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Watching as a Way of Life: Michel Foucault's Panopticon Logic in the Age of AI

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Abstract

This article explores contemporary digital surveillance through Michel Foucault's theoretical framework of the panopticon. Building upon the architectural and philosophical model originally associated with Jeremy Bentham, the paper argues that artificial intelligence does not transcend panoptic power but rather intensifies and transforms it through algorithmic surveillance, data-driven governance, and predictive technologies. The article situates artificial intelligence within Foucauldian concepts such as discipline, governmentality, power/knowledge, genealogy, and subjectivation. It further discusses how algorithmic infrastructures embedded in digital platforms reshape social visibility, behavioral regulation, and subject formation. By examining phenomena such as social media monitoring, algorithmic decision-making, and automated observation systems, the article argues that surveillance has become normalized and internalized within everyday life. The paper ultimately concludes that artificial intelligence represents a contemporary reconfiguration of panoptic power in which observation becomes continuous, automated, and embedded in digital infrastructures. The article presents a theoretically grounded philosophical interpretation of artificial intelligence and surveillance. The topic is timely and relevant in the current context of expanding algorithmic governance and digital monitoring systems.

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Introduction

Surveillance has become a central feature of contemporary social life. From biometric identification and predictive policing to recommendation algorithms and workplace monitoring, artificial intelligence increasingly shapes how people are observed, assessed, and governed (Zuboff 94-96). These developments raise important philosophical questions about power, freedom, subjectivity, and modern forms of social control. Although the technologies of surveillance have changed dramatically, their underlying logic closely echoes Michel Foucault's theory of the panopticon. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault presented the panopticon as a broad model of power. Inspired by Jeremy Bentham's architectural design, he expanded the concept beyond the prison to describe a general mechanism of social control. The panopticon operates through visibility, normalization, and internalized discipline. Its force does not depend on constant punishment, but on the possibility of being watched at any moment, which leads individuals to regulate their own behaviour (Greenwald 175-176).

Artificial intelligence (AI) is a field of computer science concerned with building machines that can perform tasks requiring human-like intelligence, such as learning, reasoning, and decision-making. These systems use algorithms and data to recognize patterns, adapt to new information, and solve problems efficiently. Different scholars have defined AI in various ways. Stuart Russell and Peter Norvig state that artificial intelligence is "the study of agents that receive percepts from the environment and perform actions" (Russell and Norvig 4). According to Elaine Rich, AI is "the study of how to make computers do things at which, at present, people are better" (Rich 3). Also, Nils J. Nilsson defines AI as the study of "intelligent behavior in artifacts" (Nilsson 1). These definitions emphasis AI as a discipline focused on replicating and enhancing human intelligence through machines.

This article argues that artificial intelligence represents a new stage in the development of panoptic power. Rather than replacing the panopticon, AI deepens and spreads its logic, turning surveillance into a pervasive condition of everyday life. Watching is no longer occasional or confined to institutions; it becomes continuous, automated, and normalized. People actively participate in their own surveillance through digital platforms,

data-generating devices, and algorithmic feedback systems (Salte 169-170). By placing AI-driven surveillance within Foucault's theoretical framework, this paper highlights both the continuing relevance of the panopticon and the ways it has evolved under algorithmic conditions. It argues that in the age of artificial intelligence, panoptic power no longer functions primarily as a centralized gaze. Instead, it operates as a distributed, predictive, and self-reinforcing system of observation and control.

1. Bentham and the Logic of the Panopticon Model

Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon is one of the most influential ideas in the history of social and political thought. Anticipated in the late eighteenth century, it was originally designed as an architectural solution to problems of prison supervision. Over time, however, the Panopticon has come to represent a broader logic of power, surveillance, and self-regulation that extends far beyond prisons. At its core, Bentham's model is not simply about watching people, but about shaping behaviour through the possibility of being watched. The Panopticon is based on a simple spatial procedure. A circular building houses individual cells along its outer edge, each cell fully visible from a central observation tower. The observer in the tower can see every prisoner, while the prisoners cannot see the observer (Brunon-Ernst 2-3). Crucially, the observer does not need to watch constantly. The uncertainty of surveillance is enough. Since prisoners never know when they are being observed, they must assume they always are. This asymmetry of visibility is the defining feature of the Panopticon. Power flows in one direction; from the unseen observer to the visible subject. The structure removes the need for force, chains, or physical punishment. Instead, it relies on psychological pressure and rational calculation (Bentham 29-33).

