

Theatre of Confinement, Surveillance, and Biopolitics in Modern Drama and Martin McDonagh's *The Pillowman*

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Summary:

The current study deals with how contemporary play act as a "political lab" to show how power and control in society have changed. The text draws heavily on the philosophical concepts of Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, particularly the transition from traditional forms of power to what is known as "biopower" in modern society, which involves the management and regulation of human life. The central thesis argues that institutions such as schools, hospitals, and the police play significant roles in this dynamic, employing surveillance and control tactics that lead individuals to internalize this control. The study closely analyzes Martin McDonagh's play *The Pillowman* (2003) to illustrate these concepts in practice. It explores how the play's setting an interrogation room within a totalitarian regime functions as both a physical and ideological space that alters perceptions of truth. Key themes include how people are reduced to "bare life" (*homo sacer*), the psychological tactics used in modern interrogations, and how families can act as a form of biopolitical control. Additionally, the document points out the "deaf child" as a symbol of those who lose their political identity, while also suggesting that the theatre itself is a place of struggle where hidden government control can be revealed and challenged.

1.Introduction

Following the First and Second World Wars, modern drama shifted its attention to new spaces where control, restriction, and regulation became central elements of what can be termed the theatre of confinement. This chapter explores how modern theatre reflects broader cultural and philosophical shifts in contemporary life. Modern texts reveal what lies beyond the surface of literal imprisonment: institutions that dominate the world through discipline, observation, and surveillance of individuals' lives. These texts illuminate how institutions capitalize

upon individual liberties, regardless of whether they ostensibly exist to protect citizens' lives, including hospitals, schools, and asylums. These institutions function not as passive spaces or zones within the narrative, but rather as active participants in dramatic events.

By bringing together the concepts of biopolitics, surveillance, and the theatre of confinement, this chapter lays the groundwork for the following analytical sections. It illustrates how theatre allows audiences to explore the systematic ways in which governments regulate behavior and identities. The chapter offers deep insights into how theatre can act as a battleground for human consciousness, highlighting individuals' awareness of how modern institutions oversee lives without opposition.

2.Theorritcal Framework

Modern drama acts as a powerful lens for examining the intricate ways in which society exerts control and institutions wield power. Theatre transcends mere entertainment, functioning as a "political laboratory" where the ideas of thinkers like Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben come to life. Central to this discussion is the shift from traditional sovereign power—the authority to take life—to biopower, which emphasizes the management and regulation of life itself. The chapter introduces the concept of Governmentality, a term Foucault used to describe the "art of government," indicating that power in contemporary society is decentralized and dispersed across various institutions, such as schools, hospitals, and prisons. This is reflected in plays that portray characters ensnared in strict social structures, where their actions are closely monitored by unseen forces.

A significant part of the discussion centers on Biopolitics, particularly drawing from Agamben's elaboration of Foucault's ideas. The key focus is the difference between bios (the qualified life of a citizen with rights) and zoe (biological life, or "bare life"). The text illustrates how modern states—and the societies depicted in contemporary drama—often reduce individuals to "bare life" through a "state of exception." The concept of "Homo Sacer" refers to individuals who can be killed without it being deemed a crime, yet cannot be sacrificed in a religious context. Modern theatre frequently depicts marginalized characters who find themselves in this legal limbo. The "camp" is presented as the ultimate representation of biopolitics, a space where laws are suspended, and bodies are entirely subject to power.

Theatre also underscores how institutions regulate the physical presence of bodies, controlling their movement, health, and identity to uphold social order. Surveillance emerges as a key mechanism for enforcing discipline within this "theatre of power."

The text traces the history of surveillance from Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon—a circular prison design where inmates are perpetually uncertain about being watched—to the digital age. This "panoptic" effect leads individuals to self-monitor, driven by the fear of constant scrutiny from authority.

Modern plays often employ stage design and lighting to evoke a sense of being "always watched," transforming the audience into silent observers or even participants in the surveillance. The discussion extends beyond physical prisons to how surveillance now involves the collection of data and digital footprints. This "synopticon" enables a more pervasive control that goes beyond physical barriers, a theme increasingly explored in contemporary drama through technological elements. In these theatrical environments, visibility becomes a trap; being seen by the institution results in categorization, judgment, and control.

