

The Digitalisation of Bentham's Panopticon

Delft University of Technology

Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment

AR1U121 History and Theory of Urbanism (2020/21 Q1)

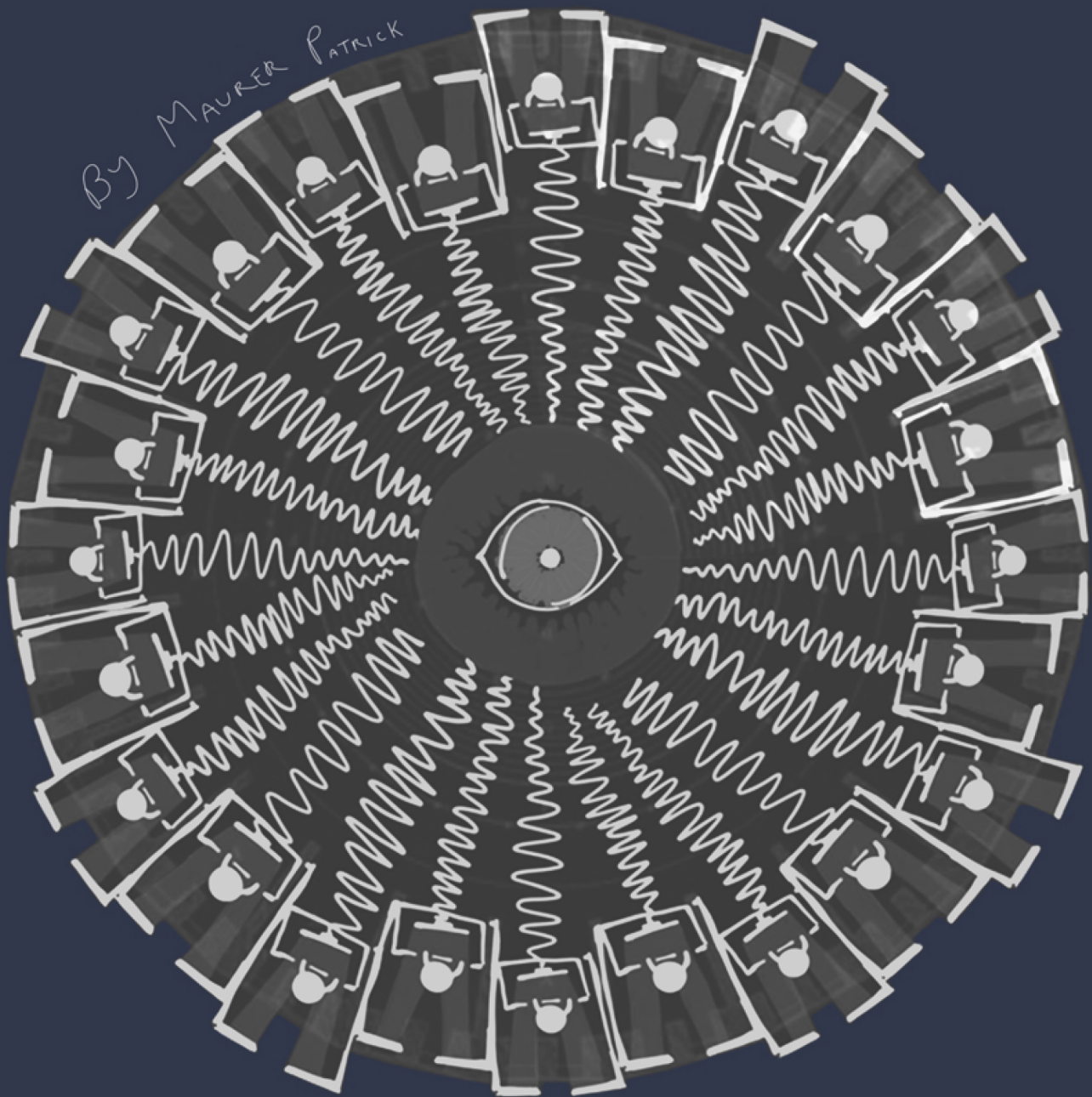
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1. Introduction

After a century from the Spanish flu, humanity is again facing a global pandemic.

