Panoptic man

Description

Panoramic photography, of the kind now common on digital cameras and smart phones, allows you to sweep your camera from a fixed point around 360 degrees (or part thereof) to produce a composite image to present either as a flat plane or to be revisited as an immersive simulacrum.

What happens when bodies get in the way of the lens? Thereâ??s a long history to the body as photographic subject. Panoramic photography provides (or revives) lessons about the body and architectural space.

Digital panoramic photography is enabled by extremely rapid in-camera processing that scans sequences of still images and detects overlaps between them. It stitches the component images together on the fly. (It sometimes also employs data from the cameraâ??s motion sensors.)

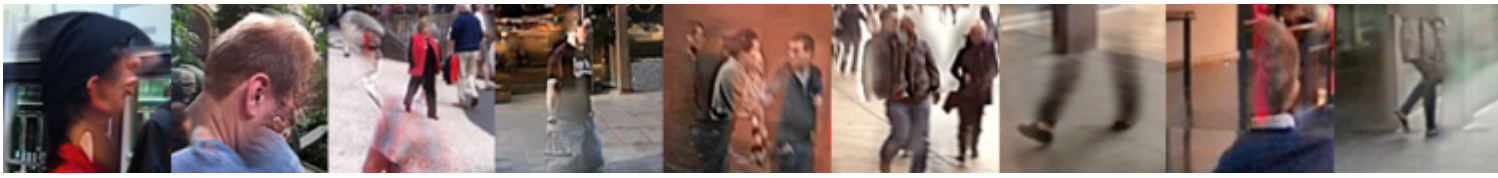
Smartphone panoramic photography is a recreational technology with similar appeal to that demonstrated in the popularity of nineteenth century public panoramas â?? circular buildings presenting scenes of cities, landscapes and battles. At least, digital panoramas render the process of creating such an immersive experience accessible to everyone.

Thereâ??s an obvious educational value to consumer-oriented panoramic photography. It advances the rituals of personal record keeping, expands the touristâ??s image consumption, and serves record-keeping by anyone interested in people and places, such as architects, urbanists, cultural theorists, and photo bloggers.

Panoramic photography exemplifies and amplifies the first-person, single-point view. Like a guard positioned on a watchtower with a spotlight (at least according to the movies), the panoramic photographer stands in the centre of a circle, systematically scanning and exposing the world to view â?? for private gaze or for broadcasting. This friendly technology provides a soft-core, recreational exemplar of heavy-duty **surveillance** culture.

Distorted bodies

There are side effects. Unlike those surveillance cameras mounted on poles, the sides of buildings or those secretive smokey glass hemisphereâ??s barnacled under shop ceilings, panoramic photographers are not machines. Thereâ??s an interesting choreography in play on the part of the photographer, and also of people in the line of fire as they dodge the lens. In the process (due also to parallax effects) bizarre things can happen to foregrounds, moving objects and human bodies. Such accidental objects can be rendered as elegant ephemeral blurs, Muybridgesque sprites, or distorted and dismembered grotesques.



So panoramic photography, in its several aspects, might offer an illustration, metaphor or model for the way society deals with bodies in spaces in the digital age.

Consider the grotesque body. As well as the accidental stitching of bodies through panoramic processing, misshapen bodies populate the Internet, not least as artfully produced YouTube videos. Itâ??s possible to edit videos to produce two-legged galloping horses, chattering human heads that are all mouth, and various human and animal hybrids. Why are we (some more than others) fascinated by

such spectacles? Thereâ??s something festive and **carnivalesque** about distorted representations, a demonstration of the appeal of â??grotesque realismâ?• enjoyed within â??folk cultureâ?• to which literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) refers.

The distortion of bodies from the ideal is a remnant perhaps of what Bakhtin attributes to the base humour of the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance. Irreverent ribaldry is the other side to formal church and state ritual, with their insistence on respect for the sacred, the aspirational and the correct. Contrary to propriety and order, the carnivalesque deals in parody and degradation of the high and the mighty, but also of the less than idealised body in total: a concern with the

> â??lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs;

it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy and birthâ?• (21). Bakhtinâ??s point is that these two strands (the formal and the degraded) co-existed in pre-modern awareness. Today we see them as separated, where one is not allowed to â??contaminateâ?• the other.

