

## Depiction Of Panopticon In *Nerve* By Jeanne Ryan

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### Abstract

This paper intends to familiarise Jeremy Bentham's architectural prison design, Panopticon, which was adopted by Paul- Michel Foucault in his work, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975). According to Foucault, Bentham's idea was to be applied upon societies with power as the key to discipline. The novel, *Nerve* (2016), by Jeanne Ryan, depicts how teenagers and young adults fall into digital traps without their knowledge. This research utilises the novel to showcase the lens of digital panopticon upon people via Internet. Thus, it is realised that people tend to believe themselves as safe and leading a secure private life, while in actuality, they have very limited privacy. Hence, this research highlights how the society is constantly surveilled by the government, corporations and other powerful entities with people's ignorance and acceptance of normality in being monitored.

**Keywords :** Panopticon, society, digital traps, Internet, normality, surveillance, discipline, power.

### Introduction

The architectural design called Panopticon, was introduced in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by the English philosopher and social theorist, Jeremy Bentham. The term 'panopticon' is the combination of two Greek words 'pan' and 'opticon', which means 'everything' and 'vision' respectively. The Panopticon was an architectural design of a wheel like structured prison where the guard can observe the prisoners. In this architectural design, a closed watch tower is situated in the centre and the prisoners are in separate cells. Through this closed watchtower, a guard, who is invisible to the prison inmates, can surveil them at a single gaze. They are aware of being monitored but are unaware of when are they being monitored. With the presumption that they are constantly under surveillance, they abide by the rule to avoid persecution. With the objective of punishing the prisoners without inflicting physical pain, fear is injected in them causing a modification in their behaviour which is favourable to the powerful entities. The idea of imprisoning the prisoners in separate cells solved issues like overcrowding, lack of discipline and lack of sanitation.

However, Bentham's aim of gaining a financial profit from the prisoners' labour led to the failure of attaining the endorsement of political establishment. As the authorities in the United Kingdom considered it inappropriate to transform a prison to a business agency, Panopticism was not implemented. Although the project was declined, the blueprint of the same was utilised by United Kingdom and many other countries.

Later, the Panopticon design was adopted by the French philosopher, politician, historian of ideas, writer and literary critic, Paul- Michel Foucault. He discussed and theorised discipline in his work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975) under the title, 'Panopticism'. According to Foucault, like the guard is invisible to the prison inmates and has the 'power' to observe them, the 'disciplinary society', which includes families, schools, factories and hospitals, looks through the lens of Panopticon, remaining invisible themselves and making all visible. He articulates that the mechanization of Panopticon rises discipline in a society where there is an increase in production, development in economy, spreading of education and a rise and definition in morality. Thus, a homogenizing or normalising effect is fallen upon the society which can be considered negative due to arrests breaks, suspends and opposes but positive is the aspects of production, efficiency.

### Normalization of Surveillance

At present, mass surveillance has been normalised across the globe with people no more concerned of being observed or controlled. An individual or a specific demography can be surveilled by the

government, corporations and other powerful entities through surveillance cameras and large volumes of data. Normalization is not to be considered as a negative effect but is a positive as it inculcates more production in a society. The concept of normalization can be considered harmful or consists of a negative aspect only when it influences the way a person thinks. Likewise, disciplinary power does not contribute any negative aspects but only helps in the growth of the productive force of the society. According to Foucault, disciplinary power moulds human impulses to create a productive society which he defines as a form of exercising and dominating the hierarchical power. He further says that the sole purpose of the disciplinary power is to compel people to accept this disciplinary perspective as a norm and to recognise this norm as the ultimate truth. Foucault encourages people to believe in this norm as the truth, thus entering a game of truth to experience life in a reflective and conscious manner where they do self surveillance promoting betterment in oneself.

While Foucault says the general population is to believe the disciplinary perspective as the absolute truth, the disciplinary power is in the hands of the powerful entity, who decides what is to be considered as “normal”. Hence, with every individual believing in this perspective of truth which is normalized, they are vulnerable to be controlled and is more visible to the managerial policies to the actual architecture leaving them with no individuality and alienating them in a society where expression of original and independent thoughts is a crime.

### **Objectives**

While plenty of works upon digital panopticon are available across various media, there are very limited works reflecting the same in fictions. This research highlights the trap set upon young adults under the lens of digital panopticon as in the novel, *Nerve* by Jeanne Ryan.

