# *1984* Still Knocking at Our Door

**George Orwell's haunting tale takes on new power in this graphic novel**

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a review of
*1984: The Graphic Novel: George Orwell, Adapted & illustrated* by Fido Nesti. HMH 2021

It might be that everyone has something to say about George Orwell's *1984*. It's not only a perennial favorite among curriculum builders in American high schools, but also a ubiquitous shortcut for political meaning.

Anytime there's a question of censorship, surveillance, or the political distortion of language, the persona of the book gets trotted out in the mass media, and it once again rises through the best-sellers list.

For this reason, it didn't come as a surprise that following a well-received graphic novel version of Orwell's Animal Farm by Brazilian artist ODYR last year, published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (now, HMH), the same publishing group is putting out 1984 this summer, adapted and illustrated by another Brazilian artist, Fido Nesti.

With visual representation in the form of the graphic novel, like with the director Michael Radford's 1984 classic film adaptation featuring John Hurt and Richard Burton, comes questions though. It's no secret that the book hinges on Orwell's ideas of sight both of surveillance, and of the violence and fear of what's seen in Room 101, an interpretation so common that it dominates 21st century covers of the text: the watching eye. But how do we understand this stress on the visual, paired and adapted from a novel?

Nesti keys in this idea right from the start to heighten the reader's sense of sight. The novel begins with two memorable panels, the first where we see Winston, the central character, from behind through the lens of a telescreen, staticky lines helpfully giving us the visual cue along with a circular lens surrounded by black.

The pairing of the first panel with the second, identical, but different panel in which we're then given a fuller, wider perspective, makes it clear he has something to say about visual perspective. In the wider vision, we see the famous clock striking thirteen, we see a poster of Big Brother poking out from behind a wall, and we see a clearer picture of the decaying buildings that line the dusty street.

Although it's small, these first panels begin to pry open the gaps between the perspectives of illustration, text, and reader. Our gaze as readers might be the same as that of the Ministry of Love, the dreaded secret police. Or, we might see more.

Here's what Nesti gets in his graphic novel version that will make it a good book to add to the many, many representations of the text over the years: we might not understand Winston as we should. Yes. We watch him. We will pull him apart and make him what we want, but Nesti recognizes in his illustrations that something is wrong in our assessment of Winston as a martyr for freedom against the tyrannies of authoritarian regimes of all sorts, as the book is often taught.

The rub comes in a section of the book that took center stage in the 2013 play, *1984*, by Duncan MacMillan and Robert Icke. The playwrights frame the action around a book group reading the text, and set in a world beyond 1984, but inside the reality of *1984*.

This can only happen if we take the Appendix of the original novel at its word when it tells us, rather coyly, that "NEWSPEAK was the language of Oceania." MacMillan and Icke make it clear that this means, as many alert readers have surmised, that in the end, Big Brother and the Party will not prevail, that there's something that stops them.

Because the reader is pointed to the Appendix early on in a footnote, the only one in Orwell's original text, we have to assume the author wanted this tease to give us a hope for the otherwise hopeless Winston Smith. But Winston fails. And the question becomes, if Winston fails, who succeeds? And why does Winston fail?

Here's where it might be helpful to understand the larger world of Orwell. In his Road to Wigan Pier, part travelogue, part critical send-up of the middling cranks that dominated and, he thought, failed leftist movements in Britain, Orwell leans again and again into his obsession with how class distorts perception. No matter what, he says, the middle class, which he knew he could not escape, would never be able to understand the working class.

For him, it was the "lingering smell" that did it. It was a bridge too far, he admitted. Even after years as a tramp, living among the "down and out" life, he still acknowledged that his own understanding of the world could not be divorced from who he was.

This is instructive in understanding Winston's failure. It wasn't that Winston didn't know where the revolution that toppled Big Brother and the Party would come from. He says it over and over again in the novel. "Hope is in the Proles." But instead, there's something in Winston as a Party Member, as a generator of words, as part of the—to borrow a more contemporary term—"creatives" that prevents him from "seeing" the Proles as they are.

Nesti helps us along here. In the sections where Winston encounters the Proles, Nesti uses the distance between the representation of the text and his illustrations to help us understand Winston's shortcoming. When Winston walks through the bustling Prole quarter of London around St. Pancras Station, the text begins with the vague reminder from Winston that "there's hope in the proles." But in that section, all we hear about is depravity and destruction. A bomb nearly kills Winston, and when he sees the severed hand of a victim of that bomb, he kicks it in disgust. It's one of those heavy-handed symbols that the book is known for. Winston thinks there is hope in the proles, but sees none, only destruction. But Nesti, as an illustrator, knows better.

In a panel showing a wide shot of a prole street, the text trots out Winston's image of the scene's depravity with "ragged barefoot children" and girls with "crudely lipsticked mouths" and "swollen waddling women."

Nesti's illustration of this moment is set in contrast, with his proles pictured almost universally in actions of community, love even.

A woman puts her hand on the shoulder of her son, children (with shoes on!) play in the street. An older lady, large, but not waddling is led by a child. Men carry barrels on their shoulders, and smile in something like satisfaction.

What we see, very clearly, is Winston not getting it. In case it wasn't clear, Winston, on the subsequent page, is saved by the warnings of a prole before a bomb shatters another street. It's a warning Winston attributes to some animal instinct that proles must have when it comes to the bombs.

What Nesti visualizes, and the original text hints at, is that Winston's class blindness, and inability to see the proles as anything but animalistic hordes, keeps him from seeing that the revolution to come is not about some secretive Brotherhood run by intelligent, subversive inner party members, but instead by the prole communities already living lives in the gaps left by the government.

That Orwell should have this idea embedded in *1984* isn't so strange, especially considering his experience in Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War and Revolution (1936–1939) led by workers in decentralized, collectivized factories, farms, and cafes. But we do see, with Nesti's new version of *1984*, another well done interpretation of the questions of perspective and the visual within the novel, where Nesti helps us expand on the question—what can Winston see?—to better understand that sometimes we cannot see the answer right in front of us.

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