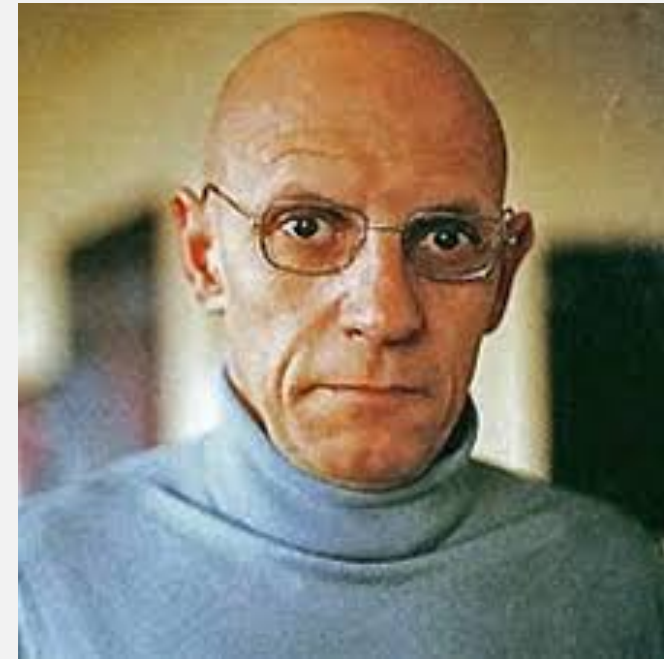


THE EYES HAVE IT

Interpreting *Pride and Prejudice* Through Michel Foucault's
Theory of Power

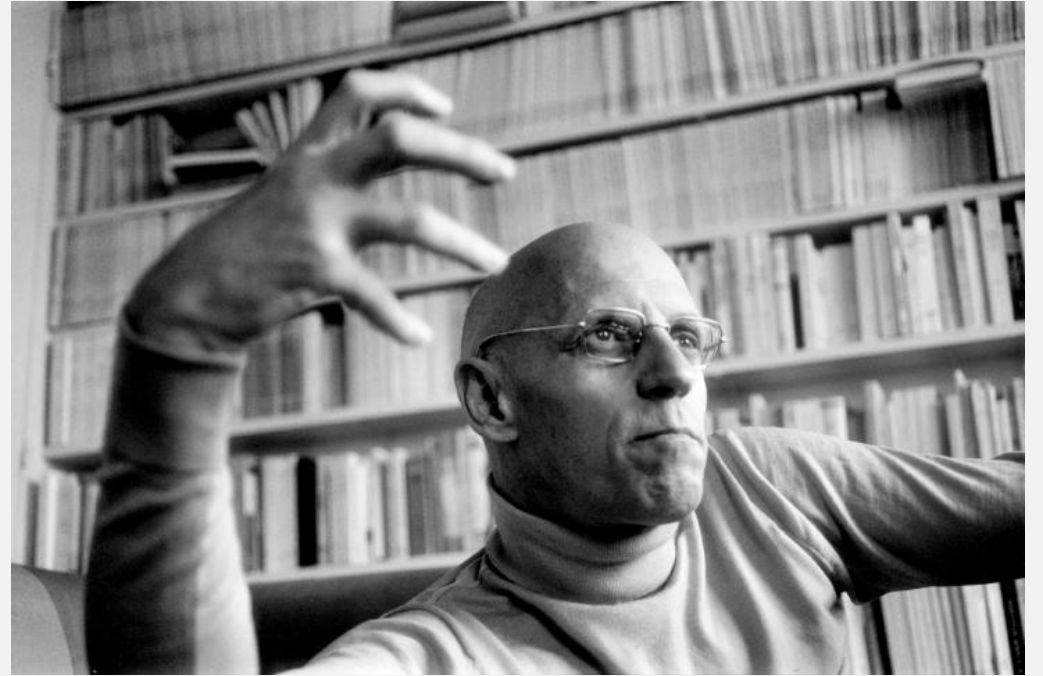
LET'S TALK ABOUT FOUCAULT

- In Michel Foucault's "The Subject and Power", Foucault states that humans are made into subjects (777).
- A subject signifies both the state of being subject to another's control, and of obtaining – and becoming tied to – an identity position (778).
- The subject is divided from others according to binaries of power dynamics (rich vs. poor, man vs. woman, etc...) (778).
- These are a series of oppositions. Each of the oppositions are struggles against the submission of people's subjectivity. They are about who we are, each questioning the status of the individual.



