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Orwell and the Obvious

Most readers of 1984—arguably the most popular and influential postwar English-language novel—agree that its importance has little to do with art. Critics have taken this absence of artistic qualities to mean that its status as a supremely important novel comes with an expiration date. Raymond Williams, for example, writes that George Orwell’s work is concerned with a “general argument” related to the “mood” of his own time. “It is not that he was a great artist, whose experience we have slowly to receive and value.” Richard Rorty, who finds much to value in the novel, admits that it is a “good example of what Nabokov thought of as ‘topical trash,’” and predicts that it “will be widely read only as long as we describe the politics of the twentieth century as Orwell did.” Harold Bloom tells us that after we have digested the voluminous criticism on Orwell, “we are driven back to what makes 1984 a good bad book: relevance.” Richard Epstein fears that the relevance that made it a “good bad book” vanished with the end of the cold war, and suggests that the time has now come to assign it to a different genre. “1984 will continue to be read, but, over time, read more and more as a period piece.”

Certainly 1984 continues to be “read more and more,” if Amazon sales rankings and college and high school reading lists are any indication. But doubt about its “relevance” might go well beyond Epstein’s belief that it no longer describes our current political situation. Exactly what political situation did it describe? When, and for how long, did we “describe the politics of the twentieth century as Orwell did?” Consider the politics Orwell describes. The monolithic regime that controls Oceania is constituted by a single basic prohibition. “The Party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears. It was their final, most essential command.” Political life in 1984 is defined by a prohibition against perceiving the external world. This prohibition elicits the protagonist’s revolutionary politics: “Truisms are true,” Winston
declares, “hold on to that! Stones are hard, water is wet, objects unsupported fall towards the earth’s center” (81).

The novel describes a prohibition against the obvious, against perceiving the surface of the world, a prohibition resisted by the passionate affirmation of the hardness of stones and the wetness of water. When did we describe politics this way? When was the defense of truisms the key political issue? “Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four,” Winston says. “If that is granted, all else follows” (81). Rorty tells us that the point of this sentence is to defend freedom of speech, to champion a value, not a truism. “It does not matter whether ‘two plus two is four’ is true, much less whether this truth is ‘subjective’ or ‘corresponds to external reality.’ All that matters is that if you do believe it, you can say it without getting hurt.”

Freedom of speech certainly is a recognizable political issue. And if free speech is what Winston’s driving at with his talk of the hardness of rocks, then the “relevance” of 1984 becomes less of a mystery. But, as James Conant points out, it doesn’t seem very likely that free speech is the point here. Conant notes the obvious: some kind of commitment to “external reality” plays a role in the statements just quoted. And Conant finds a different political relevance in this commitment. He argues that “stones are hard, water is wet” refers to an epistemology that would enable the verification of facts in the face of social disapproval. “The more totalitarian the scenario one inhabits, the greater the number of beliefs one will have that are likely to be both warranted and unacceptable to one’s peers.” Therefore, Orwell’s book is relevant as a description of the epistemology that underlies successful resistance to the kinds of “totalitarian scenarios” that proliferated, as facts and as threats, in the political life of the past century.

But how far does the wetness of water really get you in a totalitarian scenario? Hannah Arendt, in her Origins of Totalitarianism, published three years after 1984, agrees that “the truism that two and two equals four cannot be perverted. . . . It is the only reliable ‘truth’ human beings can fall back upon” once totalitarianism destroys the space of civil society. “But,” she continues, “this ‘truth’ is empty or rather no truth at all, because it does not reveal anything.” Contra Conant, Arendt argues that you can’t ground political resistance—or anything else—on the wetness of water. No values, no political position, no meaningful autonomy follows from truisms. “Truisms are true,” Winston cries, “Hold on to that!” But the truth of truisms is precisely what does not need to be held onto. The hardness of rocks requires as little passionate defense now as it did under Stalin. Pointing out the obvious acquires the supreme value and power it has for Winston only in Orwell’s fiction. Experiencing the hardness of rocks becomes an endlessly fascinating and interesting activity only in a world constituted by a prohibition against the obvious. And despite those critics who point to Orwell’s relevance, that is not and has never been our world.

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Of course, no one really thinks it is. The critics don’t think Winston is really talking about the wetness of water. Rorty and Conant both read Winston’s passionate affirmation that “stones are hard, water is wet,” as a metaphor. Rorty thinks this sentence symbolizes Winston’s commitment to free speech. Conant thinks this sentence symbolizes Winston’s commitment to the scientific method.

In these writers’ hands, “stones are hard” is a metaphor with a certain cognitive content, which they specify in different ways. The tendency to read Orwell’s descriptive sentences as if they are metaphors has had the effect of reinforcing the conviction that Orwell is a writer who is not concerned with the aesthetic. To say that he is not concerned with the aesthetic is another way of saying that he is not concerned with the surface. The hardness of stones becomes soft and transparent in the critics’ hands; stones lose the opacity on which Winston insists. The novel appears as a book that is not exclusively and obsessively concerned with the surface of the world, with the obvious. Its surfaces become windows through which the critics look to discover its relevance. In the following, I will try to read Orwell’s descriptive sentences literally. My premise is that the function of Orwell’s writing is not to endow his descriptive sentences with further meanings. His writing has a different, noncognitive function: not to make the surface transparent, but to make it tangible.

“Stones are hard,” Winston triumphantly declares, “water is wet.” “In order to make us feel objects,” declares Viktor Shklovsky in one of the key texts of twentieth-century aesthetics, “to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art.” Shklovsky writes that habit, the operation of time in the human sensorium, tends irresistibly to destroy the surface of the world. “If we examine the general laws of perception,” he writes, “we see that as it becomes habitual, it also becomes automatic.” The first time we see something, its surface is fresh and vivid. And then it begins to disappear. “Gradually, under the influence of this generalizing perception, the object fades away. . . . Life fades into nothingness. Automatization eats away at things, at clothes, at furniture.”

Orwell has invented a fictional device to stop the effect of time on human perception. He has invented a fictional world in which the stoniness of stones is immune to what Arendt calls the “emptiness” that afflicts the obvious in our world. Oceania’s totalitarian regime imposes a rigorous and unenforceable prohibition against perceiving the surface of the world. As I will show, the effect of this prohibition is to preserve the novelty of the world’s surface. In 1984, the hardness of rocks never dulls, never softens; the wetness of water never ceases to fascinate. For the citizen of Oceania, everything is seen as if for the first time, day after day, forever. Time is excluded from the neurobiology of perception.
Orwell’s invention arises out of a political condition in which the artistic plays a special role. Walter Benjamin famously defined totalitarianism as a mixing of the political and the artistic. In *1984* the artistic is not a distinct sphere of life or form of cultural capital but, in the title of Shklovsky’s essay, a “device.” If the aesthetic involves an experience of the surface of the world, the artistic involves countering the tendency of that surface to disappear.

The book is not a transparent political statement. An attentive reading will show how *1984*’s fictional political regime serves to render its surfaces opaque. From the historical experience of totalitarianism, Orwell has extracted the principle of the total artwork. But to identify the artistic functions of the regime’s techniques is not to suggest that Orwell secretly admires his fictional totalitarians. It is to prepare to understand what his obvious hostility means.

