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Sound of Subscendence: Navigating Soundscapes in George Orwell's *1984*

Zuzia Dzierzędzka

Abstract

This paper examines the sonic environments of 1984 *by George Orwell through the lens of Timothy Morton's concept of subscendence, arguing that sound operates as a paradoxical force within the novel's oppressive system. While the Party seeks to construct a sensory-controlled, prison-like environment that limits perception and embodied experience, sound continually exceeds these constraints by occupying space, shaping affect, and enabling fleeting moments of resistance. Methodologically, the paper combines close reading with insights from prison literature studies and ecocriticism, particularly subscendence from Morton's* Ecology without Nature. *It analyses key scenes, including the Two Minutes Hate, the Ministry of Love, the Thrush's Song, and the Prole Washerwoman's Singing, to demonstrate how soundscapes are co-produced by both the regime and its subjects. These environments immerse individuals in affective atmospheres that discipline perception, yet never fully eliminate the possibility of alternative experience. The analysis shows that subscendence emerges through the interaction between individuals and their environments, where the collective sonic field both reinforces and destabilises power. Moments of immersion—whether in orchestrated hate or spontaneous song—reveal that sound cannot be fully contained, as it continues to press into bodies and space. Ultimately, the paper argues that Orwell's soundscapes expose the instability of total control, demonstrating how even within a tightly regulated sensory regime, the material and affective qualities of sound preserve the potential for life, expression, and resistance.*

Keywords: Orwell, *1984*, ecocriticism, sound, soundscape, resistance and oppression

A scream rips through the air, uncontrollable laughter breaks the silence, a beautiful melody moves the soul of those who are listening, and suddenly one's mind floods with emotion. No matter the decor or the candlelight, a dinner accompanied by shrieks makes one's blood run cold, and a gentle harmony can turn even the sharpest of rooms into a peaceful sanctuary. The shimmering ecology of sonic and visual interactions envelops in its affective possibility, stringing listeners along roads of serenity or, with just one note astray, paths of discord. No matter containment, this ability of sound is almost inescapable, allowing for this perceived duality and multitude of feelings in between. A voice rises and the room is no longer still. A song swells and something unseen expands, filling the air with tension, warmth, memory, and possibility. Sound does not merely pass through space—it settles, spreads, presses against the body, rearranges what can be felt and imagined. Where voices gather, feelings expand; where melody lingers, thought begins to move. Power lives here, in this invisible occupation of space, and power rarely goes unnoticed. Speech is watched, song is restrained, expression narrowed— not by accident, but by design.

In his dystopian novel *1984*, George Orwell imagines a world that understands this all too well. There, sound is monitored, shaped, and suppressed because wherever expression resonates, hope finds room to breathe—and where hope breathes, control begins to fracture. It is no surprise that such a regime recoils from the arts, from unregulated voices, from anything that vibrates beyond command. For sound carries more than noise—it carries the dangerous possibility of freedom. This tension between resonance and restraint frames the central paradox of *1984*. The regime described in this novel seeks to engineer a world stripped of sensory depth, where perception is narrowed and embodied experience flattened into obedience. Yet sound continually exceeds this picture, because it presses into space and bodies, reintroduces affect, relation, and presence even within conditions meant to eliminate them, exposing the instability of a system that depends on sensory deprivation to maintain control. This paper argues that viewing soundscapes in *1984* through Timothy Morton's subscendence—the notion that a whole is less than the sum of its parts—makes space for

the sound to operate paradoxically. By applying subscendence, sound simultaneously allows for the attempts of the regime to construct a sensory-controlled prison that limits perception and embodied experience and for a space of resistance and living.