The chief literary subject of Bakhtinâ??s study into the grotesque is the lengthy satirical novel by FranÃ§ois Rabelais (c.1494-1553), *The Histories of Gargantua and Pantagruel*, ostensibly about two giants and their encounters with ribald monks, wayward priests, conceited rulers and arbitrary judges. The authorâ??s preface begins:

> â??Most noble boozers, and you my very esteemed and poxy friends.â?•

Amidst the Late Medieval bathroom banter thereâ??s much violence, not least a description of bodily dismembering as a friar defends his wine store against raiders: â??He beat out the brains of some, broke the arms and legs of others, disjointed the neck-bones, demolished the kidneys, slit the noses, blacked the eyes, smashed the jaws, knocked the teeth down the throats, shattered the shoulder-blades, crushed the shins, dislocated the thigh-bones, and cracked the fore-arms of yet othersâ?• (Rabelais, p. 99). Bakhtin sees the parading of this kind of detail as a typical

> â??anatomization and dismemberment of the human body.â?•

Thereâ??s also a culinary aspect to this butchery presenting â??a grotesque image of the dissected bodyâ?• (Bakhtin, p.194).

In fact carnival grotesqueries are typically described in terms outside of the privileged realms of vision and the sound. They deal in the **baser senses**, and exaggerated depictions of the organs that process and produce them: smell (the nose), taste (the tongue and belly). Needless to say, odour, flatulence, excrement, and urine, percolate through Rabelaisâ?? novel, not to mention allusions to pleasurable sensations, and anything else generated or consumed below the waist.

Panoramic photography is obviously a technology of the visual sense, but in so far as it opens our awareness to unsettled, ambiguous, disjointed, dismembered and grotesque realism, we could say it brings the character of the whole sensorium into prominence. At best it re-animates and brings life to the static pose and well-poised. In so far as it presents the familiar in a strange light, partly through

accident, it exposes a substrate of chaos and laughter within the everyday, otherwise obscured under the serious command of vision. But if panoramic vision liberates then itâ??s not all fun.

Michel **Foucault** draws attention to the carnival aspects of pre-modern European society, though as manifested in the grim punitive violence of chain gangs and public executions. Apart from the spectacle of disgrace, **torture and execution**, the public were drawn to such events by the â??whole aspect of the carnival, in which rules were inverted, authority mocked and criminals turned into heroesâ?• (61). Members of the public would gather around the prisoners to revel in the profanities expected from the condemned as they cursed â??the judges, laws, the government, and religionâ?• (60).

In spite of its accidental breaks and sutures, digital *panoramarism* inflicts no physical pain. But dismemberment is that other tradition surrounding the human body, luridly described as a mode of punishment in the opening pages of Foucaultâ??s *Discipline and Punish*. For Foucault, the transition to modernity was marked not so much by the abolition of brutality, the slow infusion of a more â??humanitarianâ?• outlook, or the growth in democracy, but a decline of the â??gloomy festival of punishment,â?• the disappearance of punishment as a spectacle. For Foucault social transformation is all about what society does to bodies.

In a previous post I referred to the place of the body in **Vitruvian** geometry uniting macrocosm and microcosm. In the paragraph above I referred to the body in carnival, both benign and tortured. The modern, industrialised era was marked by a more utilitarian approach to the body (and its disciplining) â?? societyâ??s attempt to instill order and control by creating circumstances in which the body is tamed, rather than afforded the threat or actuality of humiliation, flaying or dismemberment.

According to Foucault, the instruments for this exercise of *bio-power* by society departed from the extremes of punishing bodies to the avoidance of crime and the inculcation of good behaviour in the first place: to confinement, keeping bodies apart and isolated (as in schools and hospitals); instilling drills and routines (as in the military); removing individualising signs (by putting people in uniforms, or even taking away their clothing); and taming bodies by requiring them to attend to the training of their individuated parts (through handwriting, gymnastics, marching and other gestural practices). These

techniques instigated the promotion of â??**docile** bodies.â?•

Restraint

Such disciplinary practices and processes come together in the concept of the **prison**, an architectural instrument for reform as well as punishment. And here the panorama presents itself with greatest potency, not as a recreational or instructive apparatus but as the **Panopticon**, an architectural â??machineâ?• that positions at its fulcrum the all-seeing eye.

The foremost proponent of this architectural solution to the problem of social discipline was Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), a prominent British legal reformer, appropriately labelled a â??**utilitarian**.â?• In keeping with an era of burgeoning industrial production, bureaucracy, efficiency and the translation of social life to number and calculation, he was the one who advocated that laws should account for maximising pleasure, minimising pain, and for the greatest number. We are each capable of calculating what is to our individual benefit. Architecture could feature in that calculation, even for criminals.

