That is what you were thinking, was it not?” Winston, betrayed by his own subtle emotional expressions, confesses, “Yes.”

In addition, some surveillance devices are openly displayed, like the telescreen in Winston’s apartment. This helps to create the illusion that there is a distinction between moments when Winston is being surveilled and moments when he can express his private thoughts. For instance, Winston labors under the misapprehension that he can keep a private diary so long as he hides it from the telescreen in his room. He thinks that his trysts with Julia are not recorded, allowing him to disclose his most intimate feelings and hopes. And he thinks\ that O’Brien is capable of turning off the telescreen to ensure that their words are not overhead and recorded. In fact, however, even when Winston thinks that he can finally express himself candidly, he is being surveilled. In this way, he is bamboozled into disclosing his innermost secrets, which makes it all too easy for Big Brother and his agents to insist that they know what he’s thinking. In many cases, they *do* know, as they know about Winston’s murophobia.

**The annihilation of history**

Second, the bureaucracy of the Ministry of Truth operates with the aim of destroying people’s trust in externalized memories. By constantly revising the official record of documents, photographs, and other artifacts that serve as epistemic touchstones, the Ministry of Truth undermines collective trust in these artifacts. Think of the monuments, memorials, gravestones, and other artifacts we use to remind ourselves of what we think, what we value, and who we are. If these objects are subject to continuous revision to fit the whims of the Party, they cease to serve their function. They no longer stand as objective, publicly-verifiable reminders.

This is why Winston is so overwhelmed when he thinks he finds an original, unaltered photograph of Jones, Aaronson, and Rutherford. As Orwell puts it, “this was concrete evidence; it was a fragment of the abolished past, like a fossil bone which turns up in the wrong stratum and destroys a geological theory.” Winston is so terrified of his discovery that he drops the photograph into the memory hole. He thus participates in the destruction of history and the undermining of trust that later enable Big Brother to seduce him. A copy of the same photograph reemerges in the torture chamber of the Ministry of Love. After glimpsing it, Winston cries out, “It exists!” But O’Brien, who has by that point already tossed the copy down another memory hole, responds:

“Ashes,” he said. “Not even identifiable ashes. Dust. It does not exist. It never existed.”

“But it did exist! It does exist! It exists in memory. I remember it. You remember it.”

“I do not remember it,” said O’Brien.

Winston’s heart sank. That was doublethink. He had a feeling of deadly helplessness. If he could have been certain that O’Brien was lying, it would not have seemed to matter. But it was perfectly possible that O’Brien had really forgotten the photograph. And if so, then already he would have forgotten his denial of remembering it, and forgotten the act of forgetting. How could one be sure that it was simple trickery? Perhaps that lunatic dislocation in the mind could really happen: that was the thought that defeated him.

**Undermining self-trust**

This brings me to the third method that employed in the seduction of Winston Smith. Destruction and faking of official records leads people to doubt both the common knowledge base and each other. It destroys social trust. It also destroys self-trust, as we see in the quotation above. Winston is “defeated” by the fact that he cannot be certain about O’Brien’s lying. If O’Brien really has no memory of the photograph, and no memory of intentionally forgetting about the photograph, maybe the photograph never really existed. In that case, Winston’s own memory must be faulty in some way.

And if Winston’s memory is faulty, then perhaps his other cognitive capacities are also defective. To the extent that he takes this worry seriously, he loses trust in himself. Winston considers this problem while looking at a history book emblazoned with a portrait of Big Brother:

It was as though some huge force were pressing down upon you — something that penetrated inside your skull, battering against your brain, frightening you out of your beliefs, persuading you, almost, to deny the evidence of your senses. In the end the Party would announce that two and two made five, and you would have to believe it. It was inevitable that they should make that claim sooner or later: the logic of their position demanded it. Not merely the validity of experience, but the very existence of external reality, was tacitly denied by their philosophy. The heresy of heresies was common sense. And what was terrifying was not that they would kill you for thinking otherwise, but that they might be right. For, after all, how do we know that two and two make four?

During his torture in the Ministry of Love, Winston faces this question again. O’Brien shocks him for saying — truly — that he is holding up four fingers. He wants Winston to say that there are five. But he also shocks Winston for merely mouthing the words when it’s clear that he is lying. While turning the lever that sends shocks into Winston’s body, O’Brien again holds up four fingers and asks,

“How many fingers, Winston?”

“Four. I suppose there are four. I would see five if I could. I am trying to see five.”

“Which do you wish: to persuade me that you see five, or really to see them?”

“Really to see them.”

As I pointed out above, the seducer — here embodied by O’Brien — aims for enthusiastic consent.

After several more moments of torture, O’Brien again asks how many fingers Winston sees. This time, Winston responds, “I don’t know. I don’t know. You will kill me if you do that again. Four, five, six — in all honesty I don’t know.” O’Brien retorts, simply, “Better.”

**Isolation**

Living in a world in which your thoughts can be extracted at will by surveillance and psychological interpretation, in which neither objective records nor your own inner life can be trusted, is a lonely existence. We humans thrive only when we feel that there is something or someone we can trust. A life devoid of that — in which it’s impossible to share a secret without worrying that your confidence will be betrayed — is hardly worth living. This brings us to the final method used in the seduction of Winston Smith: isolation.

Consider the case of Tom Parsons. Tom is not very bright, but he is as committed to the Party as anyone in Oceania. Nevertheless, Tom’s children are educated to suspect their own parents and be prepared to inform on them. And that is precisely what they do. Poor Tom Parsons should not trust even his own family, but he is so indoctrinated that, when he is arrested, he cries, “Of course I’m guilty! You don’t think the Party would arrest an innocent man, do you?” Parsons has lost his trust in himself to such an extent that, when his daughter accuses him of saying, “Down with Big Brother!” in his sleep, he believes her and regards that as a serious indictment.

