

01_PRISONERS

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We have experienced in many different ways and shades the idea of a condition of imprisonment during the lockdown. We are going to experience a short path to some visions, pictures and conditions of imprisonment in different senses.

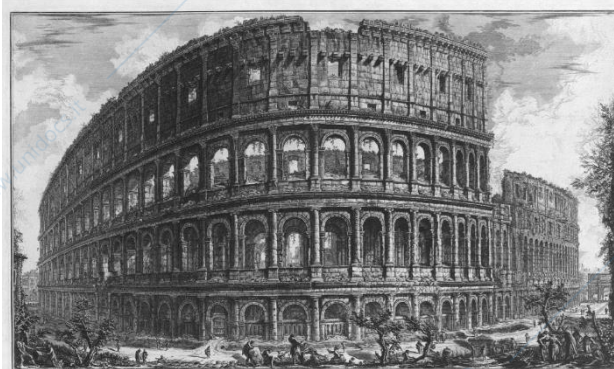
IMAGINARY PRISONS

Conceived by one of the greatest architects of the entire history and surely 18th century, Giovanni Battista (born in Mogliano Veneto, near Treviso, which in 1720 was part of the republic of Venice) pretty soon started a tied relationship with antiquity and classical culture dealing with the past, ancient buildings and ruins of ancient buildings specially in Rome. He was also introduced very early to Latin language and to ancient (classical) culture and architecture. In 1740 he moved to Rome to study the art of edging and engraving. This became one of his main focuses. He was an architect but then he to represent (not only to copy) somehow reality and imagination. He depicted the city of Rome and classical architecture.



GBP, Arco di Trionfo (1745-1750 circa) penna e inchiostro bruno, acquarello su matita rossa, 14,7 x 21,1 cm, British Museum, London

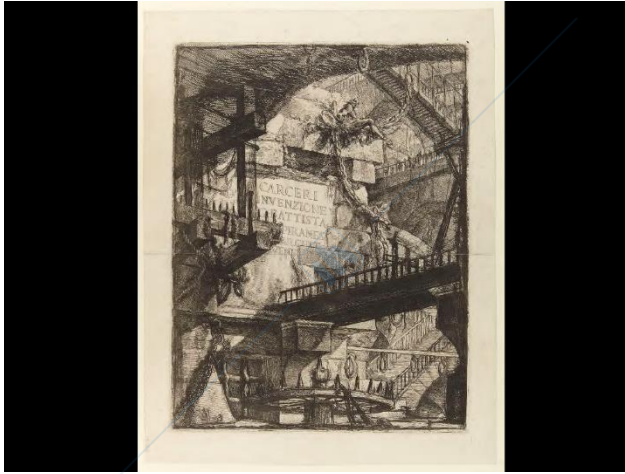
This is a view of a Triumphal arch, which is now at the British Museum. You can feel and touch the quality of his pencil, hand and eyes (quality of his mind in depicting this "imaginary classical landscape" made out of monuments).



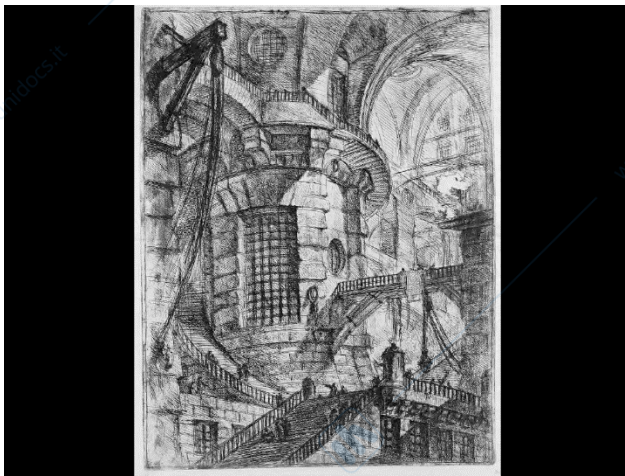
GBP, Veduta dell'Anfiteatro Flavio, detto il Colosseo, 1757

This is the view of Rome's very famous Colosseum. As seen, his work is full of this kind of pictures and views of the city of Rome and other places in Italy, where there is a strong reflection and exercise upon the aspects of an ancient city but of course with its contemporary (present) perspective. It is a sort of mix between an archaeological perspective and the perspective of its own time (one living man living in the 18th century).

