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Rise of the Novel | Buurma

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Observation in the Novel

Ever present in our technologically mediated, post 9/11, Snowden era society are conversations about observation and surveillance. The idea that we are being watched, by our neighbors, our machines, the government has become a subtle and implicit concern. This paper will attempt a brief and condensed theory of the novel through the lens of surveillance, following Richardson's 18th century epistolary novel *Pamela,* Collins's 19th century detective novel *The Moonstone,* and Joyce's 20th century modernist novel *Ulysses* to show how surveillance and observation play a fundamental role in both the plot and narration of each text. Lastly, it will map out the role of free indirect discourse in narration and use it to draw a parallel between current uses of social media. Shying away from an all encompassing thesis, this paper provides focused close readings of distinct texts, while engaging in the critical discourse about various narrative styles. To me, an effective discussion of the implications of surveillance in the novel requires a larger corpus and thorough historicization. Let the following, then, be a taste.

In Samuel Richardson's 18th century epistolary novel *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded,* observation and surveillance are present on both the level of plot and narration. At multiple points throughout the novel, Pamela's letters are intercepted and read by her master Mr. B, sometimes through him and other times through his intermediary Mrs. Jukes. Toward the end of the novel, Pamela writes in a letter, "I am very sorrowful, and still have greater reason; for, just now, as I was in my closet, opening the parcel I had hid under the rose-bush, to see if it was damaged by lying so long, Mrs. Jewkes came upon me by surprise, and laid her hands upon it;

for she had been looking through the key-hole, it seems" (Richardson, Volume II, Letter XXXII, Saturday noon). Here, Pamela is secretly viewing the letters she had "hid under the rose-bush," but to no avail — they are still seized and left subject to inspection. Not only has Mrs. Jewkes taken her private letters, but she has also "been looking" at Pamela "through the key-hole." This image of Pamela being peered upon through the key-hole is reflective of the level of surveillance upon which Pamela is placed throughout the entirety of the novel. Notable, though, is Pamela's awareness of this observation. Not only is she reflecting in her writing on being watched and having her papers seized by Mrs. Jewkes, she also uses the phrase "it seems" to describe Mrs. Jewkes "looking through the key-hole." The use of the optical word "seems" to contrast Mrs. Jukes's "looking," indicates that Pamela, the object of observation, can see her observer, too. This two-way line of sight is distinct from the panoptic model of observation that we will discuss later, in which the observed cannot see her observer.

The narrative form of Richardson's novel also gives the impression of surveillance. At the end of the novel we are told that Pamela's letters are published as the novel we are reading. Richardson writes, "And the Editor of these sheets will have his end, if it inspires a laudable emulation in the minds of any worthy persons, who may thereby entitle themselves to the rewards, the praises, and the blessings, by which PAMELA was so deservedly distinguished" (Richardson, Letter XXXII, ending). Had Richardson left the presentation and publication of the letters in *Pamela* ambiguous, that is, if the origin were implied but not stated outright, then it would be conceivable for readers to maintain the impression that the epistolary nature of the text is simply a form of representation. The fictitious insistence at the end of the novel that the (for the most part) intentionally private letters we read in *Pamela* were compiled and published as the novel negates any semblance of privacy initially instilled by the epistolary form and *on the*

formal level of narration gives the impression that private thoughts and words will be observed and disseminated. As Habermas writes in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, "Subjectivity, as the innermost core of the private, was always already oriented to an audience" (Habermas, 49). Private thoughts are outward facing, and as Habermas continues, "Letters by strangers were not only borrowed and copied, some correspondences were intended from the outset for publication" (49). The initial inclination of privacy in the letter form is overtaken by the letter's orientation to an audience. *Pamela* displays this tension between privacy and observation both on the level of plot and narrative.

