



Research Paper

Beyond The Bars: Foucault's Panopticon And Resistance In Cinematic Representation Of *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* And *The Shawshank Redemption*

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ABSTRACT: The study basically explores Michel Foucault's concept of the 'Panopticon' while manifesting the cinematic narratives of *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) directed by Miloš Forman and *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) directed by Frank Darabont. Taking into account the Foucauldian discourse, this study examines how power, control, and resistance are depicted within the institutional settings of these films. Diving into Foucault's insights of disciplinary mechanisms and surveillance from his work *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, the movies have depicted the panoptic structure which operates within the mental institution and prison as shown. Even the character dynamics and narrative strategies have also been employed to illustrate the exercise of power and resistance within these oppressive environments. *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* explores the portrayal of Nurse Ratched as a disciplinary figure who embodies the panoptic gaze, exerting control over the patients through surveillance and manipulation. Additionally, the study investigates the character of McMurphy as a disruptive force who challenges the institutional power dynamics, embodying forms of resistance within the confines of the asylum. Talking about *The Shawshank Redemption*, this study also analyzes the depiction of Shawshank State Penitentiary as a panoptic space where inmates are subjected to constant surveillance and discipline. Warden Norton and Captain Hadley emerge as symbols of authoritarian power, enforcing strict rules and maintaining order through coercion and punishment. It is also noteworthy to see how the character of Andy Dufresne subverts the panoptic gaze through acts of resistance and subversion, utilizing knowledge, patience, and ingenuity to challenge the hegemonic structures of the prison system. Through an exploration of Andy's transformative journey, it uncovers the ways in which hope, resilience, and solidarity emerge as powerful forms of resistance within the oppressive confines of Shawshank. Thus, the study underscores the enduring relevance of Foucault's concepts in analyzing the complexities of power, control, and resistance in contemporary society.

KEYWORDS: Michel Foucault, Panopticon, surveillance, resistance, institutional control, cinematic narratives.

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I. INTRODUCTION

One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest is a 1975 American drama film directed by Milos Forman based on the novel with the same name by Ken Kesey. Similarly, *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) is another important drama film directed by Frank Darabont, based on Stephen King's novella *Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption* (1982). These two films offer compelling portrayals of institutional settings: a mental institution and a prison where characters navigate oppressive power structures and strive for autonomy and freedom. Foucault's theoretical framework, articulated in his book *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* provides a lens through which it analyses the operation of power and resistance within these cinematic representations. The word 'panopticon' is a metaphorical architectural model of surveillance and discipline which serves as a heuristic device for understanding the mechanisms of control. By examining the characters' responses to surveillance, discipline, and coercion, this study aims to elucidate the complexities of power dynamics and resistance strategies within oppressive environments. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* offers a poignant portrayal of life within a mental institution, where Nurse Ratched presides as a symbol of authoritarian control. The study investigates the ways in which the panoptic gaze permeates the institutional space, shaping the

behaviors and experiences of the patients. Additionally, it also explores the character of McMurphy as a disruptive force who challenges the hegemonic power structures of the asylum, embodying forms of resistance and rebellion against the oppressive regime. In *The Shawshank Redemption*, Shawshank State Penitentiary serves as the backdrop for a narrative of resilience and redemption in the face of institutional oppression. Warden Norton and Captain Hadley epitomize the figures of authority who wield power over the inmates, enforcing discipline and surveillance within the prison walls. As discussed before, the panoptic structure of the prison always exerts control over the lives of the inmates, which further resulted with the strategies of resistance and subversion employed by characters such as Andy Dufresne. Therefore this study offers a comparative analysis of the two films basically to uncover the similarities and differences in the portrayal of power and resistance within institutional settings. The idea is to contextualize the cinematic narratives within Foucault's theoretical framework in order to contribute a deeper understanding of how power operates within institutions and how resistance emerges in response to oppressive regimes.