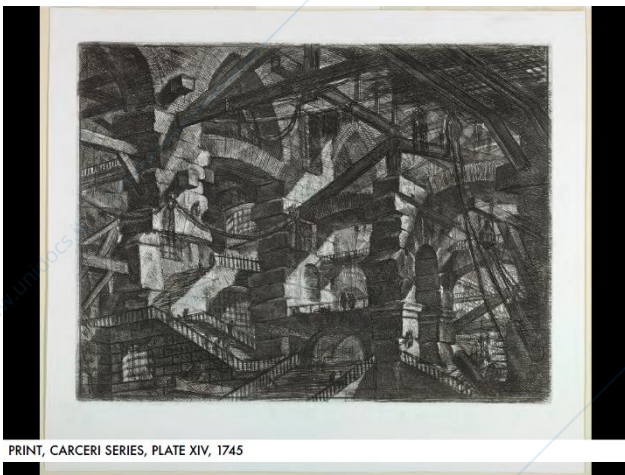
We are not going to analyse his entire work but more precisely the *carceri d'invenzione*. This "imaginary prisons" were a series of 16 prints depicting enormous subterranean spaces.



On the image enormous places empty of people but full of description can be seen. These are not normal houses or palaces but imaginary prisons where people are confined because of some crimes. There are series of bridges and staircases with horrific machines. The function is not totally clear because they are mysterious spaces. Teacher wants us to explore this image in order to be captured by the views, trying to touch a depiction of imprisonment and how a man can be imprisoned.



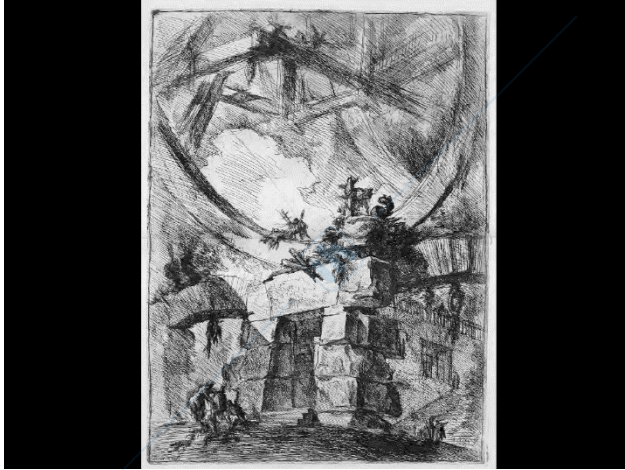
These spaces do not have a clear connection with the outside (we see some windows, but we don't see any clear connection between inside and outside).



PRINT, CARCERI SERIES, PLATE XIV, 1745

Why are these pictures so outstanding? We will be seeing also in the Parasites film or other set designs direct or hidden influences of these pictures that are not telling us precise things, but intriguingly they are giving us a sort of atmosphere; the depiction of some mysterious spaces that give us a certain feeling; a question of a feeling: How can you life, survive, experience such a mysterious space? How does a body feel within such space? How does the mind of a criminal feel within such a mysterious huge sort of a labyrinth prison? Professor asks us to

look at this picture not only once, but to zoom on details trying to understand these crazy compositions sketched by Piranesi with false perspectives and seemingly unclear relationships between all the rooms and spaces depicted in these engravings. We can see enlargement of machinery, strange sculptures or death bodies looking as sculptures, wheels, cables, cams, pulleys, catapults, bridges and strange machines (as torture machines sometimes). This somehow gives us a mix of real archaeological landscape taken from some ruin in some ancient city and mental archaeology (condition). The grandness that we see in this place is the sense of infiniteness or big labyrinth can be put in relation to the mental condition of someone in prison in such a space or in a prison.



