

Aamir Aziz

## Using the Past to Intervene in the Present: Spectacular Framing in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*

In this article Aamir Aziz argues that Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* is a wilful and purposeful theatrical response to the operations of Joseph McCarthy and his henchmen. He highlights the theatricality of the McCarthy trials and examines them through the frame of spectacle, as outlined by Guy Debord, to show how Miller used his play theatrically to unhinge the machinations of McCarthyism and the seemingly unassailable frame of an American democracy defending itself against Communist subversion. Miller's play was thus a theatrical intervention into an ideological force field that served to puncture and expose the veil of this spectacle. Aamir Aziz received his doctorate from Universiteit Leiden in 2014, and is now an Assistant Professor in English in the Department of English Language and Literature at University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan. He has recently published articles in *International Policy Digest*, *New Authors' Journal*, *Sydney Globalist*, and *London Globalist*.

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IN THIS ARTICLE I am not concerned with arguing either in favour of or against the interpretations of Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* proposed by such scholars as Robert Warshaw, Henry Hewes, Walter Kerr, Joseph T. Shipley, Eric Bentley, Penelope Curtis, and others.<sup>1</sup> Nor do I intend to elaborate extensively on the pre-existing literature on the McCarthy era and its unsettling impact in the United States. Instead, I want to explore the different ways in which *The Crucible* intervenes in the political circumstances of its times as a piece of theatre. While the relation between theatre and the representation of history has been the focal point of previous studies of the play, here I examine the play's relevance to its present in terms of theatricality.

In this respect, the focus is placed on the play's intervention in the present in relation to the immediate past. The pivot between the two is shown to be allegorical, either as a means to circumvent censorship and to use and rework historical rifts, or as a means to call for a better future. I want to question how Miller's play intervenes in and subverts the politics of its own time. It concerns a

battle between two forms of artifice. Miller described life in 1950s America as follows: 'We were living in an art form, a metaphor that had no long history but had suddenly, incredibly enough, gripped the country.'<sup>2</sup> The national scene was like a scripted text, where

all relationships had become relationships of advantage or disadvantage. That this was what it all came down to anyway and there was nothing new here. That one stayed as long as it was useful to stay, believed as long as it was not too inconvenient, and that we were fish in a tank cruising with upslanted gaze for the descending crumbs that kept us alive.<sup>3</sup>

Miller describes here the so-called 'red-baiting' trials, initiated by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), also known as the McCarthy hearings.<sup>4</sup> This was a mass media campaign that required famous public figures first to confess their past or current affiliation with Communism, and then to recant their former political idealism, shunning it as a product of their youthful naivety.<sup>5</sup> Tema Nason put it simply: 'It is all clear to me now, finally at this late

hour. They had their script. I had mine. Theirs: "Confess, lie, and you'll live".<sup>6</sup> By drawing a parallel with the 1692 Salem witch trials in *The Crucible*, Miller shows that the world is still gripped by the binary of right and wrong, good and evil, God and Lucifer.<sup>7</sup>

### The Context of un-American Activities

The tropes of official signatures and public testimonies in the 1950s strongly resemble the pattern of 'naming names' in Salem in 1692. Likewise, there was a clear affinity between the arrogance of the prosecutors in both the Salem and McCarthy periods. Miller notes: 'The same misplaced pride that had for so long prevented the original Salem court from admitting the truth before its eyes was still alive here. And that was good for the play too, it was in the mood.'<sup>8</sup> Miller is referring here to the HUAC, which had been preceded by a number of sub-committees since the early twentieth century: the Overman Committee (1918–19), the Fish Committee (1930–31), and the Dies Committee (1938). As David Cate explains, the Dies Committee was refurbished as HUAC in 1945 and approved by 207 to 86 to become a permanent standing committee with unique powers to subpoena and investigate:

