# Chapter 8: Polyopticon

## Spinning Around

Google Earth Engine, related products such as Google Maps and Google Street View, and other aerial, panoramic, and satellite image mapping programs have opened the door to an era of total surveillance or so-called ‘deep imaging’.[[1]](#footnote-1) Alike maps, photographs today have become a navigable space, as it no longer presents a fixed place. The ancient dream of being able to see the world like the gods has been realized in the total image. There are many correlations between the view in the contemporary aerial photography of the post-digital age and in the historical perspective systems of the Medieval Period; that is, between the folkloric, mythological, and religious concept of the omnipresent eye, and the interventionist concept of the evil eye. And especially during times of nation-state interventionism, these views are used to manipulate an economy, people, or society.[[2]](#footnote-2) During the 19th century, for example, two models of control were conceived: the panopticon and the peep show. The panopticon, which in a sense also imprisoned the guards, began as an architectural blueprint for prisons, based on an idea of control through presence and visibility. It was first sketched by Samuel Bentham and published in a book by his brother Jeremy.[[3]](#footnote-3) After the invention and implementation of the panopticon, peep show marked the second such surveillance model, in which the observer was positioned outside of the system, thus was invisible to the object monitored. The principle difference between the two was the position of the observer. With the panopticon, a design for institutional buildings such as prisons which consist of a rotunda with an inspection house at the center, control is achieved from above and inside of the system. Whereas with the peep show, an exhibition of pictures viewed through a small hole or magnifying glass, control is achieved from outside while freely moving about.

With the birth of aerial photographs, these two ways of seeing, one from the inside of an architectural construct, and one from the outside, were merged. With aerial images the observer is having a full control of the area under it, as in panopticon, yet, he is not locked down into a building of a prison. Prison keeper is having an immediate insight into much wider reality than the one being represented by the author of the image and imagined by the perception of the audience.

The ideas of space which are being represented in today’s aerial, drone, and satellite post-digital photography may to a certain extent be like the ideas of space defined in the mythologies of Antiquity and in the religion of the Medieval Period. But this technology is far from all-seeing (omnipresent) or all-knowing (omniscient). Instead, it allows various agents to simultaneously observe, monitor, and control others. As this technology becomes more readily available and cost effective, it also becomes more open, allowing a range of user greater access to the technology, and with fewer and fewer constraints or restrictions on its use. For example, drone may be used by a private citizen to invade another’s privacy. The popular use of this technology, in turn, leads to questions concerning its legality, especially in terms of the privacy and property. On a daily basis, American citizens and non-citizens are being surveilled by drones in the USA, and not only by the military or state, but also by private individuals.[[4]](#footnote-4) And artists also use drones in their art, as with John Carlucci and Brandon LaGanke of Ghost + Cow who in their art-porn project *Drone Boning* filmed people having sex from the air.[[5]](#footnote-5)

For this distribution of monitoring devices, contemporary paradigm of control is more distorted, fragmented, and simultaneous than Bentham’s panopticon or Foucault’s panopticonism. Bruno Latour defines it as ‘oligoptic organization’, consisting of numerous small chunks that do their small surveillances.[[6]](#footnote-6) The key difference between Foucault’s panopticon and Latour’s oligopticon lies in whether the data is centralized or decentralized. Merging both together, in what Zygmunt Bauman defines as ‘liquid control’, is the simultaneous implementation of the synopticon defined by Thomas Mathiesen and Foucault’s panopticon, producing something as a polyopticon, which simultaneously surveilles at small and at large.[[7]](#footnote-7)

## Machine Gods

As today ‘corporations replace the Christian churches as the primary source of aerial integration’, the system of airplanes, drones, and satellites is also polycentric.[[8]](#footnote-8) In the post-digital era, the forces of the universe which humans have previously attributed to deities, gods, or other spiritual beings, are more and more being attributed to machines. Indeed, one could perhaps go so far as to say that machines are becoming gods in the minds and hearts of many if not most people, and that humans have dethroned god, and replaced him with a machine. The acts of surveillance and judgement are just some of these god-like powers, which humans previously attributed to some god or other, and presently attribute to aerial photography. But the total image does not emerge from a natural way of seeing which has evolved gradually through use over time.

Rather, the machine gaze behind the total image has replaced the metaphysical ‘eye in the sky’ which previously belonged the exclusively to the domains of folklore, mythology, and religion, by taking up a point of view from the higher dimensions of the stratosphere and outer space, from which it achieves a kind of total seeing. Such a gaze affords multiple operations, with a capacity for a 360-degree view, telephoto zooming by astronomical units, and focus simultaneously at far and near distances. Imaging systems today differ from those yesterday primarily in regard to the type of surveillance which is being established.[[9]](#footnote-9) For example, it has now become possible to zoom in and out of a map almost instantaneously, and to almost synchronically experience both panoptic and synoptic vision.

Unmanned photography, getting rid of the human as the first, named, author (the one that presses the button) and leaving him the function of the second author working behind (as the creator or the programmer of the apparatus), tries to remain itself in the objective place, reducing any trajectory and abstract distortion of the located and situated object’s space. The author now infiltrates or invades the audience space, while the image space manipulates the audience through the illusion that they are having an exchange or interaction with the author. Further, each individual of the audience is continuously being mapped and datafied by the system itself, generating new content around about their place. Moreover, systems for the viewing and monitoring of others have been perfected, and now have come into the hands of the masses, who share their own as well as others’ private data without a second thought.