This one is one of professor's favourite places in which we see a sort of gigantic arch or wheel, an entrance door made of blocks of stone. It is pretty unclear what is the function of this place, of the entrance, what are they doing there and what is happening inside this imaginary prison.

As previously said, they are not telling something specific. We are not asking Piranesi to tell us something specific, a precise answer from these views. But we could try with a certain effort from our

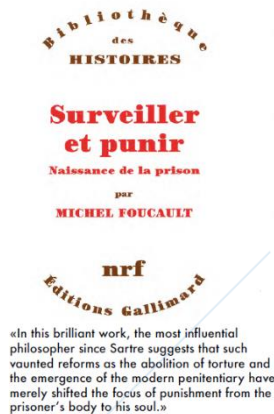
souls and mind to question these images and try to understand what Piranesi is trying to say us through them. What is the relationship between the human scale and this huge space? What is the connection? What is the mental effect that such a vast space can have on human being? Relationship between the body and the mind in such prison?

It must be said that we must say something about the context of Piranesi's imaginary prisons. We are in the century of the enlightenment (18th century) and more or less in the same years that this engraving was done, we had the publishing of Cesare Beccaria's "On Crime and Punishment". For the first time it was condemning things like torture and death penalty. So, the 18th century is a time in which there is a strong debate upon the relationship between crime and punishment. It is for us interesting to try to understand the relationship between crime and punishment in terms of space. If those of Piranesi are imaginary prisons (not the way they were built at that time but they are just some renders, views, something from imagination), it is worth of exploring more closely how prisons changed from 19th to 20th century. Because starting from completely different times of imprisonment, this tells us something about the relationship between society and space.



Michael Foucault was a great philosopher who wrote a lot of great books analysing institutions and social structures like madness and how madness was considered and managed in our society. He also wrote a great book called Discipline and Punish: The birth of the prison. [Two chapters available on Beep which we should study].

Overview



In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault presents a history of the changes in criminal codes and punishments to explore why Western society moved from a bodily punishment of torture to a 'gentle' punishment of prison sentences. He argues that we did not stop torturing people because we became more enlightened, humanitarian and respectful of individual rights. Instead, he claims that the codes of 'justice' always represent and materially enact social power. The difference between early modern society and a modern one is not that modern society is more civilized; it is just that punishment before the late eighteenth century had a logic that expressed the dominant interests of society wherein the King was meant to have absolute power. Punishment in modern society is enacted differently because modern society is bourgeois; it is controlled by the middle class, and the middle class has different social agendas than the monarchy.

Foucault focuses on a history of punishment, therefore, to illustrate the larger social transfer and transformation of power from the aristocracy to the middle classes. By learning the changes in the mode of punishment over time, we can see how since the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century, the bourgeoisie have maintained authority by creating modern forms of subjectivity through a dual process: making an individual a non-threatening, subordinated political 'subject' while simultaneously installing a new kind of personhood or identity. This form of power mainly

Professor reads the overview of the book: *"Foucault presents a history of the changes in criminal codes and punishments to explore why Western society moved from a bodily punishment of torture to a "gentle" punishment of prison sentences."* It is really interesting how for having committed a crime, you were punished in a completely different way in the space of 50 years; it was a great change in the way society answered to the people who had committed crimes.

"He argues that we did not stop torturing people because we became more enlightened," Because there was a shift: before torture was cutting legs, arms or basically doing horrible things to the human body and after creating prisons as an institution. Prison as a place where people were not in view (in a sort of showcase), were not visible when the act of punishment, but instead in completely opposite way the idea that criminals should be put in a place hidden from the rest of the world, segregated and isolated from the rest of the society. This is not a short step, but it means that something happened, there was a complete change in the way we faced crime and punishment, discipline and the others. So, this can be interesting for us working upon design and interiors, on how spaces were designed and conceived in relation to this kind of function of keeping people away from the world.

