

Foucault's panoptic disciplinary power and torture: the power of the gaze in Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit* (1944)

نظرية فوكو لقوة الانضباط والعذاب القائم على تطبيق نموذج " البانوبتيكون ": قوة النظرة
الثاقبة فى مسرحية جون بول سارتر " لا مخرج " (1944)

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Abstract

The effect of the Panopticon – introduced by Bentham - is to induce in the inmate a state of permanent visibility/exposure that assures the automatic functioning of the observer's (in tower) power. The key lies in the sustained power of surveillance despite its discontinuity in action. It does not matter who exercises the power or the motive behind it, but the more conscious a person is of another person's presence: the more a person's freedom is threatened by feeling objectified. According to Michel Foucault, discipline is maintained without the need to use force to dictate a certain behavior due to the power of the gaze. Disciplinary power based on knowledge (power-knowledge) defines what is normal, acceptable or deviant. Thus, power becomes a source of social discipline and conformity. Consequently, microcosmic systems of surveillance used in schools or panoptic prisons for example no longer require force or violence. My paper uses Michel Foucault's book *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* as its main theoretical framework and applies his theories to Sartre's masterpiece *No Exit* (1944). The play setting is an example of a panoptic prison that is described by its residents as inescapable hell, born from the need to derive validation and identity from others as long as they are the objects of each others' gaze. This leads the characters to a state of permanent torture. Yet, when characters are given the chance to leave through an open door, they choose each others' intolerable company rather than heading towards the unknown.

استطاع نموذج "البانوبتيكون" - الذى قدمه بينثام للسجون - ان يزرع حاله من الانكشاف الدائم داخل السجناء مما يضمن فاعليه واستمرارية قوة من بالبرج. السبب وراء هذا الحالة، هى شعور السجين بقوة المراقبة الدائمة له بالرغم من عدم استمراريته الفعلية. فالشخص او الدافع وراء المراقبة ليسوا ذو اهمية انما كلما زاد شعور الانسان بوجود رقيب، كلما ارتفع احساسه بتهديد يقلص حريته. طبقاً لما كتبه ميشيل فوكو، يمكن الحفاظ على الانضباط فقط بقوة النظرة دون الحاجة الى استخدام العنف فى فرض سلوك محدد . تستطيع قوة الانضباط المبنية على المعرفة تحديد ما يعد معقول ومقبول او شاذ. هكذا، تصبح القوة مصدر من مصادر الانضباط المجتمعي و المطابقة وعليه، لم تعد المدارس والسجون التى تتبنى نموذج "البانوبتيكون" باستخدام انظمة مصغرة من المراقبة على سبيل المثال تحتاج الى القوة او العنف. تتبنى هذه الورقة البحثية نظريات الكاتب ميشيل فوكو التى جاءت فى كتابه "الانضباط و التوجيه : مولد السجون" وتتناول تطبيقها على رائعة سارتر " لا مخرج" (1944). فالمسرحية تعد نموذجاً لسجن "البانوبتيكون" الذى وصف بأن نزلائه فى جحيم لا مفر منه ولد من حاجة الشخصيات الى استمداد التقدير والهوية من الاخرين طالما هم تحت اعين بعضهم البعض. كل هذا يدفع الشخصيات الى حالة من العذاب المستمر. وبالرغم من انه يتم اعطائهم فرصة للرحيل من خلال الباب المفتوح، إلا انهم يفضلون البقاء فى صحبة بعضهم البعض الغير محتملة على أن يتقدموا فى اتجاه المجهول.

Foucault's panoptic disciplinary power and torture: the power of the gaze in Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit* (1944)

This paper uses Michel Foucault's theory of the Panopticon found in his book *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (1975). Through the application of his theory, the three main protagonists of Jean-Paul Sartre's chosen play *No Exit* (1944) are seen both empowered and disempowered. A number of literary worksⁱ have dealt with the power of the gaze in totalitarian and futuristic settings where themes of mass surveillance and governmental control as means of maintaining order are discussed yet few have dealt with the power of the individual's gaze as a source of threat and torture (or a replica of a modern prison). It is not about who is in the center tower exercising power, but the more conscious a person is of another person's presence: the more a person's freedom is threatened by feeling objectified or imprisoned.