Themes of observation and surveillance in the novel are present on both the level of plot and narration in the 19th century detective novel. In the second chapter of *The Novel and the Police,* D.A. Miller makes a claim about the Panoptic nature of Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone.* Miller draws from Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prision* which describes Jeremy Bentham's proposed model of a prison called a Panopticon, in which inmates are observed from all sides but cannot see themselves being observed. Foucault writes, "The major effect of the Panopticon [is] to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault, 195-228). Miller maps the panoptic effect onto *The Moonstone* on both the level of plot and narration. Describing the ways in which the novel goes about solving the case of theft, Miller argues that all of the characters work toward solving the crime, and in this way the role of detective is discarded. Miller writes, "the move to discard the *role of the detective* is at the same time a move to disperse the *function of detection*" (Miller, 42). If the function of detection is dispersed, then observation, too, is dispersed; in the space of this novel, then, one can be detected and observed from anywhere, without knowing who is watching, producing a panoptic effect.

Miller argues that *The Moonstone* is panoptic on the level of narration as well. Miller describes *The Moonstone* with critic Mikhail Bakhtin's term *monological,* which Miller defines as "speaking in a master-voice that corrects, overrides, subordinates, or sublates all other voices it allows to speak" (54). This definition implies a single narrator, though, and the catch for Miller is that the multi-vocal narration of *The Moonstone,* rather than producing disjoint readings, is monological. Miller writes, "Collins's technique is a way to inscribe the *effects* of monologism in the text without ascribing them to the *agency* of an actual monologist . . . It is staged like an 'invisible hand,' programming the text without needing to be programmed into it" (56). Having many narrators with seemingly distinct views all coalesce into one, univocal and monological perspective, produces a diffusion of central authority and thus a panoptic effect. *The Moonstone,* like *Pamela* is about surveillance and observation, both in plot and narrative style.

We have traced a pattern of surveillance and observation in the novel through the 18th and 19th century and across two distinct narrative forms, on the levels of both plot and narration. James Joyce's 20th century modernist novel *Ulysses,* follows in this history and represents the concept of being observed in the story and through its use of free indirect discourse or what Dorrit Cohn calls narrated monolouge. In her book *Transparent Minds,* she defines it as " the technique for rendering a character's thought in his own idiom while maintaining the third-person reference and the basic tense of narration" (Cohn, Transparent Minds, TK). In *Imagining the Penitentiary,* John Bender argues that free indirect discourse parallels the layout of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon. In an essay published in *New Literary History,* Bender writes, "Free indirect discourse disperses authoritative presence into the very third-person grammar and syntax through which the illusion of consciousness is created in realist fiction" (Bender, 29). This claim about the dispersion of authoritative presence parallels Miller's claim about *The Moonstone's*

multivocal, monologic narration. Free indirect discourse's rendering of individual, first person subjectivity and consciousness through a 3rd person narrator gives authority to an all seeing narrator, and consequently is panoptic. Bender continues, "The point [of the Panopticon] is not that the actual inspector-keeper is really omniscient, but rather that the imputational transparency of Panopticon architecture — like the third-person position in the narration of consciousness — forces him to be *imagined* as all knowing" (ibid, emphasis Bender's). The *imagination* of the narrator as all knowing produces, like in the Panopticon, the perception of being observed. The capacity of free indirect discourse to narrate the consciousnesses of multiple characters, as in Ulysses, parallels the multivocal narration of *The Moonstone,* but rather than separate narrations converging to one "master-voice," multiple voices are rendered by one narration.

In an essay entitled "Optics and Power in the Novel," Dorrit Cohn critiques the argument that free indirect discourse is panoptic. Her criticism comes on many fronts, including a nuanced and semantic critique of what she views as egregious slippage of language. She also critiques them on the grounds of misunderstanding Foucault. She writes:

> Clearly then, such terms as 'surveillance,' or 'panoptic vision' make sense only when they are applied to relationships that are potentially reversible: master-slave, prison guard-prisoner, parent-child . . . They make no sense at all — no Foucauldian sense — when they are applied to an author's (or heterodiegetic narrator's) relationship to his fictional characters. The latter do not exist on the same ontological plane as the former" (Cohn, Optics, 9).