Bentham was a utilitarian thinker, concerned with maximizing happiness and minimizing suffering. From this perspective, the Panopticon was a humanitarian and efficient reform. Traditional prisons were violent, chaotic, and expensive. The Panopticon promised order, discipline, and reform at lower cost. Fewer guards were needed, and prisoners could be supervised without physical cruelty. For Bentham, the model was not limited to prisons. He proposed Panopticon model designs for factories, schools, hospitals, and workhouses. The

logic was consistent, visibility produces discipline, discipline produces productivity, and productivity serves the general good. In Bentham's view, transparency and surveillance were tools of rational governance. The most powerful aspect of the Panopticon is that control becomes internal. Because inmates must constantly assume they are being watched, they begin to regulate their own behaviour. Obedience no longer depends on direct intervention. The subject becomes both the prisoner and their own guard. This shift marks a new form of power (Bentham 40).

Bentham presented the Panopticon as a progressive reform; later thinkers have taken a far more critical view. Most notably, Michel Foucault argued that the Panopticon reflects a deeper shift in the way modern power operates. In his analysis, modern societies depend less on open force and more on surveillance, classification, and normalization. Institutions such as schools, hospitals, offices, and bureaucracies follow panoptic principles, shaping individuals to conform without the need for direct coercion (Foucault *Discipline and Punish* 201). From this perspective, the Panopticon is more than a physical structure; it is a model, or diagram, of power. It shows how modern institutions create compliant subjects by making them visible, measurable, and comparable. The danger lies not only in the loss of privacy, but in the slow weakening of autonomy as individuals begin to shape themselves according to external standards.

In the digital age, this logic has become even more pronounced. Surveillance no longer depends on a central tower or enclosing walls. Instead, data collection, cameras, algorithms, and online tracking recreate the same uncertainty Bentham described. People modify their behaviour based on what they believe may be monitored, recorded, or judged. There is, however, an important difference. Bentham imagined surveillance as centralized and transparent, justified as serving the public good. Today's surveillance systems are often decentralized, opaque, and driven by commercial or political interests. The logic remains panoptic, but the observer is no longer clearly visible or easily identified.

2. Genealogy and the Rejection of Transhistorical Surveillance

Genealogy, as developed by Michel Foucault, constitutes a methodological and

philosophical rejection of transhistorical explanations. Against theories that treat social phenomena as expressions of timeless human tendencies or universal rationalities. Genealogy insists on historical contingency, discontinuity, and the specificity of power relations (Prado 10-11; Chatterjee 22-23). Surveillance, within this framework, is not understood as a perennial feature of social life but as a historically constituted practice that emerges, mutates, and stabilizes under particular conditions. To speak of "transhistorical surveillance" would be to imply that watching is an essential or natural aspect of human coexistence, a claim genealogy explicitly rejects. Foucault's genealogical method demonstrates that what appears natural or inevitable is, in fact, the result of sedimented practices, institutional arrangements, and discursive formations. Surveillance becomes intelligible not as an anthropological constant but as a political technology produced within specific historical configurations of power (Foucault *Discipline and Punish* 170-177). Genealogy operates by dismantling origin myths. Rather than seeking the foundational moment when surveillance began, it traces multiple, discontinuous processes through which practices of observation became normalized. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault shows that modern surveillance does not evolve linearly from earlier forms of watching but emerges through a reorganization of power in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The shift from sovereign spectacle to disciplinary observation marks not an improvement in rationality but a transformation in how power relates to bodies, space, and visibility (Prado 38-39).

