FOUCAULDIAN PANOPTIC GAZE IN NADINE CHARACTER KELLY FREMON CRAIG'S THE EDGE OF SEVENTEEN (2016)

Aisha Adha Ainiya[1], Abd Hannan EF[2], Hasbi Assiddiqi[3]
[1,2,3]English Literature, Faculty of Adab and Humanities, State Islamic University of Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung
Alamat e-mail : dearestaisha@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Film studies have increasingly adopted social theory as a framework for visual analysis; however, the application of Michel Foucault's concept of panopticism to realist coming-of-age cinema remains limited, particularly in explaining how disciplinary power operates through ordinary social interactions rather than formal institutions. This study aims to examine how panoptic mechanisms are visually represented in Kelly Fremon Craig's The Edge of Seventeen (2016) and to demonstrate the usefulness of Foucauldian theory in realist film analysis. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach with document analysis, the research analyzes six selected scenes through close reading of cinematic elements, including mise-en-scène, shot scale, camera angle, and spatial design. The findings reveal that visual techniques such as shallow depth of field, high-angle framing, extreme close-up, and medium tracking shots, combined with everyday settings including parties, bathrooms, cafeterias, and classrooms, construct conditions of asymmetric visibility, self-monitoring, and normalizing judgment. Rather than relying on explicit authority figures, the film depicts discipline as emerging through peer observation and internalized social expectations. These visual strategies encourage characters to regulate their own behavior while reinforcing dominant social norms. The study concludes that Foucauldian panopticism provides a systematic analytical framework for understanding how realist coming-of-age films naturalize disciplinary power through cinematic form and everyday spaces.
Keywords: Michel Foucault, Panopticism, Coming-of-Age Film, Visual Analysis, Disciplinary Power

ABSTRAK

Kajian film semakin banyak memanfaatkan teori sosial sebagai kerangka analisis visual, namun penerapan konsep panoptisisme Michel Foucault pada film realis bertema coming-of-age masih terbatas, terutama dalam menjelaskan bagaimana kuasa disipliner bekerja melalui interaksi sosial sehari-hari, bukan melalui institusi formal. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis representasi mekanisme panoptik dalam film The Edge of Seventeen (2016) karya Kelly Fremon Craig serta menunjukkan relevansi teori Foucault dalam analisis film realis. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif dengan metode analisis dokumen. Data diperoleh dari enam adegan terpilih yang dianalisis melalui pembacaan mendalam terhadap unsur sinematik, meliputi mise-en-scène, skala pengambilan

gambar, sudut kamera, dan desain ruang. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa teknik visual seperti shallow depth of field, high-angle framing, extreme close-up, dan medium tracking shot, yang dipadukan dengan latar keseharian seperti pesta, kamar mandi, kantin, dan ruang kelas, membentuk kondisi visibilitas asimetris, pengawasan diri, dan penilaian yang menormalisasi perilaku. Tanpa menghadirkan figur otoritas secara eksplisit, film memperlihatkan bahwa disiplin muncul melalui pengamatan antarteman dan internalisasi ekspektasi sosial. Strategi visual tersebut mendorong tokoh mengatur perilakunya sendiri sekaligus memperkuat norma sosial yang dominan. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa panoptisisme Foucauldian menawarkan kerangka analisis yang sistematis untuk memahami bagaimana film realis coming-of-age menaturalisasi kuasa disipliner melalui bentuk visual dan ruang keseharian.

Kata Kunci: Michel Foucault, Panoptisisme, Film Coming-of-Age, Analisis Visual, Kuasa Disipliner

A. Introduction

A continuing difficulty in film studies involves the rigorous operationalization of theoretical frameworks, originally designed for social phenomena, into functional tools for visual analysis. Michel Foucault's concept of panopticism, as articulated in Discipline and Punish (1977), describes a disciplinary mechanism where subjects internalize the gaze of an unseen authority and eventually become the primary agents of their own subjection. Although this models has been widely used in sociological context, its translation into the sphere of cinematic representation raises distinct questions regarding how a film can effectively encode a panoptic logic through specific visual devices. The distinction between represented surveillance, which refers to the actual exercise of power over physical bodies in a social space, and represented surveillance, which involves the cinematic construction of that power through formal elements like framing, shot scale, and mise-en-scène, is crucial to this research. According to Ciccognani (2022), the cinematic apparatus does not merely documenting the act of watching but actively organizes the visual field to imitate a panoptic environment. As a result, the analytical focus shift from whether a film simply depicts characters who feels observed to how its formal apparatus produces and distributes the gaze to reflect the asymmetrical visibility described by Foucault. This study attempts to demonstrate how Kelly Fremon