A gaze is variable since one can be the subject or the object of the gaze (observer or recipient). It can be exchanged between equals or express hierarchical distinction. It can also be intended or unintended and/or gender-specific. The variables of an equal or a hierarchical gaze whether intended or not are interconnected (Davidsen 6). Michel Foucault discusses how seeing and being seen affects human behavior. In an interview that was put in writing and published, he explains there was a central moment in history that marked the transition from inflicting of penalties to surveillance (being constantly watched) that depends on exercising power from "within the social body rather than from above it" (Power/Knowledge 38-39). The abovementioned book examines the development of punitive institutions in the West and reflects on the topic of surveillance as a modern alternative that comes with benefits for different regimes.

One way the power of the gaze manifests itself is through surveillance. Its purpose is to closely observe criminals. This is seen in the architectural structure of Benthamⁱⁱ's Panopticon (described in the book), which is a structure designed to perceive and control its inmates' behavior (Foucault 200). The Panopticon is an annular building surrounding a central watchtower. The building is divided into cells that look like cages or small theatres, in which "each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible" (200). It is different from the classical idea of the dungeon that was originally designed to hide the inmate and deprive him

of light by placing him miles under the ground. In fact, full lighting and constant visibility have proved more restricting than darknessⁱⁱⁱ. In this construct, the individual “becomes the principle of his own subjection” (203) which means that he plays both parts (that of the guarding warder and the imprisoned inmate) since he/she knows that his behavior is constantly being watched whether in fact this may not be all the way true. Meanwhile the eyes, like those of the watchman in the central tower of the Panopticon, see all, but are not seen (Dickey 35). Thus, external power -used in earlier fortresses- is rarely used since discipline is maintained through the power of the gaze. In her article “Reading Pleasure: *Light in August* and the Theory of the Gendered Gaze” (1997), Irene Visser asserts that Foucault’s discussion of the Panopticon is “... extremely relevant to gaze theory since it demonstrates in detail the nature of the relation between power and visibility” (278). Power should be both visible and unverifiable. The tower is always visible to the inmates and the inmates can always assume that a guard in the tower is watching them but the inmates are unable to see through its windows , and thus never know for sure if they are actually being watched at any time “subjection is born from a fictitious relation” (202), explains Foucault. The illusion of being watched becomes more important than the actual deed. This power relation functions as a controlling mechanism since the gazed at inmate is compelled to alter his/her behavior to fit the rules set by his/her observer (201-202). The exercised power does not come from the outside, but sprouts from inside the person in a way that controls him/her.

The Panopticon can function as a laboratory to carry out experiments, try out different punishments and/or train individuals to the kind of behavior their observer finds appropriate (Foucault 203). It has a number of benefits in comparison to earlier forms of prisons. First, it can reduce the number of those who employ it while increase those on whom it is employed. Second, through discretion and low resistance; it stays away from violence and all forms of physical pain. In reference to Foucault’s theory on the pressing power of the gaze, Jennifer Burwell states that the Panopticon comes as a “solution to the problem of discipline whereby violence is replaced by unceasing observation as the prevailing disciplinary mode” (57). Third, it facilitates the exercise of power at the lowest possible cost since less expenditure is involved.

Bentham’s principle of the Panopticon may have started as a form of disciplinary institution applied to a temporary scale of a plague-stricken town^{iv} but was able to unleash the possibilities of its application on different levels throughout the whole social body. Foucault

writes “If Bentham's project aroused interest, this was because it provided a formula applicable to many domains, the formula of power through transparency, subjection by illumination” (Power/knowledge 154).