(1) The extent, character and objects of un-American propaganda activities in the United States, (2) the diffusion within the United States of subversive and un-American propaganda that is instigated from foreign countries or of a domestic origin and attacks the principle of the form of government as guaranteed by our Constitution, and (3) all other questions in relation thereto that would aid Congress in any remedial legislation.<sup>9</sup>

Arthur Miller was subpoenaed by the HUAC on 21 June 1956, three years after the Broadway premiere of *The Crucible* and while he was under investigation for an allegedly unauthorized passport. The charges against him were: 'Signing CRC statements against anti-Communist legislation and against HUAC itself; appealing on behalf of Gerhart Eisler and Howard Fast, attending five or six meetings of Communist writers in 1947.'<sup>10</sup> Miller only had to respond to the last of the charges in this instance.

During the hearing, he was also questioned about his support of the 1947 World Youth Festival in Prague, a *Washington Post* advertisement protesting against punitive measures directed against the Communist Party of America, a statement by the Veterans Against Discrimination advocating the abolition of the House Committee and certain actions of the Civil Rights Congress.<sup>11</sup>

These organizations were included in the Attorney General's List of Subversive Organizations (AGLOSO). This list originated with President Harry S. Truman's Executive Order 9835 on 21 March 1947.<sup>12</sup> It was published by the federal government in December of the same year as part of Truman's Loyalty and Security Program, where it was used to threaten, damage, and destroy over three hundred organizations, listed without any notice, evidence, or hearing.

The fact that the list was publicized on a grand scale, unlike during previous 'scare' such as the First Red Scare in the years after the First World War, is indicative of the public nature of McCarthyism.<sup>13</sup> There were many hidden machinations and secret actions, but, strategically speaking, it aimed to bring everything into the open in the form of a national spectacle.

McCarthy's policy was based on reducing the national scene to the frame of American democracy versus pro-Soviet Communism. His success was evident inasmuch as failure to defend oneself against incrimination was considered proof of seditious activities against the state.

Miller was implicated in the process due to his past left-wing leanings. However, his response to being framed by McCarthy and his affiliates was to produce his own frame, namely, a play in which he dramatized history to comment on the present. Thus, the play became an artistic intervention in the public show on which the hearings relied. In *The Crucible* Miller used the famous Salem ritualistic witch trials of 1692 to expose the analogous nature of the McCarthy hearings in the 1950s.

From 1950 until 1954, Joseph McCarthy, a junior Senator from Wisconsin, disrupted everyday politics in the United States in his

attempt to purge government institutions, universities, and performing arts hubs like Hollywood of Communist influence from the Soviet Union. Robert Griffith states that the set of judgements, attitudes, and assumptions that gave rise to this brand of politics had its roots in American history and was a natural expression of America's political culture.<sup>14</sup>

### McCarthy's Use of Forms of Anxiety

McCarthy's politics were certainly influenced by American foreign policy, the threat of Communism, and the Korean War. Yet, as Michael Paul Rogin points out, McCarthyism also 'reflected the specific traumas of conservative Republican activists: internal Communist subversion, the New Deal, centralized government, left-wing intellectuals, and the corrupting influences of a cosmopolitan society'.<sup>15</sup> In this context, Thomas C. Reeves defines McCarthyism 'as a method, a tactic, an attitude, a tendency, a mood, an hysteria, an ideology, and a philosophy'.<sup>16</sup> Clearly, McCarthy's use of fear was not new, but tapped into previous attempts to purge American society.

The American political landscape after the Second World War offers numerous examples of the use of enhanced surveillance, black-listing, and repression as part of the right-wing ideologues' tactics against government employees, educators, entertainers, and trade union activists with left-wing political affiliations. According to the orthodox views of Cold War historiography, held by such historians as Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., Herbert Feis, and Louis J. Halle, and which, according to Edward Crapol, has remained the official view of the United States government, the growing totalitarian threat from the Soviet Union led to increased attempts to safeguard America's national security and democracy.<sup>17</sup> This included inquisitorial loyalty tests for liberals, socialists, free-thinking intellectuals and labour unionists.

