Dispersal of 'detective business' in Collins's Surveillance Society

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Sergeant Cuff alone does not perform the function of surveillance in *The Moonstone*. In fact the residents of the Verinder estate resist violation and surveillance when they associate it with a particular individual i.e. Sergeant Cuff — 'I can't, and won't help Sergeant Cuff to find the girl out' proclaims Franklin Blake (99). But in Collins's universe, to use Michel Foucault's words, 'inspection functions ceaselessly. The gaze is alert everywhere' (*Discipline and Punish*, 195). Even when the detective figure of Sergeant Cuff is expunged from the narrative, detection and surveillance persist. D.A. Miller has convincingly shown in his article 'From Roman Policier to Roman Police: Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* that the work of detection 'is carried forward by the novel's entire set of characters, shifted not just from professional to amateur, but from an outsider to a whole community'. The dismissal of the 'role of the detective'' is accompanied by the 'diffusal' and dispersal of the 'function of 'detection' (159).

Betteredge makes evident the transformation of his society — 'Prying, and peeping, and listening are the natural occupations of the people situated as we are' (149). It is a society in which citizens have learnt to police each other and themselves. Every story aspires to achieve Bentham's Panoptican ideal. Sergeant Cuff might have 'mistook [his] case' (432) but a solution is obtained by the collective detective work of the various family members. Undeniably, the effects of power are not homogeneous. Hence, Rosanna and Ezra Jennings are marked as the bourgeois society's 'Other'. Nonetheless, it
cannot be denied that regulation has penetrated into even the smallest
details of everyday life. The inventory of the linen is an apt example
of this phenomenon. Rehabilitation and reform are also revealed to be
measures of supervision. Furthermore the web of suspicion and
surveillance becomes starkly evident when Franklin Blake discovers
that he himself is guilty of the theft whose perpetrator he was
pursuing.

Considering the fact that a barrister — i.e. Godfrey Ablewhite
—— is revealed to be implicated in the power matrix; it seems that the
legal discourse by itself could not have established a surveillance-
society. In *The Moonstone* the mystery is solved not by the legal
expertise of an attorney or even an extraordinary detective, but by the
diagnostic brilliance of a physician. Ezra Jennings restores, to use
Franco Morreti's words, 'reassuring transparency to a world otherwise
grown murky' (Moretti, 136). Observation gives way to clinical gaze
during Jennings 'medical enterprise' (405). The successful act of
detection depends as much upon the 'bold experiment' of a physician/
scientist as it does on the skills of lawyers or policemen. Franklin
Blake, who stares at his paint-stained gown and proclaims he is a
thief, can only regain his identity through Jennings scientific
expertise. Scientific and even pseudo-scientific discourses are
established as ideological common sense.

It seems then that the science of detection helps to reveal the
truth about modern subjectivity even as it marks individuals for
surveillance. To use a Foucauldian argument, power produces, it
produces reality in the genre of detective fiction. While manifold
relations of power permeate, characterize and constitute the body of
Collins's novel, its perception of power remains ideological. Collins
makes acceptable the idea of detection, first, by demonstrating the
need for it on account of the prevalence of theft, and second, by
creating agents of detection who conform to a recognizable cultural
ideal (Franklin Blake is an aristocrat-detective). Since considerable
effort is made to reconcile the reader to the exercise of power, the
novel conveys a sense of conformity.

Perhaps one needed to only look at the semi-rural setting and
class-heroes of the novel to discover circumspection and conformism.
The union of Blake and Rachel is integral to Collins's vision of social harmony within a hierarchical society. Further the novel's semi-rural setting eschews the potentially political material of the city and its own historical coordinates. Although the novel ends with the assertion that 'the same events revolve in the cycles of time' (464), there is a desire to restore some kind of harmony once the criminal is expelled. The continuity of the English culture and the bourgeois family rests upon such a restoration. Jennings's demands a restoration of the Verinder estate: 'the stairs, the corridors, and Miss Verinder's sitting room must also be restored to what they were when you saw them last' (390). His demand gains connotations in a novel whose deep structure reveals a similar desire to restore order inside the bourgeois home, England, and its colonies — post scandals and rebellions.

Collins's The Moonstone in other words signaled the end of 'the age of revolutions' (Hobsbawm). It proved to be an apt precursor for the novels of a conservative period of middle-class ascendancy and controlled domestic reform. In the modern spy story, detective novels and the science fiction genre we continue to catch a glimpse of Collins's novel. This novel shall retain significance till the surveillance-society it conceptualized continues to exist.

Works cited:


