Here's Looking at You: Reality TV, Big Brother, and Foucault

James Wong
Wilfrid Laurier University

Abstract: Reality TV allows us to gaze at others. Some critics link such watching, along with the reliance on new communication technologies in contemporary culture, to Foucault's use of the panopticon metaphor in his analysis of modernity. Perhaps in watching we have become Big Brother ourselves. This paper argues that linking reality TV (and the idea of Big Brother) to Foucault's use of the panopticon metaphor is mistaken. For Foucault, surveillance is only half of the story in the metaphor. The other half is that we are the ones who are exercising power over ourselves. We are our own masters. The article sets out the implications of this reading of Foucault on recent debates in connection with the preoccupation with Big Brother in contemporary culture.

Résumé : La « reality TV » nous permet de contempler les autres. Il existe des critiques qui associent un tel acte de regarder, ainsi qu'une dépendance à l'égard des nouvelles technologies de communication dans la culture contemporaine, avec la métaphore du panopticon employée par Foucault dans son analyse de la modernité. Peut-être que dans l'acte de regarder, nous devenons nous-mêmes « Big Brother ». Dans cet article, je soutiens que l'alliance entre la « reality TV » (et l'idée de « Big Brother ») et la métaphore panoptique de Foucault est mal fondée. Pour Foucault, la surveillance n'est qu'une moitié de la métaphore. L'autre moitié, c'est que nous exerçons du pouvoir sur nous-mêmes. Nous sommes nos propres maîtres. Pour conclure, je discute les implications de cette interprétation de Foucault pour de récents débats qui portent sur « Big Brother » dans la culture contemporaine.

All analysis aside ... the important thing is who gets voted off this week.
—Tony Tremblay, *Globe and Mail*

Introduction

Despite their current popularity, reality-based TV shows, commonly referred to as reality TV, are not new. The idea of capturing and televising the behaviour of ordinary individuals in various staged situations has been around since the late 1940s, when *Candid Camera*, perhaps *the* prototype reality TV show, made its debut (Paul Heyer, Professor, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, ON, personal com-

James Wong is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication Studies, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, ON N2L 3C5. E-mail: jwong@wlu.ca

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munication, March 2001). But the recent notoriety of television programs from *Big Brother* and *Survivor* to *Temptation Island* has caught the interests of academics and pundits, who speculate about the cultural significance of these shows (Gamson, 1998; McLemee, 2000; Tremblay, 2001). My paper focuses on one feature of the current fixation on reality TV programs. Some commentators of contemporary culture have suggested a connection between reality TV and the metaphors of Big Brother and the panopticon, in particular Foucault's use of the metaphor (Gamson, 1998; McLemee, 2000). In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1979) claims that our society is one of surveillance (1979, p. 217).[1] "Panopticism," he writes,

> is the general principle of a new "political anatomy".... The celebrated, transparent circular cage with its high tower, powerful and knowing, may have been ... a perfect disciplinary institution; but ... one may "unlock" the disciplines and get them to function in a diffused multiple, polyvalent way throughout the whole social body. (pp. 208-209)

The line of reasoning connecting reality TV, Big Brother and Foucault's use of the panopticon, then, seems to run as follows: Reality TV allows ordinary individuals to gaze at others much like Big Brother. Perhaps we have become Big Brother ourselves. But such surveillance is nothing compared to what is possible with new communication technologies. Indeed, the increasing reliance on such technologies in contemporary life has made possible the emergence of what Mark Poster (1990) calls a "superpanopticon", in which individuals are subject to continuous supervision (Whitaker, 1999). Reality TV, Big Brother, and the panopticon are thus linked in a continuum by surveillance and domination.

However, the suggested connection between these three elements is misleading. In this paper I argue, firstly, that reality TV has little to do with Big Brother surveillance. Secondly, for Foucault, surveillance is only *half* of the story in his analysis of the panopticon metaphor. The other half is that we are the ones who are exercising power over ourselves. We are our own masters, and that idea is central to the conception of autonomous agency. Furthermore, Foucault (1979) tells us that individuals who are subjected to surveillance, and who know that they are under scrutiny, assume "responsibility for the constraints of power," making the play of power spontaneously upon themselves (p. 202). The idea that we are the ones who bring the effects of power upon ourselves suggests the complicity to which individuals participate in the panoptic scheme, which some commentators note runs deeper still (Gamson, 1998). As such, Foucault recommends that we stop describing "the effects of power in negative terms: it excludes, it represses.... In fact, power produces.... The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production" (Foucault, 1979, p. 194).[2] Rather than concentrating on the theme of domination, Foucault's analysis of the panopticon also examines the connections between the ideas of the individual, agency, and power —themes central to modern political thinking. His account opens up the possibility for change. I will conclude with a discussion of the implications of this

reading of Foucault on the current preoccupation with the theme of Big Brother in contemporary culture.

My analysis, then, does not address the nature of reality TV itself, such as identifying the common elements in various shows from *Big Brother* and *Survivor* to *America's Funniest Home Videos* and *The Jerry Springer Show* in order to map out the genre or the connections and divergences between its subgroups, nor to determine the effects of such shows on viewers and thereby gauge the impact of these shows on contemporary culture. These are empirical questions and are beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, the paper examines the concepts *Big Brother*, the *panopticon,* and *surveillance* as they are used by commentators to assess the cultural meanings of reality TV. Such meta-analysis of reality TV, or any other cultural phenomena for that matter, is important for self-understanding and the possibility of change; however, without appropriate conceptual tools informing such interpretations, these exercises are likely to miss the mark.

Here's looking at you: Big Brother and reality TV

The notion of Big Brother surveillance appears to have captured our collective imagination. The television show *Big Brother*, aired in 2000, made headlines on both sides of the Atlantic. The basic premise of the show is the sequestering of a group of strangers for a lengthy period of time. Their movements are watched 24 hours a day, seven days a week by strategically placed video cameras, from the bedrooms to the bathrooms. The Dutch original aired in spring 2000. The show captured 53% of the national audience (Poniewozik, 2000), with an amazing 73% of Dutch viewers tuning in for the last show (Craver, 2000). Given such popularity, English and American clones quickly followed. CBS reportedly paid $20 million U.S. for the rights to produce an American version of the show. The first U.S. episode aired on July 5, 2000. It received a Nielsen rating of 27, scoring well with the all-important demographic group of viewers in the 18-34 age group. But by the end of the first week, the show, which was televised every night, only attained a Nielsen rating of 10 (Millman, 2000). For *Big Brother II,* CBS plans to broadcast fewer shows per week and to make the program more in line with other reality TV shows, emphasizing competition between contestants, with contestants deciding each other's fate.

The fascination with Big Brother surveillance is also evident in the hugely popular 1998 movie *The Truman Show.* Truman's life is totally staged, from his family interactions to those he has with the community in which he lives, and is broadcast live by 5000 hidden cameras. The movie works on many levels; it touches for instance upon the old metaphysical chestnut of reality vs. illusion, but surveillance remains its central theme. Surveillance is also at the heart of the controversial Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) database. When the story broke about the longitudinal labour force database holding information from income tax returns and immigration files, from files on welfare recipients and those in federally funded training programs, and so on, all cross-referenced by social insurance number[5], Canadian journalists were quick to apply the tag "Big Brother" to the database.[3] As one columnist for the *Chicago Tribune* puts it, con-

temporary Big Brother–style surveillance raises the frightening question: "Is the fictional spectre of an all-knowing, all-seeing eye really far removed from fact?" (cited in Gamson, 1998).

The comment by the *Tribune* columnist captures the anxiety over privacy concerns in contemporary society. Such worries, however, are offset by an opposing and equally compelling force in contemporary Western culture, namely that publicity has currency. Being watched carries advantages, be it a financial payoff or a featured individual's 15 minutes of fame (Gamson, 1998; Tremblay, 2001). As illustration of this, more than 40,000 people applied to be contestants on the U.K. version of *Big Brother* (Wells, 2000), while the U.S. version attracted over 1,000 applicants (Poniewozik, 2000). The payoff can be huge: the last person standing in the U.S. version of *Big Brother* wins $500,000 US; the U.K. winner nets £70,000 (Wells, 2000). Selling privacy is profitable for individuals at the mundane level as well. Proctor & Gamble, for instance, plans to track 80 households in the U.K., Italy, Germany, and China. Participating families will have film crews follow their activities for four days and can expect to earn up to $250 US a day (Nelson, 2001). This may explain the allure of participating in such TV shows and marketing programs. But why are viewers interested in these shows in which others' behaviour and misfortunes appear as entertainment?

Speculations abound on this question. Perhaps it is a case of voyeuristic pleasures, some salacious, some malicious, or not. The Dutch *Big Brother* showed everything, including two contestants having sex, although all that was shown was some fumbling underneath a blanket (Wente, 2000). *Candid Camera* and *America's Funniest Home Videos* both pass off people's bad handling of circumstances as entertainment in the belief that some individuals watching might relish the embarrassment of others. It could also be that watching the suffering of others reassures us that our lot is a bit better than theirs; or that we can still be empathic individuals in a cold, heartless world; or both. The psychology behind such cases of *schadenfreude* is complex. Perhaps individuals are drawn to reality TV shows because they are simply curious about the private lives of others. These programs provide an opportunity for individuals to peer into their neighbours' lives, something which would not otherwise be possible in everyday life. Yet another possibility is that there is an undercurrent of disquiet about our contact with reality and with one another in today's interconnected, hyperlinked world. Those connections may all be staged, as suggested in *The Truman Show.* Individuals seek reassurance that there are still unscripted, authentic moments in life. Somewhat paradoxically, they turn to television and other media such as the Internet for proof (Gamson, 1998). Of course, this search is in vain, for it leads to staging the very moments that are supposed to be authentic.

Here we begin to see the supposed connection between reality TV, Big Brother, and Foucault's use of the panopticon unravel. For Orwell, the Big Brother state coerces citizens to toe the line through control of the media and surveillance. Foucault, however, uses the panopticon metaphor differently. His account does two things: first, it marks a shift in the exercise of power, from the spectacular

display of what he calls "sovereign power" to a regime of disciplinary power whereby the individual exercises power over her or himself (Foucault, 1979, 1980a); second, it highlights the role of surveillance in getting individuals to modify their behaviour. For Foucault, the panopticon is not just about surveillance but also about how it figures in other key elements of modernity, such as the ideas of power and agency. It is seldom mentioned that exercising such power over oneself is at the heart of the idea of autonomy, central to Enlightenment thought. Reality TV shows have nothing to do with modifying one's behaviour, neither that of the participants nor the viewers. Self-policing, however, is a central issue for Orwell and Foucault. The contestants on these programs do not, for the most part, monitor or modify their behaviour. One contestant (in a *Big Brother* spinoff in the U.K.), for example, advised applicants for future shows to refrain from relations with other contestants and to be as polite as possible to them (Craver, 2000). This hardly constitutes the kind of policing of one's own behaviour in *1984* or in Foucault's discussion of the panopticon. Indeed, reality TV shows want the exact opposite of self-monitoring from the contestants. They want the participants' raw reactions, warts and all. Nor do the producers of reality TV shows want their audience to scrutinize their viewing habits; that might lead individuals to stop watching those programs, once they recognize their self-debasement in indulging in such vulgar diversions.[4]

Big Brother and the panopticon: Surveillance

Having disentangled reality TV from the metaphors of Big Brother and panopticon, let us now turn to the connection between these two metaphors. The phrase "an all-knowing, all-seeing eye" in the *Tribune* columnist's comment hints at just such a link. But wedding the two metaphors is problematic because it elides an important difference. For Foucault, the panopticon metaphor is an integral part of his examination of such central themes in modernity as the ideas of the individual, agency, and power. But I will first present the case for thinking of the panopticon as a concept dealing solely with surveillance.

As is well known, the term "panopticon" was invented by Jeremy Bentham in the late eighteenth century in a series of writings on prison reform. In the panopticon, inmates are housed in a structure in which their every movement can, in principle, be continuously observed. Bentham thought that such an arrangement would induce the prisoners to improve their behaviour. In his high hopes for the panopticon model, Bentham announced that "*morals reformed—health preserved—industry invigorated—instruction diffused—public burthens lightened—...*—all [achieved] by a simple idea in architecture!" (cited in Foucault, 1979, p. 207). But Bentham's prison reform schemes never took hold with the English authorities, and they faded from view (McLemee, 2000).

Like the prisoners in Bentham's panopticon, citizens in Orwell's Oceania, too, are aware that they may be watched at any moment through two-way television. Most individuals toe the line for fear of the consequences of noncompliance (Lyon, 1994). And the punishment is harsh, if Winston Smith's fate is any indication.

In the electronic age, the omnipresent gaze in the panoptic machine has taken on a new form. It is now possible to have a record of just about everything we do. Mark Poster (1984) tells us that

> with the [electronic] mechanisms of information processing, the ability to monitor behaviour is extended considerably.... All that is needed are traces of behaviour; credit card activity, traffic tickets, telephone bills, loan applications, welfare files ... library records and so forth. On the basis of these traces, a computer can gather information that yields a surprisingly full picture of an individual's life. (p. 103)

In Poster's (1990) view, the reliance on new communication technologies in contemporary society has made possible the emergence of a superpanopticon (p. 85). Databases, he (1994) writes,

> operate as a super-Panopticon. Like the prison, databases work continuously, systematically and surreptitiously, accumulating information about individuals and composing it into profiles. Unlike the Panopticon, the "inmates" need not be housed in any architecture; they need only proceed with their daily life.... [Another advantage] is its facility of communications, or transport of information. Computers easily exchange databases, the information in one being accessible to others. Instantaneously, across the globe, information from databases flows in cyberspace to keep tabs on people. Databases "survey" us without the eyes of any prison guard and they do so more accurately and thoroughly than any human being. (p. 184)

It is significant to note that the increase in surveillance is not just driven by a Big Brother state but also by the private sector, which is interested in selling goods and services to individuals. And we willingly participate in this process. We voluntarily give up information about ourselves by simply filling out a customer satisfaction questionnaire, a credit card application, or a census form. The inspecting gaze in contemporary society takes in everything, thus evoking a sense of "total surveillance," to use Reg Whitaker's phrase (1999). But we are less afraid of such information gathering and monitoring since it has become more or less domesticated.

Ambiguity in the panoptic gaze: Separating Foucault from Big Brother

For Poster, however, the critical point is not surveillance per se, but the goal of surveillance, which is the normalization of individuals. With their personal information on record in various databases, Poster contends that individuals will monitor their own behaviour. Presumably, they will want to continue to have borrowing privileges from libraries, to be able to secure future loans, and so on. Such mechanisms, Poster (1984) tells us, "extend the reach of normalizing surveillance, constituting new modes of domination that have yet to be studied" (p. 115). But because individuals voluntarily participate in the process, Poster (1990) concludes wryly that "the population participates in its own self-constitution as subjects of the normalizing gaze of the Superpanopticon" (p. 97).[5] The idea of self-constitution makes problematic the marriage of metaphors between Big Brother and the panopticon. For self-constitution suggests that we are not necessarily victims or

subjects of Big Brother's domination but, rather, agents in the process of choosing our own projects.

The ambiguity in the panoptic gaze can be traced back to Foucault's discussion of the panopticon itself. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault developed a model of power operating in modern society. For Foucault, modern society is a society of surveillance. Instead of displays of absolute power to control the populace as in the *ancien regime*, surveillance is the key component in the discipline of individuals in modern society (Foucault, 1979, Part 3).[6] The goal of surveillance is to get individuals to discipline themselves, to regulate their own behaviour. Foucault (1979) contends that the disciplinary matrix operates at every level in society: in hospitals, schools, factories, and even the family home, i.e., at the very foundation of society (p. 208). In such a regime, power does not have to be applied externally. Rather, power is exercised continuously and efficiently because individuals apply it to themselves. Individuals become "the principle of their own subjection" (p. 203).

