

Panopticon Revisited: Unraveling the Surveillance Phenomena in "The Matrix" and its Implications for Contemporary Society - A Foucauldian Analysis

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Abstract. The impact of power surveillance under Panopticism on society has permeated all aspects of social life, emphasizing the importance of maintaining constant awareness and balancing privacy and rights within a reasonable framework of "surveillance." The Matrix film series, starting with its release in 1999, to some extent reflects the dark side of technological advancement on human civilization. This article offers valuable insights into Foucault's theory and establishes connections between the film *The Matrix* and contemporary society, providing a deeper understanding of the social power dynamics. Through the analysis, it can be observed that for humanity, the centralization of social systems has given way to a techno-totalitarianism, in which subtle forces ensnare individuals, seemingly leaving no one exempt. People now live in this era of "ubiquity" and need to approach it rationally, protecting their rights reasonably. However, further exploration is warranted regarding various aspects of "surveillance" within the social power mechanism. Questions arise regarding the correct perception of oppression and being oppressed under such "surveillance" and the need for a more profound analysis of this phenomenon from a capitalist perspective. By addressing these issues, a comprehensive understanding of Foucault's proposed mechanisms of power in society can be achieved.

1 Introduction

The Matrix is a well-known movie series about the main character Neo discovers that the seemingly normal real world is controlled by a computer artificial intelligence system called "Matrix", and then. Neo and the hacker organization then fled to fight against the Matrix. Likewise, a situation similar to the "Matrix" happens in real life. With the increasing convenience of technological advancements, the Internet has emerged as a pivotal platform for efficient human interactions. However, this convenience comes hand in hand with numerous privacy concerns. Moreover, surveillance has become an ever-present aspect of daily life.

Panopticism, the third chapter of the third part of the French philosopher Michel Foucault's book *Discipline and Punish*, introduces the powerful disciplinary effects that micro-power has created in modern society. One of the most widespread models is the "Panopticon". It was first proposed by Jeremy Bentham and later discussed in depth by Foucault. The Panopticon operates with few supervisors and can manage supervisees on a large scale, and it made the operation of power simpler and easier and was later used in such hospitals, schools, and military barracks. In this model, once the supervisees see the supervisors randomly, they become suspicious and anxious, thus more eager to know whether they are being watched. By analyzing Foucault's theory of Panopticism, this paper reflects on some of the phenomena of privacy

violation in today's society by combining some scenes and episodes of surveillance set in *The Matrix*. This paper aims to analyze the theory and the film and apply the theory by understanding more about the workings behind the power.

2 Foucault and Postmodernism

2.1. Foucault and his critique of modernity

Michel Foucault is an influential philosopher who emerged after existentialism. His research originated from studying the historical construction of mental illness, revealing how rationality oppresses and constructs madness. He critically examines Western society's knowledge, power dynamics, and morality with his lifelong concern: Human beings are both constructed as subjects and treated as objects.

Foucault critiques modernity and its exercise of power in his book *Discipline and Punish*. He argues that discipline creates a confined space that turns daily life into an invisible prison [1]. Power is not vested in individuals but acts upon them, manifesting through spatialization and temporalization [1]. The whole society becomes a panoramic prison, expelling or rehabilitating those who deviate from the rules [1]. Surveillance operates more profoundly when people are unaware of being watched, as seen in *The Matrix* episode [1].

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2.2 The Understanding of Power in *Discipline and Punish*

Published in 1975, *Discipline and Punish* discusses the historical shift in Western punishment methods from public executions to covert disciplinary practices since the seventeenth century [1]. Foucault distinguishes two types of power: the supreme power embodied by a monarch and the microscopic power of disciplinary institutions permeating society. The transition from the former to the latter signifies a superficially milder form of punishment, suggesting societal progress and improved human nature. However, Foucault reveals that this shift is merely a strategic adjustment of power to enhance efficiency and control. "The issue of "power" is a core issue in Foucault's study of modern social system. The "power" he refers to is different from the narrow sense of "regime" and refers to dominance, control and non-coercive means in a broad sense." [2] Disciplinary power is more refined, encompassing every aspect of daily life. It extends from schools and hospitals to the army and factories, integrating previously unregulated spaces into its surveillance apparatus.