Literary and Theoretical Context

1984, written by George Orwell and first published in 1949, has become one of the most influential and widely recognised works of dystopian fiction. [1] The novel portrays an anti-intellectual, authoritarian society defined by near-total surveillance, a system that continues to feel disturbingly relevant in a modern world where similar regimes and governing practices have gained visibility and strength.[2] Within this setting, the protagonists Winston and Julia navigate a reality shaped by endless war, pervasive governmental control, and a constantly shifting sense of truth. Because of its complexity and popularity, the novel has inspired a vast body of academic research. Scholars have examined its socio-geographies, archival practices, and representations of childhood education, its connections to Ancient Greek and Biblical traditions, as well as Orwell's literary inheritors.[3] Studies have also focused on seemingly more detailed elements of the text, including the dirt that covers Oceania's streets, the mechanisms of torture, and the novel's recurring animal metaphors.[4] Beyond literary analysis, the work has even been explored through its musicality and its influence on pop, rock, and opera music.[5]

Yet despite this extensive scholarship, the novel's soundscapes themselves have rarely been examined in detail. For the purpose of this article, I define soundscapes as "sound understood as an environment," which encompasses an individual

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[1] Nathan Waddell, "Introduction: Orwell's Book," in *The Cambridge Companion to Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 1st edn, ed. Nathan Waddell (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 2.
[2] Waddell, "Introduction," 2.
[3] Waddell, "Introduction," 8–9; to access the articles mentioned see *The Cambridge Companion to Nineteen Eighty-Four*.
[4] Waddell, "Introduction," 10.
[5] Jamie Wood, "Making Nineteen Eighty-Four Musical: Pop, Rock, and Opera," in *The Cambridge Companion to Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 1st edn, ed. Nathan Waddell (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

or a group of individuals in an auditory landscape.[6] This essay addresses that gap in the secondary literature on *1984* by analysing the sonic environments of the text through a combination of close reading of five scenes from the novel, prison literature studies, and ecocritical theory. Drawing on the concept of subscendence developed by British philosopher Timothy Morton, I argue that sound in the novel carries a paradoxical potential: the same acoustic environments that reinforce prison-like oppression and surveillance, simultaneously generate spaces in which resistance and fleeting experiences of freedom can emerge.

Why describe the world of *1984* as a prison when its citizens are not literally locked behind bars? The answer lies in the profound absence of freedom experienced by Party members and the extent to which their lives are controlled from the outside. From the very beginning of the novel, the reader is introduced to the Thought Police, an organ of surveillance that does not merely maintain order but penetrates deeply into private life, wiring homes and monitoring communication so that individuals live in constant fear of being overheard and observed.[7] Their purpose is to ensure absolute obedience: Party members must love Big Brother, believe in the greatness of Oceania in whatever war it happens to be fighting, and avoid any form of independent or critical thought. Even minor acts of self-expression become dangerous. Winston's attempt to write in a diary, for example, is treated as a punishable offense, forcing him to conceal his efforts from the telescreens—surveillance devices that cannot be turned off and that broadcast propaganda while simultaneously functioning as microphones and cameras.[8] In this way, Party members are constantly reminded that they are being watched. The famous slogan plastered on every building wall, "BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU," captures the atmosphere of

[6] Marinna Guzy, "The Sound of Life: What Is a Soundscape?,", Folklife Local Site, 4 May 2017, https://folklife.si.edu/talkstory/the-sound-of-life-what-is-a-soundscape.

[7] George Orwell, *1984* (1959), Project Gutenberg of Australia, 6, https://archive.org/download/NineteenEightyFour-Novel-GeorgeOrwell/orwell1984.pdf.

[8] Orwell, *1984*, 6; Orwell, *1984,* 9.

permanent observation that structures daily life.[9] In such a system, conventional crimes are almost impossible to commit; instead, the Party defines *thoughtcrime* as "the essential crime that contained all others in itself," meaning that even the act of thinking against the Party becomes punishable.[10]