The final section examines the Theatre of Confinement, where the physical and psychological constraints imposed by institutions are exposed. Modern drama frequently utilizes the setting of a "total institution" (such as prisons, asylums, or rigid domestic spaces) to critique societal approaches to "otherness," aligning with Foucault's notion of a "society of control." Confinement is no longer just about being behind bars; it is about the constant modulation of behavior through various social "enclosures." While theatre depicts confinement, it also offers a space for resistance. By making the invisible mechanisms of power visible to an audience, drama provides a way to challenge and subvert the dominant narrative (Spierenburg, 1996, p. 27).

3. Martin MacDonagh

Martin MacDonagh's *The Pillowman* resides in a pivotal place in contemporary theatre. The play interrogates in a state of power, where the characters struggle within each other's boundaries about the legitimacy of control and the purpose of the art. The play presents the vulnerability of human beings and human suffering through the boundaries that are created to the political institutions. MacDonagh reveals how the government mechanism is used to put a certain kind of rules that prevent the individual from being held to their imagination. The play utilizes the power of surveillance and confinement to create a sense of biopolitical security that limits the human ability to think (Feeney, 1998, p.24–32).

Through two detectives, Tupolski and Ariel, who capture Katurian, the main suspect character of the play is his writing of short stories related to the serious crime of murdering children. Katurian's short story deliberately connects with the murder

of children because it contains the same content of touring and murdering the children. Moreover, the play revolves around the government oppressive regimes that control the individual artistic creations in a confinement setting. Furthermore, the themes of violence against Katurian reveals the ethical ambiguity of artistic freedom under surveillance powers. Importantly, *the Pillowman* exemplifies an important distinction in contemporary theater that reveals how the government dominates individual imagination as well as their physical existence in the world. This is the focus of this chapter to illustrate to what extent the government dominates human experience in the world (Feeney , 1998, p.24–32).

Martin McDonagh is the most influential figure in contemporary theatre, his writing marks a significant achievement throughout the use of dark humor, violence, and sharp critique of institutional power. Born in London in 1970 to Irish immigrant parents, profoundly influenced his writing. Because McDonagh was struggling with his identity and his belongings in the world around him. He is well known for his work within Irish theatre, yet his upbringing was in Ireland that's why he was struggling with his hybrid identity. The dual identity that he has feels, making him write in a different attitude. This influence reveals the contradiction of the institutional power that is governed through his life. Also, he leaves school at the age of sixteen, due to migration from his parents to London (Feeney , 1998, p.24–32). These uprising changes made him discover the government's oppressive regimes through a lens of confinement spaces. McDonagh climbed to prominence in the mid-1990s when the staging of *The Leenane Trilogy* (*The Beauty Queen of Leenane* , *A Skull in Connemara*, and *The Lonesome West*) , these plays produced his reputation in contemporary theatre. His unique style of dark humor, and subtle brutality in his plays , established the history of revolutionary politics thought in the contemporary world. Through the use of confined characters whether they are trapped in the physical space or psychological mental state, McDonagh provides an excellent example of the concept of biopolitical power. Although he was associated with the Irish community and the way of presenting this world, *The Pillowman* introduced a different approach to his writing. Martin McDonagh grapples with rural Irish settings and his uprising community to escape from his brutal repression of indigenous. This movement represents the playwright's awareness of the political process, including global political instability, authoritarianism , and censorship (Feeney , 1998, p.24–32).

4.Textual Analysis

4.1 Confinement and Disciplinary Power in *The Pillowman*

Martin McDonagh *The Pillowman* (2003) presents disciplinary power in a different mode of political action. McDonagh introduces the setting of the play in a closed room, where the two detectives interrogate the suspected criminal Katurian. At the beginning of the interrogation process, Katurian was unable to believe the police accusation of the recent crime. He asked the two detectives, Tupolski and Ariel, about what happened to take me out of my home. But the political investigation is not going to believe Katurian because all the available evidence suggests that he was the criminal. This notion aligns with Michel Foucault ideas about the fact that the government utilizes a closed space where the form of power can be internalized, negotiated, and controlled. Ariel and Tupolski are both representatives of the biopolitical system that can control individual actions and their behavior.

Through this approach, the closed room is not only an architectural space but an ideological one that reshapes the truth according to the government biopolitical system. This confined space allows the government to regulate the body and determine the value of life according to the standards of the political situation. This section provides an insight on how the government uses the disciplinary process and confines space for its citizens to maintain their power over human imagination and their physical existence. Following this conceptual foundation, attention shifts to Katurian is not a free individual but rather an object that his speech and actions are monitored by the government authorities.

