

The (In)visible Eye of Authority : Notes on Surveillance in Paul Auster's Ghosts

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ABSTRACT. In his *Discipline and Punish* (1995), Foucault describes the plague-stricken city where authorities exercised surveillance to control the contagion of the disease. As Foucault states, the first precaution to take was the strict division of space which led to the isolation of dwellers; this spatial partitioning reinforced the notion of pervasive surveillance and paved the way for the modern disciplinary society of which Panopticon was an ideal architectural embodiment. In this paper, we try to show how a combination of the plague-ridden city's discipline diagrams and Panopticism make the whole scene of Auster's *Ghosts*. By focusing on the role of writing in power mechanisms depicted in the novel, we illustrate the power-knowledge relations which involve the characters in the process of subjectification and which construct the subject position of the author (Blue) who acts as the (in)visible eye of authority. Then, we argue that Blue's dilemma aggravates mainly because he identifies his individual life with his Foucauldian "author function".

1. INTRODUCTION

Prisons, in Michel Foucault's view, can never be considered as something separated from the societies in which they are formed. Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish* (1995), holds that the prison has transformed the essence and appearance of punishment. To him, punishment is no more pigeonholed by the fierce bodily torments of physical punishment. The punishments presently enacted on criminals govern not only their physical life, as was the case with the torments of the previous periods, but the whole of their existence. This overall regulation of the day-to-day events of the criminal, which is typical of the present-day prison life, characterizes the practice of modern surveillance authorized by a disciplinary society.(Foucault, 1995:190-220)

Foucault states that today's disciplinary society began to develop at the end of the 18th century with the constitution of the Walnut Street jail in Philadelphia. He asserts that the prison provided a model for the other social establishments. The institutional control exercised by the prison has been so duplicated by hospitals, factories, and schools that we can say the typical control of the prison has become representative of the whole disciplinary social order. In fact, by choosing the prison as its pattern for maintaining surveillance, modern society has exercised symbolic and actual control over the different aspects of the lives of its members and the omnipresent supervision of daily life has replaced corporal cruelty as the main way of social control. (ibid)

Moreover, Foucault argues that penal institutions are purportedly intended to reduce crime by executing certain sentences; however, prisons neither exercise defined punishments nor thwart misconduct. He claims that their failure in both cases is deliberate. As prisons give rise to crime, surveillance of the criminal in the community, even after the conclusion of the prison sentence, turns out to be indispensable, thereby making the prison indefinite. Indeed, the disciplinary society never confines its surveillance only to its ex-prisoner but incorporates all its members as the real dwellers of an unseen prison through imposing disciplines on them. Consequently, the prison and all its implications become in the service of the disciplinary society in order to legitimize the control of the people either inside or outside the actual prison.(ibid:228-250)

Most importantly, it is the notion of the "Panopticon" that, acting as a metaphor for disciplinary societies, occupies Foucault's attention. As he states, we can depict the development of

a disciplinary society from the enclosed disciplines, a type of societal quarantine, “to an indefinitely generalizable mechanism of Panopticism”. According to Foucault, the Panopticon is the ideal architectural embodiment of modern disciplinary power: a circular structure with a central observation tower from which one can observe the inmates without being observed. Observing without being observed, to Foucault, is the main functional principle of surveillance methods in modern societies. The Panopticon leads to the realization of everlasting visibility as the ubiquitous form of power, where no old penal apparatus (bars, heavy chains and so on) is needed for domination any longer. (ibid: 190-210)

As Stuart Elden (2003) mentions, the chapter in which Panopticon is discussed in *Discipline and Punish* starts with the contrast between the methods of coping with two ailments, leprosy and the plague. Foucault states that whereas “the leper gave rise to rituals of exclusion... the plague gave rise to disciplinary diagrams” (Foucault, 1995:231). These disciplinary diagrams involve a “strict spatial partitioning, careful surveillance, detailed inspection and order” (ibid: 195) and segregated the plague-stricken town into regions, regions into quarters, quarters into isolated roads and individual houses. To Foucault, This strict division of space which was commanded to stymie the plague reinforced the notion of pervasive surveillance and paved the way for disciplinary society. The aim of this paper is to show how a combination of the plague-ridden city’s discipline diagram and Panopticism make the whole scene of Auster’s *Ghosts* and how the characters stack their cards in such an enigma.