"I love this turtleneck, really."

- It is power which makes individuals subjects
 - Subject to someone else by control and dependence (781).
 - Subject to one's own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge (781).
 - The struggle against forms of subjection (782).
 - “An important phenomenon took place around the eighteenth century – it was a new distribution, a new organization of this kind of individualizing power,” (783).
 - Individuality shaped in a new form and submitted to a set of very specific patterns (783).



“I’m intense about these turtlenecks.”

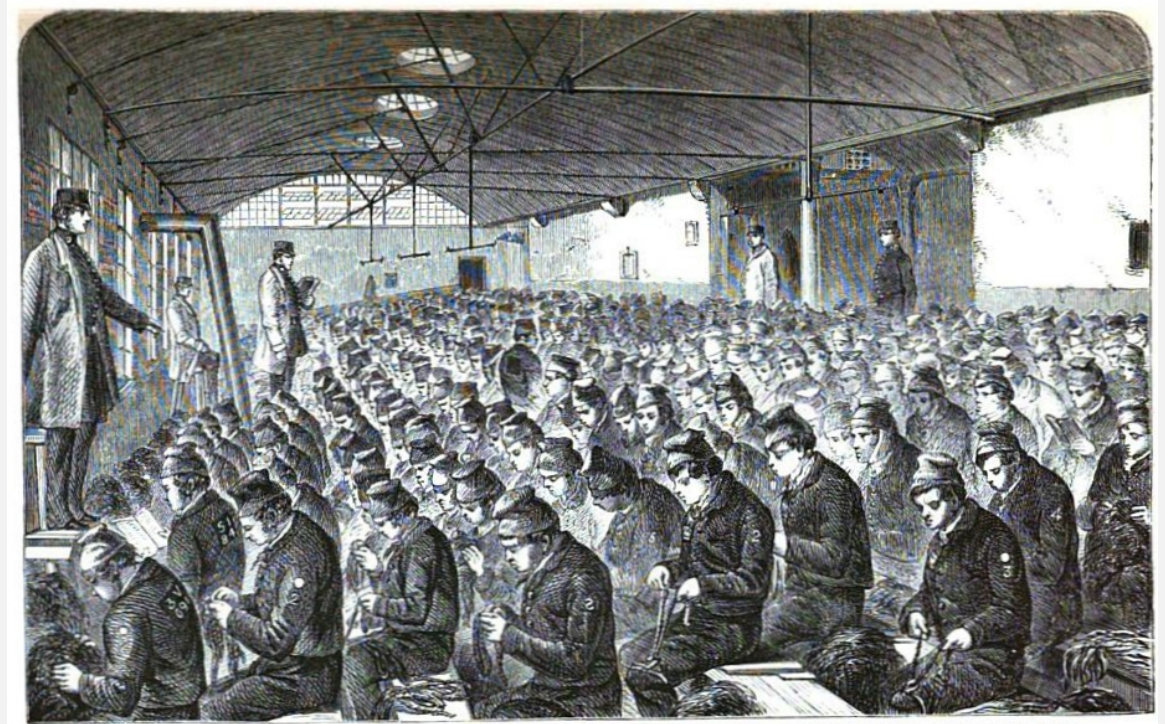
LET'S START CONNECTING TO *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

- People are structured to act and behave in a certain way “by the means of a whole series of power processes,” (*Subject and Power*, 787). Foucault uses the example of the school system. These power processes include:
 - Enclosure (787)
 - **Surveillance (787)**
 - Reward and punishment (787)
 - Pyramidal hierarchy (787)



THE BIRTH OF THE PRISON

- In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault asserts that the Enlightenment became synonymous with increasing mechanisms of surveying the members of its society (74).
- He also coins the term panopticism: universal, ceaseless surveillance from which there is no escape (*Discipline and Punish*, 195).
- Foucault assesses that beginning in the Enlightenment, institutions used data collected by surveillance to discipline and normalize, to make individuals 'useful' for society, 'strengthen the social force' (*Discipline and Punish*, 208).
- Essentially, surveillance was a subconscious network to keep people in their place (particularly as a class based system), and was based on power.
- My interest involves considering Austen's 'gaze' in terms of discipline and surveillance.