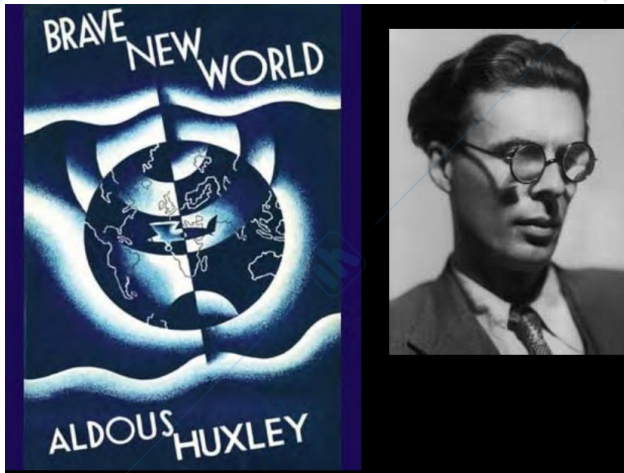
"He argues that we did not stop torturing people because we became more enlightened, humanitarian and respectful of individual rights. Instead, he claims that the codes of "justice" always represent and materially enact social power." There was "only" a shift in the way social power wanted to express itself.

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Foucault focuses on a history of punishment, therefore, to illustrate the larger social transfer and transformation of power from the aristocracy to the middle classes." Again, there is a shift in power and from aristocracy we go to new institutions and therefore new kind of different spaces.

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He goes beyond the content of this class and what we are interested in but we should read two chapters because he says interesting things about the history of prison and how the physical design of jails and places of imprisonment reflect also some social dynamics that probably are different in which we are now surrounded by but it is worth analysing them.



One important art historian whose name is Aldous Huxley from the 20th century wrote a great essay upon the prison of Piranesi. He is also the author of the famous novel and TV series "Brave New World". He focused on this prison by Piranesi and found on it a source of inspiration. This was not a precise object that could be seen and defined in every detail forever. But rather something that can be continuously reinterpreted, remanaged and questioned in order to find some answers or interpretations of our contemporary times. For instance,

he tried to read and interpret Piranesi's prisons looking at the history of prisons. He says:

of martinets and dictators. Before the days of Howard and Bentham and the Philadelphia Quakers, nobody, for some odd reason, seems ever to have thought of making prisons orderly and efficient. The gaols to which Elizabeth Fry brought her inexhaustible treasures of charity and common sense were like the embodiments of a criminal delirium. Passing these doors, the prisoner found himself condemned to an existence resembling that of Hobbes's theoretical *state of nature*. Behind the façade of Newgate — a façade which its architect, uninhibited by the tiresome necessity of finding a place for windows, had been able to make consummately elegant — there existed, not a world of men and women, not even a world of animals, but a chaos, a pandemonium.

"Before the days of Howard and Betham and the Philadelphia Quakers," meaning before a certain time, "nobody, for some odd reason, seems ever to have thought of making prisons orderly and efficient." He is highlighting another shift; one thing is prison being a new institution as Foucault told us, but then we can experience different kind of prisons: first one being one in which no one thought about making them orderly and efficient.

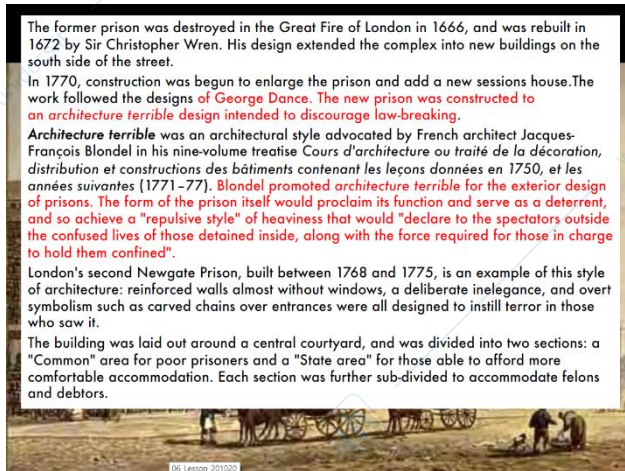
"The gaols (prisons) to which Elizabeth Fry brought her inexhaustible treasures of charity and common sense were like the embodiments of a criminal delirium." The old fashion prisons.

