

# Panopticism's difficulty essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Panopticism Michael Foucault's essay Panopticism was written much differently than other essays that I have read. Panopticism is intended to be, as mentioned by Hunter, a "meticulous tactical partitioning" (pg. 212). Foucault writes in such a different style than most of the authors that I have studied. He uses unique grammar and sentence structures that make sense but take a while to understand, as well as different use words that truly mean one thing and in his mind meaning another and even just random quotes.

From reading the Introduction in Ways of Reading, I managed to have a better approach to understanding such difficult pieces as this one. Reading with and against the grain has been a very big help as well as other techniques mentioned in the book. As stated in Tracey Hunter's essay, "All readers find Foucault's prose tough going. It helps to realize that it is necessarily difficult. Foucault, remember, is trying to work outside of, or in spite of, the usual ways of thinking and writing. He is trying not to reproduce the standard discourse but to point to what it cannot or will not say.

(pg 209) Tracey used this passage throughout her essay to show that Panopticism is meant to be a more intellectual piece and needs to be looked at in different ways in order to get the points across. She speaks of the "strategic" methods in which Foucault writes and connects different concepts, such as when she speaks of his "definition" of discipline. Hunter states "Discipline is commonly used term among Foucault's essay and is not always used in the terminology we are used to... After rereading, I understood that Foucault used the term to fix an area up as to reinforce change. This is a good example of how Foucault uses common terminology and makes his

own " meaning" of the terms. He seems to make different connections with objects that usually do not " go" together, such as the plague and leprosy. In Panopticism Foucault speaks of the plague in Europe and the disciplinary system that was being used to separate those who were lepers, considered to have been hit by the plague.

Foucault states, " If it is true that the leper gave rise to rituals of exclusion, which to certain extent provided the model for general form of the great Confinement, then the plague gave rise to disciplinary projects," (pg. 211). This statement made me question exactly what it is that Foucault is trying to say. Is he trying to say that leprosy is the plague and that those who are lepers caused the disciplinary projects to be formed, or is he trying to say that it is possible that leprosy is possibly the cause of the plague but it is not certain? I began to reread the passage to try and get a better understanding of what Foucault was trying to express. As the Introduction states " We believe the best way to work on a difficult text is by rereading..." (pg.

12) Through rereading the passage I understood a little more what he was trying to say. This concept of rereading made interpreting the passage easier and I learned this concept from the Working with Difficulty portion of the Introduction. I believed that Foucault was trying to say that the plague was the basic beginning of the disciplinary projects. It caused the discipline factor to become stricter, and the lepers, basically, brought the need for such discipline projects. However, through continuing on in the text to the next few sentences I realized that lepers were not necessarily the plagued ones, they were just "...caught up in the practice of rejection, of exile-enclosure..." Therefore, the lepers were just put to suffer by the society, they really were

not the plagued ones, but since they would die sooner or later they were not really cared for or cared about.

This portion of the essay was very difficult to comprehend and without rereading the text, I probably would have had a more difficult time trying to interpret the meaning of the passage. Rereading allowed me to recognize and notice important points of this essay that I had not noticed when reading it the first time. Throughout Foucault's essay there were terms with which I had some difficulty as to understanding the reasoning for it being in the passage as well as the general meaning of the word in context with the essay. Two words or phrases which definitely "stuck out" at me were "disciplinary mechanisms" and "surveillance". With trying to make sense of these terms I used a concept from the Introduction "This is where you find patterns and connections that are not obvious and not already articulated but that make sense to you and give you a way to describe what you see in what you are reading" (pg.

16) This helped in that for each of the terms I tried to make a modern definition that I know and then see what it is that Foucault is trying to define the term as meaning. Disciplinary mechanisms seemed to be a phrase which was essential to the entire meaning and essence of Panopticism. Discipline was a common term that I understand and mechanisms as well; however, when they are put together they mean something completely different. The phrase appears many times in this essay, one area is "...the existence of a whole set of techniques and institutions for measuring, supervising, and correcting the abnormal brings into play the disciplinary mechanisms to which the fear of the plague gave rise." (pg. 213) This shows that

disciplinary mechanisms consist of certain techniques of discipline throughout this time that compare to the thought of discipline at this time.