While it is true that author's do not exist on the same ontological plane as characters (for how could they?), the same is not true of narrators. Both narrators and characters are constructs of the author, each playing a critical role in the construction of the story. Neither exists, like an author does, in the real, physical world where he can breathe, eat, and get a cup of coffee on planet earth. The conflation in the parenthetical aperçu of author and narrator undermines Cohn's point. The narrator and characters do exist on the same ontological plane; they are both constructed by

the author to tell a story. In his response to Cohn's essay, Mark Seltzer notes, "For one thing, Cohn herself scarcely observes such a distinction, albeit violating it from the reverse direction ('far from imposing his voice on his is characters, [the narrator] allows the latter to impose their voice on him')" (Seltzer, 24). If the narrator can "allow the characters to impose their voice on him", the narrator and characters exist on the same plane as they are doing action on each other. Thus this critique of free indirect discourse being panoptic falls flat.

In the above excerpt, Seltzer is quoting an earlier portion of Cohn's essay in which she takes issue with the relationship in free indirect discourse between narrator and character outlined by Miller's *The Novel and the Police.* The question at hand, whether the narrator imposes his voice on the character or vice versa, describes a tension present in free indirect style that parallels people's relationships to social media, a subject to which we will return at the end of this essay. In an earlier work, Cohn provides an analysis of free indirect discourse which will be useful for resolving this tension. In *Transparent Minds,* Cohn views free indirect discourse differently from Bender. She writes "that narrated monologues tend to commit the narrator to attitudes of sympathy or irony" (Cohn, 117). In other words, the portion of free indirect narration that is a monologue of a character (as distinct from the portions that are the solely the narrator's voice), tend to be either ironic or sympathetic toward the character. Irony and sympathy, though seemingly distinct effects from from Panopticism, both are fundamentally about observation. To be ironic or sympathetic toward something requires enough distance from something to remark on it. Indeed, it necessarily entails observation and judgement. This treatment of a character as ironic and sympathetic implies the narrator rendering the subjectivity of the characters with a certain tone and thereby imposing his voice on them. In this way, Cohn's own theory of narrative

monologue works against her argument about the direction of vocal imposition in free indirect discourse.

We have developed, from Bender, Seltzer, Cohn, and to some extent Miller, a model of how free indirect discourse can function to produce the effect and feeling of surveillance simultaneously and paradoxically through both the proximity of the narration to the characters and the irony and sympathy generated from the judgmental distance between them. The narration style of the "Nausicaa" section of Joyce's Ulysses operates in line with this model of free indirect discourse, and in *Ulysses,* like in *Pamela* and *The Moonstone,* observation plays an important role both on the level of plot and narration. The narrator says of the character Leopold Bloom looking at Gerty Mac Dowell, "His dark eyes fixed themselves on her again drinking in her every contour, literally worshipping at her shrine. If ever there was undisguised admiration in a man's passionate gaze it was there plain to be seen on that man's face. It is for you, Gertrude Mac Dowell, and you know it" (Joyce, 296). The words "eyes," "fixed," "gaze," and "seen" are all related to optics and observation. The gravity of that last sentence indicated by the repitition of the word "you," portrays the narrator as understanding of and sympathetic toward Bloom's "undisguised admiration." Furthermore, the narrator telling Gerty what Bloom is thinking toward her and that she "know[s] it," in Bender's words, "forces him to be *imagined* as all knowing." (Bender, 29). In this exerpt, Bloom is intensely looking at Gerty and what follows is a scene in which the narrator watches Bloom and Gerty watch each other while Bloom masturbates. Joyce writes:

The eyes that were fastened upon her set her pulses tingling. She looked at him a moment, meeting his glance, and a light broke in upon her. White hot passion was in that face . . . She leaned aback far to look up where the fireworks were and she caught her knee in her hands so as to not fall back looking up and there was no-one to see only him and her when she revealed all her graceful beautifully shaped legs like that, supply soft and delicately rounded, and she seemed

to hear the panting of his heart, his hoarse breathing . . . because Bertha Supple told her once in dead secret and made her swear . . . (299).

