There's Somebody Watching You

John Brooks

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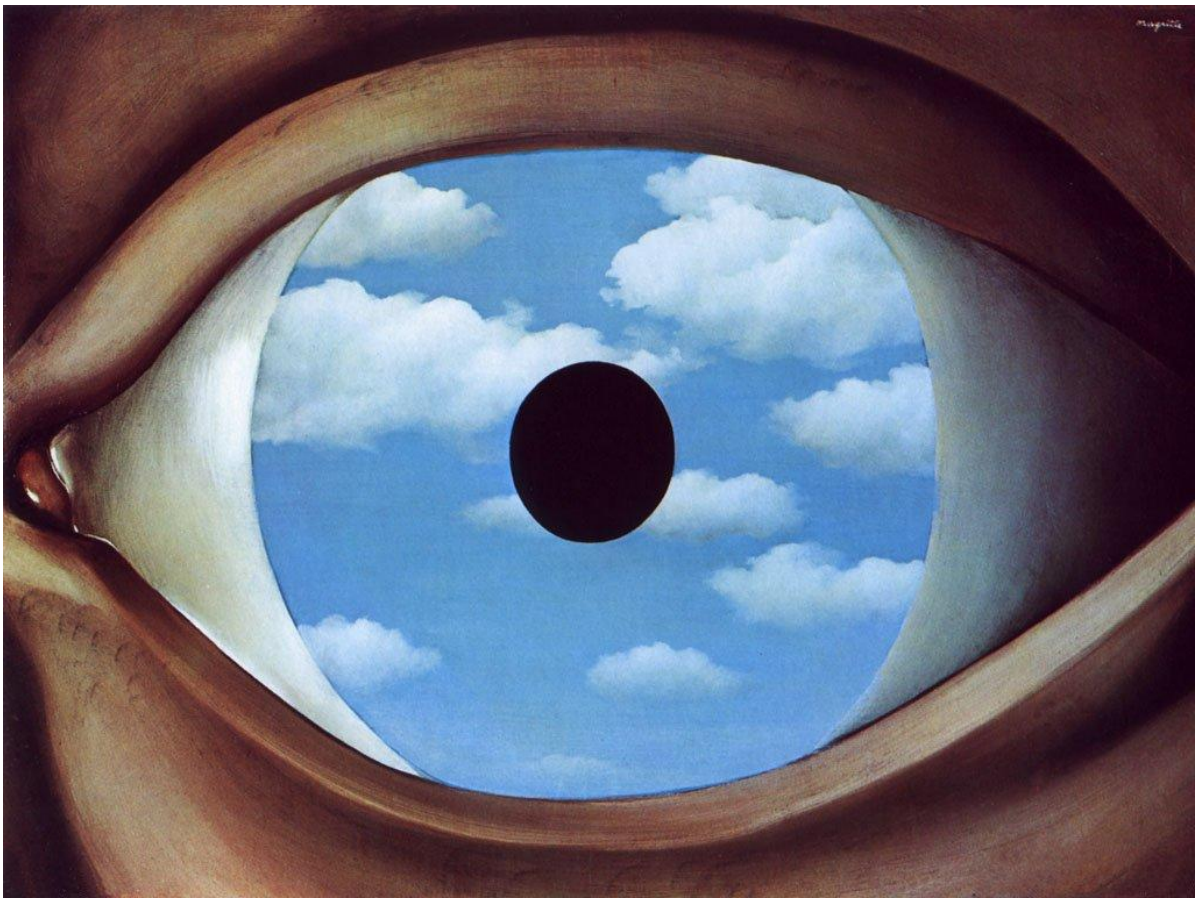
THE NAKED SOCIETY. By Vance Packard. 359 pp. New York David McKay Company. $5.95.



Painting by Rene Magritte. Collection Museum of Modern Art.

VANCE PACKARD'S books on various shortcomings of American society—hidden persuaders, status seekers, waste makers — have without exception been welcomed with almost fervent enthusiasm by many members of the society they partially condemn. Even allowing for our much-discussed national mood of soul-searching and for the fact that Mr. Packard's targets have generally been so circumscribed that many readers could share his righteous wrath while suffering no intimations of personal , guilt, his vast success appears to be a somewhat paradoxical phenomenon.

In his new book Mr. Packard is again firmly on the side of the angels. The central subject of ""The Naked Society" is the increasing invasion of privacy through the use of comparatively new electronic and psychological techniques; but in broader sense, the author is joining a battle that others— most notably, perhaps, the American Civil Liberties Union—have been fighting for years, the battle to preserve individual liberties

as originally guaranteed in the Bill of Rights. In fact, the parts of this book not directly concerned with spying and snooping are essentially a summary of the issues with which the A.C.L.U. has concerned itself in recent years.

Mr. Packard makes an overwhelming case for his contention that the new spying and snooping tools, in the hands of the morally unaware or indifferent, or the downright totalitarian-minded, constitute a new and extraordinarily vivacious threat to privacy and individual liberty. It seems that an already huge investigative industry, manned at its top echelons largely by former F.B.I. agents, is growing by leaps and bounds. Indeed, the Society of Former Agents of the F.B J., according to Mr. Packard, serves as a clearinghouse for information about available jobs, and something like one-third of those members who have active careers are working in investigation, policing or security enforcement.

