

**TO SEE AND BE SEEN**  
**THE PANOPTICON & SIGHT AS**  
**CONTROL**

**ANNABEL D.**

**THE OXBOW SCHOOL**



It is rare that to find a situation in which we go unseen. With the developments of surveillance technology and the increased sharing of public information online, we are always on display. This installation explores the concept of the Panopticon, or the omnipresent viewer, and the power that it can have over the viewed individual. I began with the original conception of the Panopticon as a prison structure and then applied this to modern surveillance, the Patriot Act, as well as the Male Gaze and, ultimately, the construction of oneself within the view of others.

Each painting in the series is meant to represent my altered sense of self across varying situations due to the audience that I am in view of. I am exploring the power of the self-portrait as a means for not only representing the physical, but also the unquantifiable. The portraits were painted using oil paint on clear vinyl. The transparency of the material and the visible stretcher bars alludes to the ideas presented by Erving Goffman who described the self as being only the performances which we create for others. There is no true self beneath these layers, and so my paintings use transparency and the visible skeleton of the paintings to convey this sense of emptiness and superficiality which our notions of a “true self” are built upon.

The first portrait is a representation of the barriers which I put up around those I am unfamiliar with in an attempt to avoid being disliked. The middle image depicts my feelings when I believe myself to be unseen. The third image uses the opaque figures painted on the clear surface and the shadows which they produce to depict a crowd. In this painting, I am represented through the individual figures as well as the concept of the crowd as a whole. In these environments, individuality is lost and people assimilate so that they become a unit within the larger group, rather than one distinct “self.”

Annabel D.  
Hillsborough, California

*This paper explores the relationship between sight and control through manifestations of the Panopticon in order to answer the question: What impact does the gaze of others have on the individual and on society as a whole? It will examine Jeremy Bentham's original prison design as well as Foucault's interpretation to define the Panopticon as a symbol of Disciplinary Power. This theory will then be applied to modern surveillance and the Patriot Act as well as the construction of female gender roles through the male gaze. These examples will ultimately be used to connect the Panopticon to the construction of self and argue that not only that the Panopticon affects behavior, but that it plays a role in defining the self altogether.*

We often do not consider the weight our gaze can carry. Human sight is not only a valuable tool for interpreting and engaging with the space around us but also in carrying a tremendous amount of power over others. Throughout history, the notion of “being seen” has been used as a disciplinary tool to carefully shape the actions of the viewed to fit the wishes of the viewer. This is reflected in the architecture of Jeremy Bentham’s “Panopticon” which was designed with the intention of reinventing methods of imprisonment with sight being used as a disciplinary force to keep prisoners captive. In his book, “Discipline and Punish”, Michel Foucault discusses the further implications of Bentham’s design, the power of sight and how it fits into society beyond the prison system. Since the original publishing of Foucault’s text in 1975, the concept of the Panopticon has become increasingly incorporated into a modern world with the development of technology which allows for an increase in the public sharing of information online as well as the capacity for constant surveillance. Governments can use this sense of omnipresent observation to ensure compliance and maintain control, even if it comes at the expense of the privacy of their citizens. The power dynamic explained by the Panopticon is present across society through the interactions between those in power and the oppressed. Notably, the *male gaze*, a term used to describe the objectification of women in order to satisfy the wishes of the viewing man, mirrors Foucault’s interpretation of the Panopticon despite having no concrete structure, as is the case with Bentham’s designs. This gaze controls the portrayal of women across film, television, and advertising and in turn, shapes the actions of women in their daily lives. These manifestations of the Panopticon across all aspects of society support the notion of sight as a means for obtaining control and maintaining power, which begs the question: If being seen has the ability to shape the way we behave, how are we shaped by the people who see us? And who are we when we are not being seen? As an introverted and introspective person, I have often identified a stark contrast in how I perceive myself and how I believe others perceive me. Since I was a child, I have been able to identify the different roles that I moved through on a regular basis: student, daughter, sister, friend, stranger. With each of these identities came a different set of behaviors necessary to best suit my environment. I was intrigued by the idea that the people around me would affect my behavior and my understanding of myself in that moment. Through my research, I strove to better understand how the sight of others plays a role in controlling the actions of the individual and how my own experience is reflected in larger societal structures.

