



BEYOND THE SURFACE: UNCOVERING THE UNCONSCIOUS IN ‘THE ASSESSMENT’

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Abstract : The paper is a psychoanalytic and literary critique of Fleur Fortuné's 2024 film *The Assessment*, and it is about a world where individuals are required to go through a psychological process to become parents. While analyzing personal identity and relationship, the study employs the works of Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Michel Foucault. The protagonists, Mia and Aaryan create growing emotional and psychological issues because they have to live in the presence of a government assessor all the time, demonstrating how power is capable of changing a person's behavior, desires, and sense of self. While analyzing key scenes and images and how the film is comparable to *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Children of Men*, the paper argues that the film demonstrates the serious harms that result from seeking approval from institutions. The film educates the viewer and challenges them to consider issues of autonomy, love, and our fixation with freedom.

Keywords: *Psychoanalytic Criticism, Dystopian Film, Surveillance and Power, Reproductive Rights, Identity and Autonomy*

I. INTRODUCTION

Fleur Fortuné's 2024 film *The Assessment* presents a dystopian future in which individuals must undergo a mandatory government evaluation before receiving permission to start a family. Set against the backdrop of a world ravaged by climate change, the narrative centers on Mia and Aaryan as they navigate life under the constant surveillance of Virginia, their government-appointed assessor. The film illustrates how deeply personal decisions, such as the desire to become parents, can be co-opted and regulated by institutional authority. More than a work of science fiction, the film interrogates how continuous scrutiny and evaluation shape individual behavior and psychological well-being.

Psychoanalytic interpretations from *The Assessment* are not just indicative of individual psychological fragmentation but are grand narratives of how systems of power construct identity, autonomy, and desire.

This section blends Freud's, Lacan's, and Foucault's theoretical ideas to explain the unconscious meaning of the acting out and emotional fragmentation of characters and how such are indicative of the agonies of contemporary society.

One of the main things to be understood from the results is how surveillance turns individuals around and about from the inside out. The superego, which Freud introduced, is what happens due to internalizing social moral standards. Virginia is just such an external authority figure in this case, and she is internalized by Mia and Aaryan through the passage of time. They begin to anticipate her judgments, adjust their behavior, and conceal their real feelings in trying to become the expected. This is internalized conflict of what occurs in the real world where people knowingly or unknowingly act differently under perceived watch, from social media to institutions of evaluation (Freud 72).

Lacan's Big Other theory can also be used in describing how the couple changes. Their power to produce a child is now under the approval of the state and not under themselves or their union. Mia and Aaryan remember why they wanted a child in the first place and are more focused on surviving the model behavior that the assessment process entails. Lacan posits that desire is ever in the grip of the Other, our image of what is desirable is determined by what the masters expect. The Big Other in the movie is not only Virginia but the system that she embodies. The haste of the couple to be "fit" captures how much our awareness of self can be wrapped up in others' approval (Lacan 216).

This is not only a theoretical but also an applied one in terms of application. In a world today where parenting, health, and even what a person does on the internet is increasingly monitored, *The Assessment* becomes a statement of actual pressures. Social credit systems, AI-driven hiring software, and surveillance algorithms all make us wonder how much of our behavior is authentic and how much is performing. When people are being constantly graded or assessed, they are bound to start living in accordance with those systems, reconstructing their self in an effort to comply, like Mia and Aaryan.

The panopticism theory presented by Foucault is the idea that people will behave as if under observation even when unobserved is there for the entire film. And as the couple modify their behavior and even language in anticipation of censure, they essentially become guards (Foucault 200). The home, instead of being a place of freedom and of love, is converted into a psychological experiment. This is characteristic of how contemporary technology, architecture, and law all conspire to be means of behavior control by other than physical coercion. The result is not control but struggle within, where individuals must make trade-offs between being and ought to be.

The other key point of discussion here is the breakdown of intimacy. The film illustrates the ways in which judgment systems influence not just individuals but also relationships. Mia and Aaryan enter the film at its beginning as an affectionate couple, but at its end, they're disconnected emotionally, accusing each other, and riddled with unexpressed hurt. They're not ruined by infidelity but by pressure. Having to "perform" for

Virginia serves to put a barrier between them that is constructed upon every challenge. This is consistent with Rook's theory of "selfhood under surveillance," whereby even close relationships are established in the backdrop of surveillance (Rook 17).

