

Public Art in the Post-Truth Era

A commentary on social media through the prism of Lee McIntyre's book 'Post-Truth' as well as the allegories in George Orwell's '1984'.

Abstract

The objective of this paper is to comment on the impact of the post truth era on art in the public sphere by drawing parallels between the nature of social media and the allegorical world of George Orwell's '1984'. It will begin by discussing the origin and concept of the post-truth era and the characteristics that define it. By citing experiments and prior events that have shaped the notion of 'post-truth' it will explore the relevance and connection between the onset of social media and the explosion of the post truth phenomenon. A comparison will then be drawn, highlighting aspects of major social media art platforms, such as Instagram and Facebook, that mirror the dystopian writings of George Orwell. Drawing briefly from other researches and theories such as postmodernism, x and y, it will critically analyze the impact of this post truth era on shaping thought and behavior. Ultimately, this paper will attempt to address whether anything be done in the face of a brazen and widespread disregard for the truth. More importantly, it will consider whether art can be a tool to rekindle critical and intelligent thought and dismantle the post-truth world.

Introduction

Upon first study, Orwell's novel '1984' may appear more paranoid than prophetic. However, he wrote this book in 1949, a time when 1984 itself, let alone social media, was a future too distant to even be imagined. Bearing that in mind, there are elements in the book that would astound us, the readers from Orwell's future, as they directly mirror the digital society in which we exist.

Take this quote for example,

“Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four. If that is granted, all else follows.”

Out of context, this quote appeared meaningless; even nonsensical. In the novel it referred to the fascist ‘Party’s’ enforcement of an ‘eternal present’. History was written and rewritten so rapidly and conclusively that even one’s memories were deceived; “the party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears”. In his article, ‘Facebook, Snapchat and the Dawn of the Post-Truth Era’, Martinez references the same notion of eternal present created by a deluge of constant and fleeting partisan news, “our exhausting and constant absorption in a transitory but completely overwhelming media cycle is our own preliterate eternal present”. The ‘Party’ in Orwell’s novel deliberately reworded history, but deliberate or not, truthful or not, the fact remains that once a news item has been published on the internet and believed for any length of time, it ‘would pass into permanent records and become truth’. That is how we, like Orwell’s dystopian government, concoct our own reality until the ability to confirm a logical, factual truth becomes a novelty.

The potential impact of social media discourse unveiled itself to me while I worked on certain humanitarian efforts in Pakistan. As people responded to what I posted, I drew crowds to contribute to social work which was exhilarating and rewarding. It was more difficult to admit that social media attention held a certain narcissistic allure. Regardless, I began to dabble in Instagram and Facebook more deeply. At that point I caught a glimpse of the power an ordinary person wielded when they caught the attention of the internet masses. I was also intrigued by the nature of online discourse; what attracted viewership and what invited scorn. I observed (and later read the same), that ‘objective facts are less influential in shaping [belief] than appeals to emotion’ on social media.

But to understand how social media works and its impact, we must first acclimatize ourselves to the concept of post-truth. We need to understand the era we are operating in and the consequences it has for the freedom of thought. Similar to Orwell's novel, it can function as a tool in the hands of political ideologies that can pander to a crowd's mentality in order to sow doubt or misinformation. Where it differs from Orwell's dystopian fictitious society is in that it technically gives every participant a platform for free speech; however if McIntyre's analysis of the human psyche is accurate, there are many ways this supposed freedom can be an illusion.

The interesting thing to note is that Orwell's emphasis is on love, sex, art, language as the things that needed to be curbed in order to convert people into either mindless drones or unintelligent 'proles'.