The principle of self-regulation is at the heart of Enlightenment thinking about autonomous agency and can be seen in Immanuel Kant's formulation of the categorical imperative. In the Kantian schema, categorical imperatives are central in determining morally permissible acts. Kant (1969) tells us that individuals should "act only according to that maxim by which one might at the same time will that it should become a universal law" (p. 44). To act morally, agents must discipline themselves by choosing projects in accordance with universal rules of reasoning binding all other agents. Reasoning that runs afoul of these rules is deemed illegitimate. Individuals, then, must monitor and regulate their ways of reasoning to ensure that their actions are morally acceptable. Self-regulation is thus a central element of moral agency in the Kantian project. As I interpret him, Foucault's claim, in *Discipline and Punish*, is that the principle of self-regulation can be seen in a wider context as a defining feature of modernity.

Foucault's contention that discipline is internalized distinguishes his use of the panopticon metaphor from that of Big Brother. Fear is central to the operation of Orwell's Big Brother system, within which fear of physical and psychological punishment motivates people to conform. No doubt fear of punishment acts as a deterrent in contemporary society as well, but that is not central to the operation of discipline. Individuals *want* to mould themselves according to disciplinary norms. They want to be normal, because abnormality typically brings about marginalization. One can talk about the fear of being marginalized, but such worries work very differently than the fear of jackboots or, in Winston Smith's case, a rendezvous with rats.

By surveillance, however, Foucault includes other means of monitoring behaviour in addition to being watched, such as the records of delinquency of students or their performances on tests, the tallies on labourers' productivity, the charts of patients, and so on. Not only is such information kept in dossiers on individuals, but with the advent of statistical thinking about populations in the nineteenth century,[7] they also provide various measures about a group of individuals,

for instance, the *average* size of households, the *average* test scores of students, and the *average* number of suicides in a district. Such figures, in turn, inform policies and practices aimed at the studied individuals themselves. Poster's notion of a superpanopticon with its attendant databases brings Foucault's analysis into the digital age.

It would appear that, given the prominence of surveillance and discipline in Foucault's analysis, individuals are *victims* of disciplinary practices imposed on them. But it is far from clear that Foucault had such a top-down model of surveillance and power in mind.[8] While he emphasizes the coercive aspects of discipline of individuals in *Discipline and Punish*, that is, things done *to* them, Foucault (1979) also contends that the disciplinary power at the heart of the panoptic scheme is an integral part of modern society. He tells us that

> [while modern society is marked by] an explicit, coded and formally egalitarian judicial framework.... [The] development and generalization of disciplinary mechanisms constituted the other, dark side of the process.... The Enlightenment which discovered the liberties, also invented the disciplines. (p. 222)

For Foucault, then, the achievements of liberalism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, such as individual rights and freedoms, go hand in hand with normalization and discipline.

Foucault (1979) observes that "it is easy to understand how the power of the norm functions within a system of formal equality, since within a homogeneity that is the rule, the norm introduces, as a useful imperative and as a result of measurement, all the shadings of individual differences" (p. 184). Why is normality important? Normal connotes being healthy and typical; abnormal, sickly or deviant. Very few of us would wish to feel, or be considered, sickly or deviant (Hacking, 1991). Most of us, safe elitists who would identify normality with mediocrity, mould ourselves voluntarily, even willingly, according to various measures. These are things we do to ourselves. But if we *acted* on ourselves, the implication would be that we are not necessarily victims.

