The Architecture of Control
Grant Vetter
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It was functionalist philosopher Jeremy Bentham whose development of the panopticon famously provided the genealogical project of Michel Foucault with the exemplar for a particular social-historical moment. For Foucault, its use of observational techniques to condition the behavior of prisoners superbly articulated the disciplinary societies of the late eighteenth century, where tightly defined architectural spaces were constructed in order exert specific effects on the body: the prison, the clinic, the factory, to name but a few. By the French publication of *Discipline and Punish* in 1975, however, the disciplinary society had already given way to something else. The proliferation of new technologies had deterritorialized the subjectivation of individuals, forming, as Gilles Deleuze would later say, a control society: a societal form where disciplinary confinements—or *molds*—come to be replaced by *modulation,* or supple and mobile controls.[1] The movement from discipline to control represents a seismic shift, which provokes a number of questions about our contemporary relationship with Bentham's panopticon. Fundamentally, it poses the question of how panopticism functions in our particular societal structure, or, rather, how is neo-panopticism complicit in the construction and propagation of a control society?

It is precisely with this question that Grant Vetter's *Architecture of Control* occupies itself. Ambitiously, Vetter's book attempts to demonstrate the way neo-panopticism functions to shape and regulate control societies. Indeed, while the title indicates an overarching concern for the place of architecture in a neo-panoptic apparatus, the book is as much about constructing a framework—an architecture—with which to understand a control society as it is about the place of architectural forms in the exercise of control. Even if Vetter periodically returns to the latter, his analysis continually has to exceed those bounds once it accepts that "panopticism today is wholly post-penitentiary. It knows...no physical, architectural or judico-legal constraints."[2]

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1 ˙Deleuze, G., *Negotiations 1972-1990*, New York: Columbia University Press (1990), 178.
2 ˙Vetter, G., *Architecture of Control: A Contribution to the Critique of the Science of Apparatus*, Winchester and Washington: Zero Books (2012), 47.

Furthermore, it is in pursuit of the former where Vetter makes the most ground. On this front, one of his biggest achievements is to offer an incisive critique of the linear narrative that Foucault, Deleuze, and, perhaps more so, those reading them, construct from sovereign societies through to disciplinary societies and finally to the control society. Instead, Vetter demonstrates that, in our contemporary society, far from a singular transformation—a neat narrative that moves from one episteme to the next—the apparatus of a control society is determined by neo-panopticism or a "fourfold diagram" of control, which folds inside itself previous societal forms as panoptic techniques. In doing so, Vetter shows us, quite successfully, that neo-panopticism and panoptic logics are at work in an array of contemporaneous social forms and relations, forming a totalizing and seemingly inescapable web of control.

Vetter ably demonstrates that mysticism of the sovereign spectacle functions today as Synopticisim, or the many watching the one. Here, the valorization of the sovereign in festivals, ceremony and decree, becomes the elevation of personas to brand names; commodities that work to produce subjects in the image of the spectacular. Similarly, for Vetter, the sovereign ban enters the diagram as Banopticisism, a mobile power of prevention; surveillance, which serves both to produce dossiers on criminals and criminality and to act on them accordingly. The bio-political is also "folded" into this neo-panoptic diagram as "Bio-optics," or the web of invasive recording of bio-data from DNA and gene sampling to biometric security. Finally, Vetter names the Acousticon—the symbolic joining of the audible and the visual—as the neo-panoptic technique where technological advances signal the "irrevocable loss of temporal and spatial respite from watching and listening devices."[3] In other words, it is the contribution of devices like the iPhone and software like Skype that have mobilized and sustain both "hyper-surveillance and the end of anonymity."[4]

Using this fourfold framework, Vetter's analysis casts neo-panopticism as both imminent (affective at a micro-level) and total (inescapable). But it is a comparative analysis between neo-panoptic control and the infamous totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century that gives us a clearer sense of the coherent functioning of seemingly disparate techniques for the purpose of what Vetter calls "hyperbolic capitalism." Here, Vetter points out that neo-panopticism has a totalitarian potential, in that its domination of subjects is without rational limit (Vetter even supposes that technological advances have destroyed natural limits) and, therefore, "nothing is hidden and everything is given to be seen."[5] But Vetter rightly argues that neo-panopticism is, nevertheless, fundamentally different from totalitarianism because it is an apparatus of hyper-capitalism rather than a singular dictatorial authority. Referencing the work of Gramsci,

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3 ˙Ibid., 98.
4 ˙Ibid., 99.
5 ˙Ibid.,109.