Within this genealogical perspective, the Panopticon is not the culmination of surveillance history but a crystallization of a particular disciplinary logic. Its significance lies in how it articulates visibility as a mechanism of control and self-regulation. Importantly, Foucault detaches the Panopticon from its architectural specificity and treats it as a diagram, a formalization of relations between seeing, knowing, and governing. This move is genealogical insofar as it exposes the Panopticon as historically contingent rather than universally necessary. Applying genealogy to contemporary surveillance requires resisting the temptation to treat digital observation as the technological fulfilment of an ancient desire to watch. Such narratives obscure the political rationalities embedded in artificial intelligence and data-driven systems. Genealogy instead asks; under what historical conditions does

algorithmic surveillance become thinkable, legitimate, and desirable? What forms of knowledge, commercial interests, and governmental rationalities converge to produce the present configuration? The rejection of transhistorical surveillance is thus also a rejection of technological determinism. Artificial intelligence does not inevitably produce surveillance; somewhat, surveillance emerges as one possible deployment of artificial intelligence within neoliberal regimes of optimization, security, and efficiency. Genealogy reveals that algorithmic surveillance is neither neutral nor necessary, but contingent upon specific institutional logics and epistemic commitments. Furthermore, genealogy foregrounds discontinuity. While contemporary surveillance may appear as a seamless extension of panoptic observation, genealogical analysis highlights shift in modality. The transition from architectural visibility to computational traceability marks a qualitative transformation in how subjects are rendered knowable. Surveillance no longer depends on the presence of an observer but operates through automated classification and predictive inference. This shift is not merely technical but ontological, reshaping the conditions under which subjectivity and agency are constituted (Foucault *Discipline and Punish* 195-208).

Significantly, genealogy destabilizes moralizing critiques that frame surveillance solely in terms of loss of privacy or freedom. Instead, it interrogates how subjects come to desire visibility, participate in their own observation, and internalize surveillance as a normative condition of social existence. As a result, genealogy exposes the productive dimensions of power, how surveillance generates subjects, truths, and forms of life. By rejecting transhistorical accounts, genealogy preserves the possibility of critique. If surveillance were a universal constant, resistance would be futile. Genealogical analysis, however, reveals that surveillance is a fragile and reversible arrangement. Its dominance depends on continued practices, discourses, and institutional support (Foucault *Power/Knowledge* 131-133). To think genealogically is therefore to recognize that what has been made can be unmade, or at least made otherwise. In this sense, genealogy functions as a critical ontology of the present. It does not offer solutions or utopias, but it renders the present strange, interrupting the sense of inevitability that surrounds contemporary surveillance regimes. Through situating watching within historically specific dispositifs,

genealogy opens a space for philosophical resistance not outside power, but within its contingencies (Koopman 219-220).

3. Power/Knowledge and the Epistemology of the Algorithm

Michel Foucault's intervention in epistemology redirected philosophy away from abstract questions about representation and toward the historical conditions that make truth possible. Rather than beginning with a knowing subject who observes an external world, Foucault argued that knowledge is inseparable from power. Knowledge does not simply reflect reality; it helps organize, regulate, and govern it. This idea, power/knowledge, is essential for understanding contemporary algorithmic systems (Foucault *Power/Knowledge* 55).

Artificial intelligence, predictive analytics, and data-driven decision-making are often presented as neutral tools that improve accuracy and efficiency. Such claims rely on the lingering Enlightenment belief that knowledge can be objective and value-free. A Foucauldian perspective challenges this assumption. Every system of knowledge is embedded in relations of power. From this viewpoint, algorithms are not passive instruments. They actively participate in shaping what counts as truth. Algorithmic systems, I argue, establish a new regime of truth, one grounded in automation, probability, and opacity. They do not eliminate human bias; they reorganize power by embedding norms, categories, and expectations directly into technical infrastructures. The key question is not simply whether algorithms are biased, but how they function as epistemic authorities within contemporary systems of governance.

Foucault developed the concept of power/knowledge in response to two dominant assumptions: that knowledge exists independently of power, and that power is mainly repressive. In *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*, he insisted that power is productive. It produces forms of knowledge, types of subjects, and versions of reality. Power and knowledge are not separate domains that occasionally intersect; they sustain one another. There is no exercise of power without the production of knowledge, and no knowledge that does not reinforce particular power relations. This insight dissolves the traditional divide

between truth and domination. Truth does not stand outside power; it is one of its effects. Epistemology therefore becomes a political matter. The central question shifts from "Is this true?" to "Under what conditions does this count as true, and for whom?" Foucault called these historically specific arrangements "regimes of truth", systems that define what can be said, who may speak, and what qualifies as evidence.