Bentham relies on single power; that of the one in the central tower and Foucault wonders in his book whose power it is. For Foucault, “Power in the substantive sense, 'le' pouvoir, doesn't exist ... In reality power means relations, a more-or-less organized, hierarchical, coordinated cluster of relations (Power/Knowledge 198). So anyone or any institution can be in the tower surveilling its inmates. It does not have to be God or a higher entity. It can be a power given to a fellow human in fear of his/her judgment. In the coming paragraphs, the researcher applies Foucault's panoptic disciplinary power to Sartre's masterpiece *No Exit* (1944).

Sartre's play *No Exit* was initially entitled “Les Autres” or “The Others”. The choice of title – in its original French language – reflects that it is not a story of what life may be after death but more of an encounter of human relationships with each taking “turns attempting to gain control of the situation through their looks” (Brunner 60). Condemned by their lifetime acts, all three main characters stay under the judgmental gaze of each others' eyes. At first, they deny responsibility for their previous deeds but later admit that their crimes cunningly went unpunished. They differ in nationality, profession and class but seem to share the Sartrean unredeemed sin which is “the compulsion to define themselves and seek validation through the eyes of others” (Gordon 167). In the present time of the play, they still depend on each other for validation and approval. They choose each others' intolerable company over freedom when they get a chance to leave at the end of the play and the door is open proving that it is their choice to live in Hell.

The original title “Les Autres” is a direct uncomplicated reference to Hell. It is about Others' power and influence but the more revised title “Huis Clos” or “No Exit” focuses on the fact that none of the three main characters leaves not because they are locked inside as the play first suggests but the door that opens at the end of the play as a response to their beseeches proves useless to any of them since they are tied to each others' moral definition (Gordon 172).

When Sartre's three characters Garcin, Inez and Estelle first arrive in hell, they encounter no torturers, burning flames, darkness or hotness or any of the traditional misconceptions associated with after-life in Hell. Garcin wonders as the Valet shows him around:

GARCIN: Quite So. But I say, where are the instruments of torture?

VALET: The what?

GARCIN: The racks and red-hot pincers and all the other paraphernalia? (No Exit 4)

The characters' eternal imprisonment takes place in a simply furnished Second-empire drawing room with a bronze statue on the mantel piece. Sartre's ordinary drawing room that serves as hell differs from the literal instruments of torture found in Dante's portrayal of the *Inferno*^v. For Dante, "the deepest isolation is to suffer separation from the source of all light and life and warmth" (Jacoff 143). Basically, torture is being away from light while in Sartre's depiction of Hell, it is the total opposite. Torture arises from the fact that lights are never turned off and the inmates' eyes never blink as they do not experience the simple indulgence of passing time by sleep (Gordon 167).

When Inez first enters, she mistakes Garcin for her torturer (an assumption that he considers comic at the beginning but proves to be right at the end of the play). All three characters have taken pleasure in torturing their beloved ones in their previous lives and continue to do so in their afterlife Hell. Garcin has not only been unfaithful to his wife but he tortured her by flaunting his infidelities in front of her. Estelle mentions that her only crime was marrying an elderly man to provide for her sick brother but she betrayed her husband through an extramarital affair conceiving a child with her lover. She drowns the child and her lover commits suicide which she finds absurd since her husband has not noticed a thing in the first place. Last but not least, Inez who seduced another woman away from her husband; convincing her that she was responsible for her husband's death and driving her to suicide. The power that a gaze has on a body becomes visible to the naked eye through the particular discipline to which the body is inclined "I crept inside her skin, she saw the world through my eyes" (26), explains Inez.

The lady reminds Garcin that he is not alone anymore in the room and thus he is expected to conform to a certain kind of behavior that his gazers find appropriate. The gaze casts its net of power over one's individuality, freedom and judgment to fix and define them by tailoring the gazed at body to meet certain expectations (Torghabeh 19). Conforming to other characters' version of what is believed to be correct behavior is induced not out of fear but from the need to derive validation and identity from others. This leads the characters to a state of

permanent torture. One that exceeds physical pain and is best described as hell. “When validation and identity derives from others, others become hell, a state where torture is not meted out by devils but self-inflicted and inescapable” (Burt 411). It becomes clear why the three of them were placed together in one room where the official torturer is absent and no physical torments are expected. Inez mentions it is the same idea as the cafeteria where customers serve themselves “each of us will act as torturer of the two others” (No Exit 17). In fact, at some point in the play:

Each becomes a victim and a victimizer. Inez, Estelle and Garcin continually seduce and reject each other – for sexual and non-sexual ends ... it is difficult to keep a pace of each character as tortured or torturer, as Self or Other, because at each moment of rejection or victory, each becomes the Subject or the Object (Gordon 171).

