

“Big Brother” and Foucault: Power of Surveillance in George Orwell’s 1984

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Abstract

A theme common for many dystopian novels is the way in which a totalitarian government holds its absolute authority over the state by manipulating its people both mentally and physically by means of a variety of surveillance methods. In this context, George Orwell’s ‘1984’, written in 1949 portrays futuristically how a British society would suffer in an imaginary land where socialism has gone wrong subjecting the people to extreme oppression. The dystopian State of Oceania ruled by ‘The Party’ wields an absolute power through a daunting surveillance technology whose operational principles are meant to exercise what is known as “panoptical control”, fashioned in accordance with Jeremy Bentham’s prison design model introduced in the 18th Century. This can be theoretically perceived with reference to Michel Foucault’s views on panopticism presented much later in his 1975 book ‘Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prisons.’ A combination of surveillance technology and panoptic control is central to the functioning of power in ‘1984’. Against this background, this paper offers an analysis of the way in which surveillance functions in the novel which in many ways foreshadowed Michel Foucault’s later work on the functioning of power within a specifically similar social structure.

Key Words: 1984, Orwell Foucault, panopticism, power, surveillance, dystopia

1. Objectives

Since the publication of Michel Foucault’s book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prisons* appeared in 1975, many studies have used it to analyze power structures, control methods and specifically surveillance strategies that operate within many current societies. Foucault’s ideas on panopticism are used as a major theory to analyze the surveillance methods that are presented in dystopian novels. In this context, since its publication in 1949, George Orwell’s *1984* has inspired many studies on dystopian literature. The concept of “Big Brother” which is central to the novel is often used as a perfect example to define Foucault’s theory of panopticism. Although Foucault’s theories are used to analyze *1984*, it was written almost two decades prior to the publication of Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prisons*. This is a connection many do not notice or often neglect. On one hand the

objective of this study is to bring out the way in which surveillance functions in *1984*. On the other hand through the analysis, the study attempts to suggest how *1984* foreshadows Foucault’s views on the ways in which power operates within a despotic social structure.

2. Theoretical Background

The idea of discipline which functions as an essential component of political power is the principle idea of Michel Foucault’s book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prisons*, where he examines various ways discipline functions in a society. He proposes that discipline is used to control the human body and mind through an omnipresent gaze which aims to monitor the human body at all times. He identifies this gaze as the ‘panoptican gaze’, a concept introduced by Jeremy Bentham in 18th Century. A traditional panopticon as defined by Jeremy Bentham is a building containing a central watch tower with radiating spokes or an outer wall containing cells. The term “panopticon” gave rise to the social theory of panopticism, first presented by Michel Foucault. *1984* presents a world where socialism has gone wrong and where the citizens are living in a virtual prison. At the center of their prison like world, acting as the watch tower is the ‘Big Brother’. In his journal article, *Orwell: History and Nightmare*, American scholar Howe (1956) states that,

...the world of *1984* is more real than our own. The book appalls us because its terror, far from being inherent in the human condition, is particular to our century...Orwell has seized upon those elements of our public life that, given courage and intelligence, were avoidable (p.193).

In *1984* the control of the mind through disciplinary surveillance is obvious in attempts to control human thoughts in ways such as creation of the “Thought Police” (Orwell, 2000, p.16). Foucault (2012) claims that discipline

...is a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a ‘physics’ or an ‘anatomy’ of power, a technology. And it may be taken over either by institutions that use it as an essential instrument for particular end, or by pre-existing authorities that find in it a means of reinforcing or recognizing their internal mechanisms of power (p.215).

Therefore the party utilizes discipline to maintain power of its members by controlling every detail of their lives; from the time they wake up, to the contents of their meals, to the thoughts they could express.

The method of control used by ‘The Party’ is similar to Foucault’s description of power of surveillance as a type of discipline. In particular, the use of surveillance in *1984* finds resonance with Foucault’s discussion of Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon in which the power of an authority’s ‘gaze’ exercises discipline. The supremacy of the structure rests in the architectural design that allows those in power to observe others without them knowing if they are being watched. Panopticon is a “circular building. The apartments of the prisoners occupy the circumference. These cells are divided from one another by partitions. The apartment of the inspector occupies the center” (Bentham, 1995, p.29). Inmates self-discipline themselves because they are uncertain of the fact that they are being observed or not and due to the perpetual prospect that someone could be watching. Foucault viewed the panopticon as the ultimate device of discipline through surveillance.