The 'new Left' revisionist theorists, among them William Appleman Williams, have since challenged this orthodox view and reassessed American foreign policy since the

1890s as an expansionist policy that was aimed at building an economic empire.<sup>18</sup> In their view, the United States bore more responsibility for creating the Cold War than Soviet Russia. The 'post-revisionist' scholar John Lewis Gaddis formulated a synthesis of the two schools of thought, presenting a widely accepted view of the events.<sup>19</sup>

The exact cause of the international historical confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, or Communist forces globally, is not the primary point of concern here. What happened in the United States during the decades preceding the 1950s is more helpful in uncovering the roots of anti-Communist sentiment.

Liberal political sentiments flourished in America between 1930 and 1945, ignited by the international opposition to Fascism and Nazism in Europe. The 1930s saw anti-big business and anti-conservatism flourish in America under the aegis of various Congressional Committees, including the Nye Committee, the La Follette Committee, and the Truman Committee.<sup>20</sup> The supremacy of the liberal left offered an opportunity for the Communist Party of America to strengthen its various leftist groups and trade unions. However, the secretive nature of the Party sparked fears about its engagement in so-called un-American activities that might lead to revolutionary defeatism of the democratic set-up.

Thus, the political rhetoric of the 1930s that focused on conservatives, isolationists, business leaders, Catholics, Republican senators and business leaders as traitorous semi-fascists took a sharp turn in the post-war social and political scene. Liberals had to be on the defensive against the growing far-rightist cult of conservatism, banking on support from interest groups let down by the New Deal reform process.<sup>21</sup> This process suffered severe setbacks from the mid-1940s, and witnessed a virtual demise in the Cold War era due to the conservatives' discontent with and stance against domestic social reform and America's non-interventionist foreign policy.

After all, until the Pearl Harbor attack, isolationism had its strains in both the left-

and the right-wing political factions of the United States. As Justus D. Doeneke observes, the country's first pacifist national-socialist group, the Keep America Out of War Congress (1938–41), was created to oppose Roosevelt's overseas commitments.<sup>22</sup>

In the virulently anti-Democrat and anti-New Deal congress of 1946, both the Republicans and the conservative Democrats joined in a campaign of far-right Americanism and waged war on the Truman administration for being too soft on Communists.<sup>23</sup> Following this uproar, Truman's Loyalty and Security Program revealed a dual purpose of containing the indigenous left-wing's covert infusion of Soviet-styled revolutionary socialism and countering criticism of the conservative Republicans for being too lenient on them.<sup>24</sup>

### Forms of Anti-Communism

Griffith argues that this political environment offered an opportunity for conservative businessmen, organized veterans, and patriotic societies like the United States Chambers of Commerce and the American Legion to amplify their concerns about the perils of Communism through the press.<sup>25</sup> Various interest groups harped on the string of fear and suspicion at different resonance and pitch. It was not a populist movement, as Schrecker shows: there were different shades of anti-Communism on the American political horizon. While the ultra-conservatives opposed favourable references to internationalism and the United Nations in textbooks, the liberals supported greater scrutiny of the Communists.

At the same time, leftist radicals argued against Stalinism and the corruption of the global socialist ideal. Yet, Schrecker continues, the main anti-Communist group consisted of conservative Republican men, who furthered their political careers by manipulating the national environment of popular myths and stereotypes according to their own partisan concerns. Richard Nixon and Joseph McCarthy are prime examples of this, along with the FBI's J. Edgar Hoover.<sup>26</sup> Soviet Russia's emergence as a post-war rival of

capitalist democracies, the loss of China to Mao's Communist forces in 1949, the end of the American nuclear monopoly, and the start of the Korean War (1950–53) all prompted greater vigilance in American power circles. 'Who lost China?' became a popular mantra in the mouths of Republicans.<sup>27</sup>