This shift is especially relevant for algorithmic knowledge. Algorithms do more than process data. They define what data is, how it should be categorized, and which patterns are meaningful. They operate within regimes of truth that privilege calculation, prediction, and optimization (Loukides & Lorica 7-8). In his earlier archaeological work, Foucault examined discursive formations, the rules that shape what can be expressed within a field of knowledge. Although algorithmic systems may appear non-discursive, they represent a transformation rather than a break in epistemic power. They encode classificatory logics into software. The move from discourse to computation does not weaken power/knowledge; it intensifies it by making it automatic and harder to challenge. Unlike arguments in a text or speech, algorithmic outputs do not present themselves as interpretations. They appear as results: risk scores, rankings, recommendations, predictions. These outputs are rarely justified in rhetorical terms; they are delivered as facts. This gives algorithms a distinctive authority, combining technical opacity with institutional legitimacy.

In Foucauldian terms, algorithms function as machines for producing truth. They generate conclusions that guide action without inviting debate. This marks a significant transformation in the epistemology of power. Algorithmic knowledge is fundamentally probabilistic. Instead of seeking causal explanations, it prioritizes correlation. The question is not why something happens, but how likely it is to happen again. Truth becomes a matter of prediction rather than understanding. From a Foucauldian perspective, this aligns closely with modern forms of governance concerned with risk and population management. Predictive policing systems, for example, do not identify criminals as such; they calculate probabilities. Neighbourhoods become zones of anticipated risk. Knowledge operates pre-emptively, intervening in the future before events unfold.

Classification lies at the core of this process. Machine learning systems rely on training data structured around categories such as normal and abnormal, risky and safe, relevant and irrelevant. These categories are not simply discovered; they are imposed. Foucault's analysis of normalization helps clarify this dynamic. Normalization does not eliminate difference; it measures and manages it. Algorithms normalize by assigning scores, ranks, and thresholds. Deviation becomes quantifiable. Credit scoring systems, for instance, do more than evaluate financial behaviour. They define what counts as responsible conduct. Individuals often adjust their actions in response, aligning themselves with algorithmic expectations. Knowledge thus operates as a subtle disciplinary force (Bucher 45).

Foucault's concept of governmentality, the rationalities through which populations are managed, further illuminates this shift. By translating social life into data, algorithms make populations legible and governable. Control no longer depends solely on law or direct discipline. It works through continuous monitoring and feedback. Recommendation systems guide behaviour gently, shaping preferences rather than issuing commands. Power functions through modulation rather than prohibition. In this situation, knowledge and intervention merge. Algorithmic systems do not merely describe social reality; they act upon it in real time. The boundary between knowing and governing begins to dissolve.

a. Artificial Intelligence as an Epistemic Regime

Michel Foucault's concept of power/knowledge provides a critical framework for understanding artificial intelligence not merely as a technological tool but as an epistemic regime. Artificial intelligence does not simply process information; it produces truths that circulate within institutional, financial, and governmental structures. These truths acquire authority precisely because they appear technical, objective, and detached from human judgment. In Foucauldian terms, artificial intelligence must be approached as a technology of power that operates through knowledge production. The epistemology of AI is inseparable from its political effects. What AI "knows" about individuals, populations, and behaviours is not neutral representation but an active structuring of reality (Nilsson 301-304). This epistemic structuring follows a logic that is deeply panopticon in nature. The Panopticon, as

theorized by Foucault, is not an architectural curiosity but a diagram of power in which visibility becomes a mechanism of control. Artificial intelligence extends this logic beyond physical visibility into the realm of data, prediction, and automation. The epistemology of AI thus inherits and transforms the panopticon model.

b. The Panopticon as a Logic of Knowledge Production

The panopticon model establishes a fundamental epistemological principle; to see is to know, and to know is to govern. Observation is not passive perception but an act that produces knowledge capable of intervening in conduct. The subject becomes intelligible only insofar as it is visible. Artificial intelligence reconfigures this principle by substituting visual observation with data extraction. In AI systems, visibility is no longer optical but informational. Individuals are rendered visible through behavioural traces, biometric signals, consumption patterns, and social interactions. Data becomes the condition of intelligibility. From the standpoint of power/knowledge, this transformation does not weaken panoptic logic; it intensifies it. AI systems observe continuously, without fatigue, and without requiring the subject's awareness. Knowledge is produced automatically, and intervention becomes immediate (Nilsson 304-305).

