



## GAZE. AN IN/SIGHT

*There is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down. [...] I get positively angry with the impertinence of it and the everlastingness. Up and down and sideways they crawl, and those absurd, unblinking eyes are everywhere.*

*Charlotte Perkins Stetson, "The Yellow Wallpaper"*

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Time passes, yet the validity of the yellow wallpaper as a quintessential metaphor of gendered surveillance seems never to wane. Over the past century, a wide range of theoretical approaches have been applied to the phenomenon in question and with each cultural (or, perhaps more precisely, technological) caesura new insights present themselves as key to the understanding of the scale and impact of the everlasting, impertinent, controlling gaze. One of the more illuminating texts to address the evolution of our understanding of surveillance is the 2017 essay “Bentham, Deleuze and Beyond: An Overview of Surveillance Theories from the Panopticon to Participation,” in which Maša Galič, Tjerk Timan, and Bert-Jaap Koops attempt to answer the question, “where does surveillance theory stand now?” The text, acknowledging the enduring relevance of Foucault’s account of the normalizing function of supervision under the regime of disciplinary power, takes stock of technologi-

1. See <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/theliteratureofprescription/exhibitionAssets/digitalDocs/The-Yellow-Wall-Paper.pdf> (Stetson: 649–650). Charlotte Perkins Stetson would become better known as Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

cal developments that have occurred since *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (*Surveiller et punir : Naissance de la prison*) was first published in France in 1975.

In the past two decades, [the authors observe,] many new layers have been added to real-space surveillant assemblages, with systems such as dataveillance supplementing rather than replacing classic systems of surveillance such as CCTV. In that sense, the Panopticon remains a powerful metaphor. However, the institutions that Foucault recognised as disciplining forces have altered in shape, place, visibility and dynamics. In addition, notions of self-surveillance point to new dynamics, where watching oneself via a mediated, mobile and networked gaze still raises questions of power, discipline and control, but in potentially new ways that cannot be easily captured in classic surveillance frameworks. Thus, many contemporary theoretical approaches to surveillance revolve around de-centralised forms of surveillance, with many watching many and with various permutations of machines and humans watching machines and humans. What binds many strands together are core questions of power and control, of who watches whom in which settings for what reasons; and these questions are asked in settings of technological infrastructures and tools, where technology functions as an intermediary of power or control dynamics. (Galič, Timan, & Koops 2017: 33)

Yet, although the rhizomatic architecture of contemporary surveillance technologies can no longer be easily identified with centralized power or even with (exclusively) human agency (as, according to the authors, the former binary opposition between the inspectors and the controlled has been rendered multidimensional), the split between the advocates and critics of omnipresent control remains sharp, including within the space of academia, where panopticism became a philosophical category already in the 1970s.

In 1975 the French philosopher Foucault coined the term “panopticism” which quickly became used to describe Bentham’s utilitarian theory as a whole. Panopticism is the theorization of surveillance society derived from Bentham’s project of a prison, with an all-seeing inspector. In his wake, the works of Michelle Perrot and J.A. Miller targeted Bentham’s Panopticon as the epitome of disciplinary society at its worst. At the same time, in the United States, similar contentions were being made. Gertrude Himmelfarb and Charles Bahmueller adopted the view that Bentham did not consider paupers as fully-fledged human beings. However, since the 1990s the London-based Bentham Project has been developing far deeper insights into Bentham’s panoptic

thought, as Janet Semple and Michael Quinn have studied, respectively, the prison-Panopticon and the pauper-Panopticon. Their research has highlighted the strength of Bentham's proposals in various fields, including prison- and pauper-management. Their analyses of Bentham's project are more balanced, and stress the benefits of the Panopticon for inmates, and also the fairness of the system. Philip Shofield explains that "[Foucault's interpretation of the Panopticon] would have seemed very odd to Bentham, who regarded his Panopticon prison as humane, and an enormous improvement on the practices of the criminal justice system of the time." (Brunon-Ernst 2016: 2-3)

The academic debates, unsurprisingly, reflect positions observable in the social practice. On the one hand, the proponents of the proliferation of surveillance technologies that seek to manage and control crime would argue that intelligent CCTV systems protect both property (destruction/theft) and individuals (harassment/violence); streaming smartphone applications allow the general public immediate access to unprocessed footage of events once subject to TV montage and available only through official channels, thereby leaving less room to blatant manipulation; AI-based algorithms of face and movement recognition speed up immigration processing at airports and aid police in their search for wanted criminals; dataveillance serves to prevent cyberviolence and to propel attention-based economy by means of advertising tailored to individual needs.