LARGE OAKUM-ROOM (UNDER THE SILENT SYSTEM) AT THE MIDDLESEX HOUSE OF CORRECTION, COLDBATH FIELDS.

SURVEILLANCE

- In *Pride and Prejudice*, vast networks of spies enable news to travel rapidly. Within a very few paragraphs of the novel's opening, everyone who lives near Netherfield Hall knows about Charles Bingley, including his mode of transportation, his annual income, and his marriage eligibility (Austen, 1-2).
- Douglas Murray postulates that it is a highly efficient network of surveillance which enables Mrs. Bennet and Lady Catherine to keep a close eye on what is happening around them (Murray, 44).



“Yes, I am incredibly awkward. It is because Mr. Darcy is surveying my every move, and everyone is into my business.”

WAIT... MRS. BENNET, A SPY?

- Mrs. Bennet commands an extensive memory and intelligence network (Chan, 5).
- After arriving home from the first assembly ball, Mrs. Bennet recounts and perfectly describes each of Mr. Bingley's dance partners (Austen, 12).
- Mrs. Bennet's chief desire is to see each of her daughters married out of the necessity of economy. As such, Mrs. Bennet becomes quite literally an embodiment of surveillance and observation. She becomes synonymous of "the public gaze that monitors decorum... based on a Foucauldian concept of surveillance and observation, not solely on desire... The public eye employs a gaze of acute observation," (Chan, 15).
- Mrs. Bennet is the center of a remarkably efficient and accurate network for the sharing of information: her 'solace was visiting and news' – in other words, discovery and dissemination (Austen, 6).



THE BALLROOM MARKETPLACE

- During the first 1/3 of the novel, the various ballrooms are used as a marketplace for which to make economic transactions. It is through gazing that assessments are made for marriage matches and economic unions.
- “In Austen, the ballroom becomes the place where the desiring gaze meets the gaze of discipline, where discipline in the form of decorum becomes the desired currency with which men are evaluated as potential husbands... who are viewed as ‘marriage material’,” (Chan, 10).
- “In *Pride and Prejudice*, the ballroom gaze combines a desiring gaze with a Foucauldian evaluative gaze to further the economic concerns of marrying well,” (Chan, 5).
- When Darcy and Bingley enter the ballroom, all eyes turn toward them to assess their eligibility, gazing up and down. When Darcy is assessed as unfavorable, all attention immediately turns to Bingley’s match to a number of potential wives (Austen, 10).
- Chan’s evaluation, and evidence from the novel, synthesizes well with Foucault’s claim that the aim of the panoptic structure is to ensure discipline by presenting the possibility that one could be watched at any moment. As a result, Foucault postulates, power functions automatically upon the panoptic subjects, for they always behave; visibility becomes useful as a trap for behavior (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 187).



MR. DARCY

- As the action shifts from the public to the private spheres, Chan identifies that Darcy's gaze of desire maintains the male spectator/female object division, and that Darcy's growing attraction is reflected in the intensity of his gaze (16).
- This can be evidenced in the text:
 - "Mr. Darcy had at first scarcely allowed her to be pretty; *he had looked at her without admiration at the ball*; and when they next met, he *looked at her only to criticise*. But no sooner had he made it clear to himself and his friends that she had hardly a good feature in her face, than he began to find it was rendered uncommonly intelligent by the *beautiful expression of her dark eyes*. To this discovery succeeded some others equally mortifying," (Austen, 21, emphasis mine).
 - Darcy on Elizabeth: "meditating on the very great pleasure which a *pair of fine eyes* on the face of a pretty woman can bestow," (Austen, 24, emphasis mine).
 - "How frequently Mr. Darcy's eyes were fixed on her," (Austen, 46).
 - He abstains from gazing at her during her last day at Netherfield, so as not to betray her feelings: "though they were at one time left by themselves for half an hour, he adhered most conscientiously to his book, and *would not even look at her*," (Austen, 54, emphasis mine).
 - Later, he leaves Lady Catherine in mid-conversation and moves "with his usual full deliberation towards the pianoforte, stationed himself so as to *command a full view* of the fair performer's countenance," (Austen, 151, emphasis mine).