A defining feature of the Panopticon is asymmetry. The observer sees without being seen, while the observed internalize the possibility of being watched. This asymmetry produces self-regulation. Artificial intelligence preserves and radicalizes this asymmetry. Subjects are rendered transparent to AI systems, while the systems themselves remain opaque. Algorithms are proprietary, technically complex, and institutionally shielded. The subject cannot see how they are seen. This opacity strengthens epistemic authority. AI-generated knowledge appears incontestable precisely because its production is inaccessible. Decisions based on AI, credit approvals, risk assessments, content moderation, are experienced as facts rather than judgments. In this sense, AI functions as an automated panoptic gaze; omnipresent, invisible, and epistemically authoritative (Lyon 14). In classical panopticon, knowledge is produced through examination. The examination combines observation with normalization, transforming individuals into cases that can be compared,

ranked, and corrected. Artificial intelligence translates examination into algorithmic classification. Machine learning systems classify individuals into categories based on statistical correlation rather than interpretive understanding. The subject is known as a probability rather than a person. This epistemological shift aligns with Foucauldian insights. Disciplinary power does not seek to understand interiority; it seeks to regulate behaviour (Foucault *Discipline and punish* 172). AI epistemology embodies this logic by privileging prediction over explanation. The panopticon logic ensures that classification is self-reinforcing. Once categorized, the subject's future actions are interpreted through that category. Knowledge thus produces the behaviour it claims to measure.

Panoptic power works only when it is internalized. People begin to regulate themselves because they assume they might always be seen. Artificial intelligence deepens this dynamic by building constant evaluation into the routines of daily life. Recommendation systems, reputation scores, productivity trackers, and social media algorithms continually assess behaviour. As a result, individuals adjust what they do, and even what they desire, in anticipation of algorithmic judgment. Here, power and knowledge operate at the level of subjectivity itself. People come to understand who they are through data profiles, performance metrics, and algorithmic feedback. Self-knowledge becomes quantified and externally validated. Instead of forming an understanding of oneself through reflection, memory, or personal narrative, the individual increasingly relies on scores, rankings, and analytics.

In this way, the logic of the panopticon moves beyond formal institutions and settles into the intimate texture of everyday life. Surveillance is no longer something imposed from the outside; it becomes part of how individuals see and shape themselves. Classical panopticon operates through the possibility of being watched. Artificial intelligence extends panoptic power into the future through predictive analytics. AI systems govern not on the basis of what individuals have done, but on what they are likely to do. Risk assessment, predictive policing, and behavioural forecasting exemplify this temporal shift. From a power/knowledge perspective, prediction constitutes a new form of epistemic authority. The future becomes actionable knowledge. Subjects are governed in advance, often without

awareness. This predictive dimension intensifies panoptic control. Power no longer waits for deviation; it intervenes pre-emptively. Knowledge becomes a mechanism for shaping possibility itself. Foucault emphasizes that disciplinary power operates through normalization rather than exclusion. AI epistemology functions similarly. Rather than enforcing rigid norms, AI establishes flexible thresholds, rankings, and scores. Normality becomes statistical. Deviation is managed, not eliminated. Individuals are positioned along continua rather than judged absolutely. This produces a regime of truth in which algorithmic outputs define what is reasonable, risky, or acceptable. These truths circulate institutionally, shaping policy and practice. The panopticon logic ensures that normalization operates invisibly. Subjects adapt to norms without explicit coercion, guided by algorithmic feedback (Noble 10-15).