The sweeping response to Soviet totalitarianism also offered the opportunity for the Republicans to pit their politics against the Democrats at home. On the face of it, in this strategy they had the overwhelming support of the American people, who, in a state of nationwide paranoia, relinquished their right to free speech in order to give precedence to national security.<sup>28</sup>

As is clear, it is difficult to separate fully the domestic from the international agenda. Truman's Loyalty and Security Program was initiated by the urgent need to safeguard national security. However, the prevailing Red Scare saw it implemented without due regard to safeguarding the individual rights guaranteed by the American Bill of Rights. The right to free speech, for example, was ignored on the ground that inflammatory speeches could incite violence and potentially trigger an overthrow of the democratic system.<sup>29</sup>

The central premise of Truman's Program was to dismiss federal executive agency employees found guilty of involvement in any indigenous or foreign organization designated by the Attorney General as totalitarian, fascist, Communist, or subversive.<sup>30</sup> Yet the arbitrary nature of the AGLOSO, the secretive procedure of accusing a federal employee of disloyalty, conspiracy, sabotage, and so on, and the denial of rights to rebut such charges meant the process was riddled with procedural defects. Moreover, the inclusion of charges based on 'guilt by association' left little margin of defence for those with associations to Communist organizations who had no intention of causing harm to the state.

Thus, state security and state unity were defended fiercely to give a holy resonance in the official political discourse, just as Salem's 'cunning folks' were punished for the threat they posed to the unity of the Puritan community. Thomas P. Adler explains:

If, in Salem, Miller discerned at work a 'cleansing' through a 'projection of one's own vileness on to others in order to wipe it out with their blood', in 1950s America he sadly found 'a public rite of contrition . . . an obligatory kowtow before the state, the century's only credible god'.<sup>31</sup>

### 'The Century's Only Credible God'

Adler is suggesting more than mere metaphor here. The notion of the state as God indicates how opaque its force had become, and how small individuals appeared in front of its committee, which, in turn, led to attempts to save one's own life by accusing others. Statesman Alger Hiss, for instance, was convicted on the basis of former Communist Party member Whittaker Chamber's accusation that he had been a Communist spy. The latter was found guilty of perjury and jailed for five years.<sup>32</sup> As for opacity, the Jewish couple Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were sentenced to death for conspiring to pass atom secrets to the Soviet Union in a far from transparent legal process. The administration used circular logic to interpret their crime as the cause of death of fifty-thousand American soldiers who lost their lives in the Korean War after America lost its nuclear monopoly.<sup>33</sup>

McCarthyism proved very effective in a political environment structured by a non-violent and quasi-consensual form of repression, which was specific to America and qualitatively different to the abrupt outlawing and banishments by totalitarian regimes elsewhere. Ellen W. Schrecker sums up this two-phase process when she states that 'first, the objectionable groups and individuals were identified – during a committee hearing, for example, or an FBI investigation; then, they were punished, usually by being fired'.<sup>34</sup>

The shift in character of the global Communist movement – from national forms of hostile attack against liberal democratic institutions to transnational co-operation between reform organizations – made the American political elite sceptical about its own liberal Left. On the domestic scene, the status anxiety of Americans was also exploited by McCarthy, who received support from such sectors as Catholics, the semi-educated,

Republicans, Irish Americans, working-class and retired people.<sup>35</sup> The educated elite – university professors, students and professional workers affiliated with managerial and clerical jobs – were his vehement opponents, as they feared a curtailment of their freedom and personal rights by the investigating committees.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, McCarthy's principal targets were artists, free-thinkers, and liberals, including Harvard professors, intellectuals, so-called 'fellow travellers', trade unionists, Jews, and American elites in the administration. The latter proved to be his eventual nemesis when his own Republican coteries withheld their support for him after the Army–McCarthy hearings in 1954 during the Eisenhower period.<sup>37</sup>

