

They: A sequence of unease

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Kate Dick's "They: A sequence of unease" is a dystopian work of fiction recently republished nearly half a century after its first appearance in 1977. Its rediscovery amid the recent global pandemic, when societies were confronted with unprecedented conditions of living and dying, was coincidental yet notably timely. This fact in itself offers a new context for reading the work, prompting the following questions: What if artists vanished from human societies? What kind of society would be the one that systematically persecutes artistic production and suppresses creative freedom? Resonating with the precarious conditions artists found themselves in during the lockdowns and the support they provided to various communities through continuing their practice, many times in imaginative ways, the novel offers a stark and bleak representation of a dystopian society where complete elimination threatens every living artist and the whole country's artistic expression, past and present.

Change slowly infiltrates everyday life through growing unease, as the novel's subtitle suggests. Artworks that mostly represent a mode of thinking that doesn't conform to society's rules are disappearing. All works are removed from the National Gallery, books are missing from shelves or mutilated of their inscriptions, music scores vanish, opera becomes "a dangerous art" (65), suggesting "too many freedoms" (65); here we are confronted with a total eradication of artistic production since no replacement is suggested. Human memory is the last resort for saving literature; poems, plays, and novels are all memorised to survive. At the same time, artists encounter aggressive violence affecting the body parts they use in their work (a painter gets blind, a musician is made deaf, a poet loses her right hand), and death. Some of them will also need to be "cured" (102), namely purged of their memories and emotions.

But who or what threatens artistic freedom to create? "They" (a pronoun that gives the novel its title) are gangs of nameless individuals who appear and disappear like elusive creatures, with no clear affiliation to the government. They hardly use words to communicate, suggesting a lack of thought and individuality. Initially, their presence and actions were dismissed as "a parody for newspapers" (20); now, they are merely "a menace one had to live with" (20). The menace gradually intensifies as physical violence and psychological torture are employed to enforce the new order. Families or people living together are somewhat protected, but singles are perceived as a threat because solitary living fosters creative agency and indicates an independent way of life. A visit to London exposes a militarised state that requires clearing credentials, passing through an investigation centre and navigating radar checkpoints. Military trucks on the streets, closed windows of block apartments, and the constant sound of pop music in the urban environment allude to highly controlled living conditions that suppress any notion of individual freedom.

The nameless, non-gendered narrator, is an artist-writer who lives alone in a coastguard cottage by the sea. Through their encounters with other artists, both friends and colleagues, as well as neighbours, merely in the English province that is less affected than the big cities, they delineate the gradual establishment of a new authoritarian and oppressive regime that persecutes creative

individuals and their works. Artists are compelled to decide how to respond to this oppressive environment. Resistance takes multiple forms. Alongside optimistic people who show resilience, believing that any destruction of their work can be overcome since “one can always create again” (19), others fight inaction, which would mean surrendering, and instead choose perseverance, deciding “never to give up” (86). They keep working amid isolation and loneliness in a constant state of vulnerability. There are also those who choose “passive resistance” (31), believing that any fight is “a waste of creative energy” (32). These individuals choose to care more about the artworks than about human lives. Thus, they sacrifice their creators' lives, considering it as “a rational bargain” (34) that secures the artworks' survival. And some prefer to keep living as if nothing has changed. They disregard the “pointers” (42) that signal increasing restrictions and the spread of fear. For them, “Ignorance is bliss” (42) and “acquiescent” (42) secures survival.

While artists face restrictions and constant surveillance, nature remains the only place where a sense of freedom persists: “I'm glad country walks are still possible” (49); as long as freedom of movement and traveling is still available, even with a traveler's pass, the countryside becomes a refuge. Gardens, representing beauty, imagination, and mystery, are protected from invasion and remain unspoilt, offering limited hope as isolated pockets of freedom. In contrast, other living creatures, such as animals, cannot escape the spreading of “senseless violence” (64), and frequently become victims of human cruelty.

The eradication of personal identity is pursued through the suppression of everyday communication. In a village, the post office is “boarded up” to discourage written communication (51). Using the phone is something already lost and to be missed. In contrast, every household is offered a TV set for entertainment and to follow the news. A new bill aims to eliminate Art centers; studios, artists' main working space, are either “boarded up” and replaced by houses (56) or demolished. Retreats are isolated spaces without windows and doors that threaten mental stability, erase feelings, and “cure” people of their identity. Emotional numbness annihilates every reaction; when people witness violent acts (a man hitting a woman) or encounter vulnerable people (an older woman crying in a tea-shop), there is no compassion or support and no questions are asked. Feelings of love are an offence and therefore are punished; grief, particularly mourning the dead, is prohibited and can only be performed in dedicated places, such as grief towers.

“They” can be read in different ways. In today's troubled world of socio-political crisis, the nine episodes through which the narrative unfolds provide a powerful allegory of how a totalitarian rule can be gradually established by means of fear and violence, targeting a specific part of the population that must be totally exterminated. It echoes examples from recent European history but, more importantly, it underscores the necessity for constant vigilance in recognising early signs of an emerging regime that may endanger individual rights and freedom. It is also tempting to read it as a commentary on the artist's role in society. Traditionally associated with creative imagination, intellectual freedom, and a provocative, fearless spirit, this group is particularly susceptible to authoritative control. When “non-conformity” becomes “an illness” and artists are labelled “sources of contagion” (53), the foundations of democratic societies are seriously threatened.

LANGUAGE: English

This title was not censored before publishing