

HUMANITIES

Panoptic Themes Present in PowerPoint Presentations

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how PowerPoint Presentations that display the synoptic and analytic modes of power in both the individual format of the slides within the slideshow and through the presentation of a PowerPoint Presentation to an audience by a presenter, according to the definition given by Barton and Barton in “Modes of Power in Technical and Professional Visuals” are instruments of power. Furthermore, this paper will also explain how the PowerPoint Presentation as an instrument of power functions similarly to that of the Panopticon Prison based on how Michel Foucault describes it in the book, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* because of the way it utilizes the panoptic mechanism.

Keywords: PowerPoint Presentations, synoptic mode of power, analytic mode of power, Panopticon, technical and professional visuals, panoptic mechanism

In “Modes of Power in Technical and Professional Visuals,” Barton and Barton assert, “technical and professional visuals are not only instruments of communication or even of knowledge but also instruments of power” (138). Throughout the article Barton and Barton explore examples of how “the Panoptic technology of power—specifically its two major modes or strategies: the synoptic and the analytic” work in these types of technical and professional visuals in order to create a system of power and hierarchy (138). The panoptic themes they describe in their article are prevalent in the format of PowerPoint slide shows and the presentation of these slideshows to an audience. This paper will report the results of analyzing the panoptic themes present in PowerPoint Presentations, both in the slide show’s format of slides and in the presentation of the slide show from a presenter to an audience, including how the different elements of PowerPoint Presentations work together to condition a person to think a certain way. Furthermore, this paper will show how PowerPoint Presentations are a form of a panoptic system of power that extends its power not only over a “human multiplicity” but also applies “the panoptic modality” to a “natural multiplicity” of non-human elements via the slide show’s layout and format (Barton and Barton 142).

The similarities between the structures of the Panopticon prison to PowerPoint presentations lies in the fact that the panoptic mechanism of organization is found in both. According to Michel Foucault, “The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately” (200). What Foucault is referring to is the observation tower’s ability to see all of the inmates at a glance as they are all separated, backlit, and within the tower’s range of vision. Eventually after the inmate realizes how their “Visibility is a trap,” Foucault enunciates that the prisoner “inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection” (200, 203). This means that the prisoner regulates their behavior so that they will not be punished because they are unsure of when they are being watched. This same concept similarly exists in PowerPoint Presentations. In the slide show, the layout of the slide allows for this panoptic structure. Typically, when a slide is being prepared, the slide has a title and then the content beneath that title that explains the concept or idea named on the slide. In this sense, there is no human involved in this panoptic model because the title is the surveyor that dictates the information in the content box below it, meaning it is part of a “natural multiplicity.” It stands at the top, a sign of power that is able to look down at the content in the box below it and regulate the information’s behavior and form, or in other words, the title regulates the analytic mode of power in this slide to create the synoptic mode of power. For example, if the title of a slide were “Colorado,” the text would be forced to regulate itself into information about the state of Colorado, whether that be a picture or text; otherwise, if the information in the box was totally unrelated to Colorado, it would be out of place and would not make any sense in the slide with the “Colorado” title. This Panoptic structure is also present in how the presenter of the slide show stands in relation to the audience and is in the domain of power in a “human multiplicity”. When a presenter presents slideshows, they are typically standing in front of the room next to the projected image of the power point on a wall or screen. When they stand at the front and lecture to the sitting audience, the presenter has a full view of the rest of the audience and regulates how they act. Foucault explains that under this panoptic observation, “Each individual is fixed in his place. And, if he moves, he does

so at the risk of his life, contagion, or punishment” (1). In this instance, the students watching the presentation do not risk their life or their health but are in danger of punishment. Because the audience does not want to be scolded or chastised for not paying attention, for talking, or for falling asleep, and as long as the presenter is continuous in their observation of the crowd they are speaking to, the audience will make a conscious effort to sit still and pay attention, or at the least, pretend that they are paying attention to what is being said.

The synoptic mode of power is characterized by the ability of a person to look at the totality of a visual and recognize meaning from it. In other words, the synoptic mode of power works similarly to a zoomed-out camera lens that captures the entirety of a landscape. Barton and Barton note that the map “may, in fact, be considered the paradigmatic case of the synoptic visual,” because the map has the ability to relay a large expanse of information of the layout of the land “within the purview of a single viewer” (143). Considering the layout of the slideshow, there is a common style choice of choosing a slide layout that includes a title with content beneath it; usually a paragraph of text, bulleted lists, and/or visuals. With this layout, the maker of the slide show is able to add text beneath a photograph or put two different photographs next to each other. This ability to create a diverse visual that introduces different types of material and information into a single visual and creates an understanding of an issue or of how different topics relate to one another, is an example of the synoptic view of power. PowerPoints are also often used to report large data sets such as statistics, facts, or even historical data, in which the person making the PowerPoint may choose to use a bulleted list in order to add notes about important information pertaining to those topics. This type of PowerPoint slide can give an overview of an issue whose expanse is extensive, by creating a synoptic view of a specific topic. Interestingly enough, PowerPoints also have the ability to display maps, graphs, data charts, all synoptic visuals in their own right, further utilizing the synoptic mode of power.

