

Using at least 3 examples, consider how image makers have utilised digital technology to explore one of the following: Conflict, Identity, the Surveillance

State, the Technological World?

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Photography In The Arts

Research in Context (ADAD5003)

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Throughout history, the methods in which governing bodies and those in power have used surveillance and its psychological effects have been used as a manner of controlling the ones being watched. Within this essay I will be studying and assessing the ways in which this long-standing observation of the masses has been used to influence artists in their work, and how the philosophies behind it are observed by the ones subjected to both the state and the informal watchfulness of the public. In what ways does it inspire their art and what ways do photographers hold a mirror to the practice by documenting it through their own eyes? How have they used modern resources to communicate this?

‘Panopticism’ is the philosophy revolving around the obedience enforced by the feeling you are under a scrutinising observation at all times. It is the concept that, if you believe you are being watched, you become deterred from acting outside of governing rules. Michel Foucault, a French philosopher, introduced the term regarding his belief that institutions were building themselves around the system of always observing while never being observed, a modern method of maintaining control over those who were subjected to it. He references in his book

Discipline and Punish that it is heavily mimicking the methodology of the Panopticon, a design created for prisons by the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham in the 18th century that would maintain order in a much more passive capacity than violent methods of the time.

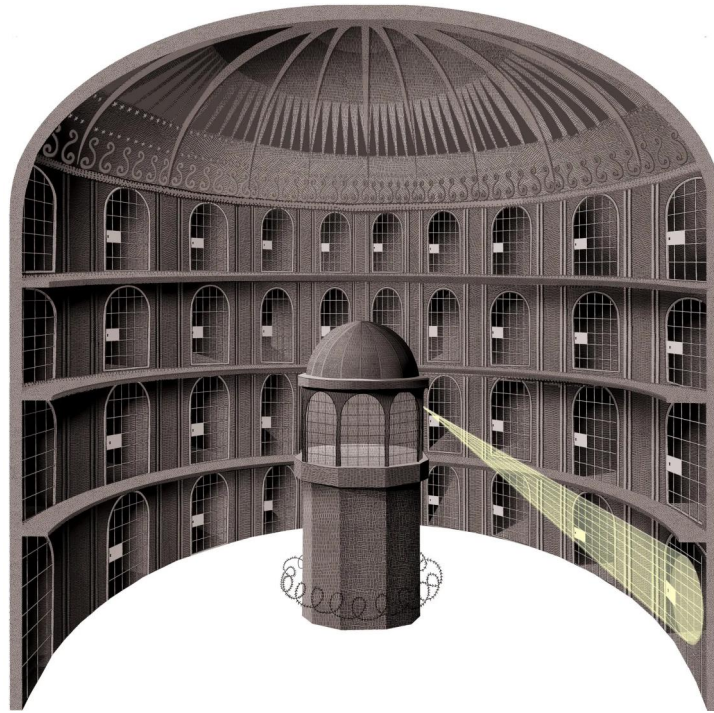


Fig.1

The design ensured that any prisoner “...is seen, but [he] does not see... is the object of information, never a subject in communication” (Foucault, 1975, pg. 200), by creating it so that their cells faced inwards towards one elevated station in the centre of the circular architecture, where guards would be within the centre. This, with a light always shining into the cells, would create the scenario where prisoners would always be exposed to the observation of the authority in their prison. The key principle in this prison structure envisioned by Bentham was that even when not under the watchfulness of whoever may or may not be in the Panopticon, those on the receiving end of the observation would forever act as though they were being

watched as they had no way of knowing if they did have someone monitoring them or not. Everything about their conditions was made to be intrusive and to in-turn prevent them from being able to hide at any time, a stark contrast to a dungeon for example, where one would be sealed away, the Panopticon always revealed everyone not within its central tower. The implementation of this within a modern society has found itself in the likes of surveillance through CCTV, of satellites mapping the landscape, and institutions such as the police and other secret services controlling the information accessible to a wider audience.



Fig.2

A project documenting the unique execution of censoring locations of military or government importance was created by Mishka Henner called *Dutch Landscapes*. The body of work depicts satellite images that Henner has collected from Google maps, his interest caught by the method

of which the Dutch government has chosen to blur their buildings with mosaic-like patterns across the landscape. With the ever-rising prevalence of digital information, The Netherlands had to naturally develop a way to keep locations of interest for criminal activity confidential, else it would run the risk of being targeted by organised attacks or abused as a form of intel for opposing countries. A popular way to do this is to normally white out the area, to blur it, or to cut the building in mind out of the satellite image and cloning the area around it to make up for the discrepancy. The Netherlands opted for a different approach, where they would block out the military or government building with areas of mosaic colours, not hiding the fact that they are indeed covering something up and that it is distinctly not for public viewing.