The prison-like nature of Oceania's London is also reflected in the visual organisation of the city itself. All Party members must wear blue overalls, the official uniform of the Party, visually marking their expected lack of individuality.[11] London's streets appear bleak and controlled: the sky is described as a "harsh blue," helicopters of the Thought Police peer through people's windows, and the city is filled with rubble left from war, largely devoid of natural life.[12] This architectural and sensory environment reinforces the experience of confinement. As Julian Murphet notes in her analysis of the acousmatics[13] of prison writing, from the prisoner's perspective, the prison is an architectural space in which the faculty of sight—normally dominant in everyday life—is drastically limited because the environment provides so few new visual stimuli.[14] In such conditions, auditory perception becomes heightened, acquiring an intensified sensitivity. Life under the Party operates in a similar way. With visual and spatial freedom restricted, the auditory world grows disproportionately significant. The inhabitants of Oceania, much like prisoners, live within an acousmatic environment in which sounds—voices, announcements, commands, and propaganda—shape their experience of space and power. This sensory imbalance allows the Party to construct soundscapes that profoundly affect its subjects, reinforcing control even without physical imprisonment.

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[9] Orwell, *1984*, 6.
[10] Orwell, *1984*, 20.
[11] Orwell, *1984*, 5.
[12] Orwell, *1984*, 6-7.
[13] Acousmatics refers to an experience of sound that is heard without the listener seeing its source. An audible presence detached from any visible origin results then in a heightened experience of hearing. For more information of acousmatics see Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision* and Pierre Schaeffer *Sound Object*.
[14] Julian Murphet, "The Acousmatics of Prison Writing," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Literature and Sound Studies*, ed. Helen Groth (Edinburgh University Press, 2024), 167.

Yet the Party's authority would be meaningless without the participation of its members. It is, after all, the individuals who obey the rules, attend Party rituals, and live their daily lives within the structures the regime establishes. Through their embodied experiences, they become connected to the abstract idea of the Party itself. In this way, Party members link the immanent reality of lived, physical existence with the transcendental notion of belonging to a larger political whole. Because of this dual relationship, the individuals who compose the Party also have the capacity to exceed the abstraction it represents. The system depends entirely on its parts; without the participation of these individuals, the collective entity could not exist.

This dynamic corresponds to the concept of subscendence, a term developed by Timothy Morton. Within a broader scholarly context, subscendence emerges from engagement with the philosophical field of Object-Oriented Ontology, where attention shifts from dominant wholes to the relational agency of their constituent parts. As a relatively recent (coined in 2017) and innovative concept, subscendence challenges hierarchical thinking by foregrounding distributed significance and ecological interdependence, making it particularly relevant to contemporary work in the environmental humanities and ecocritical literary analysis.[15] Subscendence invites the reader to shift attention from the overwhelming scale of a system to the individuals who constitute it, granting them equal if not greater significance than the distant totality they form.[16] Rather than emphasising transcendence or the desire to rise above one's conditions, the concept foregrounds the importance of the ordinary components that sustain larger structures. In doing so, it recognises the value of being part of something greater without reproducing the capitalist impulse to dominate or surpass it, instead highlighting the inherent significance of the small and the everyday.[17] Subscendence is crucial in my analysis of this novel as the soundscapes created are always a matter of the whole environment and the people within it. It highlights the tight

[15] Timothy Morton, "Subscendence - Journal #85," accessed 10 April 2026, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/85/156375/subscendence.
[16] Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology* (Columbia University Press, 2018), 114.
[17] Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 116.

bond between the Party and its members, while creating a space between their mutual efforts to create sonic environments—between how they *appear to be* and *what they are*.[18]

Everyday Rhythms of Hate

I will begin by examining the spaces of everyday existence that the Party engineers for its members, beginning with the Two Minutes Hate—a supposed occasion for party members to release their anger towards Emmanuel Goldstein. Goldstein is "the primal traitor", an infamous enemy of the Party who wishes ill to the whole society, leads the rebellion, and commits acts of heresy.[19] The Two Minutes Hate program occurs every day and requires mandatory participation, during which all the members are monitored and measured in their anger. Compared to the usual silence of the sensory deprived daily life of the party members, the sudden loudness and chaos serve as powerful mechanisms to silence one's mind and replace their thoughts with those of the party.[20] In the rigor so characteristic of a highly surveyed environment, the affective experience of Winston begs to be examined.