**The Surface of the Earth**

Orwell’s *1984* is characterized above all by the intensity and frequency of its descriptions of the world’s surface. The novel’s first page describes Winston rushing into a building on “a bright cold day in April.” He moves quickly through the doors, “though not quickly enough to prevent a swirl of gritty dust from entering along with him” (1). Inside, he looks out the window. “Down in the street little eddies of wind were whirling dust and torn paper into spirals” (2). Winston next notices “bombed sites where the plaster dust swirled in the air and the willow herb straggled over the heaps of rubble . . . crazy garden walls sagging in all directions” (3). A third of the way through the novel he is still noticing. “Winston noticed some tufts of loose-strife growing in the cracks of the cliff beneath them. One tuft was of two colors, magenta and brick red, apparently growing on the same root. He had never seen anything of the kind before” (134).

About halfway through the novel, Winston pauses while reading the secret book given to him by the Inner Party member O’Brien. “Winston stopped reading, chiefly in order to appreciate the fact that he was reading” (184). Instead of thinking about the book, he savors the feeling of reading. A few pages later, it happens again. “Winston stopped reading for a moment. . . . The blissful feeling of being alone with the forbidden book, in a room with no telescreen, had not worn off. Solitude and safety were physical sensations, mixed up somehow with the tiredness of his body, the softness of the chair, the touch of the faint breeze from the window that played upon his cheek” (199–200). Sensations have a curious way of not “wearing off” for Winston. On page five he experiences the taste of gin as a “shock.” Five pages from the end of the novel, this shock has still not worn off: “The stuff grew not less but more horrible with every mouthful he drank” (293). Orwell’s descriptive
sentences are mimetic of the curious, never-fading intensity that characterizes Winston’s perceptions.

Of course, a certain level of close description is characteristic of the genre to which 1984 belongs. One of the conventions that utopian/dystopian fiction shares with science fiction is the minute and painstaking description of particular features of the environment. These descriptions are made necessary by the fact that some of these features—teleporters, spaceships, telescreens—are unfamiliar to readers, and one of the chief pleasures of such novels is to see exactly what such strange objects look like. This convention, however, frequently comes into conflict with another convention: the attempt to present the future world as it appears to its inhabitants. The typical inhabitant of Dune, for example, would feel as little need to provide a minute description of a spaceship as the protagonist of Emma feels when she refers to a chair by a single word. This tension often motivates the device—familiar in texts from Gulliver’s Travels to Looking Back to Brave New World—of inserting a character in the story who comes from another time and world (our own, for example) and therefore needs all the new things explained to him.

Recalling the way description typically works in other novels belonging to the genre helps to clarify the strangeness of Orwell’s procedure. In the first place, it is not just futuristic objects like the telescreen (“an oblong metal plaque like a dulled mirror”) that get the full descriptive treatment here, but also things like the color of grass, the taste of gin, the feeling of reading, and the sensation of a breeze in a warm room (2). In the second place, as every reader will recall, the surface of the world described in 1984 is not at all some strange futuristic place. It is not what a reader in 1949 would expect of the future, not, in Winston’s words, “something huge, terrible, and glittering—a world of steel and concrete, of monstrous machines and terrifying weapons” (74). It is instead the actual surface of the world in which the novel was composed: wartime and immediate postwar England. A world of “bombed sites” where “the willow herb straggled over the heaps of rubble” (3). A world of “decaying, dingy cities, where underfed people shuffled to and fro in leaky shoes, in patched-up nineteenth-century houses that smelt always of cabbage and bad lavatories” (74). A world of gin, laundry hung to dry on lines, people singing popular tunes in the street, cool breezes, cigarette rations, green grass, hard rocks.

Carl Freedman, one of the few critics to register the strangeness of description in 1984, finds it difficult to reconcile the “naturalistic” description of “vivid particulars” with the “programmatic” description of the structure of the future society.14 He discovers a tension between the vivid description of grass and gin and the presentation of the properly futuristic aspects of the world of the novel, such as the Ministry of Love, Big Brother,
and the telescreens. Freedman describes this tension as a “generic contradiction,” as if the book were a struggle between two different kinds of novel, naturalist and science fiction. For Freedman this struggle has a victor. “Naturalism in 1984 must finally yield to programmatic satire,” the novel’s true genre.

But to read the relation of the novel’s vividly descriptive passages to its presentation of a fictional totalitarian state as contradictory seems to me mistaken. Rather, I would suggest, it is precisely the function of the totalitarian state Orwell invents to endow the surface of the world with its never-fading vividness. This regime—so poor at turning out decent boots or tobacco—generates the vividness of its citizens’ perceptions as its chief product. It does this in several mutually reinforcing ways. One of the most elemental, and most effective, is a simple framing procedure. Consider one of the novel’s descriptions of gin.

He took down from his shelf a bottle of colorless liquid with a plain white label marked VICTORY GIN. It gave off a sickly, oily smell, as of Chinese rice-spirit. Winston poured out nearly a teacupful, nerved himself for a shock, and gulped it down like a dose of medicine. Instantly his face turned scarlet and the water ran out of his eyes. The stuff was like nitric acid, and moreover, in swallowing it one had the sensation of being hit on the back of the head with a rubber club. (5)

The “bottle of colorless liquid” is labeled “gin” but smells like “Chinese rice-spirit” and tastes like “nitric acid.” At another moment, he is surprised when he opens a packet labeled “chocolate” and finds a crumbly substance that tastes “like the smoke of a rubbish fire” (121). He is still more surprised when something presented to him as chocolate proves to taste like chocolate.

These simple examples show one method by which Oceania’s regime frames perceptual experiences in such a way as to intensify them. Anyone who has picked up what they thought was a glass of coca-cola and discovered while drinking that the glass contains milk (or, worse yet, “nitric acid”), can testify to the greater intensity of the taste when compared with the way milk tastes in a glass one believes to contain milk. If this happens often enough, as it does to Winston, one might be just as surprised when one finally does get milk when expecting milk.

The regime cultivates a background of expectations that are continually and dramatically frustrated. Nothing tastes, looks, or feels like it is supposed to. This departure from expectations surrounds each thing with the characteristic nimbus of perceptual detail that Orwell’s prose reproduces. In Oceania, to use Martin Heidegger’s familiar example, every hammer you pick up is broken. Ordinarily, to a carpenter who reaches for a hammer to drive in a nail, the various features of the hammer do not show up vividly. They remain in the background as the carpenter completes his habitual task. It is only

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when he discovers the hammer isn’t working properly that he takes a real look at it. Then, Heidegger writes, the surface of the hammer explodes into “conspicuousness, obtrusiveness, and obstinacy.” The carpenter notices every detail, every mark, every curve.

For Winston, the things of his world have just this “conspicuousness, obtrusiveness, and obstinacy.” The framing that produces this effect works in large ways and small. Many of the things Winston tries to use—from boots to elevators—are in fact broken or defective in some way, and thus become “obtrusive.” On a wider level, the regime cultivates the general expectation that the world of Ingsoc is “huge, terrible, and glittering—a world of steel and concrete, of monstrous machines and terrifying weapons” (74). And it is against this expectation—continually renewed by the telescreens, the newspapers one reads, the conversations one has—that the actual surface of “patched-up nineteenth-century houses” never ceases to shock and to amaze.