Richard Hofstadter observes that in the post-industrial environment, when people's economic fortunes were in a state of flux and the old rich classes of Americans were being replaced by middle- and lower-middle-class immigrant groups, McCarthy's right-wing campaign against the Communists was received like a clarion call by his supporters.<sup>38</sup> These people found in McCarthy's politics an expression of their grievances. Griffith characterizes this as the anti-intellectual and anti-establishment mood of McCarthyism, which relied heavily on scorning liberals, diplomats, and young men born with good fortunes.<sup>39</sup>

In the new political landscape, the government deemed that giving free rein to left-wing liberal revolutionaries and their secret associates was a potential threat to security and the very structure of democracy. Civil liberties were increasingly perceived as a weakness in the system that the enemy could exploit for disruptive purposes, especially during emergency and war situations. As a result, a considerable number of politicians trampled on civil liberties without much hesitation. During HUAC hearings, the defendants were denied the protection of the First and Fifth Amendments, which enshrine the right to free speech and protection against self-incrimination respectively. The protection of the First Amendment was not granted to the accused because their political ideas were deemed antithetical to the official

views on loyal citizenship. Their indictment was often enough to convict them during the hearings.

Those defendants who refused to cooperate with Congress or Senate committees by invoking the Fifth Amendment were still considered guilty and labelled 'Fifth Amendment Communists'. It is, therefore, perhaps not surprising that many absolved themselves by informing on other Communists or former fellow travellers. Miller dramatizes this practice of confessing, accusing, and sacrificing others to save one's own life in *The Crucible*. John Proctor exposes the processes at play in such trials when he condemns Reverend Hale's bigoted reliance on the confessions and testimonies of the accused: 'And why not, if they must hang for denyin' it? There are them that will swear to anything before they'll hang; have you never thought of that?'<sup>40</sup>

It is worth noting, as James L. Gibson does, that safeguarding democracy by non-democratic means of repression was itself illogical, as was the degree of this non-democratic repression when weighed against the degree of the Communist threat to democracy, which proved to be exaggerated.<sup>41</sup> It was an example of American democracy acting against itself.

A collaborative anti-Communist inquisition campaign by federal, state, and local politicians, bureaucrats, journalists, 'professional witnesses', and informers set the tone for an environment of fear, suspicion, and secrecy in the country. This led the way for neglect of due process in so-called 'loyalty hearings' at most venues. Congressional bodies like the House Un-American Activities Committee, the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee, and the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations were assisted by the FBI in identifying Communists, with the help of ex-Communist witnesses and informers. Accused people could lose their jobs for the smallest of reasons.<sup>42</sup>

These punitive measures had didactic, educational, and deterrent purposes for the population at large, who came to understand the economic price of having revolutionary utopian ideas. The fear of infamy, the

publicity value and the spectacle of criminal proceedings, the fact that people's patriotism was publicly doubted or that people were directly branded as unpatriotic, made most liberal employers acquiesce in dismissing many employees, often without sufficient evidence.<sup>43</sup> The hearings functioned like a stage performance, and the entire country watched them in a state of paranoia.<sup>44</sup>

## The Panoply of Legislation

In Miller's *The Crucible*, Danforth's statement in Act Four echoes the role played by the Justice Department in the McCarthy era:

Postponement now speaks a floundering on my part; reprieve or pardon must cast doubt upon the guilt of them that died till now. While I speak God's law, I will not crack its voice with whimpering. If retaliation is your fear, know this – I should hang ten thousand that dared to rise against the law, and an ocean of salt tears could not melt the resolution of the statutes.<sup>45</sup>

As is clear from this statement, the judges and the ministers in Salem who persecuted the people were under the impression that they were defending God's holy law against an attack from the Devil's mercenaries in occult forms. They were thus able to execute any deviant without impunity.