Through the lens of power/knowledge, artificial intelligence emerges as a contemporary realization of panopticon logic. It automates observation, transforms visibility into data, and embeds epistemic authority into technical systems. AI does not replace the Panopticon; it operationalizes it at scale. The gaze is no longer architectural but algorithmic, no longer human but machinic, no longer episodic but continuous. Power operates through knowledge, and knowledge operates through automation. In this configuration, the Panopticon persists as an epistemological structure rather than a physical form. To analyse artificial intelligence philosophically, therefore, is not to ask whether it watches us, but how it makes us knowable, and how that knowledge governs us.

4. Subjectivation and the Algorithmic Self

Michel Foucault's concept of subjectivation marks a decisive break from classical theories of the subject (Foucault *History of Sexuality* 92-102). Rather than presupposing a pre-given, autonomous self that subsequently encounters power, Foucault argues that subjects are produced within historically specific relations of power and knowledge. The subject is not prior to power; it is one of power's effects (Prado 80). Within the panopticon model, subjectivation occurs through visibility. The subject becomes a subject insofar as it is rendered observable, knowable, and comparable. The Panopticon does not simply constrain behaviour; it produces a particular type of subject, one who internalizes the gaze and governs

itself accordingly. In the contemporary digital environment, this process is reconfigured through algorithmic systems. The algorithmic self emerges as a subject constituted through data extraction, predictive modelling, and continuous evaluation (Bucher 19-20). The Panopticon operates as a technology of subjectivation by transforming external surveillance into internal self-regulation. The subject behaves as if constantly visible, even in the absence of an observer. This internalization is what allows power to function automatically. Foucault emphasizes that panoptic power individualizes (Foucault *Discipline and Punish* 172). Subjects are separated, documented, measured, and classified. They are rendered legible as distinct cases within a comparative field. This individuation is not emancipatory; it is administrative. Algorithmic systems reproduce this logic at scale. They individualize by profiling, scoring, and predicting. The algorithmic self is not merely observed; it is constructed through these processes (Bucher 44). The disciplinary subject analysed by Foucault is shaped through institutions such as schools, prisons, and hospitals. These institutions impose routines, evaluations, and norms. The algorithmic self, by contrast, is shaped through everyday digital interaction. Social media platforms, fitness trackers, recommendation systems, credit scoring tools, and workplace monitoring software function as dispersed panoptic dispositifs. The key shift is not the disappearance of discipline, but its diffusion. Subjectivation no longer occurs primarily within enclosed institutions but within open, continuous, and personalized environments (Gillespie 167-194).

5. Social Media as a Field of Panoptic Experience

Social media platforms constitute one of the most prevalent and intimate sites of algorithmic surveillance in contemporary life. Unlike traditional disciplinary institutions, such as prisons, schools, or factories, social media operates within the domain of voluntary participation, affective engagement, and everyday self-expression. Hitherto, precisely for this reason, it offers a paradigmatic example of what may be described as an algorithmic panopticon; a system in which power operates through visibility, self-regulation, and continuous data extraction rather than overt coercion (Trottier 12-17). From a Foucauldian perspective, social media platforms should not be understood merely as communication technologies or cultural spaces. They function as epistemic and governmental dispositifs that

organize how subjects appear, how they are known, and how they come to know themselves. The panopticon logic identified by Foucault, continuous visibility, asymmetrical observation, normalization, and internalized control, finds a renewed and intensified form in algorithmically governed platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube. This is a conceptual case study of social media as a lived field of algorithmic panopticon. Rather than relying on quantitative metrics, the analysis draws on everyday practices, interface structures, and user experiences as sites where power/knowledge becomes operative. Foucault's Panopticon is not a building but a diagram of power, a model for how visibility can be weaponized as a technique of governance (Foucault *Discipline and Punish* 201). The panoptic mechanism functions by rendering subjects permanently visible while concealing the observer. Significantly, power becomes automatic, internalized, and self-sustaining. Social media platforms inherit this logic while transforming its modality. Observation is no longer spatial or optical but computational. Users are not watched by guards but by algorithms that register clicks, pauses, likes, shares, scrolling speed, facial recognition data, and affective signals. Visibility becomes total, continuous, and involuntary. Crucially, algorithmic panopticon differs from classical surveillance in one key respect; subjects actively participate in their own visibility (Bucher 44-68). This participation does not negate power; it intensifies it.

