

Cover Sheet

Name: Andrew Huff

Title: Disciplinary Power and Contemporary Photography

Nominating Professor: Dr. Rachel Templer

Research Strategy

I began this essay with a preliminary research consultation to help commence investigating photographic art, philosophy of surveillance, and visual imaging – all outside of my major discipline. A few minutes after searching key word terms within these topics and cross-referencing them with WorldCat and the Goucher College Library Catalogue, I discovered two bookshelves devoted to sculpture and photography with themes of surveillance. The titles that emerged from the computer search then revealed a larger extent of sources sitting on adjacent shelves. This experience reinforced for me the value of not just computer searches, but also having a wandering eye in the library shelves.

I then turned to Lexis-Nexis for newspaper accounts of art exhibitions to provide a perspective of the work inside the art gallery or internet – one more intimate to the work than a time-removed anthology of artistic works. I also employed Academic Search Premier to conduct more rapid searches for academic articles. The ability to insert key terms and phrases in various combinations, paired with the library's Internet connection (itself a valuable and taken-for-granted tool), allowed me to quickly peruse dozens of article titles and abstracts. Using Academic Search Premier revealed the research process as funnel-like: the more one researches, the more one refines the search terms and extracts the most precise resources from the search engine.

The Research Librarians aided me in replacing abstract philosophical terms with more common synonyms, in addition to answering my questions about proper citation (as this essay represented my first foray into *artistic* analysis). The acquisition of much of the research depended on a strong network of databases and people within the library, including the research librarians, CTLT, and the front desk student workers. Together, the online and human resources made me feel very comfortable successfully conducting research outside my major discipline.

Disciplinary Power and Contemporary Photography

Twentieth century photography in the two decades immediately following the publication of Michel Foucault's Discipline and Punish (1975) represents a new threshold within the "epistemological thaw" that Foucault describes as the dissemination of power relations into the minutia of human existence (224). There exists an affinity between "modern penalty" and post-modern photography, both of which engage in a subjection of bodies that creates, monitors, and penetrates the lived realities of individuals.

Although Foucault writes that when private individuals become the "principal elements" of society, power loses its efficacy as a spectacle, contemporary photography very much turns private lives into visual spectacles to be observed by multitudes (Foucault 216). Subjects are captured on film, then displayed publicly in a physical gallery, art installation, or various online forums. Foucault appears to formulate the basis for a type of "Panoptic art" when he writes that "power has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, [and] gazes" that capture an individual (202). Contemporary photography, likewise, employs these components to produce a work of art that at times narrows its lens to an individual subject. For Foucault, the sovereign ritual of public torture may be anachronistic as such, but a new artistic ritual has emerged within contemporary photography that entails a distribution of power, an act of surveillance, and a quest for deeper truth about the subjects being photographed.

Marcel Broodthaers' "La Tour Visuelle" (1966), constructed in the decade prior to publication of Discipline and Punish, ironically precludes its central panoptic theme of the evolution of power into a "visible and unverifiable" form (Foucault 201). The work, in this light, represents the product of a contemporary society's institutionalization and internalization of a disciplinary mode of punishment. "La Tour Visuelle" falls under the rubric of Pop art, though one could reinterpret it as the precursor to a new brand of "panoptic art" that both captures and perpetuates this dynamic of inhabiting an observatory world where, much like Broodthaers'

sculpture, “eyes look out from every angle [and] there is no escape from their gaze” (National Galleries Scotland 1). And yet, the tower’s plethora of eyes makes it a foil to Jeremy Bentham’s central panoptic tower, which relies on a single gaze observing multitudes.



