

THOUGHT CRIMES

Lisi Raskin considers the impact of George Orwell, Jean Genet, and riding the subway on her work.

Some of the most transgressive ideas in literature have their origin in the intimate thoughts of invented characters. In his novel *1984*, George Orwell coined the term *thought crime* as a metaphor for the invention, fantasy and contemplation that removes protagonist Winston Smith from a harsh, impoverished routine. A low-level functionary in a terror-based dictatorship, Winston cannot help himself from noticing the inconsistencies and absurdities all around him, so the thought crime is inevitable. The reader has full access to Winston's deepest moral dilemmas and paranoia, a cycle that begins with his doubts about the party (a thought crime), continues as he keeps a journal (proof of on-going thought crimes), and culminates when he conspires to aid the underground effort against Big Brother (high treason). As a result he lives with the chronic fear of being discovered as a thought criminal.

Even though the thoughts and actions that Winston commits are only subversive within the harshly restrictive reality of a fictionalized fascist dictatorship, it is the spirit of subversion that elicits empathy on the part of the reader. Through this empathy, the reader becomes a witness of and in some cases an accomplice to the thought crime. For the reader, who must somehow straddle the world of the novel and the subsequent impact it makes on their imagination, transgressive thoughts create an elastic partition, a line in the sand that may be crossed at any moment or gazed at indefinitely. The libidinal function of transgressive behavior and subversive desire was the foundation for French novelist Jean Genet's preoccupation with the homoerotic. In Genet's fantasies, criminals (who are amoral by definition) usually enact homosexual tendencies. George Bataille calls the moment of deliberately losing oneself *eroticism*. It is this moment of the thought crime that interests me.

When notions of eroticism and meditations on committing thought crimes are made manifest outside of the narrative structure of literature but are still contained within the realm of the readerly imagination, an expansion of the reader's consciousness occurs. In these situations, it is possible for the reader to become the actual protagonist of an imagined meta-narrative wherein the physical world, with its lush nuance, becomes its backdrop. This series of moments is loosely choreographed as follows: the reader disassociates from the book in front of them, shifts focus to the interior imagination, and uses the real world as a narrative place, a cohesive setting for imagined scenarios. Bachelard calls this *suspended reading*, an oneiric state that occurs once the writer has seduced the reader's eyes off the page.

The New York City subway creates an exceptional environment for such seduction. Just as in the experience of suspended reading, riding the subway lacks any fixed point of spatial, temporal, or psychological orientation. Rather, the experience of the subway is firmly rooted in the unconscious, a limitless part of the mind containing impulses that a person is not generally aware of but that manifest themselves in dreams

and associated acts. Stimuli perceived on the subway can take on hallucinatory meanings that amplify the experience of panic, paranoia, and euphoria. For example, the presence of a police officer can exacerbate feelings of safety, danger, suspicion, or reassurance, depending on one's relationship to authority. The same is true for the garbled loudspeaker announcements that remind subway riders that their bags may be searched at any time.

The MTA's recent expansion of security measures recalls Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, which when used in prisons created a dual consciousness among inmates: aware that they were potentially being watched from a central observation point, they became party to policing their own behavior. This dual consciousness is a very important component of the way suspended reading occurs on the subway. On the subway, a visible apparatus of video cameras and television banks record and play back meaningless hours of activity. This loop of constant surveillance (that may or may not be monitored) helps build the ethos of the subway environment into a tentative place with haphazard fixtures that is provisional, transitional, and observed. These elements and their connotations also form and dictate the expansion of consciousness that may occur in this subterranean non-site.

The mechanics of this expansion of consciousness first occurred to me on the subway in New York while I was reading *Crepuscular Dawn*, a book of interviews with Paul Virilio conducted by Sylvère Lotringer. In one passage, Virilio recalled a story about the ventilation fans that ceased functioning when electricity was lost during the bombardments of WWII. According to Virilio, this oversight caused French civilians to die on top of one another "...as in the subway." My blurred eyes left the page, as a daydream bridged the gap between Virilio's historical space and my actual space. Within my imagination, the subway became analogous to the bunker, crystallizing the fact that, ontologically speaking, there is nothing in New York more similar to a bunker than a subway tunnel.

I was, in essence, committing a thought crime because I was thinking about violence in a public space. I was contemplating the death of the people around me who in turn were probably contemplating my death because thinking about death and repressing thoughts about death is what we do. However, we who seek to desubliminate these thoughts, in a culture whose very mission is to control such thoughts, start to feel like criminals. As a result of this dynamic, my consciousness was split somewhere between occupying the oneiric position of my imagination, periodically reconnecting with the frank, black humor of Virilio and Lotringer's conversation, and then breaking with these places altogether in order to moralize my own imagination. My imagination became the site of the neurotic loop that had previously existed within the actions and thoughts of the fictional characters described in the earlier part of this essay.

This slippage of subject position became even more powerful and morally loaded when I looked up from *Crepuscular Dawn* and saw the anti-terrorism poster that read "If You See Something, Say Something." Immediately I was alongside Winston Smith and for a moment the subway became the setting of *1984*. My head was swimming with Orwell's own slogans "WAR IS PEACE. FREEDOM IS SLAVERY. IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH."

The very utterance of "If You See Something, Say Something" is powerful bait for the thought criminal not only because it mimics the Orwellian language of *1984*, but also because it presents specific guidelines for both "good" citizenship (i.e., compliance) and "bad" citizenship (disobedience). Thought crime, of course, is an act of disobedience that goes undetected by video cameras, undercover police officers, or even diligent citizens.

It is indisputable that catching the imagination in the act of committing a thought crime is compelling. Cues from the literary models of Orwell and Genet, as well as the physical signs of the subway's environment, helped me to internalize the act of self-policing and speculate about the countless acts of self-policing that must have been taking place all around me. These facets of self-policing and speculation make the act of reading and contemplating the slogan "If You See Something, Say Something" while on the subway incredibly titillating. Within this framework, the slogan itself becomes a moral pin-up girl, and the State becomes her pimp.

It is possible to arrive at Bataille's notion of eroticism by talking emphatically about this experience. The act of talking about architecture, technology, and imagined explosions within a moving vehicle full of people who are most likely contemplating the exact same thing is an activity that contains more promise of transgression than an actual act of violence because it functions according to the logic of a fantasy. The most important part of this type of imagination is that it lays the groundwork for other ideas to come into play, like empathy and critical discourse that broadens the subjective space of creativity.

Since 9/11, the slogan "If You See Something, Say Something" has become ubiquitous. In this climate, suggestion and suspicion become a function of outer life as personified by the State. But inner life, the life of the imagination, becomes a mirror, a slippage in real time that provokes every person on a given subway car or platform to simultaneously become a thought criminal and thought policeman. It is here that the conditions that created the character of Winston Smith become apparent. I have never been in such proximity to the intentions of Orwell as he sought to posit the mechanics of transgression and human desire within the consciousness of the reader. In the subway a normal, law-abiding citizen can press their groin against whatever the furtive and unpredictable imagination can conjure up while suspended in the depths of the city's unconscious.