The services of this industry are available to anyone who will pay the fees, but by far the best client is business. Mr. Packard says that "a substantial number of firms" now use lie-detector tests as part of their employment interviews, and as a result, a leading detective agency was able to report recently that it had quadrupled its lie-detector business in 18 months. Moreover, the machines are used in these circumstances not just to insure truthful answers, or detect untruthful ones, on legitimate matters—but also to pry into such irrelevancies as a prospective employe's sexual habits and past political associations. (It brings but cold comfort to learn from Mr. Packard that the lie detectors don't work very well; a burglar with gun in hand is usually not diminished in effectiveness or destructiveness by the fact that the gun is a toy.) Nor does invasion of a man's privacy stop when he is hired. On the contrary, according to Mr. Packard, more and more companies are taking to keeping watch on their employes' performance on the job, not to mention their honesty, through the use of hidden microphones and even closed-circuit television.

Mr. Packard quotes the head of an investigative "consulting" firm as saying, "Let's suppose, for instance, you think a guy is having a bad time on his job. It might pay to leave a bug in there for a week just to see how he is treating people and how he is getting along. You don't try to hurt the guy or fire the guy. You want to know what areas you have to fortify in his performance." The blandness of a statement like that gives a clue to the extent to which such practices reflect simple ignorance of American first principles, rather than a conscious intention to flout them.

Nor is business by any means the only part of our society in which such things go on. Federal employes, Mr. Packard says, are kept track of by means that include practically the whole arsenal of spy-and-snoop devices. The U.S. Post Office, at a word from a local, state or Federal policing agency, may apparently keep a record of all mail addressed to a stated person. More and more new apartment houses are equipped with microphones and TV cameras placed here and there, so that the superintendent may keep tabs on various parts of the building and watch for burglars—or, if he chooses, amuse himself and his friends. And, of course, municipal police departments make full use of every gadget that the law will allow them to.

AS has been much noted elsewhere, many of the psychological tests given to schoolchildren amount to a dangerous form of intrusiveness. Mr. Packard mentions a particularly mischievous one called the Blacky Pictures, in which the tester presumes to determine, by watching a child's reaction to six cartoons, the extent to which the subject shows oral eroticism, Oedipal intensity and so on. Small wonder that the youngsters sometime strike back, like the Groton boys who were expelled a couple of years ago for "bugging" their housemaster's quarters.

To the extent that an ethical example is being set for the rest of American society by all these activities, Mr. Packard concludes, the tone is one of "moral squalor."

Spying and snooping are in themselves distasteful topics; but there are some ways in which "The Naked Society" is more distasteful than it needs to be, and one of its least attractive aspects is its author's occasional tendency to adopt methods hardly more responsible than those he condemns in others. Particularly in the chapter about the wholesale swapping among public and private agencies of supposedly confidential information on individuals, the expressions, "I gathered that," "I heard reports of," "I'm told," "I was told that" and the like, occur again and again. For example, "As to the supposedly secret Bureau of Criminal Identification file maintained by New York City police, I was told that a number of the major investigating firms have contacts within, or have access to, BCI."

I will vigorously defend Mr. Packard's right as a reporter to protect his sources of information, but if he is unwilling to make this charge against the New York police on his own account, to make an evaluation of his source or to supply information that will enable the reader to make such an evaluation, his statement has little more weight than gossip. For what it may be worth, I was told by Deputy Police Commissioner Walter Arm that Mr. Packard's statement is erroneous.

Furthermore, Mr. Packard's use of the phrase "offbeat thinkers" to describe collectively the victims of McCarthyism does not tend to foster confidence in the quality of his appreciation of their independent-mindedness, and his abrupt reference to the actress Elizabeth Taylor as "Elizabeth"—after he has previously called her "Miss Taylor" — serves as a disquieting reminder of a familiar symbol of our lack of respect for privacy, the habit of using first names on too short acquaintance.

Indeed, the mam tendency of this whole book, if I read it correctly, is to regard the fight to protect privacy as primarily a simple ideological one against identifiable outsiders, human and mechanical, rather than a cultural one against an enemy that has to some extent infiltrated most of us. I suggest that the new techniques and their knavish or foolish users would not get far against a solid front of deeply rooted opposition. The enemies of privacy do not all wear uniforms. They include civilian saboteurs like the suburbanites who, in fear of obloquy or in quest of popularity, allow themselves to be dropped in on by neighbors unannounced at all hours of the day and night; the too good-natured souls who encourage polling for commercial purposes by repeatedly submitting to it; and the people who use terms like "loner" to mean "nut" or even "subversive."

True enough, Mr. Packard does take some account of the need for a change of cultural climate in his suggestions to individuals, which include returning junk mail unopened, jamming other people's transistor radios in public places by having one of your own and tuning it to a certain frequency, and knocking before entering a child's room.

The problem itself is not new. The village inquisition is an old institution in America, as it is in other countries, but the counter-thrust for privacy has always been strong, and continues to be. Surely it has been an important factor in the migration to big cities, where privacy has traditionally been more readily available than in small communities. What is new is the combination of the existence of bugs and a woefully common lack of indignation on the part of the bugged. Mr. Packard supplies plenty of indignation and, to the extent that he communicates it, the rest of us can be grateful. If only his high-mindedness, like that of others, were not so conditioned by the age of publicity in which we all live!

Mr. Brookes most recent forays into the ways of American enterprise are collected in "The Fate of the Edsel, and Other Business Adventures"

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The New York Times, March 15, 1964, pages 116 & 159 (page 1 & 44 of the Book Review section).
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