Panopticism and the Construction of Power in Franz Kafka’s *The Castle*

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This enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded, in which an uninterrupted work of writing links the centre and periphery, in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead—all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism.

Michel Foucault—*Discipline and Punish*

In his “Panopticon; or, The Inspection House” (1791), Jeremy Bentham expounded his theories for the construction of an ideal prison system—the Panopticon—following a precise architectural model. Bentham envisioned the Panopticon as consisting of a central watchtower surrounded by a circular row of cells permanently exposed to the unseen Inspector in his lodge. This prison would operate on the assumption that fear of being watched would lead the inmates not only to incorporate the rules but to regulate their own behavior as well. Bentham did not restrict his ideal to the building of a penitentiary-house, but extended its application to any of a number of institutions built under the same principles and with a similar purpose, “whether it be that of punishing the incorrigible, guarding the insane, reforming

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1Although the idea of the Panopticon has become inextricably linked to Jeremy Bentham, it was his brother Samuel who actually “devised the Panopticon, to be constructed on the principle of central inspection, as a means of facilitating the supervision of large numbers of workers” (Pease-Watkin). Jeremy Bentham saw its potential for other uses and universalized the concept.
the vicious, confining the suspected, employing the idle, maintaining the helpless [. . .]” (Bentham 34, emphasis original). Nor did he limit his plans to a carceral structure or correctional facilities, either, but went even further by formulating a utopian vision of a Panopticon town as a self-sustaining unit of production that would include factories, schools, churches, and hospitals. Following utilitarian principles, Bentham sought to conflate a moral purpose with notions of productivity in a model whose final aims were “punishment, reformation and pecuniary economy” (Bentham 50).

Written in 1922, and published posthumously in 1926, Franz Kafka’s *The Castle* portrays a world seemingly controlled by whimsical leaders and absurd rules. As K., land-surveyor and unwelcome guest in the village near the Castle, endeavors to reach his goals—the Castle itself and the elusive Director Klamm—questions arise regarding the ultimate source of power, the means of rule-enforcement, and the terms of the relationship between villagers and officials in the prison-like world created by Kafka. Regardless of who or what is in control of the Castle, of the village, and of K.’s actions, the power structures are kept in place by the pervasive fear of a ubiquitous bureaucratic system and by the threat of a punishment that is seldom actually administered or experienced.

In his analysis of *The Castle*, Michael Löwy asks, “what if the Castle did not symbolize something else but was just a castle, that is to say the seat of an earthly authority?” (50). Thus Löwy points to the need to produce interpretations of the novel that do not rely exclusively on symbolic or allegorical meanings. This article seeks to identify those structural elements that enable

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2Much of the debate on Bentham’s aims, as Simon Werret notes, has focused on “the extent to which Bentham’s program for a rational, utilitarian society was motivated by a concern for humanitarian reform or more sinister disciplinary interests.” Here, I subscribe to the first view.

3Löwy argues that “the ‘Castle’ embodies Power, Authority, State, as against the common people, represented by the ‘Village’” (50).
the construction and functioning of authority in the Castle, examining how it works rather than what it stands for. I maintain that Kafka’s Castle operates on the basis of panoptic principles, relying on an authoritarian regime and permanent surveillance for the sake of individual discipline and social stability. Tracing the numerous parallels between the Castle and Bentham’s Panopticon serves a twofold purpose. On the one hand, it reveals the organizing principles beneath the apparently haphazard and absurd structure of the Castle; on the other hand, it uncovers the contradictions and limitations intrinsic to the Benthamite carceral project.

The separation of the Castle-as-Panopticon from the village helps articulate two interrelated spaces—physical and mental—each reinforcing the other. The Castle occupies a central position in relation to the village, not because it lies at “its very geographical center,” but because of its location at a vantage point from which control and authority can be established. The spatial distance between the two spaces defines the hierarchical division between the gentlemen and their social inferiors, and it incapacitates the villagers, preventing them from reaching the Castle. As K. sets off to reach the Castle, he notes that “[t]he street he had taken, the main street in the village, did not lead to the Castle hill, [. . .] and though it didn’t lead any farther from the Castle, it didn’t get any closer either” (10). K.’s observation focuses directly on structural elements in the design of the Castle that make it inaccessible to any but authorized persons.¹ His description of its exterior, particularly of the tower, also presents striking similarities to Bentham’s Panopticon. “The tower up here,” K. says, “the tower of a residence as now became evident, possibly of the main Castle, was a monotonous