The prohibition against looking at the surface of the world constitutes another resource by which the Party prepares an intense and never-fading perceptual shock for its citizens. “The Party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears. It was their final, most essential command” (81). Don’t look at what’s in front of you, don’t smell what’s around you, don’t touch what you’re touching. The effect of this prohibition is to endow the sensible surface of things with a fascination it cannot possess or retain in a world not structured by this prohibition.

The Party is well aware of what Michel Foucault has since taught us to recognize as the essentially creative effects of prohibition. “The command of the old despotisms was ‘Thou shalt not,’” intones the Inner Party member O’Brian, “The command of the totalitarians was ‘Thou shalt.’ Our command is ‘Thou art’” (255). The Party makes extensive use of this effect in shaping sexual experience. “Its real, undeclared purpose was to remove all pleasure from the sexual act. Not love so much as eroticism was the enemy, inside marriage as well as outside it” (65). This prohibition serves as a constant incitement. “A narrow scarlet sash, emblem of the Junior Anti-Sex League, was wound several times around the waist of her overalls, just tightly enough to bring out the shapeliness of her hips” (10). By putting their mass-produced pornography in plain packets and circulating it surreptitiously, the Party ensures a ready stream of prole customers, excited by “the impression that they were buying something illegal” (130).

In a world where “a real love affair was an almost unthinkable event,” sexual sensation achieves an incredible pitch of intensity (68). But the word “unthinkable” suggests special features of this particular repressive regime. The effect elicited by the repression analyzed by Foucault was expressed primarily in discourse—discourse internalized as thought or externalized as verbal and written confession. Here, what is elicited is an intensity of
sensation, an intensity procured not by embedding the sensation more deeply in layers of discourse, but by removing it from every possible discursive context. Sensation becomes “unthinkable.” It is “astonishing.” Or, in the key word Orwell uses to describe the sexual encounter, it inspires a feeling of “incredulity.” When he finally beholds Julia before him in the secret place in the forest, Winston has “no feeling except sheer incredulity.” And again, “All he felt was incredulity” (120). Since the prohibition on the erotic is a species of a more general prohibition on the perception of the surface, the new perceptions enabled by the erotic encounter tend to drown out sexual desire itself. “He had no physical desire” (120). Just to look, to touch, to smell: the incredulous shock of sensation is the elemental experience elicited by Oceanic prohibition.

Winston’s “incredulity” at Julia’s body, like his “astonishment” (124) at the sound of birds or his amazement at the color of grass (134), is a pure product of the “lunatic credulity” required by the Party (133). An absolute “lunatic credulity” in the Party when it tells you the bottle before you contains gin, the packet contains chocolate, the city is a futuristic paradise, the body you touch cannot be touched, prepares you for the “sheer incredulity” that greets the taste of gin, the sight of the city, the feel of the body.

Prepared by the intense activity of the Party, sensation in 1984 continually emerges into “sheer incredulity.” Sensation is removed from its entanglement in beliefs, thoughts, and relations, its entanglement with the future and the past. What is most striking is how, instead of investing every aspect of experience with its discourse, the Party creates a clean separation between its discursive categories and perception. Winston labors in the Ministry that produces the endless stream of discourse the Party feeds its citizens. He notes of this product, “Most of the material that you were dealing with had no connection with anything in the real world, not even the kind of connection that is contained in a direct lie” (41).

If one kind of propaganda aims to distort reality, to offer an interpretation of reality favorable to dominant interests, the Party sets up a vast discursive apparatus with no connection to reality at all. “Life, if you looked about you, bore no resemblance not only to the lies that streamed out of the telescreens, but even to the ideals that the Party was trying to achieve” (74). “How easy it was, thought Winston, if you did not look about you, to believe that the physical type set up by the Party as an ideal—tall muscular youths and deep-bosomed maidens, blond-haired, vital, sunburnt, carefree—existed and even predominated” (60). But of course, Winston does look—with incredulity—at the “beetle-like” shapes of the actual human bodies around him.

It would have been possible, and more familiar, for Orwell to frame this gap between discourse and sensation as an epistemological question. But in
all these examples one can see that the venerable question of the connection between language and the “thing in itself” of reality is irrelevant. If you are asked how well the word “chair” describes the reality of the object you are sitting in, you have an epistemological problem. If you are told that your office will have a chair, and when you open your office door you discover there is no chair, you have a different kind of problem. Someone has played a trick on you. The success of the trick is registered in your surprise when you open your office door and look around. Of course, one might take this situation as an epistemological problem (“there is a chair here that I cannot see”), but in fact no one in 1984 does this. When Winston is told to expect a roomful of people with yellow hair and finds a roomful of people with brown hair he doesn’t imagine that he has been mistaken in his understanding of the color-sensation expressed by the word “blond.” He is simply surprised. He stares at the brown color of his colleagues’ hair with incredulity.

The painstaking construction of a worldview with no connection to reality goes by the name “doublethink” in the book. The Party doubles the sensible world with a “shadow-world” (41). A set of expectations and beliefs form a shadow reality that, at every perceptual instant, disperses like smoke over the unexpected surface of the world. The key fact here is that the false account of the world doesn’t replace actual perception, but exists alongside it. Orwell does not imagine the kind of “implanted” perception found in science fiction from Phillip K. Dick to The Matrix. Rather, a set of false expectations of the world frames one’s actual perception. The practice of doublethink exposes the citizen of Oceania to constant intense, unfamiliar, unexpected, and shocking sensations.

At every moment, one discovers that one’s entire nexus of beliefs and expectations have no relation to what one is seeing. Thus every sensation resembles Orwell’s description of Winston’s childhood memories. “Nothing remained of his childhood except a series of bright-lit tableaux, occurring against no background and mostly unintelligible” (3). Orwell describes the memories of others in identical terms. “They remembered a million useless things, a quarrel with a workmate, a hunt for a lost bicycle pump, the expression on a long-dead sister’s face, the swirls of dust on a windy morning seventy years ago; but all the relevant facts were outside the range of their vision. They were like the ant, which can see small objects but not large ones” (93).

The Party’s thoroughgoing abolition of history is another way of making the surface of the world strange. This abolition means that ordinary people have trouble inserting the shapes collected in their memories into a coherent life narrative. Ordinarily, when one suddenly remembers some sharp detail from the past, the rest of the “relevant facts” do not remain “outside the range of vision” for long. Ordinarily the objects in a random personal
memory can be dated and contextualized, inserted into a collective history. One remembers what else was happening in the world, and this helps to "place" the remembered image that floats randomly into the mind. One proceeds from the sharp registering of a random detail—bright red hair, a lunch box—to a general picture of a certain time: "I remember the early eighties, I had a Pac-man lunch box"; "I was in third grade when The Challenger exploded. My teacher had red hair." The remembered shapes lose their uncanny timelessness as they take their place in a coherent narrative about the past.