2. DISCUSSION

In his *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes a plague-stricken city where authorities exercised surveillance to control the contagion of the disease. As Foucault explains, the first precaution to take was “spatial partitioning” and thus the isolation of dwellers ensued. The authorities divided the city into quarters and held an intendant in charge, while each street was under the surveillance of a syndic who was expected to hand in reports to the intendant. (ibid: 172-185) In *Ghosts*, in the beginning of the narrative, we see White employing Blue “to keep an eye on [someone named] Black” (Auster,2006: 133). White, the epitome of the authority, has already divided the space by renting an apartment “directly across the street from Black’s” (ibid: 134). Indeed, White has located both Blue and Black in an area of confinement and determined the binary opposition between the observer(Blue) and the observed (Black) .He has prescribed two inviolable rules for Blue: first, no communication with Black, and second a weekly report in return for a pay check. The disciplinary diagram, here, bears a striking resemblance to that of the plague-stricken city in which inhabitants must shun any communication and someone (the syndic) has to write a daily report; in other words, it seems that White plays the role of intendant’s and Blue that of syndic’s. However, Blue’s “observer” position and Black’s “visible” one remind us of the epistemological dimensions Foucault pinpoints for Panopticism. The visible inmate (here, the Black), as Foucault says, is " seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication”. (Foucault, 1995:202) In fact, Black is the object of Blue’s observation and both Black and Blue are the objects of White’s information. Therefore, a combination of the plague-ridden city’s discipline diagram and Panopticism set the entire scene of Auster’s *Ghosts*.

As with the plague-ridden city, the direct consequence of the strict division of space and isolation is immobility and fixity. Foucault notes “only the intendants, syndics and guards will move...it is a segmented, immobile, frozen space. Each individual is fixed in his place” (ibid:195). In *Ghosts* the scene, the rule of no meeting and the very act of recording show the immobility of the characters. The story begins on February 3, 1947, in the middle of winter and such frozen space makes the impression of lethargy and weariness. Even though, here, we are given the exact date, it seems to us that the scene is intended to exemplify the psychologically static nature of the narrative time. When the story comes to its end, one year has passed but the narration seems not to advance in as much time as a year. In his early reports to White, Blue does not ignore an iota of details and composes an exhaustive account of Black’s every movement, even his idleness. But after a while,

his reports become routinized and repetitive, just like the ones written in the plague-stricken city in which life is immutable. Furthermore, the very act of recording obliges the Blue to sit and observe attentively with no intention to move and communicate. Brendan Martin (2008), in his Paul Auster's *Postmodernity*, mentions, "Blue's assignment is to scrutinize and record Black's every movement. Thus, Black ensures that Blue is subjected to an enforced period of solitude". (Martin, 2008: 127) This concomitance of the solitude and immobility in *Ghosts* is, also, reminiscent of life in the plague-ridden city. Such "doing nothing" (Auster, 2006: 166), just "sitting in his room and writing" (ibid: 178) "nothing more than that, with scarcely a word to anyone and no meetings with others" (ibid: 167) and Blue's recording of Black's non-action makes him feel such ceaseless impassiveness that the narrator says "they have trapped Blue into doing nothing, into being so inactive as to reduce his life to almost no life at all" (ibid: 166). That he has to make "no contact" leads Blue not only to make no communication with Black but also to dissociate himself from the rest of the world, especially from his fiancée Mrs. Blue. On the other side, Black's movements, too, have no significance of actual mobility as far as they don't make any progress in the actions of the narrative; they are just non-action.