Likewise, McCarthy and his associates launched a national purification initiative in the 1950s against Communist spies, leading Miller to observe, as noted earlier, that the state had by now replaced God. The state could now freely suppress people's liberties through stringent congressional statutes and the politics of legislation that gave their investigations a constitutional cover.<sup>46</sup> The Alien Registration Act or Smith Act (1940), the Magnuson Act (1950), the McCarran Internal Security Act (1950), the McCarran-Walter Act (1952), and the Communist Control Act (1954) were part of the legislative process that contributed to the fully-fledged anti-Communist rage in the country.<sup>47</sup>

The Smith Act made it illegal for any individual or organization to deliberately attempt to disrupt or overthrow the government through violence or force. The McCarran



Joseph McCarthy leading the questioning during a session of the House Un-American Activities Committee.

Internal Security Act, which is also known as the Subversive Activities Control Act of 1950, had a clandestine purpose of harassing Communist organizations by making it compulsory for them to register with the United States Attorney General. The Immigration and Nationality Act or McCarran-Walter Act enabled the government to deport immigrants or naturalized citizens who were found guilty of involvement in revolutionary activities. The Communist Control Act thwarted any claim for legal rights and privileges for Communist organizations. As well as ensuring coastal surveillance of the Navy, the port security program or Magnuson Act gave an opportunity for right-wing labour organizations to settle their scores with leftist unionists, who were still strong in that sector.<sup>48</sup>

Sketched like this, it seems improbable that any one individual would dare to rise against McCarthyism. However, Miller did not operate as an individual. He acted as an artist with an important public and collective tool: a play. But what could a play achieve in the face of such a massive spectacle?

Against the backdrop of right-wing supremacy, *The Crucible* acted as a conscious and purposeful theatrical response to the spectacular operations of McCarthy and his

men. Miller illustrates the parallels between Salem and his own time:

But gradually, over weeks, a living connection between myself and Salem, and between Salem and Washington, was made in my mind – for whatever else they might be, I saw that the hearings in Washington were profoundly and even avowedly ritualistic. After all, in almost every case the Committee knew in advance what they wanted the witness to give them: the names of his comrades in the Party. The FBI had long since infiltrated the Party, and informers had long ago identified the participants in various meetings. The main point of the hearings, precisely as in seventeenth-century Salem, was that the accused make public confession, damn his confederates as well as his Devil master, and guarantee his sterling new allegiance by breaking disgusting old vows – whereupon he was let loose to rejoin the society of extremely decent people. In other words, the same spiritual nugget lay folded within both procedures – an act of contrition done not in solemn privacy but out in the public air.<sup>49</sup>

### Power and the Frame of Spectacle

The key issues here are the theatrical form of ritual and the element of public confession, as opposed to the confessions during the inquisition by the Catholic Church, for instance, which were obtained in isolated

chambers of interrogation and torture. For Miller, a work of art could illuminate the dark aspects of reality that the political spectacle had masked. He states:

So I suppose that in one sense *The Crucible* was an attempt to make life real again, palpable and structured. One hoped that a work of art might illuminate the tragic absurdities of an interior work of art that was called reality, but was not.<sup>50</sup>

In many ways, John Proctor acts as Miller's mouthpiece, condemning the spectacle. In Act Two, he vociferously marks his position *vis-à-vis* the accusers in the village when he asks Reverend Hale: 'If she is innocent! Why do you never wonder if Parris be innocent, or Abigail? Is the accuser always holy now? Were they born this morning as clean as God's fingers?' Miller is here also questioning the legitimacy of the congressional committees and their summary trials in the 1950s.

