Transformative Spaces: The Library as Panopticon

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Abstract. This paper seeks to describe and understand the nature of library experiences that both conjure immersion in different worlds, and yet relate to the physical spaces in which they occur. What does the library space make possible and what does it prohibit? Using Foucault's account of panopticism to unpack layers of surveillance, docility and agency within library sites, this paper seeks to gain a richer understanding of panopticism and the library as a social institution. A discussion of Foucault's panopticism is followed by the identification of areas where application of his concept might be useful to scholars and practitioners seeking to understand the experience of library users in their interaction and encounters with information interfaces, both interpersonal and technological.

Keywords: Michel Foucault · Panopticon · Panopticonism · Libraries

1 Introduction

There is something about library spaces that conjure experiences of different worlds. Moran [1] writes that, "A library in the middle of a community is a cross between an emergency exit, a life raft, and a festival. They are cathedrals of the mind; hospitals of the soul; theme parks of the imagination" (p. 92). However, a darker side to the library experience is evoked by novelist King's [2] recollections as a young boy: "I had loved the library as a kid – why not? It was the only place a relatively poor kid like me could get all the books he wanted – but as I continued to write, I became reacquainted with a deeper truth: I had also feared it. I feared becoming lost in the dark stacks. I feared being forgotten in a dark corner of the reading room and ending up locked in for the night" (pp. 386–387).

One can find countless examples of reflections which both celebrate [3] and offer dark warnings about [4] the experiences made possible by library spaces. This paper seeks to describe and understand the nature of these experiences and their relationship to the physical spaces in which they occur through a consideration of Foucault's [5] account of panopticism. Areas are identified where his concept might be useful to scholars and practitioners seeking to understand library users' experiences in interaction and encounters with interpersonal and technological information interfaces. It is

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proposed that by unpacking the layers of surveillance, docility and agency within library sites, a richer understanding of panopticism and the library as a social institution can be gained.

2 From Heterotopia to Panopticon

Radford, Radford, and Lingel [3] conducted an examination of the library experience using Foucault's [6] concept of heterotopia. A defining feature of a heterotopic space is its capacity to give rise to "a sort of mixed, joint experience" (p. 24) where one is neither in one place or another, but has the potential to experience multiple places at once within the same physical space. The library as heterotopia is much more than a room or building that contains a collection of objects. It is also a place which makes possible the experience virtual spaces opened up by experiences when reading books and other texts. For example, Anand [7] writes that the library is a place where "you could lose your mother and then lose yourself in a book of Greek myths, or somebody's struggle to find love in class 5C or the life cycles of a ladybird" (pp. 5–6).

However, there is more to library experiences than the joys found in creativity and imagination. There are also profound feelings of fear [8–10]. In her much-cited article on library anxiety, Mellon [8] sought to articulate and understand the experiences and feelings of 6,000 undergraduate students as they encountered the space of an academic library for the first time. She asked them questions such as, "What were your experiences using the library?" and "How did you feel about the library and your ability to use it?" Mellon reported that the overwhelming number of responses were framed in terms of fear: "75 to 85% of students… described their initial response to the library in terms of fear or anxiety" and "terms like *scary*, *overpowering*, *lost*, *helpless*, and *fear of the unknown* appeared over and over again" (p. 162). Mellon also reported that these expressions of fear were not reflective of the students' perception of the actual assignments they were required to do in the library. She writes that it was these "feelings of fear that kept them [the students] from beginning to search or that got in the way of their staying in the library long enough to master search processes" (p. 163). The students' fear ran to a "deeper truth" about the library itself as expressed by Stephen King earlier. Indeed, Radford and Radford have argued that the library experience is inextricably linked to and informed by an underlying "discourse of fear" [4].

Such negative experiences may be due, in part, to an awareness that library space is dominated by surveillance and order. This is the hypothesis put forward by panopticism based in the work of Englisher utilitarianist philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and French postmodern philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–1984) and is the subject of the following section.

3 Panopticism

Foucault's problematization of space bear relevance on two fronts, first in heterotopic experience, discussed earlier. A second aspect of the experience of the library space is eloquently captured in Foucault's [5] concept of "panopticism," which Brunon-Ernst

[11] characterizes as "the theorization of surveillance society, derived from Bentham's project of a prison, with an all-seeing inspector" (p. 2). Bentham [12] proposed a panopticon prison in letters written from 1786–1787, in which he describes a circular building, called an "Inspection House." Prisoners are incarcerated in individual cells located on the perimeter of the structure and are supervised by an inspector housed in a central tower. The Inspection House's defining feature is that the inspector can see prison inhabitants, but the prisoners cannot see the inspector. In an ideal situation, the inspector would be able to surveille all of the inhabitants at all times. However, the architecture of the panopticon makes it possible for actual continuous surveillance to be replaced with the *illusion* of continuous surveillance. The illusion would be equally effective because prisoners have no way of knowing whether an inspector is actually present in the central tower. As Bentham notes, since total surveillance as a practical matter is impossible, "the next thing to be wished for is, that, at every instant, seeing reason to believe as much, and not being able to satisfy himself to the contrary, [the prisoner] should conceive himself to be so" [12, p. 34].