La Tour Visuelle (1966)

“La Tour Visuelle” conjures up Foucault’s claim that power in a panoptic society is “like a faceless gaze [...] thousands of eyes posted everywhere” (214). Contemporary photography, specifically the works of Sophie Calle, Victor Burgin, and Doug Hall, validate Foucault’s notion that this “gaze is alert everywhere” (195). They represent the personification of Bentham’s Panopticon – humans who, as observers, enact a disciplinary regime that creates subjects, investigates them, and has the potential to reconstitute them as “docile bodies” in Foucauldian language. And yet, each of their works also challenges panopticism by portraying an incomplete

gaze, showing that as panoptic vision enters the realm of photography, it loses some of its strength. Additionally, Hall's work reveals a striking evolution in the disciplinary society: technological ammunition in the effort to deter crime, observe individuals, and maintain authority. Regardless, their collective works present the interrelated machinations of a disciplinary society governed by panopticism and memorialized by contemporary photography. Doing so, they emphasize contemporary photography's unsuccessful attempt to achieve all-seeing vision, although with the application of enhanced photographic mapping technology (such as Google Maps or Google Earth), this handicap has been dwindling. Nevertheless, these collective products of contemporary society reveal that discipline is a method that can be applied anywhere – even in artistic media (Foucault 215).

Sophie Calle

The French photographer Sophie Calle demonstrates that in the modern age we have the objective of, as Foucault quotes from Julius, trying “to procure for a small number, or even for a single individual, the instantaneous view of a great multitude” (Foucault 216). Calle herself is emblematic of an agent of panoptic surveillance, using her camera lens to insert herself into the lived realities of other people, silently transforming them from citizens into subjects, then presenting these products to the public in art installations.

Calle simultaneously represents the shift in expression of power in the 18th century towards a power exercised continually, but also a resurrection of ritualized power through photographic art. Two of her works, “L’Hôtel” (1983) and “Suite Vénitienne” (1980), entailed a deep, methodical commitment to inhabiting a particular location for several weeks on end, devoted expressly to investigating the lives of others by observing them daily or literally stalking them step-by-step. This dedication and artistic mission amounts to a type of ritual in which she reconfigures a face in a crowd, or even simply personal belongings, into a character that becomes her subject. The White Cube gallery lends credence to this claim by describing Calle's work as

“concerned with self-documentation and the investigation of ritual,” primarily the daily habits of strangers that, in order to be uncovered, require a habitual routine on the part of the investigator (1). In this sense, the photos have been taken and are displayed to “read like detective reports, or a psychiatrist’s case notes” (Jeffries 1). The photographer, then, can act like the viewer in Bentham’s central tower, yet in public, with the aim of creating a grandiose project rooted to an individuated subject. This pre-determined endpoint questions Foucault’s claim that ritualized power is an artifact of the past.



Image from “L’Hôtel” (1983) collection

The photographic ritual Calle undertakes in her piece “L’Hôtel” (1983) still aligns well with panopticism, which according to Foucault, translates power into the “terms of the everyday life,” rather than the extraordinary (205). The minutia matter, extremely so, and have become the elements sought after in both disciplinary power and Calle’s photography. In the piece, Calle’s quest for these individuating elements found an outlet in her ruse as a chambermaid in a Venetian hotel; granted access to the private rooms of patrons, Calle proceeded to inspect and then photograph the contents of the rooms. Much like Le Vaux’s menagerie at Versailles, Calle utilizes the partitioned hotel, divided into distinct rooms, as a means of engaging in “individualized observation, with characterization and classification” (Foucault 203). Calle enthusiastically annotates the objects in these chambers and considers the blocky, cellular rooms open for inspection (Manchester 1).