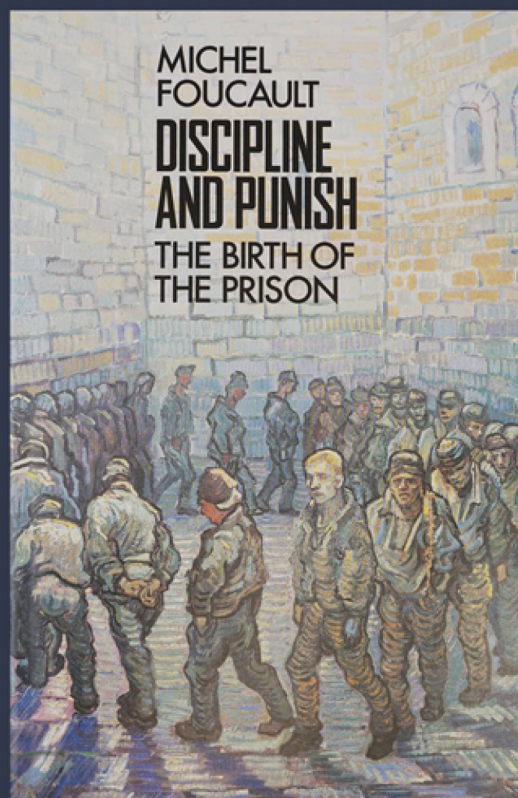
In one hundred years many things have changed, the population tripled and globalisation made it easier but also more of a necessity for people to travel greater distances, this, of course, made it much more of a challenge to contain the spread of the disease, many tools used to fight pandemics in the past are not effective anymore.

But in order to speculate what changes the covid-19 pandemic will bring to the future city and human behaviour, we must acknowledge what important changes previous pandemics have brought to society.

More importantly, because some of the resulting projects are an active part of modern society more than ever.

One of these projects is Bentham's panopticon, aside from the architectural structure of the project, it is the theoretical scheme that is often used as a metaphor to describe the modern model of surveillance.

Using the panopticon as a metaphor is largely discussed, but it is safe to say that the digital panopticon exists in some way and that it will play a major role in the fight against covid-19.



picture 1

2. Disciplinary Projects

In his book *“discipline and punish: the birth of the prison”* Foucault explains how he believes that big threats to humanity, as cataclysm or pandemics, often are the cause of drastic changes in the social structure and behaviour.

Foucault's attention goes especially to two pandemics that occurred in history that have shaped in some way human behaviour, during but also after the pandemic was over.

The first disease mentioned by Foucault is the leper; the common practice to fight leper was to exile the infected to a located place where it was useless to differentiate among the mass, while the healthy part of the population continued their daily life, neglecting the existence of such place. According to Foucault, this gave birth to the so-called practice of rejection.

This practice was proposed, in a similar manner also to fight covid-19, some governments decided to segregate, more than exiling, the groups of society that are more exposed and so have a lower immune system, as the elderly or already sick individuals, while giving rather little restrictions to the healthy population.

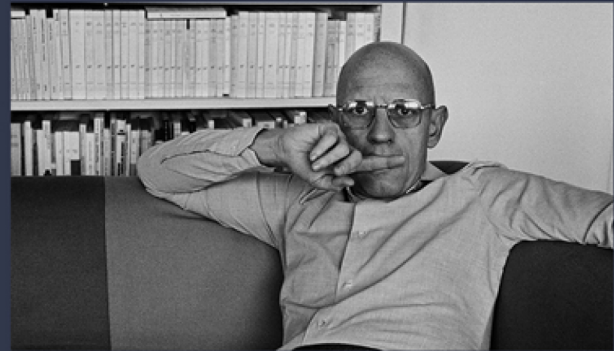
This attempt did not work out well, that is because the practice of rejection, as it happened for the leper, can work out only on a long term scale and is no match to fight a disease in the twenty-first century.

The second pandemic described is the plague, this disease has a much faster way of transmission and so the practice of rejection used in the past was no longer effective.

New methods to fight the virus were needed and so it came to the birth of the practices of quarantine, surveillance and observation.