### **Literature Review**

The novel, *Nerve*, authored by Jeanne Ryan and published in 2016, highlights how young adults and teenagers get lured to several online threats by jotting down their most intimate details in social medias. The protagonist, Vee, is a costume coordinator and makeup artist at her school. Being a shy person, she prefers to stand backstage with the excuse of privacy which contrasts to her action of sharing personal details to an online advertisement and updating her social media page in ThisIsMe. The novel showcases how peer pressure resulted in the girl joining the unofficial game, NERVE, which had dares that initially gave an adrenaline rush but later transformed to a honey trap for Vee and few other players, where at the end, the players were to shoot each other to win the game. This irresistible bait attracted the players with fame, expensive prizes and a huge amount of cash. Thus, despite several warnings from friends, Vee was one of the few players who became a victim of NERVE’s dataveillance.

### **Analysis**

Present day society has welcomed transparency and constant surveillance which promotes hierarchical power to an empowered social morality. While internet plays an undeniable alternative mode of communication and connection that can be differentiated with human interaction through virtual reality, people tend to create an alter identity of themselves and remain incognito. By promoting a synthesis of the new identity, a hyper real version of themselves is displayed.

This can be visualised in the novel, *Nerve* by Jeanne Ryan, where the protagonist, Vee, joins an online game called NERVE after she believed herself to be a mere sidekick of her best friend, Sydney and was “sick of feeling invisible”. (Ryan, 164) Although, initially Vee thinks “recklessness is not part of my personality. Shy, hard-working, loyal... that’s me” (Ryan, 30), after she joins the game, there is a complete personality transformation in her. After joining the online game, Vee begins to enjoy the new found fame she attains from the watchers of her daring videos posted in the game by herself or by other watchers. The once shy girl takes up the courage to do

dares like randomly ask ten men for a condom and to convince someone to pay her hundred dollars for sexual services. Gradually, she felt “the good cheer of the Watchers envelops (her) like a shield. A big, rowdy, beautiful shield. With them, (she is) somebody. (She is) safe.” (Ryan, 109)

Transparency and surveillance, which are at the core of panopticism, are very present in the Internet. In the present culture modern technologies provide constant surveillance. There is a demand for continual transparency. For instance, a Facebook account with information about interests, friends and location can be accessed by a stranger unless certain security is activated, yet there is no escape from the eyes of the society. What began as a way to reconnect with old friends and maintain friendships became it’s own route to a panoptic lens, where the modern people are subject to consistent monitoring from the outside world, and thus kept answerable for their actions within a community.

While Jeremy Bentham considered the theory of Panopticon to be exercised in prisons, in this novel, the unofficial online game, NERVE plays the role of the prison. The game retrieves majority of Vee’s information from her ThisIsMe page, in which she frequently writes about herself. Thus, with her information written public, she is vulnerable to the game’s honey trap. This contrasts much with her initial idea of “privacy” which she said to Matthews, when he asked her to name one benefit of not being centre stage. (Ryan, 19) The game allures teenagers by offering prizes that is beyond the player’s reach in actuality. Thus, the game rewards its players in order to make the players continue playing the game. Vee is first rewarded with a pair of expensive shoes that she have earlier posted on her ThisIsMe page and the second reward was a full day make-over at Salon Dav, which can be afforded only by celebrities. Gradually, with each dare, she is rewarded either with expensive items or with cash.

According to Foucault, the docile bodies under the control of the powerful are to perform tasks as per the orders given. Likewise, the players are the puppets of the game. While the players played to attain freedom in some way, they do not realise that they are hostages of the game. At this point, although the players are aware of being surveilled by those who signed up as the Watchers in the game and is filmed, they get adapted to being under this surveillance in such a way that they assume they are under the same for support and safety. Vee does not realise that she does not have any privacy until one of the host of the game, Gayle, virtually asks her “we are way beyond privacy, don’t you think?”. (Ryan, 164) Again, this contradicts with herself, who earlier said she has not got anything to hide when her best friend, Tommy warned her:

I don’t think you realize what you are up against. It’s not like you

Have to be the girl with the dragon tattoo to dig up personal data on

People. They’ll use it against you (Ryan, 72).

Despite several warnings from both of her friends, Sydney and Tommy, Vee chose to defend the game. This is the first step of the game where the player who is now their prisoner, is made to come to a psychological agreement with it. While Panopticon was structured to imbibe fear into the body, the game gains the trust of the player. Hence, the player trusts in the game although they are not aware of who the host of the game is. Where once the fear was that a powerful entity was watching us, the now commonly held perception is that the powerful entity is watching out for us. The decentralisation of the watchtower makes it easy for us to either ignore or forget that we are being monitored. While in Bentham's panopticon the prisoners were aware of being continually

monitored, the modern panopticon has done past it. Hence, due to the decentralised nature, being surveilled is forgotten and there is no self surveillance. Yet, initially there are instances where Vee resists the game but gradually she gets accustomed with the tasks of the game in order to win big prizes.