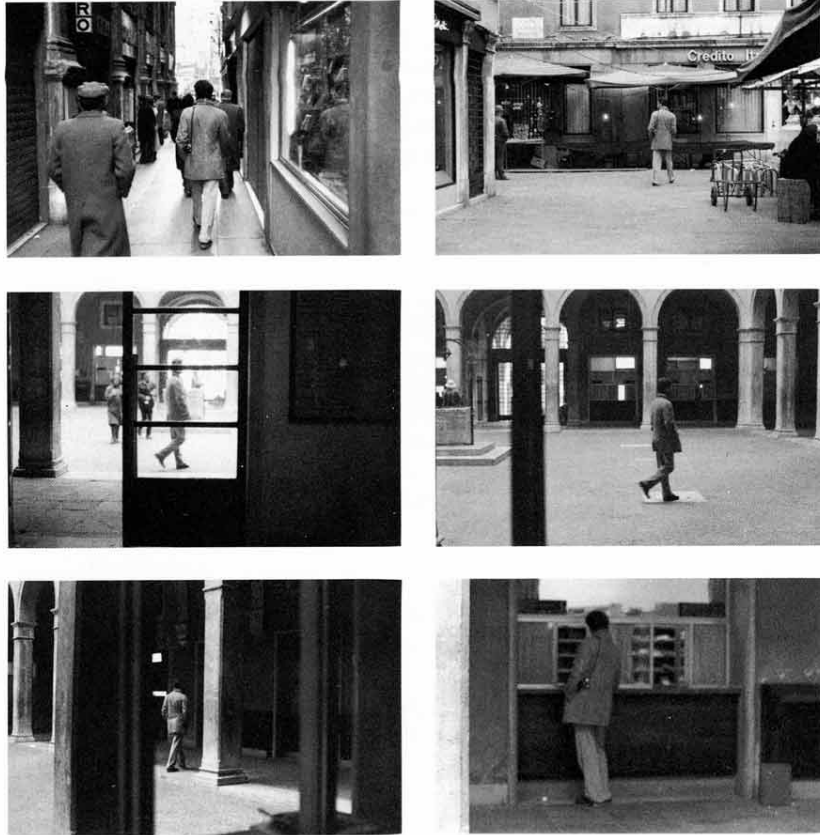
The work instills the sense of being observed in the recesses of not simply private space, but purchased and hence temporarily propertied space, which intensifies the ambiguity of the distinction between private and public space (Manchester 5). “L’Hôtel” presents personal space and private possessions as objects of public observation, drawing upon the notion of public torture as a spectacle for the public, yet with the Panoptic effort of pinpointing the individual behind the body as the focus of the spectacle. Her work endeavors to dissolve the mass of “hotel residents” into a known body of individual habits and items that correspond to particular rooms and particular residents within those rooms. Foucault describes a similar effect of the Panopticon, which reverses the “collective effect” of the crowd, which it “abolished and replaced by a collection of separated individualities” (Foucault 201). But this characterization, however thorough, is incomplete because Calle never offers photographs of the hotel *guests*, only their possessions. Whether out of artistic choice, lack of opportunity, or fear of punishment herself, her camera observes a small degree of privacy.

Still, Calle comes close to overcoming what Sherringham describes as an inherent remove from “settled, classifiable, or fixed identities” even in the midst of the living quarters of

hotel guests (418). She wears the guests' clothing, accessories, and books; reads their letters, diaries, and passports; smells their perfume and infers their diets from leftovers and trash receptacles, all of which she uses to extract an understanding of the individuals living in the rooms (Sheringham 422). Calle, like panoptic power, focuses on the "spatial relations" between subjects that enable an analysis of "distributions, gaps, series, combinations, and which use instruments that render visible, record, differentiate, and compare" (Foucault 208). So, while the complete identities remain unknown, the differences between the hotel guests become much more refined for Calle.

If "L'Hôtel" demonstrates the incomplete panoptic effort to dissolve the public-private boundary, Calle's "Suite Vénitienne" (1979) reveals a stronger effort at individuation in addition to the notion that the observed person is "the object of information, never a subject of communication" (Foucault 200). For this piece, Calle contacted dozens of hotels to determine the dwelling of a stranger she had met at a party, then convinced his neighbor to secretly allow her to use her balcony to photograph the man's "comings and goings" (Jeffries 1). Calle additionally trailed him on foot throughout Venice for several weeks, documenting his movement and behavior outside while remaining incognito.

Her solitary, individualized work parallels the Panopticon's ability to economize power. Foucault describes it as the most efficient and effective way of exercising power over others because it "can reduce the number of those who exercise it, while increasing the number of those on whom it is exercised" (206). And yet, in this piece Calle does not attempt to capture multiple individuals, only one. She has in some ways inverted the individuating elements of panoptic power by creating a dynamic where the one observing narrows his or her gaze to one subject. Calle lacks the technology and the physical ability to thoroughly identify multiple subjects, as even her work in "L'Hôtel" shows; nevertheless when she herself economizes her power, she finds the ability to discover one male individual.