In the first time in history a pandemic was fought, not by excluding the infected once it was already too late, but to control and collect information concerning the whole population in order to study the behaviour of the disease and to stop it from spreading over the town in the first place.

Foucault describes a town in times of the plague as the perfect governed city, *“the town immobilized by the functioning of an extensive power that bears in a distinct way over all individual bodies this is the utopia of the governed city”*.



picture 2

This methodology started to be used not only to fight pandemics but also for everything else society considered as a form of disorder or confusion, this happens to be the case especially for asylums, schools, hospitals and of course penitentiaries of the nineteenth century.

The old prison, the one before the rise of new methods after the plague, was the result of processes of rejection, convicts were locked up in a dark place and forgotten, in a similar way to the leper infected.

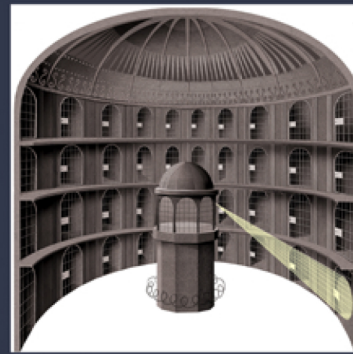
After the plague, the newly developed projects of discipline aimed to put the convict in a position of apparent constant observation, to eradicate every kind of misbehaviour at its roots.

Foucault believes that *“ If it is true that leper gave rise to rituals of exclusion, ..., then the plague gave rise to disciplinary projects”*.

This statement can be seen as rather radical, especially when it comes to disciplinary projects, it is known that the plague was not the only impulse that gave rise to them, they were also strongly influenced by changes in the structure of society occurred during the industrial revolution.

On the other hand, it is reasonable to say that the pandemic played a major role.

Knowing that pandemics can, not only give rise to new methods and behaviours but also shape existing ones, makes the study of past projects of discipline even more interesting, as they still are recognisable in the structure of modern society.



picture 3

3. The Panopticon

The panopticon is maybe the most interesting of the disciplinary projects born in the nineteenth century, as it became both a physical building in the first place and a conceptual scheme in the second.

Bentham's panopticon architectural aspect was of a peripheral building, used as a penitentiary, of circular form divided into many cells with two windows for each them, one on the outside to allow the light to cross the whole room and one on the opposite side facing the intern courtyard in which centre an observation tower was placed.

“Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected; Visibility is a trap”, Foucault.

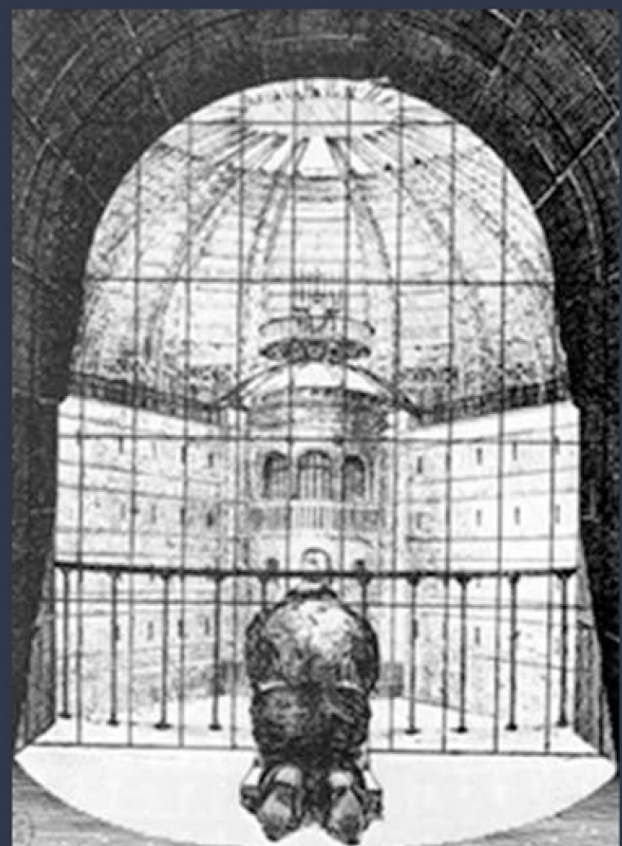
With his statement, he wants to point out how the old and dark prisons of the past were more of a hiding place for convicts, a place where they couldn't be controlled or re-educated.