On social media, to exist is to be visible. Profiles, posts, stories, and videos function as modes of self-presentation within an algorithmically ordered field. Visibility is not merely expressive; it is ontological. Content that is not seen is functionally non-existent. This condition mirrors the panoptic imperative; subjects must assume they are always visible, always evaluable. The difference is that visibility is no longer imposed but desired. Users seek attention, engagement, and recognition, thereby aligning their conduct with algorithmic incentives (Brayne 85-112). From a power/knowledge perspective, visibility produces data, and data produces knowledge. The social media platform knows the user not through introspection or dialogue but through behavioural traces. These traces are aggregated, analysed, and transformed into predictive models. Thus, social media platforms operate as epistemic machines that transform lived experience into governable knowledge. In the

classical Panopticon, the gaze is human, even if anonymous. In social media, the gaze is automated. Algorithms observe without seeing, know without understanding, and judge without explanation. This automation has two significant effects; first is that Observation becomes continuous; there is no offstage, no outside the field of surveillance. Second is that Judgment becomes opaque; users rarely know why content is promoted, suppressed, or ignored. The algorithm functions as an invisible observer whose criteria remain inaccessible. This asymmetry reproduces the core panoptic condition; the subject is seen without seeing the seer. For Foucault, power is most effective when it is unverifiable yet omnipresent (Foucault *Power/Knowledge* 170-194). Social media algorithms exemplify this principle with unprecedented efficiency. In disciplinary institutions, the examination combines observation with normalization. It produces knowledge about individuals while positioning them within a comparative field. On social media, the examination takes the form of metrics: likes, shares, views, followers, watch time, and engagement rates. These metrics function as epistemic judgments (Trottier 21-25). They signal value, relevance, and legitimacy. Users learn to interpret these metrics as truths about themselves:

- Low engagement is experienced as failure.
- High engagement is interpreted as validation.
- Algorithmic invisibility produces anxiety and self-correction.

The examination no longer requires an examiner. The social media platform itself evaluates, ranks, and disciplines through numerical feedback. Knowledge of the self becomes inseparable from algorithmic measurement. A defining feature of panoptic power is internalization. Subjects discipline themselves because they assume constant visibility. Social media intensifies this dynamic. Users pre-emptively shape their behaviour according to perceived algorithmic preferences:

- Posting at optimal times
- Adopting trending formats

- Avoiding content that may be demoted
- Modifying language, tone, or appearance

This anticipatory conformity reflects what Foucault describes as the success of disciplinary power, control without force. The subject becomes the agent of its own regulation. Importantly, this self-discipline is experienced not as oppression but as strategy. Users frame conformity as optimization, growth, or personal branding. Power thus operates affectively and aspirational. Social media platforms produce truths, not in the philosophical sense of correspondence, but in the Foucauldian sense of regimes of truth. Algorithms determine what is visible, trending, or relevant. These determinations shape collective perception. What appears repeatedly becomes true. What disappears becomes irrelevant for example:

- Political opinions gain legitimacy through algorithmic amplification.
- Aesthetic norms are reinforced through visual repetition.
- Emotional styles (outrage, irony, vulnerability) are normalized through engagement incentives.

Algorithmic truth is not argued; it is performed through circulation. Power/knowledge operates silently, shaping reality without discourse.

Foucault's concept of governmentality helps clarify how social media governs without direct command (Foucault *Governmentality* 87). The social media platforms do not tell users what to do; they structure the field of possible action. Through recommendation systems and content ranking, platforms guide attention, desire, and behaviour. Governance occurs at the level of probability rather than prohibition. Users are nudged rather than disciplined. This soft power aligns seamlessly with neoliberal rationalities of self-management and entrepreneurial subjectivity. The algorithmic panopticon thus functions not as a prison but as a market of visibility. Social media algorithms do not merely observe past behaviour; they anticipate future actions. Predictive models determine what users are likely to click, watch, or buy. This introduces a temporal dimension to panoptic power (Trottier 156-

158). Subjects are governed not for what they have done but for what they might do. From a Foucauldian perspective, this represents an intensification of biopolitical control. The future becomes an object of governance. Users experience this as personalization, but personalization is a form of epistemic capture (Brunon-Ernst 8-9).