Craig's The Edge of Seventeen (2016) uses formal choices to translate the theoretical concept of the panopticon into an intelligible visual language by bridging the epistemological gap between social theory and visual form. Panopticism must be viewed as a structural arrangement of power relations, rather than a psychological experience of being watched. According to Foucault (1977) in Discipline and Punish, this mechanism functions on three interconnected dimensions: visibility, asymmetry, and internalization. To begin, visibility refers to a state in which the subject is put in a field of constant possible observation. Foucault defines this as a system that "induces in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (1977, p. 201), but where "visibility is a trap" (1977, p. 200). Second, asymmetry is embedded in the spatial logic of the panopticon, in which the subject is fully visible without being able to see the observer, while the observer remains unseen yet all-seeing. As Foucault explains, this arrangement functions as “a machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad” and produces “dissymmetry, disequilibrium, difference” (1977, p. 202). Third, internalization occurs when individuals subjected to this field of visibility begin to regulate themselves, effectively reproducing the mechanisms of power within their own conduct. In this sense, the subject “assumes responsibility for the constraints of power” and “becomes the principle of his own subjection” (Foucault, 1977, p. 202–203). As Foucault explains, the panoptic mechanism is not limited to prison settings but can be understood as a broader model of power that operates across society (1977, p. 205). This view is supported by Leclercq-Vandelannoitte (2023), who shows that the underlying logic of visibility and asymmetry can be found in various environments structured through hierarchical observation. To translate this framework into the domain of film, it is necessary to shift the analytical focus from social structures to cinematic form. Contemporary film theory suggests that panoptic conditions are reproduced through specific visual and spatial organizations. Ciccognani (2022) conceptualizes the cinematic apparatus as a surveilling mechanism where framing, editing, and

composition guide the audience toward the internalization of disciplinary norms. Similarly, Abuhassan and Dweiri (2024) demonstrate that panoptic effects may emerge through the spatial arrangement of cinematic settings and the viewer's structural position within the screen space, even in the absence of an explicit authority figure. These perspectives indicate that cinematic form can recreate the structural logic of visibility, asymmetry, and internalization through techniques such as camera positioning, focal depth, and spatial composition. The analysis therefore focuses on Kelly Fremon Craig's The Edge of Seventeen (2016), particularly the character of Nadine Franklin, whose adolescent experience is shaped by intensified self-scrutiny within socially regulated environments. This study does not assume that panopticism exists psychologically, but examines how cinematic form constructs conditions analogous to Foucauldian visibility.

Building on this theoretical foundation, existing scholarship has applied panopticism to a range of cinematic contexts, although with a noticeable concentration in particular genres. These studies can be broadly grouped into two tendencies. On one hand, research on classical and literary adaptations demonstrates how panoptic structures can be conveyed through visual form. Zafar (2022), for instance, shows that in Anna Karenina, mise-en-scène and framing can render the panoptic gaze perceptible even without explicit surveillance technologies. On the other hand, a larger body of work focuses on dystopian and high-concept narratives in which surveillance is made visually dominant. Bouziane (2024) interprets the unseen yet omnipresent force in Bird Box as a form of panoptic power, while Cantaş and Can (2022) analyze how surveillance operates through the urban architecture of The Batman. Although these studies demonstrate the applicability of Foucauldian theory to film, they also reveal a shared limitation. The emphasis on visually explicit or spectacular forms of surveillance restricts the analytical scope of panopticism in film studies. Existing studies privilege explicit surveillance structures, leaving under-theorized how subtle, socially embedded visibility operates in realist narratives.

