

The Panopticon

Radical Visibility and Catholic Social Thought

By Anton de Wit

I. Introduction: Bentham's panopticon

The renowned French philosopher Michel Foucault once wrote a book about the rise of the modern prison system in the 18th century¹. In medieval times, Foucault explains, convicts were thrown in dark cellars, they were, quite literally, hidden from the eye. The modern prison however, is a *panopticon* – a model coined by another renowned philosopher, Jeremy Bentham. A panopticon is a circular building with a watchtower in its centre, and cellblocks in the outer rings. The prison guards are able to observe every individual cell from the watchtower. The convicts cannot see the guards, but they know that they are being watched – or at least, that they are *possibly* being watched. So the great revolution in modern prisonhood as compared to pre-modern prisonhood, is that the prisoners are made *visible* instead of invisible.

In present-day prisons – designed not long after Foucault made his observations, and quite a long time after Bentham made his invention – the central watchtower is made superfluous due to camera observation. But the principle is still the same: the possibility of being watched proves to be a method of restraint at least equally effective as chains and bars. In fact: nowadays microchip technology enables experiments with home imprisonment, so that even the prison buildings themselves may become, to a certain extent, obsolete.

II. Voluntary visibility

Of course, a philosopher like Foucault wouldn't bother writing about such a historical process, if he didn't think it was a striking example of a more general social

¹ Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*, 1975, first translated in English in 1977 as: *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. The description and interpretation presented here are mainly borrowed from: Jenny Slatman, *Vreemd lichaam. Over medisch ingrijpen en persoonlijke identiteit*, 2008.

evolution. Visibility is not only the leading principle of modern prisonhood, but of modern society as a whole. Public life is visible life. And nowadays, even more than in the 1970s when Foucault wrote his observations, even the personal, the private spheres of life are drawn into the public sphere, mainly due to the rise of new digital mass media. There hardly is a face in the western world that isn't on Facebook.com, no space that isn't occupied on MySpace.com. I seriously doubt if there are any dots uncommmed.

The great difference between the penitential panopticon and the modern social panopticon is obvious: most people do not volunteer to be thrown in jail and to be observed 24/7. While on the other hand, nobody is forced to keep a public diary on the internet, nor is there any law that states that, as a penalty for some hideous crime, you have to show your family holiday photo album on Facebook. The social panopticon, unlike the prison version, is based on *self-chosen* visibility.

We seem to like to be visible. Our very identity, our sense of self, seems to be defined by that visibility. Hence, so many digital brands carry a clear reference to the self, the ego – the suffix 'I' or 'My' – in their names: iMac, iPod, iTunes, MySpace. Those *I's* and *My's* do not express a notion of ownership, in the sense that, for instance, this Mac-notebook belongs to me and therefore it's called an iMac. It's quite the other way around: my Mac-notebook defines who I am, this instrument of modern visibility with its built-in webcam gives shape to my identity – in a way, this Mac *owns me*, and therefore it's called an iMac. Along the same lines, the iTunes I downloaded for my iPod tell you who I am, with a simple gadget I can show you what I listen on my MySpace or Facebook profile. What you see, is what I am.

III. The paradox of freedom

Although I describe it in the light of recent developments in new media technology, this phenomenon is not of recent date. After all, in the days that Foucault made his remarks about visibility, the internet didn't exist as a mass medium. He merely spoke about the public discourse as the agent of visibility. The discourse, he notes, defines what is considered normal in a given place and time, the public discourse defines the standards that people voluntarily relate their identities to, the

standards of right and wrong, true and false, beautiful and ugly. It is good to note, that the French word *discours* means discourse, public debate, and so on, but also something like 'small talk', or, to use a word now common for internet conversation, 'chatting'.

My behaviour is to a large extent defined by this chattering, by what other people think. When, to take an everyday example, in the morning I decide what to wear, I subconsciously take into account the *possible* opinions of people who *might* see what I wear. I emphasise words like 'possible' and 'might', because what people *actually* see or think has become irrelevant – just like it is irrelevant in a panopticon prison if there's actually a guard watching or even present: the possibility of being watched is enough for a prisoner to think twice before he misbehaves. "Visibility is a trap", Foucault writes. The cynical observer might call me a slave of fashion if public convention decides what clothes I wear today – even when I'm not leaving home. Indeed, the premise of visibility constitutes the most effective form of slavery imaginable, namely: a slavery without chains, without pressure, a slavery that the slave doesn't recognise as slavery, a slavery moreover that is oft mistaken for freedom.