The sound coming from the screen is sudden, "bursting," "grinding," and "monstrous," establishing the tone of the Hate from the very beginning.[21] It is not enough that Hate awakes in the hearts of the party members towards Goldstein, but with the environment surrounding it, it is meant to be deeply internalised. The "noise" is one "that set one's teeth on edge and bristled the hair at the back of one's neck" intentionally evoking fear just from the telescreen turning on.[22] That significant beginning finds a mirror in the crowd "hissing" and "squeaking in disgust."[23] As a call and response, the soundscape gets created and directly reflects on Winston and others like him among the crowd as the rage filling them is described as

[18] Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 116.
[19] Orwell, *1984,* 14.
[20] Murphet, "The Acousmatics of Prison Writing," 174.
[21] Orwell, *1984,* 13.
[22] Orwell, *1984,* 13.
[23] Orwell, *1984,* 14.

"uncontrollable" and "breaking out" of the people highlighting the perceived involuntariness of this action.[24]

As seconds pass people begin to shout "in an effort to drown the maddening bleating voice that came from the screen," a direct recall to the effort of the noise from the screen to silence the thoughts of party members.[25] This loudness reminds of its flattening property enacted in the erasure between the subjective and the social.[26] In their screams, people during the Hate join in an environment of chaos and subjectivity dictated to them by the party precisely because the use of loudness as their experience is "profoundly personal but also profoundly shared."[27] This appears especially visible when Winston realises that he is also shouting and kicking, already catching himself in the act rather than consciously making a decision to join.[28] The environment of the event itself, with its affective power, thrusts one into the experience as "it was impossible to avoid joining in."[29] Winston and other party members become completely immersed in the meticulously crafted soundscape of hate. The Hate itself would have been nothing if not for the party members shouting, kicking, and screaming as they together subscended the event itself.

This demonstrates that subscendence is neither inherently positive nor negative, but fundamentally paradoxical, as Party members, through their subscendent participation, simultaneously reinforce and enact the Party's mechanisms of manipulation. The sum of their individual emotions released in scream and loudness push them into the listeners' collapse.[30] The Hate dissolves the boundaries between interior and exterior worlds, especially in regard to sound and self. The soundscape that the party members

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[24] Orwell, *1984,* 15.
[25] Orwell, *1984,* 15.
[26] Michael C. Heller, "Between Silence and Pain: Loudness and the Affective Encounter," in *Just Beyond Listening: Essays of Sonic Encounter*, 1st edn, vol. 4 (University of California Press, 2024), 19.
[27] Heller, *Just Beyond Listening*, 19.
[28] Orwell, *1984,* 16.
[29] Orwell, *1984,* 16.
[30] "An experience of listener collapse occurs when loud sound dissolves the ability to distinguish between interior and exterior worlds, especially in regard to sound and self." Heller, *Just Beyond Listening,* 17.

find themselves in "does not only touch, but it also saturates and fills mental and physical consciousness, eliminating the possibility of detached listening."[31]

However, Winston recognises that as much as his environmentally induced rage is involuntary, it is "abstract and unidentified" enough that its object can be shifted.[32] Suddenly, the sonic environment created by propaganda induced speech becomes a powerful tool for Winston to rage towards the party and the Big Brother. In the listeners' collapse Winston submerges himself so deeply into his environment it creates space for a moment of freedom among this controlled overstimulation. As an individual part of the collective Hate, in his subscendence he overtakes the Hate, occupying particularly this gap between how he appears to the eye and how he truly is as those two become inseparable. In his brief moment of rebellion, he hoists himself off propaganda and by embracing it, he subscends it trusting "the mere power of his voice [capable] of wrecking the structure of civilization."[33] In this way, both Winston and the Party members participate in subscendence, yet in divergent forms: the collective subscendence of the crowd reinforces the Party's control, while Winston's brief, internal redirection of the same sonic immersion allows him to subscend differently only for a moment, exposing the paradox that the very process sustaining domination simultaneously allows for resistance. Thus, the Two Minutes Hate reveals how the Party's engineered sonic environment simultaneously enforces collective submission and, through the subscendent intensity of immersion itself, unintentionally opens fleeting internal spaces where control can be momentarily reoriented rather than simply obeyed.