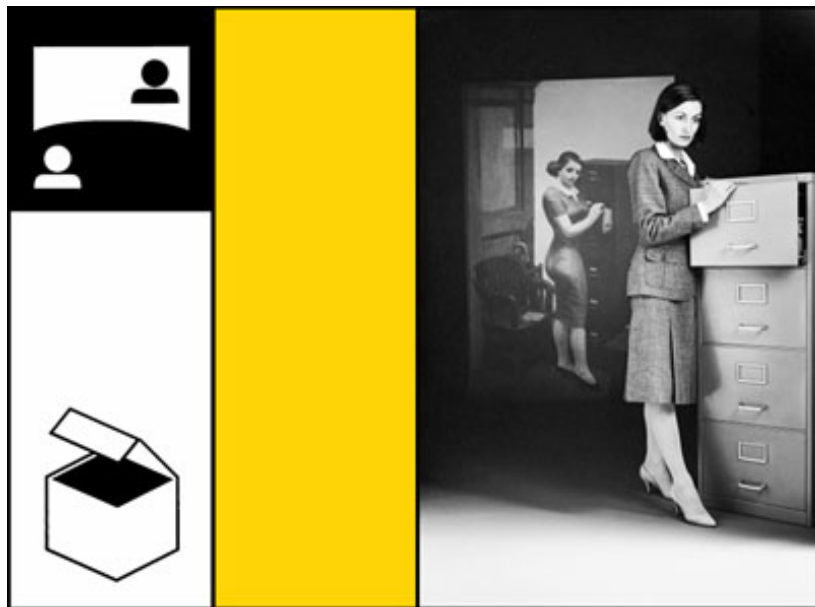


“Suite Vénitienne” (1980)

The way in which Calle produced “Suite Vénitienne” establishes what Foucault calls “differential distribution,” a further principle of panopticism. In it, the examination of the observed person is intensified to such a high degree so that “who he is; where he must be; how he is to be characterized; how he is to be recognized; how a constant surveillance is to be exercised over him in an individual way” become of paramount concern (Foucault 199). Calle’s selection of one man and the effort to insert herself into his daily routine has roots, it seems, in panoptic notions of individualized observation and inquiry. Ironically, then, she reverses Julius’ claim by attempting to present one individual before the view of a great multitude (Foucault 216). To a great extent she succeeds in this piece with using photography to capture and create an individual by taking photos only of him. Once again, though, she never offers a photo of his face, limiting the extent to which the public can know him.

Victor Burgin

Victor Burgin's photographic series entitled "The Office at Night" (1985) deepens Calle's work (which embodies the agent of power or power itself) by presenting the product of panoptic power: a self-aware subject who is also aware of being watched. He shares Calle's ability to capitalize on the "voyeuristic functions of the photograph" that peer into the lives of subjects (Taylor 98). Within this medium, where the artist is endowed with the power to "record a moment of looking and a moment of being looked at," the artistic medium of photography becomes the sight of power relations (98).



The Office at Night #1 (1985)

The pictograms to the left of "The Office at Night #1" reflect a restrained balance between the black and white figures, each of which appears to be observing or policing the other within their two-dimensional plane. The lack of a need for excess power beyond the gaze finds expression in the minimalist nature of the pictograms. Likewise, the angular form of the box and the sharp lines throughout the piece may allude to the "economic geometry" of the Panopticon,

which eliminates the extravagance of sovereign power in favor of a simpler, yet more ingraining, disciplinary power (Foucault 202). With this new structure, “there were no more bars, no more chains, no more heavy locks,” the fundamental thing required being defined partitions and openings (Foucault 202). The pictograms and photographs share the minimalist nature of the panoptic structure rather clearly. Each contains very definite, deliberate lines. Within the photograph, the woman in the foreground remains parallel to the shadow line, while the horizontal lines of the cabinet juxtapose the vertical lines created by her legs and profile. Each of the three panels has a clear demarcation, causing none of the yellow color to bleed into the black and white images, and vice versa. Each one, like each of the inmates in a Panopticon cell, can be regarded in relation to one another, or alone.