The Panopticon, instead, makes it possible to exercise power in a constant way reducing the number of those who exercise it and increasing the number of those on whom it is exercised; the constant feeling of being observed but not seeing the observer creates a sort of psychological pressure in the individuals preventing crimes, mistakes and offences even before they have been committed.

Furtheron Bentham proposes the Panopticon, not only as an architectural model for the perfect prison but also as a model for experiments on men, he believes that whenever a group of individuals must be forced to learn a certain task or behaviour the panoptic schema may be used.

Bentham is convinced that the Panopticon can increase the forces of power and simultaneously be able to increase the forces of society instead of confiscating

them, calling it the *“productive increase of power”* that can only be assured if *“It can be exercised continuously..., in the subtlest possible way, and if, ..., it functions outside these sudden, violent, discontinuous forms that are bound up with the exercise of sovereignty”, Foucault.*



picture 4

2. Modern Panopticism

While at the time of Bentham the Panopticon has received rather little attention, compared to the scientific findings in the chemical or mining industries and was considered a *“bizarre little utopia, a perverse dream ... of a polite society”*, Foucault, it is not too far from the structure of modern society and so it became a very interesting tool that can be used to understand better the structure of it.

The digitalisation made it possible to keep a much larger number of people under observation and to cut down the numbers of observants to its very lowest but the digitalised Panopticon is far away from the utopic dream Bentham had; on one side it helps authorities to control a much larger range of individuals and to easily detect misbehaviour and criminal activities, on the other side, the nature of the observant changed, especially in the last two decades, with the economic growth of social media and research browsers.

The observants are not anymore just the authorities, that exercise a slight way of power through the panopticon to prevent criminal activity.

A new group of observants has emerged, composed by

the companies that own online research motors or social media, this group not only changed the nature of the observant but also the whole task of the panoptic scheme.

The observed individual in the cell, may it be a physical or metaphorical cell, is not observed to recognize misbehaviour and to later re-educate him but to study his interests and activities to create a personalized picture of every single user based on their needs and desires. So it is clear that the panopticon is not anymore used as a tool to make an individual a productive part of society but it is used to monitor every single aspect of his life to transform the person into the final product. In easy words, social media and research browsers earn by selling the information, they collect from their users, to whom it may interests.

This modern scheme of panopticism puts itself in contrast with the principles of the Bentham panopticon not by structure but by the task.

While in Bentham’s panopticon power and society grow simultaneously in the modern scheme society takes no profit out of it anymore.



picture 5

4. The Modern Debate

Even if it is clear that there are some strong similarities between the Bentham panopticon and the modern digitalised structure of surveillance, there are still many authors that are sceptical in calling the modern model of surveillance a panopticon.

As for the examples of Jake Goldenfein, who states in an article of the Guardian that *“In the panopticon, the occupants are constantly aware of the threat of being watched - this is the whole point - but state surveillance on the internet is invisible”* and Connor Sheridan, who writes in his senior thesis that *“the old panopticon required isolation and fragmentation to separate its captives from each other... in the modern panopticon, that sense of hard power is largely done away with.”*

Now when the panoptic gaze is turned on a subject, it is to understand their needs and to serve their desires, only to catalogue those desires to later playback against them”.

These two statements focus on physical differences between the model of modern surveillance and Bentham's panopticon, however, they can be easily contrasted.

The first statement with the words of Goldenfein itself, who writes in the same article that it is possible to consider the modern model of surveillance a panopticon but only after the Snowden scandal, because he is convinced that even if society did know about surveillance on the internet, it now had certain proof. Also this statement by Goldenfein sounds contradictory; when it comes to the Snowden scandal, the observed subject is finally able to know who his observer is, while in the original panopticon this is never the case, convicts are aware of being watched but never know who is watching.

So it is quite logical to think the opposite of what Goldstein says and so, that the modern model of surveillance is rather less than closer to the panopticon after the Snowden scandal.