But the shapes remembered by people in the book—"the swirl of dust on a windy morning," "a quarrel with a workmate"—exist outside of any intelligible pattern. The shapes retain their strangeness, their uncanniness, their unfamiliarity. The intensity with which the details of these shapes are registered is a function of their heterogeneity with respect to any context. They don’t "fit" in any scheme; they are inassimilable to any recognizable time. They don’t belong in the present; they don’t belong in the past. The novel locates these remembered sensations not in history but outside of time. And again, the novel does not emphasize the epistemological problem here. The impossibility of placing these shapes in a pattern is consistently represented in terms of how this impossibility intensifies the way they are perceived.

The sense in which the pastness of things serves to intensify their perception is underlined in Winston’s visit to the antique shop in the prole section of London. "Winston came across to examine the picture. It was a steel engraving of an oval building with rectangular windows, and a small tower in front. There was a railing running round the building, and at the rear end there was what appeared to be a statue" (97–98). Here, Winston is looking at an old picture of a church. He is seeing a church for the first time, and, as with any object seen for the first time, the features of the church’s shape show up with an unusual perceptual vividness. But while Winston looks at this object as if he is seeing it for the first time, we quickly discover that he has in fact seen it many times. After a pause, he tells the shopkeeper, "I know that building. . . . It’s in the middle of the street outside the Palace of Justice" (98).

The framing of the familiar building in terms of an unknown past renews its shape for Winston in the present. In the picture frame in the antique shop, the familiar shape loses its familiarity. I will shortly have more to say about time, but for now I want to stress the formal identity of the novel’s representation of Winston’s perception of the taste of gin, his perception of Julia’s naked body, and his perception of the shape of the church. The Party’s abolition of history, which causes objects from the past to show up “against no background,” takes its place with the prohibition on sensual experience and the circulation of false expectations about the world as a
third method of endowing familiar things with the quality of having never been experienced before.

**What Does Time Feel Like?**

Through these techniques, Oceania’s regime causes its citizens always to experience everything as if for the first time. The Party directs its activity against the movement of time. The “secret book” Winston reads refers to the regime as a “huge, accurately planned effort to freeze history at a particular moment of time” (216). This effort to stop history doesn’t have an obvious motive. “I understand HOW,” Winston writes, “I do not understand WHY” (80). One doesn’t want to “freeze history” just for the sake of freezing history. The desire to stop history requires explanation in terms of some other desire, and the “secret book” circulated by the secret police suggests several: the desire to stop history is a desire to maintain power, it is a desire to freeze the class dialectic, it is a desire to prevent unpredictable technological advances. The book itself suggests that none of these explanations quite satisfy, and Winston’s arrest prevents him from reading what promises to be a definitive answer. “This motive really consists . . .’ Winston became aware of silence” (217).

I want to approach the question of motive here by looking more closely at the novel’s image of time. Most readers have seen history as the only relevant kind of time here, but the key passage actually points to two distinct temporal modes. It refers to an effort “to freeze history at a particular moment of time” (216). I want to think about this passage from “history” to “time.” Earlier in the novel, Winston suggests a causal relation between stopping history and stopping time. “History has stopped. Nothing exists except an endless present” (155). History stops, then time stops. I want to suggest that the motive for stopping history is to stop time.

Unlike the desire to stop history, the desire to stop time is something for which no adult human needs an explanation. “They were born, they grew up . . . they went to work at twelve, they passed through a brief blossoming period of beauty and sexual desire, they married at twenty, they were middle aged at thirty, they died, for the most part, at sixty” (71). “You got your ‘health and strength when you’re young,’” the old proletarian man says, “‘When you get to my time of life you ain’t never well’” (92).

Unlike Party members like Winston, the proles, the lowest segment of the population and the only segment systematically deprived of the Party’s perceptual prohibitions, are represented as abjectly vulnerable to the effects of time. For persons subject to time—like the proles inside the book and like everyone outside the book—the desire to stop time is obvious. Winston discovers it in the prole woman he sees washing clothes outside the window of
the antique store. “One had the feeling that she would have been perfectly content if the June evening had been endless” (141–42). For those, like Winston, in the top fifth of Oceania’s social structure, the Party’s methods have achieved this endlessness: “Nothing exists except an endless present” (155). The regime creates this “endless present” in the sensorium of citizens who experience everything as if for the first time, always. Not astronomical, but neurobiological time stops in the endless novelty of the world’s surface.

A horror of neurobiological time is detectable in the anxiety that shadows George Orwell’s own love for the surface of the earth. This love is well documented. Orwell expresses his admiration for his favorite writer by saying of Shakespeare, “he loved the surface of the earth,” and he attributes the same love to himself in the essay “Why I Write.” In an early novel, the narrator wonders, “Why don’t people instead of the idiocies they do spend their time on, just walk around looking at things?” In an essay composed around the time he was finishing 1984, Orwell wrote, “So long as I remain alive and well I shall continue to feel strongly about prose style, to love the surface of the earth, and to take pleasure in solid objects.” But his confidence that he will “continue to feel strongly” about the things he loves sometimes falters. In a letter he wrote, “I always feel uneasy when I get away from the ordinary world where grass is green, stones hard, etc.” Like James Conant, Alan Sandison, whose important early study collects these examples, interprets Orwell’s lifelong “obsessive” “focus on the surface of the earth” as an epistemological commitment. In the midst of a terrible century, Orwell discovered that the individual’s perception of physical reality is ultimately the only thing that can’t be taken away. “The senses are inalienable,” Sandison writes.

If this were true, we might wonder why Orwell’s description of the surface of the earth betrays the fear that it might disappear. “I always feel uneasy when I get away from the ordinary world where grass is green.” We might wonder at Orwell’s “unease” and ask how the fact that stones are hard can slip away from him. But perhaps, as Abbott Gleason suggests, “Orwell’s commitment to the principle of ‘objectivity’ was not really an epistemological position at all.” Perhaps, instead of worrying about losing the knowledge that grass is green, Orwell is concerned about losing the sensation of the greenness of grass. And this worry is entirely reasonable. If the art and science of the last century has taught us anything, it is that the senses are profoundly alienable when it comes to something like the greenness of grass.

Marcel Proust’s Remembrance of Things Past is of course the key literary study of the kind of alienation Orwell fears. In The Captive, Marcel writes that his life has been “erased by the india rubber of habit.” Proust understands habit as a force that removes sensations and erases the perception of the world’s surface. William James describes how habit causes perceptions to move irresistibly from freshness to dullness. And Viktor Shklovsky’s argument that
habit erases the world rests on a simple appeal to the reader’s own experience. “If someone were to compare the sensation of holding a pen in his hand or speaking a foreign language for the very first time with the sensation of performing this same operation for the ten thousandth time, then he would no doubt agree with us.” Habit is the neurobiological form time takes. In the processes of perception, time is measured not in months and years, but in the distance between “the very first time” and “the ten thousandth time.” Across that distance, the surface of the world grows faint, dull, and finally disappears. “Life fades into nothingness.”

Orwell’s desire to prevent the “surface of the earth” from fading away provides an unexpected clue to the motive of his fictional regime in creating an “endless present.” When he writes, “I always feel uneasy when I get away from the ordinary world where grass is green, stones hard,” he suggests that what good writing like Shakespeare’s does is to preserve the surface of the world. As we have seen, Winston—“stones are hard, water is wet”—inhabits a world where the surface of things never dulls. Artistic mastery is the preserving agent for Orwell the writer and reader, while totalitarian control serves the same function for Winston the Party member. What Orwell thinks good art does, and what Orwell thinks bad government does, thus turn out to be curiously identical.