This is what Foucault argued with the modern government system where not necessarily using direct violence against the citizens; instead, the government uses invisible means of torture to punish those who commit crimes. The absence of visible violence against the criminals, leading the prisoners to regulate themselves unconditionally. Power practices through psychological manipulation, uncertainties, and anticipation. These elements influence Katurian to monitor himself unconsciously. By situating the play in unnamed totalitarian regimes, the characters reveal their truth differently. This gives a special insight into how these oppressive regimes influence their lives.

Katurian: Some of these types of people who have no respect for the police. I have never been in trouble with the police in my life. In my life. And I . . .

Ariel: Never been in trouble until now, you mean.

Katurian Hah?

Ariel: Repeating myself . . . You have never been in trouble with the police until now. You mean.

Katurian: I'm in trouble with the police now?

Ariel: What else are you doing here?

Katurian I'm helping you with your enquiries, I thought. (I.I.3)

This conversation between the two detectives and Katurian was an instrument of psychological discipline. According to Foucault, the government's regime changed its techniques to build an effective structure of psychological pressure on the individual's mind. Physical torture is less obvious in Katurian body, Ariel and Tupolski create an environment that charges more with self-discipline. Through this conversation, Katurian does not know why and for what reasons they interrogate him through this closed room. Later on, Katurian accepts the fact that he is here for some reason that he does not know what it is. According to Foucaultian analysis, the detectives are not obliged to use the physical torture technique the same way in the previous centuries. Katurian looks for the detective's threat, and he immediately begins to understand what they request from him (Müller, 2009, 47 – 63).

This biopolitical power is presented through Ariel and Tupolski because each one of them represents a different type of biopolitical authority. While Tupolski relies heavily on logic, language, and psychological manipulation to confuse Katurian , Ariel has a strong sense of using sovereign authority to control Katurian behavior. Ariel aggressively attacks Katurian with emotional volatility to maintain political control over Katurian mind and body. This treatment reveals Katurian's stories are treated as an object that can reshape the behavior and beliefs of other individuals in the community, especially the children. These experiences provide an insight into the government in regulating individuals life and death not only imagination (Müller, 2009, 47 – 63).

All parts of life are regulated and organized by the government observational system. Thus, this system turns Katurian into an object that can regulate and control his impulsive tendencies in creating short fiction because his imagination is observed too. The disciplinary system is moving forward in all aspects of society including family relationships. Family relationships have been considered as biopolitical regimes. Katurian's family takes an alternative role through narration, establishing a biopolitical system that dominates all members of the family. His father and mother tortured him and his brother Michal, using physical violence against them. Through Foucauldian observation, the family is a part of institutional

power that reproduces their children's life. Due to this oppressive system, Katurian short stories often refer to children who are killed by different kinds of violence. This was a major reason for Michal to read Katurian's short stories and immediately imitate them in reality. These facts blurred the lines between what is fictional and what is real through Katurian confessions of the interrogation of the political system (Pilný, 2004, p. 31).

The familial authority responsible for creating a criminal that influences the whole of society. These oppressive regimes are not necessarily a prison system or police force, but the familial authority also contributes to this situation. Additionally, father and mother treat their children as a scientific experiment rather than real humans, adding a new dimension of the biopolitical relationship in the world. Katurian and Michal childhood experiences have led them into psychological and physical transformation in the real world. Yet, Michal is still influenced by his parents' oppressive treatment of his childhood, applying the same principles to innocent children torturing and killing them violently.

This abusive treatment according to the parents' system is not cruel but it's a controlled experiment. What complicates the situation is the parent's own suicide, their decision to end their lives marks a crucial step in the biopolitical evolution. They treat their lives as an abstract object without any ethical consequences, essentially this is the point of the biopolitical process (Pilný, 2004, p. 31).

Katurian stands.

Katurian This feels like school, somehow.

Tupolski Mm. Except at school they didn't execute you at the end. (Pause.) Unless you went to a really fucking tough school. (I.I. 20)

Additionally, this conversation between Katurian and Topolski reveals the important part of managing human behavior. School is a part of the political system that determines human behavior, shaping their personalities as well as their identities. Individual behavior is determined through institutional factors like school, where the school is supposed to be a place for learning and education. The school is utilized as a part of ideological purposes of the government's policy. The judgement here is not to say this is right or wrong but rather to point out how the truth is reshaped according to the government's view. According to Foucaultian perspective, the government turns its violence through invisible means, and the school system is a part of it.