My head goes light again and my heart pounds irregularly...  
Feeling so vulnerable brings tears to my eyes. Oh, hell, I'm crying in front of everyone. what a great show for NERVE. I feel a surge of anger toward the game, which sears through the panicky feelings (Ryan, 52-53).

In the ideology of Bentham and Foucault, while the prisoners or bodies are aware of the powerful entity that is watching over them, the person who represents the powerful entity remains anonymous. Likewise, the unofficial game does not disclose any information about themselves to the players yet knows all information about the players. We understand this when Vee wishes to delete her live video of a dare posted in the game and asks Tommy to do so but he is unable to delete or request the same to the game host. He said:

All NERVE provides to contact them are application forms and video links, with no way to connect to anyone directly. I can't even track them down through their hosting site; it's like they are based overseas and hop from server to server (Ryan, 36).

While Vee played the game to be recognised by people for her efforts, Ian, who is Vee's game partner, teamed up by NERVE itself, desired to attain freedom from his parents. Ty, another player in the game who is teamed up with Daniella, is desperate to take his sick father for a trip to Ireland. From these three teenagers, it is understood that they wish for freedom in some or the other aspects. By tempting people with their biggest desires that seem impossible to be fulfilled by themselves or by people closely known to them, the game achieves their players which ends as an arena for murdering opponents to win the ultimate prize. The game cleverly have two options in it where one is for players and the other is for watchers. While the players attempt the daring tasks assigned to them by the game, the watchers are to record the players in the game supporting devices. With the crowd of watchers around the players, the players are made to believe in an illusion that the watchers are present to support and cheer them. But this was NERVE's trick to watch over the players by rewarding the watchers. Hence, with the growth of the plot, Vee, who once felt safe in the crowd, later felt alone despite being cheered by the crowd.

The ruckus of the crowd faded in anticipation. Their stares send a thousand tiny prickles to my skin... I try texting Tommy and a few other friends, but get an error message. So I try calling. Everything is blocked. Even access to my ThisIsMe page. despite the crowd around me, I suddenly feel alone... Lovely, their app [NERVE] provides a 'speedy link,' but blocks everyone else out. I should've guessed (Ryan, 89).

As the novel progresses, Vee begins to realise that the game does let them off easy. Although she realises this truth, the game is able to distract her attention from reality with the prizes. Hence, Vee and Ian move forward in the hope of attaining freedom. At the end, the selected players are locked in a VIP Lounge where there are seats and tables for the player along with a giant screen where they will be able to see and receive tasks from the assumed hosts, Gayle and Guy. The first task given to the players in the VIP Lounge is "Seven Minutes in Heaven" where the hosts says:

The team or player who provides the most entertaining show for the audience earns five hundred dollars. Runner-up wins a hundred. Everyone else just gets some time in heaven (Ryan, 181).

With privacy no more a concern, Ty and Daniella, and Micki and Jen perform the sexual act in the lobbies assigned to them which is watched by a crowd of watchers who will rate them based on the same. Another task is to make the players experience a situation they most feared and the last task is to shoot the person who is votes by each players. Thus, from mere adrenaline rush like dares to mental torture to murder, the game is designed to eliminate players every month, finally giving no gain to the winner except mental and physical trauma.

### **Conclusion**

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the English philosopher and social theorist, Jeremy Bentham, introduced the architectural design, panopticon, he intended it only for prisons where fear of being surveilled by a watchman who is out of their visibility, cause them to abide by the rules and establish discipline in prisons. But Paul Michel Foucault extended the idea to be applied in the society where the powerful entities like the government and other co-operations holds the power to control people by setting rules that are to be considered normal. These normalised rules could be solely in favour of the powerful entity.

In the 2016 novel, *Nerve*, by Jeanne Ryan, the protagonist, Vee, endangers her personal information by sharing it to an online advertisement and on the social media, ThisIsMe, where her page is accessible to all. After feeling like the ‘sidekick’ of her best friend, Sydney, Vee joins the unofficial game, NERVE. This novel, points out how teenagers and young adults like Vee fall into the honey trap of unofficial games and websites that offer irresistible prizes, fame and/or huge amount of cash. Thus, by joining the game, Vee put her privacy at stake as she believes the crowd (Watchers of the game) that surrounds her and surveils her are by her side to protect and embrace her, until finally she realises the gravity of trouble she has introduced to herself.

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