The Literature of Surveillance: From Orwell's Panopticon to Post-Internet Fiction

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***Abstract*—Surveillance has always been more than a political tool; it is a psychological state that influences how people perceive themselves within power structures. Long before digital technologies emerged, literature anticipated and questioned the consequences of being watched. Surveillance in literature has never been restricted to acts of watching. It has always been about power, obedience, and the subtle shaping of the self. From early theoretical models of surveillance to twentieth-century dystopian fiction and contemporary post-internet narratives, literature depicts how observation evolves from an external force to an internal habit. This paper explores the evolution of surveillance, from the Panopticon as a discipline structure to George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four and post-internet fiction written in a world where surveillance no longer requires a visible authority. It contends that, while Orwell envisioned surveillance as coerced and violent, post-internet fiction reveals a more unsettling reality: surveillance maintained through consent, participation, and self-monitoring. The Panopticon does not disappear in the digital age. It becomes wireless, ambient, and willingly populated.**

***Index Terms*—Surveillance, Dystopian, Panopticon, Post-internet Fiction, George Orwell.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Surveillance no longer requires an announcement. It does not arrive with uniforms, slogans, or explicit commands; instead, it operates quietly through "pockets, screens, and systems" that promise convenience rather than obedience. Literary and theoretical discourse has long recognised that surveillance is not primarily about technology but about behaviour—about how power "induces in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault 201). Even in the absence of a visible authority, individuals learn to regulate themselves.

Long before digital culture normalised visibility and self-exposure, literature interrogated the consequences of eroded privacy and permanent observation. Surveillance, in literary terms, is not merely an authoritarian command imposed from above; rather, it is a condition that reshapes how individuals think, remember, desire, and speak. As David Lyon observes, surveillance has become "a routine part of everyday life" rather than an exceptional political intervention (Lyon 2). Its persistence allows it to exert profound influence, transforming external monitoring into internalised self-discipline.

The conceptual foundation of modern surveillance lies in Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, a structure designed to create "the perpetual possibility of being seen" rather than to rely on continuous punishment (Bentham). In this model, the ambiguity of observation is more powerful than the actual presence of the watcher. Because individuals can never be certain when they are being observed, they internalise discipline and regulate their own behaviour. As Foucault explains, "the major effect of the Panopticon" is to make power both visible and unverifiable, ensuring that surveillance "is internalised by the subject" (Foucault 201–02). Compliance thus becomes non-coercive and habitual. This logic finds its most influential literary expression in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Orwell depicts a world in which surveillance is overt, centralised, and unavoidable, where "Big Brother is watching you" functions as both warning and ideology (Orwell 3). Telescreens continuously monitor citizens, the state polices not only actions but thoughts, and dissent is

eradicated through fear and psychological manipulation. Orwell's warning is unequivocal: a society subjected to absolute surveillance is one in which freedom becomes impossible.

The contemporary world, however, is not structurally identical to Orwell's dystopia, even though it often arrives at a similar outcome. Surveillance persists, but its strategies have transformed to such an extent that individuals increasingly participate in their own monitoring without recognising it. In the post-internet era, observation no longer depends on overt authority or constant coercion; instead, it is embedded in everyday practices of sharing, tracking, and self-presentation. As Shoshana Zuboff notes, modern surveillance operates through systems that "claim human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioural data" (Zuboff 8). Control no longer presents itself as oppression but as choice. This paper argues that post-internet fiction does not contradict Orwell's vision but fulfils it in a subtler form. The fear Orwell imagined has not disappeared; it has been absorbed into normalised practices of participation and consent. Surveillance has become decentralised, ambient, and habitual. Although power has shifted from the state to corporations, platforms, and algorithms, its purpose remains unchanged. The subject learns to obey without being commanded. Walls, guards, and towers are no longer necessary in the Panopticon; it now exists in digital traces, profiles, and everyday routines.

By tracing surveillance from Bentham's Panopticon to Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and finally to post-internet fiction, this study demonstrates how control becomes most effective when force is no longer required. The most efficient surveillance system is not one that constantly watches, but one that convinces individuals that watching themselves is safe, normal, and voluntary.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Political Interpretations of Surveillance

George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has attracted sustained critical attention for its disturbing portrayal of surveillance, power, and authoritarian control. Early critical responses largely interpreted the novel as a political cautionary tale rooted in the historical realities of the twentieth century. Irving Howe, for instance, reads Orwell's dystopia as a direct response to totalitarian regimes, arguing that the novel exposes "the calculated use of terror as a means of governing" modern societies (Howe 60). Such interpretations emphasise the visibility and brutality of external control mechanisms in Oceania, particularly institutions such as the Thought Police and technologies like the telescreen, which function as symbols of centralised and coercive state power. These political readings foreground surveillance as an explicitly oppressive force imposed from above. Power, in this view, is exercised through fear, punishment, and ideological conformity, leaving little room for individual autonomy. Orwell's novel is thus positioned as a warning against the unchecked expansion of state authority and the erosion of democratic freedoms.