4.2. Surveillance, Interrogation, and the Production of Truth

From the outset, Katurian is placed in a position where he does not know anything about it. In a dark room where Topoliski and Ariel are interrogating him about his stories. Katurian does not have any choice except to tell the truth about his unknown crime. Katurian kills and buries his parents secretly in his house, because he believes that he gets rid of them due to their abusive treatment of Michel. The truth is still unknown according to his beliefs, but the political status presented by Tupolski and Ariel are revealed. Through the interrogation, Topoliski has three murders of innocent children linked with Katurian stories. Although Katurian insisted in defense of himself as an artist, no one could interrogate him about his imagination. Katurian suspended his truth and forced him to reveal his relationship with these crimes . According to the Foucauldian concept of "biopower", power that manages life , health and population rather than punishing individuals directly . Topoliski uses this treatment through the interrogation with Katurian about his imagination on the paper. Turning Katurian life as a biopower that can be reshaped according to the government's evidence.

Tupolski: "Who put that on you?" (removes the blindfold)

Katurian: "The, uh... the fella."

Tupolski: "Why didn't you take it off? It just looked stupid."

Katurian: "I didn't think of it." (I.II.23)

Tupolski takes off the blindfold to stop hiding and start observing how Katurian reacts. He makes fun of Katurian for wearing it, trying to make him feel small and foolish, which is a common tactic in interrogations. By getting Katurian to admit he "didn't think" to take it off, the detective starts to take control of the situation, making Katurian feel responsible for his problems. This part of the conversation is like a "pre-interrogation" phase where the detective shows he is in charge. By criticizing Katurian's appearance, Tupolski uses a method called "forced intimacy" and "debasement." He pretends they are on the same team, laughing at someone else, while making Katurian feel less smart. This weakens Katurian's confidence in his own reasoning, making him more likely to accept whatever "truth" the detectives will later demand from him.

This internalized fear is a part of surveillance programs of the contemporary political process. Individuals know that some power beyond their control monitors them. This makes them vulnerable and avoid any attempt to destroy themselves, creating a situation of fear and discipline that is what Agamben calls "normalization".

Individuals are unconsciously monitored by themselves to avoid the possibility of being attacked or punished. This is exactly what happens when Katurian is caught in the political system. He chooses his words carefully to avoid being excused for his words. "I'm a writer. I write stories. That's all I do. I don't know anything about any murders." (I.I.18). These words reveal Katurian hesitation in front of Ariel announcement of killing the children. Testing, probing, and trying to determine what they know about him.

Ariel: Two wrongs do not make a right.

Two wrongs do not make a right.

So kneel down over here, please,

so, I can connect you to this battery (II.I.12)

Ariel uses a well-known saying about being a good person "Two wrongs don't make a right" (II.I.12) while he is actually preparing to hurt someone with a battery. He does this to make the prisoner feel that torture is "fair" and that the prisoner is the only bad person there. By making the prisoner kneel, he shows that he has all the power and can force the prisoner to say whatever "truth" he wants. McDonagh uses this dialogue to illustrate how people in power can manipulate their victims. By presenting torture as a reasonable response to a crime, Ariel tries to take away the "evil" label from his own actions. The way truth is produced here is very physical; the battery ensures that the prisoner's body will eventually give in, even if their mind resists. This is the extreme form of interrogation where the state stops paying attention to words and starts listening to screams to prove its own power (Shalom, 2015, p.40).

4.3 The Chinese Deaf Child as "Bare Life"

The Chinese boy is deaf, and he cannot hear the voices around him, meanwhile, there is a train coming across him. There is an old man near to this child, but he does not care about the child, especially that the old man is not warning the child about the dangers that he faces. The child accidentally moves away from the train. Furthermore, the old man sits in the tower and watches him without any help. This resonates with Giorgio Agamben concept of "bare life" (*vita nuda*) in his book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare life* (1998). Agamben explained that bare life is life that has been stripped of political status, legal protection, and social identity. It is life that can be killed without the act being recognized as murder. This parallel to the Topoliskis story about the Chinese child (Ackerman, 2006, p. 147-154).

The little deaf child can be killed by the political state that represents the old man because he is deaf and does not deserve to live. This is a biopolitical disability, given the right of killing people who are not stable enough for the political system. McDonagh's representation of Michal raises questions about how bio power treats disabled bodies. The little Chinese boy and Michal are both treated in a proper way during the play. They are categorized as "pathological" which means a threat to the health of the social body that must be eliminated (Ackerman, 2006, p. 147-154).

