

International Journal of Human Sciences Research

CONTROL: ORWELLIAN ELEMENTS IN THE NARRATIVE OF SHINGEKI NO KYOJIN

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Abstract: In this article, a study is carried out of the Orwellian elements present in the manga *Shingeki no Kyojin* (*Attack on Titan*) by Hajime Isayama (2009). For this, only the elements related to control are analyzed through the concept of authority and the systems and methods used to maintain said authority. It seeks to analyze similarities between some of the control strategies proposed by George Orwell in his book *1984* (1949) and *Shingeki no Kyojin* (2009), basing the study on the works of Mark Dice, Edward Said, Neil Sanders, Armand Mattelart and André Vitalis on the control of knowledge as an authoritarian technique. As a result of the analysis, similarities arise between what Orwell calls the “thought police” with Isayama’s “first internal squad”, the “ministry of truth” with the political authority of *Shingeki no Kyojin* and the mind control present in both. plays. Both Orwell and Isayama demonstrate in their works the potential violations of human rights for the preservation of authority over certain subjects, with personal and/or social circumstances being a determining factor.

Keywords: control, George Orwell, *Shingeki no Kyojin*.

INTRODUCTION

Shingeki no Kyojin, also known as *Attack on Titan* (in English-speaking countries) or *Attack on the Titans* (in Spanish-speaking countries) is a manga (Japanese comic) that tells the story of a fictional world where humans are on the brink of extinction due to creatures, called titans, who are man-eaters. The plot revolves around Eren Jaeger, the protagonist, and his friends who, after a series of events, discover a network of secrets and lies that radically changes the reality they face. The manga has European influences, notable both in its design and in its political, social and cultural themes. For example, fascism, totalitarianism, the Holocaust, and racial representations.

Hajime Isayama is the creator, writer and illustrator of *Shingeki no Kyojin*, which began publishing in Japan on October 10, 2009 in the magazine *Bessatsu Shōnen Magazine* from the Kodansha publishing house. The popularity of the mangaka (creator of a manga) is evident when reviewing that the publisher has issued “100 million copies of its 31 serialized volumes” (Hunt 2020). According to Joshua Hunt, “at 33, he’s achieved a level of fame at home that would be unfathomable for a comic book artist in America” (2020), a detail that has helped promote the analysis of mangas from an academic perspective.

This work will analyze the elements for information control and the masses existing in the history of *Shingeki no Kyojin* that are related to the narrative and themes addressed in the book *1984* by George Orwell. Particularly, the thought police, the ministry of truth and mind control described by Orwell and their equivalents exposed in Hajime Isayama’s manga.

AUTHORITY: CONTROL SYSTEMS

Considering the fact that *Shingeki no Kyojin* is a manga that includes global representations, it would be pertinent to maintain the work of Edward W. Said as a common thread, in his book: *“Orientalismo”*. Said offers a description of what orientalism is, spanning from its beginnings to the present. In addition to clarifying the concept of Orientalism, he provides an in-depth analysis of it, highlighting the power relationship between the West and the East and how this relationship engendered the idea of a subordinate East. Eurocentrism is central and dominant in Eastern studies and has created a separation between “us” and “them” (Said, 1978/2016, Back Cover). Said’s study is of special relevance for the proposed analysis due to not only the representation that exists in the manga and that Said covers throughout his book, but also the concept of

authority, of a domain of a particular group of people, or of one link of society, over others.

Knowledge means rising above immediate contingencies, leaving oneself and reaching for the strange and the distant. The object of such knowledge is by nature exposed to verification; It is “a reality” that, although it develops, changes or transforms in the same way that civilizations often do, is, fundamentally and even ontologically, stable. To know an object this way is to dominate it, to have authority over it, and authority here means, for “us”, to deny it autonomy - to the eastern country -, because we know it, and, in a certain sense, it exists as we know it (Said, 1978/2016).

Much of the authority visualized in *Shingeki no Kyojin* arises and is maintained through the control of information. That is, the control of knowledge. Both the power within the society and politics of Paradis Island, as well as the dominance by the Marleyans over the Eldians in the country of Marley, are closely related to knowledge. This in turn resembles what Orwell proposed in his book 1984 where there is a ministry of truth whose main job is the control of information.

