

# PANOPTICON 1: WATCHING WITHOUT MOVING

I am a prison warder. In truth, I am the only warder in this prison. The other prison guards sit in the rest-room or work out in the gymnasium: they are only needed when the prisoners are allowed out of their cells to exercise.

I am the watcher – in fact I am a prisoner of sorts myself. I sit high above the cell compound. The cells are arranged in front of me in a semi-circle. I sit slightly above all of the cells which are arranged on a slight concave slope so that I can see as well into cells on the bottom floor as into the top floor cells which are almost on my eye-line.

The cells are walled on three sides so that the prisoners cannot see the person in the neighbouring cell nor the world outside, except for a tiny window high in the wall which reveals enough of the sky to give them some clue about the weather. The side with the door is completely open to view from my eerie and slightly wider than the rear wall so that everything is visible.

The arrangement of the cells is such that each prisoner has the feeling that I am constantly watching them from my vantage point even if I had left my position for a meal-break or to piss. This is the Panopticon: I can watch them and I can leave them with the feeling that they are being watched constantly.

I am prisoner too during my eight hour shifts because the computerised door lock records my ingress and egress, my cell has a closed-circuit television supposedly for my own safety but also so that someone, somewhere can watch me as I watch other people.

Each of the cells has both a camera and a screen. The camera watches the prisoners – reinforcing the sensation of observation and numbing them to the possibility of privacy. With each prisoner it is the same routine once they are admitted. At first they try to cover their privates as they dress or defecate in the small toilet in the corner of the room – their only means of communicating some part of themselves to the world outside the prison, little messages in faecal form. After a while they come numbed to the possibility of privacy and masturbate quite openly on their beds in front of the television screen.

The television is switched on constantly at a set volume permitting a choice between a set selection of two channels or pre-recorded videos and films. Every day they can watch news at certain times, current affairs at certain times, pre-selected films at certain times and so forth. This imposes a routine on them: the same kind of programme at the same time of day, every day.

It is the precise reversal of movement and observation. To see so much of the world would once have required travel. Now the prisoners can see the dramas and the victories of the entire world through this cathode ray travel agent. They can experience the world without movement. They are captive viewers.

It seems to me that the people on the television screens exist only for the television screen. They preen in front of the cameras, they smile at the cameras, they stage events only for the cameras. In watching them, they seem to move very far and very fast; but then it dawns on me that we never see them move beyond the edge of television screen. The camera follows them but they never leave our field of view; no matter how hard they run. In truth, they do not move at all beyond the fourteen inches of the screen. If they should escape the edges of the screen, then they simply cease to exist.

And through my windows I watch them watching the world: the world which has shunned them and sent them to this prison. The world which has appointed them observers of the free, just as I am appointed an observer of the captive.

In truth, I am a prisoner too. I began this job as field-work towards a thesis I would write for my doctorate. Gradually I realised I could not live without the small amount of money this job paid me and so could not go back to studying. My life began to mould itself around my eight hours here and the lease on the flat and my tiny existence subsidised by the tiny savings I can shave from my tiny salary.

My brother, my brilliant brother, has a job in manufacturing. His employer builds the dodgem cars used at fair grounds. He had once worked as a junior engineer for a manufacturer of small, hatch-back cars. He had specialised in the construction of bumpers to fend off impact. His researches had shown that the most typical use of his bumpers was for slow-speed collisions between people using their cars to travel the one or two miles to their mind-bending work and then the one or two miles home again. Or else they were used to travel the one or two miles to the supermarket and then the one or two miles home again.

People bought these sophisticated machines which ought to have opened up all the treasures of the Earth to them to travel and experience. Instead they used them to shuttle within the tiny compasses of their lives. The tiny radius of one or two miles in which they existed. He relished the idea of making bumpers for cars which carried sales representatives on motorways: sales representatives who travelled many more miles but always between the same few customers buying the same few items. Again, salary monkeys trapped in the tiny compass of their lives.

My brilliant brother was then offered a job at a more senior level, but for less money, building bumpers for cars which needed them. Now he builds rubber bands to protect engines which travel within tiny spaces – the bumper cars which live their insane lives packed into a tiny space intended only to crash into the other cars. Intended to travel nowhere.

And so I sit inert in my room staring at people trapped inert in their rooms. They watch people through their televisions and the people on television give the illusion of being free to move wherever they please but in truth they move no further than the edge of the television screen before ceasing to exist in the viewer's eyes. And I think of my brother, who spends his dreary life in his dreary house proud that he make bumpers for tiny cars which go nowhere.