It illustrates how power, through discipline, induces obedient adherence to norms. This new power, operating silently and invisibly, infiltrates every detail of life, earning Foucault's description as "the microbiology of power." Contrary to the liberal illusion of increased civility, morality, humanism, and respect for individual rights since the bourgeoisie gained political power, Foucault argues that modern politics covertly exploits reason and knowledge to cultivate compliant bodies serving the bourgeoisie's interests.

The book also introduces the concept of Panopticism, originally proposed by the philosopher Bentham for prison reform. Panopticism ensures constant visibility of prisoners while denying their ability to observe each other fully. In this design, individuals live under perpetual surveillance, unaware of the subject or location of the observer. Although they appear to enjoy freedom, they are effectively controlled by this mechanism. Foucault interprets this prison model as exemplifying the new power dynamics, organizational structures, and means of control. "Monitoring internalized in the minds of prisoners forms an important part of rehabilitation. For Foucault, this does not represent the humanization of punishment, but highlights two opposing mechanisms of power." [3] Such panoptic surveillance establishes pervasive norms, creating a "disciplinary society." Punishment and discipline no longer solely aim to eliminate threats or deter crime but to correct, manipulate, and transform bodies and souls, reinforcing political power's control over the populace..

3 The Matrix

3.1. The Age and Cultural Background of Movie Creation

The Matrix is a series of action films released by Warner Bros., the first of which was released as early as 1999,

coinciding with the rise of Internet connectivity when more than a quarter of American households were connected to the Internet. The advent of the Internet brought about concerns of "Internet addiction" as people engaged in online activities such as broadcasting, gaming, and social networking.

After World War II, the West had to reflect on the negative impact of the modernization movement since the late 19th century. This period gave rise to many postmodern works reflecting the modernization process, and its consequences emerged in Western intellectual circles. Among them is *The Matrix*. A basic assumption of these works is that there is no fixed and real world, and all existence is just a symbol of several relative meanings that reflect each other. With the emergence of these works, the postmodern trend of thought has swept across the world with lightning speed, prompting various research fields to rethink the existing conceptual world.

At the end of the 20th century, the era of rapid development of the world's information superhighway, when most people are immersed in the pleasant experience brought by the information age, the gradual maturity of the virtual network has prompted some prophets to embark on the path of reflection. Filmmakers took up the task of reflection, using film to contemplate human existence and development. They explored the opposing aspects of information technology, recognizing the duality of convenience and potential restrictions by informatization and automation.

According to the most basic principles of philosophy, there is an opposite behind everything, and information technology is no exception. Therefore, while people enjoy the convenience of informatization and automation, outstanding filmmakers, inspired by the trend of postmodern social science, begin to reflect on the informatization world people have built, which will form a counter-restriction. This kind of faint sadness and some panic constitute a basis for presenting the "Matrix" series of movies. The film completely abandons the unitary hero creation mode but seeks a relative presentation balance behind various intricate and heterogeneous elements, which can be seen from its specific content.

3.2 The Connection between Movie Plots and Foucault's Theory

"The world where consciousness exists is actually a world created by the matrix program, and this world is full of colors, flavors and material temptations." [4] Morpheus took Neo into the matrix and saw all kinds of passers-by with different clothes and occupations. These individuals appeared to live unrestricted lives within the system, constituting a vast virtual world. In reality, what appears to be freedom is merely an illusion designed to conceal the manipulation of individuals. However, the matrix operators had trained them to fulfill specific roles.

The "surveillance" of disciplinary power discussed by Foucault can imperceptibly erode other mechanisms and enforce its procedures. In movies, this kind of surveillance has penetrated into daily life. It is expressed in the form of space and time, and this is not a one-off but a discipline

gradually formed by multiple pieces of training, and society becomes a panoramic prison. People who are different are expelled and transformed. In this world, systems are ubiquitous yet invisible. "Any attempt to overthrow the oppression of the past has not brought about a liberated reality, and any transcendence that reverses the domination of reality creates another future domination reality." [5] People have no way to resist or even feel the system's existence. It is just that in the dark, the system's "filter dam" is constantly upgrading, filtering noise and deleting garbled characters at any time.

Indeed, individuals are subject to surveillance throughout their entire lives. This surveillance mirrors the pervasive gaze described by Foucault as panopticism. It serves to mold individuals and shapes the broader societal structure. Consequently, the concept of identity becomes pertinent within this context, as society comprises individuals with diverse identities [6]. When people are in this society, they see businessmen, teachers, lawyers, carpenters and more, they all have the shadow of the matrix, and when they are in the office, in the classroom, on the Internet, and in their sleep, it is everywhere, tracking them and controlling them. Simultaneously, once individuals establish a connection with the system, they exhibit reluctance to sever it. Many have become deeply acclimated and dependent, rendering them incapable of disengaging from the system. Instead, they vehemently uphold its existence. Within this realm, individuals find themselves assuming dual roles as both the observed and the observer, as both their own allies and adversaries.