Continuing with the theme of knowledge, Said points out the following: “the general and liberal consensus that holds that “true” knowledge is fundamentally non-political (and that, conversely, overtly political knowledge is not true), does no more have to hide the dark and very well organized political conditions that govern the production of any knowledge” (2022, p.31). In a way, Said warns of the political condition behind the knowledge accessible to the public and that they take as an absolute truth. This is evidenced in both *Shingeki no Kyojin* and 1984 through the manipulation of the masses with a supposed purpose of peace when in reality there is an entire political machinery behind the scenes.

Armand Mattelart and Andre Vitalis in

their book of *Orwell al cibercontrol* present a historical, political and social context around citizen control systems, a model of totalitarian surveillance, warned by George Orwell in his novel 1984 and its establishment in real society. Although an analysis is carried out from the beginning of control and surveillance systems, its main focus is on the use of current technologies as a control tool. The relevant aspects for the proposed analysis are the descriptions of the different control systems as well as their invisible aspect. This is because *Shingeki no Kyojin* includes quite similar ways of surveillance and control and, in turn, these are not perceived by the societies presented in the manga either.

In *De Orwell al cibercontrol*, there is talk of a potential danger.

Under these conditions, it will no longer be only the crime that would justify the deprivation of liberty, but the potential danger is enough. To deal with threats, we will try to detect, as soon as possible and thanks to profiling, those people at risk, and place them far from being able to do harm. Dangerousness takes priority over guilt, and security measures take precedence over punishment. (Mattelart and Vitalis, 2015, p.169)

On the island of Paradis, the idea of potential danger is evidenced in the disappearance of those individuals who question the general knowledge that the society of this island possesses and wonder what lies beyond the walls and territory of the titans. Armand Mattelart and Andre Vitalis ground their study of control systems, including potential danger, in George Orwell’s novel 1984.

From now on it will be collectivism that will be exclusively associated, through the imaginary of satire, with the paradigmatic objective of control and surveillance systems. This is what [...] anticipates George Orwell [...] in his novel 1984, who, during his participation in the Spanish civil war, suffered from the Stalinist “thought police”

with their newspeak of lies, deviations and distortions of words. Indeed, it is often forgotten that, in Orwellian fiction, the infallible and all-powerful “Big Brother who watches you” is none other than the “mask under which the party chose to show itself to the world.” (2015, p.87-88)

In this quote, the authors mention a public entity called the “thought police” who, through various mechanisms and tactics, observe and control the population. In *Shingeki no Kyojin* there are quite similar state entities called the First Internal Squad and the Anti-Human Suppression Squad (a subdivision of the First Internal Squad). They are a regime that many are not aware of and those who are aware know very little about them. They are involved in numerous conspiracies that involve hiding the truth from the eyes of society. They are responsible for threatening and eliminating anyone who thinks differently, who is considered to have some knowledge of the truth, who opposes the system or who could be a possible threat to the system.

These ideas of control, espionage, secret groups and projects continue in ``*Big Brother: The Orwellian Nightmare Come True* de Mark Dice``. He endeavors to detail the NSA's high-tech spy systems, mind-reading machines, secret government projects, and emerging artificial intelligence programs that seem straight out of George Orwell's novel 1984. The author delivers depth to the different elements of control described in the novel 1984. These more detailed descriptions would help with the comparisons to be made between *Shingeki no Kyojin* and 1984.

The concept of authority and the systems and methods used to maintain that authority seems to be what unites the authors already discussed and those that follow. Dice states that “many of these programs used (and continue to use) underhanded and often illegal methods to achieve their goals which range from controlling the mainstream

media to covertly trying to smear, intimidate, blackmail, or even assassinate people who pose a threat to the establishment” (2011, p.150). In the manga, all the members of the military group called the Exploration Corps are called to be arrested for a crime that they did not commit in order for the main authority of the island to have them under its control as well as tarnish the reputation of the group. Bernays comments the following:

Those who manipulate the unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country. We are governed, our minds are molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of [...] In almost every act of our lives whether in the sphere of politics or business in our social conduct or our ethical thinking, we are dominated by the relatively small number of persons who understand the mental processes and social patterns of the masses. It is they who pull the wires that control the public mind. (como se citó en Dice, 2011 p.154)

This particular quote, which comments on an invisible power, ties into the political situation within Paradis Island in *Shingeki no Kyojin*. The island of Paradis is initially governed by a Monarchy, however, the king that the population knows is a mere puppet, a false king. The true power and authority falls on an invisible other, completely unknown to both society and the different military groups, except for the previously mentioned group of the First Internal Squadron.