When Garcin first meets Estelle and Inez, he ignores them since as women they have not been the crowd to whom he may look for validation but when he hears his colleagues calling him a coward on Earth, he turns to them for approval despite him degrading women earlier on Earth. Garcin craves the women’s moral approval but both deprive him of the positive judgment he implores (Detmer 145). Estelle is only interested in his body and Inez is a sadist. She mentions earlier that she enjoys making people suffer and knows how to do so through passing judgments and being hard to satisfy. He promises he will love Estelle forever if she trusts him and says he is not a coward to which she says he is. He runs to the door and implores for the door to be open in a heart-breaking monologue that shows the agony and intolerable torture of constantly being watched, subjected and judged. The pain his words show surpasses physical torture that was used before the Benthamite modern version of a prison.

GARCIN: Open the door! Open, blast you! I’ll endure anything, your red-hot tongs and molten lead, your racks and prongs and garrotes – all your fiendish gadgets, everything that burns and flays and tears – I’ll put up with any torture you impose. Anything, anything would be better than this agony of mind, this creeping pain that gnaws and fumbles and caresses one and never hurts quite enough (THE DOOR FLIES OPEN: a with a jerk, and he just avoids falling) (No Exit 41).

As the door unexpectedly flies open, the stage directions indicate that the action is followed by a period of long silence. The barrier is down and yet no one leaves. The inmates of the panopticon are free to leave their cells yet question the whole matter. They doubt that they are not being watched. The illusion of being watched has become more restricting than the actual deed. Garcin announces that he won't leave. He decides that since Inez stands between him and Estelle, he will spend the rest of his eternity trying to convince hard-headed Inez that he is not a coward and she totally takes advantage of his vulnerability. At this point of the play, the audience realizes that the born prison is of the characters' own choice. They are not staying under each other's gaze because there is no way out but because they seek each others' approval and validation. Garcin shuts the door himself this time and proves that it is his choice to live in Hell. Hell is not about torture-chambers, red-hot pokers, fire and brimstones. "Hell is - other people" concludes Garcin.

Characters realize that they have become inseparable. They realize that each others' opinions^{vi} matter to them and that causes the hellish agony. According to Sartre, individuals are tortured not because they find life to be miserable but because they are 'condemned to be free'. Sartre believes that the circumstances and conditions of the birth as well as the upbringing of the individual are not in his control, but the moment he/she becomes conscious and self-aware, he/she has to make choices. These choices and decisions define his essence or as Detmer puts it "we are what we do" (156). Sartre's concepts of existentialism^{vii} and freedom are so intrinsically interwoven and interconnected to each other that a single brick taken out of it would have the whole structure collapsed. He writes:

To be enwrapped in a perpetual care for judgments and actions which you do not want to change is a living death ... No matter what circle of hell we are living in, I think we are free to break out of it. And if people do not break out, again, they are staying there of their own free will. So that of their own free will they will put themselves in hell (Sartre on Theater 200).

When Estelle fails to find a glass to check herself, she starts questioning her existence. The core of Sartre's philosophy of existentialism is that 'existence precedes essence' so when

Estelle fails to see her true self, she doubts her whole existence and leans to Inez in order to see herself through her eyes (the eyes of an outsider). Inez offers her services to her new eternal companion: the way she crept into her past lover's skin and had total control over her life encouraging her to see the world through her eyes.

INEZ: Come closer. Closer. Look into my eyes. What do you see?