¹Access to the “nerve-centre” of the Panopticon was almost impossible. Janet Semple explains, “The aim of this labyrinth of galleries, stairs, and passageways was not only to keep prisoners under constant observation, it was also to protect the warders by keeping them separate from the inmates” (119). The labyrinthine qualities of the Castle appear in K.’s and Olga’s descriptions of the Castle.
round building [. . .] with little windows that glinted in the sun” (8). This portrayal coincides with Bentham’s choice of the most suitable shape for the lodge. In one of his letters, he states, “As the general form of the building, the most commodious seems to be the circular” (43, emphasis original). And just as Bentham modeled his inspection tower after a church, the sight of the Castle tower brings to K.’s mind recollections of the church in his hometown. These considerations of shape and structure, nonetheless, take a secondary place in relation to the symbolic function of the building.

The Castle represents both a physical and symbolic structure; its physical presence corresponds to a psychic state determined by the symbolic value of the Castle-as-Panopticon. Unlike the Inspector’s lodge in Bentham’s scheme, which is permanently visible, the Castle seems to dissolve, and K. feels that “the longer he looked, the less he could make out, and the deeper everything sank into the twilight” (99). Even though the Castle disappears from K.’s range of vision, its hidden presence still exerts a powerful influence on his actions. That the Castle is felt rather than seen and that it shifts from a solid structure into a jumble of buildings serve as indications of its illusory nature. These attributes further support the notion that the effectiveness of the power held by the Castle and by the Panopticon does not necessitate their physical presence but depends on their ultimate psychic effects on the observers.

Much like its exterior, the Castle’s internal structure appears to be a fiction staged for outsiders. In reference to his brother’s experience at the Castle, Olga Barnabas comments, “He can enter an office, though it doesn’t even seem to be an office but rather an anteroom to the offices, and perhaps not even that, perhaps it’s a room intended for all those who aren’t allowed

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5Bentham wrote a series of letters to his father from Russia in 1786. “The letters and the Postscripts, accompanied by three illustrative plates, were printed in Dublin and London in 1791, and this is the edition often referred to as the first ‘publication,’ [. . .]” (Pease-Watkin).
Olga’s words directly address the issue of reality and illusion in the villagers’ perceptions of the Castle. In this respect, Reg Whitaker suggests that the Panopticon “is, at bottom, nothing more than sleight of hand.” He adds, “But according to Bentham it creates a context in which the subjects have no alternative but to believe that appearance is reality” (35). Hence, the physicality of the Castle, like that of the watchtower in the Panopticon, matters to the villagers insofar as it represents the control without bounds that permeates their lives. The Castle resides primarily in their minds, governing their thoughts and determining their behavior, and it marks, symbolically, the site of the gaze that reaches them in any place at any given moment.

The crucial factor in panoptic surveillance and in the workings of the panoptic Castle does not lie in the intervention of the officials but in the operation of the gaze, that is, the ability of the Inspector-Director to see in all directions at all times. James Hurley argues, “The omnipresence of the panoptic eye ensures that each subject will always be on view, on display” (77). K.’s remarks on the panopticism of the Castle resonate with the qualities of Bentham’s prison. As he stares at the Castle, he has a strong intuition, “as if he were watching someone who sat there calmly, gazing into space, not lost in thought and therefore cut off from everything, but free and untroubled; as if he were alone, unobserved; and yet it could not have escaped him that someone was observing him” (Kafka 98-99). The existence of an all-seeing observer, presumably Klamm, foregrounds the radical need for the internalization of rules and self-vigilance. In this regard, Jeffrey Reiman claims, “The very fact of general visibility—being see able more than being seen—will be enough

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6 As Rosa Ainley points out, the associated meanings of “panoptic” go beyond the original intention of the Panopticon to include the pernicious consequences of its application. “Panoptic means ‘all embracing, in a single view,’” she says, “This sounds considerably more benign than the actual purpose of the panopticon structure” (88).
to produce effective social control. Indeed, awareness of being visible makes people the agents of their own subjection” (160, emphasis original).

