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Panopticon: An Automation of Power Mechanism

A Foucauldian Analysis of the Coercive Surveillance in 1984 by George Orwell

Abstract:

Jeremy Bentham's concept of Panopticon introduced the notions of complete regulation, discipline, and observance. It is an official way of accomplishing procedures of coercion and surveillance to ensure a structured working of an edifice of discipline. Correspondingly, the notion of discipline, Foucault believes, serves as a method of power employed to control the society. Surveillance is a seminal discourse in literary fiction which often assumes the repercussive nature of political events as tropes of discursive hegemony therefore this paper explores the concept of Panopticon as a monumental apparatus of power depicted in George Orwell's 1984.

Keywords: Panopticon, Surveillance, Discourse, Hegemony.

Panopticon, a symbol of total surveillance, has been associated with the establishment of an ideal state for some, while for the others it has stood as a coercive instrument for exercising power. The structural substantiation of Panopticon received much appreciation in the late eighteenth century. An English theorist and social activist, Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), presented the first architectural manifestation of Panopticon based on the surveillance machine designed by his brother Samuel Bentham who was an architect. It was an ideal circular prison, in which it was easy for a single person to keep watch on all the prisoners. This central tower was called the Panopticon. The structure ensured an effective play of power through which the subjects were placed in such a spatial pattern so as to ensure a constant and permanent surveillance of these subjects who were constantly aware of an invisible yet incessant observation. Jeremy Bentham has written twenty-one letters to promote Samuel's contraption as a technological fix for society: "Morals reformed- health preserved-industry invigorated[-] instruction diffused-public burthens lightened-Economy seated, as it were, upon a rock-the [G]ordian knot of the Poor- Laws ... untied--all by a simple idea in Architecture!" ([1787] 1995, preface).

In this schema, subjects were to be individualized in their own spaces, to be visible, and to be conscious of their perpetual visibility. This consciousness of being in a visible space, of being watched constantly, effectively ensures an automated exercise of power. Panopticon was, Bentham writes, "A new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind, in a quantity hitherto without example ... Such is the engine: such the work that may be done with it." ([1787] 1995, preface). Though the pure form of Panopticon collapsed after a few decades yet the very concept became an important part of the discursive and social formations. As the time passed, the scholars of surveillance studies emphasized more upon the metaphorical and not the literal significance of Panopticon which may work for policing and disciplining of power relationships. Michel Foucault regarded this panoptic surveillance as a model and summation of disciplinary power. He considered it an important means to exercise control and censure which helps to define the power relations in a society. According to him, Bentham's concept of Panopticon, emphasising upon the power and its insistent exercise through surveillance, is political in nature, "a way of defining power relations in terms of the everyday life of men" (Foucault 157). He says,

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“He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection.” (Foucault 88)

Discipline thus becomes a reason for the reinforcement and reorganization of the internal workings of power. Discipline itself becomes a form of power which facilitates the execution of power and comprises a whole set of devices, techniques, processes etc. Any deviation from a norm or knowledge (either established or implied by power), in this way, was declared abnormal and therefore was suggested to be normalized through punishment.

1984 by George Orwell can be analyzed as a good example of the widening of these “carceral circles” (Foucault 1494). Foucault says, “This great carceral network reaches all the disciplinary mechanisms that function throughout society.” (Foucault 1494). In his novel *1984*, George Orwell gives an idea of a unique electronic Panopticon which is far more effective. The implementation of such an electronic Panopticon would be cheaper yet more far reaching as it would observe people not just in closed spaces but also in spaces beyond the buildings and in open public spaces. He called it “Big Brother” (Orwell 2) and presented it as an empowering technology for a dictatorial governance. One cannot deny its association with communism. Orwell's novel foregrounds the feelings of fear associated with such political structures, and the term itself became a slogan for the ones who did not believe in policing through surveillance or in the tyrannical systems of governments.

