

Emily Gunn

Jeni Williams

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The Limits of Control: Exploring the Effectiveness of the Panopticon as an Instrument of
Power in the Dystopian Novel

“The Panopticon is a marvellous machine which, whatever use one may wish to put it to, produces homogeneous effects of power” (Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 202). This marvelous machine, as described by Foucault, is the foundation of many of the power structures found in the dystopian novel. The societies of Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) both use the main elements of the Panopticon to maintain power and control over their citizens. *Brave New World*, written before the influence of Nazi Germany and Stalin’s reign, paints more of a Utopian society in which everyone is conditioned to perform their assigned role in society. However, as the reader follows Bernard, the outcast of the Alphas, the Hypnopaedic phrases of the collective society become the guards of his social behaviour. Bernard’s struggle against this social conditioning and free thought reveals the novel’s darker side, aligning it with a more dystopian world. This social conditioning is akin to *Nineteen Eighty-Four’s* vision of Big Brother, which is highly influenced by Joseph Stalin’s regime in the USSR. Big Brother, along with the protagonist Winston, reflects the guard and inmate relationship within the panopticon. Winston never knows if and when the Thought Police will catch him in his deviancy. Both these worlds create a system in which its citizens are constantly aware of their behaviours and who is watching them. Whether this power structure works to achieve mass control in these worlds, is up for debate. In each case, the deviants are

caught under the surveillance, but how those in power control these deviants will ultimately reveal whether their panopticon functions effectively.

For the Panopticon to function, it must be structured in a way so that those in power are “visible and unverifiable” (Foucault, 201). The main structure of the Panopticon is that it is a circular prison in which the inmates can always be watched by the guard in the central tower. However, the inmates cannot see the guard, so they do not know whether they are being watched at any given moment. Foucault argues that this “induce[s] in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power.” (201). This meaning, the inmates would start to internalize good behaviours because they are hyper aware of the guards that could be watching them. The inmates then start automatically enforcing these rules upon themselves and each other. Ideally, this will form a fully complacent society out of the fear of the Panoptic gaze.

Huxley’s version of this panoptic gaze functions through the idea of Hypnopaedia. In the opening scene of the novel, the Director shows some students how they play phrases to the children in the Hatchery. Within these phrases are suggestions of who they should be in society, and how they should behave. He explains the effect of this repetition from early on:

The child’s mind is these suggestions, and the sum of these suggestions is the child’s mind. And not the child’s mind only. The adult’s mind too – all his life long. The mind that judges and desires and decides – made up of these suggestions. But all these suggestions are our suggestions! (Huxley, 23)

While there is not an obvious guard in a tower to provide constant surveillance, the gaze comes through these subliminal suggestions. When any act of deviance arises, they are reminded that “a

gramme is better than a damn” (47). This refers to taking a drug called Soma, which makes the person happy. While they may be unhappy with their lives and want to rebel from the norm, Soma induces them to be happy and compliant in their current state. These hypnopaedic phrases in conjunction with Soma, forces the people to constantly remind themselves that they should be displaying good behaviours, and enjoy doing it. This shows that the Panoptic gaze in this world operates as internalized good behaviours.

As well, their society operates on a collective community. Within each class, they are encouraged to constantly switch sexual partners. When Lenina starts to have relations with one man for too long, her friend Fanny reminds her that “everyone belongs to everyone else” (37). This idea disrupts the structure of what a traditional family and home are. In fact, it is taboo to talk about ideas of home or family. When Mustapha Mond is giving a lecture, he refers to this way of life as “insane obscene relationships” (31). He makes the idea of strong emotional connections horrifying, so that people do not form these connections with one another. Along with this taboo, someone being alone for too long is seen as suspicious. When Lenina and Fanny are talking about Bernard’s unconventional social habits, Fanny mentions that “‘he spends most of his time by himself – alone.’ There was horror in Fanny’s voice’ (38). With both solitude and deep social connections being taboo, the people are continuously forced to form smaller social connections with an array of people. Within this type of social structure, these people would be constantly under surveillance by their peers. Not only do the people have the panoptic gaze within themselves, they would also be under the panoptic gaze from everyone else in society.