In the photograph, the woman in the foreground stares blankly several paces in front of her, while the woman in the background observes her. The character in the foreground appears frozen; she comports herself as if she knows she’s being watched. Her hand pauses on the file cabinet – perhaps insinuating that she has broken office protocol by snooping – and occupies a state of being where she recognizes she has been seen. One could also infer, though, that the gaze of the woman in the foreground is directed at a third character out of view, making her an observer as well.

A second piece in the series, “The Office at Night # 4,” manages to, like Calle’s work, invite the viewer into the panoptic discourse. Within this work, the woman in the photograph has her back to the viewer, her focus directed to the opening between the office partitions as she observes something in a second room. And yet, seemingly unbeknownst to her, she is also being watched, by someone out of view: the photographer.

The nature of the characters in Burgin’s pieces as both observers and the observed reflects the Panopticon’s ability to “invest” the observed object with power in such a manner that it is applied on that subject, through that subject, and finally by that subject (Foucault 206). The observed are drawn into the disciplinary gaze, and then perpetuate its grip, without realizing it.



The Office at Night #4 (1985)

The pictograms to the left of “The Office at Night #4” provide a symbolic representation of panoptic discipline’s desire to “unlock” the complexities of the criminal’s background and makeup, in addition to its use of the inmate as a circuit of power. As Foucault claims, the main effect of the Panopticon is “to induce in the inmate a state of consciousness and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (201). Through disciplinary intervention and reformation, the Panopticon uses the disciplines (i.e. psychology, physiology, criminology, etc.) to create a figure with specific ridges like a key. Doing so reveals the inner secrets of his criminality and reforms him to fit into the capitalist society outside the Panopticon. The inmate then internalizes the disciplinary power to act as if he is under examination at all times, to behave according to norms, as if a gazing eye could peer into his movements and thoughts. The pictogram also alludes to a keyhole: a window deconstructing the line between private and public space. Yet, Burgin’s works also reveal the limit of Panoptic power because in both there is the possibility of an additional character being watched whom the viewer never sees,

or even knows exists. Ironically, this subject of vision occupies the space of the “guardian” in Bentham’s tower, a figure assumed, but never actually known to be, present (Foucault 202). Calle inverts this dynamic in her piece “La Filature” (1981), of which, Calle says: “I asked my mother to hire a private detective to follow me, without him knowing that I had arranged it, and to provide photographic evidence of my existence” (Sophie Calle 1; Jones 292). Despite becoming the target of intense observation, Calle retained power through the *certainty* that her privations and daily movements had an audience. In this manner, both the supervisor and the supervised exercised a predatory gaze over one another.

Doug Hall

Burgin’s work reveals an “infra-penalty,” (Foucault 222) or the movement of panoptic discipline outside the realm of the law and into daily life, a concept that Doug Hall pinpoints in his piece entitled “The Neighborhood Watch.” Hall’s compilation of images from a security camera stationed to observe an undisclosed neighborhood manifests, initially, as a symbol of Foucault’s “police apparatus” concerned with “the dust of events, actions, behavior, and opinions” (213). However, Hall’s own use of these images as an artistic medium reaffirms Foucault’s qualifying point that “it would be wrong to believe that the disciplinary functions [of power] were confiscated and absorbed once and for all by a state apparatus” (215). As a result, the domain of art can be regarded as a new sight for panoptic power relations due to its appropriation of surveillance data.

Hall’s piece, in one sense, is a pixelated representation of what Broodthaers’ “La Tour Visuelle” sees, and in fact, Hall himself writes that “to see the world as a panorama is to control it with the eyes” (Hall 194). The security camera redefines what constitutes an eye, however, by replacing fallible human vision with presumably flawless electronic recording. Its ability to gaze upon the city in its entirety, then zoom into any particular object or person, enables it to “dissect [and] fragmentize with impunity” (Hall 196). The central image of the piece presents the viewer

with a wide shot of several city blocks, while surrounding it are nine close-ups of city residents, all unaware that the camera is watching them.