A Prison from within a Prison

Another crucial environment that demands closer examination is the literal prison embedded within the already prison-like world of the novel. With an ironically haunting name, the Ministry of Love is introduced as a terrifying building lacking windows, defined by a maze-like structure and steel doors, implemented by the Party to

[31] Heller, *Just Beyond Listening*, 17.
[32] Orwell, *1984,* 16.
[33] Orwell, *1984,* 16.

ensure law and order.[34] It carries the reputation of a high-security prison so feared that even the surrounding streets are filled with guards, and regular Party members make certain never to linger in its proximity.[35] When Winston eventually finds himself inside in one of the later chapters, he immediately understands where he is. The cell is empty, white, and submerged in a low humming noise, supposedly from a ventilator, creating a visually sterile room of extreme surveillance with no fewer than four telescreens mounted on each wall.[36]

The prisoners are kept in a state of sensory deprivation and are forbidden to move; if they do, they are "yelled at [...] from the telescreen."[37] From the very beginning of incarceration, Winston and the other political prisoners are submerged in an environment of stark contrast—forced into stillness and silence while their captors exploit the embodied consequences of loudness through sudden commands from unseen sources. The acousmatics of the cell rely on visual and sonic opposition: as one sense is suppressed, another becomes hyper-attuned, only to be manipulated. The deprivation of visual complexity heightens auditory sensitivity, which is then weaponised through bursts of amplified sound that puncture the fragile quiet. The high ceiling and windowless white surfaces are not incidental but deliberately engineered to intensify sonic distress, reflecting telescreen-generated noise across the room and into the prisoners' constantly exposed organs of audition.[38] Here, much like the sonic environment constructed during the Hate, loudness functions not merely as stimulus but as substitution. It overwhelms the mind, replacing independent thought with fear, anticipation, and submission to impending punishment. Silence becomes tension; sound becomes invasion. Together they create a regime of listening in which perception itself is disciplined.

Yet this environment of terror is not produced solely by architecture and guards. It is equally sustained by the prisoners themselves, who quickly divide into Party prisoners and others.

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[34] Orwell, *1984*, 8.
[35] Orwell, *1984,* 8.
[36] Orwell, *1984,* 207.
[37] Orwell, *1984,* 207.
[38] Murphet, "The Acousmatics of Prison Writing," 178.

Party prisoners, described as "always silent and terrified," stand in stark contrast to those who "seemed to care nothing for anybody."[39] The latter are permitted—and also permit themselves—to "yell insults at the guards," "shout down the telescreens," or even address the guards familiarly by "calling them by nicknames."[40] These seemingly minor acts of sonic expression directly contribute to the acoustic structure of the prison, shaping the very environment they inhabit. Sound does not merely occur within the prison; it participates in constructing it. In cases where political and regular prisoners are separated, sound sometimes can serve as a bridge between them, in this case, however, it reinforces division rather than overcoming it.[41] The possibility that shared sonic expression might disrupt the Party's carefully calibrated environment remains unrealised. Instead of creating solidarity or rupture, the inmates' vocalisations become absorbed into the existing order. Their participation in a shared subscendence—a collective immersion in the sensory field of confinement—strengthens the very system that contains them. The prisoners' ears equipped "with political radar, capable of new ranges of journalistic perception" effectively sort and interpret sound on behalf of the Party itself, placing political and petty criminals into neat separate boxes.[42] Listening becomes surveillance internalised.

