New Academia: An International Journal of English Language, Literature and Literary Theory

(Online ISSN 2347-2073) Vol. VI Issue I, Jan. 2017

Panopticon, Spectacle, and Identity in *Nights at the Circus*

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Abstract

Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus juxtaposes to opposite structures that use gaze for power: the spectacle and the panopticon. According to Michel Foucault, the spectacle solved an ancient problem by allowing many people to scrutinize a few objects while the panopticon addresses modern problems by allowing one person to instantly view many. Nevertheless, both structures convey a power to their users: the spectacle through definition and the panopticon through influence. Carter's two thought experiments, Countess P's asylum and Colonel Kearney's circus, explore the nature of that power, how it affects the viewers and the viewed, and how it can be subverted.

Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* analyzes Jeremy Bentham's concept of the panopticon. In Foucault's chapter on panopticism, he claims that "antiquity had been a spectacle. 'To render accessible to a multitude of men the inspection of a small number of objects': this was the problem to which the architecture of temples, theatres and circuses responded," but the panopticon is a structure that answers a modern problem: "'to procure for a small number, or even for a singular individual, the instantaneous view of the great multitude'" (Foucault 216). In the spectacle, an audience views a performer, and, in the panopticon, one person observes many. The two structures appear to be one another's antitheses, and Angela Carter juxtaposes them in her novel *Nights at the Circus* with Countess P's panopticon and Colonel Kearney's circus. The work of Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson analyzes the panopticon, and Linden Peach addresses the spectacle. This article aims to combine their research and explore Carter's thought experiments, which reveal not only fundamental flaws in Foucault's analyses of the panopticon and the spectacle, but also how these structures can affect the identities of those who participate in them.

Countess P's asylum for murderesses meets every requirement of a panopticon. The murderesses build their own prison, "a hollow circle of cells shaped like a doughnut, the inward-facing wall of which was composed of grids of steel and, in the middle of the roofed, central courtyard, there was a round room surrounded by windows" (Carter 210). The purpose of the circular outer building and the central tower is to allow Countess P's gaze, or the threat of her gaze, to control the murderesses' behavior. Gaze controls behavior, according to Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, because "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power…he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (Foucault 203). Thus, the murderesses should become both enforcers and performers beneath the threat of Countess P's gaze, and Countess P's should disseminate throughout the building.

Countess P uses the panopticon as a tool of atonement for both the inmates and herself.Each inmate has murdered her husband, been declared guilty by a court, and been identified by a phrenologist as someone of intelligence sufficient enough to mediate and learn from the meditation.The latter is the entire purpose of Countess P's panopticon, it "was not primarily intended as the domain of punishment but, in the purest sense, a penitentiary – it was a machine designed to promote penitence," which one normally associates with guilt (Carter 212). While legally and publicly, the courts have deemed the murderesses guilty, none of the murderesses feel responsible for their actions. The Countess hopes that beneath her gaze the inmates will acknowledge "their *responsibility*. And she was sure that with responsibility would come remorse," and thus, their repentance (212). Upon the process's completion, she would free them, and "by their salvation…they would have procured hers," for the Countess had also murdered her husband, but a court did not convict her of the crime (212).As a result, penitence is not available to her, and since she cannot look inward, she gazes outward in order to force the inmates to fulfill her atonement. However, the panopticon fails to achieve the intended results.

Nights at the Circus contradicts the traditional power dynamics and supposed competency of the panopticon as the murderesses expose the panopticon's weaknesses.Foucault claims that the panopticon "gives 'power of mind over mind,'" so the inmates' minds should reflect Countess P's desire while they are in the panopticon (206). However, Countess P's gaze cannot direct the women's internal gazes; those are self-directed. Thus, their introspection contradicts Countess P's desires. For example, the inmateOlga Alexandrovna participates in the panopticon as Countess P forces her to, "but every day [Olga] offered extenuating circumstances to the lenient and merciful judge in her mind and every day they made more and more impression on the judge" (Carter 213).Olga's

mental court reaches the opposite of Countess P's intended verdict, and Olga declares herself innocent. The case is the same with the other murderesses as "not a single one of the objects of [the Countess's] gaze had shown the slightest quiver of remorse" (213). Thus,in Carter's panopticon, the prisoner only increases her own subjectivity through introspection, in spite of the gaze. Gaze can require outward compliance, but Carter demonstrates the flaw in expecting mere gaze to superimpose one mind upon another.