The second statement confirms what has been said in the previous chapter, “Modern panopticism”, that the modern panopticon changed its task over time, not executing power anymore but collecting information about the so-called “convicts”.

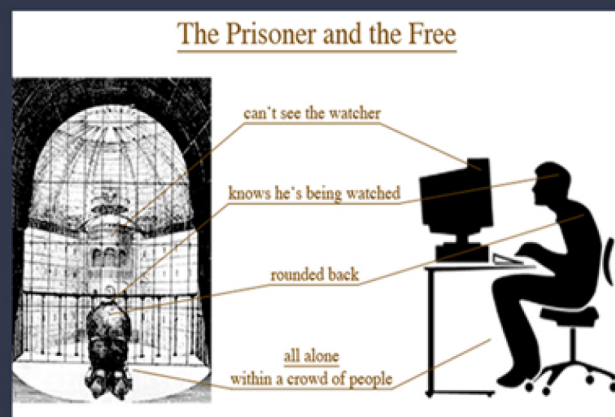
But still, Sheridan focuses on physical aspects saying that the modern surveillance system differs from the panopticon because the panopticon requires in the first place isolation and fragmentation to separate the convicts.

This might be true on a physical level, but by reading the quote of Xinzhu Zhang from his article *“Power of Panopticism in Modern Society”* it is possible to recognize how close these two models are on a theoretical level.

“Panopticism contains the idea of being watched from a watchtower, just as the governments observe their citizens’ activities from a central location. People who use social media are also aware that they are being watched and, hence, avoid engaging in activities that go against the government’s principles. Proof of being watched can be seen when people are arrested and charged for the illegal downloading of copyrighted material over the internet”.

The points of position in this debate differ in many ways but can generally be collected into two main philosophies, the ones that belief using the panopticon as a metaphor is wrong because it lacks in similarities of the physical form and the ones that embrace the use of the panopticon as a metaphor for its structural and functional similarities to modern surveillance.

Both sides have valuable arguments and it is empirical to consider both of them, the physical differences and the non-physical similarities, to understand the meaning of “digitalised panopticon”.



picture 6

6. Conclusions - The Digitalised Pandemic

Many authors still argue if the modern structure of surveillance can be compared to the Bentham panopticon or not, but all of them agree with the fact that, in some way, the panoptic scheme is bounded into the structure of institutions and social media.

Therefore, it is possible to consider the digitalised panopticon as a nonphysical existing entity, which helps us to leave the previous debate in the background and focus on more contemporary topics.