Conversation is rare, brief, and typically confined to the subject of one's conviction. One exchange that demands particular attention occurs between Winston and his former colleague Parsons, previously characterised as an enthusiastic devotee of the Party.[43] Winston is therefore deeply surprised to encounter him in the Ministry of Love. Parsons explains that he has been arrested for a thoughtcrime committed in his sleep, reported by his own daughter.[44] Within an environment so thoroughly structured by sonic sensitivity, even unconscious speech becomes evidence. Parsons's sleep talking alone is sufficient for his imprisonment, and

[39] Orwell, *1984,* 208.
[40] Orwell, *1984,* 208.
[41] Murphet, "The Acousmatics of Prison Writing," 173.
[42] Murphet, "The Acousmatics of Prison Writing," 173.
[43] Orwell, *1984,* 22.
[44] Orwell, *1984,* 213–14.

more strikingly, he believes this outcome is justified.[45] In this moment, the power of the system reveals itself most fully. Individual Party members, through belief and self-regulation, subscend the Party's mechanisms, expanding them through their own affective and perceptual investment. The prison does not merely confine bodies; it organises listening, fear, and response so completely that its subjects help sustain it. The Ministry of Love thus becomes not only a site of punishment but a fully immersive sonic environment—one in which power resonates through architecture, technology, and the disciplined perception of those contained within it.

Song of Freedom

Contrary to the controlled and planned environment of the Party facilities, nature outside of the city borders offers a sensory abundance. After a few conspiratory exchanges hidden within crowds of party members, Winston and Julia manage to arrange an escape into a zone outside of London, seemingly out of Big Brother's reach. The song of the thrush, described during that very first private sexual but also truly personal encounter, serves almost as an instruction for the two on how to embody subscendence, confronting them with this very sense of individuality. The bird demonstrates a profound connection to the natural world it inhabits, as seen when it "ducked its head for a moment, as though making a sort of obeisance to the sun." Through personification, the bird is portrayed as consciously in harmony with its surroundings.

However, harmony does not imply invisibility, as "in the afternoon hush the volume of sound was startling," clearly asserting its presence. The thrush, though just one small part of the ecosystem, holds its significance and seems to subscend instinctively. It sings not for a tangible audience but into "nothingness," as its song alone is reason enough to continue. Winston and Julia focus on the bird, rather than the meadow around them, reinstating how "the whole is subscended by its parts" and emphasising the profound impact of small, individual elements within a larger system. The animal, in its most natural state, seems to be writing an instruction for the two lovers on sound making—existing—just for its own sake.

[45] Orwell, *1984,* 214.

A melodical excretion of freedom subscending the soundscape it creates demonstrates the utopia living outside of the prison of Big Brother could be. As a symbol of freedom, through subscendence, which both the thrush and Winston and Julia are capable of, it rebels against the reality created by the party.

Moreover, the bird's song becomes the catalyst for Winston to find the courage to embrace intimacy with Julia, symbolising a push toward life in subscendence. "Winston and Julia clung together" as they listened to its song, which then led to their kiss and embrace. Even when the thought of surveillance crossed Winston's mind, it did not evoke fear but rather a sense of curiosity—wondering whether the microphones could capture the thrush's melody—revealing a momentary shift in his perspective. This shift allows Winston to "stop thinking and merely feel," enabling him to focus on his own embodied existence and material place in the world. Like the thrush, he is simply present, aware of his connection to the natural world. Outside the city's oppressive structures, Winston and Julia fully experience subscendence, briefly reclaiming their sense of individuality and interconnectedness. The thrush and its song play a significant role in facilitating this moment of connection, both to each other and to the larger web of life around them.

Unlike the engineered soundscapes of the Two Minutes Hate or the Ministry of Love, where loudness and silence are strategically imposed to discipline perception, the thrush's song emerges without intention of control. In the Hate, subscendence arises collectively, the crowd's voices exceeding propaganda; in the Ministry, it is coerced, produced through sensory deprivation and sonic intrusion. The thrush, however, subscends differently: its sound does not overwhelm but expands, filling space without domination. Rather than collapsing individuality into a collective, it affirms singular presence. Yet it still subscends, as its small, local song exceeds its source, reshaping the environment and inviting Winston and Julia into a lived, embodied freedom.