Countess P's gaze then fails to affect outward compliance in the panopticon as well.The same Olga Alexandrovna who could not accept guilt for killing her husband begins a rebellion that overthrows the asylum. It begins with a simple touch: "though speech and looking were denied her, still she thought she might be able to touch one of these fellow prisoners" (Carter 215). These "fellow prisoners" are the guards, who "were imprisoned by the terms of their contract just as securely as the murderesses" (214). As her guard delivers her food, Olga "clasp[s] the hand in the leather glove"and "though the light was burning behind the Venetian blinds, the Countess must have nodded off for a moment for she did not see this mute exchange, although they saw one another clearly" (216). In this moment, another weakness of the panopticon appears. While the prisoner can be watched at any moment, there must be many moments in which the prisoner is not being watched, depending upon how many prisoners are in the panopticon. Thus, the Countess's gaze loses potency due to its distribution, and the physical separations "intended to prevent the inmates from communicating with one another" fail because the panopticon does not take prisoner-guard communication into account (213). Another important aspect of this method of rebellion is the sense. As Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson claims in her essay "Prison, Passion, and the Female Gaze: Twentieth Century Representations of Nineteenth-Century Panopticons," touch subverts the power of vision (208). Olga does not fight gaze with gaze, a sense with long range, but with a sense that only works in close proximity, and as a result, one that has more immediateinfluence. Thus, the most powerless gain the power of the gazer: "it is the prisoner who touches first, who breaks the boundary between them. Once touch is established – as loving, as desirable – then gaze follows" (Slettedahl 208). Once the inmates and guards usurp that power for themselves, the panopticon falls.

The panopticon fails to objectify its observed and succeeds in objectifying its observer. Behind Venetian blinds, Countess P would "sit all day and stare and stare and stare at her murderesses and they, in turn, sat all day and stared at her" (Carter 210). While the observer does have the blinds to conceal her actions, she can still see so many eyes gazing into her own. If one divided gaze is meant to objectify many, surely many undivided gazes can objectify one. After a season in which the prisoners and guards "turn from gaze to touch, find the power in being gazed upon, [and] harness the illusion of control for their own

purposes,"(Slettedahl 205) they then confront Countess P with "one great, united look of accusation" and leave (Carter 218). Accustomed to her function as observing tool, the Countess cannot leave and "with nothing to observe any longer but the spectre of her own crime…she continued to turn round and round in her chair" (218). The ending here is complicated in that both her own gazing and the prisoners' united gaze objectify the Countesscompletely. Thus, the novel does not entirely contradict the objectifying power of the gaze, but it does present ways in which one can maintain subjectivity and deny being objectified. It also identifies the dangers, which Foucault does not address, of being the observer in a panopticon.

Countess P's fate is shared by Jack Walser, the American journalist who runs away with the circus. He performs a similar function to Countess P and then suffers from the same self-objectification after gazing outwardly and ignoring touch. Outside of an actual physical structure,"the panopticon serves as an image of the way in which society at large are all imprisoned" (Peach 149) through"surveillance, observation, [and] writing," all of which Walser performs as a reporter (Foucault 198). The reporter, as Countess P did, functions as a tool that gazes, records, and reports. While in an interview with Fevvers, Walser fills his notebook, "[reverses] it in order to give himself a fresh set of blank pages,…[sharpens] his pencil with a razor blade he always carried in an inner pocket for the purpose,…[and flexes] his aching wrist" (Carter 57). Walser's insistence upon writing in the notebook, even after he fills it and his wrist aches, as well as the habitually carried razor indicates his devotion to the process and his unwillingness to stray from the dictates of the panoptic machine. He is entirely its observational tool, as the Countess was in her prison. And, much like the Countess, Walser fails to cultivate his identity while being a tool.Since the panoptic system reduces Walser to someone else's eye and limits the importance of his other senses, "Walser ha[s] not experienced his experience *as* experience; sandpaper his outsides as experience might, his inwardness had been left untouched" (10).Notice that it is not that Walser has neglected his insides, or forgotten about them, or that have been eradicated. They are "untouched." Once more, vision's usurpation of touch hinders subjectivity and advances objectivity. The narrator further describes Walser's personality as lacking "any of those little, what you might call *personal* touches…as if his habit of suspending belief extended even unto his own being" (10).Without touch, Walser becomes "an *objet trouvé*, for, subjectively *himself* he never found, since it was not his *self* which he sought" (10).Walser focuses his vision outward and uses his hands to record instead of create, and these habits inhibit Walser's subjectivity and turn him into an object.