For a greater understanding of mind control and mass manipulation linked to the previously mentioned methods and tools in the execution of authority, Neil Sanders in ``*Your Thoughts Are Not Your Own: Mind control, mass manipulation and perception management*`` presents the origins, objectives and architects of mind control; providing a detailed description of different methodologies such as trauma, drugs, hypnosis, among

others; similar to those presented in ``*Big Brother: The Orwellian Nightmare Come True y 1984*`, but with a landing in reality, based on declassified documents, interviews with the doctors involved, scientific articles and reports from the main media (cf. Sanders, 2012, p.10).

Sanders provides an explanation of what mental control is, which allows the analysis of the object of study, *Shingeki no Kyojin*, to be based on a base concept.

What exactly do we mean by mind control? We are talking about the ability to control a person's thoughts and actions, in order to have them do the bidding of their programmers against their own will and in some cases, against their own moral code [...] This can not only apply to the individual in programming of personal thought and action but can also be utilized in the arena of mass manipulation or mass programming [...]. (2012, p.6-7)

In George Orwell's 1984, the mind control used is quite similar to the definition given by Neil Sanders. As for the manga, which is the main object of study, mind control appears figuratively but also literally. It is intended to analyze both examples of mental control.

Neil Sanders continues his analysis of mind control, pointing out four categories of this type of domination: "prying the truth from a suspect during interrogations, wiping memory or locking memories into the subconscious so they cannot be retrieved without the appropriate techniques, the complete physical and mental control of a subject and controlling the perceptions of the general public through propaganda, advertising and the shaping of events" (2012, p.220). These four categories resemble what was already stipulated with the previously mentioned authors, which allows a theoretical cohesion base for the analysis of *Shingeki no Kyojin*. The manga presents situations that would fit into all of these categories: the extraction of the truth

(for example: interrogations and torture), the erasure of memory (for example: erasing behavioral patterns through physiological means such as electroshock), the control of the public through manipulation of information (for example: advertisements, controlled chaos, and control through language), complete physical and mental control (for example: hypnosis, impaired judgment, and increased suggestibility).

Shingeki no Kyojin has been analyzed by critics, around gothic themes, the construction of bodies and monsters, and political representations. Regarding this last topic, the most relevant for this study, the work of Francesco-Alessio Ursini stands out in *Themes, Focalization and the Flow of Information: The Case of Shingeki no Kyojin*. Ursini approaches the analysis of *Shingeki no Kyojin* from the concepts of control, world and titans; focusing on its narrative structure and its impact on both the characters' perspectives and also the reader's perspective.

The control theme establishes how the elites control the flow of information and create consent by fear and violence. The world theme establishes the bounded location of the narrative, whereas the social structure theme establishes the roles of and relations between characters. The Titans theme establishes the main source of 'flak' in this consent system. Since the Titans are at the same time victims and executioners of the system, this control is total, and takes a very physical, violent form. (Ursini, 2017, p.8)

As can be seen in the description and citation, this last article is the closest to the topic addressed in this study. However, it lacks a specification of control models, particularly those addressed by Orwell in his novel. In 1984, different methods are detailed such as the two minutes of hate, the thought police, spies, propaganda, class separation, the ministry of truth and the concept of *Big Brother*; with the goal of maintaining control

through worship and fear.

ORWELL AND ISAYAMA: CONNECTED NARRATIVES

The representations of control and authority in *Shingeki no Kyojin* are similar to those existing in 1984. For the corresponding analysis of these similarities, Sanders' 4 categories were used in order to organize and demonstrate the different types of situations related to control. The first category is extracting the truth from a suspect during interrogations. In the present society in 1984, there is a group called thought police who monitor, persecute, detain, and torture its citizens who have committed the act of thought crime. In simple words, thinking differently from what is promoted. Next, Grisha Jaeger, the protagonist's father, is seen being tortured after being discovered as a rebel against Marley's government in his youth.



