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# *1984 after Nam June Paik*

## Colophon

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# 1984 after Nam June Paik

Jung-ho Suh

## 1. Why 1984?

This is the human nature: people tend to see only what they want to see or to focus on only what they are interested in. Whether you realize it or not, you are inclined to only read news articles that attract your attention among others. Once I read an article that the cyber censorship in China became strengthened to a serious level. The article said the Chinese authority has put stringent guidelines for the internet censorship into effect to strongly repress the freedom of expression online. Its headline was interesting: “China has brought tough internet control guidelines into force just like in 1984, a novel by George Orwell.” It criticized the totalitarian society forewarned by Orwell.

Things are not that different in Korea. When government authorities’ surveillance on civilians hit the headlines, political articles referred to Orwell under titles such as “The agony that your accounts and mails are inspected and The Big Brother society reviewed from the Orwellian perspective.” Orwell has also appeared in literary articles on a wide range

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of art such as “1Q84 Murakami called for 1984 Orwell” and “Little People tamed by Big Brother from 1984 to 1Q84.” Orwell has been cited in various articles regarding films as well including *A Clockwork Orange*, *Matrix*, and *Brazil*.

Seoul National University’s Main Library has recently released ‘Top 100 favorite books of Harvard students.’ The list has drawn a lot of attention. George Orwell’s novel *1984* took the first rank. It has huge implications to intellectuals of this time, since it proves Orwell’s perspective is still strongly connected to the modern intelligence. There have been similar releases before SNU. The *Guardian*’s survey in 2007 showed that Orwell’s *1984* came top of the books that best defined the 20th century. It also occupied the second place of *Newsweek*’s ‘Top 100 Books’ in 2008.

However, I wonder why *1984* gets all the attention among others. If the modern society is close to dystopia, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* or Zamyatin’s *We* would be good enough. However, it consists in always Orwell. In this contemporary world, Orwell’s novels are mentioned because of their implications that cannot be comprehended simply as the collection of sentences and texts. In other words, the reason for Orwell’s popularity is symbolic meanings or allegorical implications. Nam June Paik used Orwell’s novel as an internal subject matter for his video performance *Good Morning Mr. Orwell* in 1984. For Paik, *1984* itself was an allegory about the modern society.

Short and strong messages are attractive materials. The allegory of *1984* is simple. It is strong. The novel straightforwardly describes images that technological development can control people’s lives and put them in agony, and that the absolute power can form a totalitarian society, monitor people around the clock and punish them. Those images have enlightened people and texts have been given solid life. No matter Orwell wanted or not, *1984* has become an allegory in the modern society. It has grown and developed by itself, and peeked around the modern society.

People’s habit to see only what they can see has become an important topic of this time. When *1984* was published, it received mixed opinions. It was viewed as an anticommunist novel and welcomed in anticommunist countries such as the U.S. and Korea. Meanwhile, some European countries and Russia severely criticized the novel on the grounds that it attempted

to subvert their system. Orwell argued that the totalitarian state in his novel didn't mean Russia and other communist countries. However, what happened after communist states collapsed? Orwell's *1984* is still very popular, regardless of all these initial responses. It is quoted in various areas of our society for many reasons more than in the anticommunist era.

Orwell was neither a capitalist nor a socialist. If you have to define his ideology, you can say it was more of anarchism or eco-socialism. Also, some people say he was a true conservative who loved his country. Because of these diverse views about his ideology, there are different interpretations of his novels and some are even ambiguous. Therefore, reading Orwell's novels is an attempt to identify his political opinions and to observe historical features of the time.

## 2. Nam June Paik and *Good Morning Mr. Orwell*

"For us, the 21st century begins on January 1, 1984."<sup>1</sup>

Research and evaluation about Nam June Paik cannot be contained in a couple of books. However, I have to talk about Nam June Paik here because of *Good Morning Mr. Orwell*. It is his live video performance connecting major cities around the world that was broadcast real time via satellite on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1984.

George Orwell's *1984* is about a near future when technology is advanced. The future is depicted as grim, as the only absolute power, Big Brother, monitors and punishes the whole society. Big Brother takes advantage of advanced technologies which are described as unnerving and horrifying tools to constantly monitor people for the perpetuation of the system.

"Inside the flat a fruity voice was reading out a list of figures which had something to do with the production of pig-iron. The voice came from an oblong metal plaque like a dulled mirror which formed part of the surface of the right-hand wall. Winston turned a switch and the voice sank somewhat, though the words were still distinguishable. [...] Any sound that

<sup>1</sup>  
Nam June Paik, "Lettre à Wolfgang Steinecke, Darmstadt," in Edith Decker and Irmeline Lebeer eds., Im Wang-June, Jung Mi-Ae, Kim Moon-Young, trans., *Nam June Paik: From Horse to Christo*, Yongin: Nam June Paik Art Center, 2010, p.402.

Winston made, above the level of a very low whisper, would be picked up by it; moreover, so long as he remained within the field of vision which the metal plaque commanded, he could be seen as well as heard. There was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment.”<sup>2</sup>

Nam June Paik had a negative view on Orwell’s near future. As a pioneer in video art who opened a new artistic chapter by utilizing new technologies, he didn’t like Orwell’s devaluation of technologies. Paik planned a feast of technologies in 1984, the background of the novel *1984*: the unprecedented global satellite performance *Good Morning Mr. Orwell*. The plan was huge and gigantic enough to shake the pillars of the artistic history. It was ‘a technology show’ that transcended continents and spaces. Paik recorded the following draft<sup>3</sup> for the show to make it possible.