Unfortunately, because PowerPoints make it possible to condense large amounts of information in a single slide, much information is absent about the topic being covered. According to Barton and Barton, Charles Joseph Minard, a French engineer who made significant contributions to information graphics, focused so strongly on the synoptic mode of power in his maps that he “did not hesitate to sacrifice geographic fidelity to ocular manageability” (143). In this way, the information on the slides presented may omit important concepts that can affect the way a concept is interpreted. Furthermore, a presenter’s act of presenting to an audience itself can include the synoptic mode of power when considered separately from the slide show in a similar fashion. In general, presentations are given orally, and because of this, often times the presenter may stray from presenting too many concepts orally such as important dates, statistics, etc. in order to give a brief and general explanation of the topic they are presenting. This puts the presenter in a position of power especially when the presentation does not rely heavily on the slide show to display information as they speak because the most important information to understand the concepts are explained orally. Respected visual scholar Edward Tufte notes in his, *Cognitive Style of Power Point*, that “by leaving out the narrative between the points, the bullet outline ignores and conceals the causal assumptions and analytic structure of the reasoning” which in turn makes the audience reliant on the presenter to give them information to create a general understanding of the topic (6). The presenter could then manipulate the information they present to make the

audience think a certain way about that topic by carefully choosing what information to relay and what information to omit in their brief explanation.

The analytic mode of power is opposite of the synoptic as it zooms in on specific details or particulars of a concept or topic. Barton and Barton state, “particulars are an equally important source of empowerment” in technical and professional visuals (144). In a power point slide show, the analytic mode of power is what helps make up the synoptic mode of power, that is to say, it is every individual piece of information that culminates to create a slide on a specific topic. Every bullet point, visual, paragraph of text, and every citation is a particular. One cannot dismiss the analytic, because it is continuously tied as the counterpart of the synoptic mode of power. Without the analytic mode of power, the entirety of the synoptic would not exist. PowerPoints are especially adept at being able to emphasize the analytic mode of power because there is no limit on what information or how much information a slide should hold. Slides can hold full bodies of text, a couple of bulleted lists, one image, or even a one-word title. The analytic information guides the entire understanding of a concept.

This dependency on the analytic mode of power to guide the understanding of a topic makes it crucial for the individual units of information displayed to be accurate. A slideshow can be problematic if the analytic information being presented is too vague, inaccurate (such as inaccurate dates or unethical visuals, graphs, etc.) or misleading. This analytic mode of power dependency is also present when a person presents orally. The abundance of analytic information, lack thereof, or inaccuracy of the presentation when presented to an audience orally will shape how the audience understands the entire topic. In order to accurately guide a topic, the presenter putting together the slideshow and practicing presenting orally should therefore use reputable sources and should validate that they have accurately represented information for their topic of choice through their presentation. Furthermore, the audience should be critical when learning new information from these presentations in order to avoid misinterpretations. The audience should engage the presenter by asking clarifying questions, especially about information that may seem inaccurate or incomplete.

It is clear that some panoptic themes are present in PowerPoint Presentations, both in the slideshow and in the format of a presenter presenting to an audience because of the PowerPoint Presentations’ structure and how it utilizes the synoptic and analytic modes of power. It is important to understand how the PowerPoint Presentation utilizes systems of power because it is a tool that is used frequently in various different settings, especially in academia. Classes ranging from elementary school to graduate school utilize the simplistic format of the PowerPoint to present information to a large crowd of students, because it has the ability to outline and explain concepts easily and is interactive with the audience. Tufte notes that “the Pushy PP style imposes itself on the audience and, at times, seeks to set up a dominance relationship between speaker and audience” (13). Tufte makes a valid point about how PowerPoint presentations are structured, and that people should be aware of this structure, not only to improve the presentations that are being created, as was Tufte’s aim, but so that the audience understands how PowerPoints can be misleading, generalized, or even too focused on one concept. With heightened awareness of PowerPoint Presentations’ structure and modes of power, PowerPoint could be utilized more

efficiently, especially in academic settings, and could potentially be improved by its developers to strengthen some of its weaknesses. Most of all, being aware of this panoptic structure will help users of PowerPoint create more reliable slideshows and will motivate audiences of those presentations to evaluate the validity of information presented to them and think critically about the concepts they learn.

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