Of course, it's not entirely fair, and possibly even misleading, to simply dismiss this occurrence as 'slavery'. But freedom is never free of paradoxes. It is in this paradoxical tension between freedom and confinement, between individuality and conformism if you will, that our identity takes shape. After all, we are both social and individual beings, with both social and individual needs and responsibilities. The 'possibility of visibility' I am speaking of might be the single most important intermediate between the individual and the collective, the private and the public.

Foucault calls this intermediating process 'normalisation'. As said, in his view it is the discourse – the public debate, the talk of the day – that defines what is considered normal. Normalisation is a more or less democratic process of inexplicitly and inexplicably defining what is 'normal'. Back to the prison analogy: the whole point of making prisoners visible, is to prepare them for a return into decent, normal society. Their visibility isn't merely a form of punishment, it's a form of discipline. The basic assumption of the modern justice system, is that a person is never entirely

evil. A man may be rotten, but never rotten to the core. The echo of Christian anthropology is obvious: this view takes into account both the reality of original sin and the possibility of redemption. Therefore, any man deserves a chance to be redeemed, corrected, or rehabilitated. However harsh it might sometimes seem, in its essence the penitential system is based upon an optimistic image of humankind. Man can change. Maybe this is even the basic truism of what we call 'idealism' – man can change for the better, or: reality can change. Those who oppose to this view tend to call themselves 'realists', and their fundamental assumption is that reality does not ever change. I personally do not see what is so realistic about that view.

IV. Ethics of visibility

I compared the model of the panopticon prison to our modern society, loosely in the line of Michel Foucault (although my intentions and interpretations might differ considerably from his). I am aware of the fact that this comparison between a prison system and what is usually considered a free and open society is, to say the least, controversial. I am not being cynical when I draw this comparison, though – I merely wish to take notice of the observation that freedom and discipline are somehow intertwined. It is a collective disciplinary process, a tendency towards a norm of normality, that will in the long run safeguard our individual freedom.

What I'm saying, is that visibility – or to be more precise: the *possibility* of visibility – is a key aspect of our social reality. It is not my intention to criticise this. I hope we can agree that passing any ethical judgement on this mere fact, is as absurd as passing ethical judgement on the law of gravity. The importance of visibility is simply the case, as is gravity; it is a given and evident reality. But once we realise that, some very relevant ethical questions do come to mind. How does this visibility relate to our human dignity? Where is the boundary between social normalisation and suppression of the individual? Should we sacrifice privacy for the sake of security? And last but not least: What is our individual and collective responsibility in this 'visual' society?

My initial response to the last question would be that we are always responsible, individually and collectively, for any consequence of us living together

on this planet, so also for the consequence of visual culture. We are, after all, the owners of our own eyes, and therefore to some extent part of the problems that involve the culture of visibility. My eyes too see and judge. My eyes too are taken into account when my neighbour dresses in the morning. My eyes too watch the monitors of surveillance cameras in public areas. My eyes too read the magazines with juicy stories about the tragic public downfall of celebrities like Britney Spears, Pete Doherty or Amy Whinehouse – thus contributing to their very downfall.

Possibly. All too possibly.

V. Radical visibility

Again, the emphasis on *possibility* – the possibility of visibility – is crucial. Because my eyes only do not make this visibility possible. Of course, without my eyes, without all our eyes, visibility would be *impossible*. But more than our eyes are necessary to make things visible. Even though I'm no biologist, I'm pretty confident that man has always had eyes. But there hasn't always been a visual culture. I'm no historian either, but I'm also pretty confident that what we now define as 'visual culture' is something of a quite recent date. It is the rise of mass media that made it possible. It is a video camera that perfected the panopticon, it is a newspaper or radio broadcast that informs me what's going on at the other side of the world, it is a glossy magazine that made the life of the rich and famous so radically visible to me.

Radical visibility. That is what this much-debated information or media revolution is all about. So the ethics of visibility that I discussed earlier, are nowadays to a high degree *media ethics*. Our normalising public discourse is highly mediated. Which poses a sincere moral obligation for every participant in the public debate.

There are two major points I wish to derive from this.