Here the narration slips inbetween Gerty and Bloom's minds, such that it is difficult to discern who is feeling what, producing simultaneously and all-seeing and ironic effect. The phrase "set her pulses tingling" describes what Gerty is feeling, indicating that the narration is about to go into her head. Instead, though, it gradually starts describing her with more objectifying language: "a light broke in *upon* her," "white hot passion was in *that* face," "she revealed all her graceful beautifully shaped legs" (emphases mine). These objectifying words about Gerty's reaction to Bloom masturbating gives the impression that the narration is rendering Bloom's projected fantasy about Gerty's thoughts rather than Gerty's thoughts themselves. By framing it as Gerty's thoughts, though, the narration ironically mocks Blooms masturbatory fantasies. The narration then transitions quickly to Gerty's head with Gerty thinking about something "Bertha Supple told her once in dead secret." Thus, though the characters are observing each other intensely, "eyes were fastened upon her," "she looked at him for a moment," neither is really able to see inside the thoughts of the other. That task, is instead, reserved for the narrator, who can observe and judge everything. Thus like *Pamela* and *The Moonstone* before it, both on the level of plot and narration, the "Nausicaa" section of *Ulysses* is deeply concerned with observation. The proximity of the free indirect narrator to the characters forces him to be imagined as all knowing much in the same way as the inspector keeper in Bentham's Panopticon, and the distance of the narrator allows him to observe and pass judgement and irony onto the character. Thus both Bender and Cohn's contrasting and seemingly contradictory readings of free indirect discourse synthesize in *Ulysses* to place free indirect discourse firmly within the novel's trend of observation.

The narrative form of free indirect discourse also parallels the form of social media. Returning to Cohn's critique of Miller, Bender, Seltzer, etc., recall Cohn's statement "far from imposing his voice on his characters, the narrator allows the latter to impose their voice on him." The tension between these two competing views of the narrator in free indirect discourse: the controlling and mind-reading narrator vs one whose form becomes subsumed by a character, parallels the relationship between social media and it's users. Social media platforms, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, etc. mediate the subjectivity of users. The form of the "post," allows users "to impose their voice on [it]." In the way that free indirect discourse renders the thoughts of the characters on the level of narration, so too does the structure of social media invite individuals to display their thoughts in the form of post.

In the other direction, the argument posed by Miller and others about narrators imposing their voice on characters, social media imposes its forms on users. In the same way that narration in free indirect discourse is never neutral, not just an empty vessel for characters' thoughts but rather one that shapes the presentation of those thoughts, social media posts are laden and displayed with preset formatting that affects the content of the post but is subtle and invisible in the way that narration is.

Social media also plays with rendering irony and sympathy. The posting of quotidian occurrences is often made ironic by the fact that it is being broadcasted to hundreds of "friends" or "followers." In contrast, the highly visual nature of social media, coupled with the capacity for users to "like" other users' posts, allows for expressions of sympathy. The poster here, unlike the character in free indirect discourse, has control over the ironic or sympathetic presentation (though perhaps not the reception) of their thoughts.

Pamela through the interception and publication of letters, *The Moonstone*, through the dispersed role of detection and narration, and *Ulysses,* through the all-seeing free indirect narrator produce the effect of surveillance both textually and formally. Free indirect discourse, in the tension between the narrator and the character, parallels the tension between social media platforms and their users. Social media platforms, too, are notorious for their collection and use of user data. Perhaps this history of surveillance in the novel trains readers to feel comfortable with being observed, teaches them that a fundamental part of having subjectivity is being watched.

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