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MLA 9th ed.

Mathiesen, Thomas. "The Viewer Society: Michel Foucault's 'Panopticon' Revisited." *Theoretical Criminology*, vol. 1, no. 2, May 1997, pp. 215-234. HeinOnline.

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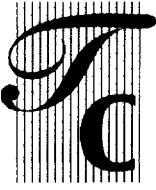
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## The viewer society

### *Michel Foucault's 'Panopticon' revisited*

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#### Abstract

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The article takes its point of departure in one limited and consciously selected aspect of Michel Foucault's use of Jeremy Bentham's concept of 'Panopticon': in his book *Discipline and Punish*, the aspect of surveillance, and the emphasis on a fundamental change and break which presumably occurred in the 1800s from social and theatrical arrangements, where the many saw the few, to modern surveillance activities where the few see the many. It is maintained that Foucault contributes in an important way to our understanding of and sensitivity regarding modern surveillance systems and practices, which are expanding at an accelerating rate, but that he overlooks an opposite process of great significance which has occurred simultaneously and at an equally accelerated rate: the mass media, and especially television, which today bring the many — literally hundreds of millions of people at the same time — with great force to see and admire the few. In contrast to Foucault's panoptical process, the latter process is referred to as synoptical. Together, the processes situate us in a viewer society in a two-way and double sense. This article explores the developmental parallels and relationships between Panopticon and Synopticon, as well as their reciprocal functions. It is maintained that the control and discipline of the 'soul', that is, the creation of human beings who control themselves through self-control and who thus fit neatly into a so-called democratic capitalist society, is a task which is actually fulfilled by modern Synopticon, whereas Foucault saw it as a function of Panopticon.

#### Key Words

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• Foucault • mass media • Panopticon • surveillance • Synopticon

In 1975 Michel Foucault published his widely acclaimed and important book *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*. The book was quickly translated into a number of languages, and was first published in English by Allen Lane in 1977 under the title *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Vintage edition, 1979). Through the 1970s and 1980s it exerted a strong influence on the sociology and philosophy of social control in a number of western countries. It also initiated important debates over the issues involved.

The concept and idea of ‘panopticon’, which Foucault borrowed from Jeremy Bentham, is among the most important in the book. It is also a concept which strongly needs to be supplemented.

### **Panopticism**

The opening chapter of *Discipline and Punish* gives a dramatic and terrifying account of an execution in Paris. The year was 1757, and the man who was executed was a certain Robert Francois Damiens, who had attempted to murder the King of France, Louis XV. Those who have read the book will remember the account. The execution was brutal to say the least, Damiens was kept alive for a long time and tortured in the most painful manner, and finally torn apart by horses tied to his arms and legs. The horses had to be helped by the executioner to complete the task. The spectacle was attended by large crowds. What Foucault does not tell us is that members of the Court also attended, and that the ladies of the Court wept, not in pity with the culprit, but over the toil of the horses.<sup>1</sup>

This was, to repeat, 1757. The next account in Foucault’s presentation — and again this is well known to his readers — implies a complete change of scene. Three-quarters of a century has past. The year is 1838, and Foucault’s source now is the rules for ‘the house of young prisoners in Paris’. The life of the young prisoners is regulated by rules down to the most minute details, from the first drum roll in the morning, making the prisoners rise and dress in silence, through prayer, working hours, meals, education, rest, the washing of hands, the inspection of clothes, and finally order, silence and sleep ‘at half-past seven in the summer, half-past eight in the winter’. Gone is the open brutality and uncontrolled infliction of physical pain so characteristic of Damiens’ execution; instead, there is a carefully developed system of rules regulating life in full and complete detail.

What does Foucault want to illustrate by contrasting the two scenes?

First, he wants to say something about the change in the nature of punishment, from physical punishment to prison. Second, and more importantly, he wants to say something about a change in the content of punishment, from the torture of the body to the transformation of the soul. ‘At the beginning of the nineteenth century’, Foucault states, ‘the great spectacle of physical punishment disappeared; the tortured body was

avoided; the theatrical representation of pain was excluded from punishment' (Foucault, 1979: 14). Surely, prison was and is a 'corporal' kind of punishment. But in this context, the body is a tool or a link: 'During the 150 or 200 years that Europe has been setting up its new penal systems, the judges have gradually . . . taken to judging something other than crimes, namely, the "soul" of the criminal' (p. 19). As a correlate, the public character of punishment has disappeared: 'Punishment, then, will tend to become the most hidden part of the penal process' (p. 9).

Third, Foucault wants to say something about a broad historical change of social order. Apparently, this is his most essential point. 'This book is intended', he says, 'as a correlative history of the modern soul and of a new power to judge' (p. 23). Modern penal leniency is actually a technique of power, and by an analysis of it 'one might understand both how man, the soul, the normal or abnormal individual have come to duplicate crime as objects of penal intervention' (p. 24). By the control of the soul, vis-a-vis the control of the body, I understand him to mean the creation of human beings who control themselves through self-control, thus fitting neatly into a so-called democratic capitalist society.

