

Panopticism Today

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What is the Panopticon?

The panopticon was created by Jeremy Bentham as a model prison. It was designed in a way to give maximum power to the prison wards. The panopticon was architected as so:

at the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other (Foucault, 200).

A supervisor, a prison guard, would reside in the central tower with the ability to watch all of the inmates. All of those locked up would be visible in their cells, their cages, but the supervisor would not be visible to them. “[T]his invisibility is a guarantee of order” (Foucault, 200). The captive never knows when he or she is being watched, but knows that it is a possibility at all times. The supervisor has great power over the inmates. The inmates are aware of the eyes watching the, thus they must behave. In the panopticon,

the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events recorded... in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings... all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism (Foucault, 197).

The panopticon is a necessary function of society. Without the power to control individuals, there would be chaos and anarchy. If there was no threat of punishment for wrongful acts, if there was no threat of surveillance, the majority of people would have nothing to lose and thus there would be no reason to abide by the rules. The power of the panopticon is also reflexive. A panoptic society

produces panoptic institutions. Society follows the model which already works and people turn panopticism around to function in their best interest.

The panopticon is visible in fictional representations, such as the movie “The Matrix” and the novel, 1984, by George Orwell. It also functions in our dramatized reality as seen in reality television shows like MTV’s “The Real World” and CBS’s “Big Brother.” Finally, the panopticism exists in many forms throughout our lives and is a necessary element for our society to function.

“The Matrix”

The 1999 film, “The Matrix,” has many panoptic elements. The entire world inside the matrix is controlled by those who have the power to see. The agents, the supervisors of the matrix, are everywhere, watching everyone. If anyone acts out of line and doesn’t conform to the “reality” of the matrix, he or she is removed from the world. In fact, most people live their lives, unassumingly, in the matrix. They live their lives unaware, and for the most part content with, the panoptic world they live in. The people don’t “see” how they are being watched or tracked because it is done with hidden cameras and they are tracked through invisible computer codes. All the people know is that they live in a 20th century society with the police existing to serve and protect. In the matrix, the agents have the ability to appear anywhere at anytime. An illusion is created where it seems as if there are agents everywhere, when in reality there are far fewer. This gives a great deal of power to the agents because the people will be more likely to behave if they believe there are many agents watching them. The panopticon is functioning as a disciplinary mechanism. The fear of discovery and punishment is enough to deter bad behavior. Panopticism is preemptive discipline.

The protagonist in the movie, Neo, is also watched and surveilled by another group of people. Those who have been removed from the matrix and fight against it, specifically Morpheus, have watched Neo since he was born in hopes that he is “the one” who can fight the matrix. Those outside of the matrix are aware that the agents receive their power from their ability to see everything. Knowing this, they devise ways to hide from the agents and control their own environment. They also begin watching and

monitoring the world inside the matrix; it's the only way for them to survive. In essence, in order to escape the panopticon of the matrix, the outsiders must also function under panopticism and adopt the roles of the supervisors.

George Orwell's 1984

George Orwell's novel, 1984, represents the controlling extreme of panopticism. The government in the fictional world of Oceania uses the panopticon to create a totalitarian society. The government, Big Brother, watches every member of society, everyday. Big Brother, specifically the Thought Police, even surveils people's thoughts. Cameras, microphones and telescreens are everywhere giving Big Brother the ability to see and know all. Neighbors and co-workers watch each other as well, turning in those who misbehave. Out of fear and discipline, the watchees become the watchers.

Anyone who dares to step out against the controlling elite is immediately targeted. The Thought Police know what someone is going to do before that particular person even knows. The public is notified when someone misbehaves and everyone witnesses as this person is removed from society, even though no one is allowed to talk about it. By visibly punishing some, others believe the power of the panopticon and the power of Big Brother. By making an example with a few, Big Brother is able to control the masses.

MTV's "The Real World"

MTV's "The Real World" is an example of panopticism in our society. Seven strangers are put together and have their lives videotaped. Every aspect of their lives is caught on tape, from work to play, while they are eating and while they are sleeping. The house members can never escape the gaze. They are fully aware of all the cameras which are positioned around their home and are fully aware of the cameramen and sound technicians whom follow them around wherever they go. The cast members know that anything they do or say can be aired on television. What they do not know is what specific instances of their lives will be compiled into episodes. The Real Worlders are the inmates of the panopticon. They know they are being watched at all times, but

they do not know *for sure* specifically when they are being watched by millions on television.

The power of this unverifiable visibility forces the cast members to behave, at least to the extent that they want to. They alter their actions because they know the eyes are watching them. If they don't want something seen or heard by others, then they must restrict their behavior. However, being aware of the panopticon forces the cast members to alter their behavior in other ways. They know what type of actions will get them the most air time, and what will not. The Real Worlders act out, cause fights, and fill their lives with drama if they want to be prominently featured on the show. Others will avoid fights and try to hide their private conversations and actions they do not want visible to the entire world. This self-exclusion may backfire if producers, the "supervisors," feel a cast member is trying to hide something so they have the cameramen pay more attention to the particular person to try and catch him or her doing something he or she does not want filmed.