To extend the panoptic gaze, Jack Walser joins the circusin which he transitions from being an observant tool in the panoptic machine to being the observed in a spectacle. The two

structures appear similar in that "the circular nature of the [panopticon] brings to mind the circus ring" (Peach 140) which, "is, after all, shaped like an eyeball" (139). However, this eyeball does not gaze outwardly as an eye does in the panopticon. The central figures in a spectacle are the observed. A faceless mass hidden in darkness directs it gaze at the performers. One would suspect then what Linden Peach claims in his book *Angela Carter* that "the circus…is designed to 'undo' the subject," which is exactly what happens to Walser (133). He signs a contract to perform as a clown, but his reporting initially prevents Walser from truly adopting an identity as a clown. After saving Mignon, the monkey trainer's wife, from a tiger and then being accused of sleeping with her, Walser defends himself to Fevvers by saying, "'I'm here to write a story…Story about the circus. About you and the circus'" (Carter 114). As he is only a recording tool, Walser is pledging his fidelity to Fevvers when he says that he is writing about her. Everything that Walser is revolves around Fevvers. However,as she is used to being observed and not observing, Fevvers fails to understand the significance of his statement. Outside of incurring Fevvers's displeasure, saving Mignon from a tiger has another negative effect upon Walser: the tiger breaks his arm. With a broken right arm, Walser "cannot write or type…so he is deprived of his profession. Therefore, for the moment, his disguise disguises nothing" (145). No longer a reporter, Walser steps outside of the panoptic machine and into the spectacle of the circus as a clown.

The spectacle deprives Buffo and his clown troop of their subjectivity by superimposing a mask over their past identities. Unlike the other circus performers, the clowns never remove their costumes, and more importantly, they never remove their masks. As a result, more than any other performer, "clowns in the novel signify the combination of the spectacle, illusion and deception of the circus itself" as it transfers outside of the circus ring for them (Peach 126). Formerly, many clowns were other circus performers: *aerialistes*, strong men, lion tamers. They become clowns as a last resort: "'For not infrequently there is no element of the *voluntary* in clowning. Often,d'you see, we take to clowning when all else fails'" (Carter 119). Thus,the identity that the clown could have outside of his performance has been effaced in a traumatic event. After this event, a clown crafts his new identity, and in this moment has complete freedom. However, after that initial moment, the clown becomes nothing but his face:

> "And what am I without my Buffo's face? Why, nobody at all. Take away my make-up and underneath is merely not-Buffo. An absence. A vacancy.And so my face eclipses me. I have become this face which is not mine, and yet I chose it freely…But one the choice is made, I am condemned, therefore, to be 'Buffo' in perpetuity."(122)

Unlike the prisoners in Countess P's panopticon, the clowns have no other identity beneath their performances. Thus, they have no recourse to develop a subjectivity to contradict the audience's gaze. There is no rebellion, no happy ending for the clowns.

The mechanism of spectacle within the circus completely objectifies the clowns. As they lack another identity, they must perform as expected.When welcoming Walser to the clown troop, Buffo provides an overview of the history and nature of the clown for him, and says "'you must know what you have become, young man, how the word defines you, now you have opted to lose your wits in the profession of the clown,'" and they both lose their wits (Carter 120). Buffo, who has been a clown longer, succumbs to his madness first. After a bout of drinking, Buffo arrives in the ring. His performance is finally absolutely real to him, and what the audience believes to be a farce is real. Buffo is attempting to stab the Human Chicken, Jack Walser. Because the audience expects it to be a farce, the clowns meet their demands and are "concerned only to give the illusion of *intentional* Bedlam, for the show must go on. And, even if Buffo at last *had* contrived to plunge his carving knife into the viscera of the Human Chicken, nobody in that vast gathering would ever have been permitted to believe it was *real* manslaughter" (177). The final scene in their show is the clown funeral, and as Buffo now is truly living their show, when he leaves the circus ring, the clowns know he is dead. To maintain their deception and fulfill the demands of the spectacle, the clowns "[run] round and round the tiers of seats…laughing to hide their broken hearts" (178).

Another crisis for the clowns occurs when the train crashes in Siberia. The circus will no longer exist, and thus, the clowns realize that they can no longer exist. So, when Liz asks the clowns to distract the tribe members, the clowns "dance of death, and they danced it for George Buffins, that they might be as him" (Carter 242). For George Buffins, or Buffo, the show ended, and as his madness made the show literal, he had to die as well. And now the rest of the clown troop has come to the same conclusion, that "the performance has to end, and the notion of being nothing more than the sum of your performance…is now regarded as a threat" (Gamble 166). The clowns dance themselves into what they truly are behind their masks, nothing.However, not every performer loses an identity in the spectacle.

