

Power and panopticism

Technology



The type of imaging technology chosen for this particular study is the Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) surveillance. By definition, this is a form of technology that picks up signals and does not broadcast them across the air. Instead, the images are led to monitors directly. Consequently, the signal's receiver is usually one subject or group. The range across which the broadcast signals can be received is minimal thus leading to its prime function; surveillance.

CCTV cameras are used as tools for scrutiny as they allow an unknown observer the chance to examine subjects' movements. Home security, 2008) Forms of social power produced through gathering visual images According to Foucault's (1995) ideas on panopticism (as written in the book Discipline and Punish) discipline reinforces order and eliminates confusion. In areas where individuals are constantly inspected and surveyed, then authorities may exercise flawless power and discipline. The same may be said of CCTV cameras. They are tools for ensuring that individuals are kept under constant scrutiny. These visual images can be likened to Foucault's example.

He uses a prison with a large number of cells surrounding a tower in the middle. Through this tower, an observer can see exactly what is going on in the cells but cannot be seen by the inmates. This observer may be watching the inmates at any time without their knowledge; the same may be said of a CCTV cameras. Whether these devices are placed in traffic areas, supermarkets or certain institutions, the same principle is still at play. The observers examining CCTV cameras may be doing so at any time of the day and they are usually objects of information.

At no time will the CCTV observer be the ‘subject’ in communication. Through the surveillance cameras, the observer manages to individualize the subject by placing him/her in a situation where they can always be observed. It reminds the subject that there are higher powers at play even when no one is implementing that form of power. In this case, the CCTV becomes the Panopticon; the object for asserting the function of power. An example of how this is achieved is through traffic surveillance cameras in the streets of London or New York.

Through this system, automobile user’s daily activities are constantly being monitored. Those who violate traffic regulations are recorded in files that are sent to the violators and they are then punished for their actions. The traffic violators may be caught or scrutinized at any time. Therefore, drivers are always careful about their driving because they are afraid of the repercussions of their actions. This places a lot of power in the hands of the observer while making the automobile user a subject used to execute this form of power.

Motorists remain fearful because they do not know when the observers will exert their authority. The main idea behind panopticism through CCTV cameras is the systematic control and ordering of human populations. The interesting component about this surveillance is that controlling or monitoring systems are normally done by invisible forces thus making the subjects particularly insecure. (Foucault, 1995) CCTV cameras are particularly essential in the process of curbing imperfection in the rate of work.

When CCTV cameras are placed at airports and other buildings, the purpose is to ensure that subjects have no way of plotting terrorist attacks in the country or committing international crimes. Through this surveillance cameras, the state (through the police force) can ensure flawlessness in its execution of power. Surveillance cameras become mechanisms of power. These cameras are associated with political technology and are detached from use by other categories of people. In this case, it ensures that the tools for exercising power are in the hands of a few individuals while the effects are felt by many.

This is the major principle of Panopticism- ensuring flawlessness of power. Additionally, Panoptic tools such as CCTV surveillance cameras are made to create the impression that everything is under control and that everyone is protected by the state. When viewed externally, one would imagine that modern societies are open and free to all its residents. However, society is controlled through tools like the surveillance cameras. It should be noted that the state is not actually trying to suppress the will of the individual through scrutiny. Nether is the state trying to alter the will of its citizens.

The state is trying to mold the will of the people such that they can accept modes of control such as imaging technologies. Since society can perceive the effects of this form of power, then they become part of the supporting mechanism. The state has managed to achieve this by convincing the public that CCTV surveillance cameras are for their own good. The police department asserts that the cameras help in curbing terrorist attacks in airports and that it reduces accidents on roads as a result of following traffic

rules. However, statistics show that there are no tangible results in terms of curbing crime.

The same may be said of traffic cameras as accident rates have not reduced much. (Foucault, 1995) Kinds of subjects produced and the kind of ideals they are forced to conform Despite the fact that surveillance cameras have the ability to reveal actual culprits, there are instances when they may go wrong. Time and time again, media accounts have reported that through the help of surveillance cameras, law enforcers were able to catch a certain criminal. Most of the time, these announcements are made quite dramatically in order to draw the attention of the listener.

These reports make it seem like the CCTV surveillance cameras had done something exceptional because of their exceptional technologic capabilities. This reinforces the feeling of safety. Such subjects may be assured that the surveillance cameras have done the following

- Enhanced the rule of law
- Created an efficient system
- Indicated advancement in democracy
- Indicated self control

However, in instances where the cameras capture a particular individual, then that individual ceases to hold the latter sentiments.

At that point, the subject realizes that these invisible eyes have finally gained access into their homes or their lives. Such visual imaging tools may place an innocent subject in a role as a terrorist, criminal scapegoat or a violent person. It is no secret that any slight misrepresentation of these images can change an innocent scenario to look like a crime scene. This especially applies to the issue of terrorism. Repeatedly, surveillance cameras

have arrested individuals purported to be criminals or terrorists planning to attack the state.

These assertions may be taken out of context and incriminate persons of a particular race wrongly. In this regard, CCTV cameras and other similar visual imaging technologies create a basis for categorizing individuals on the basis of their physical appearance. (Duckitt, 1989) Additionally, CCTV surveillance cameras have made society conform to the state's messages. For instance, society believes that this technology is a form of external power yet this is not true. Additionally, people have accepted the presence of cameras and other visual technologies as part of their every day life.

This makes it very difficult to some individuals to stop and question them. Consequently, society is willing to accept a lot of control over its activities regardless of what occurs. The CCTV camera has created these ideals amongst members of society. Without their knowledge, they are implementing the will of the state. Conclusion Society has been made part of the panoptic machine. Through surveillance cameras, the state can ensure flawlessness in its execution of power. Society is not even aware that they have been made to conform to certain ideals yet they are the mechanisms for implementing control.