The conspicuous characteristic of the plague-ridden city is its incessant inspection; the feature which helped to develop the notion of Panopticism and the "political dream" of disciplinary society. As E.W. Soja (1996) mentions, "every city is to some degree a Panopticon, a collection of surveillance modes designed to impose or maintain a particular model of conduct and disciplined adherence on its inhabitants". (Soja, 1996: 235) In this sense, *Ghosts* involves a variety of surveillance methods, including diverse manners of observing, tailing and finally intruding into Black's flat and invading his domestic privacy. However, as Blue realizes that "...little of anything happens" and "Black writes, reads, eats, takes brief strolls through the neighborhood" (Auster, 2006: 140) with no considerable significance, his surveillance takes the form of a mental obsession. To relieve his anxiety, he has no choice but to strictly stick to his compulsive observation, "he [Black] must be watched every hour of every day. Anything less than constant surveillance would be as no surveillance at all", since as a result of "A single moment's inattention—a glance to the side of him, a pause to scratch his head, the merest yawn—and presto, Black slips away and commits whatever heinous act he is planning to commit." (ibid: 141) The other side of such obsession is Blue's tendency to build up a fantastic unity with Black

... the closer he feels to Black, the less he finds it necessary to think about him...the more deeply entangled he becomes, the freer he is ... At those moments when he feels closest to Black, however, he can even begin to lead the semblance of an independent life. (ibid: 155)

Blue experiences his encounter with Black as a potential source of intense anxiety which gives rise to his obsessive and compulsive behaviors, therefore the only way for him to mitigate or overcome his nervousness is his identification with Black. In fact, this identification works as a defense mechanism that unconsciously helps to protect his self from hurt and disintegration; a mechanism like what Anna Freud (1936) named as "Identification with the Aggressor". (cited in Parker)

As Foucault explains, the constant surveillance in the Panopticon is acquired by "the gaze" which "is alert everywhere" (Foucault, 1995: 195). He expounded on the gaze to illuminate a specific dynamic in "power relations and disciplinary mechanisms" and to show how these mechanisms function in the form of self-regulation in prisons or schools as apparatuses of power. (Smart, 2002:80-1) In *Ghosts*, on the one hand, Blue's gaze, at first, intends to observe without being observed, and therefore maintain the continuous surveillance required in the Panopticism. Nonetheless, Blue's gaze has many things to do with his "will to know". Gazing at Black, Blue is well aware that knowing "everything there is to know about Black: what kind of soap he buys, what newspapers he reads, what clothes he wears" (Auster, 2006: 167) He knows perfectly that the more detailed knowledge he gains of Black, the more domination he can exercise over him; therefore, as such a will begins to intensify, "the only way for Blue to have a sense of what is happening is to be inside Black's mind, to see what he is thinking, and that of course is impossible" (Auster, 2006: 137). He decides to make contact with Black and join a friendly chat with him in disguise; then, he goes into Black's flat to know what is written on Black's notebook in order to make sure whether he

is, too, under surveillance or not. Interestingly, when he lies about Black conditions to test White's knowledge of the situation, White warns him, "no more funny business". (Auster, 2006:165) White is well aware of his job as an intendant and never leaves the syndic's (Blue's) report unobserved, as in Foucauldian plague-ridden city to which *Ghosts'* New York bears similarity the intendant is duty-bound to check whether or not the syndics have "carried out their tasks". (Foucault, 1995:196) Indeed, just like the plague-stricken city in which "each individual is constantly located, examined, and distributed" (ibid: 197) Black and Blue are constantly positioned and scrutinized.