The panoptic gaze in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is more literal in terms of the inmate-guard relationship. In this world, there is a direct correlation between the Panopticon and Winston’s relationship with Big Brother. Big Brother is a major force of propaganda and surveillance in

Oceania. Everywhere there are posters of a man with a mustache, symbolizing Big Brother. As Thomas Pynchon notes in his introduction to the novel, this picture also reflects the appearance of Joseph Stalin (vi). This gives a feeling of surveillance and terror right from the opening scene of the novel: “It was one of those pictures which are so contrived that the eyes follow you about when you move. BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU, the caption beneath it ran” (Orwell, 3). As well, the telescreens are constantly on in every home and the Thought Police are there to enforce any deviance. As Orwell describes, “You had to live – did live, from habit that became instinct – in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every moment scrutinized.” (5). What he is describing here is the direct effect that the panopticon has on the individual. It should be instinctual for Winston to be on his best behaviour because he knows that someone could be on the other end of the telescreen at any moment. Although Winston finds ways to overt the gaze by writing in his diary out of view and meeting with Julia in secret locations, he ultimately falls under the panoptic gaze and gets caught by the Thought Police. Raj Shah argues that the reason for this deviance is because Winston has not fully developed the internalized good behaviour (Urban Panopticism and Heterotopic Space in Kafka's *Der Process* And Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 708). This failure of self-discipline shows that the Panoptic structure will not work to instill fear and compliance in everyone. However, the fact that he does get caught shows that this panopticon is equipped with the power to find and to erase the visibility of its deviants. Big Brother is constantly visible, and it is unverified who is watching or when someone is watching.

Foucault notes another important element of the Panopticon: the idea of separation between the inmates, in order to get rid of any idea of a collective rebellion (200). This idea of separation between individuals is where the two novels start to differ in terms of their Panoptic

structure. While both societies in the novels have destroyed the conventional family structure, *Brave New World* runs on more of a collective society, as mentioned earlier. Although they are not allowed to form meaningful romantic relationships, the friendships that develop throughout the novel reveal the power in the exchange of ideas. For instance, Bernard and Helmholtz discover that they both share “the knowledge that they were individuals” (58). This knowledge allows them to express their thoughts freely with each other. They then proceed to talk to each other about their differences from the rest of society. Eventually, when the Director attempts to reveal that Bernard is “a conspirator against Civilization itself,” he is not demonized for his relationship with Helmholtz (129-130). It is mainly his thoughts on being an individual that he is criticized and by the end of the novel, cast out for. The collective society allows Bernard and Helmholtz to develop their thoughts of deviance. Helmholtz and the Savage’s relationship is important to note as well. Once Helmholtz reveals the rhymes that he wrote about solitude, “Helmholtz and the Savage took to one another at once” and they form an even more intimate relationship that Bernard is jealous of (159). Their exchange of ideas and writing reveal the power of social congregation. Their relationships show that long-term friendship lead to the exchange of rebellious ideas. However, this collective society is also the downfall of these deviants. Because Helmholtz shares his poem to his students, he recognizes that he becomes “a marked man” because of his deviating ideas (157). He and Bernard ultimately become victims to the Panoptic gaze from the collective society. Although this collective society goes against the Panoptic structure in terms of separation, the constant surveillance still holds enough power to control deviating ideas.

Nineteen Eighty-Four however, shows more distinct separation between individuals. Rather than Huxley’s homogenizing of sex, where “everyone belongs to everyone else” (37),

Orwell depicts a world where intimacy and relationships are abolished all together. The people mainly live by themselves but still monitored by a telescreen. The Party uses this separation of individuals “to kill the sex instinct, or, if it could not be killed, then to distort it and dirty it” to which Winston “did not know why this was so, but it seemed natural that it should be so” (76). At first, Winston recognizes that this separation prevents people from gaining something, but he is unsure of what that is. Later, once having sex with Julia for the first time he realizes that what is missing is passion. Orwell describes that their sexual relationship is “a political act” (145). This signifies that their sexual relationship connects passion to deviance. So, while the separation between individuals limits the amount of the exchange of ideas, it also eliminates strong emotions. Without these strong emotions, Winston was unable to connect his unhappiness as to why he was unhappy. His new sense of passion gave him a reason to continue to rebel. This reveals that if the notion of desire and passion were completely abolished, it would eliminate the congregation of individuals and differing ideas. Thus, this separation within the Panopticon further inhibits the ability for people to rebel.

