‘They Believed Themselves Invisible’: Panopticism and the Construction of Homosexuality in Annie Proulx’s Brokeback Mountain

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Michel Foucault’s essay *Discipline and Punish* (2004) outlines a system of surveillance based on Jeremy Bentham’s prison design of the Panopticon. Foucault expands this concept as being incorporated throughout society. His landmark theory sparked a wide range of inspiration in the literary field concerning the paranoid nature of modern surveillance society and the consequent subconscious submission into socially ‘acceptable’ practices. Foucault is interested in how this system of ideological control affects displays of sexuality in society and the subsequent punishment that individuals are subjected to if they demonstrate subversive sexualities. This article analyses the extent to which *Brokeback Mountain* by Annie Proulx incorporates Foucault’s idea of the panoptic regime. Both of the main characters are subject to a watchful eye from society, as well as to punishment when they step outside of the norms. Using both Foucault’s idea of the Panopticon and Gayle Rubin’s (1989) theory of the Charmed Circle as theoretical lenses, this essay explores characters in *Brokeback Mountain* as panoptic agents who suppress subversive sexualities and desires.

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In his seminal 1975 book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Michel Foucault (2004) examines the social mechanisms and structures that facilitated the birth of the modern penitentiary. As part of this analysis, Foucault draws on a prison design by philosopher Jeremy Bentham known as the Panopticon. Bentham’s design has ‘at the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells’ (p. 554). There is no need for the cells to have any kind of physical security system, as the knowledge that there may be a guard watching in the central tower means that ‘power is exercised without division’ (p. 552).

For Foucault, the physical design of the Panopticon transfers into a theory of discipline commonly referred to as ‘panopticism’, where fear of punishment manifests power and subservience. Foucault also evolves the concept of panopticism towards its function as ‘destined to spread throughout the social body’ (p. 556), arguing that the whole of society has an integrated panoptic regime, whereby each member of society acts as a disciplinary gaze for any type of subversive behaviour.

This article will use Foucault’s theory as a lens through which to explore how, in *Brokeback Mountain*, characters display a panoptic gaze to suppress homosexuality. It will also argue that ultimately, ‘[t]he body is the centerpiece […] of the corrective treatment’ (Sheets-Johnstone, 1994, p. 19). The characters of Joe Aguirre, Jack’s father and Alma will be analysed as panoptic agents, demonstrating how they oppress Jack and Ennis’ bodies through a panoptic system of surveillance, discipline and ultimately, punishment.

*Brokeback Mountain* is known to most as the homosexual love story set in southern America in the 2005 film starring Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal. Due to its popularity and cult classic status, most people are aware of the story on a very basic level as a ‘gay cowboy’ film (Kitterman, 2007, p. 48). The story is, of course, much more complex than this. Proulx’s narration guides us through the clandestine affair of Jack and Ennis, spanning many years and including fleeting moments of passionate but secretive love-making and bonding. After losing contact for years, Ennis ultimately discovers that Jack has died and likely as a result of a violent homophobic attack.

The film adaptation of Proulx’s work has received far more attention and critical focus than the original short story. Popular critical angles analyse how well the story has been adapted into film; queer readings, in particular, often present the argument that the film provides only ‘heteronormative’ re-framings of the characters’, and ‘preserves heterosexual privilege by

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1 ‘Heteronormative’ refers to the idea that heterosexuality is the normal and natural order of things.
obscurring the ways that heteronormativity produces an abjected other through social erasure and exclusion’ (Arellano, 2007, p. 59).

I intend to focus on the original short story whilst approaching a less common and more socially theoretical angle, through the theories and ideas of Michel Foucault and panopticism. I will use close textual analysis of character construction and the narrator’s specific language choices in order to assess how the panoptic regime is able to enforce discipline and punishment on homosexuality in Proulx’s *Brokeback Mountain*. Another theoretical angle used throughout this article is Gayle Rubin’s Charmed Circle (1989, p. 281). The Charmed Circle includes a range of ‘vanilla’ and ‘heterosexual’ sexual behaviours, which Rubin argues are seen as higher on the ‘hierarchical system of sexual value’ (p. 279) and are generally acceptable. Outside of this circle are ‘homosexuality’ and ‘promiscuous’ behaviours. Rubin suggests that

> as sexual behaviours or occupations fall lower on the scale, the individuals who practice them are subjected to a presumption of mental illness, disreputability, criminality, restricted social and physical mobility, loss of institutional support, and economic sanctions (p. 279).

Throughout this article, in conjunction with Foucault’s ideas of surveillance and panopticism, I will refer to Rubin’s Charmed Circle in terms of how the characters of Jack and Ennis are punished for their sexual choices falling outside of it.

