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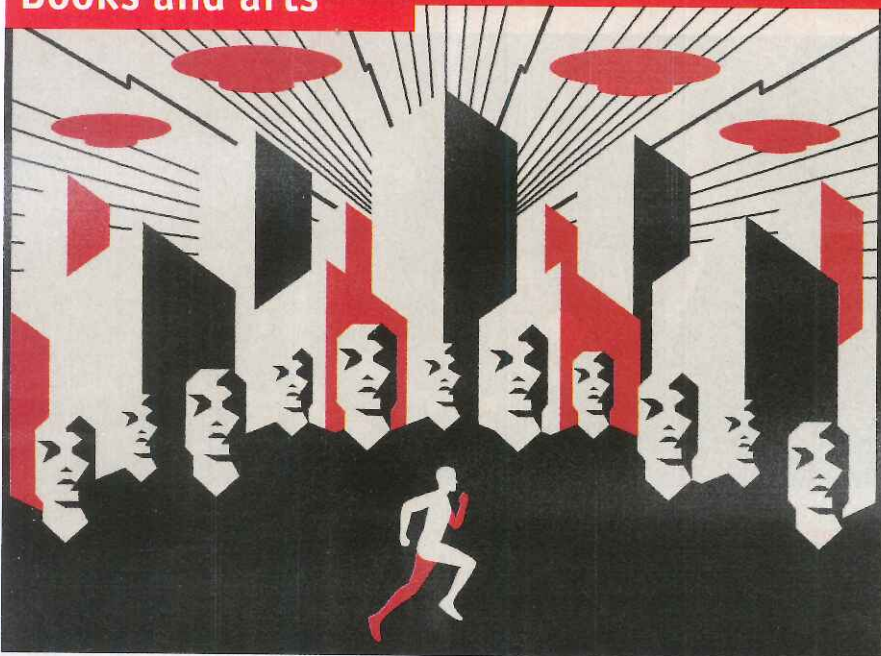
The surveillance state: a growing threat

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A dystopian prophecy

We and us

An influential novel by a disillusioned Bolshevik has proved more prescient than he could have imagined

IT IS the 26th century and humans have become “Numbers”—automatons who prioritise efficiency over freedom. They are watched by menacing drones, which hover above the OneState’s streets. The Bureau of Guardians eavesdrops on conversations to ensure productivity. Walls encase the metropolis, keeping at bay undocumented people and an unruly environment.

One of these Numbers, an engineer named D-503, is building the INTEGRAL, a spaceship designed for galactic imperialism. He has been ordered to spread the OneState’s ideology to other planets, colonising resources and perhaps workers. But a dangerous condition festers within him. In a world of conformity and mechanical obedience, he develops an antiquated faculty that has long been thought extinct. Improbably, D-503 acquires a soul.

This plot may sound like something out of HBO’s “Westworld” or Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale”, but it is much older. This is the world of “We”, a novel written by Yevgeny Zamyatin in 1921. Little-known today, Zamyatin influenced some of the most celebrated authors of the 20th century. George Orwell used “We” as a blueprint for “Nineteen Eighty-Four”. Aldous Huxley’s “Brave New World” follows a similar arc to Zamyatin’s story. Writers such as Anthony Burgess, Kurt Vonnegut and Ayn Rand were in his debt, as are more recent novels by Kazuo Ishiguro and Octa-

We. By Yevgeny Zamyatin. Translated by Clarence Brown. Illustrated by Kit Russell. *The Folio Society*; 240 pages; £36.95

via Butler that take up his inquiry into utopia and its shortcomings.

But “We”—recently republished with an introduction by Ursula Le Guin—is more than an academic curiosity. Zamyatin’s bleak vision was forged in the ferment after the Russian revolution; but, with its prophetic reflections on climate change and surveillance culture, it is as relevant today as it was a century ago.

A hair’s breadth of time

“We” was written between the fall of the Russian empire and the rise of the Soviet Union. It both caricatures the autocracy of tsarism and anticipates Bolshevism’s descent into tyranny. The hero, D-503, resembles Zamyatin himself, looking back at life as if in a funhouse mirror.

