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Survival Under His Eye: Divergent Surveillance Models in Dystopian Literature

According to Michel Foucault, “visibility is a trap” (*Discipline and Punish*, 200). This theme of surveillance is common amongst dystopian literature where there is anxiety around depleting resources and the survival of humanity. Within these worlds, regimented systems are put in place in order to guarantee the success of future generations. The idea of constant surveillance is essential because it ensures compliance amongst individuals within the regimented system. In this case, the individual is aware that their actions are being monitored and are adjusting their own behaviour according to the needs of society. Foucault notes that in this system of surveillance, individuals are “caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers” (201). So, not only do they police their own behaviour, they constantly watch and police the behaviour of others to keep the system in order. While these systems try to ensure survival and equal distribution of resources, the rigid nature of these systems pose issues of oppression and loss of individuality.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood displays what might happen if the sterility of Caucasian people increases, and the rise of women's reproductive rights threatens the proliferation of the dominating race. The novel follows Offred, a Handmaid, who recounts her experiences in this totalitarian state, and reveals her struggles to remember the past before women were forced into categories according to their fertility. Atwood implements multiple

systems of surveillance within this world that police women's emotional and sexual behaviour, as well as the way in which they perceive their own bodies. The anxiety surrounding sterility eventually leads Offred to go to more extreme measures to bear a child, while attempting to find some of her old freedoms back in the process. Ultimately, these actions lead her deviant behaviour to be caught under surveillance. Whether she is caught by the Eyes of the government or saved by the Mayday rebels, Atwood leaves up to interpretation.

Ursula Le Guin on the other hand, poses a different system of surveillance in her novel, *The Dispossessed*. While the more consumerist planet of Urras displays a world of plenty, the planet of Annares shows what can happen if the world lost a majority of its natural resources. Annares' belief system evolved from Odo, a philosopher originally from Urras. She believes in an anarchistic system where everyone is free, and people live based on sharing amongst each other. Since Odo's beliefs would overthrow the capitalist system on Urras, they come to an agreement where those who believe in anarchy would live on a different planet, completely separating interaction between the two systems. The major problem however, is that Annares is a barren moon of Urras with hardly any natural resources to live from. From this, the Annaresti develop a more regimented system from Odo's beliefs in order to have enough resources for everyone to survive. While they do not have a formal government to oversee everyone's actions, they do have social norms which keep people from immersing themselves into the arts, or anything viewed as "excess." As the reader follows the physicist Shevek, they see how the systems on Annares and Urras limit his ability to express his free thought because of the social surveillance by other individuals. What both Le Guin and Atwood illustrate is that the scarcity of resources generates a system of surveillance, which ultimately limits the individual and their freedom.

Within the world of Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the scarce resource is fertility. The way in which they control this resource is through controlling the behaviours of women, as well as controlling how women are perceived. In the first chapter of the novel, Offred recounts her time in the Centre as the fertile women are training to be Handmaids. She knows that "The Angels stood outside [the Centre] with their backs to us. They were objects of fear to us, but something else as well. If only they would look. If only we could talk to them" (Atwood 14). Offred recognizes the authority of the Angels, and the power they have, even though she cannot see their faces. This reveals that the women must fear the gaze of men, as they are the ones of authority. If they are deviant, the officials can send them away as Unwomen, or have them killed at any point in time, because the women are constantly being watched.

It is important to note the titles of the men in society; Commanders, Angels, Guardians, and most importantly, the Eyes, who act as the secret police of behavior. These names are authoritarian in nature, as well as biblical. Atwood also includes a biblical story before the beginning of the novel. This story is of Rachel, who is infertile, who uses the maid Bilhah as a surrogate in order to have children with Jacob (Genesis, 30:1-3). This inclusion emphasizes the major influence of Christianity in Gilead. As Pamela Cooper notes, the type of surveillance Atwood portrays, "brings together pre-Christian notions of absolute patriarchal authority - the omniscient, avenging god - with postmodernist theories of the objectifying and possessive male gaze - the omniscient, avenging eye" (Sexual Surveillance and Medical Authority in Two Versions of *The Handmaid's Tale*, 50). The two levels of surveillance leaves Offred aware of every move she makes, which makes her question who can be trusted. When she sees Nick, the Guardian, out on the lawn and he winks at her, she starts to overthink his actions and even wonders if it is a test from the Eyes (Atwood, 28). This anxiety surrounding God, and men

consistently observing their behaviours, ultimately makes the women compliant in their roles that are set out for them. Thus, through this gaze, the men in power can control the fertile women into being handmaids, and the non-fertile women in other roles in society, and if they are not compliant, they are sent away as Unwomen to the colonies. This leaves women limited in their ability to express autonomy and free thought.

