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The Memory Police: Rehashing the Image of Totalitarianism or Intentionally Anachronistic Writing?

Abstract: Literary images, followed by their visual interpretation in diverse film adaptations have effective impact of reinforcing the “knowledge” about certain political ideologies. The cultural representation of fascism and totalitarianism seems to be reductively limited to its repetitive features of definite suppression of freedom and brutal control. Yoko Ogawa’s dystopian novel *The Memory Police* (1994) depicts the state of affairs of a novelist on an unnamed island where inhabitants are subjugated to oppressive regime of the Memory Police enabling the total amnesia of all the objects disappearing from everyday life. My intention is to explore whether Ogawa’s literary images challenge or underpin the previously established imagery of existing power structures. Further, I will discuss the notion of anachronism both as motif and (intended) literary approach. This novel is also analyzed through its allegory about the future perspective of the written word in the indifferent and oblivious world.

Keywords: *The Memory Police*; totalitarianism; Yoko Ogawa; dystopic fiction; anachronism.

“I mean, things are disappearing more quickly than they
are being created, right?”

Yoko Ogawa, *The Memory Police*

Introduction

A leading Japanese critic of fascism during the third and fourth decade of the 20th century, Tsugimaro Imanaka suggests that “just as romanticism was the illusion of the nineteenth century, fascism is the illusion of our time”¹. This comparison reveals Imanaka’s standpoint on both movements as illusive and idealistic – romanticism envisioning the world led by people’s emotion while its escapist realm ignores the industrial effect and changes of everyday life, and fascism enforcing the idea of national rebirth and (social) unity along with a suppression of individual freedoms and

¹ Tsugimaro Imanaka, “Fuashizumu undō ron,” in *Imanaka Tsugimaro seijigaku ronshū*, eds. Tanaka Hiroshi et al., (Tokyo: Ochanomizu Shobō, 1981), 78–79.

production of fear. As responses to the crisis of their times, romanticism highly valued the nature, past and sublime in contrast to rapid urbanization and mechanization that generates dehumanization, and fascism provided an illusion of national purity and strength, supported by militarism and violence as solutions to social and economic problems. In parallel, these visions of reality, distinguishable in their respective periods, highlight that phantasms are indivisible of human understanding of the world.

On the other hand, literary depictions and their subsequent visual interpretations in various film adaptations play a powerful role in solidifying perceptions of specific political ideologies. However, the cultural portrayal of fascism and totalitarianism often appears overly simplistic, focusing primarily on transparent iconography of uniformed militants brutally enforcing repressive control. Yoko Ogawa's dystopian novel *The Memory Police* (1994) depicts the state of affairs of a novelist on an unnamed island where inhabitants are subjugated to oppressive regime of the Memory Police, enabling the total amnesia of all the objects disappearing from everyday life. This novel has been widely read for its exploration of themes such as memory, identity, survival, resistance and trauma. In Ogawa's narrative, Kumar and Singh note that silenced opponents of the authoritarian regime utilize memory as a weapon, while Foong and Chandran identify it as compliant, threatening and effective mechanism of resistance against the trauma imposed by repressive power structures.² Losing a memory is a traumatic experience that Prasol further relates to the loss of identity, which is also dissected by Tache in terms of preserving the integrity of the human in this peculiar space of disappearing objects.³ In such thematic explorations of *The Memory Police*, scholars tend to favor the comparative analysis, drawing connections to the works of Ray Bradbury, Franz Kafka, George Orwell, Olga Tokarczuk and others.

Do these comparisons reveal certain imaginative restrictions, or more precisely, specific reiterations when dealing with dystopian reflections of totalitarianism? Does the writer consciously construct the realm which echoes the literary images of that many influential authors, or the very notion of oppression essentially defies heterogeneousness? In *American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army* (2016), Frederic Jameson recognizes the "overwhelming increase in all manner of conceivable dystopias, most of which look monotonously alike"⁴. This unvarying aspect of dystopian imaginary is read by Patricia McManus in relation to Jameson's own further impression that the lack of production of new utopias in recent decades is evident, suggesting that classic dystopias were also inspired by proliferation of utopias, and not solely by political conditions determined by mass movements of socialism and

² Sunil Kumar and Ravinder Singh, "Suppression of Memory as Totalitarian Strategy: A Critique of Yoko Ogawa's *The Memory Police*," *Literary Voice* 2, 1 (January 2024): 111–19; Soon Seng Foong and Gheeta Chandran, "(Re)Imagining 'Dystopian Space': Memory and Trauma in Yoko Ogawa's *The Memory Police*," *Southeast Asian Review of English* 57, 1 (July 2020): 100–22.