Vetter demonstrates that neo-panopticism is hegemonic but does not create a hegemonic block; it dominates without central orchestration or, as Vetter says, "without deploying centrifugal forms of power."[6] Instead, it is a decentralized, supple, and malleable power. As a result, rather than demanding sameness, or a unity of subjectivity, it demands the avoidance of the Other (other than capital) and forecloses sameness, producing hyper-individuation as individualized consumption.

Having completed this analysis, Vetter brings us to the second occupation of *Architecture of Control*, which can be succinctly formulated into the following question: If neo-panoptic control is both imminent and totalizing, what strategies are available for resistance? For Vetter, such a strategy might be realized through feng-shui—via Foucault's concept of "care of the self" and Giorgio Agamben's term "profaning"—as a practice that reconfigures neo-panoptic spaces, activating within them an alternative spatial discipline. What traditional feng-shui practices appear to offer Vetter's analysis is an approach to realigning the everyday that can confront the immanence and totalizing purview of neo-panopticism, which is both pragmatic and positive (in the sense that it doesn't attempt to destroy neo-panopticism and escape to a life that is "outside," but tries to reconfigure space into an alternative discipline). Moreover, for those skeptical of the mysticism of feng-shui, and, furthermore, its co-option by big capital, Vetter claims that feng-shui must be radicalized and politicized through a patient engagement with Western anti-modern architectural disciplines. Feng-shui must declare itself faithful to a number of political commitments if it is to co-ordinate its efforts and achieve anything like a meaningful resistance to neo-panopticism.

Nevertheless, such an embryonic discussion of the project can't offer the reader a formulation for resistance in concrete terms. It struggles to detail what resistance might actually look like, offering only a couple of open-ended avenues for future investigation. This weakness is particularly prevalent when Vetter makes some determinations about how the alliance between feng shui and anti-modern architecture might work. For example, we are told the feng-shui School of Forms "… might be a mode to (re)consider the substantive effects of placement outlines and structuration in relation to the contours of Neo-panoptic control."[7] While this is certainly a legitimate avenue of investigation, it feels a little disappointing that it offers nothing more concrete, especially given the size and scale of the project being proposed. It might have been better to offer one or more of these avenues as a detailed case-study, or an analysis of this "radicalization" of feng-shui in detailed, practical terms. Such a move would have, no doubt, done more to ease the concerns of those who might think that the practice of feng-shui

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6 ˙Ibid.
7 ˙Ibid., 148

is either too mystical to offer anything to the "modern" or too easily co-opted to offer substantial resistance.

Furthermore, Vetter's response to his own claim that resistance to neo-panopticism must be interdisciplinary (which clearly informs the rationale for setting up a site of resistance around feng-shui as an "Eastern" discipline, brought into dialogue with Western "anti-modern" architectural principles) is problematic. Given that much of what Vetter has identified as "neo-panoptic" refers to the increasing presence of emerging computer technologies and media practices, it feels awkward that much of what Vetter posits as resistance is presented in architectural terms. This is not to say that an architectural approach should not be part of any solution to the effects of neo-panopticism, but, rather, that the analysis could benefit from a wider approach to resistance. Accommodating hackers and computer programmers, for example, who could work within the same "profaning" framework that Vetter sets out would make for a truly interdisciplinary approach to resisting neo-panoptic forms that deals with virtual as well as geographic conceptions of space.

Criticism aside, Vetter's *Architecture of Control* is an ambitious book that uses a number of colourful cultural references (*The Dark Knight*, and *Nightmare on Elm Street* among them), to achieve an accessible "architectural drawing" of our contemporary control society. It provides a thought provoking analysis of how neo-panopticism, as the apparatus of hyper-capitalism, has achieved the total colonization and commodification of public and private spaces. As such, it is a compelling read for any Foucauldian, but particularly for academics working in the field of security studies, or on critiques of our contemporary control society, outlining a "complete" understanding of this contemporary phenomenon, its totalizing web, and its material, subjectivizing effects.

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