

Autumn Essay, *In what ways were  
visual technologies used by  
government as a means of social  
control?*

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### ***In what ways were visual technologies used by government as a means of social control?***

From the 19th century onwards, photography has been used by authorities as a means to document, record and identify members of the public. As society became more self-aware, both the criminal mugshot and the Carte de Visite were used to convey specific attributes to enforce ideas about the subject, either as an attempt to educate and identify what were deemed to be 'criminal features' or to determine and influence how they would be understood and judged by their peers. This effectively turned people into signs that were able to be read by their dress, posture and the ability to have one's photograph taken in the first place.

One dominant feature of Victorian Britain is the dramatic and sudden increase in city populations during the Industrial Revolution<sup>1</sup>. As swathes of people migrated for work, London and other major cities became overcrowded and polluted, leading to extreme cases of poverty and, in turn, criminality. Criminal offences increased from 5000 per year in 1800 to around 20,000 per year in 1840.<sup>2</sup> The Victorians maintained strict beliefs about moral values, with many artists depicting scenes of fallen women (*Fig 1*) or those who had fallen victim to 'the bottle' (*Fig 2*). Despite the political and social upheaval of the time,<sup>3</sup> Victorian Britain became associated with strict, responsible and ordered ways of living, with the likes of Queen Victoria and members of parliament utilising certain visual techniques as a means to portray themselves as relatable, stable and strong amidst the chaos of technological and industrial development (*Fig 3*).

Aside from fears surrounding criminality, society felt anxious and alienated by modern life.<sup>4</sup> Rapid development and the introduction of new ways of living were difficult to sustain, leading many artists and audiences to find solace in idyllic scenes of nature and the Picturesque (*Fig 4*). The Picturesque relied on the artificial construction of 'managed naturalness' of the British

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<sup>1</sup> GB Historical GIS, University of Portsmouth, *Total Population, A Vision of Britain through Time* <[http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10097836/cube/TOT\\_POP](http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10097836/cube/TOT_POP)> [accessed 5 December 2018].

<sup>2</sup> National Archives, *Why Were Victorian Prisons so Tough?* <<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/victorian-prison/>> [accessed 5 December 2018].

<sup>3</sup> Ginger, S. Frost, *Victorian Childhoods* (California: ABC-CLIO, 2008), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Gerald Parsons, John Wolfe, *Religion in Victorian Britain: Culture and Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p. 27.

landscape,<sup>5</sup> acting as a direct cultural antithesis to France who were struggling to maintain order in the period following the French Revolution.

To combat the rise in criminality, the 19th century saw the professionalisation of the police force, which previously relied on local night watchmen and constables. Initiated by Sir Robert Peel in 1822, the police force would be a full-time, centralised, professional organisation that worked to maintain law and order on a previously-unseen scale. To solve the criminality problem quickly, authorities relied on severe discipline to ensure offenders were prosecuted and deterred from future crimes. Simultaneously, they initiated reformatory programs and educational welfare systems for children in an attempt to lead them away from a life of crime towards a stable job and honest living. Many children in reformatory schools were taught necessary skills to ensure they would be able to find work after their sentence.<sup>6</sup>

'The pressing problem locally and generally, was how to train and mobilise a diversified workforce while instilling docility and practices of social obedience within the dangerously large urban concentrations which advanced industrialisation necessitated.'<sup>7</sup>

These reformatory programs were also present in prisons, where prisoners would be made to work in a productive and profitable way, rather than being idle. Whilst instilling a sense of discipline and purpose in the prisoner, authorities were also able to profit from their labour, much like what we see today.<sup>8</sup> The Victorian period was one of vast pedagogy, penetrating almost all aspects of everyday life in an attempt to educate and refine the taste of the masses while exploring philanthropic endeavours that were believed to be a Christian duty.

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<sup>5</sup> Gresham College, *English Landscape: The Picturesque - Professor Malcolm Andrews* (2017) <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wa8bw\\_ARgf0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wa8bw_ARgf0)> [accessed 7 December 2018].

<sup>6</sup> Mary Carpenter, *Reformatory Schools, for the Children of the Perishing and Dangerous Classes, and for Juvenile Offenders*(London: C. Gilpin, 1851), p. 154.