The new prisons had, with variations, an important common form: they were organized so that a few could supervise or survey a large number. They were, in this sense, 'panoptical', from the Greek word *pan*, meaning 'all', and *opticon*, which represents the visual. To Foucault, however, the movement towards the panoptical form was not only a characteristic feature of the modern prison. A new kind of society was implied in the transformation. 'In appearance', he says, panopticism 'is merely the solution of a technical problem, but, through it, a whole new type of society emerges' (p. 216). To Foucault, panopticism represents a fundamental movement or transformation *from the situation where the many see the few to the situation where the few see the many*.

He lets the German prison reformer M.H. Julius describe the transformation. Antiquity had been the civilization of spectacle. 'To render accessible to a multitude of men the inspection of a small number of objects'; this was the problem to which the architecture of the temples, theatres and circuses responded. This was the age of public life, intensive feasts, sensual proximity. The modern age poses the opposite problem: 'To procure for a small number, or even for a single individual, the instantaneous view of a great multitude' (Julius, 1831, in Foucault, 1979: 216). Foucault formulates it this way: 'Our society is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance . . . We are much less Greeks than we believe. We are neither in the amphitheatre, nor on the stage, but in the panoptical machine, invested by its effects of power, which we bring to ourselves since we are a part of its mechanism' (p. 217).

On this background, Foucault describes how panopticism has been transported 'from the penal institution to the entire social body' (p. 298). A carceral society has been developed, in which the principle of panopticism gradually and imperceptibly has invaded ever-larger segments. 'At the

moment of its full blossoming', Foucault admits, the new society 'still assumes with the Emperor the old aspect of power of spectacle'. The old monarch may be kept in the new state. But the tendency is that 'the pomp of sovereignty, the necessarily spectacular manifestations of power', gradually yield to 'the daily exercise of surveillance, in a panopticism in which the vigilance of the intersecting gazes was soon to render useless both the eagle and the sun' (p. 217). It is the normalizing gaze of panopticism which presumably produces that subjectivity, that self-control, which disciplines people to fit into a democratic capitalist society.

### Synopticism

In what follows, I shall touch on the wider ramifications of Foucault's thesis, notably his perspective — as I understand it — on the control of the 'soul', but rather than providing a full discussion and interpretation of Foucault, which numerous others have provided anyway, I will largely and explicitly limit myself to putting the magnifying glass on one selected aspect of his book: the emphasis on panoptical surveillance as such. There are several good reasons for doing this. For one thing, that aspect is surely there in *Discipline and Punish* as one important component or ingredient; indeed, the French title — *Surveiller et punir* — in itself alludes to it. Second, the same aspect has in a decisive way influenced parts of criminology, notably the study of and debate about the 'widening of the net' of formal control around the prison (Cohen, 1985; McMahon, 1992). Third, recent historical developments suggest the increasing and politically extremely great importance of the modern surveillance machines as such.

As an observer of the development of modern control systems in Norway and other western countries, I find the panoptical principle, where the few see the many, to be a pronounced aspect of various systems and parts of society. First, in the immediate circle around the prison, organized systems of surveillance of those who are released from prison have grown. Second, further away from the prison, but still within the realm of the criminal control system in a broad sense of the word, organized computerized surveillance of whole categories of people rather than just individuals, with a view towards possible future crimes rather than past acts, has grown enormous. In Europe, the recent enormous systems of computerized police cooperation — the Europol Information System, the Schengen Information System, the so-called Sirenes and the European Information System — are cases in point. Third, still further away from the prison, and outside the realm of the police and other formal control systems, it may be said that important social institutions have surveillance functions. It may be maintained that the school system, the medical services, the psychiatric and social systems through their classificatory and diagnostic techniques and scales, are panoptical systems with carceral functions. We certainly live in a society where the few see the many.

Yet, something of crucial importance is missing. Acceleration of surveillance where the few see the many, yes. But is Foucault right in saying that we have developed *from* a situation where the many see the few *to* a situation where the few see the many?

As a striking parallel to the panoptical process, and concurring in detail with its historical development, we have seen the development of a unique and enormously extensive system enabling *the many to see and contemplate the few*, so that the tendency for the few to see and supervise the many is contextualized by a highly significant counterpart.

I am thinking, of course, of the development of the total system of the modern mass media. It is, to put it mildly, puzzling that Michel Foucault, in a large volume which explicitly or implicitly sensitizes us *inter alia* to surveillance in modern society, does not mention television — or any other mass media — with a single word. It is more than just an omission; its inclusion in the analysis would necessarily in a basic way have changed his whole image of society as far as surveillance goes.