Instead of our thoughts of discipline which are forceful actions and spontaneous, this form of a "disciplinary mechanism" is formal, impersonal, and consists of observation rather than taking action. Another example was "All the mechanisms of power which, even today, are disposed around the abnormal individual, to brand him and to alter him, are composed of those two forms from which they distantly derive. (pg. 213) This discusses how the disciplinary mechanisms of this time both altered and shaped a person, as well as today, therefore stating that discipline has the same meaning at anytime. There are many instances in which these mechanisms are expressed and established.

The term "disciplinary mechanism" is used in a very "strategic" manner throughout this essay. It is used to express the form of discipline throughout the society, the manner in which discipline is dealt with throughout the Panopticon, as well as to establish a main idea throughout the essay.

Foucault uses the terms disciplinary and mechanisms in different relation than I could comprehend. Defining the terms individually gives you a completely different meaning as to what the actual phrase means throughout Foucault's essay. The term is "necessary" in this essay because it establishes the main concepts that the essay portrays. It gives the reader the chance to compare their own knowledge of the subject and see what he is trying to portray in comparison.

Power and discipline are extremely important throughout Panopticism. They seem to be themes that are displayed in this essay. Disciplinary mechanisms are essential to establish and develop any society because they allow a sense of authority to be maintained, and for power to still be maintained. It is an ordered systematic structure that has a specific order to the actions that are made in various occasions. As for the use of the term "surveillance", there are various areas in which surveillance plays a key role.

The first area in which it appeared was in the sentence "...an organization in depth of surveillance and control..." (pg. 211-212), another was the sentence "The plague-stricken town, traversed throughout with hierarchy, surveillance, observation, writing..." (pg. 212), and the last one was "So to arrange things so the surveillance is permanent in its effects even if it is discontinuous in its action..." (pg. 214). All three of these sentences use the term "surveillance" in similar ways.

"Surveillance" means shadowing and observation. In this essay it played a tremendous role to describe the structure of the Panopticon and the use of authority and power throughout it. The inspectors constantly keeping an eye on the inmates shows them being the authority figures and continuously trying to make sure that order is being held and that rules and regulations are being followed. "Strategically" the use of surveillance in terms of the essay is essential.

It shows the true meaning of the piece which is the role of power in society. As for the "necessity" of the use of the term, surveillance allowed for such power to be enforced and to make sure that no one went against them. The

inspectors were supposed to enforce authority which was shown by them always keeping an eye on the inmates. A passage that Foucault used strategically was: "... Bedlam laid down the principle that power should be visible and unverifiable. Visible: the inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon.

Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so. " (pg. 215)

This passage was quite confusing for me. It states the two principles that create power are visible and unverifiable. For understanding this passage I read both with and against the grain. Through reading with the grain I tried to " read generously, to work inside someone else's system, to see your world in someone else's terms" (pg.

11). In doing so I got a wider perspective of what Foucault was trying to say regarding power. I attempted to think as he would and see myself in the position of the passage. I attempted to work with his ideas and began to understand what the two principles of power truly mean. I attempted to think of myself being in the situation to better understand the text.

The visible principle consists of the inmates seeing the tower which is an authority figure to them. They visualize the tower as being the place where they are being watched very carefully from and also being much more powerful than any other portion of the prison. It is the place that determines their life or death. As for the other portion of the passage about being unverifiable, I read against the grain in that I "... read critically, to turn back... to ask questions they believe might come as a surprise, to look for

the limits of her vision,..." (pg. 1) I did so in trying to comprehend the concept of power being unverifiable. In the passage Foucault says that the inmate must never know when they are being watched but should always know that they may be being watched at anytime.

This confused me in the fact that I always thought that it was more effective for one to see the authority or seeing that someone is watching them, because it caused them to fear doing anything that may get them into trouble. It seems as though this "strategy" or form of authority just doesn't make sense with the common thought of visibility. Rather than visibility being a positive thing it is used negatively because "Visibility is a trap." (pg.