THE PANOPTIC STRUCTURE IN ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST AND THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION

Foucault describes the Panopticon as a system where "visibility is a trap" (Foucault 200), emphasizing the power of constant observation to regulate behavior. Nurse Ratched's presence within the mental institution serves to enforce discipline and conformity among the patients, fostering an atmosphere of fear and docility. As Foucault writes, "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power" (Foucault 201), suggesting that the patients' awareness of being observed leads to self-regulation and internalized discipline. Similarly, in *The Shawshank Redemption*, Shawshank State Penitentiary operates as a panoptic space where inmates are subjected to constant surveillance and discipline. Warden Norton and Captain Hadley wield power through visibility, enforcing strict rules and maintaining order within the prison walls. Foucault's concept of the panopticon is reflected in the design of the prison, with its centralized control tower and surrounding cells, symbolizing the hierarchical structure of power and control. As Foucault argues, "The panopticon is a marvelous machine which, whatever use one may wish to put it to, produces homogeneous effects of power" (Foucault 202), highlighting the efficiency of the panoptic mechanism in enforcing discipline and conformity. Furthermore, both films depict instances of resistance against the panoptic structure, challenging the hegemonic power of the institutional authorities. In *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, McMurphy emerges as a disruptive force who defies Nurse Ratched's authority and incites acts of rebellion among the patients. Foucault writes, "To disobey in order to take revenge, or because of a real need, or even out of pure desire, is legitimate" (Foucault 228), suggesting that acts of resistance can serve as a means of reclaiming agency and autonomy within oppressive institutions. Similarly, in *The Shawshank Redemption*, Andy Dufresne utilizes knowledge and ingenuity to subvert the panoptic gaze, challenging the power dynamics of the prison system. Foucault's notion of resistance as a form of "counter-discourse" (Foucault 229) is reflected in Andy's strategic efforts to resist oppression and assert his humanity within the confines of Shawshank. Overall, both *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *The Shawshank Redemption* provide compelling cinematic representations of the panoptic structure, illustrating the ways in which power operates through surveillance, discipline, and resistance within institutional settings. Moreover, these films offer valuable insights into the complexities of institutional control and the possibilities for resistance within oppressive environments.

ANALYSIS OF INSTITUTIONAL SETTING: THE MENTAL INSTITUTION AND THE PRISON

In both *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *The Shawshank Redemption*, the institutional settings of a mental institution and a prison, respectively, can be analyzed through the eyes of Michel Foucault's *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. In *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the mental institution, ruled by Nurse Ratched, exemplifies Foucault's concept of disciplinary power. Nurse Ratched maintains control through surveillance, regulation, and normalization of behavior. She enforces strict routines, imposes medication, and uses various forms of discipline to maintain order and dominance over the patients. The hierarchical structure within the institution reflects Foucault's idea of power relations, where authority figures exercise control over the marginalized individuals. This power dynamic is evident in the interaction between Nurse Ratched and the patients, particularly the protagonist, McMurphy. McMurphy's defiance against the institutional rules challenges the established power structure, leading to conflicts and resistance. Foucault would interpret McMurphy's rebellion as a form of resistance against the disciplinary mechanisms of the institution, highlighting the inherent struggle for power within such confined spaces. Similarly, in *The Shawshank Redemption*, Shawshank State Penitentiary operates as a panoptic institution, a concept central to Foucault's analysis. The prison's design, with its centralized watchtower enabling constant surveillance, reflects the panoptic principle of visibility and control. The presence of guards and wardens reinforces the disciplinary mechanisms aimed at regulating the behavior of inmates and maintaining order within the institution. Through the character of Warden Norton, the film portrays the exercise of disciplinary power at multiple levels. Norton enforces strict rules, employs

surveillance tactics, and manipulates the inmates for his personal gain, illustrating the pervasiveness of power relations within the prison system. Additionally, the routine and regimented life of the inmates, as depicted in the film, exemplifies Foucault's concept of disciplinary normalization, where individuals conform to institutional norms and expectations under the threat of punishment. Also, the friendship between Andy Dufresne and Red in *The Shawshank Redemption* can be seen as a form of resistance against the oppressive disciplinary regime of the prison. Their camaraderie provides solace and support amidst the dehumanizing conditions of confinement, demonstrating the potential for agency and solidarity within oppressive institutional settings. Through the characters' interactions and narratives, these films illuminate the complex dynamics of power and resistance within confined spaces, inviting critical reflection on the nature of institutional authority and its impact on individual autonomy and agency.