This includes Ariel's threat of Michal being justified because Michal belongs to the category of life that does not matter. The old man is a perfect example of governmentality, which Foucault explains as governance through calculations rather than direct forces. The old man could save the child, but this protection is not his responsibility. Instead, the old man sits and observes in the tower rather than help. He chooses to calculate, observe, and know, he "ho- hummed without much interest" (II.II.34) and returned to his place. This indifference represents a biopolitical crisis, the state does not want to kill but simply does not care. As a result, the boy survives not because of the political state but despite it. Moreover, Katurian asks Topolski how the old man knows the little boy is deaf. Tupolski says "He saw his hearing aid" (II.II. 87). Thinking of this moment is crucial, because the hearing aid is a technology of identification, which means a marker that makes the boy visible to the political state as a case and a life to be managed. Through this technology the boy becomes visible, vulnerable, and legible. This means that politicians give themselves a right to determine who can live, who can die, and who can punish without consequences.

Conclusion:

The study shows that modern plays, especially Martin McDonagh's *The Pillowman*, act like a "political lab" to explore how power has changed from traditional forms to modern control over life. By linking the ideas of philosophers like Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, the argument suggests that institutions such as schools, families, and the police actively influence how individuals live, rather than being merely passive entities. The research highlights that in environments of confinement, psychological control often proves more restrictive than physical barriers, leading individuals to self-monitor to avoid being perceived as threats.

A crucial point made is that modern governments employ surveillance and interrogation to construct a specific "truth" that reinforces their authority. In *The Pillowman*, characters Tupolski and Ariel represent different facets of this control: one employs logic and psychological manipulation, while the other resorts to fear

and violence. This reflects the concept of "bare life," where individuals, like the deaf child or Michal, lose their political identity and are reduced to mere biological entities that can be managed or disregarded without legal or moral repercussions. The text underscores that in such oppressive systems, visibility can become a trap, and human creativity is often seen as a threat that the state seeks to regulate.

Finally, while the play portrays a world of strict control and regulation, it also reveals spaces for struggle and resistance. By uncovering the subtle ways in which governments and institutions oppress individuals, McDonagh's work challenges the notion of total control over human spirit and creativity. The blurred boundaries between fiction and reality, as well as between family dynamics and state authority, illustrate that this power permeates all aspects of life. Through this lens, theatre becomes a medium that reveals the management of identities, raising profound questions about how society values life and defines personal freedom.

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مسرح المحجز، والمراقبة، والسياسة الحيوية في الدراما الحديثة ومسرحية 'رجل الوسادة' لمارتن ماكدوننا

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الملخص:

تبحث هذه الدراسة في كيفية عمل المسرحية الحديثة كـ "مختبر سياسي" لدراسة كيفية تغير القوة والسيطرة في المجتمع. وتعتمد الدراسة بشكل كبير على أفكار الفيلسوفين ميشيل فوكو وجورجيو أغامبين، مع التركيز على التحول من السلطة التقليدية إلى "السلطة الحيوية" (Biopower) الحديثة، والتي تتعلق بإدارة وتنظيم حياة الإنسان. الحجة الرئيسية للدراسة هي أن مؤسسات مثل المدارس والمستشفيات والشرطة هي أطراف فاعلة في هذه القصص، حيث تستخدم أساليب المراقبة والسيطرة لجعل الأفراد يتبنون هذه السيطرة داخلياً. وتستخدم الدراسة تحليلاً دقيقاً لمسرحية "رجل الوسادة" (2003) لمارتن ماكدوننا لإظهار هذه الأفكار بشكل عملي. كما تبحث في كيفية عمل بيئة المسرحية — وهي غرفة استجواب في ظل حكومة شمولية — كمساحة مادية وأيديولوجية في آن واحد تغير مفهوم الحقيقة. وتشمل الموضوعات الرئيسية كيفية اختزال البشر إلى "حياة مجردة" (homo sacer)، والتكتيكات النفسية المستخدمة في الاستجابات الحديثة، وكيف يمكن للعائلات أن تعمل كشكل من أشكال السيطرة السياسية الحيوية. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، يشير المستند إلى "الطفل الأصم" كرمز لأولئك الذين يفقدون هويتهم السياسية، مع الإشارة أيضاً إلى أن المسرح نفسه هو مكان للصراع حيث يمكن كشف السيطرة الحكومية الخفية وتحديها.