As an engineering student in St Petersburg at the turn of the century, Zamyatin had thrown himself into revolutionary politics. He was first arrested in 1905, shortly after tsarist troops detained Leon Trotsky and other leaders of the Petersburg Soviet. Zamyatin had left socialist pamphlets under his bed and nitrocellulose, an explosive, on his windowsill (alongside his staples of sugar and salami). His Bolshevik

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comrades disposed of the evidence, saving him from execution, but he was sentenced to three months in solitary confinement for his activism.

In prison, Zamyatin began writing in code, hiding his insubordination in plain sight. Released in March of 1906 and exiled to his childhood village of Lebedian, he found Russia in a state of upheaval after the previous year’s revolution. The authorities were preoccupied, and he sneaked back into St Petersburg to continue his studies. A decade later, during the first world war, the Russian government sent Zamyatin—by then a respected engineer—to Newcastle in England. A German flotilla had blocked Russia’s access to the Baltic, but with the proper technology, a channel could be cut through the White Sea and Arctic Ocean. Zamyatin supervised the construction of icebreaking ships. Already an aspiring author, he satirised England in his off hours.

He returned to Russia in 1917, when the October revolution was under way. He arrived in tweeds, smoking a pipe; friends nicknamed him “the Englishman”. Zamyatin’s politics, however, remained fiercely independent. He had become disillusioned with the Bolsheviks, whom he accused of “stealing the honourable title of socialists and democrats”. In 1922 he was arrested again, after censors intercepted invitations to publish “We” in Berlin and Paris. Fortunately he had befriended Maxim Gorky, the godfather of Socialist Realist literature, who personally appealed to Stalin for leniency. Zamyatin was eventually permitted to leave for exile in Paris.

When Orwell reviewed “We” in 1946, the novel had been published in English, French and Czech, but it would not appear in the Soviet Union until 1988, during *glasnost*. In Orwell’s view, the book targets “the ▶▶

implied aims of industrial civilisation” as a whole, rather than any particular society. Still, he notes the stark resemblance between the OneState and Stalinism, with its cult of personality, rapid industrialisation and political repression. But to modern readers, other aspects of Zamyatin’s multifarious parable will seem more relevant.

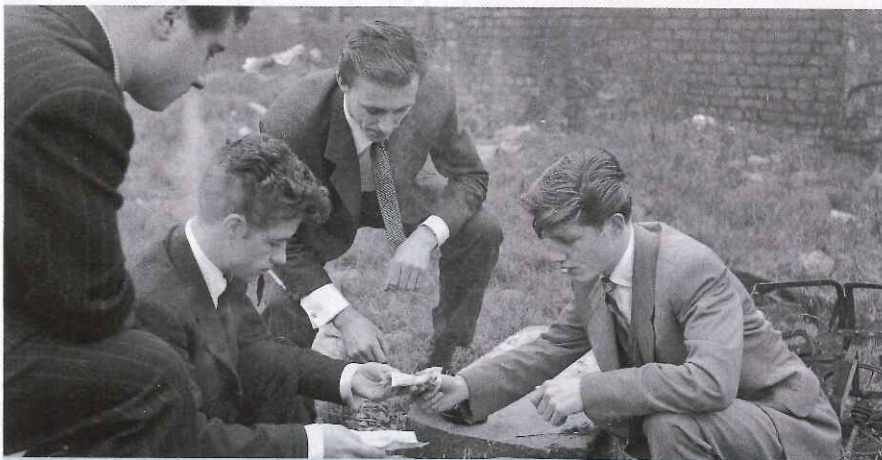
Something has gone wrong with nature in the OneState. Storms have become stronger and more frequent, requiring the erection of an “Accumulator Tower” to prevent lightning damage. Plants are growing uncontrollably. To safeguard industrial production, a Green Wall is built to isolate the city from the countryside—“unknown and terrible” jungles filled with yellow-eyed beasts and irradiated creatures. To maintain the status quo until the INTEGRAL can explore new planets, Guardians gather intelligence with hidden microphones and “spy tubes”. A resistance movement arises among the Numbers, who communicate in code to avoid detection, like Zamyatin in his prison cell.