The power of the gaze, which in the Panopticon is concentrated in the figure of the Inspector, becomes dispersed in the Castle. In this respect, Hurley speaks of “a visual architecture that permits the symbolic order—ideology—to deploy its authoritative gaze not merely on its subjects, but through them, each subject’s gaze positioning his neighbor even as that neighbor’s gaze positions him” (77). K. notices the insistent stares of the patrons at the Bridge Inn, fixing him as if “they really wanted something but just couldn’t say what it was” (Kafka 25). Similarly, Frieda associates the assistants, whom she calls “Klamm’s emissaries,” with the gaze. “Their eyes, those naïve but sparkling eyes,” she tells K., “somehow remind me of Klamm’s eyes, yes, that’s it, Klamm’s glance sometimes leaps from their eyes and goes straight through me” (Kafka 139). K. and Frieda are never entirely free from their observation, and, in this way, Bentham’s symbolic configuration of the gaze turns into a reality of “bodies gazing and being gazed at” (Hurley 6). Owing to the dispersal of the gaze, the assistants act as stand-ins for Klamm at those moments when direct viewing is made impossible by physical barriers.

Whereas the gaze operates mostly, but not exclusively, on the level of the imaginary, an additional element—the voice—functions at the physical level. The conversation tubes that Bentham devised as a means of communication between the Inspector and the inmates are replaced in the Castle by a more modern device—the telephone. In the Panopticon, only the Inspector can employ the tin tube to initiate communication. “By means of this implement,” Bentham writes, “the slightest whisper of the one might be heard by the other, especially if he had proper notice to apply his ear to the tube” (36). When K. decides to call the Castle, this whisper sounds like a “humming,” more specifically a kind of “singing, the singing of the most distant, of the most utterly distant, voices” (Kafka 20). That he has ever actually
contacted one of the authorities is later placed in doubt by the chairman’s explanation that “[t]here is no separate telephone connection to the Castle and no switchboard to forward [their] calls,” and that “all the telephones in the lowest-level departments ring, or all would ring if the ringing mechanism on nearly all of them were not [. . .] disconnected.” Only in such exceptional circumstances as when “an overtired official needs some diversion” does the caller receive an answer from “somebody” (Kafka 72). Because the person who picks up the phone on the receiving end may not be the one for whom the call was intended, the speaker can never ascertain the real identity of the person who answers the call. The voice, then, becomes a disembodied phenomenon in an impersonal mechanism of power. The use of the voice—as well as of the gaze—equates anonymity and invisibility with the exercise of power and emphasizes the type of human interactions favored by the authoritarian regime of the Castle-as-Panopticon.

The workings of the gaze and the constant surveillance of individual movements indicate that the system makes no allowances for intimacy or privacy. On the night K. meets Frieda at the Gentlemen’s Inn, his self-proclaimed “assistants” confess to having spent the whole night in the taproom while K. and Frieda were “frolicking” and lying on the filthy floor. This zealous vigilance of the assistants recurs in all the intimate moments shared by K. and Frieda. At some point, K. even regrets that “[h]e would have liked to have a confidential conversation with Frieda, but the assistants [. . .] prevented this with their intrusive presence” (Kafka 44). After the brief interlude that follows their love-making at the Bridge Inn, K. notices, once more, the “intrusive presence” of his assistants and of the landlady in the room. Later, in an incident at the school that verges on absurdity, K. wakes up to find one of his assistants—instead of Frieda—lying by his side.

7“The panopticon is governed by a gaze and a voice which are desubjectivized, detached from the bearer—in a word, by gaze and voice qua objects” (Bozovic 11).
on the makeshift bed. Any attempt he makes to protect himself from them ends in failure, for they always manage to break into the room, look in through a window, or make themselves felt even from a distance.

These frequent invasions of privacy confirm the loss of personal rights and of selfhood in the pseudo-carceral world of the village. Privacy, defined as “the condition in which other people are deprived of access to either some information about you or some experience of you” (Reiman 162), cannot exist in the panoptic Castle, for it could promote a sense of freedom opposed, in principle, to the structures of absolute power. The constant visibility to which bodies are exposed in the panoptic village precludes the development of a private self, and, because the Castle demands unrestricted access to information in order to establish control, individual agency must necessarily disappear.