2.2 The Panopticon and Self-Regulation

Later theoretical interventions complicate this purely institutional reading of surveillance by shifting attention from external coercion to internalised discipline. Michel Foucault's theorisation of the Panopticon in *Discipline and Punish* provides a crucial framework for understanding surveillance as a psychological mechanism rather than a merely physical one. Foucault famously argues that the Panopticon "induces in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (201). Surveillance, therefore, becomes effective not because it is constant, but because it is internalised. Building on this framework, scholars such as Mark Poster and David Lyon suggest that Orwellian surveillance operates most powerfully at the level of consciousness. Poster argues that modern systems of information reshape subjectivity itself, producing individuals who "participate in their own regulation" (Poster 93). Similarly, Lyon contends that surveillance works by conditioning individuals to monitor their own behaviour, making control "less visible but more pervasive" (Lyon 14). From this perspective, power in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is most effective not when it is overtly displayed, but when it is absorbed into the subject's inner life.

2.3 Surveillance in the Age of Digital Capitalism

More recent scholarship situates Orwell's vision within the context of contemporary digital culture. Shoshana Zuboff's concept of "surveillance capitalism" reframes Orwell's concerns in terms of

data extraction, algorithmic governance, and corporate power. Zuboff argues that contemporary surveillance systems "unilaterally claim human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioural data" (8), signalling a shift from state-driven surveillance to market-oriented forms of monitoring. Similarly, Zygmunt Bauman and David Lyon describe modern surveillance as "liquid"—diffuse, participatory, and decentralised (Bauman and Lyon 6). In this model, the boundary between the watcher and the watched becomes increasingly blurred, as individuals voluntarily disclose personal information in exchange for visibility, convenience, and connectivity. These perspectives suggest that Orwell's dystopia is no longer confined to fiction but anticipates lived realities shaped by technological mediation and digital infrastructures.

2.4 Psychological Impact of Constant Monitoring and the Contemporary Relevance of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

Recent critical work has also focused on the psychological and emotional consequences of constant monitoring. Scholars such as Mark Andrejevic and Christian Fuchs emphasise that pervasive surveillance produces anxiety, alienation, and a gradual erosion of individual autonomy. Andrejevic notes that interactive media encourage "a form of self-surveillance that aligns individual behaviour with institutional expectations" (Andrejevic 3), while Fuchs argues that digital surveillance restructures both consciousness and social relations (Fuchs 92). These analyses closely parallel Orwell's portrayal of Winston Smith, whose mental fragmentation and emotional isolation illustrate the intimate effects of living under continuous observation. Surveillance in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not only a political condition but an embodied experience that reshapes thought, emotion, and identity.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate the enduring relevance of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a critical framework for understanding evolving forms of surveillance. Orwell's novel continues to offer a powerful lens through which contemporary systems of power, visibility, and control can be examined, revealing how surveillance gradually shifts from external structures of authority into the most private spaces of the human mind.

III. THE PANOPTICON: ORIGIN, CONCEPT, AND LITERARY SIGNIFICANCE

The Panopticon originated as a theoretical model of surveillance rather than a fully realised architectural structure. Proposed by Jeremy Bentham in the late eighteenth century, it was conceived as a circular building with a central watchtower from which an observer could potentially monitor all inmates housed in surrounding cells (Bentham). The defining feature of this design is its principle of asymmetrical visibility: while the observer may see the subject at any time, the subject can never be certain whether they are being observed. This uncertainty is not a limitation of the Panopticon but its central mechanism. Bentham emphasised that the power of the structure lies in "the apparent omnipresence of the inspector" rather than in continuous observation (Bentham). Because individuals cannot verify whether they are being watched, they are compelled to behave as though surveillance is constant. As a result, the Panopticon functions effectively without uninterrupted supervision. Surveillance becomes psychologically sustained rather than physically enforced, rendering it continuous and self-perpetuating.

Unlike earlier systems of punishment that relied on public spectacle, violence, or corporeal discipline, the Panopticon operates through internal regulation. Control is exercised silently and efficiently, as individuals learn to govern their own behaviour to avoid punishment that may never materialise. As Michel Foucault explains, the Panopticon "automatizes and disindividualizes power" by making it independent of the person who exercises it (Foucault 202). Power thus becomes economical: it does not need to intervene repeatedly, but merely to be believed in. This shift represents a decisive moment in the history of surveillance. The Panopticon demonstrates how visibility itself can function as a disciplinary force. Awareness of possible observation produces self-consciousness, which in turn leads individuals to modify their conduct. Over time, this modification becomes habitual. Surveillance is most effective, therefore, not when it is experienced as coercive, but when it appears normal, routine, and inevitable.