Arthur Miller first learnt about the 1692 Salem episode in Marion Starkey's 1949 book *The Devil in Massachusetts*.<sup>51</sup> He saw a living connection between the ritualistic scene of the hearings in Washington and the proceedings in Salem. The former were ritualistic in that the Committee had already drawn its conclusions and its sole purpose was to extract confessions from the witnesses according to a pre-formulated verdict, much as in the Salem trials. Each hearing was characterized by this notion of purge through confession. He argues: 'The overwhelmingly significant truth, I thought, as I still do, was the artist-hating brutality of the Committee and its envy of its victims' power to attract public attention and to make big money at it besides.'<sup>52</sup>

### Miller before the Committee

Miller faced this brutality himself on 21 June 1956, when the House Un-American Activities Committee subpoenaed him, two years after he had tried to renew his passport in order to travel to Belgium to attend a production of *The Crucible*. His application was turned down on account of his so-called support of global Communist activities that could undermine and endanger American national security.<sup>53</sup>

Miller was asked, among other things, for the names of the Communist writers who were present at the meeting of Communist authors held in New York City in 1947. Miller testified that he had never been a Communist, but that he had been associated with a number of Communist front groups in the past. He was present at five or six meetings of the Communist writers, but he refused to name those who had attended the meeting. The following excerpts from the questioning by Richard Arens, Donald L. Jackson, and Gordon H. Scherer of the Committee illustrate Miller's position:

MR ARENS: Can you tell us who was there when you walked into the room?

MR MILLER: Mr Chairman, I understand the philosophy behind this question and I want you to understand mine. When I say this, I want you to understand that I am not protecting the Communists or the Communist Party. I am trying to, and I will, protect my sense of myself. I could not use the name of another person and bring trouble on him. These are writers, poets, as far as I could see, and the life of a writer, despite what it sometimes seems, is pretty tough. I wouldn't make it any tougher for anybody. I ask you not to ask me that question. . . .

MR JACKSON: May I say that moral scruples, however laudable, do not constitute legal reason for refusing to answer the question. . . .

MR SCHERER: We do not accept the reason you gave for refusing to answer the question, and . . . if you do not answer . . . you are placing yourself in contempt.

MR MILLER: All I can say, sir, is that my conscience will not permit me to use the name of another person.<sup>54</sup>

The last sentence is clear in its defiance. Miller did not recant from his past affiliations, but he did express regret about having been a Communist sympathizer in the past, having witnessed the Soviet leadership's persecutions of their own citizens and intellectuals.<sup>55</sup> But he refused to betray others. His defiance was such that he was charged with contempt of Congress and was forced to pay \$40,000 in lawyer's fees, a \$500 fine, and he received a one-year suspended sentence. It was a year of creative inanition in his life.<sup>56</sup>

The theatrical aspect of the McCarthy hearings thus lay in the fact that the accused





Arthur Miller testifying to the House Subcommittee, 21 June 1956.

were supposed to produce confessions, name their past affiliates, and vow to have renewed pacts of allegiance to the state and its official ideas through a public expression of remorse. Those who did so were amicably granted the status of decent citizen, whereas the dissidents, in line with the Salem Witch trials, were subjected to persecution and public vilification. Yet, while there is a certain element of theatricality present in all legal trials, the particular theatricality of the McCarthy hearings was governed or framed by the generic form of the *spectacle*, as addressed in its modern manifestation by Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle* in 1967.

### Debord and Defining the Spectacle

Debord was not primarily concerned with McCarthyism. He defined the modern spectacle in a broader sense as 'the reigning social organization of a paralyzed history, of a paralyzed memory, of an abandonment of any history founded in historical time, [it] is in effect a *false consciousness of time*.'<sup>57</sup> In

Debord's reading, there are various *spectacles* in any society where modern conditions of production prevail.<sup>58</sup> He believes that modern spectacle is the autocratic reign of the market economy, which had generated a totality of new techniques of government, determining the social relations between people through mediated images.<sup>59</sup>

Debord's terms of reference help to shed light on the spectacle of McCarthyism as an example of the politics of everyday life under modern capitalism. *The Crucible* is a precautionary tale of the role of media power in modern society, presaging Debord's analysis more than a decade later.

