

# Watching Worlds: Surveillance and Identity in 1984 and the Handmaid's Tale

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## Abstract

Surveillance is shown as a part of how societies are controlled in dystopian narratives. It marks how people behave and who they are as person. This research examines how surveillance and identity are portrayed in George Orwell's 1984 and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

This paper compares these two books to see how governments with control manipulate people's language, memories, gender, and bodies to make them obey. George Orwell shows surveillance as a tool that is always present and takes away people individuality by controlling their minds and watching them all the time. Margaret Atwood on the hand shows how societies controlled by men watch and control women's bodies and identities through religion and reproduction.

Both novels show what happens when people are not free under a controlling government. However, they differ in how they show people fighting back, how they deal with gender, and how people keep their identities. This study uses Michel Foucault's ideas about how people are watched and controlled and how this affects who they are. These books are still important today when we talk about governments controlling people's surveillance in the age of identity politics.

By comparing how technology and societies controlled by men dominate people, this research adds to what we know about stories. It looks at surveillance not just as a way to control people but as a way to create identities. Surveillance and identity formation in 1984 and *The Handmaid's Tale* are still topics. The exemplification of surveillance in these works helps us understand its effects on people. Surveillance is a part of dystopian literature, and it continues to affect our thinking about individuality and domination.

**Keywords:** Surveillance, domination, identity, dystopian literature, totalitarian.

## Introduction

While science fiction opens a larger palette to literary work with, dystopia stresses the dangers of unrestricted technological progression. Dystopia: A genre in literature that displays adverse visions of a future, often portraying the outcome or role of science and various technology вЂ” Via Wikipedia

Dystopian literature frequently deals with the theme of power versus the individual, especially in societies where dictatorial regimes depend on surveillance to maintain political control. This is an incredibly powerful genre, and "1984" and "The Handmaid's Tale" are two of the most important pieces in it. These two novels show us totalitarian systems in which every coincidence is monitored and thought-directed, controlling not just how we think but also who we are.

Although written in different historical contexts, the texts raise concerns about how political systems transform people into obedient subjects. Published in 1949, Orwell's 1984 communicates the fear of

totalitarianism, suppression, and state propaganda after the Second World War. The novel represents Oceania as a society ruled by the Party, symbolized by Big Brother. Inhabitants are subjected to constant surveillance through telescreens, spies, and psychological manipulation. Individual identity is damaged in a system where independent thought is a political crime. Orwell illustrates how surveillance goes beyond physical watching to invade memory, language and consciousness (Orwell, 1949).

A classic work of feminist dystopian literature published in 1985, Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* addresses concerns about patriarchal oppression, religious extremism, and control over female reproductive rights. Set in the Republic of Gilead, the novel depicts a theocratic regime where women are sorted according to their reproductive and domestic roles. Surveillance occurs through institutional observation, social rituals, gendered discipline and internalized fear. Offred's fragmented narrative uncovers the psychological effects of living under a regime that erases personal identity and autonomy (Atwood, 1985).

This study examines how surveillance affects the construction and destruction of identity in both novels. It argues that while Orwell focuses on political and technological control, Atwood draws attention to gendered and corporeal surveillance. Through comparative analysis, this study shows how both works reveal how authoritarian systems can reshape human identity while also highlighting the ongoing presence of resistance and memory.

### **Surveillance and Identity in *1984***

Surveillance in George Orwell's *1984* aids as a device that maintains the Party's complete control over Oceania's people. Orwell describes a system in which technology, institutional violence, and language control work together to support a totalitarian regime. This regime not only watches people's actions but also penetrates their thoughts and memories. This constant surveillance leads to self-regulation, creating a psychological state of fear and conformity that strengthens power beyond mere physical observation into the depths of individual consciousness (Orwell, 1949).

At the center of this surveillance system is the telescreen, a symbol of constant control found in homes and workplaces. These devices serve two main purposes: broadcasting propaganda and tracking people's actions in real time. Winston Smith's effort to write privately illustrates the psychological effects of this system. Even though he tries to hide his thoughts by concealing his diary, he is still haunted by the fear of being watched. Orwell shows that surveillance goes beyond visible watching, fostering the internal fear that silences private dissent. This incorporation connects to Foucault's idea of disciplinary power, where surveillance becomes a way of self-discipline due to the awareness of being constantly monitored (Foucault, 1977).

The psychological aspect of surveillance becomes even stronger with the Thought Police. They enforce ideological conformity by punishing not only open rebellion but also any thoughts that are seen as anti-party. Thoughtcrime shows how the line between private thoughts and public actions is blurred. This demonstrates how power seeps into the most personal aspects of individual identity. Winston realizes that even his involuntary reactions or dreams could betray him. This highlights the regime's aim to control subconscious processes, creating a split between how one acts outwardly and what one fears internally. Constant psychological pressure pushes for complete ideological submission, stripping away personal freedom (Orwell, 1949).