The world of the Castle affords no room for the development of emotional ties in the form of companionship or friendship, especially because they disrupt the established order. For this reason, the affair between K. and Frieda eventually becomes a mockery of love, as they both strive to reach their individual goals. While Frieda longs to leave, “go somewhere else, to southern France, or to Spain” (136), K. single-mindedly attempts to stay and gain access to the Castle by any available means. When they fail to reconcile their differing aspirations, their relationship falls apart. At the same time, their romantic liaison turns into a “disturbance,” that is, a challenge to the status quo that characterizes the rule of the Castle. This prompts its officials to intervene in the matter and restore order. “[E]very trivial change in the most trivial matters,” Secretary Erlanger explains, “can be a serious disturbance.” Consequently, “[p]ersonal feelings cannot be taken into account” (273). Erlanger goes on to demand

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8According to Ruth Gavison, privacy “functions to promote liberty of action, removing the unpleasant consequences of certain actions and thus increasing the liberty to perform them” (qtd. in Reiman 167). This foregrounds the relation control-privacy as an antinomy.
that Frieda return immediately to her place in the taproom, which suggests she has only been temporarily released from the control of the Castle and now reclaimed.

Because they are dealing with forces beyond their control, K. and Frieda can indulge in the illusion of freedom only for a brief moment, believing they are free—or at least capable of making themselves free—and of loving each other. Erlanger’s intervention casts light on what Hurley describes as “the collapsing of public and private into each other,” as a result of which “the public extends into the private, ensuring the social practices enacted in the private conform to those sanctioned by the public” (80). Instead of leading to the coexistence of the two spheres, this blurring of boundaries leads to the expansion of the public and the consequent disappearance of the private.

As for K.’s “irresistible urge to seek out new acquaintances” (10) in the village, the odds are set against him. Social isolation becomes evident in his portrayal of the peasants at the Bridge Inn, “each one on his own chair, neither conversing with one another nor visibly connected, connected only because all of them were staring at him” (25). A His subsequent conversations with the village inhabitants reveal their mistrust, animosity, contempt, or fear, and he soon realizes that, in Lasemann’s words, “there is no custom of hospitality here” (Kafka 12). During his first walk around town he notes that “not a living soul” can be seen in the “tiny little houses,” and that the streets are deserted (10). Undoubtedly, compartmentalization and segmentation of village life facilitate the concentration of power and the task of surveillance. Because of its aims—reformation, discipline and social stability—the panoptic Castle cannot permit the formation of strong interpersonal bonds between the members of this community. In order to ensure “the seamlessness of the official organization” (265), any form of social coordination must be

9“The panopticon is haunted by the same ‘gloomy paradox of crowded solitude’ by the chilling vision of men packed together and yet alone” (Semple 129).
prevented and actively discouraged. Unsurprisingly, K. remains “a complete stranger in the village without acquaintances, without a refuge, exhausted [. . .], lying helpless in the straw mattress at the mercy of each official intervention” (165).

In his interaction with the villagers, K. must confront not only their hostility but also their unquestioning obeisance to the castle rules: no unauthorized persons can stay in the village without a permit; no one can get a permit; no one can see Klamm’s face; no one who is not a gentleman can stay at the Gentlemen’s Inn; no one who is not an official, servant, or messenger can reach the Castle. The simplicity of the regulations, which K. learns soon after his arrival in the village, leaves no doubt as to their meaning: limited access ensures unlimited control with minimal expense. Within the asymmetrical power structure of the Castle, the villagers are reduced to the level of “property,” and as such they have no personal rights, but a single function: to obey. The rules place them in a position of utter subservience and vulnerability in relation to the Castle officials, whose uses and abuses of power they must tolerate. In one of his most lucid moments, K. tells Olga, “Respect for the authorities is innate here and then it’s instilled in you throughout your lives in many different ways and from all sides, and you yourselves help this along as best you can” (182-83). In the Castle-as-Panopticon, the smooth functioning of the “great living organization,” as Secretary Burgel calls it (267), is guaranteed by the villagers’ blind acquiescence to the rules, mostly without any overt intervention or enforcement by the Castle officials. In other words, their “voluntary servitude,” as Löwy puts it, rather than the employment of direct coercion, maintains the regulatory system.