This limitation points to a broader methodological gap in the field. Despite the growing body of research, there remains a lack of a systematic framework that connects the micro-level elements of cinematic form, such as framing, shot scale, and spatial composition, to the structural mechanisms identified by Foucault, including visibility, asymmetry, and internalization. Ciccognani (2022) begins to address this issue by describing cinema as a “surveilling machine,” while Siety (2023) highlights the role of spectatorship as an experiential and perceptual process shaped by the viewer’s prior encounters with film. However, these approaches do not fully establish how formal cinematic techniques function as mechanisms of discipline in a Foucauldian sense. Positioned within this gap, the present study argues that realist coming-of-age cinema provides a productive site for developing such an analytical model. Unlike dystopian or spectacular narratives, realist films rely on subtle formal strategies that require closer attention to how visibility is constructed within everyday social environments. By examining The Edge of Seventeen (2016), this study demonstrates that panoptic conditions can emerge through understated cinematic techniques, revealing that disciplinary power operates not only through institutional structures but also through ordinary social interactions and the lived experience of adolescence.

Extending this discussion, recent studies have further highlighted how disciplinary power operates within everyday social environments and how it may be represented through cinematic form. McNair (2022) demonstrates that educational settings function as spaces of internalized peer surveillance, in which normative behavior is regulated not only through institutional authority but also through the distributed judgment of social actors, reflecting Foucault's concept of normalizing power. From a formal perspective, Barrett (2021) argues that cinematographic elements such as camera angle and proximity are not merely technical choices but function as semiotic modes that systematically encode meaning about power and social relations for the viewer, suggesting that visual techniques play a central role in structuring disciplinary meaning on screen. Building on this idea, Armstrong and Cutting (2023)

show through empirical research that basic cinematic elements such as shot scale, movement, and lighting directly shape viewers' emotional responses. Their findings suggest that film form does not simply represent social experiences like shame or judgment, but also plays an active role in creating the emotional conditions through which these experiences are felt.

Recent studies have also highlighted the importance of spectatorship in shaping how cinematic images are understood. According to Siety (2023), film viewing is an experiencing process molded by the viewer's previous encounters with cinema, implying that audiences bring their own perceptual histories to bear when interpreting a character's emotional experiences. This perspective is particularly relevant to coming-of-age stories, in which visual storytelling frequently conveys psychological weight that words alone cannot. Franco (2023) shows that cinematography can strongly enhance viewers' emotional engagement with characters. Through the way images are visually organized, film allows audiences to follow a character's inner psychological experience more closely. These findings show that the relationship between visual form and viewer interpretation is actively established by the film's formal choices. Together, these insights suggest that the relationship between visual form and viewer interpretation is not passive, but actively constructed through the formal choices embedded in the film.

Collectively, these studies highlight the increasing relevance of panopticism as a framework for analyzing cinematic form, especially in understanding how everyday social settings produce conditions of visibility and encourage self-regulation. However, their contributions remain more suggestive at the theoretical level than clearly structured in methodological terms. Barrett (2021) and Siety (2023) each offer useful insights into how visual form conveys meaning and influences audience interpretation, yet neither provides a replicable analytical model that directly links specific cinematographic techniques to the structural mechanisms identified by Foucault. The main limitation is not simply in the choice of objects of analysis, but in the lack of a systematic framework that connects formal elements such as depth of field, spatial composition, and

shot scale with key aspects of panoptic power, including asymmetric visibility, internalized surveillance, and processes of normalization.

To address this constraint, the present work provides a formal analytical approach that directly relates cinematic approaches to Foucauldian theory. This study, which focuses on Kelly Fremon Craig's realist coming-of-age film The Edge of Seventeen (2016), reveals how panoptic structures are articulated through the subtle visual structuring of common social settings rather than overt monitoring systems. In doing so, it helps to the construction of a more precise and operational paradigm for studying the relationship between film form and disciplinary power.

B. Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design to examine the visual representation of the panoptic gaze in Kelly Fremon Craig's The Edge of Seventeen (2016). Following Creswell and Creswell (2018), qualitative research aims to understand meanings constructed around social experiences, which in this study relate to internalized surveillance and adolescent self-regulation. This approach is also supported by Hall and Liebenberg (2024), who argue that qualitative descriptive methods allow for rich, detailed interpretation while remaining closely grounded in the data. The research adopts qualitative document analysis, in which the film is treated as an audio-visual document and cultural artifact. As explained by Morgan (2022), document analysis involves systematically reviewing and interpreting recorded materials. Accordingly, selected scenes and frames from the film serve as the primary data and are analyzed as visual "texts" through the lens of Foucault's panopticism. The researcher functions as the key instrument by directly engaging with the film to identify and interpret relevant visual elements. The analysis follows an inductive process consisting of three stages: (1) repeated viewing to identify patterns related to isolation and social scrutiny. (2) coding of mise-en-scène and cinematographic elements such as lighting, setting, shot scale, and camera angles. and (3) interpretation using Foucault's theory to explain how visual techniques construct themes of surveillance and discipline. To

enhance the study's trustworthiness, theoretical triangulation is employed by integrating cinematic analysis with Foucauldian concepts. The findings are presented in a narrative form, supported by visual evidence and relevant theoretical frameworks, thereby ensuring a coherent and systematic interpretation.

C. Result And Discussion



Figure 1. Shallow focus on Nadine amidst the blurred crowd (00:27:48)

The data in this section is in minute 00:27:48, Nadine's presence at the party was itself the result of social pressure, she had no intention of attending the party, but Krista's insistence left her with little choice but to comply. From the very beginning, Nadine was in that social setting not as a willing participant, but as someone who had been forced to comply with the wishes of others, a circumstance that shaped her entire experience there. In this scene, Nadine positioned in the middle of the party, a space that according to Foucault (1977), functions as a field of constant visibility. She attends the party as Krista's friend, but from the moment she arrives, it is clear that she didn't comfortable as Krista did in that social setting, she drifts through the crowd without landing anywhere, unable to locate herself within the unspoken hierarchies that everyone else seems to navigate instinctively. In the mise-en-scène, the party setting itself works as a disciplinary environment: the crowded room, warm ambient lighting, and dense social arrangement create a space where everyone is simultaneously watching and being watched. Although a party is typically a place for social interaction, for Nadine it becomes a place of "asymmetrical surveillance." The use of shallow depth of field, where the camera keeps Nadine in sharp focus while Krista and the surrounding crowd are blurred, creates a psychological boundary that visually isolates her from the social space she occupies. As Foucault argues, the panopticon's potency is in its capacity to make the individual feel watched even in the absence of a direct supervisor. He states in Discipline and Punish (1977) that a person in a field of visibility "assumes responsibility for

the constraints of power" and "becomes the principle of his own subjection" (p. 202). For Nadine, the party didn't need a central authority to function as a space of discipline—the social gaze of the crowd, which she felt through the awareness that she didn't belong there, was enough to trigger mechanisms of self-surveillance and internalized judgment.



Figure 2. Medium side-angle shot in low-key lighting, Nadine self-directed monologue in the bathroom (00:28:27)

The data in this section is in minute 00:28:27, In this scene, Nadine retreats the bathroom after failing to connect with anyone at the party, after seeing Krista easily fit into social circle that has been out of her reach and speaking to herself in the mirror: "Don't be so weird. God, why are you so awkward?" By saying these words, Nadine wasn't merely expressing frustration—she was actually applying the logic of normative judgment, measuring herself against standards of social acceptance she had internalized that she couldn't meet and that no one in the room had ever explicitly demanded of her. The retreats itself is telling: that the bathroom is the only place at the party where Nadine could briefly escape the social visibility, yet what follows is not relief but an intensification of the disciplinary gaze turned inward. In the mise-en-scène, the bathroom functions paradoxically as both a private refuge and a disciplinary cell: the enclosed space, harsh lighting, and the mirror as a central prop transform what should be a space of escape into a site of self-examination. The mirror operates as a panoptic device, splitting Nadine into both the observer and the observed simultaneously. The use of a medium side-angle shot, framing her from the right side as she speaks to her own reflection, generates a sense of fragmentation between her social self and her inner experience. As Foucault notes, the subject becomes visible to an unseen gaze where "he is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication" (1977, p. 200). Nadine's self-correction ultimately confirms that "visibility is a trap" (p. 200), as she becomes the primary

agent of her own subjection to unreachable social norms.