*Brokeback Mountain* is set during the 1960s in Wyoming, an area known to this day for homophobic violence (Martin, 2016). The characters of Jack and Ennis exist within a space which socially constructs ideas of what male and female bodies should do, look like and be representative of. This heteronormative state views masculinity as an assurance of heterosexuality. Acts such as marriage and monogamy lie within the Charmed Circle alongside heterosexuality. Ennis and Jack thus perform what they consider to be masculine acts such as fatherhood and marriage, in order to protect themselves from the threat of homophobic violence. However, Jack and Ennis never truly escape the disciplinary gaze of society, as their secret and condemned acts are inevitably seen and punished. Proulx herself has said that ‘the story isn’t about Jack and Ennis. It’s about homophobia; it’s about a social situation; it’s about a place and a particular mindset and morality’ (Proulx, 2009). The ‘mindset’ that Proulx discusses is important in exploring the idea of homophobia as a disciplinary gaze in the text through Foucault’s idea of the Panopticon.

The most explicit example of a panoptic agent in the short story is Joe Aguirre, Jack and Ennis’ employer. When Jack and Ennis first engage in sexual intercourse on the mountain, the reader
is informed that they believe themselves to be safe from the constraints of the panoptic gaze on Brokeback Mountain. Whilst on the mountain, they were ‘flying on the euphoric, bitter air, […] suspended above ordinary affairs […]. They believed themselves invisible’ (Proulx, 1999, p. 291). However, the narrative voice quickly deconstructs this state of utopia, informing us that ‘Joe Aguirre had watched them through his 10x42 binoculars for ten minutes one day’ (p. 291). The contrasting romantic and technical language in this paragraph highlights the danger of Jack and Ennis’ experience by placing the reader in the position of a second-hand voyeur. The binoculars become a symbol of the panoptic gaze, their main feature being that they allow the viewer to watch something from a distance, suggesting an initiative for surveillance. Joe’s voyeuristic intentions also suggest a suppressed sexual interest which clearly focuses on fetishising the two male bodies. However, due to the heteronormative ideals that society imprints on individuals, he judges their sexuality as acting outside of the constructed norms that are associated with the male body. Despite the suggestion of his repressed desires, Joe enforces ‘a punishment that is a correction, a therapy, a normalization’ (Foucault, 1995, p. 208) and declines to rehire Jack when he returns the next summer.

Through Foucault’s concept of the panoptic gaze, we can begin to analyse issues of society and homosexuality in Brokeback Mountain. We can see how Joe enforces discipline and punishment on men who choose to use their bodies outside of socially accepted normative behaviours, first by watching from an unknown location and then by rejecting Ennis’ employment. This reflects Rubin’s idea that individuals who display sexual behaviours outside of the Charmed Circle are subject to ‘economic sanctions’ (1989, p. 279). Joe’s actions also support Foucault’s idea that nobody can escape the panoptic gaze, even at night time on a mountain, as ‘[v]isibility is a trap’ (Foucault, 2004, p. 554). Jack and Ennis believe they are safe on the mountain, its size and majesty offering the feeling of hiding in plain sight. However, as Patterson explores, ‘[t]he natural world is itself subject to the effort to maintain the dominance of heteronormativity through a process of panoptic surveillance’ (2008, p. 136). Even the natural space of the mountain is not exempt from the surveillance of the panoptic regime.

As well as unemployment, Jack is eventually subjected to the ultimate punishment, suggested by language such as ‘they had got him with the tire iron’ (Proulx, 1999, p. 311), his fate being due to his explicit breaking of society’s boundaries. In addition to homosexuality, his father suggests he may have had more lovers than just Ennis. Jack’s father also reveals that Jack had plans for more sexually deviant acts, complaining that ‘this spring he’s got another one’s goin a come up here with him […] He’s goin a split up with his wife’ (p. 314). Jack’s deviation from societal norms means that, despite his ‘productive’ acts of marriage and procreation, his multiple promiscuous homosexual affairs and intention to leave his wife cause him to fall
outside of the Charmed Circle, meaning he is subject to punishment. His father’s judgment, even after the death of his son, is worth consideration, and based on Foucault’s argument that all of society becomes involved in the panoptic regime, we could argue that Jack’s father also acts as a panoptic agent.

