Life of Digital Double

Colophon

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Sarah Grochala

For Orwell, writing in the 1940s, 1984 was the future. For Nam June Paik, broadcasting live in 1984, 1984 was the present. In Headlong's theatre adaptation of *1984*, 1984 is the past.

Headlong's adaptation of *1984* opened at the Nottingham Playhouse in September 2013 and has since toured the UK and played in London at the Almeida Theatre and then at the Playhouse Theatre in the West End. The production was co-written and co-directed by the Robert Icke and Duncan Macmillan.

The aim with this adaptation was to find a theatrical form that captured the form of Orwell's original novel. The adaptation would not be the literal representation of the Orwell's novel that audiences have come to expect but rather a theatrical way to 'mainline what's inside the novel and what its questions are and what its anxieties are and deliver that not cerebrally but to try and deliver that as an experience.' Robert Icke uses a jar of honey analogy to try and describe the difference between a literal approach to adaptation and the approach that he and Macmillan took to adapting *1984*.

Sarah Grochala | Associate Artist with Headlong, UK

Sarah Grochala is an associate artist with Headlong and produces and curates a range of digital content around each of Headlong's productions and explores the use of different digital platforms to deliver this content. She holds a PhD in contemporary British playwriting from Queen Mary, University of London. Her research examines the use of new forms in contemporary British theatre and their political implications. As a dramaturg, she has written on theatre for academic journals, and taught performance practice and theory in universities. She is currently Lecturer in Writing for Theatre at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama.

"If you wanted to have the experience of what honey was like one way of doing it would be to draw a picture of a jar of honey, which would be fine and not inaccurate – but if you did a production of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that was focused mainly on blue overalls, peeling walls and dry ice that was the equivalent of drawing a jar of honey and what you really want to do is open the jar and say, Taste this – this is brilliant!"

(Icke, Macmillan and Cavendish)[1]

Icke and Macmillan's adaptation takes Orwell's Appendix to the novel as its starting point. The Appendix frames Winston Smith's account of events during 1984. It ends the novel and Orwell draws the reader's attention to it at the very beginning of the novel. On the third page of the text there is a footnote regarding the definition of Newspeak, which points the reader to the Appendix.

'Newspeak was the official language of Oceania. For an account of its structure and etymology see Appendix.'

George Orwell's footnote, *1984*[2]

This footnote is Orwell's only footnote in the entire novel. Most people, who read the book, don't read the appendix. but for Orwell, the Appendix was an important part of the novel. Orwell was keen to make sure that the book was never published without it.

'It's possible that the American publishers will want to cut out the Appendix, which of course is not a usual thing to have in something purporting to be a novel, but I would like to retain it if possible.'

George Orwell, Letter[3]

When the American Book of the Month club asked to publish the book without the Appendix, Orwell refused to allow them to publish the novel without it, so risking losing himself £40,000. They eventually backed down and published the novel complete with the Appendix.[4]

If you do read the Appendix, you realise that the set of events that

1

Robert Icke, Duncan Macmillan and Dominic Cavendish, 'Headlong's Robert Icke and Duncan Macmillan Talk Orwell and Nineteen Eighty-Four,' *theatreVOICE*, 2013 http://www.theatrevoice.com/audio/headlongs-robert-icke-and-duncan-macmillan-talk-orwell-and-1984/ [accessed 3 September 2014]

2

George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2000), p.5

3

George Orwell, *George Orwell: A Life in Letters* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), p.435

4

Jeffrey Meyers, *Orwell: Life and Art* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010), pp.156-157

are described in the book are not happening in the future or even in the present, they're happening in the past. To quote the Appendix:

> 'Newspeak was the official language of Oceania ⋯ It was expected that
> Newspeak would have finally superseded Oldspeak (or Standard English as
> we should call it) by about the year 2050.'
> George Orwell's Appendix, *1984* [5]

The exact date of the Appendix is unclear, but what is clear is that it is written at some point after 1984, perhaps in 2050. Winston's story is contextualized as something that happened before the publication of the book that we read as *1984*. The party's project to introduce Newspeak has failed. It is implied that Ingsoc, Oceania and the party may be, but may not necessarily be, a thing of the past. The record of Winston's experiences has not been deleted from history as O'Brien tells him it will be. If party do still exist, it is in a different form to Winston's experience of them in *1984*.