Near the end of the movie, Neo enters the matrix to rescue Morpheus, who is in a perilous situation. During the rescue, Neo engages in a fierce battle with Smith. This sequence is filled with inexplicable occurrences. For instance, Smith survives being crushed by a subway unharmed, Neo is shot by Smith but miraculously revives, and Neo demonstrates the ability to manipulate bullets, halting their motion in front of him. In the final moments of the movie, Neo places a phone call and says: "I know you're out there; I can feel you know. I know that you're afraid of us; you're afraid of change. I don't know the future; I didn't come here to tell you how this is going to end; I came here to tell you how is going to begin." Neo knew this call would be monitored, but his purpose was to let this call be heard. He jumped out of this "surveillance" and looked at everything from a higher level. He wants to expose to people what the controllers and surveillants of these virtual worlds have done: that is, people have been under surveillance for a long time.

This is what the controllers do not want to see because once people realize that they are being watched, many variables will inevitably arise: Some people may choose to be content with the status quo, or they have long been inseparable from the system so that they will defend it; others may rise up against it. As Stephen Legg said in his article, "Being differently is here the active form of resistance: to be other." Once there is this resistance variable, with the existence of "other", the whole system will become chaotic and thus not easy to control.

After making the phone call, he soared into the sky. This move is another new breakthrough, which makes people see the hope of breaking free. Neo had practiced

jumping from one rooftop to another during his previous training, but flying was free from gravity and not controlled by the rules of the whole world. At this time, no one in this virtual world can imprison him.

Foucault believes that power is hidden, including the subject of implementation and the object of its action, and it works by combining with the "discipline" mechanism, and it is also a part of this mechanism. Everyone is both the implementer and the object of the action. He also believes that the operation of disciplinary power should have a mechanism that can induce the effect of power; he defines it as "hierarchical observation".

4 The Matrix and Power

4.1. The Symbolism of Surveillance and Power in Film

At the film's beginning, when the "antivirus program" Smith arrests Neo and subjects him to interrogation, a peculiar mirror-like shot is depicted on the monitor. As the camera retreats, an increasing number of small monitor images are revealed, all displaying identical content. Nevertheless, it is commonly understood that conventional surveillance screens should exhibit distinct content on each individual screen.

Here is Neo from the perspective of Smith, which is the first level of surveillance. The movie wants to use this seemingly unreasonable lens to create a feeling that many people are watching Neo or that every monitor is watching only Neo. This shows the perspective of the artificial intelligence side. They strengthen the sense of oppression through surveillance, and the pictures that do not conform to the normal rules also pave the way for the subsequent plot.

There are four worlds in the movie, and different characters are in different worlds. The first level of the world is the world of ordinary people, and it is also the world where most people live. Most people are confined to this world, and likewise, Neo was in this world before he came out of the matrix. "The body is "raised" in the real world, while the mind is imprisoned in the "matrix". Not only Neo but most people also do not know that the world they live in is a virtual program controlled by a computer system. The other side of the existence of the hyper-real world is the destruction of human civilization. Such a hyper-real world is terrible for human beings." [7] Like most of current society, they only pay attention to themselves and everything in front of them, only care about enjoying the present, and rarely think about the future. They pay attention to their personal feelings and live in this world numbly. They believe that what they see with their own eyes, what they experience, what is confirmed by scientists, and what the mainstream media propagates is true. Generally speaking, when the program is running normally, they are very happy, but once the program is unstable, wrong or even the program crashes, they will be abandoned (deleted) by the monitor.

In the second world are ordinary people in Zion, including Neo, Trinity, Morpheus and others who were freed from the matrix. They are the enlightened awakened

ones, shouldering the mission of resisting the matrix and protecting the last civilization of mankind. When they were in the matrix, they discovered all kinds of illusions, which led to doubts, and they began to seek the truth. This is the beginning of awakening consciousness. From the perspective of higher-level monitors, they still cannot see the essence; that is, Zion is actually a virtual world. The belief they cling to is still an obsession in the fog.