Language is a powerful tool for control and plays a key role in solidifying the surveillance. Newspeak, the Party's official language, reduces vocabulary to eliminate any chance of dissent. Syme, who specializes

in Newspeak, explains that its purpose is to limit thought. This effectively makes rebellion impossible by restricting people's self-expression. Orwell emphasized that language shapes thought. By controlling language, the Party rebuilds individual identities to fit its ideological beliefs. Winston's struggle to express alternative realities shows how the simplification of language hinders the ability to think rebelliously, making resistance increasingly unimaginable (Orwell, 1949).

The Party controls history through the Ministry of Truth, which constantly rewrites the past to align it with the Party's present policies. Winston's role in this process emphasizes the manipulation of memory, an essential element of both personal and collective identity. Through the erasure and rewriting of history, the regime erodes people's sense of reality, forcing them to accept a version of the truth that is always changing. Winston's attempt to hold on to real memories is an act of rebellion, but the Party's total control of the documentation of history leaves him powerless. Orwell shows this as a domination of the epistemological kind, where power shapes not only conduct but also the fabric of reality itself (Orwell, 1949).

One striking example of the psychological burden of surveillance is illustrated in Winston's memories of his childhood, which increasingly contradict the official version of history. The Party's slogan "Who controls the past controls the future" exemplifies the influence of historical revisionism on individual subjectivity. Winston's memories are fractured and unreliable, and his sense of self begins to disintegrate. This shows that the manipulation of memory destroys the continuity of identity and stresses how surveillance penetrates the deepest layers of human consciousness (Orwell, 1949).

The power of the Party to spy and punish reaches its height in Room 101, and here, psychological ruin is completed. Previous mechanisms relied on observation and fear, but Room 101 intends to destroy the very core of identity through torture. O'Brien's comment that the Party pursues power solely for its own sake emphasizes the regime's intention to eliminate emotional and moral independence from its citizens. Winston's betrayal of Julia represents the destruction of personal loyalty and love and illustrates how surveillance penetrates emotional relationships, rendering people into compliant, ideologically compliant subjects. Orwell shows that the power of surveillance lies in its ability to internalize control so that rebellion is not only difficult, but seems impossible (Orwell, 1949).

Throughout the novel, Orwell portrays resistance as fragile yet meaningful. Winston's rebellious acts—writing in his diary, secretly loving Julia, and yearning for the truth—are attempts to preserve individuality in the face of an omnipresent system. Yet, these acts are ultimately rendered powerless by the regime's control of the social, linguistic, and psychological conditions. The novel ends with Winston's psychological capitulation and his love for Big Brother, illustrating the horrifying extent to which surveillance alters personal identity and eliminates the potential for genuine resistance. Orwell's dystopia demonstrates that the most powerful form of totalitarian surveillance is that which internalizes control in the minds of individuals to the point of destroying their ability to imagine alternative realities.

In a broader sense, Orwell's insight into surveillance is a pertinent warning for contemporary anxieties about government surveillance, media manipulation, and the erosion of privacy. The novel proposes that the best authoritarian regimes are those in which people internalize the notion of surveillance and self-censor and police their own thoughts without any external coercion. Through a combination of technological, linguistic, and institutional mechanisms, Orwell shows how power consolidates itself by transforming citizens into compliant subjects whose inner psychological states are indistinguishable from their outward conformity. This total control demonstrates the terrifying power of surveillance to change

not only behaviour but also the very structure of human consciousness and identity (Foucault, 1977; Orwell, 1949).

### **Surveillance and Identity in *The Handmaid's Tale***

Surveillance in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* functions as a deeply embedded, gendered mechanism of control that sustains Gilead's patriarchal and totalitarian regime. Unlike the technological surveillance portrayed in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Gilead's system relies on embodied observation, social rituals, and linguistic regulation to enforce conformity and to suppress individual autonomy. This multifaceted surveillance operates both openly and covertly, transforming women's bodies and behaviours into political resources and tools of repression, thereby shaping personal identities in accordance with the regime's ideological objectives (Atwood 1985).

Central to Gilead's surveillance apparatus are the Eyes, a secretive and omnipresent group of spies whose invisibility generates a climate of suspicion and fear. The uncertainty surrounding who may be watching encourages constant self-monitoring among citizens, particularly women. This decentralized form of surveillance echoes Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, in which social and institutional mechanisms work together to internalize control. Women, in particular, engage in mutual surveillance through gossip, social judgment, and ritualized observation, reinforcing a collective discipline that extends beyond formal institutions. Such communal policing ensures conformity by making surveillance an ordinary aspect of daily life, embedding power relations into social interactions rather than relying solely on technological means (Foucault 1977).