Melodies of Silence

In the prison world made by the Party, privacy is a luxury that nobody under the telescreens can afford. Even if you are not being watched by the telescreen, you can be sure you are being heard, so

the only soundscapes which Winston takes part in are either forcefully constructed and upheld by the Party and its members or experienced in secret from it. The only subscendence allowed in sound is that of violence and constraint, so to experience the song of the bird they had to escape outside the city. In another effort at privacy, Winston wanders around the prole districts free of telescreens and stumbles upon a shop filled with antiques, which becomes a sort of privacy heaven—it is there that he buys a journal, beginning his journey of rebellion mentioned from the very first pages of the book.[46] After returning to this shop once again and holding the very first truthful conversation about the past of Oceania, upon his return to London, he even dares to hum an improvised tune, a sign that perhaps song is a physical manifestation of him subscending the Party's ideology—he sings, like the bird, for the sake of song.[47]

Another instance that brings Winston closer to subscendence is his encounter with the washerwoman's song, which introduces an element of play into the Party's rigid propaganda. It reaches him from an apartment he rents from the owner of the very same shop he previously attended in the prole district. Initially kept for his affair with Julia, the room quickly becomes much more—a promise of a slightly more permanent privacy than what they have ever experienced before.[48] The tune the woman sings beneath Winston's window is described as having been "hunting London for past weeks," as it was one of the songs created without human intervention specifically for war propaganda.[49] While the song initially strikes Winston as a grim reminder of the war, the washerwoman transforms it, singing "so tunefully as to turn the dreadful rubbish into an almost pleasant sound."[50] By singing, the woman takes a serious indoctrinating tune and makes it her own, with humanity and playfulness. For Morton, play is an essential tool in subscendence, as it introduces imperfection and individuality into otherwise ineffable systems—for example like the workings of the

[46] Orwell, *1984,* 87.
[47] Orwell, *1984,* 93.
[48] Orwell, *1984,* 126.
[49] Orwell, *1984,* 127.
[50] Orwell, *1984,* 127.

Party.[51] Through her playful reinterpretation, the washerwoman connects herself to the whole by engaging with its parts, reclaiming a piece of propaganda meant for Hate Week and reshaping it into a moment of joy. Her act highlights how subscendence can occur even within a structure as oppressive as the Party, allowing small, meaningful expressions of life and resistance. This moment exposes the paradox of Party-induced soundscapes: a song designed for ideological control appears as propaganda, yet through embodied performance becomes something entirely different. Unlike the collective immersion of the Two Minutes Hate or the coercive acousmatics of the Ministry of Love, subscendence here emerges through reinterpretation, occupying the gap between what the soundscape is meant to be and what it becomes in lived experience.

The booming voice of the washerwoman created a striking tension between silence and sound, drawing Winston's attention to his auditory surroundings. He described the area outside as noisy, while the room he resides in remains "curiously silent, thanks to the absence of a telescreen."[52] The use of the word "curiously" conveyed Winston's surprise and joy at discovering this rare silence. It reconstructed silence not merely as the absence of sound but as a physical and mental state tied to privacy and safety—a soundscape created by the lack of it. This silence became a meaningful contrast to the oppressive noise of the Party's constant surveillance, offering Winston a sense of security. His auditory environment created a whole in which he felt comforted by the realisation that he is still part of it, even while finding freedom within the quiet. The absence of the telescreen subscended Winston outside of the Party's regime, allowing him, for a brief moment, to live and breathe freely, unfazed by its control. In this way, silence itself becomes a subscendent soundscape, where the absence imposed by the Party is reconfigured into a space of embodied freedom.