"Passing these doors, the prisoner found himself condemned to an existence resembling that of Hobbe's theoretical 'statue of nature'." No order, no rationality; just a mess. A mental and physical frustration-state of nature in Hobbe's conception.

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Newgate Prison, 1769-1777. It was damaged in the Gordon Riots (1780), restored in 1780-83 and finally demolished in 1902-04

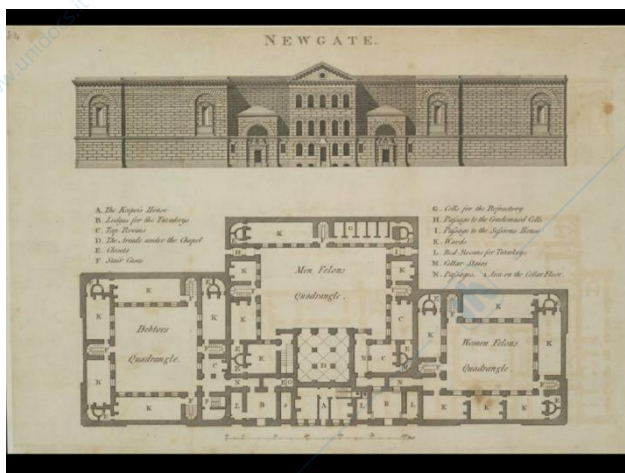


In this Newgate prison was built in different steps by a very famous architect who was George Dance. It was built in London, as Michael Foucault explained, after this sort of transformation in the conception of discipline and punishment of crimes in society.

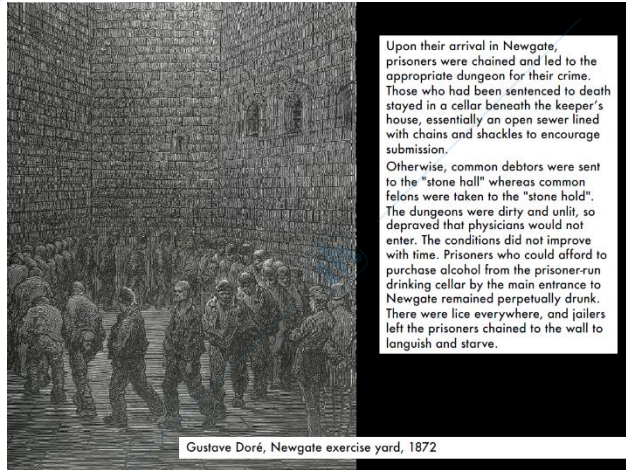
"The former prison was destroyed in the Great Fire of London in 1666, and was rebuilt in 1672 by Sir Christopher Wren. In 1770, construction was begun to enlarge the prison and add a new sessions house. The work followed the designs of George Dance. The new prison was constructed to an architecture terrible design intended to discourage law-breaking."

The idea is to find a style fitting the idea of punishment, a style that could stop people from making crimes because of the aspect of the prison. A so strong and monumental prison, also a bit rough that

you see this institution and think better not to commit a crime. This is interesting because *"Blondel promoted architecture terrible for the exterior design of these prisons. The form of the prison itself would proclaim its function and serve as a deterrent, and so achieve a "repulsive style" of heaviness that would "declare to the spectators outside the confused lives of those detained inside, along with the force required for those in charge to hold them confined".*



This is the plan of the Newgate prison. You can see three main spaces separated and distinct for different crimes and so, different kind of people.



Gustave Doré, Newgate exercise yard, 1872

Upon their arrival in Newgate, prisoners were chained and led to the appropriate dungeon for their crime. Those who had been sentenced to death stayed in a cellar beneath the keeper's house, essentially an open sewer lined with chains and shackles to encourage submission. Otherwise, common debtors were sent to the "stone hall" whereas common felons were taken to the "stone hold". The dungeons were dirty and unlit, so depraved that physicians would not enter. The conditions did not improve with time. Prisoners who could afford to purchase alcohol from the prisoner-run drinking cellar by the main entrance to Newgate remained perpetually drunk. There were lice everywhere, and jailers left the prisoners chained to the wall to languish and starve.