3. Literature Review

It is impossible to leave out *1984* in a discussion regarding dystopian literature mainly because it exemplifies almost every characteristic a dystopian world portrays. Therefore many of the studies that carried out on dystopian literary genre include George Orwell’s *1984*. Not only it heavily influenced the later dystopian fictions, due to its publication just a few years post Second World War, the book presented horrific results of a possible future. Whereas Jeremy Bentham’s architectural design of panopticon or Michel Foucault’s (2012) identification of it as panopticism, a tool to exercise control over individuals, does not limit to literature instead they both are widely referred in study areas such as sociology, criminology and even in psychology. However Foucault’s ideas on power and its implementations are very common literary theories used in literary criticism. Similarly panopticism is widely used to analyze the power and controlling aspects in literary texts.

Many of the studies were conducted through a Marxist view point focusing on the plurality of power, social hierarchies or on power structures. *Utopia and Dystopia in Prophetic Literature* by Ehud Ben Zvi (2013) explores the utopian and dystopian literary features in prophetic literature with particular references to folk literature. The researcher discusses the social roles of utopian visions in prophetic books within their historical contexts. In the study he narrowly refers to the exemplifications of panopticism which are present in various historical contexts. Julia Gerhard’s (2012) *Control and Resistance in the Dystopian Novel*, discusses the controlling and resisting methods portrayed in dystopian novels. While her research is inspiring, the research does not extensively address the surveillance gaze which will be discussed in this study.

There are many studies that focus on dystopian literature and the aspect of power and control referring to many theories including Foucault’s. Panopticism is quite often used to analyse the aspect of discipline which is utilized as a tool to control people. Many of these studies have used Foucault’s (2012) ideas he presented in his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prisons* to analyse the text but have not paid specific attention to useful general resemblances between the principles of panopticism and the surveillance methods and their functions that prevail in *1984*. Therefore this study is an attempt to fill the gap in studies done on the similarities between Foucault’s ideas on panopticism and *1984*, which was written decades before Foucault presented his views on the controlling omnipresent gaze.

4. Data and Methodology

Primary data for the study is George Orwell’s novel *1984* which was published in 1949. The novel is set in Airstrip One (formerly known as Great Britain), a province of super state Oceania which is in a world of perpetual war, omnipresent government surveillance and public manipulation. The study is theoretically supported by using the text *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prisons* by Michel Foucault. The study pays particular attention to Foucault’s views on panopticism, the way it functions as a source of power in the society and how those elements are portrayed in *1984*.

5. Discussion

George Orwell’s *1984*, considered one of the dystopian classics, was published in 1949 as a product of his intense fear for the future generations. The startling dystopia Orwell creates was heavily influenced by Yeghev Zamyatin’s *We* (1924) and was written as a critique of Stalinism which was prevailing at the time. The corruption and dreadful violence implemented by Stalin over the Russian people and the rise of Hitler in Germany spread a possible rise of communist or fascist rule throughout Europe during the Second World War. In *1984* Orwell presents this dreadful future he feared, where the society is under a brutal dictatorship, wars and where people have lost their individuality. The ruling ideology of the Big Brother is fortified by means of propaganda, manipulations of the past and various forms of surveillance. Among many theorists on surveillance, few have been as influential as the French philosopher Michel Foucault. In one of his most significant works, *Discipline and Punish; The Birth of the Prisons* (1975), he extensively discusses the topic of surveillance. The system of severe discipline is applied in dystopian societies to manipulate people’s bodies and minds to ensure the maximum power of the state. Foucault believes that discipline is a powerful mechanism used to govern people’s