The third world corresponds to the second awakened Neo and the mutated Smith. People standing at this level have already seen through the truth and principle of Zion and the matrix, that is, the world simulated by machines. Not only can they find the loopholes of the Matrix, but they can also find the loopholes of Zion, thereby breaking all the laws of physics in the virtual world (bullet stagnation, flying into the sky, etc.).

The fourth world is the world where the Prophet and others live, and they are also the most advanced monitors. What they consider is how to maintain the stability of the entire virtual world and avoid the problem of collapse. They wish to harness the energy of humanity while paralyzing their consciousness and preventing their awakening. They use various means to control people to achieve the goal of people obeying the system.

4.2 Connections to Today's Society

Social power under Panopticism is a combination of various elements, and it is closely related to people's daily life. With the development of the information society, the Internet has become more and more developed, and people rely more and more on the Internet in their daily life. At the same time, Panopticism on the Internet is also gradually expanding, quietly infiltrating people's lives. "Panopticism is essentially the result of power operation. When maintaining social order, choose the lowest-cost form of power to discipline individuals and control society. This has certain enlightening value and reference for the innovation of the current social security governance model significance." [8] The power behind Panopticism and the mechanism of power operation are constantly affecting people and society. People will inadvertently discover that the "surveillance" that appears in movies also exists in the internet world around them.

In people's daily life, it is often found that when they open software, the homepage can always push the content they want to watch or the things they want to buy, which reflects the precise "surveillance" of users by big data. Big data can make a detailed analysis of whether users click to watch, complain, or are not interested in these pushed contents. Besides, big data surveillance enables the extraction of valuable information. For instance, law enforcement agencies can employ big data to forecast crime probabilities, search engines can utilize user-searched keywords to predict disease outbreaks in specific regions, and the healthcare industry can leverage extensive data for advancing information technology, allocating funds, and developing medications. Although big data surveillance offers advantages in enhancing people's lives, it also reveals its drawbacks. As technological means become more and more developed,

incidents of data leakage emerge in an endless stream, which has brought a lot of unnecessary troubles to society. "Internet services seem to be free, but sensitive information such as names, addresses, phone numbers, and even ID numbers required to obtain free services has become a very valuable "price". In addition to personal information, the Internet will also accurately record the behavior habits of netizens, such as browsing records and consumption records, so as to establish a huge database and use the database to carry out a series of commercial activities such as very targeted advertising. Whether the so-called "precise delivery" has violated the privacy of citizens and whether it has touched legal norms actually seems to be a blank area at present [9]. Some lawbreakers will even use big data to act as invisible "surveillants" in other people's lives, stealing their private information, thereby affecting their lives, and some people even use other people's private information to do illegal things.

The widespread use of artificial intelligence in modern life raises questions. Artificial intelligence helps people to complete numerous jobs more efficiently and conveniently. At the same time, the progress of artificial intelligence brings new ethical and moral quandaries. "We seem to be freer and more democratic, but we are in a social environment where we are being monitored and exposed, and each of us is constantly being controlled by others and various network data in the "little prison" of the information cocoon. Onlookers, imprisonment." [10] Aside from privacy concerns, issues like money control and power incursion develop. Once this algorithmic "surveillance" takes root, its monitoring powers expand.

To sum up, power and surveillance under Panopticism have shown their advantages and disadvantages, which depend on how people use this "surveillance" properly and legally. From the perspective of panopticism, people can understand more clearly the situation in which individuals are monitored, manipulated, and dominated in the era of information. At the same time, people realize that the operation of power in society forms another more concealed means of discipline. Determining how to harness the benefits of technology while mitigating its drawbacks within society is a question that requires contemplation in the foreseeable future.

5 Conclusion

The impact of power surveillance under Panopticism on society has penetrated into every corner of society, so it reminds people that they need to maintain a clear understanding at all times, take into account privacy and rights under reasonable "surveillance", protect personal privacy while maintaining society order so that society becomes more harmonious and stable. This article is helpful for readers to have a clearer understanding of Foucault's theory. By analyzing the film, it can be connected with society so that people can have a deeper understanding of the social power mechanism.

Meanwhile, regarding the "surveillance" in the social power mechanism, there are still many issues worthy of further exploration, such as how to correctly view oppression and being oppressed under this kind of

"surveillance"? From the perspective of capitalism, how to conduct a deeper analysis of this "surveillance"? As these issues are analyzed and studied, a deeper understanding of the effects of Foucault's proposed mechanisms of power in society will emerge.

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