The telescreen functions similarly to the Panopticon as conceived by Jeremy Bentham. In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault gives a detailed description of this kind of surveillance:

“[A]t the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy...They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible.” (Foucault 1500)

The ultimate end of the Panopticon is to establish discipline, restore order, and control the subjects completely by not giving them any chance to plot or riot against the governing authority. The merciless efficiency of the quality of unflinching and permanent observation gives a sort of power to the Panoptical system. There is a sinister feeling in the subjects who are being observed almost all the times and are caught unaware the moment they think they have stolen a moment of freedom for themselves. The coldness and cruelty of the system lies in the fact that the observance is electronic, remote and thus cannot be dodged. The lack of human involvement in this disciplining system makes it ruthless, mechanical, and intimidating. The fact that the “Big Brother” (Orwell 2) is watching all the time but is himself invisible provokes fear. This fear becomes a permanent mark of the lives of the subjects who live with the compulsion of always being visible to an authority. The same fear becomes the chief reason for their obedient behaviour, otherwise “You were abolished, annihilated: vaporized was the usual word.” (Orwell 19).

The efficiency of the Panopticon depends upon the symbolic significance of the system. It is because of this symbolic significance that the system does not even need someone to remain seated in the tower and keep an eye on all. It is in this capacity that it goes beyond being simply a prison or a structural containment, and becomes a device of power contextualized in multitudinous ways. In the novel *1984*, Orwell shows telescreen working on the model of the Panopticon that is formative of the behavior of the people who are constantly observed for almost all the actions they perform. The concept of Big Brother acts as a metaphor usurping the power which comes with privacy, which is thereby regarded as a seminal aspect shaping the political structure of a society. There is no private space where one can hide from the constant and coercive gaze of the Big Brother:

“On coins, on stamps, on the covers of books, on banners, on posters, and on the wrapping of a cigarette packet__ everywhere. Always the eyes watching you and the voice enveloping you. Asleep or awake, working or eating, indoors or out of doors, in the bath or in bed__ no escape. Nothing was your own except the few cubic centimeters inside your skull.” (Orwell 27)

The reality is that even the few cubic centimeters inside the skull are not owned by the person himself. The system promotes a kind of life for these individuals which discourages any free thought or idea to be conceived in their minds. In the above quoted citation from the text, it is very obvious that the presence of the ‘Big Brother’ encompasses all the senses of the individuals. Their eyes, their ears, their feelings, and even the very air they inhale.

Big Brother is presented as an all-knowing, constantly vigilant government that regulates the lives of the common people, their thought patterns, their vision, and even their dreams. The subjugation should be complete in

essence so that not just the body but also the soul is controlled and disciplined. The system produces its own language, manipulates history, ostracizes its critics, creates ideologies for the public, and destroys all means of knowledge which is considered another form of power. The knowledge formed under this surveillance is a direct effect of power. Foucault says about such a state of affairs, "Every point in the exercise of power is a site where knowledge is formed. Conversely every established piece of knowledge permits and assures the exercise of power." (Foucault 8)

Foucault sees the production of knowledge as a direct outcome of the production of power. He says, "Power produces knowledge...power and knowledge directly imply one another... there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations." (Foucault 1491). Knowledge thus is not autonomous rather becomes an instrument and an effect of dominant power relations. It is for this reason that Julia in the novel does not care to read books. "Books were just a commodity that had to be produced, like jam or bootlaces" (Orwell 130), she says. Even the very face of the Big Brother signifies a set of maxims (knowledge).

"The face gazed up at him, heavy, calm, protecting, but what kind of smile was hidden beneath the dark mustache? Like a leaden knell the words came back at him:

WAR IS PEACE

FREEDOM IS SLAVERY

IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH" (Orwell 104)