<sup>7</sup> John Tagg, 'Evidence, truth and order: a means of surveillance', in *Visual Culture: The Reader.*, ed. by Jessica Evans & Stuart Hall(London: Sage Publications in Association with the Open University, 1999), p. 245

<sup>8</sup> The Corrections Accountability Project, *The Prison Industrial Complex: Mapping Private Sector Payers* (2018) <<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58e127cb1b10e31ed45b20f4/t/5ade0281f950b7ab293c86a6/1524499083424/The+Prison+Industrial+Complex+-+Mapping+Private+Sector+Players+%28April+2018%29.pdf>> [accessed 9 December 2018].

Solving this issue of criminality was a priority for many Victorians. One theory that sought to discipline society in a way that would reduce overall violence, both in the streets and in the prisons, in what is arguably the least intrusive way is the Panopticon.<sup>9</sup> Designed by Jeremy Bentham and published in 1791, the Panopticon relied on architectural design as a means to manipulate the behaviour of the masses, albeit prisoners, patients or children. The Panopticon (*Fig 5*) was a circular structure designed to allow the central watchtower omniscient power over the inmates who were housed in individual cells around the perimeter of the structure. As the inhabitants would not know when they were being watched, they would then, as a precaution, behave appropriately even when the watchtower was empty. Constant surveillance would no-doubt be unsettling, but Bentham believed that the benefits were unprecedented:

‘Morals reformed—health preserved—industry invigorated—instruction diffused—public burdens lightened—Economy seated, as it were, upon a rock...all by a simple idea in Architecture!’<sup>10</sup>

Michel Foucault felt the Panopticon signified a shift in the way society thought about power.<sup>11</sup> Power, rather than being imposed by a monarch or individual authority, had become internalised. Institutional frameworks became more important than the people applying them as modernity allowed for a systemic understanding of power, challenging notions of free will as people behaved according to the bias and whims of the watchtower, regardless of whether they were being observed or not. Foucault felt that this system would create ‘docile bodies’ which were ideal for the new social dynamics imposed by the industrial revolution.<sup>12</sup> People would function best in factories, schools and the military having internalised certain behaviours and discipline, put forth by the unequal gaze of the panopticon. This, in turn, stretches outside the prison into everyday modern life, used by governments as an attempt to make the public as efficient and profitable as possible, even outside the prison walls.

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<sup>9</sup> David Knights, Hugh Willmott, *Introducing Organizational Behaviour and Management* (Andover: Cengage Learning EMEA, 2007), p. 246.

<sup>10</sup> Jeremy Bentham, *Jeremy Bentham, The Works of Jeremy Bentham, vol. 4 (Panopticon, Constitution, Colonies, Codification)*, ed. by John Bowring, (1843) <<https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/bentham-the-works-of-jeremy-bentham-vol-4>> [accessed 7 December 2018].

<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan, 2 edn (New York: Random House, Inc., 1995)

<sup>12</sup> Foucault, p. 135.

A recurring issue faced by authorities was how to identify repeat offenders.<sup>13</sup> The act of recording and cataloguing criminals was considered useful for identification purposes but also as a way to further explore physiognomy and the notion of 'criminal types'. From the 1880s, Sir Francis Galton used composite photography (*Fig 6*) to define characteristics of criminals, as well as those of healthy or diseased people. By averaging violent criminal faces together, Galton sought to identify a common criminal type however, he found that the composite face was 'more respectable' than the individual images.<sup>14</sup> Galton went on to influence the likes of Cesare Lombroso who sought to prove that 'criminality was inherited' and 'that criminals could be identified by physical attributes such as hawk-like noses and bloodshot eyes'.<sup>15</sup> Although much of Galton's criminal theory was disregarded in the late 19th century, there has been a revival of interest recently alongside the rise of Artificial Intelligence and machine learning.<sup>16</sup>

Photography was adopted by authorities early on as an attempt to document prisoners, although those images relied on additional information to specify defining characteristics such as their eye and hair colour or scars. According to John Tagg, it is unreliable to use photography as a kind of proof,<sup>17</sup> as, in cases such as mugshots, it relies on external context to establish meaning. Tagg argues that, 'like the state, the camera is never neutral',<sup>18</sup> and it instead relies on power relations invested into it to give it substance. It could be argued that the way the authorities constructed realism for the mugshot is similar to the constructed irregularity of the Picturesque

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<sup>13</sup> BBC Teach, How photography changed everything for young Victorian offenders | History - Victorian Villains (2017) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KZSD1kY0HCs>> [accessed 6 December 2018].