The Morbid Chorale

Unfortunately, the rented room shelters the couple for only a month, after which they are arrested by the Thought Police.[53] The

[51] Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 116.
[52] Orwell, *1984,* 127.
[53] Orwell, *1984,* 138.

return of the washerwoman during Winston and Julia's final moments of freedom serves as a powerful symbol of life in subscendence and death without it. To subscend is to engage and open yourselves to the possibility of its rebellion-oppression paradox, without which you become still and drown under the currents of the prison-like reality. As stark as this statement may seem, it is reflected in Winston's own words: "You were the dead, theirs [proles'] was the future."[54] While the washerwoman once again sang her war tune, Winston was compelled to reflect on the truths he had just learned from *The Book*—a work allegedly created by Goldstain containing the manifesto of the rebellion.[55] The soundscape she conjured with her song induced "a single shared vibration—a shimmering together that nevertheless is always experienced individually."[56] He viewed the washerwoman as representative of the proles—the lowest social class in the novel, yet he did not strip her of her individuality. Instead, he recognised her as a symbol of the greater whole, embodying life through her act of subscendence. "The birds sang, the proles sang. The Party did not sing." —these words highlight the alignment of the proles and nature, both existing in a state of vitality, while the Party is tied to a lifeless netherworld, separated from the natural order.[57]

The Party's soundscapes, as seen in the frenzied noise of the Two Minutes Hate and the sterile hum of the Ministry of Love, replace organic expression with mechanical repetition and enforced silence, producing an acoustic environment devoid of spontaneity, and therefore aligned not with life but with stasis and death. Both "birds" and "proles" are plural, emphasising the ability for individuals to subscend within a collective, whereas the Party defines itself as a rigid, monolithic block. This rigidity ensures its eventual collapse, as it denies the fluidity and connection that sustain life. Just as a fortress cannot exist without its individual bricks, the Party cannot endure without its members. Without acknowledging this interconnectedness, it fails, and subscendence emerges as the only viable path forward. Ultimately, the vitality of song—whether from

[54] Orwell, *1984,* 203.
[55] Orwell, *1984,* 203; Orwell, *1984*, 15.
[56] Heller, *Just Beyond Listening*, 16.
[57] Orwell, *1984,* 203.

birds or proles—reveals that life persists through the subscendent interplay of individuals within a shared environment, something the Party's rigid totality cannot sustain. In denying this dynamic relationality, the Party aligns itself with silence, stasis, and death, ensuring that the very subscendence it suppresses becomes the condition of its eventual undoing.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that soundscapes in *1984* operate paradoxically through Timothy Morton's concept of subscendence, revealing that the very sonic environments designed to discipline and suppress embodied experience simultaneously create conditions in which resistance, individuality, and affective life re-emerge. From the collective immersion of the Two Minutes Hate, to the coercive acousmatics of the Ministry of Love, and finally to the spontaneous song of the thrush and the washerwoman, sound repeatedly demonstrates its capacity to exceed the intentions of the Party. These environments show that subscendence is not inherently liberatory or oppressive; rather, it is the dynamic relation between individuals and the systems they constitute. The Party relies on subscendence to sustain its mechanisms of control, yet those same participatory processes allow sound to reintroduce unpredictability, play, and embodied presence into an otherwise flattened sensory world.

Reading *1984* through subscendence materialised in soundscapes therefore highlights an often-overlooked dimension of literary analysis: the inaudible layer of texts. While scholarship has traditionally prioritised visual metaphors, spatial organisation, or ideological structures, attending to sound reveals how power operates through affect, atmosphere, and sensory experience. Soundscapes expose political systems not only as visual architectures but as environments of listening, vibration, and resonance, demonstrating how literature encodes ecological and relational dynamics within its sensory fabric. Subscendence becomes crucial here, as it foregrounds the importance of small, embodied interactions that sustain—and potentially destabilise—larger systems.

This study, however, remains limited to textual analysis. Future research could extend this approach to the audio drama

adaptations and film versions of *1984*, where sound is no longer implied but materially produced, offering new possibilities for examining how sonic environments shape perception and power. Such work would further illuminate the relationship between literature, soundscapes, and political context, encouraging a broader engagement with the environmental humanities. By listening more closely to literary worlds, we uncover not only how control is imposed, but also how, even within the most oppressive structures, sound continues to sustain the possibility of life.

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