There is a complete standardization of knowledge, truth, history, feelings and even expressions in the novel. The norm becomes the truth and whatever and whoever deviates from it is brought back to normalization through a violent treatment which usually was referred to as something "not essentially different from that of curing or educating." (Foucault 1498). O'Brien, in the last part of the novel, works on Winston devising a similar cure for him. The emphasis here is on change and normalization. This is what is considered to be the ultimate achievement, no matter how violent this process of normalization ends up to be. O'Brien tells him that they have brought him there to be cured, and to make him sane. The suggested cure is destructive as well as formative of a self which conforms to the norms of the society. O'Brien says, "You are a flaw in the pattern, Winston. You are a stain that must be wiped out." (Orwell 255) Death is not considered to be a proper punishment. O'Brien instead reinforces that they do not meet resistance with fatal attacks on the subject but they treat the problem in a different way. He says, "We convert him, we capture his inner mind, we reshape him." (Orwell 255). This is even more disturbing for the subject remains alive in such cases but only physically. Their mind and soul are badly crushed and deformed.

This process of reshaping and remapping continues for history also. The history, just like all the other fields of knowledge, is also destroyed. It is revised so as to suit the interests of the party in power. "The past not only changed, but changed continuously." (Orwell 79) The actual events evaporate to give way to imaginary facts and figures created so as to constitute a fake knowledge supporting the prevalent power positions. Winston realizes this when he says that all the means of knowledge are destroyed or proven wrong through false logic. Not just the previous means of knowledge are erased but also they are replaced by new appropriated forms of knowledge. Winston affirms, "And that process is continuing day by day and minute by minute. History has stopped. Nothing exists except an endless present in which the party is always right." (Orwell 155).

All the means of documenting history were continuously revised so that the party has evidence for any claim that it makes at any point in history. "This process of continuous alteration was applied not only to newspapers, but to books, periodicals, pamphlets, posters, leaflets, films, sound tracks, and cartoons, photographs to every kind of literature or documentation which might conceivably hold any political or ideological significance." (Orwell 40). This shows complete care which which all the proofs of truth are erased. Norms are represented as truths and it is this culturally constructed truth or reality which forms the discourse in the novel. This process of construction of the discourse involves the principles of exclusion and inclusion. There are things which are foregrounded to keep the other things in the background. Winston, for example was very much aware that "an act of fabrication was taking place." (Orwell 45) No evidence of this fabrication or falsification was left behind and *truth* was already fading giving way to *norms*. "Everything faded into mist. The past was erased, the erasure was forgotten, the lie became truth." (Orwell 75) It is for this reason that Foucault believes discourse not to be the exact copy of reality but a

representation of a reality constructed by the power positions in a society. Lois McNay, while commenting on Foucauldian discourse theory, remarks, "Discourse is not analyzed in terms of a hidden nucleus of meaning but in terms of its external conditions of existence, that is, the power relations in which it is embedded." (McNay 88) The discourse in the novel can thus be analyzed not as an internally regulating formation but as something which is determined by and constitutive of the power relations that permeate the social realm.

Big Brother prioritizes complete control and discourages any uniqueness or deviation from the norms. To achieve this extreme degree of discipline the party attempts to regulate its citizens, not only their way of life but also their innermost thoughts. As Winston Smith enters the glass doors of the Victory Mansion, there is felt a very strong sense of being watched and observed all the time. "... A colored poster, too large for indoor display, had been tacked to the wall. It depicted simply an enormous face of a man of about forty-five, with a heavy black mustache and ruggedly handsome features." (Orwell 1) As the novel progresses, one can see these posters peeping in from all directions intruding the privacy of all the people around. "The black-mustachio'd face gazed down from every commanding corner... BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU, the caption said, while the dark eyes looked deep into Winston's own." (Orwell 2)

The constant and continuous gaze of the Big Brother pierces the lives and thoughts of the citizens of Oceania. It coerces the beliefs and practices which suit its own purposes. The gaze in itself is a force ruling the minds of the people living in Oceania. Winston feels that "The hypnotic eyes gazed into his own. It was as though some huge force were pressing down upon you__ something that penetrated inside your skull, battering against your brain, frightening you out of your beliefs, persuading you, almost, to deny the evidence of your senses." (Orwell 80) According to the (illogical) logic of the position of the political organization, they could even claim that two and two could make five and everybody around would have to believe in it because "Truisms are true..." (Orwell 81). Besides, people are expected to deny the validation of their own senses and are supposed to see each and everything through the eyes of the Big Brother.