On the other, as Ruha Benjamin observes, surveillance technology that seeks social control through carceral logics "aids and abets the process by which carcerality penetrates social life" (2). As she explains, "[i]t does so, in part, because technoscientific approaches seem to 'fix' the problem of human bias when it comes to a wide range activities" (2). On the contrary, such fixes "nevertheless sediment existing hierarchies" (3). These problems embedded in everyday forms of surveillance have already given rise to a plethora of popular culture artifacts that seek to critique surveillance society (the most popular of which include such Netflix series as *Black Mirror* or *Mr. Robot*), inspired the adoption of binding documents, regulating the human-AI relations (such as the European Commission's *White Paper on Artificial Intelligence—A European Approach to Excellence and Trust*), and generated a long list of academic publications addressing the question of the relationship between

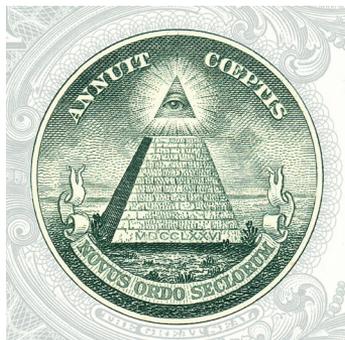
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technology, algorithmization, and ethics (such as those collected in the 42nd issue of the journal *Er(r)go. Theory–Literature–Culture* titled *Machine–Subject–Power*).

Irrespective of the position one might take, it is undeniable that the digitally networked technologies available today are a transnational, transcultural, and translocal fact, necessitating a variety of forms of self-surveillance and, oftentimes, identity fashioning, which yields fruit not only in terms of the proliferation of experimental avatars, but also, interestingly, encouraging the creative adoption of avatar-like personas in the real world. At the same time, the blending of virtual space and actual space complicates the “classical” understanding of panoptic surveillance as Galič, Timan, and Koops suggest. Indeed, as some scholars have argued, the freedom afforded by the Internet has enhanced the personal and collective liberties of once strictly marginalized social groups, encouraging activism and self-organization, owing to which, like the lyrical “I” of Lorna Crozier’s poetry analyzed by Zuzanna Szatanik in her groundbreaking book *De-Shamed. Feminist Strategies of Transgression* (to which I will presently return), the e-subject today *returns the gaze* of the inspector without reservation.

However, none of the advantages of such a turn changes the fact

that the Internet, and more specifically web 2.0 platforms, facilitate surveillance through economically driven, de-centered technological infrastructures that serve the ultimate purpose of desiring-production. Faceless, these corporate entities can do without *annuit cœptis*; the bills bearing the motto suffice. Rhizomatic, in-human, beyond ethics, they



Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dollarnote\\_siegel\\_hq.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dollarnote_siegel_hq.jpg) (public domain).

answer to no-one. The Internet, in its creative schizophrenia, encourages openness (often adopting the forms, of virtual coming-out, blatant exhibitionism, or narcissistic self-fashioning) but such visibility, unsurprisingly, comes at the cost of the (potential or actual) exposure to inspection. The all-seeing technology, in turn, propels the development of numerous strategies of resistance to panoptic

control, giving rise to the anarchy of digital nomadism in a queer post-anthropocentric world, shared by both human subjects, non-anthropic agencies, and anthropotechnical hybrids, that harbor the potential to be more and more immune to gendered surveillance<sup>2</sup>.

Yet, despite the technological leap, the de-genderization of surveillance is unlikely to happen “automatically,” or soon. Desired and abhorred, wished for and fought against, whether protective or oppressive—surveillance, older than the hills, is never neutral. Since before culture could be documented in writing, humans would pray to all-seeing gods in hope that the immortals would *watch over them* and protect them against perils. Divine protection, however, has always come at a price. Irrespective of the religion, the promise of the deliverance from (variously construed) evil hinges upon the believer’s readiness to dutifully observe gods-given laws. Defiance, impossible to hide from the all-seeing eye, does not only strip one of the “protected” status—it also dooms one to (inevitable) punishment. Why then would anyone choose to transgress? Why not entrust oneself to surveillance if there is nothing sinister to hide? What could be wrong about abiding by the laws? Is it not more rational to be a model citizen and raise one’s family in a condominium surveyed by hundreds of CCTV cameras equipped with movement detectors that will alert security on watch 24/7 should anything “abnormal” come to pass rather than in an unprotected neighborhood? Is it not better to be in the winning camp than among the “renegades”? To be protected rather than to confront endless agonies of fear? To claim otherwise would be absurd.

Or would it? After all, such choices are obvious if and only if you can afford them because you either are in the winning camp already, or at least because you *believe* that you are in it. Then, disinclined to question the laws at the foundations of the “norm” that favors you, you may discover that the surveillance you accept as good is only good because you *believe* that its lens is leveled at the Others, who, for one reason or another, fail to meet your camp’s entry requirements. After all, *annuit cœptis*: the Providence has

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2. See, for instance, Piotr Gorliński-Kucik’s article “On Liberatory Strategies of Digital Nomads” (Gorliński-Kucik 2021)

always-already approved the acts of those who would construe the all-seeing eye as their ally in the first place.