Corresponding to panopticism, imbued with certain basic parallels in structure, vested with certain reciprocal supplementary functions, and — during the past few years — merged with panopticism through a common technology, the system of modern mass media has been going through a most significant and accelerating development. The total time span of this development — the past 150 to 200 years — coincides most remarkably with the period of the modern growth of panopticism. Increasingly, the few have been able to see the many, but also increasingly, the many have been enabled to see the few — to see the VIPs, the reporters, the stars, almost a new class in the public sphere.

Formulated in bold terms, it is possible to say that not only panopticism, but also *synopticism* characterizes our society, and characterized the transition to modernity.<sup>2</sup> The concept is composed of the Greek word *syn* which stands for ‘together’ or ‘at the same time’, and *opticon*, which, again, has to do with the visual. It may be used to represent the situation where a large number focuses on something in common which is condensed. In other words, it may stand for the *opposite* of the situation where the few see the many. In a two-way and significant double sense of the word we thus live in a *viewer society*.

As I have said, the panoptical and the synoptical structures show several conspicuous parallels in development, and they together, precisely together, serve decisive control functions in modern society. Let us first look at some of the parallels, and, by way of conclusion, the control functions.

### *Parallels*

I want to emphasize three parallels:

1. The first one has been alluded to already and strikes the eye immediately: *the acceleration which synopticism as well as panopticism has shown in modern times, that is, during the period 1800–2000.*

The story and history of the media is well known, but has to be sketched briefly in order to place the panoptical development in perspective. Foucault takes the modern prison, which came between 1750 and 1830, as his point of departure for panopticism. Precisely at the same time, between 1750 and 1830, the mass press was born — the first wave of mass media after the printed book. Though we had newspapers in the 1700s, the 1800s was the seminal century, and the 1830s was a seminal decade in what was to become the mass media society par excellence, the USA. In 1833 Benjamin Day founded the *New York Sun*. Two months later, on 3 September 1833, the circulation was 3000, and after five years it was 30,000. James Gordon Bennett's *Herald*, also of New York, was the main competitor. In 1836, Bennett wrote:

Books have had their day — the theatres have had their day — the temple of religion has had its day. A newspaper can be made to take the lead in all of these in the great movements of human thought and of human civilization. A newspaper can send more souls to heaven, and save more from Hell, than all of the churches or chapels in New York — besides making money at the same time.

(quoted in De Fleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1989: 54)

The growth of the newspaper presupposed a comprehensive scientific and technical development which took place about the same time — the train and the steam ship, which facilitated the distribution of newspapers as well as the interchange of news, and the telegraph, which made rapid communication of news possible. It also presupposed important social conditions: a changed political role of the citizens and the development of a large middle class followed by the growth of trade and consequently of large markets. In a peripheral country like Norway, the same development took place, only a little later.

And, as we know, then came the other media, in a neatly packed row (for details of the development, see De Fleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1989; for Norway, see Mathiesen, 1993), as striking parallels to the development of panopticism. The second wave was the film, also founded on a complex set of technological innovations and social conditions. First silent film, then film with a sound track added, black-and-white film, and finally colour film. The enormous popularity of the film implied the gathering of large crowds of people in large film theatres, blatantly contradicting Foucault's thesis that in modern times we have moved away from the situation where the many see the few, away from synopticism. The popularity of the film presupposed a social structure where mobility, especially out of the family, was possible. In turn, the film probably also facilitated such mobility.

Then came the radio, followed by television, as the third and fourth wave. Television shared the history of the radio as well as its financial basis, its traditions and talents. A large number of complex social circumstances established a need and a search for new communication media which could communicate instantaneous messages over very great distances. An under-

standing of electricity in the 1900s constituted the foundation of instantaneous communication in its modern form (instantaneous communication was not unknown in earlier times — drum signals and smoke signals in so-called primitive societies, the semaphore stations in Napoleon's France, and so on). The radio was in many ways a by-product of a long, continuous and basic chain of investigations into electrical energy. The 1920s was the great decade for the establishment of regular broadcasting from a number of stations in the United States and other parts of the world.

And, finally, from 1945 in the United States and 1960 in Norway, television, based on a technology developed before and during the Second World War. The basic synoptical character of the media was in a fundamental way enhanced by television. As television developed, millions, hundreds of millions, of people could see the few on the stage, first by the aid of the camera after the event, and more recently on the spot and directly. We may speak of a fifth wave, from the 1980s on, with the enormous technological advances in the form of video, cables and satellites, in Norway and other countries accompanied by privatization of radio and television, as well as digital technology and entirely new pathways of communication. With the plethora of television channels, a decentralization has also taken place, so that there are many synopticons. But there are certainly also many panopticons, many surveillance systems. The decentralized, narrowly oriented panopticons may quickly be combined into large broad-ranging systems by simple technological devices, covering large categories of people in full detail. So may, on given important occasions, the various decentralized synopticons, and in terms of general content the synopticons are strikingly similar.