To achieve perfection in surveillance, the state of Oceania has developed an official language of its own i.e. Newspeak. The language is devised so as to uphold the manifesto of *Ingsoc*, the political party in power. The dictionary of Newspeak undergoes a continuous change thus producing many revised editions. The language is primarily intended to eliminate the *Oldspeak* thereby eliminating also all the modes of thought associated with it. The words are destroyed so as to destroy the thoughts associated with it. Syme who is working on the eleventh edition of the Newspeak dictionary, disproves Winston for his dislike for Newspeak. He says, "You don't grasp the beauty of the destruction of words. Do you know that Newspeak is the only language in the world whose vocabulary gets smaller every year?" (Orwell 52). He regards the perfection of this language as a mark of the completion of the revolution of the party. Newspeak thus becomes one of the most effective tools of surveillance. It contains in itself the 'power of normalization'. Syme asserts, "Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thought crime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it...Every year fewer and fewer words, and the range of consciousness always a little smaller." (Orwell 52). The narrowness of vocabulary helps the imprisonment of all human thought which fails for it cannot find any word to express it.

The minimization of consciousness is also achieved though the technique of doublethink. Through doublethink one could control reality as well as the memory. History/truth thus is perceived only as it is presented by the party i.e. in a falsified form. Any other version is denounced. "But where did that knowledge exist? Only in his own consciousness, which in any case must soon be annihilated. And if others accepted the lie which the party imposed__ if all records told the same tale__ then the lie passed into history and became truth." (Orwell 34-5) All this leads one into the "labyrinthine world of doublethink" (Orwell 35). The paradoxical inferences that the doublethink implies obscure and finally erase the truth. "To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out..." (Orwell 35) is a process which is boggling enough for one to sink in a state of oblivion and to forget the truth completely. The result is that "All history was a palimpsest, scraped clean and reinscribed exactly as often as was necessary." (Orwell 40)

Art, literature as well as science are disregarded by the party in power in the state of Oceania. There is a total control over these forms of knowledge. An interest in any of the above mentioned fields of knowledge is

discouraged and disciplined. Syme, for instance says, "By 2050__ earlier, probably__ all real knowledge of Oldspeak will have disappeared." (Orwell 53). literature, another carrier of history, needs to be re-written in Newspeak. The limitation of the new language is especially designed to appropriate all literature to suit the ideologies of the party.

Individualism is highly discouraged for it threatens the establishment with a challenge to validate the normative social and political formations. To attain a state of total control, the private life is targeted by engaging in ways which eliminate any trace of privacy or individuality. Big Brother regards loneliness as a danger and thus uses different methods of surveillance as its techniques of power. Big Brother uses different means for spying and monitoring the lives of the people. There are regimentals on every street corner, there are helicopters hovering in the skies, peering into the windows of houses. The basic regulatory tool, a device called a 'telescreen', is installed into each house and apartment. The telescreen is a synergistic television which the individuals can watch, but which also allows the Big Brother to watch them. The citizens, however, remain unaware of the time and purpose for which they are watched. The expressions are to be controlled and not exhibited publically or in front of the telescreens. "He had set his features into the expression of quiet optimism which it was advisable to wear when facing the telescreen." (Orwell 5) Winston, as he sets down to write his diary finds out about himself that he no more possessed the power to express his feeling, emotions or even his views on a particular subject. "It was curious that he seemed not merely to have lost the power of expressing himself, but even to have forgotten what it was that he had originally intended to say." (Orwell 7)

It is not just the threat of a constant watch but also an overpowering force and relentless violence which keep the people disciplined. "People simply disappeared, always during the night. Your name was removed from the registers, every record of everything you had ever done was wiped out, your one-time existence was denied and then forgotten." (Orwell 19) The horror of the impending violent fate is enough to restrain people from going against any of the rules and principles devised by the party in power. Winston reflects upon the terrifying fate embedded in future for him. He says, "To be killed was what you expected. But before death (nobody spoke of such things, yet everybody knew of them) there was the routine of confession that had to be gone through: ..." (Orwell 103). The public confession was even more important than their death. It was accompanied by a terrifying series of violent punishments. It was specifically arranged for the others to realize why they need to conform to the given version of truth.