Foucault was drawn to Bentham's panopticon through a prior study of the gaze in medical institutions where "the whole problem of the visibility of bodies, individuals and things, under a system of centralized observation" is enacted [13, p. 146]. In hospitals, one needed to avoid any undue contact, physical proximity and overcrowding to reduce disease contagion and, also, to ensure proper air circulation. So, one needed to: (a) divide space, (b) keep space open, and (c) create a global and individualizing surveillance. In response to such conditions "the sovereignty of the gaze gradually establishes itself – the eye that knows and decides, the eye that governs," and, thus, "the clinic was probably the first attempt to order a science on the exercise and decisions of the gaze" [14, p. 89].

In writing *The Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault initially had thought that such concerns were specific to 18th century medicine, but he also found them in the reorganization of penal systems in early 19th century. He notes, "There was scarcely a text or a proposal about the prisons which didn't mention Bentham's 'device' – the 'panopticon'" [13, p. 147]. He realized that the panopticon was not just an architectural design intended to solve a specific problem concerning the incarceration of prisoners. According to Foucault, Bentham "invented a technology of power designed to solve the problems of surveillance" [13, p. 148].

> There is no need for arms, physical violence, mental constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorizing to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual this exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself. A superb formula: a power exercised continuously and for what turns out to be minimal cost [13, p. 155].

Foucault takes Bentham's self-surveillance as a central feature of his broader notion of panopticism, where the principles of a panoptic architecture can be applied to a wider range of institutions, including the library. He asserts that one objective of panopticism is to produce "docile bodies" that may be "subjected, used, transformed, and improved" [5, p. 136]. Foucault uses the term "disciplines" to identify those methods used to achieve this docility. The panopticon's architecture is offered as a model of how space becomes a focal point for the administration of power through

discipline. Foucault [5] writes: "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" (pp. 202–205).

The genius of Bentham's panopticon is that it does not matter if an inspector is present in the inspection tower. All that matters is that the cell's inhabitants believe this to be case. Power does not come from the person doing the surveillance, but from the building's architecture, which becomes a "cruel, ingenious cage" that "automatizes and disindividualizes power" [5, p. 202]. As Foucault explains, "Power has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up" [5, p. 202]. It is worth considering the extent to which libraries as institutions have always been sites of authority and control, not only of books, but of bodies. What is revealed when the space of the library is considered in terms of panopticism? How are bodies, surfaces, lights, and gazes distributed in the library space to produce effects of power and self-surveillance?

4 The Experience of Panopticism in the Library

The premise of Bentham's panopticon building is that the architecture itself would be enough to induce a particular kind of feeling that, in turn, would lead to particular kind of desired behavior. He writes: "The greater chance there is, of a given person's being at a given time actually under inspection, the more strong will be the persuasion – the more *intense*, if I may say so, the *feeling*, he has of being so" [12, p. 44]. There are clear elements in the library space that communicate either actual or perceived surveillance and have the power to structure the way one feels and acts. For example, actual or perceived surveillance is communicated is by overt displays of rules and regulations. At first, these displays of rules derived from a setting in which books were quite expensive and rare. For example, the following are taken from library rules at Harris-Manchester College, Oxford, from 1817 [15]:

> The Librarian is empowered to lend the key of the Library-room to any student who has passed through the first two years of his course, & who may be desirous of consulting any book or books in the Library, but no books shall be taken out, unless the Librarian be present under the penalty of two shillings & sixpence. The Librarian, upon delivering a book from the Library, shall enter, in a book provided for that purpose, the number of the book delivered, the name of the student who receives it, and the date of its deliver: and when the book is returned he shall mark the date of its return, signing the whole entry with the initials of his name. For every neglect to do so he shall forfeit sixpence.

Remnants of these regulations, including overdue fines, remain in most libraries today. Physical or online displays of rules are a constant reminder to the library user that her use of books is constantly subject to surveillance and sanction by the librarian/inspector.

Another expression of surveillance is represented in stereotypes of the perpetually "shushing librarian" [16]. Although many libraries have long embraced noise and

activity as positive signs of institutional use, the presumed need for silence endures, especially in academic and special libraries where scholars expect to be able to read, think, and write in quiet.

