

Inflation, Amplification, Multiplication in Foucault's Panopticon

Segmentation + Separation

Confusion and disorder can destroy the structure of a society. Foucault describes these forces in the form of a crowd as “a compact mass, a locus of multiple exchanges, individualities merging together, a collective effect”¹ The most decisive solution to this messy complexity is segmentation and separation; producing “a collection of separated individualities.”² Rock collections are managed well if they are divided by type in separate small boxes arranged in a grid and displayed for viewing in a glass case. The same is true of people who are organized as a collection of separated individualities. Clarity can be forceful when its vehicles are segmentation and separation.

All the mechanisms of power which, even today, are disposed around the abnormal individual, to brand him and to alter him, are comprised of those two forms from which they distantly derive.³

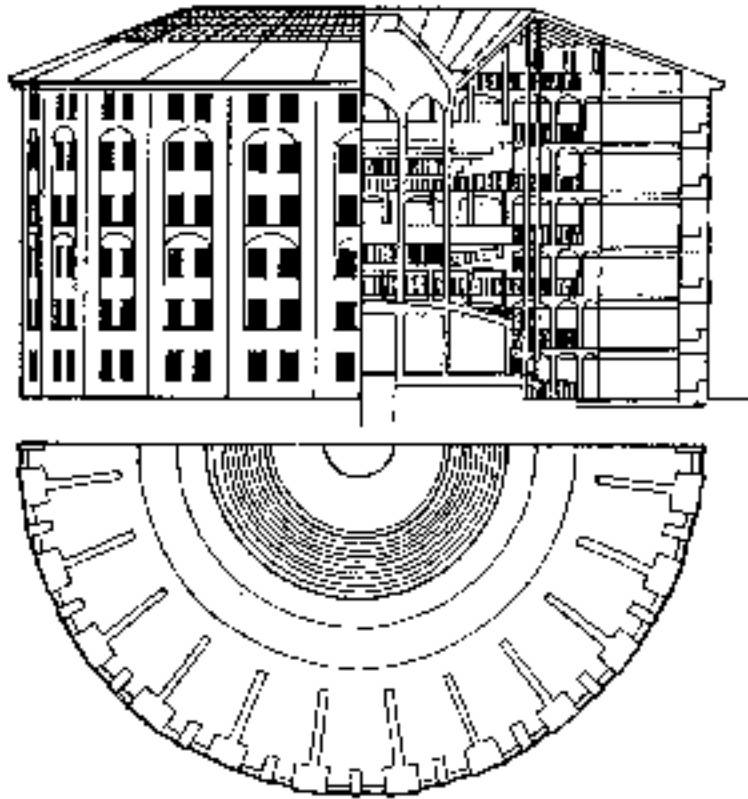
These two forms of discipline, in Foucault's terms, aim to separate the abnormal individual from the rest (who are presumed to be more uniform in some respect) and to segment sections of society, even down to the level of setting one individual apart from another. The ultimate purpose of segmentation is analysis, which allows knowledge to be gathered about an individual.

This is a reductionist method: To break a complex system down to its most fundamental parts and then to analyze those parts in order to understand the whole. Gestalt, which implies that the whole might be more than the sum of its parts, is far too messy and unpredictable. It reeks of a crowd with its multiple exchanges and collective effects.

¹ Michel Foucault, Panopticism, pg. 592

² Michel Foucault, Panopticism, pg. 592

³ Michel Foucault, Panopticism, pg 591



The Panopticon, designed by Jeremy Bentham in 1785, is for Foucault the “architectural figure” of a composition which finds a way to fit segmentation and separation together in one functioning whole. He calls it a “new physics of power”⁴ and the “general principle of a new “political anatomy” ”⁵ The Panopticon is a circular arrangement of jail cells that separates each prisoner in to an individual box whose inward-facing surface is open. This prevents each inmate from seeing their neighbors but allows them to be easily seen by a monitor stationed in a central watch tower. What it eliminates is the need for the costly exercise of brute force in the maintenance of order. If a prisoner can be seen at all times, it is difficult for them to plan or prepare for deviance. If one prisoner can not see the next prisoner, it is impossible for deviance to be strengthened or enabled by collaboration. The prisoners will be, of course, aware of this set of facts, as they make up the substance of their built environment and they are reminded of them with every glance. Under the impression that they are always being potentially surveyed by disciplinary powers, they can be relied on to discipline themselves. Those who have knowledge of the prisoners through surveillance hold power over them.

⁴ Michel Foucault, Panopticism, pg. 595

⁵ Michel Foucault, Panopticism, pg. 595

Knowledge of Truth + Power

One driving force behind the Panopticon thrusts knowledge of truth together with power. In order to sustain power, truth must be produced, and producing truths facilitates power. Like a panoptical prison guard holds non-physical power over the prisoners, the priest has power over the confessing subject because he knows things about them. Carl Bernstein has power over Hillary Clinton because he knows things about her. He wields this power by publishing books like [A Woman in Charge: The Life of Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) that dissect her claims to truth about herself and hold his truth to be truer than her truth. As a journalist, his job might ideally be to distribute power by disseminating his knowledge of truth to vast numbers of people previously powerless because of their lack of knowledge of truth. This is all a caricature, but functional in a self-proclaimed Democratic society like ours, because of a collective high regard for people who know and tell the truth. (or an equally potent loathing of those people if they refuse to share it).