<sup>14</sup> Philip Benson, David Perrett, Face to face with the perfect image: Images generated by computer are adding new dimensions to traditional portraiture. Besides their humorous value, these images are beginning to reveal how we process faces (1992) <<https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg13318094-400/>> [accessed 6 December 2018].

<sup>15</sup> Diana Bretherick, *The 'born criminal'? Lombroso and the origins of modern criminology* (2016) <<https://www.historyextra.com/period/victorian/the-born-criminal-lombroso-and-the-origins-of-modern-criminology/>> [accessed 6 December 2018].

<sup>16</sup> Roger Highfield, Richard Wiseman, Rob Jenkins, *How your looks betray your personality* (2009) <<https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg20126957-300-how-your-looks-betray-your-personality/?full=true>> [accessed 7 December 2018].

<sup>17</sup> Tagg, p. 246

<sup>18</sup> Tagg, p. 246

aesthetic, further emphasising the influence of visual techniques as a means to convey and enhance certain social and political beliefs.<sup>19</sup>

As in the panopticon, photography demands the same level of scrutiny;

‘the bodies - workers, vagrants, criminals, patients, the insane, the poor, the colonised races - are taken one by one: isolated in a shallow, contained space; turned full face and subjected to an unreturnable gaze; illuminated, focused, measured, numbered and named; forced to yield to the minutest scrutiny of gestures and features.’<sup>20</sup>

This scrutiny juxtaposes Tagg’s argument, as it implies that the camera is capable of escaping control and highlighting every single detail, regardless of the will or narrative imposed by the state. In a sense, photography has an element of indexicality that cannot be manipulated. However, Susan Sontag reiterates the aggression of photography and the danger of losing power over ones own image which, when taken out of context, can be used to suit an alternative motive than that of the original author,<sup>21</sup> further indicating the impact of context on defining the meaning of an image.

Around the same time as the introduction of mugshots, Victorian Britain saw the emergence of the Carte de Visite culture. The Carte de Visite phenomenon that had gained traction by the 1860s portrays the unique dynamic between the subject and the photographer.<sup>22</sup> Carte de Visites allowed people to have their photograph taken in a fast and cheap way, democratising the portrait.<sup>23</sup> They were created with the purpose of being shared with loved ones, with many people collecting them for family photo albums and scrapbooks. The public could have

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<sup>19</sup> Gresham College

<sup>20</sup> Tagg, p. 246

<sup>21</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Penguin Modern Classics), Kindle Edition edn (New York: Penguin Classics, 2014), p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> Steve Edwards, *The Making of English Photography* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), p. 68.

<sup>23</sup> John Hannavy, *Encyclopedia of nineteenth-century photography* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2008), p. 467.

their photo taken in the same way as their monarch - something unheard of until the invention of photography and the Carte de Visite. As signs, Carte de Visites moved locally, conceived and distributed within the domestic space. They brought portraiture from the art history pedestal and placed it within the 'universe for the private citizen'; the everyday.<sup>24</sup>

As they were created with the intention to be shared, people became increasingly self-aware and would use their Carte de Visite portrait to present themselves in a deliberate, essentialised way. People would use clothing, posture and props to communicate to their preconceived audience who they are, what their status is and how they should be interpreted.<sup>25</sup> In the case of Queen Victoria, who often dressed in typical middle class fashion rather than as royalty, she utilised the Carte de Visite medium as a means to appear more relatable to the general public (*Fig 7*). By combining her dress with the democratic and new medium of photography, the monarch was able to communicate her morals and beliefs to her public whilst appearing relevant, up-to-date and accessible, seemingly to contrast the tense political upheaval in Europe at the time.

The Carte de Visite allowed people to view themselves both as the watchtower guard and the prisoner. The way they behaved before a camera for the Carte de Visite was determined by the awareness of their future audience. The subject had agency over his or her own image, and was made aware of the way it would reflect them in society. Despite their efforts, it was and still is very easy for us to take an image and decontextualise it to suit our own narrative. No matter what precautions the Carte de Visite subject took, they had little control over their own image once it had been taken.

Regardless of whether photography was used by governments or individuals, it was apparent that its introduction into everyday life; whether through criminal documentation or upgraded swagger portraits,<sup>26</sup> changed the way people viewed themselves and their society. In the form of mugshots, authorities constructed realism in an attempt to identify the criminal

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<sup>24</sup> Edwards, p. 78.

<sup>25</sup> Allan Sekula, *The Body and the Archive*, October, vol. 39, p. 3-64.