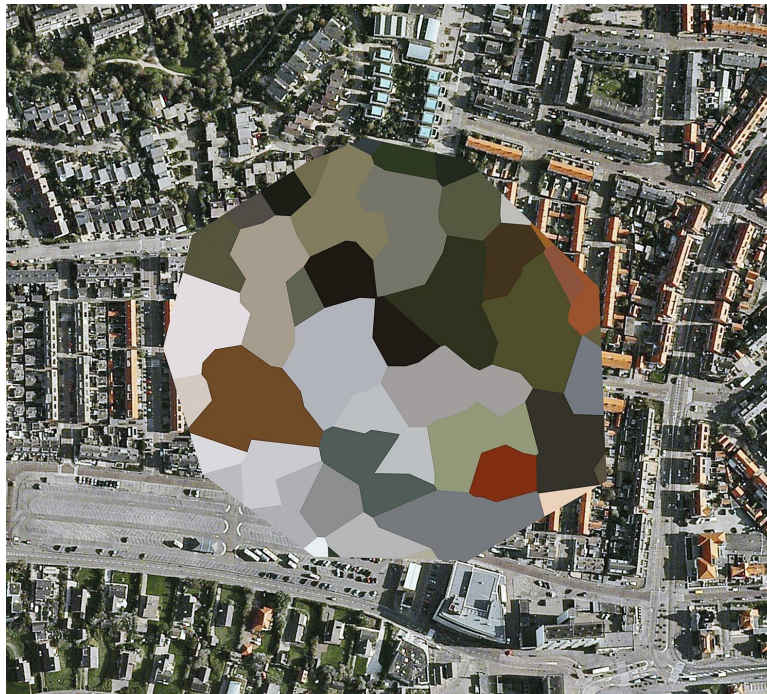


Fig.3

It is an active attempt to uphold some of the principles surrounding the construction of a Panopticon – a ceaseless all-seeing authority. Country governments are, ordinarily, the ones

who have implemented passive but consistent observation of the public, yet with the release of Google maps providing access to viewing the landscape to the masses, the power held by an unseen but constantly monitoring figure is greatly diminished, and therefore runs the risk of encouraging disorder. It is fascinating to see how the security of the state is maintained when a technology “...enables everyone to come and observe any of the observers” (Foucault, 1975, pg. 207) as it reveals the holes in the societal structures inspired by the philosophy of panopticism in an age of freedom of information. Henner has utilised the public access to highlight the unique method the Dutch have implemented to withhold what information they can and, in doing so, protect the safety and unknown nature of the people in positions of authority. Panopticism is ingrained so much so into the maintenance of order that no country wishes to be the one under the scrutiny of another person’s light, as information has become synonymous with power. The use of Google maps to shine a light on this is greatly impactful in this context, as Henner is using the public resource provided by the evolution of technology to identify the figures previously unseen to many people, and demonstrating how the ‘freedom of information’ will never be to the same extent as those keen to observe us.



Fig.4

Another piece of work that has made use of the technology at their disposal is *The New Town* project by Andrew Hammerand. This collection of images comes from a surveillance camera that was installed in a planned community atop a church in the centre of the town, intended to be used to document the building and development of the area. Anyone could access this 24hr stream and Hammerand noted that it was exceptionally easy for you as a member of the general public to control this camera. He was able to adjust where it looked out to, who it followed on their daily routes, how zoomed into the person he wanted to be to follow more closely, and even the exposure of the camera. The grainy, struggling quality of this surveillance camera evokes a similar imagery to that often seen in news reports, when they will use footage from CCTV to capture a suspicious individual or a criminal currently being pursued. This camera gives anyone who decides to control it a glimpse of the perspective from an observer in the scenario of a surveillance driven state. They can watch, unseen but a known presence to the people of the town, and closely follow any passersby through a lens that

innately paints the people walking past as someone to be wary of. Residents know of the camera on the church, and they can even access it themselves if they wanted to, but they will never know truly which of their actions are the ones that are watched and which will remain unseen, altogether discouraging criminal or genuinely suspicious activity. Furthermore, the camera being positioned atop the church of the town can be likened much to the judgement of the penitentiary's director and reporting guards that would sit within the central tower. For those who worship there, God is considered their witness as he is omniscient, and the fear of authority knowing everything you do was one of the key components as to why Bentham so strongly believed in his Panopticon design on a psychological level.