At first glance, the ultimate source of power could be located within the Castle, more specifically in the figure of Director Klamm. The boundaries between Castle and village, however, are

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10 In an extreme instance of the intrusive gaze, K. watches the sleeping Klamm through a peep-hole. Later references, however, make it unlikely that the person K. has seen is actually Klamm.
not clearly demarcated, and since the village is “Castle property,” it stands as a constituent part of its structure of power as well. Therefore, power does not emanate from a single individual or site, but in the multiple interactions between the villagers and the authorities and between the villagers themselves. In this context, Klamm does not need to act in any definitive manner to assert or distribute power; his mere existence—or perceived existence—suffices to remind everybody of the mechanism of power at work in their daily lives. With the exception of isolated cases such as K.’s, the direct intervention of the authorities proves to be unnecessary because power constitutes an integral element of the hierarchical structure that villagers and authorities subscribe to. On the subject of power, Clifford Shearing and Philip Stenning remark, “As it is part of the social fabric, it is everywhere, and yet it is nowhere because it does not have an identifiable locus” (35). Nevertheless, because of the asymmetry of power relations between “rulers” and “subjects” in the village, only those who can claim a direct association with the Castle can exercise power and arrogate to themselves the right to command and discipline. The inherent inequality of the apparatus allows even a lowly figure like Schwarzer, the son of a substeward, to exact respect, enforce the law, and impose his will on his social inferiors.

On the other hand, the effectiveness of a system in which punishment is mostly self-inflicted and socially enforced becomes evident during the events leading to, and following, the downfall of the Barnabas family. After Amalia’s defiance of a Castle official, her whole family falls into disrepute simply by their association with her. Their isolation is the price they must pay for breaking communal rules and daring to oppose the wishes of an official whose power originates in, and is sanctioned by,

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11In reference to the parallel God-Inspector in the Panopticon, Bozovic suggests, “Like any God worthy of the name, the inspector may [. . .] turn his back on the universe of the panopticon and peacefully devote himself to his book-keeping; from now on, the universe of the panopticon is perfectly capable of running without him” (17).
the Castle. “[T]he curse was placed on our family,” Olga states, “and then the treatment of the messenger came to be seen as unpardonable and was even thrust to the forefront of public attention” (193). The “ceremony” in which the father resigns his job and returns his diploma takes place before family and neighbors, which makes the punished subject “visible” to others as a deterrent to similar behavior. In this way, the neighbors become spectators as well as participants in the administration of punishment.

The Barnabas family undergo public disgrace so that others may learn the dire consequences of transgression.12 As in Bentham’s ideal, “punishment is first and foremost spectacle: it is insofar as punishment is not intended for the punished individual, but for all others, that the execution of the punishment is a spectacle” (Bozovic 4). Being surrounded by a community in which they had formerly enjoyed a position of pre-eminence, the Barnabas family find themselves subjected to social isolation and to the enduring contempt of their neighbors.13 Thus their punishment consists in the dual burden of stigmatization and ostracism in their community. While the villagers experience estrangement from the external world and from one another, the Barnabas family go a step further in their alienation. Deprived of their social standing and unable to cope with the extremity of their poverty, mother and father turn into shadows of their former selves, reduced by the weight of their punishment—a form of solitary confinement—to silence, lunacy, and the position of helpless invalids.

12“The entire Panopticon is itself a kind of theatrical spectacle for the benefit of the public [. . .]. Reformation of the prisoners themselves is almost of secondary interest. The wider purpose is the moral reformation of the society through the edifying spectacle of discipline via surveillance” (Whitaker 33).

13“The ‘cursed’ family’s servility is impressive,” says Löwy, “but that of the villagers, who shut them out like lepers—without the castle even needing to issue an order—is far worse: it is utter ignominy” (53).
Although the absence of physical punishments or other punitive measures may suggest that the Castle’s rule is benevolent, its visible physical and mental effects on the Barnabas family expose the intrinsic perverseness of a system that aims to dehumanize its subjects. Because the Castle works in accordance with panoptic principles, its methods and their effects can be perceived primarily at the level of the mind and the imaginary. With the construction of the Panopticon, Bentham sought “a mode of obtaining power of mind over mind in a quantity hitherto without example” (31). Unlike his detractors, he failed to consider the effects that mental control and punishment could have on the subjects’ emotional and psychic balance, as well as on their bodies. In the villagers’ case, the fear that permeates their minds manifests itself in physical symptoms, in their ailments, and in “their bulging lips, open mouths, and almost tortured faces” (Kafka 22). The absence of cells, bars, chains, armed guards, or corporal punishments does not make of the Castle less than a prison, but a different type of prison. The terms that govern the interaction between the authorities and the inhabitants—rules, deposition, error, interrogation, intervention, control agency, and punitive measures—belong to the characteristic juridical and penal discourse of a carceral institution. At the same time, synonymous concepts like commandments, sin, confession, intercession, and punishment indicate that the panoptic Castle is coterminous with the universe of organized religion.