ESTELLE: Oh, I'm there! But so tiny I can't see myself properly.

INEZ: But I can. Every inch of you. Now ask me questions. I'll be as candid as any looking-glass ...

ESTELLE: But how can I rely upon your taste? Is it the same as my taste? Oh, how sickening it all is, enough to drive one crazy (No Exit 20).

When Estelle depends on Inez's eyes for identifying her own image, she becomes helpless at the mercy of Inez's gaze. Ironically, as soon as Inez realizes that Estelle feels haughty and is not interested in postal clerks like herself: she points out a nonexistent nasty red pimple at the bottom of her cheek to which Estelle panics. Each character becomes enslaved and imprisoned by the two others' judgment. The essence of their existence is reduced to objectification while their privacy is shattered. When Garcin begs them to keep quiet and forget about each others' presence, Inez replies that she may be able to cut his tongue out but never prevent his being there. As each becomes conscious of the presence of the other, another consciousness, who is watching and scrutinizing him/her, his/her self-esteem is both intimidated and flirted with what Sartre calls "being-for-others" (Torghabeh 18).

In his book *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre explains in "The Look" section (pp. 340-400) what he means by "being-for-others" through his description (pp. 347-349) of a man peeping through a keyhole into a room watching others. He is all alone and unaware of the presence of other people watching him when all of a sudden, the man hears a footstep behind him, and suddenly realizes he is being watched. Suddenly the whole situation changes radically for him as he becomes aware of the presence of someone else — another consciousness, who is watching him. The difference between the two situations (watching and being watched or before and after)

is exactly the difference between an isolated consciousness, all by itself, and a consciousness in the presence of others. By “Being-for-others”^{viii}, Sartre means taking oneself as others perceive it which he considers bad faith being deceptive and inauthentic (Priest 222-223). The other cannot be simply seen as another object (being-in-itself) since he/she is himself/herself a subject (being-for-itself) which possesses the ability via ‘the look’ to judge and ultimately reduce us into an object in their own world. Therefore, the concept of “being-for-others” involves a complicated interplay of objectivity and subjectivity and an individual cannot be free if he is moving between the subjective or objective conditions: where subjective conditions are related to his psychological history and status and the objective conditions are related to the people around him or the people whom he is surrounded with.

The gaze plays a vital role in this play as the term itself is repeatedly used^{ix} by the characters showing its effect in either winning each other over or repulsing each other away. Inez tries to seduce Estelle by giving her alleged freedom to be whatever she wants except through her eyes however as Estelle rejects Inez’s attempts, she turns to Garcin – the only man around – for validation and approval. She compares herself to inanimate ornaments and objects in the room that he sees all day long and adds, “surely I’m better to look at” (No Exit 33). When they agree to come to terms with each other, they are reminded by Inez that they are not alone. With all the pressure of being constantly watched^x, frustration accompanied with agony and torture to conform to the gazer’s version of appropriate behavior is born. Out of repression, Garcin at some point tries to attack Inez with his bare hands while Estelle tries to stab her with a paper-knife claiming that she will stop her watching but it is no surprise for them that they are all already dead and nothing can stop the gaze “...just look at me, see how weak I am, a mere breath on the air, a gaze observing you, a formless thought that thinks you ... You can’t throttle thoughts with hands” says Inez (44). The play ends with the characters slumping on their sofas laughing but their laughter dies away as they continue gazing at each other.

According to Foucault, power is based on knowledge to the extent that he uses a hyphenated version that links both terms showing the inevitable relation between the two concepts. “Power is exercised by virtue of things being known and people being seen” (The History of Sexuality 154).

Modern humanism is therefore mistaken in drawing this line between knowledge and power. Knowledge and power are integrated with one another, and there is no point in dreaming of a time when knowledge will cease to depend on power; this is just a way of reviving humanism in a utopian guise. It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power (Power/Knowledge 52).