Bentham describes his prison design in great detail a series of published letters, helpfully available online in facsimile as well as text formats. Thereâ??s a naive, industrial simplicity to his circular schema: Cells are arranged around a closed courtyard. Thereâ??s an â??inspection lodgeâ?• or tower at the centre from which the guard can see every prisoner in their cell.

Unlike the situation for the contemporary tourist with panoramic smartphone, itâ??s not possible to tell if the guard at the hub of this arrangement is present or even watching the cells. Furthermore, the prisoners canâ??t see or hear one another. Bentham suggested that this â??inspection principleâ?• could be applied to other building types, such as hospitals, schools and factories.

Any architect could spot the many â??utilitarianâ?• reasons for the lack of success of the panoptic plan form as detailed by Bentham, not least thereâ??s: the wastage of space around the tower; the difficulty of accommodating other necessary spaces that are not part of the panoptic arrangement, such as staff quarters, kitchens, recreation areas, eating and service zones, access points, circulation, fire escape

stairs; and the problems of fitting ducts and furniture against curved walls.

Like the naively rudimentary Platonic shape on which itâ??s based (the circle), the Panopticon presents as an idealised type, a form that is only imperfectly realised, if at all. The Panopticon is also a handy emblem of the way **power** gets distributed amongst bodies in society.

Real power

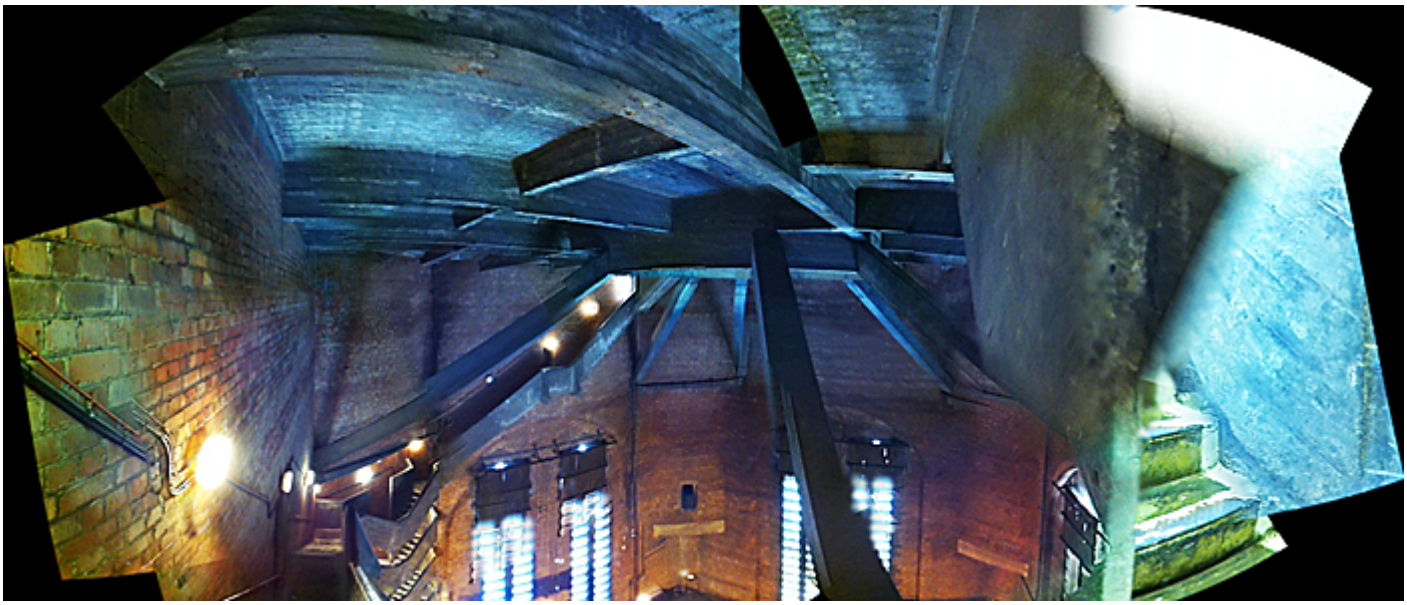
Michel Foucaultâ??s account of Benthamâ??s panoptic schema for controlling bodies sustains a potent social commentary. The Panopticon is not a machine for the powerful to exercise control over the weak, or for the domination of one class over another. In fact in any panoptic arrangement (in a hospital, factory, school or prison), it matters little who is in the position of observer, or if thereâ??s even anyone there. The panopticon provides â??an apparatus for supervising its own mechanisms,â?• and â??enclosed as he is in the middle of this architectural mechanism, is not the directorâ??s own fate entirely bound up with it?â?• (204)