By breaking down bonds of attachment and trust between intimates and replacing them with suspicion, Big Brother eliminates one of the few remaining objects of trust. But the insidious intervention goes further. In addition to destroying interpersonal trust, the Big Brother’s representatives insert themselves between people as gatekeepers. Tom Parsons’s daughter did not keep her father’s somnambulism to herself, bring it up with him directly, or consult her mother about what to do. No, she went straight to the thought police.

To understand the importance of this, it’s helpful to think about the structure of trust in a community.[[3]](#footnote-3) In network science, it’s common to model communities as sets of nodes that represent agents. These nodes are then connected by edges that represent some kind of relation; in our case, the relation is trust. A very simple network is shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1:** **simple dyadic network.** This network represents a small community in which A trusts B but B does not trust A.



Adding a reflexive loop indicates that the agent trusts himself, as in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: reflexive dyadic network.** This network represents a small community in which A trusts B, B trusts A, and both A and B trust themselves.



In the plot of *1984*, the method of isolation is combined with surveillance and the undermining of self-trust to transform healthy communities like the one pictured in Figure 2 into unhealthy communities like the one pictured in Figure 3.

**Figure 3: the community in the Ministry of Love after Winston’s and Julia’s arrest.** Note that Winston no longer trusts either himself or Julia, and Julia no longer trusts herself or Winston.



One of the few things that makes Winston Smith’s life tolerable during the first half of the story is his intimate bond with Julia. By isolating them from each other, torturing them into informing on and betraying each other, and undermining their self-trust, O’Brien strips Winston (and Julia) of a precious good. Near the end the novel, they both confess to having betrayed each other, after which Julia says that sometimes

they threaten you with something you can’t stand up to, can’t even think about. And then you say, ‘Don’t do it to me, do it to somebody else, do it to so-and-so.’ And perhaps you might pretend, afterwards, that it was only a trick and that you just said it to make them stop and didn’t really mean it. But that isn’t true. At the time when it happens you do mean it. You think there’s no other way of saving yourself, and you’re quite ready to save yourself that way. You WANT it to happen to the other person. You don’t give a damn what they suffer. All you care about is yourself.”

Having done precisely this himself when threatened with the voracious rats, Winston echoes her sentiment, then Julia says, “And after that, you don’t feel the same towards the other person any longer.”

**From *1984* to the twenty-first century**

What can we learn from *1984*? Is Orwell’s dystopia something we managed to avoid, or does contemporary society stand on the brink of a new dystopia? Are we, like Winston Smith, being seduced at a distance by a loathsome monster? To shed light on this question, we can ask to what extent the four methods employed in the seduction of Winston Smith are also being employed today. The answer is scary. I will use recent developments in the United States to make my case. The United States is just one country, of course, but what’s happened there could happen in many other places.

First, consider surveillance. After the 9/11 attacks on New York City and the Pentagon, the United States government set up a massive surveillance system that taps phone and email communications both within the country and abroad. This sort of system has also been implemented in Britain, China, Russia, and to some extent the European continent as a whole. Moreover, sometimes we know that we are being observed and recorded, but in many cases we think that we are enjoying a private moment when we are actually being surveilled.

Second, consider the annihilation of history and official documentation more generally. After being inaugurated, Donald Trump directed his administration to impose a gag rule on scientists working in the Environmental Protection Agency and elsewhere. In addition, reports produced by these scientists were quashed, and the website of the Environmental Protection Agency was scrubbed of all mention of ‘climate change.’

Third, people are being invited to distrust their own perceptions. For example, despite losing the popular vote by approximately three million ballots in 2016, Trump continues to insist that he actually won the popular vote and was somehow defrauded by millions of illegally cast ballots. Only a handful of such illegal ballots have been discovered, however, and many of them were cast for Trump himself. While this isn’t exactly the same as insisting that two and two make five, it is insisting that 62,984,825 is greater than 65,853,516. Likewise, Trump has insisted that the crowd at his inauguration was the largest in history; photographs of the event show otherwise, but Trump’s supporters — when surveyed by psychologists — often follow his lead rather than trusting their own eyes.

Fourth, by hurling the epithet of ‘fake news’ at everything that shows him in a bad light, Trump is undermining trust in the media. Indeed, he recently bragged about this on his Twitter feed, saying. “It is finally sinking through. 46% OF PEOPLE BELIEVE MAJOR NATIONAL NEWS ORGS FABRICATE STORIES ABOUT ME. FAKE NEWS, even worse! Lost cred.” While this is not exactly the same as the interpersonal isolation that O’Brien imposes between Winston Smith and Julia, it has a similar effect: Trump is essentially telling people, “Don’t trust each other or your own eyes — trust me instead!”

The good news is that the resistance to Trump and those like him is much stronger and more organized than the resistance to Big Brother in Orwell’s novel. The bad news is that there is no guarantee the resistance will win.

1. Forrester, John. (1990). *The Seductions of Psychoanalysis: Freud, Lacan, and Derrida.* Cambridge University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I explore these ideas further in Alfano, M. (2013). *Character as Moral Fiction*. Cambridge University Press. You can read more about these ideas in Doris, J. (2015). *Talking To Ourselves*. Oxford University Press. And Wong, D. (2006). *Natural Moralities*. Oxford University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For more on this, see Alfano, M. (2016). The topology of communities of trust. *Russian Sociological Review*, 15(4): 30-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)