The significance of the Panopticon extends far beyond the prison system. Its logic applies equally to schools, factories, hospitals, and bureaucratic institutions that depend on monitoring, assessment, and compliance.

Within such environments, individuals are trained to perform under the assumption of constant evaluation. As Foucault notes, disciplinary power spreads through "a whole series of institutions" that shape modern social life (Foucault 211). Surveillance thus becomes integrated into everyday practices and is rarely questioned.

In literary terms, the Panopticon serves as the conceptual foundation for modern narratives of control. It represents a world in which authority no longer needs to announce itself. Power becomes ubiquitous yet invisible, replacing direct enforcement with the threat of observation. Surveillance is no longer confined to a specific space; instead, the gaze is imagined, internalised, and carried within the individual. Control operates beyond physical boundaries, shaping thought and behaviour from within.

The Panopticon is particularly significant for literary studies because it reframes control as a psychological condition rather than a purely physical constraint. Characters shaped by surveillance do not merely suffer oppression from external forces; they actively participate in their own regulation. As a result, power appears to vanish while remaining deeply effective. This logic is crucial for understanding later literary depictions of surveillance, especially in dystopian fiction. Ultimately, the Panopticon depicts a world in which continuous watching is no longer necessary. Its true legacy lies in its capacity to teach subjects self-discipline, laying the groundwork for narratives in which surveillance evolves from an external threat into an internalised habit. In this sense, the Panopticon anticipates modern forms of control, where obedience is maintained not through force, but through the internalisation of the gaze.

IV. ORWELL'S *NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR*: SURVEILLANCE AS A TOTALITARIAN ENVIRONMENT

George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* remains one of the most influential literary representations of surveillance, demonstrating how the Panopticon's theoretical logic is transformed into a lived totalitarian reality (Orwell). Set within the authoritarian state of Oceania, the novel depicts a society in which observation is constant, unavoidable, and deeply embedded in everyday life. Language, memory, personal relationships, and even individual identity are placed under continuous scrutiny, leaving no aspect of human experience untouched by power.

Central to this surveillance regime is the telescreen, which simultaneously transmits propaganda and monitors citizens. Through this device, the boundary between private and public life collapses entirely. Unlike Bentham's Panopticon, where surveillance remains uncertain and invisible, Orwell's system is overt and explicitly threatening. The omnipresent image of Big Brother reinforces this visibility, encapsulated in the chilling slogan, "BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU" (Orwell 3). Surveillance here functions as a spectacle designed to instil fear and obedience.

Yet the most potent force of surveillance in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is psychological rather than technological. The Party does not need to punish every act of dissent; the mere possibility of observation is sufficient. Winston Smith observes that "you had to live—did live, from habit that became instinct—in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard" (Orwell 5). As a result, citizens begin to censor not only their speech and actions but even their facial expressions. Surveillance thus begins internally, shaping behaviour before any external intervention becomes necessary.

Orwell extends surveillance into the realm of thought itself through the concept of "thoughtcrime," which exposes the Party's ultimate objective: to eliminate dissent before it can be articulated. The systematic reduction of language through Newspeak ensures that "thoughtcrime will be literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it" (Orwell 56). History is continually rewritten, memory is manipulated, and truth becomes unstable. Surveillance does not merely record reality; it actively constructs and controls it.

In this sense, the citizens of Oceania have already internalised the gaze of authority. They behave as though they are perpetually observed, rendering direct enforcement increasingly unnecessary. This aligns closely with Foucault's interpretation of the Panopticon, in which power is most effective when individuals "assume responsibility for the constraints of power" and regulate themselves accordingly (Foucault 202). Self-discipline, rather than constant punishment, becomes the key mechanism of control.

Nineteen Eighty-Four therefore functions not only as a critique of authoritarian governance but also as a warning against any system that seeks to dominate inner life. Orwell reveals surveillance as a totalising force that reshapes consciousness itself, reducing human freedom to a matter of ideological alignment. By portraying a society in which obedience is internalised and resistance becomes unthinkable, Orwell exposes the ultimate danger of surveillance: its ability to erase individuality from within.

