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COMM 197A

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An All-Seeing Eye in *The Crucible*

The Crucible is an outstanding play written by Arthur Miller to depict a horrifying chapter of the Salem witch trials amid hysteria. Through a series of hearings and prosecutions, the chilling story unveils the presence and impact of social surveillance. However, the surveillance society in Arthur Miller's play is not only based on the three well-known states of surveillance including Panopticon, Synopticon, and Omnioticon but also composed of the abuse of power and restriction of liberty.

Comprised of "sur" (above) and "veillance" (watch), surveillance is a theory represented by Michel Foucault to create a disciplinary society where everyone becomes docile due to the state of constantly being watched (200). The earliest idea related to surveillance can be referred to Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon in the late 1700s. According to the English philosopher, Panopticon is an architectural design of a prison which puts a tower at the centre of an annular building so that all prisoners can be watched by a single security guard. Its power does not lie in the impossibility of a single guard observing all inmates at once but in "a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault 201). The prisoners never know when they are being watched but the undeniable possibility drives them to behave decently. While Panopticon functions on the basis of fear, a different surveillance based on pleasure was coined in 1997 by Thomas Mathiesen. It is the Synopticon where "the many see and contemplate the few" (Mathiesen 219). The objects of surveillance usually focus on eminent

individuals such as celebrities and politicians. Their lives are considered the ideal lifestyles that attract people with admiration, envy and entertainment. Based on the two previous processes, in 2004, Omniopticon was introduced by Jeffrey Rosen in *The Naked Crowd*. Instead of centralized surveillance, all individuals can actively engage in the observation process. In other words, “by means of the omniopticon where the majority monitors the majority, everyone monitors everyone” (Serdar 2023). It is the concurrence of Panopticon where one observes many and Synopticon where the many see the few. Although surveillance can exist in different stages, the ultimate goal remains to create a disciplinary society of docile citizens.

In *The Crucible*, social surveillance is core to exerting power and control over Salem villagers. Instantly at the beginning, traits of Synopticon can be implied from Parris’s tension when it comes to witchcraft. He even expresses more concern about people finding out than his daughter’s sickness as he continuously mentions “Now my ministry’s at stake” (Miller 8). In a system of Synopticon, renowned individuals like Parris are regarded as models whose lives are constantly watched and looked up to by the majority. Therefore, Salem’s parish priest easily feels insecure when his superior state is threatened. The massive observation is made more clearly by the 1996 film adaptation where a crowd gathers in front of Parris’s house as Betty cries and attempts to jump from the window. Furthermore, throughout the play, an Omniopticon-oriented society can be indicated as witchcraft hysteria heightens and everybody begins monitoring for signs of witches. Whether it is Martha’s absorption in books or a poppet that Mary sewed, the smallest actions and details are carefully watched and suspected. Once accused, a great number of the defendants call out other names as requested by the people in charge. Tituba, after desperate attempts to prove her innocence, eventually succumbs to her brutal fate and mentions “there was Goody Good,” beginning a series of hysteria in the Salem village

(Miller 24). These claims mark the repeated transitions between the observers and the observed as an individual can both be accused due to others' observation and accuse others with their observation. The Salem village allows everyone to watch and be watched by everyone. This way, *The Crucible* represents traits of widely seen stages of surveillance.

The idea of surveillance in *The Crucible* does not merely revolve around observation, though. It is greatly driven by an abuse of power, particularly political and religious power. When it comes to religious power, Abigail and the girls take advantage of the villagers' blind belief in religion to manifest power. By distorting the truth and creating an atmosphere of phobia in Salem, they easily claim power over the people's lives. Their vision and observation overwhelm the reality in trials. No matter how many arguments and documents Proctor attempts to present, he is still disbelieved when the girls insist on seeing the Devil. Within abusing religious power, only what they can see is considered valuable and reliable hard proof. However, as Gandouz Ayeb argues that "religion is a cover behind which the hidden intentions of the court are achieved," the abuse of political power engulfs the Salem society (251). The witch trials and judges' decisions are held as the supreme form of righteousness which can be implied through Danforth's haughtiness that "you must understand, sir, that a person is either with this court or he must be counter against it" (Miller 55). While Wallcot's claim of Martha's spells that cause his pigs' death can imprison Corey's wife, the opinions of ninety-one villagers cannot convince Danforth to release Nurse Rebecca and Martha Corey. He even brutally abuses his power to a greater extent by arresting all of the farmers for examination despite Francis's begging. In witch trials, although all of the evidence is intangible and based on observation, only individuals with judicial power have the authority to decide what counts as legitimate surveillance and proof of moral goodness.