In his account of society as developing *from* a situation where the many see the few *to* a situation where the few see the many, Foucault fails to take into account all of the major waves of synoptical development briefly outlined above. Perhaps he could not foresee the developments in the 1980s and 1990s, but the major trends were certainly visible in 1975.

To some extent the media waves have supplemented or added on to each other. For example, the radio has adjusted to television and become the medium of the kitchen, the car and the beach, and in Norway the local newspapers have so far survived despite television. But the media waves have also replaced each other. Norway as well as Sweden have very recently seen a downward trend in newspaper circulation, probably partly caused by competition from television and other modern media. At the same time the older media, like the newspapers (at least the tabloid papers) and the radio, have changed form (large headlines, large pictures, short texts) as well as content (entertainment), bringing them within the orbit of the culture of television. It appears that television has become a model for the old media (Mathiesen, 1993: 296–7). The most typical medium where the many see the few, the clearest contrast to Foucault's panopticism, has in other words developed dramatically, either directly or through its influence on the older media.



2. Second, the panoptical surveillance structure and the media structure are parallel in that they are archaic, or 'ancient', as means or potential means of power in society.

Clearly it is Foucault's view that the history of the panoptical structure as a main model commenced in the late 1700s and the early 1800s, though he also mentions historical lines going further back, and he does mention that the panoptical techniques taken 'one by one' have 'a long history behind them' (1979: 224). This historical understanding is expressed through the dramatic *break*, which Foucault emphasized so strongly, from the control policy of the mid-1700s to that of the mid-1800s.

This historical understanding must be wrong. It seems closer to the facts that a panoptical system, though strongly developed during the most recent two centuries, has ancient historical roots; that not only individual surveillance techniques, but the very model of the panoptical surveillance system, goes back to the early Christian era or before. Indeed, in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 2:1) it is stated: 'And it came to pass in those days that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world shall be taxed. And this taxing was first made when Cirenus was governor of Syria. And all went to be taxed, everyone into his own city.' The Roman State, in other words, undertook such a large task as to tax, and thereby register, what was at the time 'all the world' in the archives of the state. The surveillance was hardly always successful as a control measure; Herod failed in his search for at least one first-born male child. But this is not the last time surveillance systems have failed to 'hit'; it is indeed a characteristic also of modern data systems. Probably all great state structures in history have had such systems, at least in elementary form. In our own more recent history, three institutions have been particularly important: the church, the Inquisition and the military. I will return to them shortly.

Synopticism is equally ancient, with the emphasis on maximum diffusion from a few leading figures of visual impressions, sound impressions and other impressions. Foucault emphasizes the ancient nature of this structure, though he does not relate it to the media — his point is that it *is* the old form. The older institutions of spectacle differed in several respects from the modern ones. In the older context, people were gathered together; in the modern media context, the 'audience' has increasingly been delocalized so that people have become isolated from each other. In the older context, 'sender' and 'receiver' were in each other's proximity, be it in the ancient theatre or the festivals and image-building of the Colosseum; in the modern media context, distance between the two may be great. Such differences, and especially the general fragmentation which is alluded to here, may have consequences for persuasion as well as protest. Yet, the similarity and continuity is also striking.

The main point here is that the models of both systems go back far beyond the 1700s, and that they have historical roots in central social and political institutions. What has happened in the 1800s, and especially in the 1900s, is that organizational and technological changes have advanced the

use of *both models* by leaps and bounds, thus making them into two basic characteristics of modernity.

3. Third, and most importantly, panopticism and synopticism *have developed in intimate interaction, even fusion, with each other*. The same institutions have often been panoptical as well as synoptical. Historically we have many examples of this.

The Roman Catholic Church, with the confession during which many isolated individuals confide their secrets one by one to the unseen representative of the Church, has functioned panoptically as a setting in which the few — the priests — have seen and surveyed the many — the people of the town. Simultaneously, the Catholic Church has definitely functioned synoptically, with its enormous cathedrals intentionally placed in very visible locations for synoptical admiration, drawing large masses of people to listen to the sermon, and with the Pope speaking from the balcony of St Peter's on Easter Day.

The Inquisition was panoptical; indeed, panopticism was its very purpose in relation to heresy and witchcraft from the 1200s on: 'As a spider it sat there on guard, watching so that catholicism was not exposed to harmful influences from abroad or from corrupted souls within the country itself' (Henningsen, 1981: 28; translated from the Danish by the present author). But it was also synoptical, with its manifestations of great authority through its many visitations, with the highly visible Inquisitor up front, throughout the communities of the enormous Spanish empire.

The military has always had a strict disciplinary hierarchy providing possibilities for hidden surveillance from the upper echelons of the system. But it has also been synoptical with highly visible military leaders victoriously entering the city after the battle.