“Although satellite has been available for cultural use for a long time, within an affordable price range (\$10,000), not many two way broadcasts with cultural content have been tried. Imagine, for example, Merce Cunningham and Jean-Louis Barrault making a sky duet on live TV. Imagine a discussion on the existential problems of today between Simone de Beauvoir and Norman Mailer... or a performance duet with Joseph Beuys and John Cage. “Sky is the limit!!” is not a symbolic word anymore in this case. With less than the cost of a one night Broadway production, which reaches only a few hundred people, our trans-Atlantic satellite production will reach millions of people on two continents, and many million more behind the iron curtain; as it is well known, many Eastern European countries can receive broadcasts from western TV networks.”<sup>4</sup>

*Good Morning Mr. Orwell* was a new kind of video performance that utilized satellite transmission technology, overcame physical limitations of national boundaries and barriers, and provided a program 25 million people could watch simultaneously.<sup>5</sup> For Nam June Paik, ‘Eastern European countries can watch Western TV programs’ meant technologies can resolve ideological conflicts. Orwell’s near future in *1984* was a gloomy society based on technology development. However, Paik thought technology

<sup>2</sup>  
George Orwell, *1984*, London: Penguin Books, 2003, pp.3-5.

<sup>3</sup>  
Nam June Paik, Appendix 1 “The First Script, 1983 May,” in DAAD Galerie ed. *Art for 25 million*, Berlin: DAAD Galerie, 1984, unpagued.

<sup>4</sup>  
Nam June Paik, *ibid*.

<sup>5</sup>  
Edith Decker, Kim Jeong-Yong, trans. *Nam June Paik*, Seoul: Goongri, 2001, pp.238-240.

development would bring about hopeful future and a positive society where technologies could help resolve disputes. He drew up a specific scenario for *Good Morning Mr. Orwell* and prepared detail compositions for the performance.<sup>6</sup>

Paik presented a live satellite show linking global cities including Paris and New York along with his artistic companions, including John Cage, Joseph Beuys, Merce Cunningham, Peter Gabriel, a pop star Yves Montand and among others, on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1984.<sup>7</sup> This performance opened a new chapter in satellite art, and it was personally meaningful for Paik as a chance to move from video art to satellite art.

For Paik, the early 1980s when technologies boomed was different from Orwell's 1980s. He maintained his critical view on Orwell's idea. Through *Good Morning Mr. Orwell*, Paik reinterpreted the depressed future of Big Brother's totalitarianism as a bright and positive technology-savvy modern society where conflicts could be resolved. Fluxus movement of Paik transformed Orwell's universal allegory into his territory. For him, art was 'territorial, not universal for the public.'<sup>8</sup>

### 3. 1984 after 1984

Orwell's 1984 criticizes totalitarianism. The novel describes the near future as a depressed dystopian society. Technocrats work as instruments of the absolute power under the system, and monitor and punish citizens. Big Brother's oppressive society thoroughly controls individual liberty and even love between men and women. Citizens exist simply as tools to maintain the system. They have no choice but to lead monotonous everyday lives without any human dignity. They live under an unprecedented tyranny. It is worth noticing Orwell's Big Brother society is not just an absurd near future.

Orwell described the contemporary society. Big Brother society should have disappeared after the end of the cold war. However, articles still quote Orwell and his phantom is penetrated deep into the literary world. If what he criticized was simply the communism, his shadow should have been shrunk. Totalitarianism reminds you of despotic rulings by Stalin,

<sup>6</sup>  
Nam June Paik, *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup>  
Kim Eunhyung, "1984's 'Good Morning, Mr. Orwell' draws global attention," *The Hankyoreh*, January 30, 2006. <http://news.naver.com/main/read.nhn?mode=LSD&mid=sec&sid1=103&oid=028&aid=000014372>

<sup>8</sup>  
Yong-Ok Kim, *Nam June Paik-Seok do hwa ron*, Seoul: Tongnamu, 1992, p.216.

Mussolini and Hitler. However, capitalism, another kind of totalitarianism, took the place of the horrendous despotism. The new totalitarianism would have probably invaded the overall world already without being noticed in the form of 'Little People' of *1Q84*.

Orwell's *1984* contains literary allegory. His allegory has been reproduced repeatedly and formed a certain notion which criticizes the absolute power, the destruction of human nature, and monitoring and punishment of citizens. This notion is steadily expressed as texts on paper or as images on pictures or surfaces. Orwell's 'cognitive framework' arouses clear thoughts on public interests. Results of the framework are shown in various forms such as installations, images, literatures and articles in mass media. This is why Orwell's *1984* is still significant today.

The first allegory formed by *1984* created a clear cognitive framework of the time, and generated values that can be upheld consistently for a long time. If a tyranny worse than the society in *1984* comes in the near future, people will be able to share 'affectif' of resistance mechanism through Orwell's allegory. That is because of the power of allegory produced by *1984*. ∞