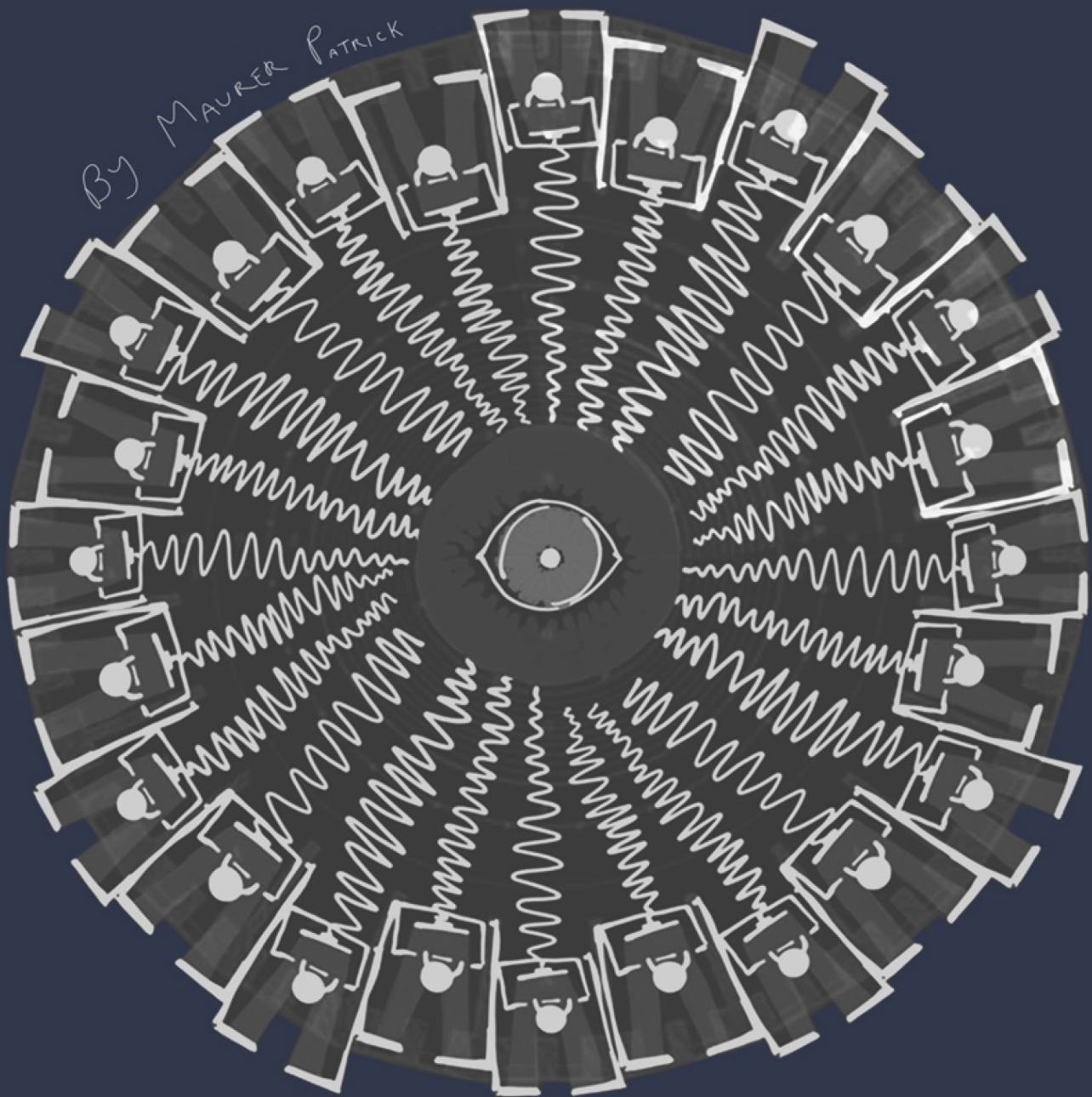
Foucault explains how the panopticon and other disciplinary projects arise after a pandemic as the plague or the leper, and this leads us to our question, what role will the COVID-19 pandemic play in the evolution of the panoptic scheme and is the panopticon the right tool to create a temporary utopian society capable of fighting the spread of the disease? What new forms of architecture and disciplinary projects will arise from it?

It is still difficult to speculate what the future will bring, but by knowing how the digital panopticon works it is possible to recognise projects, used to fight the spread of covid-19, that work with the same structure, for example tracking apps for smartphones.

In the same way, it allows to think about modern tools that could be used in a panoptical manner to prevent misbehaviour, an example, in this case, could be the use of tools like google traffic, by both, the observed, to avoid crowded places and the observer to stop non-authorized gatherings from happening in the first place.



picture 7



Lectures

- "Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison", Michel Foucault, New York, Pantheon Books, 1977.
- "The Contradictions of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon Penitentiary", Philip Steadman, University College London, January 2007.
- "Foucault, Power and the Modern Panopticon", Sheridan Connor, Senior Theses, Trinity College, Hartford, 2016.
- "Power of Panopticism in Modern Society", Xinyu Zhang, medium.com, May 2017.
- "What does the panopticon mean in the age of digital surveillance?", Thomas McMullan, The Guardian, July 2015.

Links

- Picture 1 : penguin.com.au/books/discipline-and-punish-9780241386019.
- Picture 2: the-tls.co.uk/articles/michel-foucault-footnotes-to-plato/.
- Picture 3: nytimes.com/2013/07/21/books/review/the-panopticon-by-jenni-fagan.html.
- Picture 4: utilitarianism.com/panopticon.html.
- Picture 5: fsmatters.com/page_1150770.asp.
- Picture 6 : medium.com/@xzhan065/power-of-panopticism-in-modern-society-79ea015fab9a.
- Picture 7: riksbank.se/en-gb.