Even more clearly the interaction — indeed, fusion — of panopticism and synopticism may be seen in the old prison chapels from the 1800s. They were panoptical in that the minister could see all of the prisoners sitting isolated in their booths, but they were at the same time synoptical in that the prisoners, from their booths, could see only one person — the minister in the pulpit.

In modern times, the interaction has taken new form, and concrete fusion is even more pronounced. First of all, in our century, panopticism and synopticism have developed on the basis of a joint technology. The telegraph and the radio have, as I have already mentioned, been methods on both sides. In our own time, television, video, satellites, cables and modern computer development are joint technological features. In his book 1984 George Orwell described panopticism and synopticism in their ultimate form as completely merged: through a screen in your living room you saw Big Brother, just as Big Brother saw you. We have not come this far, but we clearly see tendencies for panopticism and synopticism to merge into one. A fusion takes place between the two structures in the 'electronic super highway'. Today it is technologically entirely possible to have a large number of consumers synoptically watch television and order and pay for

the commodities advertised, as well as undertaking a number of other economic transactions, while the producers of the commodities panoptically survey everyone, controlling the consumers' ability to pay, ensuring that payment takes place, or interrupting the transaction if solvency does not obtain.

Great emphasis has recently been placed on various forms of interactive mass media. The Norwegian author and lawyer Jon Bing has described the 'interactive novel', where the receiver participates with active inputs, thus creating the novel in cooperation and interaction with the original author. His book on the topic has the suggestive title *The Book is Dead! Long Live the Book!* (Bing, 1984). The Internet, World Wide Web and the numerous video games which have entered the market are further cases in point. The receiver actively enters the system and takes out the information needed, combines it with still other pieces of information in numerous novel ways, and actively transmits his own information to others through the Web pages, or, in the case of games, activates actors in various ways through the game. However, two points should be kept in mind, especially in connection with the Internet as the most advanced point-to-point interactive system:

First, contrary to what academics in the universities (who have relatively free access to the Internet and the Web) tend to trust and believe, the Internet and the Web are hardly for 'everyone'. For one thing, installation and use of the Internet costs money. This in itself makes its distribution skewed in terms of class and status. Furthermore, the use of the Internet is predominantly a male preoccupation. In Norway, about 75 percent of the users are men, in spite of the fact that access is more evenly distributed. In addition, there is a center-periphery dimension involved – in Norway, an industrialized and urbanized society, the use of the Internet is heavily located in the capital city and immediate surroundings: 35 percent of the inhabitants of Oslo have access to the Internet in one capacity or another, while the percentages in the regions are far lower. All of this points towards a new class division in terms of information and communication.

Second, capital increasingly sees the Internet as a source of profit, and economic and political control of the Internet is currently becoming an issue. This goes to the heart of the matter. In Norway, the media company Schibsted, small by international standards but a giant within Scandinavia, has recently launched a new Internet 'concept'. In cooperation with Norway's largest cable owner, the company offers access to the Internet through the TV-cable. With a special, high velocity modem connecting the cable to the computer, the speed with which the Internet is activated and used is increased between 70 and 100 times compared with an ordinary modem. It is also cheaper. Transmission of video, television, as well as far more advanced Web pages than we have at present are made possible. This makes the Internet commercially extremely interesting. Schibsted's plan, which the company has made fully public, is not to make the customers publish their own material on the Internet. The idealistic initial period of

the truly interactive Internet with a 'flat' point-to-point structure is thus coming to an end, and the Internet is rapidly and in the near future developing into what may be called *an interactive one-way medium*: it is interactive in the sense that you may choose what you would like to see, but it is one-way in the sense that Schibsted bars you from sending information for others to see. Schibsted provides you with especially designed and politically determined commercial entertainment and information services, and invites you to spend time and money choosing between and in the numerous packages they offer. The Telenor Company (a state-owned and capitalistic, highly competitive version of the earlier Government Administration of Telephone, Telegraph, Radio and Broadcasting Services) has not yet launched a similar offer. Instead, it merged with Schibsted early in 1997 (in addition to swallowing some 80 small private companies in the area). Under the new common name, Scandinavia Online, the two companies plan to own and run most of the Internet in Norway. In developing from a 'flat' point-to-point *grunder* phase to a commercial monopolized one-way structure in relation to the general public, the Internet resembles the developmental process of other media. In short, even in the most modern interactive media, the basic conditions are increasingly and in the near future being set from above rather than from below, from the level of capital rather than from the level of the participants, though they may still contain *an illusion* of two parties on an equal footing. One of the parties, the party with economic and political power, systematically and increasingly defines the criteria or frames of reference for the information which is to be stored, which is to be available, and which subsequently may be selected, combined and recombined. The human actor in this context is a chooser and not a creator. The Norwegian sociologist Tom Johansen has formulated it in general terms as follows, and his formulation is highly relevant to the modern mass media:

When I have now demonstrated that the actions of daily life increasingly constitute choices among given alternatives, and that *the choice* as action is becoming predominant, it is implied that action life is dislocated: Homo Creator yields to Homo Elector. It is a question of choice actions: not to manufacture things yourself or produce, but to select, to choose among the most handy utility articles, such is our time.