1.2. Literature Review

Dystopian fiction has long been present in the form of a mirror to the tensions and fears of the society, specifically on the axes of freedom, control, and identity. Scholars have, in the last two decades, increasingly examined how literary and filmic texts portray state control of private life, specifically of the body, desire, and procreation. Such fiction uses speculative worlds to explore how individuals respond or collapse when faced with impossible demands. The psychoanalytic critical framework is especially useful in dismantling the emotional and unconscious responses displayed in such fiction.

The theoretical basis of the research draws on classical psychoanalytic theory and modern literary theory to place *The Assessment* in the broader corpus of work on dystopian literature and psychological authority. Sigmund Freud's conception of the psyche, divided into the id, ego, and superego provides a foundation upon which the repressive dominance of reproduction by the state in the film can be analyzed. Freud's argument that civilization is constructed upon the foundation of the renunciation of instinctual freedom for the sake of social order (Freud 69) is reduced in the ways in which the personal desires of Mia and Aaryan are made the subject of public scrutiny. This is in line with Foucault's power and discipline model, whereby institutions gain control by observing, normalizing, and interiorizing surveillance (Foucault 195).

Jacques Lacan's work also accounts for the dynamics of control and desire in *The Assessment*. His conceptualization of the Big Other as symbolic order that regulates behavior and identity is especially applicable in the film's representation of an anonymous state apparatus that decides if one is worthy of being a parent or not (Lacan 213). Lacan's mirror stage theory, where the subject constructs an identity based on how it is seen by others, is also the experience of the couple as they have to perform in the presence of Virginia's approbation. Film, according to Pietro Bianchi, is a site of symbolic recognition where characters and viewers are addressed by the gaze of authority (Bianchi 88).

Scholarship on dystopian fiction recognizes the pervasive theme of controlling reproduction as a means of political control. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* has been cited as the classic instance of this trope, and theorists such as Theodore F. Sheckels have examined how reproductive rights in dystopian futures reflect real battles over autonomy (Sheckels 109). Likewise, Moira Weigel's cultural critique traces how recent fears of ecological disaster and authoritarianism have reappropriated interest in fiction limiting or controlling reproduction (Weigel). She recognizes similarities between speculative fiction and real fears, observing that who controls reproduction is becoming a growing fear in most cultures. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, for example, the state controls women's bodies and defines them by their ability to reproduce. Sheckels

observes how this is realized as deeper battles over bodily control and individual identity under authoritarianism (Sheckels 109).

James Bowman's critique of *Children of Men* also situates reproductive dystopia as a metaphor for existential despair and societal collapse (Bowman). While Gilead's forced reproduction is the opposite, the world in *Children of Men* implodes because of rampant infertility, representing human fear of extinction and the loss of future generations. The juxtaposition of these worlds and *The Assessment* is a fertile ground for comparison. Atwood's and James's worlds negotiate loss through control or collapse, but Fortuné's film offers a middle ground: a world based on psychological assessment as a silent, insidious form of gatekeeping.

Modern film psychoanalysis has extended Freudian and Lacanian analysis into the cinemas of today. Andreas Hamburger's Film *Psychoanalysis* argues that the psychological effect of films is not only created by character development but also by spectator identification with film space and narrative rhythm (Hamburger 142). Jean-Michel Rabaté's *Knots* brings together post-Lacanian insights that emphasize how subjectivity and ideology are intertwined through language and image. These insights support that *The Assessment*, though fictional, involves genuine psychological tensions in the spectator, resonating interior conflict between selfhood and social expectation.

1.3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a qualitative, interpretative methodology based on psychoanalytic film theory and literary criticism in examining character relationships and the themes of *The Assessment* (2024). Close reading is the primary method utilized, whereby individual scenes, dialogue, symbolism, and visual structure are analyzed to determine emotional and psychological significance. Special care was taken in the instance of scenes where characters were shown in stress, identity shifts, or reacting to institutional power.