<sup>26</sup> Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013).

classes and to support theories about criminal physiology.<sup>27</sup> Carte de Visites, on the other hand, gave the subject, regardless of their background, the ability to construct and somewhat determine their own image, explicitly aware of the way they would be read in the context of their society. With the Carte de Visite, the government was able to impose particular beliefs onto the public to support their own narrative in a more subtle way, enforcing particular beliefs about the monarch, the power of the police force and even the status of the everyday citizen whilst encouraging the public to look at and read each other with similar criteria.

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<sup>27</sup> Matilda Battersby, *Victorian Mugshots Reveal Nineteenth Century Interest in Criminal Anthropology* (2012) <<https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/history/victorian-mugshots-reveal-nineteenth-century-interest-in-criminal-anthropology-7892823.html>> [accessed 6 December 2018].

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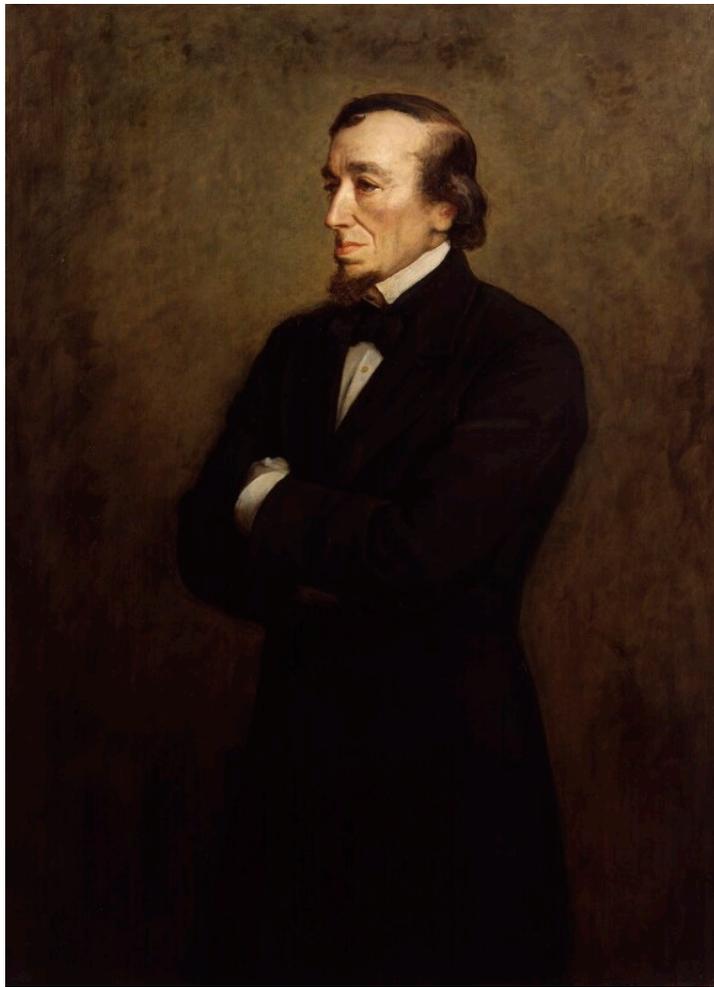
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(Fig 1) *The Fallen Woman* by G. F. Watts, 1850