So the hard interpretive problem here turns out not to be the one we were pursuing. It seemed that the question was why Oceania’s regime would invest such vast amounts of labor into creating an artificial “endless present,” a world where the hardness of rocks and the greenness of grass are always new, always interesting. If it were simply a matter of gaining control over a population, surely easier and more direct methods could have been used instead of the elaborate defamiliarizing techniques and prohibitions discussed earlier. But the mystery of the regime’s motive—“I understand how, I do not understand why”—dissipates when we realize that Orwell shares this desire to stop time and, indeed, that he shares it to the point of assuming that the reason one wants to stop the greenness of grass from fading is so obvious it doesn’t need to be explained. Thus, we don’t need to search for some mysterious further end served by Oceania’s attempt to freeze time. Freezing time is an end in itself.

Of course, the identity of the effects produced by good writing and bad politics solves one problem only to open a more difficult one. If Orwell describes the regime and art as aiming at the same effect, why then does he love art and hate the regime? I will return to this problem. But for now I want to give an explanation of what Orwell thinks too evident to explain. He believes literature restores freshness, novelty, and interest to our perception of things. The history of literary criticism over the past half-century has obscured the obviousness of this belief. Fortunately a new defense of art’s
time-stopping power is unnecessary. Shklovsky has given this view of art its most powerful theoretical elaboration, and by attending to it a little more closely we might clarify the motive that animates both Orwell’s prose style and his fictional regime’s style of rule.

Shklovsky begins by asking us to think of the difference between the first time we do something and the ten-thousandth time. He then imagines a technique that will turn back the clock to “the very first time.” He calls this technique “art.” Art is a means of “intensifying the impressions of the senses.”32 “The removal of the object from the sphere of automatized perception is accomplished in art by a variety of means.”33 The writer “describes [the object] as if it were perceived for the first time.”34

These formulations, nearly a century old, are both strange and familiar. At a single stroke, they dispense with the sociological understanding of art. Here, the existence of artworks is not a consequence of the historical emergence of an artistic sphere and its differentiation from the economic or the religious. Artworks are no longer defined tautologically, as that class of objects that people recognize as art. This perspective also dissolves a familiar problem of Kantian aesthetics, which, by describing the aesthetic as an “aspectual” attention that could potentially take anything as its object, makes it difficult to draw a categorical distinction between a painting and a landscape.35 Shklovsky, on the other hand, theorizes a strong distinction. The aesthetic is an experience characterized by an intense attention to a surface; the artistic is a technique for arresting the tendency of the surface to disappear over time.

At the same time that it grants art a degree of specificity it lacks in traditional aesthetics, Shklovsky’s formula erases the boundary between art and life in a way that has become familiar to us from the history of the twentieth-century avant-garde. Art-as-function stands opposed to art-as-culture. The artwork no longer requires the name and the status of art. A fictional world in which art has ceased to exist because the state flawlessly executes its function, 1984 presents an extreme version of the opposition of art-as-culture to art-as-function. As we have seen, the novel’s extraordinary wealth of vivid descriptive detail is not simply an artistic effect layered by Orwell over his political message. The very features that identify this work as artistic prose—its abundance of vivid perceptual details—are produced by the fictional political regime as its characteristic effect. The novel’s artistic features are the effect of a function that in the world of the novel does not go by the name of art.

To collapse the border between art and life by identifying art with a function is familiar, as is the association of this collapse with totalitarian politics.36 But the particular function Shklovsky and Orwell describe, and the kind of interpenetration of art and life they imagine, is as strange today as it was sixty or ninety years ago. We are familiar with the mixing of art and life, but not with art’s capacity to alter biological processes. We are familiar with how art
distorts, refracts, or contains history, but not with how art cancels the effect of time. And yet Shklovsky could not be clearer: “The removal of [the] object from the sphere of automatized perception is accomplished in art.”37 I think we can account for the unfamiliarity of this formula in the context of recent theory and criticism by pointing to two different tendencies. The first is the tendency to replace defamiliarization as a perceptual problem with defamiliarization as an epistemological problem. The second is the tendency of literary critics not to take Shklovsky’s psychology of perception seriously.

Just as critics from Alan Sandison to James Conant have insisted on reading Winston’s insistence “stones are hard, water is wet” as the assertion of a realist epistemology, so critics have preferred to read Shklovskian defamiliarization as a procedure that enables a new understanding rather than a new sensing. Carlo Ginzberg, for example, finds two distinct ways of reading defamiliarization in Shklovsky. On one reading, art, by removing things from their familiar contexts “provide[s] a standpoint for a critical, detached, estranged approach to society.”38 Ginzberg distinguishes this idea of defamiliarization as an epistemological tool, a way of lifting the critic out of a familiar conceptual scheme and enabling “moral and political criticism,” from defamiliarization as a vehicle of “impressionistic immediacy.”39 Ginzberg’s interest lies exclusively in the former mode.

Fredric Jameson addresses defamiliarization through a similar distinction, although he presents it as a difference between Shklovsky and Bertolt Brecht. The point of defamiliarization for Brecht, Jameson writes, is “to make you aware that objects and institutions you thought to be natural were really only historical.”40 Jameson separates this critically useful version of defamiliarization from Shklovsky’s, which “suffers from ahistoricity and essentialism since it is based on the belief that objects exist in a ‘unitary, atemporal way’ prior to being made strange by the artist.”41 Unlike Ginzberg, Jameson’s splitting of defamiliarization into “two forms, the metaphysical vision and the social critique,” is less a distinction between a theory of perception and an epistemology than between two different epistemologies.42 Yet Shklovsky’s theory of perception does not, as Jameson thinks, conceal an epistemological commitment to the “unitary, atemporal” existence of particular objects. His vision is not “metaphysical”; it is not concerned with the gap between my experience of an object and the object itself, but with the gap between the “very first time” I see something, and the “ten thousandth time” I see it.

The tendency to understand the artistic practice of removing a thing from its familiar context in epistemological terms has been strengthened by the ways deconstruction has handled the question of context. Critics like Marjorie Perloff understand poetic defamiliarization in terms of the “indeterminacy of meaning” which, on Jacques Derrida’s account, proceeds from the iterability of linguistic elements.43 If the meaning of an utterance can
only be established in a context, the fact that any element of that utterance can appear in any other context subjects its meaning to a constant sliding. While for Derrida indeterminacy is the general condition of meaning, for Perloff and those influenced by her, this semantic sliding is an effect of artistic defamiliarization.