Vision + Knowledge of Truth

Through the Panoptical lens, vision can produce power. For Foucault, vision is a process by which we locate objects in space in order to have disciplinary control over them. In the Panopticon, prisoners are kept separate from one another in cells which ensure both the potential of their visibility and the separation of meaningful knowledge from their senses.

He (the prisoner) is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject of communication.⁶

Further,

The Panopticon is a machine for dissociating the see-being see dyad: in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen.⁷

Foucault points out the prisoner's simultaneous axial visibility and lateral invisibility. This invisibility, he writes, "is a guarantee of order."⁸ The reason is that order, which otherwise must be maintained by spectacular displays of power and coercion (which

⁶ Michel Foucault, Panopticism, pg. 592

⁷ Michel Foucault, Panopticism, pg. 592

⁸ Michel Foucault, Panopticism, pg. 592

Foucault caricatures as “the meticulous exercise of the right of the sword”⁹), is more easily upheld through having knowledge of subjects, which is effectively power over them. The mechanism of such knowledge is visibility. Foucault redefines power as something that is most efficiently managed and held by techniques of visibility. Sight is not some epistemological modality whose purpose is to serve the task of confirming knowledge claims. It is a mechanism for social, individualized surveillance.

Visibility + Disembodiment

What is important is that the prisoners are always *potentially* visible. Their supervisors, whose identity does not matter, do not need to actually watch them at all times; their discipline can be disembodied, absorbed in to a nebulous matrix of fear. As they can potentially be seen at any time, prisoners in the Panopticon are always on their best behavior. They do not know when they will be seen, and the ever present hum of “maybe” keeps them lulled in to a softly abstract kind of fear. Foucault calls this the “machinery of a furtive power.”¹⁰

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.¹¹

Prisoners learn to discipline themselves. The Panopticon can efficiently “reduce the number of those who exercise” power, “while increasing the number of those on whom it is exercised.”¹² Its strength, therefore, is that it never intervenes forcefully. It never needs to, because its disembodied gaze is ever present in the imaginations of prisoners.

Disembodiment + Everyone

While the ever-potential gaze *need* not employ many people, it is *able* to handle the efforts of multitudes because its function is in a way automated once it is understood and internalized by its subjects. Because the gaze is disembodied, and potentially carried out by many people, it must be held up by a skeleton of documentation.

⁹ Michel Foucault, Panopticism, pg. 595

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, Panopticism, pg. 593

¹¹ Michel Foucault, Panopticism, pg. 593

¹² Michel Foucault, Panopticism, pg. 594

Once inhabitants of the seeing machine at the center of the panopticon are disembodied, they can multiply. Anyone, and any number of people, can occupy the tower.

The seeing machine was once a sort of dark room into which individuals spied; it has become a transparent building in which the exercise of power may be supervised by society as a whole.¹³

This turns the Panopticon on itself.

This panopticon, subtly arranged so that an observer may observe, at a glance, so many different individuals, also enables everyone to come and observe any of the observers.¹⁴



fractal shelves by Takeshi Miyakawa Design

To Increase + Multiply

The organizational pattern of a shelving system, turned on itself, would either become shelves of shelving systems in a warehouse, or small shelves sitting on the original shelves. Either result is fractal and amplifying. The Panopticon, when turned on itself, acts similarly. It will, Foucault holds, strengthen its own production, economy, and ability to multiply.¹⁵

The Panoptic mechanism is not simply a hinge, a point of exchange between a mechanism of power and a function; it is a way of making power relations function in a function, and of making a function function through these power relations.¹⁶

¹³ Michel Foucault, *Panopticism*, pg. 595

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, *Panopticism*, pg. 595

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *Panopticism*, pg. 595

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, *Panopticism*, pg. 595

There is a hint of autopoiesis here; something that creates and strengthens itself through a dialectic between structure and function.

Multiplication + Competition

The news industry expands this way. By splitting into many different (and competing) companies, it creates multiple Panoptic viewing towers. By distributing information via the internet, television, radio, and print, it invites more and more people in to the panoptic towers - people who are themselves the subjects of the other viewing towers. By delivering never ending sequential dramas, it perpetuates a need for itself. By piling flashing cameras at the sight of a happening, it creates a spectacle that attracts more cameras. By multiplying the cameras at events like riots, it creates the potential of amplifying their intensity (when people know that they are on camera with a chance of broadcasting their cause, they act differently. Protest signs in foreign countries are often written in English.) By amplifying an event, they attract still more camera-carrying-coverage, more stories, more viewers, more questions, more curiosity, more need for more news.