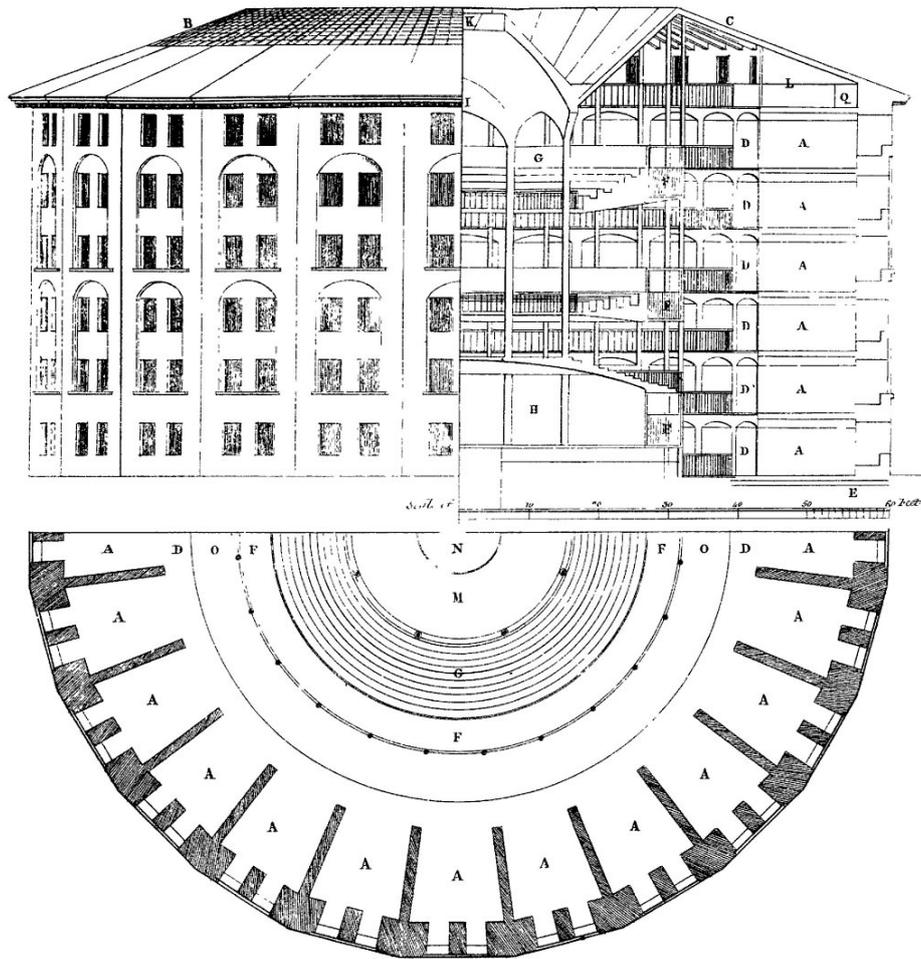
(Fig 2) *Unable to Obtain Employment, They Are Driven by Poverty into the Streets to Beg, and by This Means They Still Supply the Bottle.* Fourth Illustration in *The Bottle* by George Cruikshank 1847



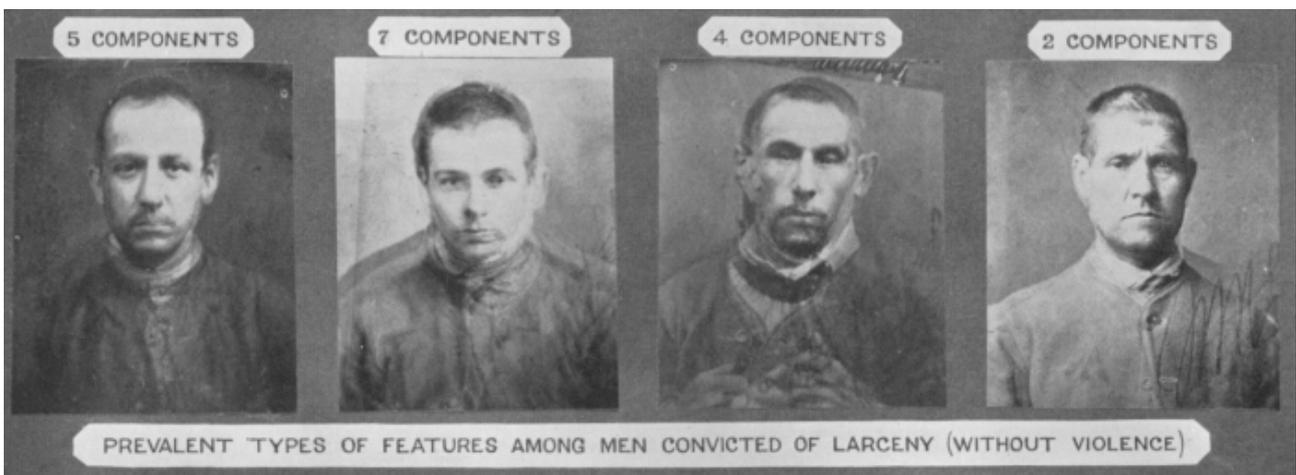
(Fig 3) *Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield* by Sir John Everett Millais, 1881



(Fig 4) *Boy Driving Cows Near a Pool* by Thomas Gainsborough, 1796



(Fig 5) Elevation, Section and Plan of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon penitentiary drawn by Willey Revely, 1791



(Fig 6) Sir Francis Galton, Criminal Composites, c. 1880



(Fig 7) Carte-de-Visite portrait of Queen Victoria, taken by John Jabez Edwin Mayall, 1861