However, the formula 'society of the spectacle' may be too general in its scope. The art critic Jonathan Crary points out:

One can still well ask if the notion of spectacle is the imposition of an illusory unity on to a more heterogeneous field. Is it a totalizing and monolithic concept that inadequately represents a plurality of incommensurable institutions and events? For some, a troubling aspect about the term spectacle is the almost ubiquitous presence of the defi-

nite article in front of it, suggesting a single and seamless global system of relations. For others, it is a mystification of the functioning of power, a new opiate-of-the-masses type of explanation, a vague cultural-institutional formation with a suspicious structural autonomy. Or is a concept such as spectacle a necessary tool for the figuration of a radical systemic shift in the way power functions noncoercively within twentieth-century modernity? Is it an indispensable means of revealing as related what would otherwise appear as disparate and unconnected phenomena? Does it not show that a patchwork or mosaic of techniques can still constitute a homogenous effect of power?<sup>60</sup>

These questions are revealing as regards Crary's idea of the key characteristics of the notion of spectacle. Debord's words are as follows:

The spectacle appears at once as society itself, as a part of society and as a means of unification. As a part of society, it is that sector where all attention, all consciousness, converges. Being isolated – and precisely for that reason – this sector is the locus of illusion and false consciousness; the unity it imposes is merely the official language of generalized separation.<sup>61</sup>

The key sentence is the first, indicating that what people consume and do in society is a matter of reproduction of that society and its economy. Following Marx, Debord argues that the production and consumption of commodities in a neoliberal economy brings about the alienation of labour, by which labour becomes abstract. He explains that the spectacle in this scenario is not merely a collection of images, but social relations between people mediated by images:

It is the very heart of society's real unreality. In all its aspects, manifestations – news or propaganda, advertising or the actual consumption of entertainment – the spectacle epitomizes the prevailing model of social life.<sup>62</sup>

John Harris summarizes Debord's analysis of contemporary society as follows:

Essentially Debord argues that having recast the idea of 'being into having', what he calls 'the present phase of total occupation of social life by the accumulated results of the economy' has led to 'a generalized sliding from having into *appearing*, from which all actual "having" must draw its immediate prestige and its ultimate function'.<sup>63</sup>

According to Debord, being, under capitalism, is a matter of people becoming socially functional when they know how to appear, that is, be spectacular, in Debord's sense of 'spectacle'.

### The Red Scare as Spectacle

This notion of spectacle can be related to the McCarthy hearings, where American society became hostage to the Red Scare, fabricated through public trials, enforced confessions, and televised displays of people's alleged betrayal of, and disloyalty, to the official national creeds. Such a spectacle was constructed not only to frighten an entire society, but also to divide it in order, perhaps paradoxically, to make it whole. McCarthy built the spectacle around the issue of American national security and American purity and purgation. Debord's idea of spectacle is useful precisely because American society at that point had appeared to itself in the form of a spectacle, framing a show context for the McCarthy hearings.<sup>64</sup>

First, there was the seemingly undefeatable frame of American democracy against Communist totalitarianism proposed by McCarthy. It is in this context that McCarthy profiled all Communists as traitors and framed them in a nationwide spectacle as the enemies within. For this reason, Crary's analysis is relevant when he considers the effect of such strategies:

Thus, as I will argue, spectacular culture is not founded on the necessity of making a subject see, but rather on strategies in which individuals are isolated, separated, and inhabit time as disempowered. Likewise, counter-forms of attention are neither exclusively nor essentially visual but rather constituted as other temporalities and cognitive states, such as those in trance or reverie.<sup>65</sup>

McCarthyism was a distinct form of spectacle in that it wanted its audience to see only one thing in the context of a strategy that framed time itself, as if time could be reduced to an opposition between historical counterparts. The result was similar insofar as all who were confronted with the spec-



Demonstration in support of the 'Hollywood Ten', screenwriters and directors who publicly denounced the House UnAmerican Activities Committee in 1947. They received jail sentences and were blacklisted from working for the major Hollywood studios.

tacle were, indeed, disempowered in the sense that they were subjected by the spectacle and not the subjects of history. Miller's response was an attempt to historicize the present and expose the frame that had been set up.

## Notes and References

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