At first sight, what follows is a platitude: propaganda notwithstanding, we are not yet all “winners” in the socio-political struggle—and even a cursory survey of studies dedicated to the present-day dynamics of race, class, and gender will *obviously* confirm it. Thus, for all those whose chief transgression would be to attempt sneaking into the winning camp without proper credentials, surveillance, whether historically or today, poses an often impenetrable barrier; for those aspiring to it or already in it, it is a Panopticon—a measure warranting continued docility, a complex, often ambivalent, instrument of what Michel Foucault would dub *normation* (1991: 183)<sup>3</sup>. In such a context, despite the achievements of the technological revolution of the digital era, the connectivity between power, gender, and surveillance seems only too obvious: it is manifest not only in institutionalized “oversight” over disadvantaged genders, but, as Zuzanna Szatanik explains it in the “Introduction” to her 2011 book on feminist strategies of resistance to the discursive practices of patriarchal control, it is often tantamount to the coercive, although often disembodied, masculine gaze. Such a gaze shames women (and nonbinary people) into obedience with respect to the norm; it becomes the “perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions, compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes” or, “[i]n short, it normalizes” (Foucault, 1991: 183).

Shame is a common sensation. An unpleasant contraction felt when one is caught red-handed, shame is manifest on a blushing face. It makes one feel both exorbitantly aware of being and, at the same time, desperate not to be: to disappear or hide. As such, it is an antithetic emotion, described in terms of freezing, withdrawal or paralysis, as well as burning, aggrandisement or transgression. Because of the fact that shame is felt in and on the body, and, at the same time, breaches the body’s limits, it makes one feel too large or too small, both indiscernible and overexposed. A shamed person is therefore perplexingly (un)framed. Indeed, the angst inscribed in the experience of shame is that of “losing face”: the fundamental “(Who) am I?” becomes inevitable. [...] Shame,

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3. See also Christopher R. Mayes’s article “Revisiting Foucault’s ‘Normative Confusions’: Surveying the Debate Since the *Collège de France* Lectures” (Mayes 2015).

at the same time, is a cultural phenomenon. Inscribed within basic discourses of the culture of the West, it becomes an instrument of power and subjection. As such, it not only merits a fullfledged study, but also calls for a remedy. As a function of the language rooted in androcentric metanarratives, it has detrimentally affected women since the time immemorial—not only at the level describable in terms of sociopolitical dynamics between (traditionally conceived) genders, but also at the level of the body: a non-discursive entity beyond language. Born in discourse, cultural shame transcends discourse; yet, even though the body will not lend itself to deconstructions, rhetorical strategies of shaming, which involve the attribution of values to the body, will. The underlying assumption of the argument presented in this book is that, like shame, the rhetorical disempowerment of shaming discourses will manifest itself in and on the shameless body: at home with one's body, the de-shamed self becomes "riftless." No longer politically disciplined or coerced, such a self may seek its own definition beyond inherited categories: Woman's self, no longer determined by the androcentric language, loses rigid fixity imposed by patriarchal categories: instead, it brings a plethora of possible alternatives into play. (Szatanik 2011: 19)

As it seems, the gendered Panopticon, a concept that initially could have been perceived as banal, emerges as a rather complex phenomenon. Surveillance, perceived in such a perspective, although one might intuitively be inclined to reduce it to the sphere of visual perceptions alone, appears to be an essential thread in the texture of the androcentric metanarrative, surfacing not only in the physical acts of vigilance particularly sensitized to non-male transgressions, but—above all—encoded in the language of everyday axiology. This language, rooted in traditional religious discourses, was more recently reinforced by the authority of the historically male-dominated academia, which suggested the association of the definition of femininity with infantilism or with such degrading concepts as "penis envy," "hysteria," or "masturbatory insanity."<sup>4</sup> Such semantics, reinforcing dominant hierarchies, underlie far more than the primitive lingo of male chauvinism today: in fact, they rest at the fundament of the androcentric system of values, warranting the stability of the status quo. The passage of time notwithstanding

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4. This is further exemplified by early practices in therapy, in which the female patient, "yielding" herself "to psychoanalysis," is expected to "abandon herself" to the talking cure, a process conducted and controlled by a male therapist (Szatanik 2011: 23).

ing, patriarchal rhetoric continues to supply the brick and mortar necessary for the upkeep of the gendered Panopticon's functionality. Interiorized androcentric definitions, splitting humankind into the simple heteronormative binary of masculinity and femininity, keep all disadvantaged genders (including heterosexual women) on their tiptoes, coercing individuals into "beauty"/"chivalry," or forcing them into hiding/locking them in their closets, or—in a still different dimension—relegating those who have dared to age or put on weight to the margins of the acceptable "norm." Needless to say, even the apparently "democratic" forms of oversight, such as the present day participatory surveillance (community-based monitoring of individual behaviors), may serve such a purpose.