The religious allegorical meanings usually attributed to the novel do not detract from its reading in terms of the Panopticon. On the contrary, they reinforce it, particularly because of the similarities between the fictional universe of The Castle and the human world in relation to the divine order, as well as those between the Panopticon and the world of organized religion. The religious analogy is sustained by the various references to Klamm, from Frieda’s peremptory orders given “In the name of Klamm” (40) to the landlady’s warning to “Call him ‘he’ or something else, but not by his name” (85). Like God, the Father, and the
panoptic Inspector, Klamm acts as an omniscient omnipotent force that is always felt but never seen or heard. The religious overtones in K.’s depiction of Klamm are unequivocal:

He considered Klamm’s remoteness, his impregnable abode, his muteness, broken perhaps only by shouts the likes of which K. had never heard before, his piercing downturned gaze, which could never be proved, never be refuted, and his, from K.’s position below, indestructible circles, which he was describing up there in accordance with incomprehensible laws. (116)

For all K. knows, Klamm may be no more than a figment of the villagers’ imagination, but that does not disprove his existence, simply because they believe he exists.\(^\text{14}\) The God-like Klamm watches over the human world of the village, where his arbitrary laws, endowed with the force of religious precepts and the threat of punishment, regulate individual behavior.

A set of stringent regulations whose final goals are moral reformation, self-control, and social stability sustains the triads God-Director-Inspector, priest-official-prison officer, and worshipper-villager-inmate. Within the Castle system, K. attempts to find Klamm with a quasi-religious zeal, yet his efforts arouse reactions of horror, suspicion, and condemnation among the villagers. Like superstitious peasants, they reject the idea that the deified Klamm can be reached by means other than through the intercession of his officials, the visible manifestation of a fixed order in which the highest source of power is ultimately unknowable and unreachable. For this reason, K.’s desire assumes, in the eyes of the villagers, the character of heresy, to which they oppose their unquestioning “faith.” The more he struggles in the pursuit of his goal, the more his isolation grows; his obstinacy eventually drives the villagers away as they try to distance themselves from his wrongful conduct. His estrangement, in

\(^{14}\text{Bozovic’s words on the relation between the universe of the Panopticon and God’s universe are much to the point. He argues, “It is true that God is the one who sustains the universe with his gaze; but it is the subjects of this universe who imagine that this gaze really exists. The universe of the panopticon would thus disintegrate the moment that the prisoners stopped imagining God” (20).}
turn, facilitates the modification of his behavior in accordance with the ruling socio-political system.

K. progresses from a subversive position of autonomy and defiance to one of growing subjection to, and compliance with, the rules. His internal change is mediated by the humbling treatment he suffers at the hands of the authorities and by his increasing awareness of “the futility of all his efforts” to reach the Castle (Kafka 273). Paradoxically, he never realizes he has partly fulfilled his purpose of getting to it. “The village is Castle property,” Schwarzer tells him upon his arrival; “Anybody residing or spending the night here is effectively residing or spending the night at the Castle” (2). In his ignorance, K. sets his mind on a hopeless pursuit not knowing that, from the moment Schwarzer informs him of the rules, he embarks on the path of his own reformation. In a quick succession of events, K. is commanded and expected to obey, given a job, lowered to the status of a menial servant, physically punished by the schoolmistress, allowed to have a lover and deprived of her, and finally, starved, deprived of sleep, and subjected to an improvised lecture on the infallibility of the system. In a moment of realization, he tells Olga, “I was indeed taken on here as surveyor, but only in appearance, they played games with me, drove me out of every house and even today they’re still playing games with me, but now it’s all much more complicated” (198).