Indeed, in Foucault's (1979) view, the technology of normalization is constitutive of the very notion of an individual itself. "It should not be forgotten," he reminds us,

> that there existed [in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries] a technique for constituting individuals as correlative elements of power and knowledge.... [The individual] is a reality fabricated by this technology of power that I have called "discipline." (p. 194)

He adds furthermore that "it is not that ... the individual is amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it, according to the whole technique of forces and bodies" (p. 217). For Foucault, then, various disciplinary regimes are constitutive of the categories describing people and their behaviour. For instance, the family gives us the "breadwinner," the "housewife," the "mother," and other categories; schools give

us the "truant," the "gifted child," and various categories of students and teachers; factories give us various kinds of labourers, managers, and owners, and so on. Individuals occupying these subject positions negotiate (to the extent that they can) specific boundaries for themselves. Few individuals fit those categories, or their roles, perfectly.

But one may object that, by making the normalization of behaviour such an essential feature of the idea of an individual in modernity, we also become committed to the position that we should submit to every process of normalization. Acquiescence, however, is not entailed by the suggestion that normalization is a key component in the production of individuals in modernity. Foucault is not claiming that all processes of normalization are equally acceptable. Some processes of normalization are coercive. We need not go far to find various practices that force various marginalized groups to behave in "acceptable" ways. Such processes disempower people and should be struggled against. There are other instances, however, when normalization is most welcome. One of these cases can be seen in the birth of a child, especially in the West. Within minutes of birth, a child is measured in various ways and parents become very concerned about how these results actually conform to the normative scale. A low birth weight, together with other indicators, is not welcome news. Parents of newborns dearly anticipate a normal infant, and most go on to organize the child's life and theirs according to various established norms, within limits of course. There is, then, an ambiguity in the processes of normalization and discipline (Code, 2000). We are not always victims of oppression. The interpretation of Foucault's notions of surveillance and discipline offered here has the virtue of recognizing individuals as autonomous agents.

To sum up the discussion in this section, I have argued that surveillance is but one part of the story in Foucault's discussion of the panopticon. The connection between the metaphor of Big Brother and Foucault's use of the panopticon suggested by some critics is problematic because it overlooks an important part of his analysis, namely the relation between the ideas of the individual and power. In arguing against the typical link between the Big Brother metaphor and Foucault's analysis, I do not mean to underestimate the effects of surveillance on privacy, as witnessed by, for example, the increasing use of closed-circuit television as a form of surveillance in the workplace, the use of active badges to track the whereabouts of employees (Whalen, 1995), or the sale of the personal information in databases. Whitaker (1999), for instance, tells us that the state of Maryland sold information contained in its motor vehicle database to insurance companies for about $13 million U.S. While efforts to point out the dangers involved with surveillance are a necessary part of consciousness raising, overemphasis (if not exaggeration) draws attention away from other areas that stand in need of further investigation.

Ronald Deibert (1999) points out that, in the electronic age, surveillance is dispersed over many points. Individuals and watchdog organizations like Amnesty International can and do track the activities of states (p. 39). The watchers *can* be watched. The point should not be overstated, however, for not all cases of

watching the watchers will result in immediate change. Much more has yet to be done for such change to occur. A major obstacle to such transformation is perhaps that surveillance is so ingrained in contemporary life, from video cameras in convenience stores to application forms for library cards, that it appears natural. Nonetheless, further research into the relation between the watchers and the watched would seem warranted.

The extended usage of the term "surveillance" itself, as evidenced in the examples given here, presents a difficulty for scholars in the field. The expression is too broad to deal adequately with issues that range from the use of closed-circuit television in monitoring public places to information peddling through the sale of databases. As distinct problems, each of these would require very different solutions, for one approach may not be adequate, or appropriate, for all. In the case of closed-circuit television itself, the issues involved are complicated. For instance, there is a difference between having a surveillance camera in a storage room to detect possible theft and having security cameras in taxicabs for drivers' protection. Monitoring by closed-circuit television can be viewed as *both* an infringement of privacy as well as offering protection for individuals. The recent tragic events in New York City bring home the need to find a balance between the concern for privacy and the need for security.