SURVEILLANCE AND DISCIPLINARY MECHANISM IN THE INSTITUTIONAL SETTING

Surveillance and disciplinary mechanisms play a crucial role in perpetuating power dynamics within institutional settings. Michel Foucault's analysis of surveillance, as outlined in *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, provides a framework for understanding how these mechanisms function and what are their effects on the characters. In *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Nurse Ratched embodies the disciplinary power as her centralized control of the mental institution is facilitated through various surveillance mechanisms. The nurse's station, situated at the heart of the ward, serves as a panoptic point from which Nurse Ratched observes and regulates the behavior of the patients. This spatial arrangement creates a sense of constant visibility, leading to self-regulation among the inmates as they internalize the gaze of authority. Furthermore, Nurse Ratched employs tactics such as patient informants and group therapy sessions to maintain a network of surveillance. This pervasive monitoring instills a sense of powerlessness and conformity among the patients, who are aware of the consequences of deviating from the institutional norms. Foucault would interpret this as an example of disciplinary power at work, where surveillance serves as a mechanism for enforcing compliance and docility among the marginalized individuals within the institution. Similarly, the Shawshank State Penitentiary operates as a panoptic institution where the visibility creates a sense of omnipresence, leading to self-discipline and conformity among the prisoners. The fear of being observed and punished for any transgression reinforces the power dynamics between the prison authorities and the inmates. Foucault's concept of normalization is evident in both films through the disciplinary mechanisms intertwined with surveillance. The films highlight how surveillance mechanisms serve as tools for maintaining control and regulating behavior within confined spaces, shaping the experiences and identities of the characters subjected to them.

RESISTANCE, SUBVERSION AND REDEMPTION

Resistance, subversion, and redemption are prominent themes that can be analyzed through Michel Foucault's concept. As mentioned earlier, Foucault's framework provides insight into the dynamics of power and control within institutional settings which sheds a light on the ways in which individuals challenge and negotiates oppressive systems. Foucault describes resistance as a form of struggle against power relations, where individuals contest and challenge the norms imposed upon them. McMurphy's rebellious nature and defiance of Nurse Ratched's authority disrupt the established power structure within the institution. For example, he encourages the other patients to question authority and assert their agency, thereby subverting the oppressive regime of surveillance and control. Foucault discusses how resistance can emerge as a response to disciplinary power, highlighting the agency of individuals in challenging oppressive systems (Foucault, 1977). Even in *The Shawshank Redemption*, Andy Dufresne represents resistance and subversion within the prison system. Despite facing the dehumanizing conditions of incarceration, Andy maintains a sense of dignity and autonomy by subverting the disciplinary mechanisms of Shawshank State Penitentiary. Foucault's concept of subversion involves the creative appropriation of institutional resources to resist domination. For instance, Andy uses his knowledge of finance to aid the prison staff, thereby gaining privileges and carving out a semblance of freedom within the confines of the institution. Foucault argues that subversion can undermine the effectiveness of disciplinary power by exploiting its vulnerabilities and contradictions (Foucault, 1977). Other than that, both films explore themes of redemption through the transformative experiences of the protagonists. In *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, McMurphy's sacrificial act of defiance ultimately leads to his demise but inspires the other patients to reclaim their agency and resist oppression. Similarly, in *The Shawshank Redemption*, Andy's perseverance and resilience enable him to overcome the injustices of the prison system and attain redemption. Foucault's analysis of redemption emphasizes the possibility of individual liberation and self-transformation within oppressive institutions, highlighting the enduring human capacity for resistance and resilience (Foucault, 1977). Thus, these films offer compelling narratives of resistance, subversion, and redemption within institutional settings, which can be understood through Michel Foucault's notion of disciplinary power.

II. CONCLUSION

These films vividly depict the operation of disciplinary mechanisms and surveillance, mirroring Foucault's concepts of panopticism and disciplinary power. Characters like Nurse Ratched and Warden Norton symbolize authoritarian control, enforcing conformity and discipline among inmates and patients. However, amidst these oppressive structures, figures like McMurphy and Andy Dufresne emerge as agents of resistance, challenging the hegemonic power and inspiring others to reclaim their autonomy. The narratives of redemption within both films further underscore the enduring human capacity for liberation and transformation within oppressive environments. Through Foucault's theoretical framework, these films offer profound reflections on the complexities of institutional authority and the possibilities for individual agency and resilience in the face of oppression. In addition, the comparative analysis highlights the enduring relevance of Foucault's theories in understanding the dynamics of institutional power and resistance. By examining how characters navigate and challenge oppressive systems, we gain deeper insights into the complexities of human agency and the potential for liberation within constrained environments. Moreover, the parallels drawn between the mental institution in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* and the prison in *The Shawshank Redemption* underscore the universality of Foucault's concepts across different institutional contexts. Through critical engagement with these cinematic narratives, we are encouraged to reflect not only on the realities of institutional life but also on the broader implications for individual freedom and social justice.

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