What if George Orwell or his publisher Frederic Warburg had chosen the other title that Orwell was considering for what would be his final book, Nineteen Eighty-Four? Would a novel called The Last Man in Europe have grabbed the public imagination as much as the abbreviated title it now usually goes by, 1984?

The change from a number written out as words to Arabic numerals in itself mimics the terrifying reduction of words and thoughts in the world Orwell creates. The ideogram 1984 transmits Orwell’s vision of a totalitarian state directly to our brains. The title phrase The Last Man in Europe might not have led to the word “Orwellian” becoming the universal adjective to describe any society in which the values that make human lives human have been perverted into their opposites by those in power so that they can retain their power.

A book with the title The Last Man in Europe also might not have offered the incentive to produce and release, in December 1984, Michael Radford’s superb film adaptation with John Hurt as Winston Smith and Richard Burton as O’Brien. I still remember seeing it soon after its release and walking out into nighttime Manhattan near Lincoln Center, feeling drained of emotion and any small belief I then had left in the inherent goodness of human nature or my own significance as a human being. How easy it is to be removed from the stream of history, or never to be part of it in the first place.

It has been 25 years since that movie renewed the power of Orwell’s story for readers and viewers. It was easy then in the US, looking, as we Americans always do, at our own society and our place in it, to be smug about how our realised future was not at all like Orwell’s “boot stamping on a human face”.

Our historical memory was intact and accurate within reason. In recent memory, our political system had worked to protect us. It had seen to the investigation and forced resignation of a president whose corruption was petty in comparison with the Big Brotherish political monsters who then inhabited our nightmares: Pol Pot, Idi Amin, Pinochet, Stalin and Hitler.

In contrast to the earlier Cold War tensions among the real-life equivalents of Oceania, Eurasia and Eastasia, President Nixon, before resigning, had made contact with Chinese leaders. At the time Radford’s 1984 was released, Mikhail Gorbachev, then second-in-command at the Kremlin, visited London and spent, according to the BBC, five hours “in very friendly talks” with Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, signalling a “thaw in relations between the West and the Soviet Union”. Gorbachev and his wife Raisa viewed the seat where Karl Marx had written Das Kapital in the British Library. History was there in a wooden artefact that had its own verifiable history, unlike the coral in glass that Winston Smith buys for too high a price in his eagerness to have something genuinely old.

Political activism in the US had brought about changes in civil rights for minorities and had supported the Great Society programmes that addressed poverty, housing, health and education. Women had gained greater control over their own bodies and sexual identities. One informant in an oral history of the Sixties described what it felt like, braless and jean-clad, to be free from being “encased in plastic”. Bras, garters, girdles, nylons, skirts and high heels had served the purpose of the red sash that Julia wore in Nineteen Eighty-Four.

By 1984, our society as a whole had moved in the opposite direction to those religious elements advocating sexual mores akin to Orwell’s Junior Anti-Sex League. What was called arts and culture was for us a procedure to bring happiness to couples who otherwise could not have children of their own. In Oceania it was a false virtue propagated by those in power to make sure human beings did not form the strong attachments that come from personal intimacy.

Public opinion had also forced our government to end a senselessly violent and technically undeclared war in South-East Asia. For nine years there was no indication that the
military industrial establishment was going to ramp up toward such full-scale war again. The US invasion of Grenada between October and December 1983, known by a codename even Evelyn Waugh could not have outdone – Operation Urgent Fury – would have been the stuff of satire, except for the 646 casualties. Even so, there was visible opposition to this military action, including a movement among some Democratic congressional representatives to impeach Ronald Reagan.

Unlike Winston Smith’s apartment and even O’Brien’s home, the places where we lived were secure, except for the intrusion of fixed-line telephones. While there, our private thoughts and actions remained private. National news was still delivered by three major television networks and by quality local newspapers in major cities. Independent journalism had helped remove Nixon and Spiro Agnew from office, draw attention to the brutality of Jim Crow racism in the American South, and bring the horrors of Vietnam’s body counts, free-fire zones and Zippo raids to the attention of American citizens back home. For 14 years, what came into homes on a screen via government sponsorship on the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) was benign educational, even culturally uplifting.

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