Fig.5

Hammerand comments that “...*mass surveillance through the interception of internet traffic is a powerful tool for monitoring and manipulation...*” (2017), which highlights the way that panopticism has remained integrated in the average person’s peripheral following along with advancements in technology. The likes of CCTV and other cameras has become a widely accepted aspect of urban living and while they can be partly intended to act as an archive, such is the case with documenting the progress in the town Hammerand was observing in his work, there is no doubt the action of putting up a camera in a high traffic area has the similarly desired effects of one focus of constant scrutiny over an area. This may soon become less and less effective however, as it’s yet another example of how the evolving world of technology has slowly allowed the wider population to have their own access to watch and remain unobserved in the process.

Peter van Agtmael, a Magnum photographer, did a collaboration project with the Edgeland Institute in 2022 called “*Documenting the Invisible*” where over the course of 10 days he explored and photographed the nature of Medellín, the sheer frequency of surveillance cameras posted around the buildings but also the passive practice the public there has developed of keeping their own gaze on him wherever he would go.

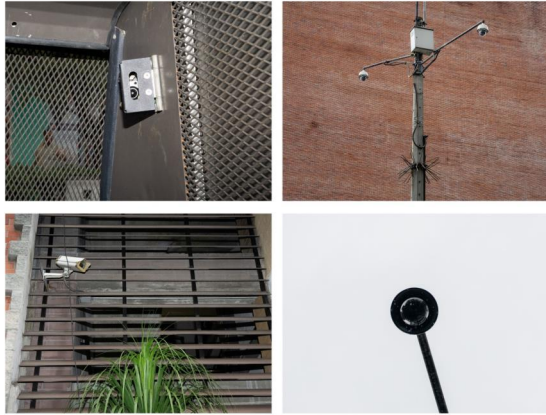


Fig. 6



Fig.7

Medellín, a city within Colombia, is said to have the palpable feeling of being watched. It is easy to see through the work produced by van Agtmael that there are few moments around the city where something or someone cannot see you or know what you are doing. The title of the body of work even tells us that though you can't see it, the role of observation is actively and habitually carried out amongst other members of the public. Though as one can expect, he would often find the gazes to be hostile at worst, prying at best. In a busy city where cartel activity is known to control certain areas, everyone becomes their own epicentre of observation, looking at the people who pass by to ensure that they follow their internalised rules.



Fig.8

The act of the residents of the city so notably tracking the moves of the public creates an interesting, self-sustaining approach to how they engage with the space in relation to the psychology that panopticism depends on. *"...Its strength is that it never intervenes, it is exercised spontaneously and without noise..."* (Foucault, 1975, pg. 206), much like the silent inspection coming from the people on Medellín's streets, it is a wordless enforcement of the expectations of an individual's behaviour, knowing that whatever they do it will be seen even when someone might think that they're alone. Where the CCTV doesn't capture the residents will and, in this instance, it becomes a cycle where the ones under the ceaseless watch of technology take their own opportunities to be as close as not being subjected to scrutiny as they can manage. My photographing these moments, Van Agtmael is holding a metaphorical mirror to the behaviour. It loses what kept it hidden and, by doing so, the uncertainty revolving around the idea of being monitored is gone. The subject is made aware that the artist is watching them back.

Michel Foucault was, undoubtedly, correct in his ideas about the future and the integrations of quiet pervasive control of the masses through constant monitoring and subtle psychological tactics to maintain order without violence. The blueprints of the philosophy for panopticism based around Jeremy Bentham's prison architecture have seen their usefulness in a much more modern setting, where the rising wave of technology allows for more discreet and sophisticated methods of observing the public's activity while the authority behind it remains hidden to the ones watched. By doing this, the larger organisations have instilled a sense of unease across the general public, and it results in them engaging in the same practice with their peers. Signs signalling that an area is highly monitored with CCTV make it clear to us that our actions are always observed within the public setting and, as a result, has normalised the need to have to watch others for suspicious behaviour. Under a guise of practical safety, surveillance of the general public is often excessive for what is actually required, and with fast developing technology the ability for those in power – the observers - to learn and monitor people without those same privileges – the observed – becomes easier while remaining behind the screen of the cameras. It is as Foucault says, "*visibility is a trap.*" (1975, pg. 200)

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