> â??Power has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up.â?• (202)

If I dare, thereâ??s an obvious orbital logic to the account of the body provided above. Itâ??s all about the circle. Think of the Vitruvian man positioned within a circle, and its Renaissance representations: the body enclosed in the circle and the square advertising itâ??s role in the play between heaven and earth. In the industrial age thereâ??s a shift to a utilitarian, machinic circle, a circuit of visually-linked control points, with all attention on the hub.

Inevitably there are circles within circles, or at least circles within narratives about circles. Thereâ??s the rotary spectre of the body torn apart (quartered) by four horses that begins Foucaultâ??s account in *Discipline and Punish*. As a slightly less gruesome spectacle, Foucault refers to the punitive chain gangs in the early 1800s that would pass periodically through a European town, â??a saturnalia of punishment,â?• and â??a great merry-go-roundâ?• (261).

Turning a blind eye to grim festivals, we can incline towards hope in the carnivalesque spirit â?? seeing the strange in the familiar, or turning it into that. Itâ??s a bit like looking at the world reflected in a distorting mirror, through a fish-eye lens, or chopped up like a panorama.



Related posts

- Circles and how to get out of them
- Le Corbusierâ??s error
- Accidental people
- E-motion

Also see

- Coyne, Richard. 1999. *Technoromanticism: Digital Narrative, Holism, and the Romance of the Real*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. pp. 119-120, 161-162, 197-198, 247-250.
- Snodgrass, Adrian, and Richard Coyne. 2006. *Interpretation in Architecture: Design as a Way of Thinking*. London: Routledge. pp. 192-194.

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- Bentham, Jeremy. 1787. *The Works of Jeremy Bentham, Volume 4*. London: John Bowring. online
- Markus, Tom. 1993. *Buildings and Power: Freedom and Control in the Origin of Modern Building Types*. Routledge: London.
- McLemee, Scott. 1997. Critic at the carnival. *Nation*, (265) 22, 16-18.
- Rabelais, FranÃ§ois. 1955. *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Trans. J. M. Cohen. London: Penguin. First published in French in 1530-1534.
- Ryan, Alan (ed). 1987. *John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham: Utilitarianism and Other Essays*. London: Penguin.

For images of a Panoptic prison design, Google Illinois State Penitentiary.

- Blog article by John Cox, 2009, The History Behind Modern Surveillance and Its Effect on Society blog post

On the theme of the senses see

- Classen, Constance. 2005. McLuhan in the rainforest: the sensory world of oral cultures. In D. Howes (ed.), *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*: 147-163. Oxford: Berg.
- Classen, Constance. 1993. *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and across Cultures* . London: Routledge.

For a critique of the primacy we normally accord to vision and the myth of abstract sense data see the introductory chapter to

- Merleau-Ponty, Marcel. 1962. *Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Note added 30 March 2012: Thereâ??s a further relationship between the previous post on centrality and Michel Foucaultâ??s postmodern take on geometry. He describes the Persian garden as a potential â??heterotopia,â?• ie an ambiguous and paradoxical space.

â??The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible. â?¦ We must not forget that in the Orient the garden, an astonishing creation that is now a thousand years old, had very deep and seemingly superimposed meanings. The traditional garden of the Persians was a sacred space that was supposed to bring together inside its rectangle four parts representing the four parts of the world, with a space still more sacred than the others that were like an umbilicus, the navel of the world at its center (the basin and water fountain were there); and all the vegetation of the garden was supposed to come together in this space, in this sort of microcosm. As for carpets, they were originally reproductions of gardens (the garden is a rug onto which the whole world comes to enact its symbolic perfection, and the rug is a sort of garden that can move across space). The garden is the smallest parcel of the world and then it is the totality of the world. The garden has been a sort of happy, universalizing heterotopia since the beginnings of antiquity (our modern zoological gardens spring from that source).â?• Foucault, Michel. 1986. Of other spaces. *Diacritics*, (16) 1, 22-27, p.25-26.

Category

1. Architecture

Tags

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2. Bakhtin
3. bodies
4. carnival
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6. Foucault
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