Figure 3. High angle shot where Nadine being alone in the crowds of canteen (00:48:09)

The data in this section is in minute 00:48:09, In this scene, Nadine wanders through the crowded school canteen during lunch, visibly disoriented as she searches for a place to belong following her falling out with Krista. Without Krista, Nadine lost not only a friend but also her place in the school's social hierarchy, and canteen makes that lost immediately and publicly legible. In the mise-en-scène, the canteen setting carries significant disciplinary weight: the large open room, uniformly arranged tables filled with established social groups, and bright institutional lighting create a space where everyone's position is immediately readable–who belongs where, and who does not. Nadine's physical reactions, constantly scanning the room, hesitating, failing to settle, serve as an unintentional display of social deviance, one that requires no supervisory authority to be noticed and judged by those around her. Nadine's inability to locate herself within this social map ultimately leads her to leave without eating, making the canteen not a place of nourishment but of exclusion. The use of a high-angle shot positions the viewer as an invisible supervisor overlooking the scene from above, exposing Nadine's disorientation within the crowd without her awareness of being watched. This asymmetry between her vulnerability and the camera's omniscient position exemplifies what Foucault (1977) describes as the principal effect of the panopticon: "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (p. 201).



Figure 4. Extreme close-up shot of the smartphone screen during the accidental message transmission (1:05:25)

The data in this section is in minute 1:05:25, In this scene, following an impulsive joyride in her mother's car after a heated argument,

Nadine retreats to a playground, an open outdoor space that paradoxically functions as a site of private emotional release. Still emotionally unstable from the confrontation with her mother, Nadine impulsively types an intimate message to Nick, her crush, as a way to channel the frustration and vulnerability she can't express otherwise. The setting of a children's playground in broad daylight carries a symbolic weight in the mise-en-scène as a space coded for innocence and play becomes the location where Nadine enacts a moment of reckless self-disclosure. The smartphone itself operates as the central prop in this scene, functioning as a portable panopticon that connects Nadine directly to the social gaze she fears. The use of an extreme close-up on the phone screen narrows the visual field entirely to the message interface, eliminating surrounding space and trapping the viewer inside Nadine's impulsive decision. Her verbal hesitation, "You can't send this," signals the activation of internalized discipline, but the accidental press of the send button reveals how fragile that self-regulation is. As Foucault (1977) argues, the subject "assumes responsibility for the constraints of power" and "becomes the principle of his own subjection" (pp. 202–203). The moment the message is sent, Nadine becomes fully visible to the recipient with no control over interpretation, embodying the asymmetrical visibility at the core of panoptic power.



Figure 5. Medium tracking shot of Nadine running through the school corridors (1:05:51)

The data in this section is in minute 1:05:51, In this scene, after unintentionally sending an intimate message to Nick, Nadine rushes into the school building in a state of distress, running through the corridor while covering her face frustratingly. The mise-en-scène presents the school corridor as a disciplinary space. Its long and narrow layout, lined with lockers and filled with students moving in olderly directions, reflects what Foucault (1977) describes as an architectural form designed not only to contain individuals but also to shape and direct their behaviour. He argues that such spaces are meant to act on those

within them and influence their conduct (p. 172). In this context, Nadines's uncontrolled movements, such as running, covering her face frustratingly, and moving against the expected flow, immediately mark her as someone who does not conform to the norms embedded in that space. The use of medium tracking shot that follows Nadine from behind positions the viewer as an unseen observer, reflecting the asymmetry of the panoptic gaze. The camera continues to follow her without direct confrontation, illustrating a form of disciplinary power that operates continuously and often without visibility (Foucault, 1977, p. 177). Nadine's act of covering her face does not indicate an attempt to escape visibility, but rather suggests that she is already aware of being seen and judged. This response shows that the evaluative gaze has been internalized. As Foucault explains, normalizing judgment works by comparing, differentiating, and regulating individuals according to certain standards (1977, p. 183). In this context, Nadine's hurried movement through the corridor reflects not an attempt to escape a specific authority figure, but a response to the norms she feels she has violated. This condition indicates that she has internalized the mechanisms of control, becoming subject to them herself (Foucault, 1977, pp. 202–203).



