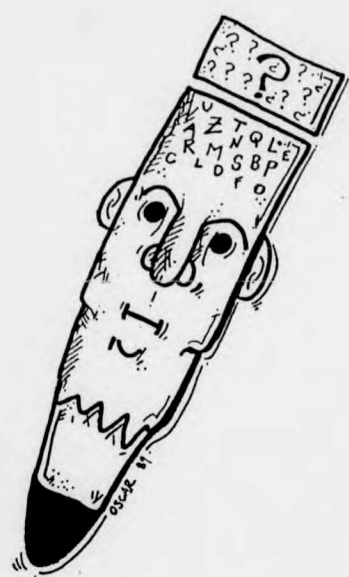


the writer's block



by Ira Nayman

There is a strange world where an explosion at a nuclear power plant is an "energetic disassembly," where the Mafia is "a career offender cartel" and where the Pentagon doesn't merely set troops down at midnight, but effects a "predawn vertical insertion."

It is a world full of "real counterfeit diamonds." It is a world where doctors do not malpractice, they have "diagnostic misadventures of high magnitude." It is a world where employees are never fired, they experience "workforce adjustments," "negative employee retention" or "indefinite idling."

Increasingly, it is our world. There used to be a time when language was used to communicate ideas, to reveal truths. Today, language is often used to obscure ideas and evade truths. Sometimes, this is to soften a hard reality for the listener; mostly, though, such language is used by the teller to avoid the consequences of his actions.

Into this world steps William Lutz, of Rutgers University's department of English, author of *Doublespeak: From "Revenue Enhancement" to "Terminal Living"* (Harper and Row, 1989). Lutz is also the editor of the *Quarterly Review of Doublespeak* (National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), 1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois, 61801).

The concept of doublespeak incorporates two ideas from George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four*: newspeak (a language created to politically control the population by limiting people's ability to put complex thoughts into words) and doublethink (the ability to hold two contradictory beliefs at the same time). Doublespeak is language "that is grossly deceptive, evasive, euphemistic, confusing or self-contradictory."

The book looks at the use of doublespeak in a variety of contexts (business, advertising and, of course, government and the military). Although Lutz's running commentary is often unnecessary (most doublespeak is sufficiently ridiculous that even a mildly sarcastic approach seems like overkill), he more than amply proves his thesis: that doublespeak is rampant, frequently with sinister implications.

Lutz identifies four types of doublespeak: euphemism, jargon, gobbledygook (AKA — bureaucratise) and inflated language. He is fair in his assessments of how terms are used: jargon, for instance, is acceptable when used in the professional group for which it was created (doctors using medical terms, for example); technical terms only become

jargon when told to laypersons who cannot be expected to know what they mean.

My favourite analysis comes from the inflated language of advertising. "Since all toothpastes are equal, no one brand is superior to any of the others. Therefore, not only are all products 'good' products, they are all the 'best' products. Thus, you can advertise your toothpaste, gasoline, deodorant, or other parity product as the 'best' and not have to prove your claim. However, if you claim your parity product is 'better' than another parity product, you have to prove your claim because 'better' is comparative and a claim of superiority, and only one product can be better than the others in a parity class. Did you get that? In the world of gobbledygook, 'better' means 'best,' but 'best' only means 'equal to.'"

The *Review* is a twelve-page listing of recent abuses of the English language culled from newspapers, magazines and professional journals from around the world (although dominated by examples from the United States). Twelve magazine pages may not seem like much, but I found the concentrated use of doublespeak overwhelming, and frequently had to come up for air.

The NCTE also presents annual Doublespeak and George Orwell Awards. In 1989, the Doublespeak Award (given to the most egregious example of language abuse that hurts the public) was given to Exxon Corporation. Exxon spokespeople called beaches in Alaska "environmentally clean" and "environmentally stabilized" even though they were still covered with crude oil from the Exxon Valdez tanker spill.

The 1989 George Orwell Award (given to the best analysis of language abuses) was given to Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky for *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. Herman and Chomsky dissected media coverage of America's military adventures in Central America, focusing on reporting from El Salvador and Nicaragua (an excellent choice, I might add, which I would highly recommend).

Doublespeak is often very funny. And, I must admit, since the difference between what people say and what really happens is a ripe subject for satire, I have incorporated many of the ideas in the book into pieces I have recently written. Still, the increasing use of doublespeak, and its acceptance by a largely uncritical public, is very, very frightening.

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artscalendar

compiled by Kristy Gordon

Does Anyone Work Here? is a question we've all asked, but it specifically refers to **Ronn Wright's** debut exhibition in the Samuel J. Zacks Gallery (109 Stong). The display commemorates the memory of the artist's father through paintings, sculpture, audio and over 80 drawings. The exhibition runs until Feb 9.

Don't miss **Kevin Crossley-Holland** Feb 13 at 7:30pm in the Fellows' Lounge (004A Atkinson). Crossley-Holland is a well-known poet and writer for children who will lecture on "Climbing the Glass Mountain: An Intro To The 'Wonderful' Canon Of British Folk Tales And Some Of The Ways In Which A Writer Can Approach And Re-tell Them."

Kitty De Hoyos and **Roberto D'Amico** will perform *Historias de Romances y Corridos* Feb 10 at 8pm in the Harry S. Crowe Room (1st floor Atkinson). This free theatrical show is a blend of readings from plays, novels, poetry and song. The intros are in English and the scenes in Spanish. Everyone is welcome.

The IDA Gallery (1st floor Fine Arts Building) presents a *Matrix Area Exhibition* featuring the work of non-majors in Visual Arts until Feb 9.

The music department presents a screening of *Portrait of*

Stravinsky, accompanied by his music (performed by **Danielle Waxer, Greg Prosser and Lorie Valentine**) in DACARY Hall (050 McLaughlin) Feb 7 at 12:15pm.

Don't miss the **Jazz Bash**, a pre-reading week mini-bash showcasing the talents of jazz students in the music department Feb 8 at 6:30pm in the Winters Senior Common Room.

There will be a *Chamber Music Concert* Feb 9 at noon in DACARY Hall. A variety of student ensembles from the classical programme, (woodwinds, trombone, piano, flute) will perform.

The annual Osgoode Hall **Mock Trial** promises to entertain through a lampoon of law school and the legal profession. The show will be presented Feb 15-17 in the Osgoode Moot Court. Tickets are being sold daily (11-3pm) in the mixing area of Osgoode Hall.

Del Artie Productions presents *HUGO: Man of a Thousand Faces*, a new tragic-comedy opening Feb 6 at the Samuel Beckett Theatre (110 Stong). *HUGO* is about a reluctant spy-in-training with a guilty conscience whose quest for knowledge leads him back to his shady past. The play runs until Feb 9, and the curtain rises at 8pm. Tickets are \$3.

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M. Foster, Communications Department, 1430 Trafalgar Road, Oakville, Ontario, L6H 2L1

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