Another anxiety-inducing mechanism is the sheer magnitude of the order that surrounds one in library spaces. The user, in withdrawing texts from the shelves presents a threat of disorder (in Douglas' [17] terms, introducing dirt into the purity of library organization). Such threats are constantly acknowledged by library notices which inform the user not to return the books to the shelves, a task entrusted to qualified staff. The stereotype of the librarian firmly date-stamping the book with a loud thud and displaying the damning stare of scrutiny emphasizes the dichotomous arrangements of power between librarians as in control and library users as being at their disciplinary mercy. The use of the library book is temporary, it can only leave the collection for so long, and the consequences of the user not complying (and thus having overdue books) are conveyed by the implied violence of the stamp striking the book, a theme so starkly brought to life in King's [2] novella, *The Library Policeman*.

Panopticism as a principle of internalizing self-surveillance can also shape our experiences interacting with an electronic interface, such as the home screen of the Google search engine. The home screen consists of a mostly white and bare background with a search box in the middle, almost like a letter box in the door to a large and ornate house. When we type our inquiries into the search box, we are, in a sense, peering through the letter box. We know that what we see, as revealed by the search results that the system gives to us, is always an incomplete reflection of what is actually there. But there is another gaze that is signified by the Google screen. The box in the middle of the screen can works two ways. We know, if only implicitly, that each search not only asks the system for information, it also becomes information for the system. However, where that information goes, how it is stored, and how it used, is unknown to us. It remains hidden behind the blank white screen of the Google page, just as the omnipotent inspector remains permanently hidden from the prisoners by the very architecture of the building.

5 Heterotopia in the Panopticon

In an interview, Foucault was asked, "Are there revolts against the gaze?" [13, p. 162]. Foucault replied, "Oh yes, provided that isn't the final purpose of the operation. Do you think it would be much better to have the prisoners operating the panoptic apparatus and sitting in the central tower, instead of the guards?" (pp. 164–165). Clearly, just shifting the actors in the panopticon is like rearranging the deck chairs on a sinking Titanic. The inhabitants may be in different places, but the building and its effects remain the same. But what would be the "final purpose" that goes beyond controlling the building? The inspector is as much a docile body produced by the panopticon as the prisoners.

The lesson from Foucault's observation is that there is no escape from panopticism. It is embodied in the very spaces that we occupy, including the library, and the effects are clearly seen in the accounts of library users such as those recorded by Mellon and others [8–10]. However, the library is a paradoxical place because, on the one hand, it

demands that the library user be docile and adhere to the many regulations it imposes. These demands in large part evoke the feelings of fear so often reported by library users. On the other hand, the library communicates that it is a place which encourages people *not* to be docile, but rather to be creative, to explore, discover, and express themselves in ways that are more akin to Foucault's account of heterotopia [3, 6]. Unlike the home screen of the Google search engine, one does not need to peer through the letter box to see what is in the library. One can open the door and see the library as it is. One may feel confused or overwhelmed by the perceived size and complexity of the library space (this was a main source of fear reported by Mellon [8]), but it is nevertheless not hidden from us. Unlike the home screen of the Google search engine where the relationship between your search query and results retrieved are unknown to you, the library space allows you to physically experience the direct correlation between the library catalog and the organization of the empirical books on an empirical shelf. You actually walk to a physical object in a physical location guided by the numbers on the catalog card. But you are not bound by the catalog number on the card. You can reach for and look at any book on the shelf, or any shelf. In the context of panopticism, such messages are practically subversive! And yet the same systematic, rule-driven, panopticism of the empirical library space creates the conditions for heterotopia. As well as the fear-riddled and docile bodies reported by Mellon, the architecture of the library also has the potential to create the wonder and joy of the library user. Semiotician Eco [18] expresses his experience in the library space as follows:

> I can decide to pass a whole day there in bliss: I read the papers, take the books down to the bar, then I go and look for some more. I make my discoveries. Having gone in to work on, say, British Empiricism, I start to follow commentaries on Aristotle instead. On getting the floor wrong, I find myself in an area I hadn't thought to enter, on medicine, but then I suddenly find works on Galen, and hence complete with philosophical references. In this sense the library becomes an adventure (p. 11).