The panopticon model helps explain this shift. It demonstrates how power can function indirectly by organizing visibility and encouraging individuals to regulate themselves. Artificial intelligence expands this logic. It automates observation, analysis, and intervention. Where the classical panopticon relied on architecture and human supervision, AI relies on digital infrastructures that constantly monitor, sort, and predict behaviour across multiple areas of social life. In this sense, AI becomes a central technology of government. It rarely governs through direct commands. Instead, it structures environments, influences probabilities, and shapes the range of available choices. Power operates through design and prediction rather than explicit instruction.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes disciplinary power as operating through surveillance, examination, and normalization. The Panopticon functions as the diagram of this power, enabling continuous visibility while rendering authority invisible (Schwan & Shapiro 127-130). Artificial intelligence generalizes this disciplinary logic while embedding it within governmental rationality. Surveillance no longer occurs primarily within enclosed institutions but across everyday life. Smartphones, sensors, databases, and predictive systems create an ambient field of observation. The algorithm replaces the guard tower. Observation becomes automated, scalable, and constant. The asymmetry of panoptic power is preserved; individuals are visible to systems they cannot see or fully understand (Angwin 41-46). Crucially, this surveillance is not only retrospective. AI systems increasingly operate prospectively, orienting governance toward the future.

The panopticon is not an outdated metaphor but a flexible model that adapts to technological change. In its algorithmic form, it governs by rendering the future calculable and actionable. Surveillance extends beyond physical space into time itself. Power does not wait for misconduct; it anticipates and adjusts behaviour before it occurs. Artificial

intelligence therefore does not replace panoptic power, it intensifies it. The visible watch tower dissolves into distributed digital systems, but the essential dynamics remain: asymmetrical visibility, constant evaluation, and self-regulation. The panopticon survives as a temporal and epistemic structure through which contemporary power organizes populations and shapes subjects in the age of artificial intelligence.

Conclusion

Bentham's Panopticon is better understood as a theory of power than as a simple prison design. Its core principles are visibility, uncertainty, and self-discipline. Bentham believed such a model could create rational, humane, and efficient institutions. Yet later critics showed how easily this structure can become a tool of domination. Its lasting importance lies in what it reveals about human behaviour: when people think they are being watched, they change how they act. The panopticon exposes a central feature of modern power; it works best when it no longer needs to declare itself.

Michel Foucault's reading of the panopticon remains crucial for making sense of contemporary artificial intelligence. The panopticon is not just a historical metaphor tied to disciplinary institutions; it is a dynamic logic that has evolved. Digital technologies have not replaced it. Instead, they have dispersed, automated, and extended it across time. Algorithmic systems now shape governance, subjectivity, and everyday life in ways that echo and intensify panoptic principles.

Importantly, this article has resisted transhistorical and technologically deterministic accounts of surveillance. Through a genealogical approach, it has shown that algorithmic panopticon is neither inevitable nor universal. It is the product of specific historical, economic, and political rationalities that privilege optimization, efficiency, and risk management. By revealing the contingency of these arrangements, genealogy preserves the possibility of critique and transformation. The analysis has also underscored the paradoxical role of freedom within algorithmic governmentality. Artificial intelligence does not eliminate choice; it presupposes it. Subjects remain free to act, yet their actions are structured within algorithmically produced fields of possibility. Freedom becomes the medium through which

control operates, echoing Foucault's insight that modern power governs not against freedom but through it. In tracing these dynamics, the article has reframed the Panopticon not as an obsolete architectural model but as a mutable diagram of power that persists across historical transformations. In its contemporary form, the Panopticon no longer relies on towers or guards. It operates through distributed infrastructures, opaque algorithms, and predictive analytics that permeate social life. Surveillance extends beyond space into time, reorganizing governance around anticipation and modulation. The Panopticon, once a figure of enclosed visibility, has become a condition of contemporary existence. Understanding its transformation is therefore not an abstract exercise, but a necessary step toward thinking within the algorithmic present.

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