First of all: media ethics are not only a media affair. Of course, journalists, television producers, publishers, et cetera, ought to be concerned with the moral questions that their enterprises evoke. However, if visibility is indeed the key factor in the ethical framework of mass media, not only media professionals are ethically responsible, but also media consumers and anybody who uses the media: politicians,

commercial companies, religious or ideological movements, and so on. Practically anybody, I suppose. Moreover it is important to note that the distinctions I made here – between media producer, consumer and user – are getting fuzzier and fuzzier due to the own peculiar nature of the internet. In communication science there's a classical difference between the sender (the one with the message), the medium (the messenger), and the receiver (the one that is supposed to get the message). But a politician, for example, who runs his own website, with a weblog and a forum for direct communication with his voters, is both sender, medium and receiver at the same time. So this fading away of most basic communication roles further confirms the need for an ethical spectrum beyond merely media professionals.

Secondly, I think the analysis I made about radical visibility calls for a more inclusive moral stance than is now often the case in the self-awareness of media. Traditional news media – newspapers, magazines, radio and TV – often seem to conceive themselves as objective reporters or even guard dogs of truth. Hence, the traditional focus of the journalist's ethics is primarily on *truth*. I'll be the last to assert that truthfulness is an unimportant trait for a journalist. But the main question that arises from the reality of radical visibility is not the question of truth, but the question of the *good*: the common good, the individual good, human dignity, social cohesion, those types of things. News media, however, are usually quite ambivalent towards the question 'what is good?', because it threatens their cherished objectivity and independence. An understandable attitude in the light of the permanent process of safeguarding press freedom. Censorship is still a severe threat to that freedom, even in the abundance of information in this digital age. But not only truth is at stake today. Human dignity is at stake too. The panic call for security measures after 9-11 and other dates we now associate with global terrorism, poses a serious question: do we sacrifice freedom and justice for security's sake? This is a question about what is good and what is better, or perhaps what is wrong and what is less wrong - a question every media professional and user has to answer.

VI. Mass media and Catholic Social Thought

So, a credible ethical framework for the present-day situation of radical visibility should be more inclusive both in focus as in content. It shouldn't only address media professionals, but media consumers and 'users' (companies, politicians, anybody with a message to be spread to the public) too. And it shouldn't be concerned exclusively with truth, but with all the classical transcendent values of *bonum, verum* and *pulchrum*, good, truth and beauty.

I know only one ethical framework that fits this profile (and I dare anybody to name me an equivalent that is just as rich and solid both spiritually and intellectually): the social teachings of the Catholic Church, as put forth in encyclicals and numerous letters and other documents of the Holy See in Vatican City.

First of all it must be noted that the attitude of the Church towards "media of social communications", as they are persistently called in official Vatican writings, is fundamentally positive.² To illustrate this: In the heart of the Vatican, ironically mainly invisible to the tourist's eye, lies a small, private chapel of the late pope John Paul II, called *Redemptoris Mater*. On one of the magnificent mosaics that cover the wall, there's a fascinating tableau of the Final Judgement. Waiting in line to enter the Kingdom of God, several figures are portrayed carrying items that depict the achievements of mankind; a book to represent the intellect, a painter's palette to represent the fine arts, and, remarkably, even a laptop to represent the internet. The media, including new media, are part of God's divine design and creation.

The writings of the Church underline this theological significance of communication media. "Viewed in the light of faith" – I'm citing a key document of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications now³ – "the history of human communication can be seen as a long journey from Babel (...) to Pentecost". As we can read in the 11th chapter of Genesis, not only did God create the famous Babylonian confusion of tongues in Babel, but also did He scatter mankind physically, geographically, to all the corners of the earth. So He made people *literally* invisible to each other. The story of Pentecost, as described in the 2nd chapter of the Acts of the Apostles mirrors the story of Babel in a striking manner. People from all

² Cf. Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *Ethics in Communications*, June 2, 2000: I, 4.

³ *Ethics in Communications*: I, 3.

the corners of the earth – Jews, Arabs, Asians, Egyptians, Romans – came to live in Jerusalem in those days, and they heard the apostles of Christ speaking in tongues. And to their astonishment every single one of them understood what was said, they heard the apostles speak in their own native languages and dialects.