Figure 6. Two-shots of Nadine and Mr. Brunner as he reads the message on her phone (1:06:25)

The data in this section is in minute 1:08:14. In this scene, Nadine sits across from Mr. Brunner at his desk, appearing restless as she hands over her phone and allows him to read the intimate message she accidentally sent to Nick. The mise-en-scène of the classroom strengthens the sense of discipline. The teacher's desk represents institutional authority, while the positioning of their bodies across from each other reflects a structured interaction shaped by evaluation. Foucault (1977) explains that the examination combines observation and judgment, functioning as a form of surveillance that allows individuals to be assessed, classified, and disciplined (p. 184). By giving her phone to Mr. Brunner, Nadine places

herself within this structure, turning a private moment into something that can be examined within an institutional setting. The use of a two-shot that frames both Nadine and Mr. Brunner at the desk highlights a clear imbalance of power. Mr. Brunner reads while Nadine watches, reflecting what Foucault describes as a condition where individuals are made visible, while power operates by organizing and observing them (1977, p. 187). This imbalance becomes more evident when Mr. Brunner briefly looks at Nadine while reading. The glance carries a sense of judgment even without any spoken response. As Foucault notes, the examination creates visibility that allows individuals to be distinguished and evaluated (1977, p. 184). Nadine's physical reaction, such as pressing her hands together and struggling to remain still, shows that she feels this judgment immediately. Her earlier statement, "I think I wanna die," suggests that she has already internalized these expectations and evaluations. She expresses her own sense of failure before it is articulated by authority, positioning herself as what Foucault describes as a "case," defined through observable traits and deviations (1977, pp. 189, 192). By handing over her phone, she effectively provides the evidence of her own actions to the same system of observation that she has chosen to enter.

E. Conclusion

This study has examined how panopticism, as theorized by Michel Foucault, is articulated through the visual and spatial construction of The Edge of Seventeen (2016). Rather than situating surveillance within explicitly institutional or dystopian frameworks, the film appears to embed disciplinary mechanisms within the everyday environments of adolescent life, including the party, bathroom, canteen, playground, corridor, and classroom. Through a series of understated cinematographic strategies, these spaces collectively suggest the presence of a diffuse and internalized mode of observation. The analysis indicates that disciplinary power in the film does not necessarily depend on the visibility of an external authority. In the party scene, the use of shallow depth of field isolates Nadine within a social environment she cannot fully access, thereby rendering her difference perceptible without direct confrontation. In the

bathroom, the mirror functions as a reflective surface through which self-surveillance is enacted, aligning with Foucault's notion of internalized discipline. This dynamic is further reinforced in the canteen scene, where Nadine's loss of social positioning becomes apparent through a high-angle shot that frames her from a perspective that remains inaccessible to her. The playground sequence introduces a mediated dimension of surveillance, as digital technology facilitates an unintended exposure of the self. In this context, the smartphone operates as a mechanism through which visibility is extended and control over self-representation is diminished. This loss of control is subsequently materialized in the corridor scene, where Nadine's movement contrasts with the regulated flow of the surrounding space, while the tracking shot implies the persistence of an unseen observational gaze. By the final classroom interaction with Mr. Brunner, Nadine's subjectivity appears to be stabilized within a framework of evaluation, positioning her as an object of scrutiny, or what Foucault conceptualizes as a "case." Importantly, these moments do not present surveillance in its conventional, institutionalized form. The absence of overt monitoring structures such as watchtowers or surveillance devices underscores how disciplinary power may operate in a more dispersed and normalized manner. In this sense, the film can be read as illustrating how social norms are internalized and enacted through everyday interactions, supporting Foucault's argument that discipline functions most effectively when it is no longer perceived as external. Overall, this study contributes to film and cultural analysis by demonstrating how realist coming-of-age cinema can encode disciplinary power through subtle formal elements rather than explicit narrative devices. It suggests that such films offer a productive site for examining the normalization of social control in daily life. Future research may extend this approach to coming-of-age films across different cultural contexts in order to explore how varying social norms shape the cinematic representation of discipline and subject formation.

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