(Johansen, 1981: 112, translated from the Norwegian  
by the present author)

### *What about power?*

Before concluding, an elaboration is necessary as far as synopticism goes: is *power* actually represented in the media? This is an important question. To repeat, Foucault wrote that 'the pomp of sovereignty, the necessarily spectacular manifestations of power', have today gradually yielded to 'the daily exercise of surveillance, in a panopticism in which the vigilance of the intersecting gazes was soon to render useless both the eagle and the sun'.

The power of visible and concrete rulers was and is fading away. This perspective fits nicely with Foucault's view of power in modern society: the visible actors' power in central institutions of state and society is blurred, indistinct and even unimportant; instead, power is a phenomenon permeating society as invisible micropower.

If this is true, and if those we meet and see in the media are just ornamental figures without power, Foucault's omission of synopticism might not be so serious.

I do not think it is true, and find reason to give an affirmative answer to the question of whether power — indeed, great power — is located in concrete individuals and concrete delimited groups as represented in our mass media. The eagle and the sun have not been extinguished, but are expressed in a different way. This is probably especially so in the most visible media. It does not mean that Foucault's micropower, which cannot be delimited to definite performers but which silently permeates the social fabric, is unimportant. Both perspectives, the perspective of micropower but also that of *the actor's* power, are necessary.

In synoptic space, particular news reporters, more or less brilliant media personalities and commentators who are continuously visible and seen are of particular importance. To understand them just as ornamental figures is to underestimate them. They actively filter and shape information; as has been widely documented in media research, they produce news (for an early documentation, see Cohen and Young, 1973; see also Tuchman, 1978); they place topics on the agenda and avoid placing topics on the agenda (Protest and McCombs, 1991). To be sure, all of this is performed within the context of a broader hidden agenda of political or economic interests, so to speak behind the media (Curran and Seaton, 1988; Murdock, 1988). But this does not detract from the importance and role of the visible actors, on the stage. Stage setters also operate behind and outside the scene. But the visible personalities cooperate with them, contributing significantly in their way — as creative mouthpieces — to the collective and enormously important staging of the great moments in the nation and the world, such as the staging of the Gulf War, so favourable to American interests, in 1991 (see Johnsen and Mathiesen, 1991, 1992; Ottosen, 1992), and the Olympic Games in Atlanta and the Republican Party Convention, both in 1996.

It is interesting to see what public opinion polls tell us about people's *confidence* in media personalities. Two nationwide representative Norwegian studies from 1991 and 1993 revealed very great confidence throughout the Norwegian population in prominent television personalities — particular charismatic reporters, commentators and so on. As far as it may be measured through opinions polls of this kind, these reporters and commentators did not only compete effectively, in people's minds, with very central and internationally known and popular politicians. They were even partly ahead in terms of confidence. This brings us to the core of their importance: it appears that the classical and greatly influential 'two step

hypothesis' about the influence of the media, in which opinion leaders in outside society are seen as links and transmitters of media messages from the media to the larger population (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948), must be revised. As the Norwegian sociologist Ole Kristian Hjemdal has pointed out,<sup>3</sup> television has produced television personalities who *themselves*, from the screen, function as opinion leaders and links between the media message and people — well known, dear to us, and on the face of it close to us.

But this does not end the story of power. Second, we must add what we know about who are allowed to enter the media from the outside to express their views. A number of international and Norwegian studies have shown that they systematically belong to *the institutional elites*. Those who are allowed to enter are systematically men — not women — from the higher social strata, with power in political life, private industry and public bureaucracy (a summary of the findings is provided in Mathiesen, 1993: 152–8). From a democratic point of view, the dominance of the television personalities is serious enough through the filtering of information and so on which we know they perform. The problem of democracy is in a decisive way enlarged by the dominance of the institutional elites.

But do not many people with power actively try to avoid the limelight of public attention? Certainly, today as in former times. Nevertheless, they are in an interesting and important way represented by hired information professionals. This point of view has been forcefully presented by the Norwegian sociologist and journalist Sigurd Allern (1992, quotes translated from the Norwegian by the present author). Allern writes that

... the point is not only that the media and journalists *choose* sources. The roles may also be reversed, so that the sources choose the media; they operate professionally and in a goal-oriented way to establish the premises for news production. *The sources* have become constantly more professionalized.

In business, public administration and large-scale organizations there has taken place during the past few decades 'a systematic organizational development to meet the bureaucratic quest for news on the part of the press' (p. 94). 'Information', which in actual fact is influence, has 'become an integrated part of the activity of industrial companies, financial institutions, ministries, police, municipal services and professional organizations' (p. 94). The information professionals have become highly visible and valuable sources of information for the media; informational activity has become an occupation. The information professionals are trained to filter information, and to present images which are favourable to the institution or organization in question.