³ Eugenia Prasol, "Trauma Through Dystopian Distortions of Memory: Ogawa Yoko's *The Memory Police*," *Journal of East-West Thought* 14, 2 (2024): 47–60; Lavinia Tache, "Objects Reconfiguring the Present and the Presence. Routes of Displacement for Humans: Yoko Ogawa, Han Kang, Olga Tokarczuk," *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory* 7, 1 (2021): 246–60.

⁴ Frederic Jameson, *American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army* (London & New York: Verso, 2016), 1.

fascism.⁵ Reflecting on present-day plethora of dystopias, McManus opposes Mark Bould's reasoning which equals monotony with "the totalization of the present" and interprets the world we exist in as "the worst of all possible", thus "there is no critique left that dystopias can effect".⁶ The crucial aspect of reading today's dystopias embarks with McManus's question – "is the popularity of dystopian fiction part of a free-floating world of cultural production, geared towards commercial legibility, either indifferent to politics or committed to the reactionary fantasy that 'things could always be worse'"?⁷ Is totalitarianism of dystopian or anti-utopian setting in contemporary fiction an empty signifier? Does contemporary dystopian fiction acknowledge and generate totalitarian manifestations in such a narrow framework that it can be only read as recognition of images previously established in the classics of the genre? Instead of dealing with the vast bibliography of dystopia in the last three decades, I intend to explore Yoko Ogawa's novel focusing on writer's vision of totalitarianism embodied by the Memory police. Special attention will be directed to the notion of anachronism, both as a theme and as a (deliberate) literary technique. Also, I will discuss the writer's perspective as the novel intersects the chapters of the protagonist's narration with the excerpts from the book she is writing.

Totalitarianism as anachronism

Ogawa leaves plenty of details unexplained about the Memory Police, but the reader is given a clear insight into the visual identity of its members. Their appearance does not stand out as distinctively unique – "there were five of them, dressed in dark green uniforms, with heavy belts and black boots. They wore leather gloves, and their guns were half hidden in holsters on their hips. The men were nearly identical, with only three badges on their collars to tell them apart"⁸. The typical military uniform with dark accessories descriptively does not reveal any authentic specificity of authoritarian power of the island. Noticeably, the same can be said for their demeanor which illustrates surveilling authority strictly disposed to control and violence, conducted with "remarkable efficacy"⁹. Ogawa's choice to create yet another prosaic representative of oppression can be unraveled in two contrasting perspectives.

Firstly, no original trait of the Memory Police could be read as intentional, as it provides a reader with a familiar epitome that could stand in place of any government or autocratic body. Depicting the Memory Police, Ogawa appoints the basic symbols of tyrannical dominion in order to deftly evoke common mental images of the coercive power. The readership is thus directed towards widely known dystopian tropes, left to their own vast interpretations of author's vague imaginings. Ogawa is

⁵ Patricia McManus, *Critical Theory and Dystopia* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022), 6.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁸ Yoko Ogawa, *The Memory Police* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2019), 12.

⁹ Ibid., 21.

purposely indefinite, designing the motif of the Memory Police nearly as a Rorschach test, to encourage each reader to not limit the possible number of interpretations. Today, thirty years after the novel was published, it entirely resonates with the current global climate in which neofascists, anti-antifascists, ur-fascists or even imaginary fascists seem to be frequently detected in both virtual and actual domains.

Conversely, a repetitive employment of the literary images deriving from classic dystopian fiction and the works of previously mentioned authors, already existing in both originals and their adaptations eventually becomes a cliché. In the case of Ogawa's novel, Orwellian and Bradburian motifs can be perceived as overused, tired models portraying a singular manifestation of political extremism. Insisting on well-known literary images, several decades after the original, essentially oversimplifies the facets of certain ideology and risks to desensitize the readers in their ability to recognize totalitarianism within customary paradigms. In the era of immense popularity of dystopian fiction which offers little variation in its essence, the reader is pampered in the "safe mode" and ultimately deprived of the opportunity to identify the multifaceted manifestations of the oppressive ideology. José Ovejero's polemic critique on *ethics of violence* in literature and cinema points out that "when the ideology conveyed is left leaning or vaguely humanistic, the book functions both as a product and as a source of absolution: the readers feel solidarity with an idea, positioning themselves on the side of the good, without having to take any actual action"¹⁰. The subversive potential of the dystopian novel diminishes when various shapes of totalitarianism are neglected, without challenging the reader to go beyond lazy confirmation of his/her set of values and prefabricated truths. If we still assume that the state figures as a sole and supreme oppressor in current times, we are willingly blind to see both sophisticated and crude forms of cultural dictatorship. Therefore, the repetitiveness of such vision marks the work as anachronistic.

Drawing on etymology of the Greek word *anachronismos* (ἀναχρονισμός) (*ana-*(ἀνά) bearing a meaning "against" or "back", and *chronos* (χρόνος) for "time"), a such literary approach can be marked as the one that keeps the text "back in time". It integrates itself in the echelon of the classic works, only stripped of their originality, revolutionary perspective and significant cultural impact.