The most essential of all the crimes was 'Thoughtcrime' which could neither be concealed nor did it ever go unpunished. "Thoughtcrime does not entail death: thoughtcrime *IS* death." (Orwell 28) Winston reflects, "Nobody ever escaped detection, and nobody ever failed to confess. When once you had succumbed to thoughtcrime it was certain that by a given date you would be dead." (Orwell 103) Any "departure from the norm" (Foucault 1495) would mean punishment which means subjugation to the "power of normalization" (Foucault 1493) Seumas Miller argues, "Normalization is the process where the individual is not just categorized, but also controlled and even constructed by the power vested in institutions and antecedent social practices." (Miller 118)

Orwell's narrative of the Big Brother gives graphic details of the horror created by itself. Moreover, the images continue to haunt the legal and discursive formations of privacy and personal information. "The ultimate horror in Orwell's imagined anti-utopia," observes Dennis Wrong, "is that men are deprived of the very capacity for cherishing private thoughts and feelings opposed to the regime, let alone acting on them." (Wrong 125). Big Brother is intrigued by the the private life of the people because the private life of a person is an essential formative element of a person's life, mind, actions. All the human feelings and passions are shunned and discouraged. Under the surveillance of the telescreens no one can dare to express their feelings. The feelings of love, privacy and friendship are replaced in the people by the feelings of fear, hatred and pain. The sex instinct is killed and the idea of pleasure removed from it. The relationship between parents and children is also no more natural. The process of normalization renders the human beings devoid of any human feelings. O'Brien says, "Never again will you be capable of ordinary human feeling... Never again will you be capable of love, or friendship, or joy of living, or laughter, or curiosity, or courage, or integrity. You will be hollow. We shall squeeze you empty, and then we shall fill you with ourselves," (Orwell 256)

It takes no time for these disciplinary methods to become the general formulas of domination. In Foucault's panoptic model, discipline is perceived as a design of power which enables the system to coerce both the individual

and the society. The three steps involved in this coercive process are enlisted as observation, normalization and examination by Foucault (Discipline and Punish). O'Brien in the novel echoes these three steps when he is seen disciplining Winston's body in a torture cell: "There are three stages in your reintegration," said O'Brien. "There is learning, there is understanding, and there is acceptance." (Orwell 260)

The process of normalization also involved a complete destruction of all the truths which may challenge the authenticity of the norms established by the power party in Oceania. For this purpose are devised 'memory holes' in the buildings of Oceania. The powerful surveillance makes it almost an instinct of each individual to destroy all such material which may go against the 'truisms' of the party. "[Oblong] slits existed in thousands or tens of thousands throughout the building, not only in every room but at short intervals in every corridor. For some reason they were nicknamed memory holes." (Orwell 37-8). In this way, the humans are trained so as to know that all the material which does not co-incide with the party rules should be destroyed. The automation of their actions signify the robotic nature of their existence.

Winston suffers because he is unable to destroy his memory. In O'Brien's opinion, he has got a "defective memory" (Orwell 245). He says, "You are here because you have failed in humility, in self-discipline... Only the disciplined mind can see reality, Winston." (Orwell 249) This act of disciplining involves a complete subjugation to the ideals of the dominating power party. "Whatever the party holds to be truth *is* truth. It is impossible to see reality except by looking through the eyes of the party...It needs an act of self-destruction..." (Orwell 249)

In short, the panoptic discourse in Foucauldian theory can be identified and examined as a dominant discourse used in the novel *1984* by George Orwell. It is the constant, continued, and coercive surveillance of the panoptic model which automates the power mechanisms in the novel.

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