Take business life as a concrete example. 'Norwegian Hydro' [a large and, from a business point of view, successful Norwegian company with many international investments], Allern writes, 'has on a nationwide basis about 60 employees engaged, Statoil [the Norwegian Oil Company, owned

by the state] has fewer, but both have a larger number of employees in this sector than the editorial staff of the *Labourer* [*Arbeiderbladet*, the main newspaper of the Labour Party, currently in power in Norway]' (p. 100). In 1991 the Norwegian Bank Association and the four largest commercial banks reported that they had 32 information professionals. Also in 1991, the Norwegian Insurance Association and the 7 largest insurance companies had 41 employees in their information departments. If those who are partly engaged in other tasks as well as those working in industrial trade organizations are included, the total number of information professionals in Norwegian industry and business may be estimated to be over 1000 (p. 100). This figure is very large for a small country like Norway; comparable British and American figures are of course much larger still. A number of key posts as information professionals are filled by people who earlier were employees in the Norwegian Broadcasting Company and by people from the press. 'The situation', Allern writes, 'at times resembles how people are bought in the upper divisions of soccer'.

### Control functions

Finally, I arrive at the question of control functions. I use the concept here in its simplest possible form, as change in behaviour or attitude in a wide sense, following from the influence of others. 'Control', then, is something more than 'surveillance'; it implies the regulation of behaviour or attitude which may follow for example from surveillance. I use the concept of 'discipline', Foucault's term, as a synonym.

There is an ongoing discussion of whether panopticism and synopticism, surveillance and the media, in fact have the effect of control or discipline (Bottoms, 1983; Waldahl, 1989). The discussion should be taken beyond the effects of isolated, single measures or messages, which has characterized media research in particular. The question is the effects of the total pattern of surveillance measures or media messages. Thus, with regard to the media, the total Gestalt produced by the messages of television is much more important than the individual programme or even type of programme. The American media researcher George Gerbner and associates have pointed to this in a number of empirical works. As they succinctly put it:

[The point is a concept of] broad enculturation rather than of narrow changes in opinion or behavior. Instead of asking what communication 'variables' might propagate what kinds of individual behavior changes, we want to know what types of common consciousness whole systems of messages might cultivate. This is less like asking about preconceived fears and hopes and more like asking about the 'effects' of Christianity on one's views of the world or — as the Chinese *had* asked — of Confucianism on public morality.

(Gerbner and Gross, 1976: 180)

The question is, then, the control or discipline of behaviour and attitude. That aspect of *panopticism* which consists of the growth of a modern veiled and secret surveillance industry, and which preoccupies us here, first of all controls or disciplines our *behaviour*. In this respect the modern surveillance systems are very different from the old panoptical prisons, which are also growing by leaps and bounds. The latter inflict great pain on those who inhabit them. But a vast amount of research shows that they have no effect, or at most a marginal effect, in terms of controlled behaviour (Mathiesen, 1990). Rather, I am thinking of the vast hidden apparatus, and the effect of this apparatus on people in usual or unusual political situations. Well aware of 'the intersecting gazes' of panopticism, but unable to point concretely to them — this is the nature of their secrecy — we arrange our affairs accordingly, perhaps without being fully aware of it. We remain, in our attitude, communists, left-oriented, or what have you, but adjust in terms of behaviour.

Two major examples come to mind. First, the McCarthy period in the US in the 1950s. I experienced the 1950s in McCarthy's own state, at the University of Wisconsin. Communists remained communists, but they became cautious, secretive and partly silent. Second, the activities of the Norwegian secret police from 1945 until the mid-1980s. Extensive unacceptable and illegal surveillance activities have recently been uncovered in an authoritative report delivered by a commission appointed by Parliament (The Lund Report, 1996). The report only verified what communists and other left-oriented groups had said for years. It contains numerous accounts of how communists remained communists and Marxist-Leninists remained Marxist-Leninists, but also of how they adjusted in terms of behaviour, became cautious and secretive, using cover names even for their children when attending political summer camps (it was documented that children down to the age of 11 had been registered). Psychological breakdowns, with repercussions throughout whole families, ensued. The argument that surveillance has negligible effect on behaviour was dramatically contradicted.

Other features of the political situation at the time were no doubt also important in both instances — the Cold War in the wake of the Second World War being one of them. But in the Norwegian case, widespread surveillance as well as the behavioural effects of it continued through the 1970s and 1980s, and to some extent even in the 1990s, and the effects on behaviour are concretely demonstrated.