The objective of social surveillance is to achieve a disciplinary society but, in *The Crucible*, it is restricting personal liberty due to the abuse of power. Under the fear of being watched, individuals will eventually obtain self-regulation and modify their behaviors to fit into the standards. Social surveillance works as a process of “normalization.” Although standardized society may appear to be positive, its problems lie in what diverts from “normalization” or what counts as different. In most cases, differences tend to attack marginalized groups like Tituba, Sarah Osborne, and Sarah Good. As a drunkard and a mentally unstable homeless woman, Osborne and Good easily become the target owing to their inferior social status when Putnam immediately asks “Sarah Good? Did you ever see Sarah Good with him? - or Osburn?” (Miller 23). Surely, names like Parris or Danforth will never come into question thanks to their privileged position in society. Due to her African roots, Tituba is not only accused instantly but also deprived of the right to prove her innocence. While Abigail can deny her involvement in witchcraft, “Tituba’s denials are not even recognised as such but are interpreted by her accusers as a ‘confession’” (Lowe 179). Despite her desperate efforts, Reverend Hale asserts that, “You most certainly do” while Parris threatens, “You will confess yourself or I will take you out and whip you to your death, Tituba” (Miller 23). Innocence is no longer an option. In all other witch trials, the same situation repeats as the accused is faced with only two options, to admit or to die. One cannot choose to be innocent and alive unless one belongs to the force in charge. As a result, the supposedly disciplinary society is merely a fabricated showcase where individuals exist as objects of performance and pretend to be content with the deprivation of their liberty. Built upon conformity, this society exoticizes and executes everyone who is depicted as different.

While liberty pays attention to individual rights in relation to the government's power, freedom concentrates on individuals' ability to follow their own agency. In a society where

liberty is restricted by abusing power, some characters, especially John Proctor, still hold onto their freedom. Confronted by the price of his own life, “Proctor can shape himself as a subject with power and control over his physical body” when he prioritizes his dignity and righteousness (Rashid and Muhi 523). In contrast to Abigail’s struggle for power by exploiting fabrication, Proctor’s struggle lies in the power of his body and soul. When he screams “Because it is my name,” Proctor claims control over his name and his united self which are threatened by the abusing power (Miller 86). His friend, Giles Corey, even challenges that whole corrupted system by demanding “More weight” on the brink of his death (81). The dignity of their characters as well as their wives and friends like Rebecca indicates signs of the collapse of a rotten disciplinary society. By refusing to conform to normalization and performance, they preserve and strengthen their freedom. Even when the ending is cruel to them, their righteousness sheds a ray of hope on the Salem village.

With a state of constantly observing and being observed, the characters in *The Crucible* call into discussion the theory of surveillance which consists of three popular stages: Panopticon, Synopticon, and Omnipticon. However, that surveillance is heavily impacted by the abuse of religious and political power which aims at creating a disciplinary society where equity and liberty are strictly restricted. Through the preservation of dignity, characters like John Proctor threaten that corrupted system and pursue their personal freedom. It is certain that even in today’s world, surveillance and the abuse of power are still in existence. New forms will continue to emerge and grow from old ones. Self-censorship may cause fear of standing up for disadvantaged people. Our critical mission, though, is to hold onto our freedom like Proctor and claim our own power in a world of abusing power.

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