Foucault extends the model of the Panopticon to the hospital, the school, and the workshop. All of these, he holds, are structures which collect information, separate individuals in to categories like “sick” and “healthy”, “productive” and “unproductive”. These structures prevent individuals from communicating with one another by orchestrating architecture, in the form of hospital curtains, desk arrangements, and cubicles. At the same time, they solidify mechanisms for monitoring patients (such as x-rays) and cataloguing their productivity and behavior (evaluation forms, medical records). In time, subjects internalize these mechanisms and monitor themselves. This self-monitoring is formalized in structures from peer evaluation groups to public testimonials.

Schools can operate according to rich Panoptical structures. Students are separated from one another in that they can not easily see one another in a lecture hall (lateral invisibility) while the lecturer, standing at the front of the room, can see them with ease (axial visibility). Information on students is centrally gathered in transcripts and can be viewed by individuals who are invited in to the panoptical viewing booth, from other teachers to potential employers. An institution like this can be expected to amplify itself: as Foucault says, “to increase and multiply”¹⁷

Inflation + Amplification

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, Panopticism, pg. 595

What is degree inflation but self-amplification? A complex of educational institutions, operating in a panoptical way, will view and analyze not only their students but also one another. As parent-teacher meetings and school board meetings invite more people into the viewing tower, organizational structures like accreditation boards run via frameworks like the College Art Association. It is the collective decision of such organizations to decide what degree is required for teaching at a college level. Some views of progress require that these standards amplify over time. Years ago, an artist could teach at the college level with a Bachelor's degree. Today, an artist can not even apply for such a job without a Master's. Some schools are now offering a Doctorate degree in studio art. This is how the MFA began to take hold. Classical musicians are often required to hold a Doctorate in order to teach at a conservatory. Some years ago, a Master's was the terminal degree. In the 1970's, musicians who held only a Bachelor's degree were hired as professors at the Eastman School of music.

The very nature of a formally accredited degree could be looked at through the lens of "fixing" which for Foucault is a primary objective of discipline and an "anti-nomadic technique."¹⁸ This is particularly interesting with regard to the visual arts in Europe and North America, which have been shifting fervently away from the objective criteria of the French Academy for decades, certainly since the advent of Modernism. In broad terms, the Renaissance revival values of the Academies were challenged by the standards of the Bauhaus, which found their footing at Black Mountain College in the 1950's. These standards were subsequently challenged by the next pedagogical generation in the form of abstract expressionism and action painting. Artists from Willem de Kooning to Cy Twombly carried this movement forward until it was in turn challenged by conceptualism, as well as other more fractured associations. More recently, the work of well-known artists from Matthew Barney to Mel Chin has posed drastic challenges to even this scattered framework. The Twentieth Century has been called the age of the isms¹⁹. The tone of the twenty-first century often feels like laughter at the idea of an "ism".²⁰ With all of this shifting, multi-coded, *ism-dodging* / *ism-celebrating* paradigm-challenging / paradigm-celebrating inside-joke-driven multiplicity running through the Art/art-world, standards can be difficult to pin down.²¹ The Bachelors of Fine Arts and Masters of Fine Arts degrees seem to attempt the work of fixing this nomadic re-defining of Art. In this way, they operate as tools of discipline.

(discipline) could reduce what, in multiplicity, makes it much less manageable than a unity; ... That is why discipline fixes; it arrests or regulates movements it

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, *Panopticism*, pg. 597

¹⁹ See, for example, the work of Dr. Honora M. Finkelstein

²⁰ This is largely a personal observation. For examples, see writings such as *Postmodernism becomes post-mining-ism* (thedialecticalplaya.com) or see YouTube videos by *the Bedroom Philosopher*.

²¹ What is good art? The official answer may have been staked out by the owner of the domain name www.goodart.org. Perhaps, though, linguistic passion should be taken in to account. In this case, the writers behind www.fuckinggoodart.nl might have the debate cornered. The www.goodart.net people seem to be interested in sales, and Kant says that the sublime aesthetic experience should be one of disinterest, which probably excludes monetary drives. How much do domain names cost?

clears up confusion; it dissipates compact groupings of individuals wandering about the country in unpredictable ways; it establishes calculated distributions.²²

The devices of this clarifying, fixing discipline are observation and documentation.

In order to extract from bodies the maximum time and force, the use of those overall methods known as time-tables, collective training, exercises, total and detailed surveillance.²³

As a knowledge base is compiled about an individual or group, it becomes possible to utilize that group's energy for the expansion of disciplinary structures. When the curriculum of a University can comprehend Conceptualism, it is able to harness the energy of that movement for the expansion of its student body, the growth of its reputation, and the extension of its influence in the field. Not only must the process of observation and documentation segment individuals and groups into *isms* of different names in order to understand them, but the Panoptical structure must be turned on itself; The collected documentation must be organized in to time-tables and charts. The Panopticon not only expands and inflates itself, but it also organizes itself. It is a phenomenally autopoetic, hegemonic, and sustainable model.

²² Michel Foucault, Panopticism, pg. 598

²³ Michel Foucault, Panopticism, pg. 598