VII. Sound public opinion

The long journey from Babel to Pentecost is not only a journey from confusion to understanding, from division to unity, but also from invisibility to visibility. So it's obvious that the Church is principally positive and encouraging towards these instruments of visibility.

In 1963, pope Paul VI wrote:

“Since public opinion exercises the greatest power and authority today in every sphere of life, both private and public, every member of society must fulfil the demands of justice and charity in this area. As a result, all must strive, through these media as well, to form and spread sound public opinion.”⁴

The public opinion exercises great authority not only in public, but in the private sphere as well, according to Paul VI. Roughly ten years later, the secular French philosopher Michel Foucault would advance pretty much the same statement. The normalising aspect that Foucault discovered in the public discourse, poses a moral obligation in Catholic social thought. If it's true that this media panopticon that forms our public discourse is so powerful, everyone – media professionals, politicians, citizens, *everybody*⁵ – is obliged to make use of it, to do good through these media, “to fulfil the demands of justice and charity”. How? By spreading “sound public opinion”.

Needless to say, the Church has some very pronounced ideas about what is ‘sound’ public opinion and what is not. I will not elaborate on that matter too much –

⁴ Paul VI, *Inter Mirifica, Decree on the Media of Social Communications*, December 4, 1963: I, 8.

⁵ This point is emphasised repeatedly in Vatican documents. See for instance: *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 2004: 562; *Inter Mirifica*: I, 9-11; *Ethics in Communications*: IV, 25; John Paul II, *The Rapid Development*, January 24, 2005: IV, 10; Benedict XVI, *Message of the Holy Father for the 42nd World Communications Day*, January 24, 2008: 5.

for now I think it's sufficient to mention what the Church itself thinks it contributes to this ethical discussion: on the one hand a long tradition of moral wisdom, on the other hand a profound and compelling notion of human dignity.⁶ One of the most concise descriptions of Catholic media ethics reads:

“Serving the human person, building up human community grounded in solidarity and justice and love, and speaking the truth about human life and its final fulfilment in God were, are, and will remain at the heart of ethics in the media.”⁷

My main point is: there is no such thing as neutrality or objectivity in our present-day visual culture. In the words of pope Benedict XVI: “To inform the consciences of individuals and help shape their thinking is never a neutral task.”⁸ And, on another occasion: “(...) it is a task which to some degree concerns us all, because we are all consumers and operators of social communications in this era of globalization.”⁹ The social panopticon begs for a committed stance of everybody. Not only have we all become journalists in these days of blogs, vlogs and podcasts, we have become *embedded* journalists. We are embedded in a diverse, multicultural community with a culture of radical visibility. We are only just beginning to comprehend what that means. For the good and for the evil.

VIII. Conclusion: The long, long road from Babel to Pentecost

Only last week, eight American teenagers, mostly girls, were arrested for beating up a 16-year old school girl.¹⁰ The victim wrote something offensive on MySpace that displeased the other girls. One of the girls videotaped the whole fight, with the intention of uploading it to YouTube. On CNN, the mother of the victim and a police officer stated that they blamed ‘culture’ and ‘the media’ for this. Experts speak of a new trend – the search string ‘girl fight’ produces thousands of hits

⁶ *Ethics in Communications*: I, 5; Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *Ethics in Internet*, February 22, 2002: I, 2.

⁷ *Ethics in Communications*: V, 33.

⁸ Benedict XVI, *The Media: A Network for Communication, Communion and Cooperation*, January 24, 2006: 2.

⁹ *Message of the Holy Father for the 42nd World Communications Day*: 5.

¹⁰ See: <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/CRIME/04/10/girl.fights/>

(excusez le mot) on YouTube. Again, it's the visibility of the act that justifies the act – those teenagers don't seem to care or understand that putting this film on the internet might get them into trouble. They take pride in the visibility of their act, their identity depends upon it – and they make me accessory in this vulgar form of normalisation. For my eyes too are meant to see that a 16-year old girl getting severely abused. This is the panopticon in its most perverse and ugly shape. We're still on that long, long road from Babel to Pentecost.

Yes, culture is to blame, the media are to blame. But don't forget: we are culture, we are the media. You and I. That's why the Catholic Church teaches us that “despite their immense power, the means of communication are, and will remain, only media – that is to say: instruments, tools, available for both good and evil uses. The choice is ours.”¹¹

¹¹ *Ethics in Communications*: V, 28.