The question that Icke and Macmillan asked themselves in creating their adaption was: "How do you dramatise the appendix?" How does rethinking the book through the context of the appendix change the way that you experience and understand Orwell's novel? (Icke, Macmillan and Cavendish)

So the adaptation begins not in 1984, but some years after 1984. At the beginning of the production we see a book group meeting to discuss a book. This book could be *1984*; it could be Winston's diary. As the book group talks about the book, one of its members starts to experience the events in the book. The temporal point of view from which the story is told, however, is unclear. It is also unclear from whose perspective the story is being told. It could be Winston remembering the events of 1984 from the future. It could be Winston in 1984 imagining people in the future reading his diary. It could be people in the future imagining Winston in the past.

The adaptation questions the reliability of this remembered or imagined or rewritten narrative, picking up on contradictions within Orwell's own text, in which Winston's narration is strange mixture of

[5]
Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*,
p.312

action, memories, prophecies and dreams. He seems to impossibly imagine events before they happen. For example, he dreams the sexual encounter with Julia in the countryside long before it actually happens.

> 'The girl with dark hair was coming towards him across the field. With what seemed a single movement she tore off her clothes and flung them disdainfully aside.'
>
> George Orwell, *1984* [6]

He also makes statements that contradict the narrative of his story. When Julia is dragged out of the antique shop, he states that this was 'the last he saw of her'[7] but yet he sees her again later in the café. In the same way, the narrative in the theatrical adaptation seeks to constantly question its own reliability. It posits the idea that the imperfections in Orwell's narrative, which are often read as the mistakes of a seriously ill man struggling to finish his last masterpiece, are deliberate. Orwell deliberately implies that Winston's account of the events of 1984 is as unstable as the histories that he rewrites in his job in the Records Department at the Ministry of Truth.

In adapting the novel, there was no explicit desire to contemporise Orwell's narrative and relate it to current events. There was some discussion of contemporary whistle-blowers such as Edward Snowdon and Chelsea Manning. There was some discussion of surveillance culture and the history of surveillance. The adaptation is informed by elements from contemporary culture including Stanley Kubrick's film *The Shining*, Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's film *The Lives of Others* and *Gatz*, an adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby by* the American Theatre Company Elevator Repair Service. These ideas were all in the room, but the main objective was to re-read the novel with fresh eyes and to reconsider our assumptions about it. Through this reconsideration, the hope was that the audience would be able to experience the heart of Orwell's novel and see it anew.

> "We really didn't want to make this the sort of Chinese marching 1984, but rather to make it a sort of psychological pressure that started when the curtain went out and when we spat it back out at the end and the house

[6]
Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p.33

[7]
Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p.232

lights came up again you felt like you'd been like under this tight pressure

for the whole thing."

(Icke, Macmillan and Cavendish)

So the job of explicitly exploring the contemporary relevance of Orwell's novel became the driving force behind the digital project that would sit alongside the production.

The aim of Headlong's digital work is to develop digital experiences that operate in a similar way to the theatre that Headlong makes. A digital experience that is live, theatrical and provocative. A digital experience that offers the user a chance to see the world around them in a new way through a visceral experience. At the same time, we aim to capitalise on two of the elements of the digital medium that make it distinct from the experience of conventional theatre – personalisation and interactivity.

In terms of the digital experience's relationship to the theatre event, we aim to produce a digital experience that builds a relationship between the digital experience and the theatre event as opposed to the digital experience simply being a reproduction of the theatre event. The digital experience should illuminate the theatre experience and vice versa.

At the same time, the digital experience should be able to stand alone as an experience in itself, just as the theatre event does. So in the case of *1984*, we have a theatre event that rereads Orwell's book in the light of its Appendix and a digital experience that asks how Orwell's ideas relate to contemporary society. The two have a relationship with each other but they are not dependent on each other.

We had been talking to the Cultural Institute at King's College about collaborating on a project that would explore the relationship between the digital experience and the live event. The institute specialises in building and supporting partnerships between research expertise at King's College London and artists and arts organisations. The team was lead by myself for Headlong. The Cultural Institute connected us to three academics from King's College London: Professor Alex Callinicos, an expert in Marxism and Social Theory; Dr. Paolo Gerbaudo, an expert on the use of social media in political activism; and Dr. Btihaj Ajana, an expert in contemporary surveillance, digital technology and biometrics. Alongside
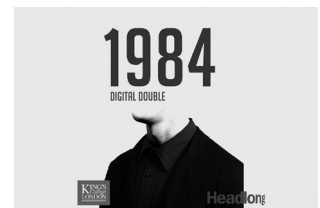
1984 Digital Double App

these experts, we worked on the creative and technical side of the project with the visual artist Michael Takeo Magruder and with Angelo Pestas from the London based design studio M/A

The *1984 Digital Double App* was born out of a set of three simple questions about the contemporary relevance of Orwell's *1984*:

- People often refer to the idea that we are living in 1984, but to what extent is that a valid observation about contemporary society?
- If Big Brother is always watching, how is he watching us now?
- And to what end?

