

The Surveillance of the Other is Not a Sign of Love

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It is well known that surveillance is everywhere—that we are being watched at all times. Shoshana Zuboff explains that Surveillance Capitalism is the dispossession of human experience¹, a form of radical indifference fundamentally asocial—a tyranny that feeds on people.² Professionals in the “helping” occupations recognize that, at least in the U.S., Child Protective Services (CPS) functions as an institution of social control³, one that threatens family separation, particularly for the poor. CPS organizes help around surveillance, creating an experience of precarious motherhood⁴ that affects individuals and entire communities.

The sociologist Kelley Fong conducted a study of the disastrous effects of CPS’ scrutiny on mothers and their children. These investigations are often invasive, usurping family intimacy without limits. This *surveillance* is not a sign of love. Those who work with these families understand that something is profoundly lost once CPS enters their lives. Mothers are left demoralized, trapped in a state of uncertainty.

What hope remains for them when hope is understood not only as a pillar of well-being but also as something we, as “helpers” with remedial intentions, are expected to transmit? A few years ago, a mother attempting to process her experience under CPS’s watch told me that she had always made sure she had everything her baby needed—she did not want to be a mother who lacked the essentials for her child. But once CPS knocked on her door, she felt as if she had nothing. She became powerless, unable to continue even minimally with her responsibilities. She could no longer find ways to sustain the signs of her love—the signs of her *Once Upon a Time* with her child, as she put it. From being a mother under stress, she became, in the eyes of the system, a risky mother for her kids—eventually determined as a threat to her own child.⁵

At the conclusion of her book, Fong makes a compelling remark criticizing the forms of care provision in the U.S., where care is provided alongside control, supervision, and sanctions. She

¹ Zuboff, S., *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, New York: Profile Books, 2019, p. 498.

² *Ibid.*, p.505.

³ *Ibid.*, p.513.

⁴ Fong, K., *Investigating Families: Motherhood in the Shadow of Child Protective Services*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023, p. 16.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

advises those who work with mothers to adopt an attitude of humility, recognizing that they cannot presume to know what mothers truly want. Rather than employing the surveillance power of the state, professionals must step back and allow mothers to create alternatives.⁶

Here, psychoanalysis can play a crucial role, helping analysts occupy a position in reverse⁷ that Jacques-Alain Miller describes—working against surveillance by giving words a chance, by allowing the words that express love for the person to emerge, and by dismantling the mortifying jouissance of the Other that erodes every bond we attempt to form. As Miller states, what is being lived deserves to be told⁸, and what deserves to be told has the power to reinvent love. It holds the power of “Once upon a time...” Borrowing the words of Mauricio Tarrab⁹, this is an ethic—a psychoanalytic ethic—that runs counter to conventional notions of well-being and pleasure.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

⁷ Miller, J.-A., “Psicoanálisis y Sociedad”, Escuela de la Orientación Lacaniana, October 2005, available online.

⁸ Miller, J.-A., *Los Signos del Goce*, Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2006, p. 34.

⁹ Tarrab, M., “Dos Comentarios Sobre el Amor”, *Virtualia* 35, 2019, p. 5, available online.