This was a mess, a chaos. *"The dungeons were dirty and unlit, so depraved that physicians would not enter. The conditions did not improve with time. Prisoners who could afford to purchase alcohol from the prisoner-run drinking cellar by the main entrance to Newgate remained perpetually drunk."* So, it was a condition where this façade built to prevent crime outside reflected a total chaos inside in which people were left in sort of state of nature, without a precise discipline but getting worse in their daily life and without improving the soul of the

prisoners (without trying to improve, as we do in a more contemporary attempt, the soul and behaviour of the prisoners).

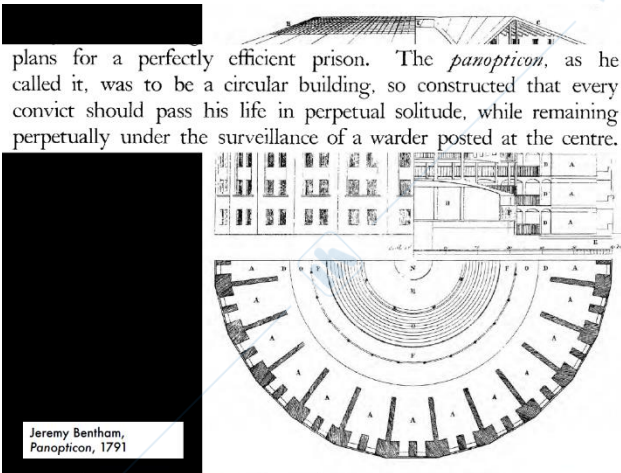
Within a space of thirty or forty years the Prison Discipline Society accomplished an extraordinary reformation. From being sub-humanly anarchical, prisons became sub-humanly mechanical. Ever since Sir Joshua Jebb erected his model gaol at Pentonville, the consciousness of being inside a machine, inside a realized ideal of absolute tidiness and perfect regimentation, has been a principal part of the punishment of convicts. Even in the Nazi concentration camps hell on earth was not of the old Hogarthian kind, but thoroughly neat and scientific. Seen from the air, Belsen is said to have looked like an atomic research station or a well-designed motion picture studio. The Bentham brothers have been dead these hundred years and more; but the spirit of the *panopticon*, the spirit of Sir Samuel's *mujik*-compelling work-house, has gone marching along to strange and horrible destinations.

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it was not a total mess made out of disorder and state of nature kind of conditions but there was this extraordinary reformation from anarchy to a mechanical spaces in which instead of chaos and dirty places you have order, rationality and everything cleaned up. A complete change in the conception of space in which people are in prison for their crimes.

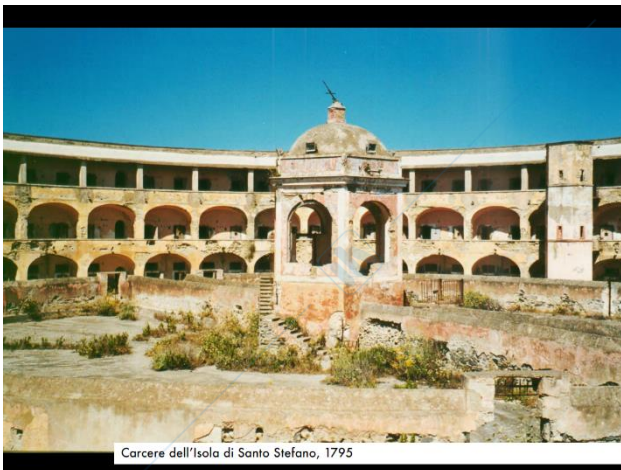
"Seen from the air, Belsen (the Nazi concentration camp) is said to have looked like an atomic research station or a well-designed motion picture studio." Concentration camps were a special kind of prisons where the aim of exterminating people was designed precisely in a mechanical order like an assembly line, with a straight and ordered process of destroying the identity and soul of the human being and then a mechanical process for destroying the human bodies. This parallelism is interesting because there was a profound change in the way prisons were designed so they became a really mechanical place, ruled by principles of order and efficiency. And later on, the principle had the base of principles found in the design and functioning of concentration camps. A clean engine-like, functional, mechanical and rational space also in esthetical terms.