## PART ONE: THE PANOPTICON

In 1791, English philosopher, Jeremy Bentham, published his design for the Panopticon prison in an attempt to reform the current penal system which he believed to be unconstitutional and impractical in effecting punishments. The building was structured to reflect Bentham’s utilitarian beliefs and strove to maximize the efficiency of the prison with the least harm and effort required. The Panopticon design involved a round outer structure which had cells built into it to house the prisoners. Walls along the sides of the cells separated prisoners from each other, but there were no walls between the cells and the hollow inner circle to allow for maximum visibility.

In the center of the circle stood a guard tower that loomed menacingly in the view of the prisoners. The guard tower was occupied by a singular guard who, due to the prison's circular structure, had the ability to view any of the prisoners at

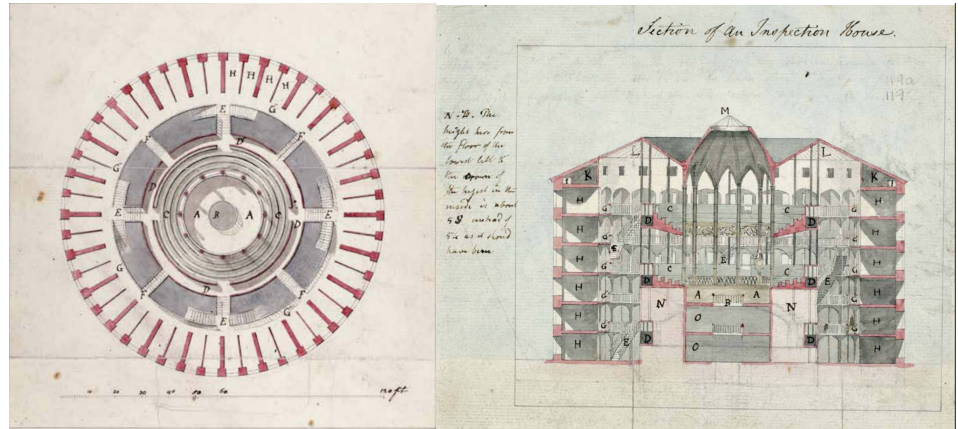


Figure 1 Images from Bentham's original design

any time, although never all of them at once. By contrast, prisoners could never see into the guard tower or know if they were being watched<sup>1</sup>. This was intended to create a sense of omnipresent surveillance for the prisoners: they *could* be watched at any time, and so they would behave as though they were always being watched. Although Jeremy Bentham never lived to see his prison come into existence, panopticon prisons have been built across the world as inspired by Bentham's original concept. Until its closure in 2016, the Stateville Prison in Crest Hill, Illinois was the only existing panopticon in the United States. Despite Bentham's desires to make the prison efficient and effective, the structure of the prison actually "magnified the already distressing auditory and visually chaotic experience prison frequently inflicts"<sup>2</sup> and ultimately led to its closure.



Figure 2 Inside the Stateville Prison.

Directly inspired by Stateville, the Presidio Modelo prison in Cuba was built in 1928 and consisted of 5 separate panopticons which made up the larger prison complex. It was initially designed to house 2,500 prisoners although it would eventually hold over 6,000 including Fidel Castro and other enemies of the government. Overcrowding ultimately led to riots which caused the prison's closure in 1966.