ELIZABETH

- “Despite Darcy’s constant gaze, Elizabeth’s perception and understanding make her gaze the most powerful one in the novel. It enables her to assess many of the situations she encounters correctly,” (Chan, 27).
- “Elizabeth attracts Darcy’s gaze, but she also returns it, for her ability to look others in the eye is a measure of her independence and strength,” (Murray, 45).
- For example, she is not deceived as to the state of her parents’ marriage, never having been “blind to the impropriety of her father’s behavior as a husband,” (Austen, 202).
- She also uses her “quickness of observation” to notice that Mr. Bingley’s sisters display “proud and conceited” manners, (Austen, 14).



LADY CATHERINE

- Lady Catherine is a powerful agent of surveillance in the novel.
- She uses her considerable power to control and survey others.
 - “She was the most active magistrate in her own parish the minutest concerns of which were carried to her by Mr. Collins; and whenever any of the cottagers were disposed to be quarrelsome, discontented, or too poor, she sallied forth into the village to settle their differences, silence their complaints, and scold them into harmony and plenty,” (Austen, 144).
 - Here, we see her using Mr. Collins as an agent of surveillance. The upper class’s use of the lower orders as spies and manipulators.
 - This synthesizes nicely with Foucault’s assertion that power is a “governance of the possible actions of others,” (*Subject and Power*, 790).



THE PAINTING

- Elizabeth's rejection of the power structures that define her society involves quite literally adjusting her vision of Darcy's character.
- When Elizabeth visits at Pemberley, she encounters a portrait of Darcy.
- "Every idea brought forward by the housekeeper was favourable to his character, and as she stood before the canvas, on which he represented, and fixed his eyes upon herself, she thought of his regard with a deeper sentiment of gratitude than it had ever raised before; she remembered its warmth, and softened its impropriety of expression," (Austen, 212).
- The mechanics of the Foucauldian gaze break down completely.



In the 2005 film, Elizabeth makes eye contact with this sculpture of Matthew MacFadyen instead.

SO WHAT? SHE'S JUST LOOKING AT A PAINTING

- The phrase “fixed his eyes upon herself” has been described by Isobel Armstrong as “an amazing moment of syntactic ambiguity,” (xxi).
- Peter Sabor postulates that it: “allows both Elizabeth and the portrait of Darcy (and by extension Darcy himself) to be fixing his eyes upon her; either Elizabeth is become Darcy, looking at herself through his eyes, or she finds herself unable to evade his gaze,” (233).



I couldn't find a good visual of this scene, so instead, here is a painting from Pride and Prejudice and Zombies. You're welcome.

JUST BECAUSE A FEW LITERARY SCHOLARS THINK THIS IS IMPORTANT?

- Actually, the text supports this hypothesis. After establishing an egalitarian power dynamic with Darcy's painting, Elizabeth and Darcy begin to quite literally see each other for who they are:
- “They were confined for the evening at different tables, and she had nothing to hope, but that *his eyes were so often turned towards her* side of the room, as to make him play as unsuccessfully as herself,” (Austen, 287, emphasis mine).
- The position of the ‘gazer’ is now subverted, taken on by the female, and then shared equally between the two parties.



SHOWDOWN!

- Although Lady Catherine identifies as the panoptic center of her society, she is humbled – and her power dynamic subverted – by the implacable and independent gaze of Elizabeth Bennet.
- As we have seen, all through *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth becomes symbolically associated with her eyes, with gazing, and sight. Her eyes are mentioned by the narrator every ten pages or so, with a near predictable frequency.
- I submit that the true height of action within *Pride and Prejudice* is Elizabeth's ability to withstand the powerful gaze of Lady Catherine, unblinking and causing Lady Catherine's retreat. Through her ability to return the gaze of others, Elizabeth is able to declare her resistance and independence of mind amid dominant forces of conformity within her world.
- Lady Catherine's Foucauldian gaze as an attempt to control her environment (Chan, 25).
- Lady Catherine looks for submission but Elizabeth does not blink (Austen, 298).
- This synthesizes well with Foucault's claim that power is a governance of the possible actions of others (*Subject and Power*, 790).
- Lady Catherine says that if Elizabeth marries Mr. Darcy, she will "disgrace him *in the eyes of everybody*," (Austen, 302, emphasis mine).
- "Ultimately, the power of Lady Catherine's gaze is undermined by Elizabeth and Darcy's marriage. For once, she cannot lecture people into doing her will," (Chan, 25).