Not only is there a need for surveillance of social behaviour, there is a need for surveillance within medical sphere as well, as the health of the Handmaids control how the population rises. The one interaction shown between Offred and the doctor, although brief, carries significant meaning about the power structures in play, and the types of surveillance within Gilead. After her uterine examination, the doctor offers to have sex with Offred in order to help her conceive a child, as most older men are sterile:

‘It’s too dangerous,’ I say. ‘No. I can’t.’ The penalty is death. But they have to catch you in the act, with two witnesses. What are the odds, is this room bugged, who’s waiting just outside the door?

His hand stops. ‘Think about it,’ he says. ‘I’ve seen your chart. You don’t have a lot of time left. But it’s your life.’

‘Thank you,’ I say. I must leave the impression that I’m not offended, that I’m open to suggestion. He takes his hand away, lazily almost, lingeringly, this is not the last word as far as he’s concerned. He could fake the tests, report me for cancer, for infertility, have me shipped off to the Colonies with the Unwomen. None of this has been said, but the knowledge of his power hangs nevertheless in the air as he pats my thigh, withdraws himself behind the hanging sheet.

‘Next month,’ he says. (Atwood, 71)

This short interaction displays many levels of surveillance and power that the doctor has over Offred. He ultimately has major influence on her societal position. Her sole position in Gilead currently, is to produce children, so if she cannot do that, her life is obsolete. As Cooper notes, “it is the medical eye, with its invasive technological expertise, that can introduce the over-controlling, patriarchal gaze of totalitarianism into the most private spheres, the inner spaces of the human body” (52). So, he is not only able to control Offred’s medical records, but he has sexual power over her as well. This leaves Offred in a difficult position. As she says in the quote above, anyone could be watching or recording, or the doctor could be testing her loyalty to the regime. As well, she emphasizes that she cannot leave a bad impression with the doctor, as he has the authority to change her medical records and mark her as an Unwoman. This leaves her with the anxiety of breaking the law, the anxiety of infertility, and the anxiety of pleasing men. She has some choices in the matter, but none of which are choices that she would want to make. The gaze of the doctor, the gaze of the government, and the importance of fertility leave Handmaids in conflict as to what exactly is good and bad behaviour. This ultimately limits their autonomy over their own bodies. The looming “next month” the doctor leaves her with, reminds Offred that she will have to experience this gaze time and time again. Even by the end of the novel, Offred must put her trust in Nick, who may be a part of the Mayday rebellion, or he could be an Eye turning her in to the authorities (Atwood, 305). Thus, the women’s fate in society are always subject to the gaze of men, so they have no real autonomy over their bodies and position in society.

The worlds of *The Dispossessed* display multiple types of surveillance as well. Firstly, on the barren planet of Anarres, there is a need to limit anything viewed as unnecessary, as natural resources are limited. One of those limitations is the arts and creative thinking: “Learning centres

taught all the skills that prepare for the practice of art [...] It was all pragmatic: the children learned to see, speak, hear, move, handle. No distinction was drawn between the arts and crafts; art was not considered as having a place in life, but as a basic technique of life, like speech” (Le Guin, 131). Although they practice the arts on Annares, it is seen as a practical skill, rather than promoting creativity and free thought. Because of this view, we see the more free-thinking individuals, like Shevek and Bedap struggle with their aspirations in life. Although there are no laws stating what they can and cannot do, the social norms deter them from pursuing these aspirations because they are not necessary for survival. As Christine Nadir notes, this emphasis on preserving the environment “can remind you to sacrifice and to limit consumption to save the earth and its inhabitants, but nature can also force you to give too much or unnecessarily” (Utopian Studies, Environmental Literature, and the Legacy of an Idea: Educating Desire in Miguel Abensour and Ursula K. Le Guin, 41). This results in sparing too much of your energy on cooperation, rather than your own well-being. This is evident when Shevek reveals to Bedap that he has contemplated suicide, and Bedap starts to discuss their limitations:

In [Shevek’s] case, the wall seems to be Sabul, and his supporters in the science syndicates and the PDC. As for me, I’ve been in Abbenay four decads. Forty days. Long enough to see that in forty years here I’ll accomplish nothing, nothing at all, of what I want to do, the improvement of science in the learning centres. Unless things are changed. Or unless I join the enemies. (Le Guin, 137)

Here, Bedap recognizes that Sabul and his supporters have power over Shevek, and since his ideas are controversial, Sabul puts up walls against the publication of his ideas. This constant imagery of walls and barriers reflects the limitations people create for themselves and others when certain social norms are in play. As Susan Storing Benfield writes, “Le Guin provides a

vivid picture of those aspects of human nature that create hierarchies and bureaucracies even in the absence of formal government” (The Interplanetary Dialectic: Freedom and Equality in Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, 128). So, although Shevek should be able to publish his ideas because there are no laws, Sabul has created the notion that he and the PDC have power over Shevek by constantly monitoring and editing his work.