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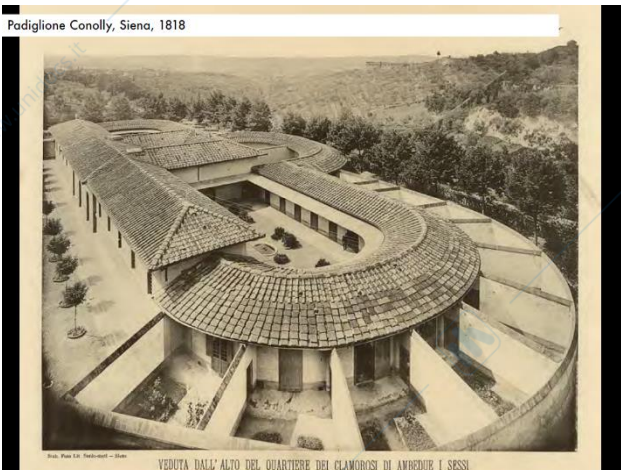


What is the panopticon? It is a space, not only intended to be for prisons or jails, but also for other institutions as some schools or camps for children, hospitals for people with mental or physical diseases. It is a circular building in which you have someone watching people from a single point (middle of the construction) and he/she has around a series of cells/rooms that can be observed by this single person at every time. It is like the extreme and most efficient way to exploit the work of one single person and also to put the single

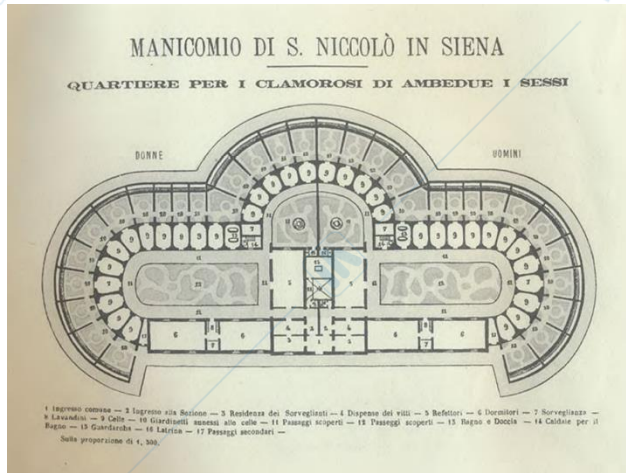
people in a single cell in this solitude but like in the condition of being watched all day long. The people imprisoned in such a place is always on-show, always under surveillance. This is a really rational way of designing such a space with the aim to control these people. It is the total opposite of anarchist prisons of which we have talked before (for example the Newgate prison).



Here, in such a space we have a perfect control. This is a prison in the island of Santo Stefano in 1795. We have a single point of observation and all the different cells around this place.



This is another pavilion in the *Quartiere dei clamorosi* for people with mental diseases in Siena, Italy 1818. Again, you can see this same principle with different variations of this idea of rationalising, the act of controlling and also punish people.



It is worth of considering the relationship between the shape of a space (geometrical shape) and the mental consequences that this geometry provokes. In a state of nature prison, you will be stuck with many other criminals beating and raping you in a physical and also mental hell.

In this case, we should consider in a completely different space as this one how the extreme rationality of the design causes other kind of mental oppression and pressure (being under surveillance 24 hours a day from a single point). This are features and relationships between space, mind, body and also a certain kind of society which affects architecture and the construction of the contemporary interiors and spaces of our world.

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This is another view of such space.