Unlike the Barnabas family, who are subjected to exclusionary practices, K. experiences disciplinary actions, intended for his reformation rather than his confinement. From the beginning, “the Castle had all the necessary information about him, had assessed the opposing forces, and was taking up the struggle with a smile” (5). The treatment K. receives differs in its immediate effects from that of the Barnabas family, yet it serves the same purpose: to discipline his body and mind without resorting to physical violence. Foucault refers to these distinct practices as “[t]wo ways of exercising power over men, of controlling their relations, of separating out their dangerous mixtures” (198). In
the end, the Castle prevails, and as a result, K. undergoes what Jeffrey Reiman calls a “psycho-political metamorphosis” (166). He expresses his enlightenment in the following terms: “[U]p there are the authorities in their inextricable greatness—I thought I had an approximate conception of them before coming here, how childish all that was” (Kafka 184). K. eventually abandons his “childish” ways and his initial resistance by coming to an understanding of his inferiority in relation to the authorities.

In his “accidental” encounter with Secretary Burgel, K. gains an insight into the means by which the system anticipates and forestalls the destabilizing effects of resistance and non-conformity by taking preventive measures. “When risk can be confidently calculated,” Whitaker argues, “potential rule-breakers can be excluded from the opportunity of noncompliance” (44). In his almost uninterrupted monologue, Burgel reflects on this notion of risk. He tells K. how the consideration of likely disturbances to the system allows the Castle to foresee them and its officials to be adequately prepared for the intrusion of men such as K. Even so, however minimal, the possibility of error exists, in which case,

With the loquaciousness of the fortunate one must explain everything to him. Without sparing oneself in the least, one must show how extremely rare and singularly great an opportunity this is, one must show the party how, even though he has stumbled into this affair in an utter helplessness that no being other than the party is capable of, he can now if he wants [ . . .] take control of the entire situation. (270)

In his exhaustion, K. is in no position to take advantage of his “privileged” position. Burgel’s words make little impact on K., who keeps falling asleep, but their revelatory power is unmistakable, and the events in which K. has been involved begin to fall into place. Schwarzer’s swift intervention, the appearance of the assistants, his assignment and subsequent demotion reveal the agency of the Castle directed at curtailing the danger of transgressive behavior, managing the threat, and diminishing the risk. From this perspective, K.’s treatment assumes
the qualities of an effective case of risk-management within a panoptic structure.

The incessant file-keeping of the officials enables the Castle to calculate such risks and act accordingly. The continuous process of typing, copying, reading, and filing of the officials at the Castle, at the Gentlemen’s Inn, and in the Chairman’s office serves to strengthen the links between the panoptic village and the “plague-stricken town” or the “utopia of the perfectly governed city,” characterized according to Foucault by four elements: “hierarchy, surveillance, observation, writing” (198). As befits the bureaucratic apparatus of the Castle, its work is carried out by a complex medley of stewards, sub-stewards, sons of sub-stewards, assistants, “authorized” and “unauthorized” secretaries, sub-secretaries, high servants, low servants and an unspecified number of other “gentlemen.”

Freed from the duties of law enforcement and punishing, they can devote themselves to the “iron-clad pursuit and performance of duty” (Kafka 262)—namely, the task of administrative management, especially the organization of the information that presumably derives from constant surveillance. As K. waits for his interview with Secretary Erlanger, he witnesses the procedures of file delivery. In what resembles a ritualistic dance, doors open and close, files are delivered, examined, returned, and exchanged, and expectant silences mix with muffled complaints and loud objections. In this manner, the highly bureaucratized ideal of the Castle-as-Panopticon is enacted.

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15Precursors of the Panopticon project like John Howard and John Jebb maintained that “prisons should be entirely under the control of the magistrates and the gentlemen of the districts” (Semple 83, emphasis added).

16On the uses of surveillance, Christopher Dandeker argues, the exercise of surveillance involves one or more of the following: (1) the collection and storage of information (presumed to be useful) about people or objects; (2) the supervision of the activities of people or objects through the issuing of instructions [. . .]; (3) the application of information gathering activities to the business of monitoring the information of those under supervision. (qtd. in Whitaker 32)
in the form of a senseless ritual applied to the management of public affairs, the transmission of knowledge, and the handling of “relevant” documents.