What I have said here is, as far as it goes, in line with Foucault: to him, the fact that the torture of the docile body came to an end did not mean that the body ceased to be an object of attention. It just took place in a different way: 'The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it' (1979: 138). But at the same time, as I have said before, he saw his book as 'a correlative history of the modern soul'. To repeat, by the control of the soul, vis-a-vis the control of



the body, I understand him to mean the creation of human beings who control themselves through self-control.

My guess is that the souls in our time, and precisely in Foucault's sense as I understand it, above all belong to the other machinery, that of *synopticism*, and that James Gordon Bennett in fact was right when in 1836 he said just that about the mass media. My point is that synopticism, through the modern mass media in general and television in particular, first of all directs and controls or disciplines our *consciousness*. The concept of 'consciousness industry' (Enzenberger, 1974; Tuchman, 1981) is suggestive: to Enzenberger, the modern media encourage the 'industrialization of mind', 'they foster a consciousness conducive to advanced industrialism, just as some fifty years ago, earlier industrialists and efficiency experts transformed the body into an extension of the machine' (Tuchman, 1981: 84), thus — in my words — inducing self-control and making us fit into the requirements of modernity. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno pointed to this process, in the context of their time, half a century ago in their analysis of the culture industry (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1947/1969), and their presentation seems all the more relevant today.

To repeat, it is the total pattern or Gestalt rather than the individual programme or type of programmes which functions this way, à la Gerbner, like Christianity 'on one's views of the world'. Surely, there are variations which are obvious topics for research, and which have been extensively researched: when people have first-hand knowledge, when the issues are close to people's everyday life, and when people have access to alternative information, and so on, the effects are smaller. Indeed, this is also how Christianity worked and continues to work. But the variations should not make us overlook the effect of the total message system. The total message inculcates or produces a general understanding of the world, a *world paradigm* if you like, which emphasizes personal and individual, the deviant, the shuddering, the titillating — as alluded to already, the entertaining in a wide sense (Postman, 1985). The paradigm is successful because it is received in the context of a need — satisfies a need — for escape from the concrete misery of the world, very much like the Church which offered rescue and salvation in the hereafter. It is by satisfying the need for escape that people are made to acquiesce, accept and fit into the requirements of our society. In this sense, the Church and television are real functional alternatives, a relationship which has been explored in such detail and so eloquently by James Curran (1988).

Each from their side, like a pincer, panopticon and synopticon thus subdue or even make silent what Pierre Bourdieu calls 'the heterodox debate' (Bourdieu, 1977: Chapter 4), that is, the debate which raises the basic critical questions concerning the very foundation of our life and existence. We are left, again in Bourdieu's terminology, with 'the orthodox debate', where the answers to the basic questions are taken for granted, and the debate concerns details and remains on the surface. In bold relief: surveillance, panopticon, makes us silent about that which breaks funda-

mentally with the taken-for-granted because we are made afraid to break with it. Modern television, synopticon, makes us silent because we do not have anything to talk about that might initiate the break.

It does not improve matters that panopticon and synopticon reciprocally feed on each other. Those parts of modern panopticon which I am concerned with here, the secret apparatuses of surveillance, try to keep synopticon at arm's length. After all, they wish to live under cover. But this is precisely where other parts of panopticon, in and close to the old prison, have their function. News from these parts of panopticon — news about prisoners, escapes, robberies, murder — are the best pieces of news which synopticon — television and the tabloid newspapers — can find. Inside synopticon, which devours this news, the material is purged of everything but the purely criminal — what was originally a small segment of a human being becomes the whole human being — whereupon the material is hurled back into the open society as stereotypes and panic-like, terrifying stories about individual cases, thus completely contradicting Foucault's thesis that punishment tends to become the most hidden part of the penal process. The execution in Paris in 1757 becomes, as a spectacle, peanuts compared to the executions (real or metaphoric) on the screens of modern television. This way, a basis is established for more resources to be given not only to the expansion of prisons, but also to the concealed panoptical surveillance systems: the modern European computerized registration and surveillance systems mentioned earlier are, on the formal level, motivated by crime prevention. But empirically we can safely say that they hardly prevent much crime. The 'hit' figures as far as official crime goes are extremely low (Mathiesen, 1996: 28–9). In the light of the mass media image of crime, the low 'hit' figures are taken as a sign that still more resources are needed. And so it continues in a circle.

Taken as a whole, things are much *worse* than Michel Foucault imagined. The total situation clearly calls for political resistance (Mathiesen, 1982). But to muster such double resistance is a difficult task, because the call for resistance may — in line with what I have argued in this article — be silenced by the very panopticon and synopticon which we wish to counteract. In the years to come, much effort and lots of time should therefore be devoted to the search for the roads to resistance.

## Notes

1. Oral information from the Swedish historian Erik Anners.
2. The concept was first used by the Danish sociologist Frank Henriksen, in a review of a book I had written on the topic I deal with here (Henriksen, 1985; Mathiesen, 1985).
3. Oral communication to the author.

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