It is worth mentioning that the play originated when three friends^{xi} of Sartre asked him to write them a play to act in the year in which *Being and Nothingness* was published. Taking their vanity in consideration, he wrote them *No Exit* in which all three characters have equal number of lines (Webber 48). Metaphorically, this trick has served in the play's overall theme. With the absence of a single domineering hero/heroine, all three characters prove to have equal dominance on each others' lives through their gazes despite their different personalities, motives and approaches.

One of the most controversial quotes and often quoted lines is Garcin's comment near the end of the play "Hell is - other people". It has often been misinterpreted^{xii}. Readers/spectators have often wondered about Sartre's original meaning of it as he finds the oblivion of people's presence unfeasible. If others cannot be avoided by the individual and their mere existence affects him/her, does that mean he/she is bound (or forced) to suffer by living in Hell surrounded by others? Sartre has emphasized the importance of radical freedom and condemned social repressive forces throughout his works. For the notable philosopher, Man is condemned to be free, so writing about an individual's confinement is far away from his beliefs. It is true Man has no choice to exist but once he does, he becomes totally responsible for his actions giving meaning to his life. Becoming an object through seeking others' validation and approval is a choice that an individual takes. Others become Hell when the individual uses their judgment as a means to judge himself/herself. Hell can be a mindset and not a physical place like the Panopticon in which no actual torture is practiced. There is no need for physical torture when the mere existence of the other causes enough anguish. Sartre advocated for the return to the self-being uninhibited by the look or the other.

In conclusion, *No Exit* offers a typical illustration of Foucault's theory of a modern prison through its extraordinary setting: one that fits the modern era and is far away from violence, burning and dismembering of body parts as means of punishment and torture. It adopts the principle of full, permanent and unverifiable visibility as a force exercised in intersubjective human situations.

The long-lasting fascination with this multilayered play^{xiii} may be due to its intrinsic presentation of a topic that modern readers/spectators find relatable now more than ever in an era where social media has become a domineering force that affects people's lives dramatically and puts them under the spotlights: yet they do it voluntarily and keep returning for more as a result of the validation, recognition and attention they get no matter how restricting and confining it has turned to be.

A modern prison is living under the power of a constant gaze more like Bentham's central tower in the panopticon that controls the inmates' behavior. The look, gaze or eye guarantees discipline and sometimes torture through the power of permanent unverifiable observation (power-knowledge). In the words of the Spanish poet Antonio Machado "The eye you see isn't an eye because you see it; it's an eye because it sees you" (176).

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ⁱ Including Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949), Rand’s *Anthem* (1938) and Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985).

ⁱⁱ It has been said that Bentham’s brother is the one who came up with the idea of the Panopticon while visiting the Military school but Bentham revealed the building as his authentic discovery. Later on, Foucault came across this structure that fell into oblivion while studying the problems of the penal system.

ⁱⁱⁱ “Visibility is a trap” (200) writes Foucault.

^{iv} The measures taken when the plague appeared in a town were mentioned in the Archives militaires de Vincennes.

^v Hell is depicted as nine concentric circles of torment located within the Earth in which readers read about beasts, worms, fire, ice and many other means of physical torture.

^{vi} “They overlooked the fact of possibility of opinion ... They believed opinion would be inherently just” (Power/Knowledge 162) which is not true since one’s opinion is affected by materialistic aspects and individual intentions.

^{vii} Existentialism was developed in the 19th century. Existentialism explores human beings’ suffering and difficult choices.

^{viii} Sartre introduces a new element into his analysis of “being-for-itself”: he remains a dualist, not a triadist.

^{ix} Other words used include “look” or “eye”.

^x Garcin asks “Will you always see me?” To which Inez replies “Always” (No Exit 45).

^{xi} Including Albert Camus

^{xii} After the controversy his most quoted line has made, Sartre explained twenty years after the publication of his play that what he meant by “Hell is – other people” was not that an individual’s relations with other people are

always doomed but if relations with someone are twisted, then that other person can only be hell (Sartre on Theatre 199).

^{xiii} Scholars should avoid reducing this masterpiece to a single superficial didactic plot line.