Figure 1 Volume 22, Chapter 87: Frontier

Note. Adapted from *Attack on Titan*, by Hajime Isayama, 2018, ``Norma Editorial``.

In this case, quite similar to what happens in 1984, Grisha was handed over to authority by his own son, Zeke Jaeger; a constant fear that parents experienced in Orwellian society. Regarding the theme, the main character of 1984, Winston Smith, comments that "the thought police would get him just the same. He had committed [...] the essential crime that contained all others in itself. Thoughtcrime, they called it. Thoughtcrime was not a thing that could be hidden forever. "You might dodge successfully for a while, even for years,

but sooner or later they were bound to get you" (Orwell, 1949/2008, p.21). This lurking entity, watching over its citizens and waiting for the slightest error in behavior (reflecting thought), becomes most evident on Paradis Island with the government institution First Internal Squad. For them there is a potential danger in society. Your task is to identify and eliminate it. There is its similarity with the Thought Police of 1984, "the most gifted among them, who could possibly become nuclei of discontent, are simply marked down by the Thought Police and eliminated" (Orwell, 1949/2008, p.218). This is exactly what happens with Erwin Smith's father, a character who was once the commander of the Exploration Corps, a group to which Eren and his friends belonged. Erwin's father was a professor who doubted the supposed truths he taught, culminating in his death by the First Internal Squad.



Figure 2 Volume 14, Chapter 55: Pain (Part 1)

Note. Adapted from *Attack on Titan*, by Hajime Isayama, 2015, ``Norma Editorial``.



Figure 3 Volume 14, Chapter 55: Pain (Part 2)

Note. Adapted from *Attack on Titan* by Hajime Isayama, 2015, ``Norma Editorial``.

As can be seen in these scenes, there were inconsistencies in the information accessible to the society of Paradis Island. By identifying and sharing this detail with his son, Erwin's father immediately became a potential danger. The threat that Erwin's father presented was that of questioning the government, which could trigger a wave of distrust and rebellion from the population towards authority. Therefore, Erwin's father, like so many others, had to be eliminated.

The second category is that of erasing memory. This type of control is the basis of the society built within Paradis Island, where the people's memories were literally erased, exercising complete domination over them.



Figure 4 Volume 22, Chapter 89: Meeting

Note. Adapted from Attack on Titan by Hajime Isayama, 2018, ``Norma Editorial``.

In 1984, the manipulation and deletion of memory is not literal as in Isayama's manga. Rather, it is executed through constant torture. The alleged criminals are taken to room 101 of the ministry of love. There they face their greatest fears to the point that "the truth" they know is distorted until it concludes in a single truth, the one postulated by the party in 1984 and, in the case of Shingeki no kyojin, the one established by the king of the wall. Memory loss engenders a malleable subject that is completely susceptible to the information provided. That is, it is like a blank page that can be filled in as they please, thus maintaining control over the subject since they do not know anything else and lack the cognitive skills necessary to reflect and analyze their actions.

The third category is the control of the perceptions of the general public through propaganda, publicity and the shaping of events. In 1984, it is said that "if all others accepted the lie which the Party imposed, if all records told the same tale—then the lie passed into history and became truth. 'Who controls the past' runs the Party slogan, 'controls the future: who controls the present controls the past'" (Orwell, 1949/2008, p.37). This is evident in Shingeki no Kyojin when the stories of Ymir (the first titan) promoted by Marley's government and the one promoted by the group of rebel Eldians are compared.



Figure 5 Volume 22, Chapter 88: The Attack Titan (part 1)

Note. Adapted from Attack on Titan, by Hajime Isayama, 2018, ``Norma Editorial``.



Figure 6 Volume 22, Chapter 88: The Attack Titan (2nd part)

Note: Adapted from Attack on Titan, by Hajime Isayama, 2015, ``Norma Editorial``.

The truth is controlled for the purposes of those in a position of authority. He who has the knowledge, has the power. For this reason, the ministry of truth in 1984 is precisely concerned with knowledge. It is decided what must be modified or eliminated in order to maintain control. "When memory failed and

written records were falsified—when that happened, the claim of the Party to have improved the conditions of human life had got to be accepted, because there did not exist, and never again could exist, any standard against which it “could be tested” (Orwell, 1949/2008, p.97). If there is nothing to compare with, the fight for truth and freedom is eliminated.

