



WATCH
a short story

NICHOLAS ANTHONY

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BIG BROTHER

People.

Watching.

I stare across the campus lawn at the bookstore. The window wall reflects a pathetic goodbye between a mother and son framed like a movie set. Freshmen move across the street to the bus stop absorbed in headphones that make a musical from the mundane. A woman in black smokes at the corner also watching the sitcom of silence like a detail.

No laugh track. No applause sign. No obvious audience.

Beside me is a bronze statue that appears to be reading a newspaper on the same park bench. The nose is worn to a shine from the football team trying to pull good luck from his face.

The pencil grinds into the composition notebook as I note specific features. I'm a twitcher blossoming into an ornithologist.

Early in life, we accept that everyone is already watching. Self-aware in middle school, we assume everyone notices everything we do. All of us are wrapped into our own endless streaming service series.

Voice control appliances are always listening. Phones in the pockets of strangers eavesdropping. Supermarket security cameras spying on your shopping habits.

Your credit card purchase history is for sale. Your favorite sudoku app is listening to you poop. Your search history is defining your preferred porn.

A boy diligently writes into a similar notebook. He is composing the greatest symphony the world will never hear. A rain storm will tragically soak his backpack tomorrow, making the ink run. With the original notes and lyrics washed away, he will drive himself insane trying to find the progression on the ivory again.

It was a natural shift to invite people into our minds with social media. Public photo albums of personal discovery. Timeline reminders of three years ago on this day. Likes and dislikes. Friends and employment. This is our culture. It's no surprise they have perfected targeted advertising.

Vanity embraces voyeurism.
Convenience endorses surveillance.

A boy and girl cuddle on the blanket under the shade. He is cheating on her with her Little Sister from the sorority. The Little Sister has HPV. It all explodes when the girlfriend gets her test back from the pathology lab.

I assign scripts to the reality of reality TV. I give title cards to Nosferatu.

We are vampires. We are parasites.
Vicariously sucking life from tragedy.

We are the indifferent god.

Observe and never interact. Pretend it is predetermined. Judge the cast from balcony seats in the clouds.

The son awkwardly looks around as the mother gets weepy. She has a terminal illness. She was happy to see him graduate High School. She knows she will never witness him walk across the University stage. She has mere months. He has no idea.

I guess at the dialogue. I make up the stage directions. I direct the movie holding a popcorn tub.

I flip through the stack of paper beside me. Like a play manuscript intended to rewrite history, I run my fingers across the title: Additional Required Readings. A collection of scientific facts and literary fiction given to me by a professor researching the way that fact and fiction are combined to create reality.

Some science. Some philosophy. Some novels.

The first part of the assignment is to insert these lists into the cover of textbooks. Every new shipment, I sit, waiting and watching for the bookstore to open.

Introducing the independent variable. Inserting the thing that I change in the experiment. Manipulation is at the core of science.

We are 1984. We are Big Brother. We are the Ministry of Plenty.

Online shopping has not only mapped our searching and purchasing behavior but dictates it. Our purchase history and poverty status. Our submission to funding corporations that give campaign finances to politicians that keep us poor.

Blue and red and dark money forever.

If we work endlessly, chasing material possessions, we have no leisure time to become informed.

We run in place, while they run the place.

The couple makes amends. The HPV lingers. The Big Sister hides the cervical cancer diagnosis. The composer plays at a piano bar for tips. Alcoholism worsens. The metal string noose ends the outro. The mother passes away as he passes English Literature 1100. Her heart fails as he fails out of Arts and Sciences.

The second part of the assignment is to record interactions that mirror the theories and storylines. Every morning, I sit, noting and transcribing the events of the college grounds.

Documenting the dependent variable. Describing the things I measure in the experiment. Observation is at the core of science.

We are 1984. We are Big Brother. We are the Ministry of Truth.

We watch. We evaluate. But most importantly, we lie.

Searching for answers we have given search engines everything they need. Our content and compliance. The permission to be the newspeak news that murders the newspaper.

Black and white and red all over.

If we find leisure time, exhausted from the rat race, we seek only entertainment to be distracted instead of educated.

Additional Required Readings assigns leisure for erudition.

We are altering the environment. We are tampering with causation. We are indirectly rewriting the history of mankind.

The unofficial part of the assignment is to read. Read the Additional Required Readings ourselves so that we can identify the combination of science and storytelling realized in reality.

Science is stranger than fiction.

The sign on the bookstore door flips to: OPEN. I stand. I survey the campus grounds. The terminal mother finishes the long goodbye. The doomed couple kisses goodbye. The woman in black exhales a cloud.

The boy I cast as writing the symphony abruptly closes his notebook.

Suddenly, it becomes apparent that I might be the test subject. I might be the rat. I might be the observation.

I walk toward the bookstore, shaking the realization in my head. It seems so convenient. Such a clear data set. I am the experiment.

The terminal mother stops me as I start to enter the bookstore. She addresses me by name: Gregory Harbors.

She tells me that she knows I have been watching. She tells me my observations are the best from the entire assignment. She tells me to supervise his education.

She hands me a wad of money. She threatens that the professor will ensure I fail out of college if I don't watch her son.

She points at him through the glass as he lifts textbooks from the pallets. She tells me to make him read. She crosses the street.

Perplexed, I look around.

The woman in black on the corner stares into me. Grinding the cigarette into the sidewalk, she points with two fingers at her eyeballs.

Then, she points at me with both of them.

The universal signal:
I'm watching you.

Watching.

I believe that
empowering students with the ambition
to change the world they are inheriting
as well as equipping them with
academic and social tools
to accomplish those changes,
is the true purpose of education.

- Nicholas Anthony Linke



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