Another point of distinction between the novels is how the deviants of the society are punished for their behaviour. In *Brave New World*, Bernard and Helmholtz are cast away to islands separate from the central society. As the Director notes, by sending them away, they “will have small opportunity to lead others astray” (Huxley 130). This causes another point of separation between ideas of deviance and the collective, compliant group. This separation eliminates the spread of rebellion. It would also be difficult to form a rebellion away from the society itself, if Bernard and Helmholtz decided to do so. However, even if they could revolt, they likely would not feel the need to. Mustafa Mond notes that they will be happy being sent away:

If he had any of the smallest sense, he'd understand that his punishment is really a reward. He's being sent to an island. That's to say, he's being sent to a place where he'll meet the most interesting set of men and women to be found anywhere in the world. All the people who, for one reason or another have got too self-consciously individual to fit into community life. All the people who aren't satisfied with orthodoxy, who've got independent ideas of their own. (199-200)

Thus, this separation ultimately makes the deviants content since they will be allowed to be themselves with other like-minded people. By sending them away instead of trying to torture them or eliminate them entirely, the society that is left will be completely complacent. And, in the event of more deviants arising, they will be sent away as well. Thus, the Controllers of this world are ultimately still managing control over everyone in the society. The *Brave New World* adaptation of the Panoptic structure functions effectively as a way to maintain power over society.

The main difference in punishment in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is how the deviants are tortured into compliance, rather than being sent away. In his work, Mario Varrichio notes that “the members of the inner party do not want to daze their subjects’ minds so much as to train them and bend their own existence: more than prevent from thinking, they impose *their own way of thinking*” (Power of Images/Images of Power in *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* 112). So, rather than kill Winston, or hypnotize him into compliance, they want Winston to truly believe their alternate facts and their realities. They achieve this by torturing him and giving him a choice between the worst thing in the world, or betraying Julia. They do not explicitly state this choice, but Winston ‘suddenly understood that there was just one person to whom he could transfer his punishment – one body that he could thrust himself in between himself and the

rats[...] “Do it to Julia! Do it to Julia!” (329). This ultimate betrayal is what makes the torturing stop and what converts him back into a compliant member of society. As stated earlier, the fear of the panoptic gaze is what makes it function properly. Through this torture of showing him his worst fear, is ultimately what breaks him down to do what O’Brian wants from him. O’Brian knows that he has been converted, because he instinctively does so without the mention of Winston’s options. Therefore, this Panoptic structure works because the deviants can be tortured until good behaviours are instinctive.

The two dystopias presented seem to operate under the same basic Panoptic structure. Both societies have the citizens under a behavioural gaze and the citizens being unaware of when this gaze could be operated. The difference between these worlds lies in their views on separation and individuality, and how the deviants are punished. In *Brave New World*, the taboo of being alone shows it is more of a collective society. However, the fact that everyone is in constant view of the observers, a collective rebellion would be hard to function. The constant switching of partners forms a strong enough disconnect to limit the possibility of attachment and formation of one’s own ideas. Since Bernard and Helmholtz are sent away from the society, the deviants become non-existent in the mass society. Thus, there would be no desire for change within the society because the masses are not aware of this other way of life. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Winston shows that there is possibility to hide from the gaze and rebel to a certain extent. Once Winston tries to form a collective rebellion with Julia and O’Brian, he gets caught and eventually is tortured into his love for Big Brother. This reveals that any attempts at rebellion will fail and the deviants will be rehabilitated back into compliance. Therefore, both texts show that the Panoptic gaze has the power to remove all autonomy from the individual in order to

produce mass compliance within society. Reflecting the times of war, unrest and totalitarian regimes, Huxley and Orwell remind us of the truly oppressive nature of these Utopian ideals.

References

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