After seeing the free-thinkers and physicists of Urras, Shevek starts to question the norms of his home planet: “What is idealistic about social cooperation, mutual aid, when it is the only means of staying alive?” (Le Guin, 114). Peter Stillman notes that while it may seem like an idealistic, utopian world, “Anarres’s natural environment is bleak and inimical, and its social and political life has difficulties: public opinion can become too dominant, acceptance of bureaucratic decisions too prevalent, and individuals seeking power too successful.” (*The Dispossessed as Ecological Political Theory*, 68). Public opinion on Annarens ends up holding a significant amount of power over Shevek. Since the people of Urras go against the views of Odo, the public opinion on Annarens ends up making Shevek aware of some of the dangers of visiting Urras:

You are traitors! You and the whole Syndicate! There are people all over Annarens watching you. You think we don’t know that Shevek’s been asked to go to Urras, to go sell Annaresti science to profiteers? You think we don’t know that all you snivellers would would love to go there and live rich and let proprietarians pat you on the back? You can go! Good riddance! But if you try coming back here, you’ll meet with justice” (Le Guin, 294).

This social surveillance puts Shevek’s life at risk when he comes back from Urras. This surveillance even affects his family, as evident when Sadik starts getting bullied for being his

daughter (304). Because this social surveillance puts so many limitations on his freedom, which affects his and his family's mental health, Shevek feels the need to escape to Urras. He believes that on Urras, since those with advanced ideas thrive within capitalism, he can fully express his ideas.

Although Shevek attempts to escape this surveillance by presenting his ideas on Urras, he still ends up being closely monitored by the Ioti government. Le Guin presents the idea that whether there are scarce resources or not, individuals may still be subject to surveillance, just of a different model. On Urras, while there are plenty of natural resources to go around, the main concern is power. Here, power can be interpreted as limited resource, because in capitalist and consumerist societies, there is only a limited number of individuals who can be in power. If there are too many individuals with power, it dissolves into anarchy, like on Annares. Shevek learns of this aspect of life on Urras when he speaks with Chifoilisk about his supervisor, Pae: "He's dangerous to you because he is a loyal, ambitious agent of the Ioti Government. He reports on you, and on me, regularly to the Department of National Security – the secret police [...] You have got to understand the powers behind individuals" (115). Shevek then becomes aware of the power that the government has over him and his work. He realizes that they agree to bring him to Urras for dishonorable intentions. When Efor, his servant, helps him find the microphones in his room, he realizes that he is imprisoned there in order for the government to steal his ideas on physics (237-238). Shevek ultimately learns that "concern with status, wealth and power can possess individuals, dominating their lives and limiting their freedom" (Stillman, 68-69). Because Shevek's presence brings the ideas of anarchy to Urras, the government limits his ability to spread these ideas by confining him and observing his behaviour. If these ideas spread and reach the rebels on Urras, it would cause an uprising. So, the government puts surveillance

on Shevek in order to secure their positions of power. Thus, with both types of resources being scarce (natural resources on Annares and power on Urras), individuals experience similar problems of surveillance and limitations on free thought.

It is evident that these dystopian worlds rely on the surveillance of individuals in order to control resources necessary for survival. In the world of Gilead, the three levels of surveillance put women in forced positions in society. The eyes of men, God, and the doctors, put surveillance on the roles of women in order to keep the population rising, leaving women with little to no autonomy in the process. Le Guin however, presents two different surveillance systems which limit freedom and expression of individuals. On Annares, the limited natural resources forces individuals to observe each other's behaviour in order to limit excess consumption and expended energy on unnecessary activities. On the other hand, Shevek's time on Urras shows that the limited resource of power also creates a system in which the people are observed and punished for deviating behaviours in order to maintain the status quo. Thus, both Le Guin and Atwood present systems in which individual freedom and autonomy are sacrificed to maintain society as a whole. Although the endings of both novels are ambiguous as to the characters' safety, they leave the reader with the hope that freedom of thought will prevail. As Virginia Woolf states in her famous essay, "A Room of One's Own," "lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind" (69). The values on free thought and ambiguity proposed in these novels gives prospect that there is a possibility for a balance between the individual, and the welfare of society.

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