Jack’s father closely observes and judges his son’s intentions and actions, as shown by the way he bitterly discuses it after Jack’s death. It is not shocking that ‘this “watching of movements” – or to use Foucault’s term, “surveillance” – […] occurs in the family […]’. This surveillance of the body is a key feature of the family, especially the control and limiting of sexual expression – of both children and adult married partners’ (Steel, Kidd and Brown, 2012, p. 77). As Rubin (1989) explores, the whole family becomes a panoptic force that controls its members, as much as outsiders, in order to ensure a productive family unit in terms of sexuality. When individuals like Jack become subversive and step too far outside of the accepted ideas of how the male body should perform, they are punished, and for his behaviour Jack pays the ultimate price.

Proulx further explores the detrimental impact of the family on the suppression of subversive sexualities through Ennis’ wife Alma, who similarly functions as a panoptic agent. After not seeing each other for four years, Jack and Ennis are reunited:

…”their mouths came together, and hard, Jack’s big teeth bringing blood, his hat falling to the floor, stubble rasping, wet saliva welling, and the door opening and Alma looking out for a few seconds at Ennis’s straining shoulders and shutting the door again […] The door opened again a few inches and Alma stood in the narrow light […] What could he say? […] She had seen what she had seen (Proulx, 1999, pp. 295-6).

This scene, which should be a romantic reunion, is ‘poisoned with homophobia’ (Patterson, 2008, p. 139). Alma sees that her husband is clearly both romantically and sexually involved with Jack, and her automatic and emotional reaction is to walk away. However, her inherent duty as a panoptic agent draws her back in order to observe this rebellion against heteronormative standards of their culture. The panoptic gaze ‘is an apparatus that must be coextensive with the entire social body and not only by the extreme limits that it embraces, but by the minuteness of the details it is concerned with’ (Foucault, 2004, p. 560). This is clear to see through the language which is used to describe the encounter, focusing on minute details such as ‘mouths’, ‘big teeth’, ‘blood’, ‘wet saliva’ and ‘straining shoulders’. It is worth noting that this description comes from the narrator and not Alma. However, the use of indirect discourse allows the imagery to be interpreted as being through Alma’s eyes, and thus through the reader’s eyes. As readers, we are forced onto the side of the voyeur – the panoptic agent.
There is also a focus on ‘light’ and ‘seeing’ in this paragraph, which highlights Foucault’s interest in ‘full lighting and the eye of a supervisor’ (Foucault, 2004, p. 554). The description also shows that the problem with the encounter is that it challenges the ideas of what men should do in their society. Not only should two men not have physical encounters with each other’s bodies, as seen before by Joe, but they should also not be as sensitive and emotional about seeing an old friend as Jack and Ennis are.

Almost every person in the society becomes an agent for panoptic surveillance, including those who are closest to the individuals. Being close to Ennis, Alma has more power over him. We are told that ‘a slow corrosion worked between Ennis and Alma’, and that Alma eventually ‘divorced Ennis and married the Riverton Grocer’ (Proulx, 1999, p. 302). The divorce emasculates Ennis by removing the productive sexual role of father and the masculinising role of husband, both of which are constructs that lie within the Charmed Circle. This, in turn, makes him more visible to panoptic agents as a subject for careful observation.

In conclusion, this article has shown, through the ideas of panopticism and the Charmed Circle, how society in Brokeback Mountain has a homophobic and self-policing surveillance structure. Even members of the family have been analysed as partaking in this regime. Alma’s role as both wife and panoptic agent displays the integration of the panoptic gaze into their family. Ennis feels safe in the company of family when in fact, ‘the more numerous those anonymous and temporary observers are, the greater the risk for the inmate of being surprised’ (Foucault, 2004, p. 555). The examples of panoptic agents that have been discussed are ‘anonymous’. For instance, Joe observes from a distance, and Alma’s relationship with Ennis creates a false safe space that he falls victim to. These examples have shown how even safe spaces such as the natural environment and the home are susceptible to the panoptic gaze.

In the society within which Jack and Ennis exist, the main agenda of the panoptic control is enforcing ‘acceptable’ sexuality and gender. That society is ruled by a dominant heteronormative discourse that individuals should obey. This discourse focuses on the body, and how the male body acts and displays itself is vital to the performance of accepted heterosexuality. If one steps outside of these socially constructed norms, then that individual is subject to punishment. We have seen this punishment in the case of Ennis, through Alma removing his masculinising role as husband, and with Jack, through unemployment and eventually death. Thus, we can see how through Foucault’s ideas, no person in society can escape the panoptic gaze. Acceptable behaviours for a body are inevitably created and policed by society itself, but they can be explored and challenged by analysing society through ideas such as the Charmed Circle. The story of Ennis and Jack, which should have been a
love story, is turned into a tragic critique of society through the violent suppression of sexuality and gender, and the control of individuality.
References