Conclusion

What implications, then, can be drawn from the examination of Foucault's analysis of panopticism for the current fascination with Big Brother surveillance? In contrast to the idea of Big Brother, a top-down force that dominates and oppresses, Foucault's discussion of panopticism opens up the possibility of agency. His analysis suggests that while disciplinary power makes possible the domain for various subject positions, it does not set the position of any individual in a deterministic way. These subject positions are contingent, which means they can be otherwise. This reading of Foucault runs against a common interpretation of him as denying the very possibility of agency. David Lyon (1993, 1994), for instance, asserts that Foucault denies agency in his analysis. Such interpretations of Foucault are understandable, especially given Foucault's own emphasis on the notion of discourse and *epistemes* in his earlier works. For instance, in *The Order of Things*, Foucault (1973) predicted that the discourse of man is nearing its end and that the present episteme in which the human sciences are found will be replaced by another one focusing on language. Man, he tells us, "is a only a recent invention, a figure not yet two hundred years old, a new wrinkle in our knowledge, and … he will disappear again as that knowledge has discovered a new form" (p. xxiii). But as the Canadian philosopher Ian Hacking (1986a) reminds us, it does not follow from such meta-analysis of discourses or epistemes that individuals, like you and I, are nothing (p. 39).

In his later works, Foucault (1982a, 1982b, 1984, 1988) interrogates the connections between agency, power, and autonomy. An examination of these works will have to wait for another occasion, but perhaps it is enough for our purposes here to point out that among the issues with which Foucault (1984) engages are

the following: "How are we constituted as subjects who exercise or submit to power relations? How are we constituted as moral subjects of our own actions?" (1984, p. 49). These are questions about agency, power, and autonomy. They direct us to examine our relation to present circumstances in order to determine "from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing or thinking what we are, do or think" (p. 46). The project, which Foucault (1982b, 1984) calls a "critical ontology" of ourselves, is rooted in the ethos of the Enlightenment. Critical ontology, however, should not be viewed as a theory or doctrine, but rather as a practical critique of ourselves by ourselves, as free beings (Foucault, 1984, p. 47). The task is to question the ways in which we have constituted ourselves into the kinds of subjects we are in order that we may go beyond them.

Genealogical analyses are central to the project of critical ontology. Foucault (1980b) describes genealogy as "the union of erudite knowledge and local memories which allows us to establish a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of this knowledge tactically today" (p. 83). Genealogies, then, are tools for action, providing individuals with some of the materials with which to fashion themselves. Individuals may contest certain descriptions of themselves, certain profiles. Not all challenges succeed, however; in fact, many do not. But some do, as represented by the more recent accomplishments of feminist, gay, and disability activists. In closing, then, if individuals are to refuse the current version of consumer culture, a critique of the conditions that make possible the production of phenomena such as reality TV (and our own roles in those processes) would be an important first step.

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Notes

1. Given the enormity of Foucault's oeuvre, my discussion here concentrates on two works: *Discipline and Punish* (1979) and "What Is Enlightenment?" (1984).
2. Foucault provides a fuller treatment of power relations in modern society in *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1 (1980a).
3. The database was described variously as the "Big Brother database," the "Big Brother files," and the "Big Brother filing system" (McCarthy, 2000).
4. I owe this point to Alison Hearn.
5. It is interesting to note the shift in tone in Poster's analyses between *Foucault, Marxism and History* (1984) and *The Mode of Information* (1990). There is a much less pronounced sense of individuals as the victims of some regime in the latter work.
6. Foucault (1979) tells us that "in a society in which the principal elements are no longer the community and public life, but on one hand private individuals, and on the other, the state, relations can be regulated only in a form which is the exact reverse of the spectacle" (1979, p. 216). He describes surveillance as "the general principle of a new 'political anatomy' whose object and end are ... the relations of discipline" (p. 208).
7. For an analysis of the emergence and impact of statistical thinking in the nineteenth century, see Ian Hacking's *The Taming of Chance* (1991).

8. Foucault articulates such a stance himself in Foucault 1982a and Foucault 1984. For a discussion of Foucault's anti-victim stance, see Hacking 1986a and 1986b.

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