Work started on the project in February 2013, four months before the Snowden revelations. At the time, there were some obvious answers to the questions we were asking ourselves such as CCTV cameras or biometrics. Headlong's theatrical work aims to enable people to see something differently – the old Apple slogan 'Think Different' would describe the company's attitude very well – so there was a need for the digital experience to question its users' assumptions about the world and to turn them on their heads in the same way that one of our theatre productions would. None of the obvious answers to the questions we set ourselves seemed to do that. The main problem was that all the obvious answers were posited on the premise that somewhere, there was an identifiable figure or group of figures who held power over us and were watching us in order to punish us harshly if we broke any of their rules. So not only did these answers seem obvious, they fundamentally misunderstood the subtle and seductive in which power operates in late capitalist societies.

For several months, I had noticed that I seemed to be being stalked. Not by a person but by all the things I had looked at but hadn't brought whilst shopping online. This infuriated me, as one of my pet hates is intrusive marketing. Around the same time, the location of my home was 'outed' on Facebook by one of my friends. For three years, I had managed to fool Facebook into believing that I lived in Hong Kong. I'd changed my location setting to Hong Kong while I was visiting there and initially forgot to change it back. After a while I started receiving all my Facebook adverts translated into Mandarin characters and then I deliberately decided to forget to change it back. When Facebook introduced tagging, however, one of my friends decided to betray my true location by tagging me as someone

who she worked with in London. Almost instantly all of my advertising was translated back into English, at which point I noticed how much more targeted it was, than it had been previously. If rather inaccurately targeted – adverts for mature dating, weight loss and anti-aging products based on my age, gender and my refusal to discuss my relationship status.

This led me to think about the ways in which we are being tracked online and colluding in that process by volunteering up huge amounts of personal information about both ourselves and other people via social media. It also raised questions for me about how this personal data projects an online identity for each of us that may or may not be a misrepresentation of our real world selves. This felt like a possible answer to question of how 'Big Brother' is watching us now and one that could form the basis for the digital project. It also seemed a particularly productive idea from an artistic point of view, as it would offer us the opportunity to interrogate some of the issues that are raised by digital technology by using digital technology itself to examine them. A project in which both the content and the form of the final work would generate a commentary on the issues we were exploring.

Btihaj Ajana introduced us to the idea that our online selves, created out of all the information available about each of us on the internet, can be thought of as our 'digital doubles.' She stressed that, regardless of whether they are a true reflection of our identities or not, these digital doubles have an impact on our lives in the real world as they affect how we are viewed by the people around us and by organisations.

The decision was made to create a web app focused around the idea of the Digital Double that would engage with issues around privacy. We wanted to give the user a glimpse of their Digital Double and to enable them to make an informed decision about whether or not they were happy with the data that was available about them online. Alongside this we wanted to provide them with some information about their internet use and some tools to help them control the nature of the data that is available about them online.

The app asks the user a set of questions about their use of personal data online and gives them information about the possible consequences of their online actions. The app also contains a range of in-depth articles

about Orwell and contemporary online forms of surveillance. Alongside this, the app offers to give the user a summary of the data that is currently available about them online, their Digital Double, if they will allow the app to access their social media accounts.

The data gathered by the app is then fed into a live experience. The app has a set of terms and conditions. These are as simplified and as clear as possible. They hint at how we are going to use the data that they provide in the live experience. Users agree to the public display of their data and metadata. They also agree that we can communicate with them via their mobile phone if they provide us with a phone number.

The live experience aims to provide users with a live equivalent of their online activity. Data scraped live from the users' feeds and is fed into a projection and displayed publicly in the foyer of the theatres where *1984* is playing. The range of data displayed in any single venue can be narrowed down to only include people have bought tickets for the show at that particular venue. The hope is that a user who is seeing our production of *1984* will see their data publicly displayed in the theatre foyer, gaining a better understanding of of how readily accessible their online personal data is to anyone by seeing that data displayed openly in a public space. If users provide us with their mobile phone number they receive texts from Big Brother before the show, warning them that they are being watched. After the show, they receive a phone call, during which they are played the song *Oranges and Lemons*.

There has been a surprising, but not entirely unexpected, response to the data projection used in the display in the theatre foyers. Many of the users were excited rather than shocked to see their data publicly displayed. Through the app, we wanted to demonstrate to its users the ease with which their data can be accessed and to provide them with information about how to protect their personal data. But we also wanted to encourage them to consider how digital technology might be changing the very idea of personal privacy itself. ∞