The tradition of understanding defamiliarization in the context of questions about meaning and interpretation causes Shklovsky’s original formulas to retain a certain strangeness. “The purpose of the image is not to draw our understanding closer to that which this image stands for, but rather to allow us to perceive the object in a special way.”44 Perhaps the writer who comes closest to Shklovsky’s alignment of artistic language with perception is Donald Davidson, who, in his celebrated essay “What Metaphors Mean,” writes “I deny that metaphor does its work by having a special meaning, a specific cognitive content.”45 “We must give up the idea that a metaphor carries a message,” Davidson continues, “that it has a content or meaning (except of course its literal meaning).”46 Instead of asking what artistic language means, we should ask what it “brings to our attention,” what it “makes us notice.”47 And “what we notice or see is not, in general, propositional in character.”48 Consider again the sentence where Orwell describes Winston’s gin as being “like nitric acid” (5). If Orwell had meant this simile to express the badness or the toxic qualities of the gin, he might, Davidson suggests, simply have said that. On Davidson’s account, we should not take this phrase as expressing some particular meaning about the gin. Rather, we should pay attention to how the juxtaposition of gin and acid makes us notice certain features of gin.

While Davidson suggests that artistic language is primarily addressed to our “attention” rather than to our “understanding,” he does not attempt to specify exactly how art affects our attention. The absence of specificity accounts to a large degree for the power of his argument. The juxtaposition of gin and nitric acid could cause people to notice a wide range of different things—the sharp taste of gin, its colorlessness, the burn it causes in the stomach, the burn it causes on an open wound—which they might then put forward as interpretations of the metaphor’s meaning. Davidson accounts for the fact that some metaphors elicit a wide range of different interpretations, not by making a claim about the indeterminacy of meaning or by trying to rule some interpretations out by restricting the meaning to the one the author intended, but by arguing that metaphor isn’t about meaning at all. For Davidson, metaphor is about attention, experience, noticing. The variety of interpretations metaphors generate is therefore to be taken as an expression of what interpreters notice about a thing in the world, not as a claim about what the metaphor means. Interpreters of artistic language are not trying to “decipher an encoded content,” but are rather “telling us something about the effects metaphors have on us.”49

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In seeing the artwork as the occasion for an experience that is not strictly determined by it, Davidson’s account is broadly compatible with reader-response critical models. It also fits into the pattern of contemporary literary criticism in a way that Shklovsky’s does not. Because while Shklovsky is also concerned to describe the activity elicited by art as “noticing” rather than “deciphering,” he has a very particular kind of noticing in mind. Art “removes the object from the sphere of automatized perception.” It makes us see the familiar thing “as if for the first time.” Whereas Davidson refrains from attempting to characterize what artistic juxtaposition causes us to notice in any but the most general terms—the metaphor causes us to notice something—Shklovsky argues for the transformation and renewal of perception by art. The critical tendency to read defamiliarization as generating (Jameson) or exemplifying (Perloff) a certain kind of meaning is thus only part of the reason Shklovsky’s essay still sounds so strange. This unfamiliarity is not just a consequence of Shklovsky’s emphasis on experience over meaning—an emphasis shared by writers like Davidson—but also of the special place his theory of perceptual experience makes for art.

That theory is simple. The first time we see, touch, smell, or hear something, the sensation is vivid, intense. We are acutely aware of the thing’s texture, the shape and contour of our sensation of it. As we continue to experience it, the vividness fades until we almost completely lose our sensation of it. We take our seat at our chair and begin to type away without being focally aware of the color of the desk, the shape of the chair, the little chips in the paint on the wall, or the feel of the keys’ surface. It is the same way at home. We sit down on our couch without noticing it. We barely taste the spaghetti. Life has become dull. We don’t feel as if we are alive. We look back to a time before our sensations became weak and dull with regret. We seek out ways of renewing our sense of the world. We buy a new couch. We travel. We try new spices. We read a novel where something shocking happens in an ordinary office like ours. When we return to our own office, we see it in a new way.

For Shklovsky, time has a distinct effect on perceptions: it erases them. We experience time as a fading of perceptual detail. And because of this link between time and perception, we all know exactly how it would feel if time stopped: everything would continue to look the way it did the very first time we saw it. To continue to see things as if for the first time is to exist, in Orwell’s phrase, in “an endless present” (155).

Michael Holquist and Ilya Kliger, in their recent study, rehearse the conventional suspicion of all this when they write that, “as is well known,” Shklovsky based his work “on a rough and ready psychology of perception.” From the perspective of the psychoanalytic models that have dominated literary criticism, Shklovsky’s theory does indeed seem crude, even as the desire that animates it—the rescue of life from time—seems hubristic.
Certainly he takes very little trouble to prove his claims. For evidence, he simply refers his readers to their own experience, stating that anyone who takes even a moment to examine their life “would no doubt agree with us.” The truth of his theory of perception is, he claims, utterly obvious. And once one has grasped the obvious fact that familiarity erases the world, then art’s defamiliarizing function provides it with an obvious value.

And isn’t he right? I doubt there are many readers who, when asked to compare the “very first time” they saw a given object to the “ten thousandth time” would describe their experience in ways that differ significantly from Shklovsky’s. I take it that the obviousness of this fact about experience is not at issue in the “well-known” problems with Shklovsky’s psychological model. Rather, the problem concerns the value of this obviousness. The Freudian and then Lacanian psychological models that have dominated literary criticism have—to say the least—not tended to ground their claims on what is obvious to everyone. I suggest that the very obviousness of Shklovsky’s theory of perception has presented a powerful obstacle to its critical acceptance. Can one practice a criticism that is content to repeat the obvious?

We can try: All things being equal, we tend to feel the new more, and we tend to experience it as affectively better. Holquist and Kliger’s description of this kind of claim as psychologically “rough and ready” is abundantly refuted by recent research. For most readers, the obvious truth of Shklovsky’s psychological claim won’t require verification by the most sophisticated neuroscientific techniques, but such evidence exists for those who would like it. I think slightly better grounds for Holquist and Kliger’s objection rest on a fear that Shklovsky’s theory, by harping on the simple distinction between the first and ten-thousandth time, drowns out nuance and interpretive rigor. The entire range of emotional and intellectual values seems crudely compressed into a choice between a dead dullness and an Orwellian “incredulity.” Why the great value on the incredulous, very first time feeling? Doesn’t a commitment to evaluating art exclusively in terms of the old/new, familiar/unfamiliar binary exclude all the historical, emotional, sexual, and economic information to which good criticism is committed to recovering?

I think this worry arises out of a mistaken assumption about the status of Shklovsky’s claim. His distinction between the first time (intense) and the ten-thousandth time (dull) can look like a value judgment. But the high affective value Shklovsky attributes to “the very first time” is not a judgment but a neutral description of the neurobiology of perception. Thus, the importance of the familiar/unfamiliar binary in Shklovsky’s critical scheme should not be understood as a problematic privileging of one issue above others. This binary is situated not arbitrarily above traditional critical topoi but below them, as a feature of immediate perception.

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Shklovsky’s theory enables us to see art in terms of an intervention at an elemental biological level. Art makes the familiar new. Artistic technology, for Shklovsky, turns the affective clock back from “the ten thousandth time” to “the very first time,” from vanished to present, from dull to live. We can describe the intervention performed by this technology with a formula adequate to Winston’s existence in the “endless present” of a state that has perfected the artistic function: Art stops biotime. Time stops at the eye, the ear, and the fingertip of the organism shaped by art.