The issue of anachronism also emerges from *The Memory Police's* narrative – the protagonist and her few acquaintances rebel against the order that enforces the disappearance of the objects and their meanings from the collective memory. If we take a suppression of memory as a totalitarian strategy, how should we regard the resistance to such action? Jacques Rancière proposes the following hypothesis – "anachronism is so called because what is at stake is not only a problem of succession. It is not a horizontal problem of the order of times but a vertical problem of the order of time in the hierarchy of beings. It is a problem of the division (*partage*) of time, in the sense of 'what one receives as one's share.'¹¹ In the context of a novel, such *anachronistic* hierarchy is palpably set, as the one group actively denies the other their "share

¹⁰ José Ovejero, *L'éthique de la cruauté*, trans. Jean-Claude Villegas (Orbis Tertius, 2015), 19. – my translation

¹¹ Jacques Rancière, "The Concept of Anachronism and the Historian's Truth (English translation)," *In/Print* 3, 1 (June 2015): 23.

of time". With radical obliteration of recollection, the Memory Police destabilizes the (un)certainly of individual memory, as it forcefully negates the things in future time and their mental images. In this sense, the Memory Police's plan of action operates as a mechanism *against the time*.

The island is stirred up after a disappearance. People gather in little groups out in the street to talk about their memories of the thing that's been lost. There are regrets and a certain sadness, and we try to comfort one another. If it's a physical object that has been disappeared, we gather the remnants up to burn, or bury, or toss into the river. But no one makes much of a fuss, and it's over in a few days. Soon enough, things are back to normal, as though nothing has happened, and no one can even recall what it was that disappeared.¹²

Described acceptance of evanescence seems to be the prevailing practice on the island, with the passivated inhabitants whose present is determined with affirmation of the future conditioned with perpetual diminishing of the objects. Nevertheless, the defiant effort of several islanders to preserve the remembrance on vanishing objects is the attempt to go *back in time*. Before being taken by the Memory Police, the protagonist's mother, a sculptor, concealed the forbidden objects within her art. Her sculptures preserved mundane things suggesting that they are inherent to the work of art, regardless of its sublime form and striking concept. All the efforts to protect the materiality of time that once are made by the very few. Thus, the undertaking of both counterparts, the oppressor being *against the time* and the minority maintaining the possibility to stay *back in time*, proves to be paradoxically anachronistic, in spite of their utterly divergent tactics.

Ogawa manages to achieve a striking "synchrony of anachronisms" in her work, where both thematic subject and its stylistic representation deem to be read as positively anachronistic.

Writing into oblivion

In this novel, Ogawa perceives the act of writing in a typical conventional manner, as a reflexive process, a creative interpretation of unsettling reality. The protagonist reveals the narratives of her published work which all directly reflect a persistent vanishing of the objects, while dwelling on the overall set of circumstances relating to the status of literature on the island:

The first was about a piano tuner who wanders through music shops and concert halls searching for her lover, a pianist, who has vanished. She relies solely on the sound of his music that lingers in her ears. The second

¹² Ogawa, *The Memory Police*, 4.

was about a ballerina who lost her right leg in an accident and lives in a greenhouse with her boyfriend, who is a botanist. And the third was about a young woman nursing her younger brother, who suffers from a disease that is destroying his chromosomes. Each one told the story of something that had been disappeared. Everyone likes that sort of thing. But here on the island, writing novels is one of the least impressive, most underappreciated occupations one can pursue. No one could claim that the island is overflowing with books. The library, a shabby single-floor wooden building next to the rose garden, has only a handful of patrons, no matter when one visits, and the books seem to cower on the shelves, fearful of crumbling to dust at the slightest touch. They will all, in the end, be tossed out without being cared for or rebound – which is why the collection never grows. But no one ever complains. The bookstores are much the same. Nearly deserted, and the managers appear almost surly behind their stacks of unsold books with yellowing covers. Few people here have any need for novels.¹³

This lamenting over the islanders' lack of interest for books does not affect the novelist's determination to finish the writing of her latest work about the woman who lost her voice and communicates with her lover (a typing instructor), using only the typewriter. The plot of the story she is writing clearly mirrors the events and anxieties of her own life. Her female protagonist is trapped in a clock tower of a church where her lover has a repair room for the typing machines, feeling "as though locked inside the typewriter"¹⁴. Helping her editor R, who is one of a few islanders with the ability to remember still intact, hide from the Memory Police, the novelist keeps him in a secretly constructed room. With having a supportive, non-amnesiac editor friend, concealed in *a room of her own*, Ogawa's novelist echoes Ovejero's premise of a *cruel author who*

does not seek escape but rather the confinement of the reader with themselves. They block all exits so that the reader has no other solution but to confront themselves in a given situation. A cruel author feels at war against the sugar-coated versions of the world that conceal cruelty and are often used to legitimize a specific political and moral order, which in turn perpetuates other forms of cruelty. To escape softness and certainties, to move towards discomfort and uncertainty, to flee, yes, reality, but an anesthetized reality that gives us the sensation of living our lives as we could live another, with the same detachment, as if the world outside could be worse – it can always be worse – but hardly better, and thus that any effort is dangerous.¹⁵

¹³ Ibid., 15.