For all these reasons, de-shaming, as a process requiring the deployment of language against itself in order to deconstruct the binaries underlying the ossified system of values, is far from easy:

we are born into and raised in a language that has always already defined our reality. And yet, literature, the testing ground for ideas, remains far from "exhausted." Poised against language, self-conscious and self-reflective, literature has the power of annulling and redefining categories not only by deconstructing fundamental oppositions upon which central metanarratives rest, but also by its capacity of exposing the reader to an experience which in itself transgresses discourse. An act of reading, as well as an act of writing, is an existential act, throwing one into the liminal space where the organising principles of the dominant discourses collapse. (Szatanik 2011: 20)

Contemporary women's literature, as Szatanik's case study demonstrates, "returns the gaze": when this happens, the inspector no longer sees the inmates with whose control he has been culturally entrusted. Locked in his *anopticon*<sup>5</sup>, he sees nothing, unaware that he himself has transmogrified into the object of the alleged inmates' scrutiny.

Hopeful as Szatanik's findings are, the moment when the inspector/inmate binary (deconstructed in such a vision) ultimately becomes null and void may never arrive. Still, irrespective of what the future

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5. The term has been coined by Umberto Eco in his book of essays *Il secondo diario minimo* (1992), translated into English by William Weaver in 1994 as *How To Travel With A Salmon and Other Essays*. See footnote 4 in Galič, Timan, & Koops (2017: 14).

brings, Szatanik's book makes an important foray into the question of *agency* within the complexity of the largely globalized, Internet-enhanced culture at the onset of the third decade of the second millennium. Her study, emphasizing affects, allows one to infer that not only is human agency in the context of surveillance far from *passé*, but also that without a critical recontextualization taking into account the present scholarly moment, theoretical argumentation reducing Foucauldian thought solely to historical reflection on the disciplinary society and transplanting it directly onto other fields of study (such as feminist or queer studies) does little more than scratch the surface of the phenomena at stake today. In the long run, no "convenient" simplifications will do justice to the utilitarian dimension of surveillance as Jeremy Bentham envisaged it, or to the actual practice of oversight (including the various forms of the much-debated cancel culture) as we experience it in the 21st century. Especially given that, as Anne Brunon-Ernst notes,

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[t]o readers familiar with Foucault's—or Bentham's—works, examining the Bentham-Foucault relationship in this way is far from self-explanatory; quite the contrary, it is, and seeks to be provocative, especially when the works of both authors on Panopticon—Bentham's inspection-house principle of utilitarian management—are considered. [...] There are traditionally two schools of thought in Bentham studies. On the one hand, the authoritarian school contends that Bentham is the mastermind of authoritarian state control. On the other hand, the liberal school contends that Bentham thinks in terms of the rule of law, and aims at promoting civil and political rights. These two perspectives have always coexisted in academia, as is shown by Élie Halévy's 1901 statement that Bentham's thought was divided between the preservation of liberty and authoritarian social reform. (Brunon-Ernst 2016: 2)

Important as they are, studies such as Brunon-Ernst's seem to indicate that scholars today must seek a way out of a standstill. Intuitively, academia is no longer content with the somewhat unproductive suspension between the two "classical" poles of ethical reflection: "authoritarian state control" (usually construed as "evil") vs. "promotion of civil and political rights" (usually construed as "good"). Yet, seeking to transcend the traditional binary in their search for a solid methodological basis for the study

of a phenomenon whose cultural impact extends well beyond “good” and “evil,” scholars realize that even in their own rhizomatic reality, the most important questions concerning surveillance remain, essentially, ethical in nature. Paradoxically, it is so, because even if an alternative, non-binary–Deleuzoguattarian, Xenofeminist, or Posthumanist–perspective is adopted, the problem of *agency* remains central to the debate. Whether AI or human-controlled, the machinery of oversight, ultimately, is the machinery of normalization, and as such it must, by definition, overlook the fundamentals of its own programming. The “norm,” in other words, whoever or whatever institutes it, remains “under the radar.” Normation, however, even if operating beyond “traditional” distinctions, remains the basic motive of oversight. Hampering the possibility of creative transgression—the prerequisite of change—it may well become the ultimate cultural steamroller. Eliminating individuality, transforming privacy into a voyeuristic travesty, manipulating groups, responsible to no one, the depersonalized, global surveillance has imperceptibly transformed the ethics of honesty (“I have *nothing* to hide”) into the ethics of dishonesty (“I have *no way* to hide”). Born upon the ruins of intimacy, the human revolution, fought in the name of the right of an individual to defy the rule of the algorithm, is at hand.

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