V. POST-INTERNET FICTION: AMBIENT SURVEILLANCE AND VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

The Panopticon was never an internet-based fiction. There were no digital screens on prison walls and no algorithms tracking behaviour. Yet, in the post-internet era, surveillance no longer requires architectural confinement. There are no towers or telescreens; instead, there are smartphones in pockets and consent embedded within the seemingly harmless click of "Accept All." Surveillance becomes pervasive, algorithmic, and intensely personal, operating through everyday technologies rather than visible instruments of control. While Orwell warned against surveillance enforced through fear and coercion, contemporary post-internet fiction reveals a more subdued and unsettling condition: voluntary submission. Surveillance no longer speaks in the language of authority; it softens its voice. As a result, obedience is no longer demanded by a single, identifiable power. There is no Big Brother and no central watchtower. Instead, surveillance becomes decentralised, corporate, continuous, and algorithmic, embedded within platforms that structure daily life (Zuboff 2019).

In this environment, observation does not feel oppressive. On the contrary, it feels participatory. Individuals willingly offer themselves to systems of monitoring by sharing data, curating digital identities, tracking their routines, and repeatedly consenting through interfaces designed to appear neutral and user-friendly. Surveillance thus disguises itself as convenience, connectivity, and personalisation. As Shoshana Zuboff notes, contemporary systems "claim human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioural data" (8). Surveillance is therefore accepted long before it is recognised as such. This condition does not represent a departure from Orwell's warning; rather, it marks its fulfilment. Power shifts away from the state towards digital platforms and data economies that profit from prediction and behavioural modification. Surveillance becomes profitable rather than punitive. Individuals are "nudged" instead of threatened, guided instead of commanded. Freedom is not overtly revoked; it is subtly redirected towards outcomes that serve institutional and economic interests (Zuboff 2019).

Post-internet fiction illustrates how individuals begin to regulate themselves under algorithmic judgement. They anticipate visibility, perform relevance, and curate acceptability. Self-censorship emerges not because expression is explicitly forbidden, but because individuals are aware that they are simultaneously watched by everyone and no one. This condition closely echoes the Panoptic principle that control is most effective when it becomes habitual rather than enforced (Bentham; Foucault 197).

The Panopticon, therefore, does not disappear in post-internet fiction. It multiplies and fragments. It exists within devices, routines, data profiles, and social expectations. Surveillance no longer requires walls or guards; it resides within behaviour itself. This pervasive presence reshapes not only how individuals interact with technology, but also how they understand autonomy and agency. In this contemporary landscape, the distinction between observer and observed becomes increasingly blurred, producing a complex network of influence and control that permeates everyday life.

VI. CONCLUSION

The trajectory of surveillance traced in this study—from Bentham's Panopticon through Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to contemporary post-internet fiction—reveals a crucial transformation in the operation of power. Surveillance no longer functions primarily through visible force or overt coercion; instead, it has become subtle, decentralised, and internalised. What unites these seemingly distinct historical moments is the persistent logic of the Panopticon: power is most effective when individuals regulate themselves under the assumption of being watched.

Bentham's Panopticon establishes surveillance as a psychological mechanism grounded in uncertainty,

where "the apparent omnipresence of the inspector" compels self-discipline without continuous observation (Bentham). Foucault extends this insight by demonstrating how disciplinary power "induces in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility" that renders external enforcement largely unnecessary (Foucault 201). Orwell's dystopian imagination translates this theory into a totalitarian environment in which surveillance becomes absolute, fear-driven, and ideologically explicit. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, citizens live under the constant reminder that "Big Brother is watching you," internalising obedience until resistance becomes unthinkable (Orwell 3).

Post-internet fiction, however, exposes an even more unsettling evolution of this logic. Surveillance persists, but it no longer announces itself as domination. Instead, it is embedded in everyday technologies and normalised practices of participation. As Zuboff observes, contemporary surveillance systems "claim human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioural data" (8), transforming individuals from coerced subjects into willing contributors. Observation becomes ambient rather than spectacular, profitable rather than punitive, and consensual rather than compulsory. This shift does not invalidate Orwell's warning; it confirms it. The Panopticon has not disappeared in the digital age—it has become mobile, fragmented, and internal. Individuals anticipate visibility, curate their identities, and self-censor in response to algorithmic judgement, exemplifying Foucault's assertion that power succeeds when it becomes habitual (197). Post-internet fiction thus reveals that the most effective form of surveillance is not one imposed from above, but one that convinces individuals to participate in their own monitoring.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that surveillance literature continues to function as a critical lens through which evolving power structures can be examined. From architectural designs to totalitarian states and digital platforms, surveillance reshapes subjectivity by blurring the boundary between freedom and control. The enduring relevance of the Panopticon lies in its ability to explain why surveillance no longer needs walls, guards, or slogans. It survives because it has been absorbed into behaviour, consent, and everyday life—where the act of watching oneself becomes indistinguishable from the illusion of autonomy.

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