THE PROPOSAL

- Darcy's second proposal to Elizabeth is the final breakdown of the Foucauldian surveillance gaze.
- When Elizabeth accepts the proposal, she “could not look” at Darcy (Austen, 310).
- The text reads: “Had Elizabeth been able to encounter his eye, she might have seen how well the expression of heart-felt delight, diffused all over his face, became him,” (Austen, 310).
- Authentic expressions of feeling presented without a hierarchy of power.
- Mary Chan asserts: “Elizabeth does not need to look at Darcy to receive or convey any more information during their proposal scene. When it comes to heart-felt, sincere declarations of love, the politics of looking are not necessary,” (31).



What?! They are not power-tripping by trying to stare each other down. Scholars such as Mary Chan and Douglas Murray assert that the removal of the power dynamic signifies the two see each other as egalitarians and equals.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

- We have applied the insights of Michel Foucault's "Theory of Power," particularly the ways in which surveillance is manifest in *Pride and Prejudice*.
- One of the most interesting ways this power dynamic is signified is through gazing and eye contact.
- While Darcy notices the beauty of Elizabeth's 'fine eyes', those same eyes look directly into those of Lady Catherine, and resist her power by refusing to blink. Elizabeth subverts the power dynamic and refuses to close her eyes or conform to her patriarchal and class-based society's expectations for middle class womanhood. "To look back becomes the most powerful act a woman can perform because the power to control the gaze is subverted and taken over by the female object," (Chan, 4).
- Indeed, Elizabeth subverts the power dynamic in her relationships to both Mr. Darcy and Lady Catherine. As Foucault says, "At the very heart of the power relationship and constantly provoking it, are the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom," (*Subject and Power*, 790).



"I'm watching you!"

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

- Armstrong, Isobel. Introduction. *Pride and Prejudice*. By Jane Austen. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990. vii-xxx.
- Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. Delhi, IN: Global Media, 2006. ProQuest ebrary. Web. 21 September 2016.
- Chan, Mary M. *Vision and Visibility: Power and the Observer in Jane Austen's Novels*. MA Thesis. McMaster University, 2002. Web. 24 September 2016.
- Evoy, Karen. *Jane Austen: Women and Power*. MA Thesis, McGill University, 1987. Web. 24 September 2016.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Allen Lane, 1977. Web. https://monoskop.org/images/4/43/Foucault_Michel_Discipline_and_Punish_The_Birth_of_the_Prison_1977_1995.pdf. 19 October 2016.
- _____. "The Subject and Power." *Critical Inquiry*: The University of Chicago, vol. 8, 1982, [https://d2l.viu.ca/content/enforced/99163ENGL_ENGL240_N01_D01_R01_F2016/Foucault%20-%20The%20Subject%20and%20Power%20\(R\).pdf](https://d2l.viu.ca/content/enforced/99163ENGL_ENGL240_N01_D01_R01_F2016/Foucault%20-%20The%20Subject%20and%20Power%20(R).pdf). 23 September 2016.
- Hill, Christine A. *Authoring Resistance to Power: Jane Austen and Michel Foucault*. MA Thesis. California State University, 2014. Web. 25 September 2016.
- Murray, Douglas. "Gazing and Avoiding the Gaze." *Jane Austen's Business: Her World and Her Profession*. Ed. Juliet McMaster and Bruce Stovel. London: Macmillan, 1996. 44-50. Print.
- Sabor, Peter. "The Strategic Withdrawal from Ekphrasis in Jane Austen's Novels." *Icons, Texts, Iconotexts: Ekphrasis and Intermediality*. Ed. Peter Wagner. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1996. 213-235.



“See? The Foucauldian surveillance gaze. I told you it was a thing.”