Our desire to watch "The Real World" is also a manifestation of panopticism. Our curiosity drives people to become involved with the show. People begin to identify themselves with one or more of the cast members, or through exclusion realize who they don't identify with and thus determine their individualism.

CBS's "Big Brother"

In CBS's reality show, "Big Brother," a group of people is sequestered inside a house with no contact with the outside world. They are put through various challenges for food and survival in the game, with the last person remaining in the house being awarded a half million dollars. This house and a small outdoor area are filled with cameras and microphones, like "The Real World." The main difference between the two shows is that those on "Big Brother" only have each other to talk to and the show itself is a contest. The show adapts the notions of George Orwell's 1984, most specifically the title. Instead of the government, Big Brother is the producers of the show and the American public which watches. The show is also linked with a website where there is streaming video which captures the activities of the contestants 24/7. Every element of

life inside the house is watched and controlled. The show is an experiment in human behavior. It examines how people act and interact with each other when they have no escape and are made fully aware of the panopticon in which they live. While the contestants are hyper-sensitive to the cameras when they first enter the house, after a while they begin to accept it as normal. Our society works the same way. We function ceaselessly with the presence of panopticism. We recognize its existence but tend to ignore it for the most part. The power and control of the panopticon is so engrained into our lives that we forget about it.

Panopticism and Voyeurism

Reality television has taught us one thing: we like to watch ourselves and others. Reality television flourishes because we are curious as to how other people live. Today people are turning the panopticon on themselves by willingly setting up web-cams which broadcast their daily activities over the internet, allowing anyone to watch. On the internet, people also keep live journals and create numerous online profiles, such as those on TheFacebook. People who partake in such activities control how much information is released, thus giving them the power to determine what others can know about their life.

TheFacebook is the newest online community meant to link students in high school and college. Members can search for old friends by name or school, find people in their classes, and find those with similar interests. It is very common for people to “stalk” others on TheFacebook or be “stalked” themselves. Stalking refers to repeatedly checking the profiles of others to see what they are doing at any given time. People also surveil each other's behaviors by checking the profiles and away messages of friends on instant messenger. In mere seconds, one has the ability to peak into the life of another, without that person ever knowing. Technology has given us the ability to surveil anyone and to be surveilled by anyone. As Foucault stated, “any individual can operate the machine.” (Foucault, 202). The watchers are empowered by their invisibility. They can watch and surveil anyone without their knowledge. This freedom and power only

provokes people to watch more. The American public has become obsessed with watching each other. We have become a voyeuristic society.

The American “Big Brother”

The American public lives in the panopticon with the United States government playing the role of the ultimate supervisors. At any given time, the government knows everything about you. From the moment of birth, a record of your life is created. Hospital records, criminal records, credit reports, the taxes you pay, the things you buy—everything is recorded and surveilled. For example, at any given time, the government can order an IRS audit of your finances. The possibility of such an action keeps most people disciplined and honest. The government also has the ability to monitor your online activities and read your email. The police track sexual predators through email correspondence and also target people who illegally download movies and music. The computer leaves a record of all activity which can at any moment be traced. Other high-tech equipment allows the police to tap phone calls and heat sensors can alert illegal behavior.

Walk into any store, and you’ll see at camera. Even if the camera is a fake or has no tape inside, we are aware of the possibility that all of our actions while inside the store are being watched. The unverifiable visibility controls our behavior. We don’t steal because we know it might be caught on tape. Cameras often serve as the best witness for the prosecution. For example, when a fight erupted between fans and basketball players at a Detroit Pistons- Indiana Pacers basketball game, many cameras recorded all of the action. The police were then able to watch the tapes over and over again to determine who was at fault and who would face criminal charges. What is seen on the cameras cannot be disputed, thus giving even greater power to the panopticon- it is accurate.

The Role of Panopticism Today

Our society would not function without panopticism. Society cannot function without control. People often take the order of our society and the discipline that

controls us for granted. The imaginary eyes that keep us in check protect us from dangers. It can also be argued that the United States government takes our acceptance of the panopticon as reason to further take away our privacy and rights. Americans are not even aware of the countless ways in which the government is able to watch our lives, but we do have a great deal of freedom in comparison to complete, totalitarian control.

Just as the outsiders do in “The Matrix,” Americans have found the best way to function in the panopticon is to try and control as much as possible. By switching sides and watching each other and by willingly letting others watch our lives, we take control of our lives. We recognize that we are the objects of the gaze as well as the watchers.

The panopticon is undisputedly existent in society today, and I don’t believe that is a bad thing. Americans may be naïve, but the order and control of life creates a feeling of safety. It works to serve our best interests by making us feel safe and letting us continue on with our lives as we see fit. We come to ignore the panopticon because there tends to be few negative elements drawing our attention. We come to internalize panopticism. We are watchers and watchees without knowing it. Panopticism works, so we ignore it.