Because Kafka abandoned his project of writing *The Castle*, the final outcome of K.’s experiences can only be a matter of speculation. Still, the novel effectively portrays the complexity and the downside of Bentham’s project. Bentham imagined the construction of a *Panopticon Hill* at Battersea Rise, near London. In his unbounded day-dreaming, he pictured himself being carried upriver to the site of the Panopticon and staying in the *Panopticon Tavern*. He went as far as “to build, literally a Castle in the air, a skyscraper” to rival the Egyptian pyramids (Semple 297). The river, the inn, and the castle all appear in the introductory pages of Kafka’s novel, but something has gone awry in Bentham’s utopian plans. The darkness surrounding the Castle and the joyless atmosphere of the Bridge Inn stand in stark contrast to the brilliance of Bentham’s utopian vision. The slow bureaucratic machine of the Castle and the unproductive lifestyle of the villagers have little in common with the efficient administrative management that would make the Panopticon an ideal unit of production. Moreover, the abuses of power of lustful officials depart from Bentham’s ideal of an institution that would contribute to the moral edification of society.

Despite the pointless growth of Castle bureaucracy, the laws and the power of the gaze remain intact, as is evident from the manner in which the villagers conduct their affairs and regulate themselves in accordance with Castle rules. K.’s experiences attest to the effectiveness of the panoptic gaze in bringing about a depersonalized society as well as to the failure of an impersonal structure of surveillance and control whose cruelty and perverseness reside in the dehumanization of Castle officials and villagers alike. Bentham did not conceive of social control for its own sake; docility and utility were inextricably linked, in such a manner that individual energy could be channeled for productive purposes. In the village, by contrast, no one is ac-
tively doing or producing anything. The villagers stand idle or move without apparent direction in wasteful inactivity. K., who is assigned the position of land-surveyor, has no work to do, and finally he is given a job for which he is poorly prepared. Only the controllers engage in some form of activity, but their efforts are wasted in the senseless and endless proliferation of files and reports that perpetuates the power of the Castle.

A reading of The Castle in the light of Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon does not exhaust the multiple possibilities of textual interpretation, nor does it explain every single element of the novel. Yet it helps to illuminate the multiple layers of the narrative. Fundamental differences emerge in a comparative study of Kafka’s “village” and Bentham’s Panopticon town, particularly because the latter’s utopian plan is transformed into a dystopian nightmare. To some extent, it could be argued that Kafka’s Castle represents the Panopticon, not at the height of optimal functioning, but at a stage of growing dissolution and disintegration in which the structure of the system has grown fossilized. Nowhere is this clearer than in the state of dereliction K. notes in the Castle itself. As he approaches the building, he notices that “it was only a rather miserable little town, pieced together from village houses, distinctive only because everything was perhaps built of stone, but the paint had long since flaked off, and the stone seemed to be crumbling” (8). In view of the illusory nature of the Castle, its deterioration may be deceptive, for it still maintains its firm grip on the villagers. This control, however, has no utility other than perpetuating domination.

Finally, the question arises regarding how Bentham’s work could have become a source of inspiration for Kafka. Understanding how Kafka relied on panoptic principles in constructing the Castle further helps elucidate the extent to which his legal

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17The Panopticon, Semple affirms, “was a town rather than a building, vastly extravagant; and the methods of management were profoundly misconceived” (92). The limitations of Bentham’s scheme may also account for the inconsistencies between the ideal Panopticon and the “real” Castle.
knowledge found its way into his fiction. In her analysis of *The Trial*, Martha Robinson remarks, “His frequent use of the law and the trial as analogies indicate a frame of reference many lawyers share, for the readiest references are always to those with which one is most familiar” (128). This familiarity with legal concepts recurs in *The Castle* as well. It is likely that Kafka, who received a Law Doctorate in 1906, gained knowledge of Bentham’s plans not directly but through the work of his admirer and advocate, Etienne Dumont. As a law student in Prague, Kafka would have read a translation of Dumont’s “recensions,”18 which helps explain how the mechanisms of authority, power, surveillance, and control at work in the Castle came to bear a strong resemblance to those of the Panopticon. This, of course, does not mean Kafka deliberately intended *The Castle* as a critique of Bentham’s penitentiary, but the Panopticon obviously suited him as a model in his portrayal of dehumanization, bureaucratization, and authoritarianism.

**Works Cited**


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18Pease-Watkin explains,

Over the years, Dumont was to produce five editions of Bentham’s works. Dumont’s editions were not simple translations, but rather “recensions”—that is, reworked versions which, while preserving the essence of Bentham’s texts, were shorter and more concise […] Through the medium of his recensions Dumont played a significant part in the dissemination and popularisation of Bentham and his works in Europe: there were second editions of some of Dumont’s texts, and they were also translated into Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, German and Swedish.


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