In this research, scenes were selected based on their affective strength, symbolic structure, and narrative salience, e.g., Virginia's psychological examinations, the dinner party scene, and tense interactions between Aaryan and Mia. Scenes were explored using Freudian psychoanalysis with particular focus on terms such as repression, neurosis, and the superego (Freud 70). The mirror stage, desire, and the Big Other were Lacanian theories that guided analysis of surveillance and identity (Lacan 213). Discipline and panopticism were theories by Foucault that guided analysis of the larger social context of surveillance and judgment (Foucault 195).

This study employs comparative analysis as well. The movie was read in tandem with dystopian literature such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and P.D. James's *Children of Men* in order to determine thematic coherence. These comparisons summon the manner in which different cultures control reproduction and identity and call to mind what distinguishes *The Assessment* from them. For extra strength to this exercise, the paper also borrowed concepts from Andreas Hamburger's and Jean-Michel Rabaté's work, who provide

fresh approaches to psychoanalysis in film analysis. Their works guided the reading of scenes and how theoretical concepts were implemented (Hamburger 142; Rabaté 90).

Lastly, the method permits a reader to read *The Assessment* as political commentary and as psychological fiction. It shows how film portrays both individual trauma and cultural unease surrounding control, identity, and human worth.

1.4 RESULTS

Psychoanalytic interpretations from *The Assessment* are not just indicative of individual psychological fragmentation but are grand narratives of how systems of power construct identity, autonomy, and desire. This section blends Freud's, Lacan's, and Foucault's theoretical ideas to explain the unconscious meaning of the acting out and emotional fragmentation of characters and how such are indicative of the agonies of contemporary society.

One of the main things to be understood from the results is how surveillance turns individuals around and about from the inside out. The superego, which Freud introduced, is what happens due to internalizing social moral standards. Virginia is just such an external authority figure in this case, and she is internalized by Mia and Aaryan through the passage of time. They begin to anticipate her judgments, adjust their behavior, and conceal their real feelings in trying to become the expected. This is internalized conflict of what occurs in the real world where people knowingly or unknowingly act differently under perceived watch, from social media to institutions of evaluation (Freud 72).

Lacan's Big Other theory can also be used in describing how the couple changes. Their power to produce a child is now under the approval of the state and not under themselves or their union. Mia and Aaryan remember why they wanted a child in the first place and are more focused on surviving the model behavior that the assessment process entails. Lacan posits that desire is ever in the grip of the Other, our image of what is desirable is determined by what the masters expect. The Big Other in the movie is not only Virginia but the system that she embodies. The haste of the couple to be "fit" captures how much our awareness of self can be wrapped up in others' approval (Lacan 216).

This is not only a theoretical but also an applied one in terms of application. In a world today where parenting, health, and even what a person does on the internet is increasingly monitored, *The Assessment* becomes a statement of actual pressures. Social credit systems, AI-driven hiring software, and surveillance algorithms all make us wonder how much of our behavior is authentic and how much is performing. When people are being constantly graded or assessed, they are bound to start living in accordance with those systems, reconstructing their self in an effort to comply, like Mia and Aaryan.

The panopticism theory presented by Foucault is the idea that people will behave as if under observation even when unobserved is there for the entire film. And as the couple modify their behavior and even language in anticipation of censure, they essentially become guards (Foucault 200). The home, instead of being a place of freedom and of love, is converted into a psychological experiment. This is characteristic of how contemporary technology, architecture, and law all conspire to be means of behavior control by other than physical coercion. The result is not control but struggle within, where individuals must make trade-offs between being and ought to be.

The other key point of discussion here is the breakdown of intimacy. The film illustrates the ways in which judgment systems influence not just individuals but also relationships. Mia and Aaryan enter the film at its beginning as an affectionate couple, but at its end, they're disconnected emotionally, accusing each other, and riddled with unexpressed hurt. They're not ruined by infidelity but by pressure. Having to "perform" for Virginia serves to put a barrier between them that is constructed upon every challenge. This is consistent with Rook's theory of "selfhood under surveillance," whereby even close relationships are established in the backdrop of surveillance (Rook 17).

1.5 Discussion

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