¹⁴ Ibid., 92.

¹⁵ Ovejero, *L'éthique de la cruauté*, 51.

For Ogawa's novelist "the world outside" is getting worse day by day – possibly, it was a difficult endeavor to face the idea that the Memory Police could only be a consequence and not the cause of prevailing unease. If the islanders display little interest in the books in the libraries, which are indispensable for preserving memory, then that the memory may prove to be fundamentally inconsequential and expendable. In that case, the oppressive agency would simply remove what it deems unnecessary. For a writer who chronicles life, even when its completely fabricated, navigating such a world becomes a daunting experience. *The Memory Police* is a book about the art of writing, recording all the worldly and unworldly things preoccupying one's mind and extensive concern of what will remain of literary manuscripts in the collective memory. Ogawa's work is an auto-reflexive novel, where the author is contemplating possible futility of all written work, including hers.

After the disappearances of roses, birds, photographs, calendars and fruits of all sorts, the novelist also has to endure the loss of books. Looking at the bonfire where the islanders burned the books, the narrator notices a woman dragged by the Memory Police screaming "No one can erase the stories"¹⁶, epitomizing unrelenting persuasion or hopefulness that the texts would somehow keep their noteworthiness. On the island of vanishing things, body parts also become obsolete, but the all-remembering editor comforts the novelist, caressing her invisible, disappeared limbs. Ogawa's novelist managed to finish her writing before her body completely disappeared, only with her voice left to fade away, closed in the hidden room. But her finished work, like any other, does not end at that point. Aleida Assmann effectively argues:

[...], despite its completeness, the book is not a totalitarian metaphor. Opposite to the completeness and finality of the text stands the incompleteness and infinity of interpretations. Similarly, memory, especially human memory, does not have a final form. If the infinity of the text rests on the impossibility of a definitive reading, then the infinity of memory rests on its changeability and the impossibility of being fully controlled once and for all.¹⁷

Such perspective echoes to a certain extent the concept presented in Roland Barthes's seminal essay *The Death of the Author*, proclaiming that the individual reader's interpretation has ultimately more significance than the writer's original intention.¹⁸ Regardless of the author's intention, all pre-existing (cultural) influences on the reader shape the interpretations of each individual, thus lies the *incompleteness* of the book. Yet, in *The Memory Police*, Barthes's reasoning gets upgraded by the allegorical fear that the death of the author is rendered irrelevant in the world where the reader is

¹⁶ Ogawa, *The Memory Police*, 180.

¹⁷ Alaida Asman, "O metaforici sećanja". *Reč – Časopis za književnost i kulturu, i društvena pitanja*, 56, 2 (1999): 124. – my translation

¹⁸ Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text* (New York: Fontana Press, 1977), 142–48.

totally indifferent to his/her reading and interpretation. The finality of the text, therefore, rests specifically in the realm of unconcerned and disinterested people.

Conclusion

Both literary and visual images of totalitarianism established in the years before and following the Second World War are so undeniably imprinted in the global collective memory that even half a century later, the authors are rarely trying to construct a new paradigm of it. Relying on these existing perimeters too strongly contributes solely to the preservation of memory of what has been, and not being alert to alarmingly evolving potential of the totalitarian thought. Apparently, in present time, the writer's position is a demanding one – he/she can only be inventive and imaginative as the longstanding literary past allows him/her to. Yoko Ogawa's portrayal of the Memory Police is being deliberately vague in order to possibly evoke a familiar image of authoritarian control as a universal symbol of oppression. This approach bears a risk that her work would be read as a cliché. Additionally, the repetitiveness of iconography established by classical authors may desensitize readers to the multifaceted nature of totalitarianism, limiting their understanding of diverse forms of oppression. Paradoxically, Ogawa's novel can be interpreted as both thematically and stylistically anachronistic but striking in its portrayal of the fight against forgetting. Furthermore, in *The Memory Police*, Ogawa explores writing as a reflective and creative process, but also the potential futility of such activity within the realm of oppressive control and prevailing indifference. Ultimately, the novel suggests that while texts may be forgotten or destroyed, memory of them and their interpretations are beyond anyone's firm control. In the vast landscape of a human mind, literary images allow their recipients to reshape them constantly, and thus evade the ever apparent, oppressive constraints of the *memory police*.

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