*Outside and inside of the Presidio Modelo in Cuba.*<sup>3</sup>

In "Discipline and Punish," Michel Foucault describes the nature of surveillance within the Panopticon as being "permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action"<sup>4</sup>. Foucault suggests that the Panopticon was revolutionary in its design as a divergence from the widely accepted principles of the dungeon. Bentham uses



“visibility as a trap” unlike previous methods of imprisonment, which sought to hide and deprive its prisoners of light. He makes the threat of being seen the primary tool for discipline rather than walls or chains. The architecture of the building creates an unbalanced power dynamic between the watching guard and the watched prisoner because the viewing is one-sided. The prisoners are forced to conform to the moral wishes of the viewer and behave as they are expected to. In this way, the prisoners begin to monitor their own behavior, internalizing the omnipresent surveillance and altering their actions. Through this process, the prisoners become their own guards and reinforce their own captivity. The overwatching-guard has a power over the prisoners which is amplified by the fact that they are anonymous and invisible. The guards’ power is de-individualized which gives them a sense of looming strength over the visible and vulnerable prisoner. This unverifiable power reflects Foucault’s concept of *disciplinary power* which he uses to explain that modern power systems are structured around training subjects to behave as they are expected to, rather than forcing them to<sup>5</sup>. Instead of occasionally enforcing regulation and imposing disciplinary measures when it is necessary, constant surveillance ensures that people are always behaving as they are expected to. This makes the gaze a powerful tool both for ensuring compliance as well as an enforcing the will of an overarching force.

## PART TWO: SURVEILLANCE, DISCIPLINE AND TECHNOLOGY

The development of technology has allowed the modern world to become increasingly accessible and ultimately, more visible. Closed-circuit television systems, or CCTVs, are often what comes to mind when one thinks of surveillance in the modern world: security cameras placed at storefronts in parking lots and elevators to ensure that people are held accountable for their actions and any wrongdoing which they commit. There is a fairly obvious link to the Panopticon here: technology has made surveillance easier and more widespread, creating a society where it is difficult to go unseen. Whether it is video footage of a person buying groceries at the supermarket or the digital archive of their search history, the actions of individuals across society are constantly monitored. When they are surveilled, individuals are directly accountable for their own actions and so they must act to avoid any possible transgressions. This makes security footage a valuable tool for maintaining acceptable behavior. The asymmetrical viewing between an individual and an identity-less camera reinforces the power that the technology has over people. This is also shown through the use of fake security cameras: the visual of the camera is more powerful than its ability to actually record. We fear the physical representations of surveillance because we cannot see who is behind them. While there are obvious connections between original Panopticon and technological surveillance, there is a significant distinction: a key element of discipline within Bentham’s theory is that the awareness of being seen plays a role in reinforcing the powerless role of the viewed subject. Often in modern society, however people are not aware of how frequently they are truly being surveilled. Perhaps this is because constant surveillance is becoming normalized and internalized into the way that our society operates. People learn to just accept that they are constantly being monitored so as to not disturb the systems of power which are dependent on people remaining complicit.

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<sup>5</sup> J. G. Merquior, "Foucault's 'cratology': his theory of power," in *Foucault* (n.p.: Fontana Paperbacks, 1985), 113, 114.

Passed just 45 days after the attacks on 9/11, The Patriot Act is often credited as sparking the US government's now extensive surveillance of its citizens. The Department of Justice describes the law as playing an integral role in "a number of successful operations to protect innocent Americans from the deadly plans of terrorists dedicated to destroying America and our way of life"<sup>6</sup>. Since 2001, the law has allowed the government to access phone records and computer records, as well as the credit and banking histories of any American through the issuing of national security letters (NSLs). The Patriot Act gives the government the ability to issue these NSLs without having to gain the approval of a judge and also states that once the private information is acquired, the government is not required to delete it. This means that the government has access to private information long after it is relevant to any investigation. Until 2015, the law also included a "gag" order which prevented Americans who received NSLs from speaking about the fact that their privacy was unwillingly taken from them<sup>7</sup>. The inability to speak out against the unconstitutional actions of the government perpetuates the position of the American people beneath their government and mimics the roles of prisoner and guard which Bentham described. Although all Americans are not necessarily surveilled at all times, the loose protections on privacy make it easy for the government to examine anyone without substantial justification. The Patriot Act allows the government to breach of the privacy of Americans and to directly violate the essential protections promised to all citizens in the Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Amendments to the Constitution. This mirrors the notion of the Panopticon in the government's identity as an omnipresent, all-seeing power.