214) With reading against the grain I did not completely disagree with Foucault's ideas I tried analyzing what he mentioned, and through doing so I understood more of what he was trying to get across. Through not knowing when you are being watched, you are kept in suspense and therefore have to always be in good behavior, where as if you know when you are being watched, you can do things when they are turned around, etc. The Panopticon, Bentham's architectural figure, is very specific in structure. It consist of "...an annular building; at the center, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells,... they have two windows, on o the inside, corresponding the windows of the tower, the other, on the outside... Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which is ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap.



” (pgs. 213-214) This “ layout” of the panopticon gave me a better visual of what it was like for the inmates to not be able to see, but are constantly seen. Foucault explains the layout of the Panopticon as just mentioned, and continuously speaks of the visibility of the inmates but them not being capable of seeing anything out of their cells. He speaks of how “ power” plays a big role in the Panopticon and how its layout “...assures the automatic functioning of power” (pg.

214). This shows how truly important authority was in such situations. The final point of Foucault’s essay was: “ Is it surprising that the cellular prison, with its regular chronologies, forced labor, its authorities of surveillance and registration, its experts in normality ... should have become the modern instrument of penalty? Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons? ” (pg. 236).

Foucault seems to be using these questions rhetorically. Throughout reading this part of the essay I began to question, what exactly is Foucault trying to express about the vision and layout of prisons? Is he trying to say that they are the same as common areas as hospitals and factories? He seems to be trying to portray that these locations just as similarly resemble a prison. This gives one the impression that throughout society all of these locations have many similarities and have basically the same missions. In each of these locations there is an authority that “ leads” the particular industry or business and has a specific power tied with their roles. Missions that each has are protecting the people who come to their particular industry, and to have people follow authority. There is an equal mode of power which all three of these locations represent and follow.

There is always a person in charge, and there are always those who must obey in order to make it through life. In hospitals the lead authorities would be the doctors, in the prisons it would be the "inspectors" and in factories the employers. Each location tries to keep people safe from certain things, hospitals from illness and injury, factories from unemployment and from being unoccupied, and prisons to keep people protected from those in prison. Foucault had a specific sentence structure which he used throughout Panopticism.

He uses many commas, semicolons, and long sentences. An example of his strange however unique use of sentence structure would be the passage: Our society is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance; under the surface of images, one invests bodies in depth; behind the great abstraction of exchange, there continues the meticulous, concrete training of useful forces; the circuits of communication are the supports of an accumulation and a centralization of knowledge; the play of signs defines the anchorages of power; it is not that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it, according to a whole technique of forces and bodies. (pg. 228) This is a very long "sentence."

"Foucault uses many semicolons and commas which allows the entire sentence to become fabricated and connect. The use of commas make sense once looking at this sentence more profoundly in that Foucault uses them to make connections between different objects and ideas that actually go together. In his use of semicolons he is bringing different clauses with similar topics and ideas to make them remain in the same sentence and have a

more meaningful purpose and meaning to what they mean through putting them all together. Foucault does so in many of his sentences throughout his work and it is very impressive in how he does so. Without reading the College Writer's Guide I would not have realized his intellectual way of using punctuation to make his text more difficult in interpretation but very descriptive of what he is trying to portray. Throughout the essay, Foucault uses a great amount of terminology to express his views on the Panopticon, his views on authority and power as well as to make a point of his essay.

These terms create more work throughout the piece and cause the reader to take some time to figure out what the terms mean in context and what exactly the writer is trying to express throughout the work. Foucault does this in such a strange and unique way, although it is quite difficult to comprehend. He does many things in his own way and in order to understand what he is trying to do or portray you need to understand some of the concepts in the Introduction. That was honestly the only true way in which I could understand Panopticism.

Works Cited Bartholomae, David and Anthony Petrosky. "Introduction: Ways of Reading." *Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Readers*. 8th Ed.

Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008. 209-236. English Dept.

of Quinnipiac University. "Part Seven: Editing Grammar." *The College Writers Reference*. 5th Ed. Upper Saddle River: New Jersey, 2008.

335-350. Foucault, Michel. "Panopticism." *Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Readers*.

<https://assignbuster.com/panopticisms-difficulty-essay/>

8th Ed. By: David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008. 209-236.