Hill [19] recounts a similar experience browsing the book stacks of the London Library: "There is something extraordinarily liberating and exciting about being let loose in such a place, allowed to wander, pick out this and that, read a bit here, a page there, take out the book, then wander to another bay in search of something related to it" (p. 111). The physical movement from book to book, shelf to shelf, and floor to floor are all made possible by the physical space of the library, forming the basis of Eco's "adventure" and Hill's "liberation." What Eco describes as an adventure, Foucault [11] will describe as a "fantasia of the library" [20], or what more recent scholars refer to as serendipity [21]. The order that is embodied in the physical space of the library (in its shelves, its floors, its sections, and so on) makes possible the disorder and the creativity of the imagination. Crucially, the message here is not about celebration replacing fear. Rather it is to acknowledge fear and to celebrate anyway. Spaces that privilege serendipity can highlight rather than obscure the arbitrary nature of organization, when these rationales of control are loosened, this facilitates possibilities of dissent.

6 Libraries in Prisons

This paper concludes by briefly considering a space that combines the two sites of panopticism discussed here: the library and the prison. According to the World Prison Brief (http://www.prisonstudies.org/country/united-states-america) there are over two million people in the U.S. prison population in 2017, the largest prison population in the world. Educational programming and media access have been shown to have significant efficacy in reducing recidivism [22] and libraries facilitate both functions. Yet, libraries for the incarcerated are micro-spaces of constraint within macro-spaces of constraint, a layered arrangement of organization, control and surveillance. Book censorship in prison libraries is pervasive, with wardens and guards making decisions about appropriate and inappropriate content [23]. Books can be censored for a number of reasons, including violent or explicitly sexual content, as well as racially charged or politically controversial works. Some institutions only allow books that are soft-cover, others only allow books to be donated to the library if they are brand new, rather than previously owned. Content, format, provenance: there are many modes of restricting library books (not to mention capricious decisions to exclude books for arbitrary reasons), measures of surveillance that emerge before the books are even on the shelf. When books are finally allowed into prison and jail libraries, users' reading choices can be monitored by prison staff, to the point of affecting parole outcomes [24]. Although experiences of jail and prison libraries involve heightened feelings of regulation, they also entail precious access to choice, entertainment and intellectual play. Even with all the mechanisms for censoring and controlling books within prison libraries, once there, they are powerful instruments of fantasy, education, distraction and play. It is this contradiction that perhaps explains the reoccurring presence of the library in fictional portrayals of prison including *The Wire*, *A Clockwork Orange*, *Orange Is the New Black,* and *The Shawshank Redemption*.

Yet, while books can be transformative, they can also be tools of control. Narratives of working in a prison library suggest that rather than acting as a site of resistance, libraries foster a demeanor of docility [25]. Docility is not concerned with the imposition of power through punishment or force, a principle inherent in Bentham's design of the panopticon. The panopticon will "be kind: it will prevent transgressing; it will save punishing" [12, p. 105], at least from the point of view of the inspector. Foucault [5] writes that docility will be ensured by "The meticulousness of the regulations, the fussiness of inspections, the supervision of the smallest fragment of life and of the body" (p. 141). These rules and regulations are strictly enforced by librarians and library staff, who hesitate to bend the rules to make exceptions (such as allowing overdue books or extended time in the library), often because they fear reprisals from their supervisors. In the context of jails and prisons, the library is no escape from regulation, it is rather the normalization of discipline in a familiar setting. Lingel [26] has argued that libraries can offer a sense making function of institutional legibility in contexts that are otherwise chaotic or incoherent, such as massive protests or, (as asserted here) jails and prisons. In contexts of incarceration, libraries provide a form of panopticism that hails from outside prison walls. Moreover, the surveillance and docility of the library is more palatable than those of the prison itself, where the veneer

of choice over what to read can help mask forms of control. Considering the prison library in particular draws attention to the obvious, although often overlooked, modes of control and constraints around choice in collection development policy, service provision, and management of space. Prison libraries demonstrate the contradiction of managed access to information and intellectual freedom: while books and media are available for use and meaning-making, people and texts are continually surveilled and controlled according to rules that can vary from the arcane and arbitrary to the cruel and ingenious.

7 Conclusion

The goals of this paper have been to consider the library through a frame of panopticism, a reframing meant to counterbalance to fetishizing libraries as sites of endless imagination and play without recognizing the ways that these sites are also institutions of surveillance and control. The paradoxical phenomenology of the library allows for pleasure and trepidation, curiosity and strictly-imposed access constraints of access, intellectual freedom and surveilled bodies. That libraries organize books is all but tautological – that they also organize, monitor and constrain bodies is a crucial recognition for a nuanced understanding of the social and political realities of library space. By considering the above convergences and divergences in how different library spaces and contexts institute surveillance and produce docile bodies, scholars are better placed to theorize practices of resistance and subversion within libraries, especially regarding marginalized populations, such as the incarcerated, or formerly incarcerated.

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