If human-brain time oscillates between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the sensorium modified by the effective work of art is no longer the subject of a human experience. This modification, and this work, is effective only to the extent that it constantly changes. Both Shklovsky and Orwell think of this work in terms of a process, a strategy, a “technique.” Particular artworks don’t stop time for very long; the endless work of art keeps it stopped. This work makes the hardness of rocks and the wetness of water the kind of news that, in Oceania, stays news. This ceaseless activity accounts for the fact that Winston drinks the same gin every day for years and never gets used to it.

Winston’s biostasis is supported by an elaborate, ever-changing structure. Like the statements that issue from Oceania’s telescreens, for Shklovsky individual art works are no more than tactical adjustments of this single defamiliarizing technique. The ceaseless, feverish activity Shklovsky finds in the history of art, and Winston finds in the self-consuming history that supports the antihistory of Oceania, amount to running to stand still. The ongoing functioning of art—the constant defamiliarizing of the world’s surface—keeps the brain at the year one. The surface of the world is lit up and preserved in an unfading incredulity: “Stones are hard, water is wet!” Time stops in the sensorium’s endless present. Who wouldn’t want this?

Down in the yard the red-armed woman was still marching to and fro between the washtub and the line. . . . One had the feeling that she would have been perfectly content if the June evening had been endless. (141)

Death/Life

And yet in 1984 this desire is not just anyone’s. Earlier I noted the interpretive problem raised by the fact that Orwell’s letters and essays praise art for stopping time, while his novel condemns a regime for doing the same thing. But this tension, this pull between the desire for an endless present and a horror of it, runs through the novel itself. To begin with the most obvious example, Winston, who feels himself to be living in the timelessness created by the regime’s techniques, cannot embrace the desire that animates his condition. His obsessive attempts to get a sense of time, to verify a past and to
anticipate a future, set him in opposition to the basic principle of the regime, which imprisons him to cure him of this tendency. Winston—before his imprisonment—hates the “endless present.” He is not the one who wants it. He attributes the longing for the June evening to be “endless” to the anonymous “red-armed” proletarian woman he sees outside his window.

And yet, Winston writes: “If there is hope . . . it lies in the proles” (82). Hope is a desire attuned to futurity, to the kind of temporal unfolding that Oceania’s regime has foreclosed for the top 20 percent of the social order. Winston believes the proles will create the future he is unable to grasp. But when he allows himself to imaginatively inhabit the desires of a prole, he finds only a hope for stasis, for “endlessness.”

There is one more twist. Winston makes his observation about the prole’s desire for endlessness immediately after he hears her singing a popular song “with deep feeling.”

“They say that time eals all things,
They say you can always forget;
But the smiles an’ the tears across the years
They twist my eartstrings yet!”

Her voice floated upward with the sweet summer air, very tuneful, charged with a sort of happy melancholy. One had the feeling that she would have been perfectly content if the June evening had been endless. (141–42)

The song she sings was one of the countless similar songs published for the benefit of the proles by a sub-section of the Music Department. The words of these songs were composed without any human intervention whatever on an instrument known as a versificator. But the woman sang so tunefully as to turn the dreadful rubbish into an almost pleasant sound. (138)

In Oceania, only the proles use artworks. They love art that invites them to imagine a state in which time does not heal all things, in which feeling doesn’t fade with years. By performing these mechanically generated songs, the proles imbue them with “deep feeling.” What do we make of the fact that the only authentic desire for endlessness in the novel is generated by an act of artistic reception?

The social category of art has been rendered obsolete among the upper levels of Oceanic society. Compare the total efficiency of the regime’s defamiliarizing techniques with the modest effects of forms that still bear the label of art. If the regime’s techniques produce “an endless present,” the songs and novels distributed among the proles accomplish nothing so dramatic. They don’t defamiliarize, they don’t stop time. They merely present a weak and blurry image of a world where “smiles and tears” last “across the
years." Art is humble. It doesn’t produce an endless present; it merely gives a watery image of such a state, an image that raises a longing for endlessness.

As we have seen, the state in 1984 is broadly consistent with the idea of totalitarianism as the collapsing of art into politics in that the regime takes over the artistic function of defamiliarization. But the novel also leaves room for the representation of art in more traditional terms, as a relatively autonomous sphere of activity. In Oceania, the difference between art that has been mixed with politics and art that retains the name of art is the difference between more and less effective techniques, or between virtual and actual modes of endlessness. The songs and novels paint imaginary pictures of stasis; the defamiliarizing regime actually achieves it.

So why does the novel prefer the proles’ virtual mode of access to endlessness to the Party members’ actual experience of it? It is possible to deny that this is the novel’s preference. Winston’s hope lies in the proles, and the proles’ hope lies in the state of endlessness Winston has achieved. Thus one could read this as a circle, as what Jameson has referred to as the absolute closure of the dystopian form, a symptom of a stasis from which there is no escape. On this reading, the value Winston finds in the proles’ desire for stasis would be no value at all; it would simply be an image of how desire might be fully enclosed by a total system.

But I think a better reading would show the privileging of a prospective relation to endlessness over its achievement. Why can’t Winston—for whom the hardness of rocks and the wetness of water is news that stays news—feel the desire that animates his condition? Why is this desire found only among the proles, who are left to stoke it with the weaker forms of art? This is simply to raise the question of the larger displacement that frames the entire novel. Why does Orwell, who often repeats his love for “the surface of the earth,” portray the effective care of that surface as the work, not of the artist, but of the kind of regime he hates?

We can pose this as a question about Orwell’s own artistic practice. Orwell prides himself on his vivid descriptive sentences, a technique he practiced and honed throughout his career. And yet, in this novel the Orwellian descriptive sentence has a dual status. It is a sign that the novel is a work of art (or at least that it has artistic pretensions). And it is mimetic of the kind of perception produced by the totalitarian regime. The striking descriptive passages of 1984 are mimetic of the way that Winston, in the grip of the Party’s circulation of false expectations and prohibitions, always encounters the surface of the world as new and astonishing. Thus Orwell works to perfect a vivid descriptive style, but condemns a world in which that style has become the rule of perception.

Consider, for example, the sentence describing Winston’s perception of “vistas of rotting nineteenth-century houses, their sides shored up with balks
of timber, their windows patched with cardboard and their roofs with corrugated iron, their crazy garden walls sagging in all directions” (3). This sentence operates on two levels. On one level, it is an example of art, of Orwell’s love of carefully crafted detail. A sentence like this exemplifies his aesthetic, which he describes as an attempt to preserve “the surface of the earth” by fixing the rich features of that surface in art. But on another level, this sentence represents the fictional Winston’s experience as he is continually shocked into vivid awareness by the regime’s manifold techniques. Here, the relevant technique is the expectation that Oceania should be a gleaming world of futuristic skyscrapers. This expectation is continually renewed only to be continually shattered as Winston stares at Oceania’s actual surface, and every detail of each sagging house comes into sharp focus.

The sentence exemplifies two different methods of achieving perceptual vividness: the method of artistic prose, and the method of total politics. These methods have a number of differences, but perhaps the central difference lies in their respective degrees of effectiveness. No matter how good one thinks Orwell’s descriptive sentences are, I doubt anyone would argue that 1984 will produce anything like the same effect on its reader that the fictional regime achieves in peeling back Winston’s nerves for each new sensation. As defamiliarizing technique, art is much weaker than the kind of politics the novel represents. Thus, the two sides of the Orwellian descriptive sentence mirror the distinction between the proles’ weak, prospective art and the regime’s fatally effective politics.

