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## Regaining Control: Jenni Fagan, *The Panopticon* (2012)

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## **Regaining Control: Jenni Fagan, *The Panopticon* (2012)<sup>1</sup>**

When Jenni Fagan's debut novel *The Panopticon* came out in 2012, it catapulted her on to the 2013 Granta list of Best Young British Novelists, a success confirmed by its very swift translation into French and German (2013) as well as Italian and Turkish (2014 and 2015), and which can in part be attributed to its being situated in the line of contemporary Scottish novels that runs from James Kelman to Irvine Welsh.

Partly written in Edinburgh dialect, this first-person narrative follows the steps of fifteen-year-old Anais Hendricks, an orphan born to a prostitute, who has been in care all her life ("a wee fucking dirty from a fucking kids' home" (136) to quote her prison-bound boyfriend), and who counts foster homes instead of sheep to lull herself to sleep (she has known over fifty of them). She is suspected of putting a policewoman in a coma, and is brought to the Panopticon, an institution for troublesome youngsters, pending a judicial decision concerning her case. Her backstory—she has been gang raped, has found the only foster mother she loved dead in her bath—as well as the stories of the other "cared for young people" as the institution calls them, "inmates" or even "lifers" as they see themselves, make this novel an exploration of subalternity, a term "to designate unequal and iniquitous power relations between individuals and groups and underpinned by the institutional structure of the state."<sup>2</sup>

The unequal power relation portrayed in this book is reminiscent of the way the generation depicted by Irvine Welsh was dubbed the "fucked generation", and extends to Anais' presentation of herself: "I'd rather be dead today, but I umnay—I'm fifteen and fucked" (18). The generation presented in *The Panopticon* conforms to the description in a frightfully literal manner, several of the "cared for" youngsters being driven to suicide. This focus on the subaltern and the various structures that oppress them links the novel to the indictment of authoritarianism and state

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<sup>1</sup> These comments draw from my essay, "Punishment and crime in Jenni Fagan's *The Panopticon*," in *Crime and Punishment in Scotland*, forthcoming.

<sup>2</sup> Stephanie Lehner, *Subaltern Ethics in Contemporary Scottish and Irish Literature: Tracing Counter-Histories* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 9.

apparatuses in James Kelman's fiction, in particular *You Have to be Careful in the Land of the Free* (2004), and the chilling *Translated Accounts* (2001).

The central building in Fagan's novel, an animated gothic castle, is at the centre of what Michel Foucault calls "cartographies of power": in the mind of its creator, the 18<sup>th</sup>-century philosopher Jeremy Bentham, the Panopticon was designed to subdue people through permanent inspection, substituting relations of power to human rights. Fagan's novel, coming after Kelman's, is an important novel in that it resists oppressive state power over the underclasses. It does so by naming names, by portraying the consequences of state oppression. The invisible power-wielders behind the Panopticon are described as "soul-stealers" (255) while Anais registers her lack of a personal past, of personal memories that would vouch for her existence in an environment where she can no longer be secure in the knowledge that she *is*.

In a truly Foucauldian move, Anais describes herself not as a human being but as an "experiment", grown "from a bit of bacteria in a Petri dish" (31), while making this status reversible, and therefore more complex, as she also calls the Panopticon and the invisible apparatus behind it "the Experiment". In this frightful environment, Anais has learned the lessons of *1984* as she, unlike Winston Smith, cannot even be certain that her memories and her thoughts are secure in her mind, that they cannot be reached by the Experiment. She starts off as confident as Winston, saying that "they cannae have my memories, not even the bad ones" (79) while also resolving to photograph all her belongings, which attest to the reality of her existence, and to hide the photos in a box because "then even if they do fry me, someone will open the box one day and find them. Then they will have the memory." (79)

Consequently, the novel takes on distinctly dystopian undertones—Fiona McCulloch describes it as belonging to the genre of contemporary Scottish gothic<sup>3</sup>—which are conveyed by the focalisation, an internal point of view in a novel which is all about being seen and not seen, about existing and not being. When Anais realises that "people in care are always disappearing" (124), and that she herself is not important enough to be granted actual human existence (186), she underlines the ultimate fate of the subaltern, and the internal viewpoint gives the reader the opportunity to "watch" the experiment, the novel turning into a sort of fictional Panopticon in which the narrator makes clear the dangers of internalising oppression:

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<sup>3</sup> Fiona McCulloch, "'Daughter of an Outcast Queen' –Defying State Expectation in Jenni Fagan's *The Panopticon*," *Scottish Literary Review*, 7:1 (2015): 113-131.

Then they would inject me in the head – with a big needle full of shit that makes your skull see-through. Then they would put me in a box. The box would have a light switch that'd make my thoughts glow a different colour, in my see-through skull. So they could read them. Forced telepathy – it's the last stop for total mind control. (69-70)

Fagan presents the reader with the ideal Panopticon (we have to remember that Bentham's experiment failed): It is ideal because it mixes Bentham's idea with Orwell's imperative: it is a mental structure that provides its own internalised surveillance, a Foucauldian nightmare where the oppressor has finally colonised the oppressed from inside. Internal focalisation is both a means to give the reader access to the inmates' minds and therefore to be offered a unique perspective on how to discipline and educate them, and an ingenuous way to mimic the panoptic principle at the level of the narrative by importing it into its own structure: focalisation, that big needle, prevents Anais from hiding in a secret corner, well away from the prying eyes of the reader turned watcher. To back up this suggestion, the novel implements the panoptic principle by folding upon itself, by including sentences that are repeated verbatim in several places, indicating that there is no escape from its structure.

But Fagan also uses her narrator as a figure of resistance, because ultimately, by securing for Anais the power not just to see but also to tell the story, as her namesake the writer Anais Nin suggests, she turns her into a figure of the creator, of the story and therefore of the Panopticon. When Anais at the end declares "I—begin today" (324), it is both a declaration of intent, whereby the narrator asserts her capacity to change her story, because she has a grasp of *the* story, however dire that story may be, and a performative act of resistance and victory over the forces of oppression of the subaltern.

*The Panopticon* is an important landmark of contemporary literature because, like Kelman's fiction, it does not shy away from the most controversial issues of our contemporary society; nor does it employ the uniform brush of the politically correct. Anais' narrative is rugged; it shows its asperities not because of the crude language in which it depicts crude situations, but because it uses its own disruptive potential to create a counter-discourse on those issues, in a way that is also obvious in Fagan's second novel, *The Sunlight Pilgrims* (2016) in which such issues as our propensity to destroy our planet, or sex-change and its implications for a teenager, are uncompromisingly depicted.

Fagan's novels are indeed an invitation to reconsider the ethics of our contemporary world, and the words, "I—begin today" lead us back to the unattributed words opening the novel "*I'm an experiment. I Always have*

*been. It's a given, a liberty, a fact" (2), and historicise this invitation and turn it into an imperative, a liberty, for it to become a fact, a given.*

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