Neighborhood Watch, 10 panels, 63.5" x 68.5", 1995

Neighborhood Watch (1995)

The camera itself symbolizes a profound evolution in panopticism in contemporary society because anonymity has been forever removed. As Hall writes, computer imaging has enabled the interrogation of photographic pixels, meaning “the image has become data,” which may become a tool of “wider, and perhaps more insidious, kinds of use” (Hall 197). But while one’s image may be seen, one’s individuating features can still be ambiguous to the “eye,” as the blurry pixels of Hall’s camera show.

Nevertheless, the ability to diffuse a photograph of an individual into a compilation of thousands of pixels in essence reduces the individual into his or her elemental fragments. This breakdown mimics the reformation of criminals into the numerous “cogs” Foucault speaks of throughout Discipline and Punish, those which can be replaced and moved about in a capitalist society by “offering nearly limitless possibilities for [...] sorting and restructuring information” (Hall 198). This imagery once again draws a connection to “La Tour Visuelle,” whose identical eyes can be removed, rearranged, and replaced in any position on the tower by an external agent. Hall does not neglect to note, though, that such a “model of fluidity has its dark side” (Hall 198).

The Panopticon, like the security camera in Hall’s piece, uses a technology of organization and observation to turn the agent watching the criminals or would-be-criminals into “the distant, invisible viewer – the controller and manipulator of information who pays no price for watching” (Hall 198). The parallel runs deeper, though. No one has to be present in the central tower of the Panopticon in order for its effect to take place – the inmates simply need to believe that they are being watched (Foucault 201). Likewise, the security camera does not need to be controlled, or even turned on, for the wayward subject in its sight of vision to assume that he is being watched. It is feasible that one wouldn’t have to pay for a guard, or even electricity, in order to elicit the desired docility from those viewed. At this moment, the impact of surveillance has affixed itself to the individual, without the need for power to actually be exercised (Foucault 201).

Innovation as Incarceration

The implications of the power of imaging appear beyond the art gallery in the realm of Internet inquiries. The refinement and democratization of satellite technology through “Google Earth” and “Google Maps” software allow any individual with internet access to observe or inspect the architecture, city planning, and physical terrain of virtually any point on Earth in great detail. Unlike in Hall’s work, though, “the technology used by Google is more advanced than the technology employed by ordinary cameras due to advanced magnification and centralized record

collection” (Segall 5). Google’s “Street View,” which enables Internet users to explore a location from the vantage point of a person on the street, has even been developing technology “capable of capturing *indoor* imagery” (Jennings 218). With regard to the image resolution provided through Google’s mapping products, “the eventual goal is centimeter-per-pixel imagery for the entire globe: every square centimeter of the (real) Earth’s surface would be its own pixel on Google Earth” – the highest level of image resolution attainable (Jennings 217). The improvement of the technology swiftly has been swiftly removing the buffer of privacy afforded by the blurry camera presented in Hall’s work.

Human interaction with mapping technology is more nuanced, though. The extraction of information from an online search engine has assumed the format of a dialogue between sentient beings. Currently, “data is indexed by place, not by theme,” so if one asks “‘What’s around here?’ (and that query is probably automated, if you have a GPS-enabled phone), the answers flood in: these friends, these businesses, these photos” (Jennings 225). In its presentation of “customized” data that reflects your previous search histories, “the Internet overlays itself on the real world like – well, like a map, frankly” (Jennings 225-26). This dynamic reveals the knowing power of the Internet: to observe, to remember, and to instill the very expectation that it observes and remembers. Paradoxically, it is both intimately personal, through its personalization of our queries and movements, yet also perfectly impersonal due to its lack of a face or corpus. In many respects, it has digitized the guardian inside Bentham’s watchtower.