Technological surveillance functions as a manifestation of the Panopticon in contemporary society in that both use sight to maintain their power in society, however the methods which each uses differ slightly. In this situation, the gaze is used as means for accountability and less for preventing crime. Because citizens are not always aware that they are being seen, they cannot shift their behavior to appear more moral in the eyes of the government. Since the public may not be aware of its presence, the government uses sight as a means for identifying wrongdoing rather than preventing it. This began to shift in 2013, when Edward Snowden, former CIA employee, released top secret information regarding the extent of NSA surveillance and the data collection of unknowing citizens. Snowden's actions have prompted an outcry against extensive surveillance with about "Twenty-five percent [of Americans saying that] they have changed the way they use technology at least somewhat after the Snowden revelations"<sup>8</sup>. When people become more aware of the fact that they are monitored, the modern systems of surveillance begin to move closer to that of Bentham's original Panopticon.

### PART THREE: THE GAZE AND GENDER ACROSS SOCIETY AND MEDIA

The concept of the Panopticon also reveals itself through the ways individuals define themselves in society, specifically the restrictive gender roles which determine and constrict the actions which men and women are permitted to carry out. In "The Second Sex," Simone de Beauvoir argues that "one is not born a woman, one becomes a woman"<sup>9</sup>. In the same ways that

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<sup>6</sup> "Highlights of the USA PATRIOT Act," Department of Justice, <https://www.justice.gov/archive/ll/highlights.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> "Surveillance Under the Patriot Act," ACLU, <https://www.aclu.org/issues/national-security/privacy-and-surveillance/surveillance-under-patriot-act>.

<sup>8</sup> Safia Ali and Halimah Abdullah, "Did the Patriot Act Change US Attitudes on Surveillance?," NBC News, last modified September 8, 2016, <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/9-11-anniversary/did-patriot-act-change-us-attitudes-surveillance-n641586>.

<sup>9</sup> Simone DeBeauvoir, *The Second Sex* (n.p., 1949).

prisoners begin to reinforce their own captivity in Bentham's Panopticon, women begin to internalize their reduced status in society and shift their behavior to suit patriarchal systems of power. The construction of the female<sup>10</sup> gender is often centered around male ideals. The awareness of the male gaze shapes the way women move through the world, consciously or unconsciously shifting their actions to suit an inescapable male audience. The prioritization of male ideals for female beauty further points to their role as "the viewed" in society. The expectation of perfect, feminine beauty, in order to gain the approval of men, creates a perpetual sense of self-consciousness which mirrors the self-monitoring noted by Foucault. Minimizing gender roles and the restricting male gaze imprison women in society and perpetuate the systems which keep them oppressed.

In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey applies de Beauvoir's *male gaze* to explain the biases which exist in media in order to appeal to a male audience. Mulvey explains how through a process of simplification, objectification, and sexualization, female characters in film are presented to appeal to the male viewer<sup>11</sup>. In this situation, the man is the watcher, the monitor of female behavior, and so the women who are presented in media are shaped to fit the desires of his gaze. Although most film audiences are filled with both men and women, the biased lens of the camera forces female viewers to assume the male gaze. This furthers the process of internalized judgement and self-monitoring.