lives “to produce subjected and practiced bodies, docile bodies” that can be “manipulated, shaped,” and “trained” for the benefit of the state (2012, p.146). He proposes that discipline is used to control the human body and mind through an omnipresent gaze, which aims to monitor the human body at all times using the Panoptican gaze. In the section entitled “Panopticism”, he refers to a little known architectural design by Jeremy Bentham, eighteenth century English philosopher, called the ‘panopticon’. Initially envisioned as a suggestion for reforming the prison system, Bentham’s work describes a central tower in which supervisors can observe prisoners’ cells in a round building. As exemplified by Foucault (2012) given the structure and that “effect of backlighting” the supervisors can watch the prisoners appearing as “captive shadows” in their cells, like “so many small theaters, in which each actor is alone, individualized and constantly visible” (p.216). There are some useful general resemblances between the principles of panopticism, the surveillance methods and their functions that prevail in *1984*, despite the fact that Foucault presented his views almost two decades post the publication of *1984*.

For Foucault (2012), surveillance “reverses the principle of the dungeon” of the dungeon’s “three functions- to enclose, to deprive of light and to hide- it preserves only the forts and eliminates the other two” (p.216). Foucault applies this concept to the society where the governmental organizations achieve an immense control over humans through omnipresent surveillance which he introduces as the Panoptican gaze. It is exemplified in *1984* in the form of the telescreen that constantly monitors individuals to maintain their docility and ultimately turn them into their own observers. The control of the mind through disciplinary surveillance is obvious in attempts to control human thoughts, creation of the Thought Police in *1984* to detect and eradicate any sign of unconventional thinking.

In *1984*, no one gets very far away from the instruments of surveillance, but it is not just the telescreens that sheds the light on people. In a world of suspicion, fear and self-preservation created by government policies, citizens of Oceania do not know whom to trust. In such an atmosphere, it is no wonder that people stay away from one another whenever they can; metaphorically they construct their own “side walls,” the equivalent of the literal ones described by Bentham to keep prisoners apart. Keeping people isolated is also advantageous for the authorities, since it cuts down on the possibilities for conspiracy.

There are many similarities between Foucault’s (2012) description of the prison system as a model of society and Orwell’s imagined society in *1984*. According to both Bentham and Foucault, one of the major importance of panopticon is that it does

not require any additional power or discipline because surveillance itself exerts control over individuals and therefore they self-discipline themselves. Panopticism allows “the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it” (Foucault, 2012, p.217). In *1984*, people of Oceania limit themselves and control their own actions because of the omnipresent gaze of the Big Brother. The protagonist, Winston Smith states,

...even from the coin the eyes pursued you. 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, 2000, p.27).

This faceless surveillance gaze which may or may not be always there to watch your actions is a vivid portrayal of Foucauldian understanding of the primary purpose of surveillance; to discipline the citizens. The disciplinary power exercised through the telescreen in *1984*, enables the state to observe people and assure that their physical bodies never rebel against the authorities. It also verifies that the people are fulfilling the given social duties for the growth of the production to guarantee “its economy and efficacy, its continuous functioning and its automatic mechanisms” (Foucault, 2012, p.206). The telescreen becomes the literal representation of the gaze and a perfect device to discipline the bodies. Foucault (2012) speaks of the immense power this process generates in favour of the authorities;

He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and knows it, assumes responsibility for power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjugation (2012, p.202).

Tyner (2004) supports this claim stating that due to the invisible nature of the omnipresent gaze, the body is always conscious of its actions because of “induced paranoia of not knowing when one is being watched” (p.137). The perpetual omnipresent surveillance gaze is designed to observe the body in space and time and when the rigid discipline is performed on the body, the body adopts it and it becomes innate. The movements of the body have to be observed by the Party, surveillance invades all “spatial and temporal elements” of everyday lifestyle of the people and “every behaviour, however, inauspicious, is disciplined along the state lines” (Tyner, 2004, p.136). Winston Smith writes that a Party member “was never alone except in

bed” knowing that the telescreen never let them wander without its gaze (Orwell, 2000, p.72).