Finally, the category related to complete physical and mental control of a subject is more the result of all the previous ones. Through torture, the manipulation of knowledge, the elimination of memories (Figurative and literal), complete control of the subject is achieved. For example, the case of Gabi Braun, a Marleyan who firmly believes that the inhabitants of Paradis Island are demons. That is the idea that was established by the Marley government. She is so convinced of this supposed truth that, even when encountering people on Paradis Island who are as human as anyone else, she continues to consider them malevolent beings for much of the manga’s story.



Figure 7 Volume 23, Chapter 94: *The Boy Within the Walls*

Note. Adapted from *Attack on Titan*, by Hajime Isayama, 2018, ‘‘Norma Editorial’’.

Gabi suffers a kind of brainwashing similar to those religious sects where children are indoctrinated in their teachings and stories. In this example of Gabi, the Orientalism proposed by Said also resonates, the separation

between “us” and “them”, with the “us” being the one who has the right to control since they are the “good” ones and those who have the right. knowledge. Gabi, by belonging to “us” (the “good” Eldians), denies autonomy to the inhabitants of Paradis Island, demonstrating zero consideration for their lives. The Eldians of the island do not have the right over their own lives, that right belongs to “us.” At the same time, Gabi can also be considered a “they” by the inhabitants of Marley who would represent the “we.” Hence the similarities between the residence of the Marley Eldians with the Jewish ghettos during the Nazi regime. The Marleyans maintain complete control over the people of Eldia.

While reading Isayama’s manga, the concepts that stand out again and again is struggle, both internal and external in the societies presented. This fight is associated with the search for freedom. For the Eldians of Paradis Island, the fight, in its beginning, is against the titans; The search for freedom consists of knowing what lies beyond the walls. This then transforms into a fight for the freedom to live in the face of imminent attack from other countries. On the other hand, the Eldians belonging to Marley also fight for the freedom to live. But more than that, the fight to be recognized as human beings, since they live a life quite similar to that lived by the victims of the Holocaust. *Shingeki no Kyojin* seems to be a warning. Reality must be questioned and analyzed from where the meaning of that reality is given in order not to submit to the methods of control, both visible and hidden, exercised by the “authorities.”

CONCLUSIONS

After analyzing the similarities between Orwell's thought police and Isayama's First Internal Squad, Orwell's ministry of truth and the information control present in the manga, and the mind control described by both authors (Orwell and Isayama); the presence of Orwellian elements is effectively established in the manga: *Shingeki no Kyojin*. Despite being works written by different authors, temporalities and geographical locations, their narratives are connected under the concept of control. In a way, this is a representation of world historical reality. Systems of control and authority are common elements in countless countries, with one of the most extreme examples, totalitarianism, being evidence of this. There are Nazi Germany, Italian fascism, Soviet Stalinism, Japanese ultranationalism, North Korean communism, among others.

Furthermore, as has been seen, within the theme of control, a range of possibilities is presented in which to delve deeper. For example, why is it that characters with Asian features, representative of an ethnic group, are the only ones not affected by the king's mental manipulation within the walls? This question and many others that arise after the analysis raises questions about the potential influences on the work of Hajime Isayama as well as other

manga (for example: Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood, Code Geass, Psycho-Pass). The main setting of Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood is the country called Amestris, a fascist nation ruled by a Führer who does not hesitate to massacre and use the population for his own purposes, all under a veil of order and good, similar to the events of 1984 and Marley's military authority in *Shingeki no Kyojin*. At the same time, Code Geass features a similar authority called The Holy Empire of Britannia. It is the dominant world military superpower. Additionally, the manga exhibits abilities including mind control. For its part, the narrative of Psycho-Pass takes place in a totalitarian Japan. His control over society is reflected in his use of the Sybil system which has the ability to identify potential dangers, who can be rehabilitated or eliminated depending on their crime coefficient.

Finally, the idea that *Shingeki no Kyoji* is a cautionary tale about the consequences of losing questioning and reasoning, being passive in the face of an authority that claims to be the one that controls knowledge and people, and that freedom is not inherently assured. But more than that, both *Shingeki no Kyojin* and 1984 show that everyone is capable of evil, and circumstance is the only thing that separates us.

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