In some ways, the OneState looks less far-fetched now than it must originally have seemed. Lightning strikes in America could increase by 50% over the next century as a result of climate change. As sea levels rise, dikes have been proposed to protect low-lying cities, much like Zamyatin’s Green Wall. Spaceships like the INTEGRAL are no longer the stuff of science fiction. Elon Musk has built his SpaceX rocketry company on the dream of colonising Mars. Meanwhile, revelations about data collection and privacy have popularised encrypted messaging applications such as WhatsApp and Wickr.

These have spooked autocrats in Russia and elsewhere. In the run-up to Vladimir Putin’s latest inauguration, a Moscow court attempted to block Telegram, a similar service, after the company refused to provide access to private communications. The Kremlin may have been trying to stave off the sort of protests that caught it off guard in 2011. Zamyatin foresaw such surges of dissent, too. At the end of “We”, D-503 attends the annual re-election of the OneState’s Benefactor. For as long as anyone can remember, the vote has always been a unanimous “yes”. Not this time.

All this took the hundredth part of a second, a hair’s breadth of time. I saw a thousand hands shoot up—‘opposed’—and come down.

A revolution has begun. After his exile, though, Zamyatin’s own activism was confined to his articles, stories and plays. On his deathbed in 1937, as another terrible war loomed, he could not have known how prescient his novel would come to seem. Today reading “We” is like opening a time capsule, sent from the past with a plea for the present. To peer into Zamyatin’s future is to see modernity’s reflection gazing darkly back. ■



Historical fiction

In the shadows of war

Warlight. By Michael Ondaatje. Knopf; 304 pages; \$26.95. Jonathan Cape; £16.99

CHARACTER in “Warlight”, Michael Ondaatje’s seventh novel, remarks that “Wars don’t end. They never remain in the past.” Not in England, anyway, where the mythology of the second world war has shaped and distorted the nation’s identity. A quarter-century ago, the Sri Lankan-born Canadian writer won global acclaim with “The English Patient”. With subtlety and grace, that novel clouded the legends of conflict in Egypt and Italy in doubts as dense as a Western Desert sandstorm. Now Mr Ondaatje, who spent his teenage years in London, returns to Britain’s war and its immediate aftermath.

“Warlight” unfolds after 1945 in a bomb-ravaged city that, although victorious, “still felt wounded, unsure of itself”. Nathaniel, the narrator, is a junior British intelligence officer. From the vantage-point of the late 1950s, he looks back to Blitz-wrecked London and seeks to understand the “omissions and silences” that haunted his disrupted childhood. His father, an executive with Unilever, apparently left for a post in Singapore. Rose, his beloved but elusive mother, also vanished—to work undercover, the reader grasps by increments, in the “unknown and unspoken world” of the secret services.

Already shaped by this “family of disguises”, Nathaniel and his rebellious sister Rachel grow up in the care of louche informal guardians who make a murky living “on the edge of the law”. Known by nicknames such as “the Moth” and “the Pimlico Darter”, these memorable hustlers move their “shifting tents of

spivery” through the hotels and bomb-sites of London in a time of “fewer rules, less order”. Nathaniel, and Mr Ondaatje, relish these underworld adventures.

A fledgling spy, Nathaniel learns to be “a caterpillar changing colour” to survive. Meanwhile the novel glances at the chaos of post-war Europe, where Rose operates in the shadows. Score-settling between armed factions, notably in Yugoslavia, persists despite Germany’s surrender, as “acts of war continued beyond public hearing”. Yet an “almost apocalyptic censorship”, which British intelligence abets, hides this (largely forgotten) bloodshed. There is, Nathaniel reflects, “so much left unburied at the end of a war”.

Mr Ondaatje illuminates this rubble-strewn landscape from angled sidelights. Lyrical but oblique, his prose matches a mood of mystery and suspicion that tantalises, if occasionally frustrates, the reader. With Nathaniel, he shows the child observer as a kind of secret agent, piecing together baffling fragments picked up from the hidden lives of adults. As more of Rose’s career in espionage becomes visible, along with the clandestine stunts of the Moth and his pals, “Warlight” also explores the English talent for camouflage and deceit: “the most remarkable theatrical performance of any European nation”.

Still, those arts of subterfuge that win a war may ruin the peace. A colleague of Rose’s in the twilight fellowship of spies reads a classified report about the state of continental Europe, which finds that “nothing has moved into the past and no wounds have healed with time”. That verdict, “Warlight” suggests, applies on the British side of the Channel.