## Viewer Tracked

Yet, contemporary surveillance seems to be at least partially voluntary, as humans provide a great deal of this information themselves. And in the Quantified Self movement, which is fast gaining popularity, all data is provided voluntarily. As Matthew H. Wilson notes, ‘Quantification, as an interoperable, proprietary system that fashions habits and surveils for the purpose of competition, is life lived under spectacle’.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The subject in the post-digital era is not whole unto themselves, in the eye of a machine, but rather consists of discreet elements such as number of steps, calories lost, weight, height, time spent online, DNA, pin codes, passwords, facial features, and on. Healthcare applications such as pedometers and cardiograph heart rate monitors for smart phones or smart watches at once connect us to and dissociate us from our own bodies. And with the increasing use of web mapping services and applications, we are losing our primordial connection to the Earth. Although these may situate us within our environment, we have no big picture, no navigational instinct. In each of these systems, the place is over-produced. That is, the same location is covered by views from satellite, GPS trackers for cars, and mobile trackers for personal devices. We live in a time where the majority of our devices, which extend the functions of our perception, also serve to locate us as dots within a Cartesian coordinate system. While previously maps were placing oneself on the space by the act of use, now the map places the users without their knowledge, simultaneously providing seducing total images of space.

Not only personal data but also real-time is transmitted through our devices to various trackers, broadcasting GPS information to cellular stations and to internet servers. Indeed, data has become more valuable than even oil in the post-digital age. After the 2018 scandal with Cambridge Analytica, which harvested personal data from social media in order to manipulate election outcomes for various clients, it has become clear that data is itself a currency. Game applications on social networks provide our data to commercial companies, for example.[[11]](#footnote-11) And today, it is even possible to exercise surveillance on oneself, whether with a 24-hour webcam or using satellite imagery.

Systems collect more data on us than ever before. Consequently, surveillance has been modified into ‘dataveillance’ organized around discursive practices.[[12]](#footnote-12) As Manuel deLanda writes in his analysis of work by Gilles Deleuze:

Non-discursive practices of visual surveillance and monitoring, performed in buildings specifically designed to facilitate their routine execution, sort the raw materials (human bodies) into criminal, medical, or pedagogic categories; and discursive practices, like those of the criminologists, doctors, or teachers who produce a variety of conceptual categories, consolidate those sorted human materials, giving prisons, hospitals and schools a more stable form and identity.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The era of visible totalitarian organization, marching soldiers, not-that-invisible secret services following, arresting and interrogating citizens has passed. As totalitarianism reaches the space beyond visibility, such as the micro and macro, but curiously enough skip over being visible in everyday life.

## Tracked by the Image

Post-digital photography may also be function as a system of control through the view or views which they afford. In historical original photography, the direction for the transaction of value flowed from the author through the photograph to their audience. That is, the photographer depicted and framed the content of the image which was then interpreted by the viewer. In contemporary post-digital photography, however, the image value is neither unidirectional nor interactive. Rather, the author of the image is the audience itself, with the content of the image depending upon the choices made and data given by the viewer. In other words, the audience has become part of the image in so far as they are voluntarily or involuntarily recorded while interacting with the images on some device. And the age-old distinction between the space of the author, the space of the object, and the space of the audience has become porous and blurred. There almost seems to be a certain inverted relation by which the amount of totality of the image influences on the loss of the particular picture; the more total image it is offered, lesser the capacity for the picture-view.

1. Trevor Paglen, ‘Homepage’, http://www.paglen.com/. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jennifer Stob, ‘Detournement as Optic: Debord, Derisory Documents and the Aerial View’, *Philosophy of Photography* 5.2 (2013): 19-34. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bentham writes in *Panopticon: The Inspection House* written as a series of letters in 1787. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See, for example: The Electronic Frontier Foundation’s *Map of Domestic Drone Authorization*, https://fusiontables.googleusercontent.com/embedviz?viz=MAP&q=select+col2+from+1WuTyH62PmUF97oxo6IreT1BL\_aw9HJN5pocwmwg&h=false&lat=44.08758502824518&lng=-85.5615234375&z=4&t=1&l=col2&y=1&tmplt=2. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See John Carlucci and Brandon LaGanke (Ghost + Cow), ‘Drone Boning’*,* http://www.droneboning.com. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Barney Warf and Santa Arias, *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives in Human Geography*, New York: Routledge, 2009, 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Latour defines the oligopticon in contrast to the panorama: ‘Whereas oligoptica are constantly revealing the fragility of their connections and their lack of control on what is left in between their networks, panoramas give the impression of complete control over what is being surveyed, even though they are partially blind and nothing enters or leaves their walls except interested or baffled spectators’. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 188. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Matthew H. Wilson, *New Lines: Critical GIS and the Trouble of the Map,* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The information being sent out by 24 satellites, allowing precise location of a mobile phone between three of them. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Roger A. Clarke, ‘Information Technology and Dataveillance’, *Communications of the ACM* 31.5 (1988): 498–511. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. deLanda, *Assemblage Theory*, 38-39. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)