The aunt's role exemplifies how surveillance is pedagogical and internalized. At the Red Center, women undergo ideological conditioning aimed at erasing their previous identities and normalizing their submission. Through biblical teachings and psychological manipulation, the aunt instils patriarchal values, teaching women to accept their subordinate roles and perceive surveillance as protective rather than oppressive. This internalization of discipline is reinforced through linguistic practices, particularly naming conventions. Women's names, such as Offred, signify possession and reduce individual identity to a function of patriarchal ownership. This linguistic erasure underscores how language in Gilead is a tool for controlling self-perception and social roles, aligning personal identity with the regime's ideology (Atwood 1985).

Reproductive surveillance exemplifies control through bodily monitoring. Handmaids are subjected to constant surveillance of their fertility and obedience through medical examinations, ceremonial sex rituals, and domestic oversight. Their bodies are transformed into political instruments, publicly scrutinized and regulated to ensure reproductive compliance. This gendered surveillance makes the female body a site of social and political control, where sexuality and fertility are policed as state assets. Rituals like Salvaging and Particition, in which women participate in public executions and punishment, serve to mobilize collective emotion and reinforce discipline. These communal acts of violence and judgment function as social spectacles that uphold the regime's authority through shared participation and fear (Atwood 1985). Despite the pervasive surveillance system, Atwood emphasizes the importance of individual acts of resistance rooted in memory, storytelling, and clandestine relationships. Offred's narration, although constrained by the regime's ideological framework, becomes an act of self-preservation that preserves the fragments of her personal identity. Her memories of her husband, daughter, and past life serve as covert acts of defiance, asserting her subjective experience in the face of systemic erasure. This storytelling highlights how personal narratives can serve as a subtle form of resistance that sustains autonomy within

oppressive conditions. Unlike Orwell's depiction of technological control, Atwood underscores that resistance can manifest through social and linguistic practices—using language, memory, and emotional bonds to preserve individuality (Atwood 1985).

Hence, *The Handmaid's Tale* portrays surveillance as a gendered and embodied process that operates through social rituals, bodily regulation, and linguistic control. This demonstrates that authoritarian power sustains itself not only through overt technological means but also through everyday social interactions and patriarchal norms that infiltrate personal and collective lives. Surveillance in Gilead transforms women into visible objects of political and reproductive management, while constraining the conditions necessary for autonomous identity and resistance. Through this depiction, Atwood reveals how totalitarian regimes manipulate the social fabric and individual consciousness to maintain control, emphasizing the subtle yet potent forms of resistance that persist within such systems (Atwood, 1985).

### Comparative Analysis

Although *1984* and *The Handmaid's Tale* depict distinct dystopian societies, both novels examine how surveillance functions as a mechanism for controlling identities. In each text, authoritarian systems seek to eliminate individuality by regulating thoughts, memories, language, and behaviour. However, the methods and ideological foundations of surveillance differ significantly from each other.

Orwell's Oceania relies primarily on technological and political surveillance methods. The Party employs telescreens, propaganda, and historical revisionism to establish total, ideological control. Surveillance is centralized and explicitly political, targeting all citizens, regardless of gender. Identity becomes subordinate to the state's collective authority.

In contrast, Atwood's Gilead emphasizes gendered surveillance rooted in religious and patriarchal ideology. Women experience surveillance through reproductive regulation, domestic hierarchies, and social discipline. While Orwell focuses on political totalitarianism, Atwood foregrounds the intersection of power and gender. Surveillance in Gilead specifically targets women's autonomy and bodily independence.

The protagonists also differ in their responses to this oppression. Winston Smith attempts intellectual rebellion through private thought and romantic relationships, yet his resistance collapses under torture. Offred's resistance is more subtle and psychological, consisting of memory, narrative, and emotional survival. Consequently, Atwood offers a more ambiguous representation of resistance than Orwell.

Another important distinction is the role of language. In *1984*, language is deliberately reduced through Newspeak to eliminate dissenting opinions. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, language is restricted through religious discourse and censorship, but the narrative remains a source of resistance. Offred's storytelling preserves individuality in ways that are unavailable to Winston.

Despite these differences, both novels demonstrate how surveillance threatens the fundamental conditions necessary for human identity. The destruction of privacy, memory, and emotional connections results in the fragmentation of selfhood. Both Orwell and Atwood warn that authoritarian systems become most dangerous when surveillance is normalized and internalized by individuals.

### Conclusion

Both *1984* and *The Handmaid's Tale* remain enduring critiques of surveillance and authoritarianism. Through distinct yet complementary approaches, Orwell and Atwood reveal how oppressive regimes manipulate identity through observation, ideology, and psychological discipline. Orwell emphasizes

technological surveillance and political indoctrination, whereas Atwood highlights patriarchal regulation and bodily control. Both authors demonstrate that surveillance extends beyond physical monitoring to encompass language, memory, sexuality, and personal connections.

The novels continue to resonate in contemporary society, where concerns regarding digital surveillance, governmental authority, misinformation, and gender politics are increasingly significant. Their relevance lies not only in their depiction of oppressive futures, but also in their insight into the fragility of individuality under systems of institutional power. Ultimately, both texts suggest that the preservation of identity depends on memory, language, and the capacity for critical resistance.

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