Another striking similarity between Foucault’s views on panopticism and Orwell’s creation of Oceania is that even though power is known to exist no one is certain if they are being observed. Stating the effectiveness of panoptic gaze Foucault (2012) claims that,

...the prisoner should be constantly observed by an inspector: too little, for what matters is that he knows himself to be observed; too much, because he has no need in fact of being so. In view of this, Bentham laid down the principle that power should be visible and unverifiable (p.217).

Relatively Winston Smith comments;

...there was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment. How often, or on what system, the Thought Police plugged in on any individual wire was guesswork. It was even conceivable that they watched everybody all the time. But at any rate, they could plug into your wire whenever they wanted to. 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 movement scrutinized (Orwell, 2000, p.3).

Although Foucault (2012) never referred to Orwell on his views on panopticism, the similarities between the two are remarkable. Considering the fact that Foucault (2012) presented his ideas almost three decades post the publication of *1984*, it is possible that Orwell was familiar with Bentham’s architectural design of panopticon and the horrific results it may produce if it exists in a context of abusive power. Foucault (2012) claims that the rebels or transgressors are created by the system itself and ultimately punished by the same system:

The carceral system does not cast the un-assimilable into a confused hell; there is no outside... In this panoptic society of which incarceration is the omnipresent armature, the delinquent is not outside the law; he is, from the very outset, in the law, at the very heart of the law, or at least in the very mechanisms that transfer the individual imperceptibly from discipline to the law, from deviation to offence. Although it is true that prison punishes delinquency, delinquency is for the most part produced in and by incarceration (p.301).

In the same manner in *1984*, O’Brien, whom Winston thought to be a fellow rebel but in fact a Thought Police official, tells Winston,

No one who has once gone astray is ever spared. And even if we chose to let you live out the natural term of your life, still you would never escape from us. What happens to you here is forever. Understand that in advance. We shall crush you down to the point from which there is no coming back. Things will happen to you from which you could not recover, if you lived a thousand years” (Orwell, 2000, p.256).

Furthermore both Orwell (2000) and Foucault (2012) shed light on the fact how people’s minds can be controlled through surveillance. The discipline in a dystopian world, materialized in the continuous surveillance system that “fixes ...or regulates movements,” does not subjugate only the body but also the human mind. (Foucault, 2012, p.219). The process of controlling and disciplining the mind is again connected to the same idea that one can never be certain if he or she is being watched. In Oceania, to think a thought that disagrees with the dominant ideology is considered a crime that can be punished with death. Therefore the telescreen forces citizens to control and regulate their thoughts which are supervised by the “Thought Police”. Winston Smith explains this horrifying situation saying;

[i]t was terribly dangerous to let your thoughts wander when you were in any public place or within the range of a telescreen. The smallest thing could give you away... (Orwell, 2000, p.54).

Tyner (2004) suggests, in a dystopian world “all facets of humanity are monitored and disciplined” and even your thoughts do not belong to you anymore. Thus “to think your own thoughts that somehow challenged the ideology literally meant annihilation” (p.138).

In conclusion, *1984* stands as a perfect representation of panopticism in exercise. As stated above, there are various similarities between what Orwell has expressed in *1984* and Foucault’s ideas on panopticism. For both Orwell and Foucault, the idea of constant and never ending watch from a bigger power is essential for a society ruled under a totalitarian government. It is also important to mention that dystopian literature emerges as a result of horrifying historical events and also provides a prediction over future possibilities that might take place if the world continues to move forward along the same path as it is doing now. Orwell’s novel, *1984* is a warning about the injustices that are created by communistic governments and portrays a world of horror no man wishes to experience. Both Orwell and Foucault

seem to suggest that under the guise of absolute authority, man is capable of bringing chaos upon his fellow humans. Primo Levi, a holocaust survivor and an author, once famously stated, “it happened, therefore it can happen again: this is the core of what we have to say” (as cited by Homer, 2001, p.225). The world has recurrently proved that history has a tendency to repeat itself therefore dystopian literature will always stand as a warning to mankind of the end results of absolute power. Though the views of Orwell (2000) and Foucault (2012) are presented within the gap of more than two decades, they express the similar ideas on the exercise of absolute power and the ghastly results of tyranny.

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