Of course, one often praises in art what one thinks unethical in life. But the particular tension between art and life set up by this novel allows us to ask this question in a new way. Is it acceptable for art to aim at timelessness only because we know art isn’t strong enough to achieve it? The “endless present” targeted by the proles’ weak song looks beautiful to Winston, but he hates the eternal present he occupies. Is this a question of preferring the virtual as such to the actual? Or is the idea of effective art a case of the kind of wish that one regrets as soon as it is granted? Is defamiliarization best kept where it will be least effective and do least harm—best kept, that is, in the social category of art? Is the artistic the category where we expect to believe in effects we know will never work? To think about experiences we don’t have? To turn experiences into meanings?

The deep ambivalence that characterizes Orwell’s relation to the possibility of an eternal present generates these questions. I will conclude with one final feature of this ambivalence. Consider this conversation between Winston and Julia, near the center of the novel.

“We are the dead,” he said.
“We’re not dead yet,” said Julia prosaically.

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“Not physically. Six months, a year—five years. . . . We shall put it off as long as we can. But it makes very little difference. So long as human beings stay human, death and life are the same thing.”

“Oh rubbish! Which would you sooner sleep with, me or a skeleton? Don’t you enjoy being alive? Don’t you like feeling: This is me, this is my hand, this is my leg, I’m real, I’m solid, I’m alive!”

“Yes, I like that,” he said. (136)

As I have been arguing, the fascination with sensation that Julia urges is the condition of a new mode of existence outside temporality. In 1984, “death” and “life” are alternative descriptions of this state. Winston’s description isn’t prospective. He doesn’t say: “Since we will die eventually, right now we are as good as dead.” He says that, in his present condition, the question of “physical” life or death makes very little difference. “Life and death are the same thing.”

In this novel Orwell presents the collapse of the border between art and life as the collapse of the border between life and death. When the state takes over the defamiliarizing function, defamiliarization becomes effective. It lifts the sensorium of its subjects out of time. It suspends temporality. Our most familiar model for such a suspension is death. Orwell’s own proximity to the border between life and death while he wrote this book (he was dying when he wrote it and dead within a year of finishing it), perhaps accounts for the power of his portrayal of sensation at the instant it loses the familiar definition given by time.

But we may, nevertheless, want to distance ourselves from Orwell’s identification of the defamiliarized sensorium with death. For Orwell, this identification, and the hostility it expresses, is generated by a third category: the human. “So long as human beings stay human,” to arrest habit, to stop biotime, is to die. Orwell’s original title for 1984 was The Last Man in Europe. Like the protagonist of the roughly contemporary near-future novel I Am Legend, Winston is surrounded by organisms who are no longer the subjects of human experience. What will we call this nonhuman, atemporal experience? Winston’s—and Orwell’s—description of it as “death” seems counterintuitive. The name the new organisms—like Julia—give to their condition seems like the obvious one: “life.”

Notes

My thanks go to Hunt Hawkins, Aaron Kunin, Susan Mooney, and Laura Runge for comments on an earlier version of this essay.

9. Ibid.
15. Ibid. 16. Ibid., 106.
20. Ibid., 10. 22. Ibid. 23. Ibid., 14.
21. Ibid., 10. 25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 5.
27. Immanuel Kant notoriously uses natural rather than art objects for his examples in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790) (Cambridge, 2001). Gerard Genette’s *The Aesthetic Relation* (Ithaca, 1999) contains a useful recent discussion of this problem. For Genette, following Kant, “it is not the object that
makes the relation aesthetic, but the relation that makes the object aesthetic” (11). Genette writes that art is merely that class of objects that “proceed from an aesthetic intention” (1) and approvingly quotes the following formula of Bernard Teyssedre: “The dividing line between artworks and practical objects depends on an intention that cannot be determined absolutely” (135). That is, there is no feature of aesthetic experience to which one could appeal in order to differentiate the artistic object from the nonartistic. “The criterion which defines the artistic character (the criterion of intention) is not, generally speaking, empirically perceptible” (135). It is above all Shklovsky’s strong sense of the capacity of the artistic to transform perception—a transformation that provides the “empirical” criteria for separating the artwork from the natural object of aesthetic attention—that distinguishes his brand of formalism from the Kantian tradition.

36. The classic study of the twentieth-century impulse to collapse the border between art and life is Peter Burger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis, 1999). Burger’s treatment of “shock” as device recognizes Shklovsky (18). In that he interprets defamiliarization in cognitive terms, Burger’s position is similar to the readings of Shklovsky I analyze later. For a recent study on practices that merge life and art, see Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (Oxford, 2006). On the association of the collapse of art and life with totalitarianism, see Benjamin and Arendt, cited in note 13. See also Andrew Hewitt, *Fascist Modernism: Aesthetics, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Stanford, 1996).

39. Ibid., 20.
40. Cited in Cristina Vatulescu, “Tracking Estrangement Through Literary and Policing Practices,” *Poetics Today* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 37. Vatulescu attempts to historicize Shklovsky’s aesthetics. In her intriguing investigation of the “estranging” or “surrealist” techniques of the Soviet secret police, she proposes a different relation between the aesthetic and totalitarianism than that developed here. While the secret police in her account attempt to disorient prisoners by putting them in spaces where familiar objects have actually been replaced by strange objects, Shklovsky (at least in “Art as Device”) and Orwell are interested in making one see familiar objects as if for the first time. This is a key distinction. It accounts for the emphasis on the temporality of perception in the works I examine, the link they forge between perceptual intensity and “an eternal present.” When Winston falls into the hands of the secret police toward the end of 1984, the regime’s procedure shifts to one roughly analogous to those Vatulescu describes. In these scenes, O’Brien aims not to make Winston see familiar objects in a new way, but to make him see terrifying and strange objects (as when he shows him a rat about to gnaw off his face), or to make him see things that are not actually visible (as when he tries to get Winston to see more fingers than he is holding up).

41. Ibid.
44. Shklovsky, “Art as Device,” 10.
46. Ibid. 47. Ibid., 223. 48. Ibid. 49. Ibid., 222.
52. I provide a brief overview of recent research on novelty and perception in “Cue Fascination: A New Vulnerability in Addiction,” co-authored with John Sarneki and Rebecca Traynor, Behavioral and Brain Sciences 31, no. 4 (August, 2008). This work is part of an interdisciplinary project focused on my proposal that at the center of addiction as a brain disease one encounters an aesthetic problem.
53. In the interrogation sequence, O’Brien seeks to “cure” Winston of his belief in the past (247–48). Exactly what the regime objects to in Winston can be seen by comparing him before and after his reprogramming in the Ministry of Love. When he is finally released, he has lost his desire for a past or future, but he still cannot get used to the taste of gin (293). Winston’s desire for a past and a future, which represents a fundamental opposition to the regime, should be distinguished from his passionate awareness of the surface of the world (“stones are hard, water is wet”), which is elicited by the regime through the technique of prohibition.
54. See Fredric Jameson’s discussion of Foucault’s “total” disciplinary systems in Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Durham, NC, 1991), 5.