The relationship between media and life works both ways. Society's construction of gender roles influences the content produced and, in turn, media reinforces the way women are viewed by themselves and others in everyday life. Across all of these situations, The Panopticon is represented by the omnipresent male judgement which inhibits the actions of women and maintains the existing patriarchal systems in society. The effects of this cycle are clear and quantifiable. A study conducted by Dove found that 9 in 10 women opted out of "important activities such as engaging with friends and loved ones" because they felt insecure about the way that they looked<sup>12</sup>. Additionally, around 50 percent of women reported that insecurity makes them less assertive and less inclined to stand by their decisions<sup>13</sup>. The *male gaze* forces women to be more aware of their own bodies and distracts from their ability to function at their full potential. An additional study found that when both men and women received a controlled, objectifying gaze from a member of the opposite gender, only the women consistently performed worse on a math exam which was given afterwards. The men performed at the same level regardless of whether or not they were objectified. Following the initial test, they found that women were more likely to try to seek out conversations with the men who had gazed at them previously, while men had a lesser desire to speak with the women. This suggests a dangerous cycle at play "in which women underperform but continue to interact with the people who led them to underperform in the first place"<sup>14</sup>. This shows the internalization of male desires due to

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<sup>10</sup> In this paper, the terms female and woman will be used interchangeably to represent gender. While in its literal definition, the word female commonly refers to the biological sex, this paper will apply it to anyone who can somehow relate to the experience of womanhood.

<sup>11</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (n.p., 1975).

<sup>12</sup> Vanessa Brown, "Women's body confidence becomes a 'critical issue' worldwide, Dove global study indicates," News.com.au, last modified June 23, 2016, <http://www.news.com.au/lifestyle/beauty/face-body/womens-body-confidence-becomes-a-critical-issue-worldwide-dove-global-study-indicates/news-story/5bf063c6a19c838cee9464a248af6bff>.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Sarah J. Gervais, Theresa K. Vescio, and Jill Allen, "When What You See Is What You Get: The Consequences of the Objectifying Gaze for Women and Men," *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, January 25, 2011.



the influence of the male gaze across media and society. Women are taught that they ought to appease men even if it comes at the expense of their own freedoms. We change our behaviors due to the knowledge that men will view and ultimately be critical of us. Inevitably, women become critical of themselves, making the male gaze and its effects an intrinsic aspect of the female experience.

#### PART FOUR: SEEING AND THE SELF

There are very few opportunities to go unseen. In every aspect of life, there is some form of surveillance which shapes the way we perform. It is possible that this surveillance makes us better. It assumes that being viewed by others encourages people to behave at their best because they are being held accountable for their actions. Perhaps human society would not function without any supervision. However, this viewpoint also ignores the numerous issues with the concept of the Panopticon as an inherently controlling and oppressive force. Human beings have learned to accept surveillance which we believe benefits the public good, however surveillance becomes immoral once it infringes on our right to privacy. We are okay with the unconscious surveillance from our peers which motivates us to perform better, but uncomfortable with the complete loss of private information to government agencies. It seems that we are comfortable with monitoring as long as we do not believe that it threatens our ability to make choices freely. This notion refuses to recognize that all of the choices we make are the by-product of outside influence. In “The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life,” Erving Goffman asserts that human beings shift their behaviors to perform the appropriate role for that specific interaction. He uses the analogy of life as a performance to explain how “we are all just actors trying to control and manage our public image, we act based on how others might see us”<sup>15</sup>. As Goffman states, who we are being viewed by shapes how we behave. Sight is an integral force not only in maintaining systems of power, but in governing an individual’s presentation of *self*. Depending on the situation, an individual may present several different *selves* in order to best fit their viewer. There is a dynamic of power here, however it does not entirely reflect that of the Panopticon because the roles of the viewer and the viewed are being played by both participants in the interaction at the same time. They are both influenced by the behavior of the other, although this may not always be equally influential for both actors. At a base level, people should have the same amount of influence over one another, however overarching privileges and systems of power play a role in who has the more dominant stance in the interaction (e.g. the male gaze as mentioned earlier). This notion of influence would imply an alteration from an original state— perhaps that some initial, most genuine self beneath the performance of self that exists within the sight of others. Goffman argues that this is not the case. He explains that beneath these roles, we are nothing— there is no self beyond what we present for others. This gives an additional element of power to the Panopticon and to those who view others in the world: not only does the Panopticon have the power to discipline individuals, but it possesses the ability to construct the individual altogether.

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<sup>15</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (n.p., 1959).

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