The uninterrupted registration in *Ghosts* takes the form of a weekly report and a pay check in return. In the plague-ridden city, "... an uninterrupted work of writing links the center and periphery, in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure..." (ibid, 197); here, writing which links the center to periphery takes the form of a hierarchy including White (as the periphery for both Black and Blue), Blue (as the periphery for Black and the center for White) and Black (as the center for both Black and Blue). In effect, this hierarchy creates a power discourse informed by writing as its vital constituent and, more interestingly, when Blue decides to topple White's hierarchical figure and invalidate his power discourse, he has no choice but to rid himself of writing. To put it more precisely, writing, in *Ghosts*, provides White and Blue with the means of gaining and recording knowledge and, in actuality, forms the power-knowledge relations which involve the characters in the process of subjectification; a twofold process which both lets characters construct their subjectivity and makes them subjected to the power mechanisms. (Miller, 1987:210-245) Therefore, as long as such writing is the driving force, the power-knowledge relations built by White exist and the characters assume their subject positions and as this writing loses its effect, a new set of power-knowledge relationship is brought into being.

However, considering the vital role of writing in constructing power mechanisms, we can pose a fundamental question: what subject position does a writer take in power-knowledge relations? In fact, the invisible hand of domination (White) employs Blue (the writer) to exercise an (in)visible surveillance over an ordinary person (Black); as far as the reports (Blue's writing) are concerned, Blue maintains the typical visible surveillance exercised in the plague-ridden city and as with Blue's Gaze, the invisible surveillance of Panopticism is realized. Writer is a subject position in which the disciplinary diagrams of the plague-ridden city (visible surveillance) combine with modern disciplinary mechanisms (Panopticon and its invisible surveillance). Moreover, it can be implied that the author is the (in)visible eye of authority which is doomed to scrutinize the life of ordinary people and submit reports on the actual and potential forms human life can take; therefore, if he dares to question or renounce his predetermined "writer" subject position, as Blue does, he is destined to leave the scene and give up writing.

Eliot, in *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1920), states that a "mature" poet's mind works like a catalyst; such a catalyst-poet dissolves in order to incorporate into his poem the images and feelings he's gotten through his dialogue with tradition. For Eliot, genuine art is a far cry from the artist's individual life but is, in fact, the immediate consequence of his capability to synthesize and associate, a capability which stems from his profound and in-depth reflection on the legacy of tradition. This self-annihilation of the author is, also, concealed in the concept of "author function" which

Foucault (1969) introduces in his *What IS an Author*. Foucault considers "author function" as associated with legal system which can hold the author responsible for insubordinate or transgressive communications and as a position varying according to the author's discipline and field. The "author function" is performed and fulfilled through "complex operations" and "is not defined by the spontaneous attribution of a discourse to its producer". More importantly, an "author" isn't necessarily a certain individual, since several things such as his existence as a narrator, his self and his subjectivity beside all those of his readers' confuse his designation as an author and as a certain individual. (ibid) Blue's dilemma arises mainly because he cannot distinguish between his beings as a specific individual and as an author. As an author, he has to meet the terms of the legal contract he signed with White; he is only supposed to perform his "author function" that is writing on the minute details of Black's life and not do anything else which

makes him a certain individual in breach of the contract; however, he wants to establish personal communications with Black, he changes Black's conundrum into a personal problem, lets himself intrude into Black's privacy out of his curiosity and terminate the contract which has awarded him the status of the writer. He identifies his individual life with his "author function" and that's exactly where he faces his predicament.

3. CONCLUSION

In his *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault portrays the plague-stricken city in which authorities keep the dwellers under surveillance in order to stymie the contagion of the disease. The first precaution to take was the "spatial partitioning" which resulted in the segregation of inhabitants; this strict division of space reinforced the notion of pervasive surveillance and facilitated the formation of the modern disciplinary society of which Panopticon was an ideal architectural embodiment. This paper is intended to show how the discipline diagrams of the plague-ridden city and Panopticism combine to set the whole scene of Auster's *Ghosts*. Emphasizing the role of writing in the power mechanisms represented in the novel, we have pinpointed the power-knowledge relations which involve the characters in the process of subjectification and which give the subject position of the author to (Blue) who functions as the (in)visible eye of authority. Then, we've shown that Blue's quandary worsens mainly because he cannot distinguish between his individual life and his Foucauldian "author function".

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