This fusion within the web’s identity, or the web’s reflection of our own, prompts the question of what happens to one’s bodily sovereignty when one becomes part of a map or a character in its presentation of the world. The act of “geotagging” (indexing one’s movements, preferences, and searches by place) confirms that our interactions with “space” are no longer privileged: they are observed, and indeed one often chooses to be observed, as Sophie Calle’s “La Filature” demonstrates. Jerome Dobson, the president of the American Geographical Society,

offers “the word “geoslavery” to refer to the potential threat to our privacy and autonomy that GPS-powered maps might someday pose” (Jennings 227). He claims that

If everything you do is geotagged, then everyone always knows where you are – which is awesome if you’re hoping to meet some friends after work for a drink, but maybe not so awesome if potential burglars are casing your neighborhood to find out who’s not home, or if you’re dealing with an abusive ex or a child predator or even some stranger who got mad about something you posted online. We’re an Orwellian dystopia in the making (Jennings 228).

This “dystopia” will perpetuate itself in a Panoptic manner through mimicking the internalization of disciplinary power in the subjects targeted for discipline and surveillance. Governments will not be burdened with tracking and pinpointing the locations of individuals because, as Jennings writes, “we’re opting to do it ourselves (228).

However, some restrictions on this penetrating vision exist. For instance, on “Google Street View,” the presence of “nudity, sensitive locations, or clearly identifiable individuals” warrants removal, while “in order to protect domestic violence victims Google has worked to keep images of shelters private” (Segall 6). Nevertheless, the program’s operations in Switzerland have generated strong complaints after “numerous faces and vehicle registration plates were either not wiped out or inadequately blurred, especially where the persons concerned were shown in sensitive locations, such as outside hospitals, prisons or schools” (Segall 19). Part of the threat of Google’s visionary technology lies in its potentially clandestine utility. Equipped with the address of a new acquaintance, one can see the layout of the property, the location of the nearest supermarket, park, etc.; calculate the exact time to move from his or her front door to any location on foot, by car, or public transportation; and more. The ritual of personal introductions has evolved into a private investigation that commences with a point on a map, one which unlocks the personal details of a person’s habitat through satellite photographs. This gallery of the human landscape and its inhabitants perpetuates Panoptic power by extending the sense of being observed to the exterior – and eventually the interior – of a person’s private property.

Conclusion

The contemporary photographers Sophie Calle, Victor Burgin, and Doug Hall each produced works of art that highlight the shift from a “codified power to punish” to a new “disciplinary power to observe,” while participating in and revealing its limitations (Foucault 224). The monarchical sovereign directed his power, extravagantly, towards the body of the criminal, while disciplinary power dug deeper than the body to reach the criminal’s psyche. The former, reliant on a spectacle of public torture to reassert itself, evolved into the latter, which no longer needed grandiose displays of brutality and law-in-action upon the body, but rather precision, classification, and analysis. Meanwhile, the liberal political paradigm changed subjects into citizens, giving them rights and contextualizing their political existence within the social contract theory. And yet, Foucault believes that we are still subjected even though we are no longer “subjects” politically. Panoptic power very much structures our existence, not entirely in the most direct modes of expression, but also in the seemingly innocuous realm of contemporary photography, where individuals can easily and artistically be transformed from citizens back into subjects. Foucault states that “visibility is a trap,” but as Calle, Burgin, and Hall demonstrate, the harder power looks, the more strained it becomes, and the greater the possibility of escaping it (201). The photographer’s camera can enter into the most private of routines and spaces, though its inability to do so with perfect clarity makes interaction with its subjects reminiscent of the “duel” between the sovereign and the criminal in public torture (Foucault 41). This challenge presents the opportunity of resistance to panoptic vision. However, this resistance has been tempered by the progressive linking of Internet searches with personalized histories and preferences of the user, reducing the boundary between the observed individual and the “guardian” observing. Likewise, the introduction of sophisticated satellite imaging technologies such as “Google Earth,” “Google Maps,” and “Google Street View,” stealthily allows physical surroundings and pedestrians to become photographically captured. As the technology expands, the number of havens from observation dwindles. The final product of these photographic duels –

the public display of the images themselves in the gallery or online – establishes a paradoxical connection between contemporary panoptic gazes and the ritualized spectacle of public torture.

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