Fevvers is the object of both panoptic gazes as well as spectacle gazes, but maintains her subjectivity. In order to do this, she defies definition.Unlike the clowns with the history of the word "clown" that demands their eventual madness, Fevvers is the first of her kind and does not "[have] any history and there are no expectations of [her] except the ones that [she] [her]self create[s]'" (Carter 198). Her identity is complex as "Fevvers, like the circus itself, is a combination of 'real' circumstance (smoky old London), self-invention and fantasy (the 'Cockney Venus') and spectacle ('Helen of the Hire Wire')" (Peach 132). Thus, when she feels Jack Walser's panoptic gaze attempting to limit her to real circumstance with his fact

recording during their interview, Fevvers can rely upon her reputation and act to avoid his limitations.Though these limitations do serve a function:"it was the limitations of her act in themselves that made [Walser] briefly contemplate the unimaginable – that is, the absolute suspension of disbelief. For, in order to earn a living, might not a genuine bird-woman…have to pretend she was an artificial one?" (Carter 17). However, if anyone believed the truth, that the only deception that she practices on the public is that she dyes her feathers, Fevvers would be limited to another identity (25). Colonel Kearney, the circus owner, reflects upon the dangers of the spectacle portion of Fevvers's identity defining her: "if she were indeed a *lususnaturae,* a prodigy, then – she was no longer a wonder. She would no longer be an extraordinary woman…but – a freak…always the object of the observer, never the subject of sympathy" (161). Thus, Fevvers avoids the fate of the clown troop by cultivating an indefinable identity comprised of three parts that deny the belief and disbelief of any observer.

Of course, Jack Walser also evades the fate of the clown troop, but not entirely. After the train crash, Walser loses his identity. While it may seem that this is an unfortunate event in Walser's life, Linden Peach claims that

> for Walser, the loss of his normal equilibrium is essential to his self-development…Walser epitomizes the whole process of 'desubjectivisation' with which a spectacle, and especially the spectacle of the circus, provides the audience…A prerequisite of 'desubjectivisation' through the experience of fantasy and spectacle is that narrative and 'normal' time must be interrupted and that meaning and status…must change. (Peach 138-40)

Walser meets all of the prerequisites for desubjectivisation after the train crash. His status changes as he is no longer the panoptic reporter, nor is he a clown. He lacks an identity as "all his past life coursed through his head in concrete but discrete fragments and he could not make head nor tail of any of it," thus the meaning of everything changes (Carter 238). As for normal time being interrupted, "any 'history' was a concept with which [the tribe was] perfectly unfamiliar" (253).Thus, Walser is reborn and completely free to craft an identity.

Walser's new identity frees him from being the object in either the panopticon or the spectacle.He adopts the tribe's seeing-is-believing perspective, and Walser too "made no categorical distinction between seeing and believing…there existed no difference between fact and fiction; instead, a sort of magical realism. Strange fate for a journalist, to find himself in a place where no facts, as such, existed!" (Carter 260). As a result, Walser becomes more pensive and "[acquires] and 'inner life', a realm of speculation and surmise within himself that was entirely his own. If before he set out with the circus in pursuit of a bird-woman, he had been like a house to let, furnished, now he was tenanted at last" (261).

Now, Walser is safe from both the panopticon and the spectacle. Like the murderesses, Walser has an inner world to promote his subjectivity. No longer can he be simply an observant tool defined by his usage, nor is he defined by his performance on the stage. The clowns had nothing beneath their masks, but Walser is now tenanted.

Walser also now provides Fevvers with an audience that complements and supports her identity. Typically, "the circus audience temporarily enter a world of spectacle and, when the show is over, they return to a more humdrum reality," but Walser will not return to this reality with Fevvers (Peach 132). For him, seeing is now believing, and he is not interested in facts that would limit her potentiality. What he wants to know now is "'What is your name? Have you a soul? Can you love?'" and not if she is fact or fiction, because facts and thus fiction, no longer exist for him (Carter 291). Thus, "in the light of his grey eyes, [Fevvers] was transformed back into her old self again, without an application of peroxide even," and if Fevvers chose to change herself, Walser could simply accept her as she were (293). The spectacle supports Fevvers's identity and she does not experience "Buffo's curse," which"is to understand that the freedom of self-creation has its limits" (Gamble 163-64).Fevver'sself-creation will never have limits as Walser, her audience, will never impose them.

*Nights at the Circus*juxtaposes two structures that depend on observation: the panopticon and the spectacle. In Foucault's analysis of both, he "'seems sometimes on the verge of depriving us of a vocabulary in which to conceptualize the nature and meaning of those periodic refusals of control that, just as much as the imposition of control, mark the course of human history'" (Slettedahl 220). The murderesses, Walser, and Fevvers all demonstrate how introspection and a complex identity can allow the overthrow of restrictions imposed by a gaze. The novel also illuminates the dangers of being the observer in a panopticon. Countess P loses her subjectivity and Walser fails to have an identity while being a reporter. And finally, Foucault claims that the public nature of the spectacle prevents its gaze from objectifying its performers, but *Nights at the Circus* illuminates how the audience's expectations can objectify those beneath its gaze. Thus,*Discipline and Punish*, while it does address the dangers of the panoptic machine and its dissemination into other aspects of life, fails to address the capabilities of people to deny its objectifying gaze and support their own subjectivities.

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