Today every efficient office, every up-to-date factory is a panoptical prison, in which the worker suffers (more or less, according to the character of the warders and the degree of his native sensibility) from the consciousness of being inside a machine. It is, I think, only in literature that there has been anything like an adequate artistic rendering of this consciousness. De Vigny, for example, has said

Huxley did another parallelism: *“Today every efficient office, every up-to-date factory is a panoptical prison, in which the worker suffers (more or less, according to the character of the warders and the degree of his native sensibility) from the consciousness of being inside a machine. It is, I think only in literature that there has been anything like an adequate artistic rendering of this consciousness.”* It is like doing a step forward, make a sort of connection between the panopticon of prisons and the panoptical structures of



certain kind of offices. We could also try to think on the degree of surveillance that is included in our digital lives.

point. For the real horror of the situation in an industrial or administrative *panopticon* is not that human beings are transformed into machines (if they could be so transformed, they would be perfectly happy in their prisons); no, the horror consists precisely in the fact that they are not machines, but freedom-loving animals, far-ranging minds and God-like spirits, who find themselves subordinated to machines and constrained to live, if they can be said to live, within the issueless tunnel of an arbitrary and inhuman system.

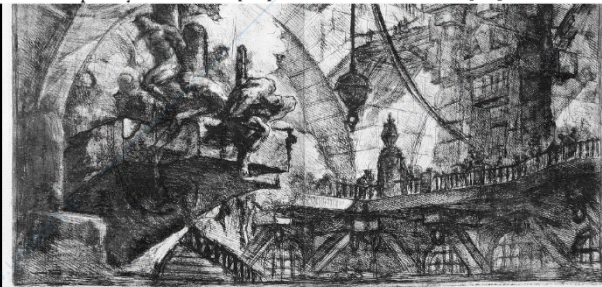
Beyond the real, historical prisons of too much tidiness and those where anarchy engenders the hell of physical and moral chaos there lie yet other prisons, no less terrible for being fantastic and unembodied — the *metaphysical prisons*, whose seat is within the mind, whose walls are made of nightmare and incomprehension, whose chains are anxiety and their racks a sense of personal and even generic guilt. De Quincey's Oxford Street and the road on which

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Beyond the real, historical prisons of too much tidiness and those where anarchy engenders the hell of physical and moral chaos there lie yet other prisons, no less terrible for being fantastic and unembodied – the metaphysical prisons, whose seat is within the mind, whose walls are made of nightmare and incomprehension, whose chains are anxiety and their racks a sense of personal and even generic guilt."

Continuing with the interpretations proposed by Huxley of the imaginary prisons considered by Piranesi...

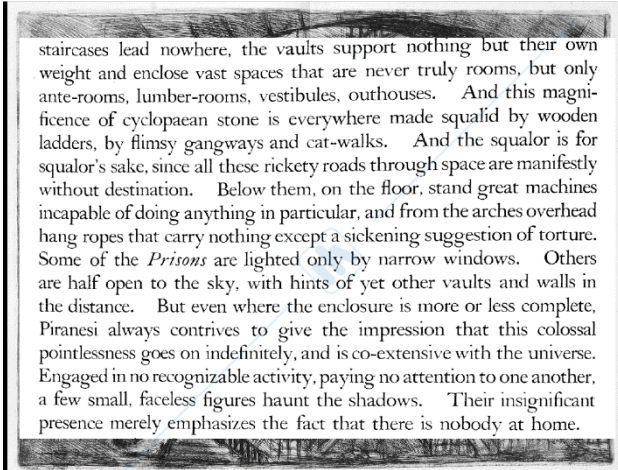
The most disquietingly obvious fact about all these dungeons is the perfect pointlessness which reigns throughout. Their architecture is colossal and magnificent. One is made to feel that the genius of great artists and the labour of innumerable slaves have gone into the creation of these monuments, every detail of which is completely without a purpose. Yes, without a purpose: for the



"purpose." So, embodied in these spaces we could also find that we can feel also another kind of imprisonment, the condition of the slaves who probably built these buildings. Another point is that every detail of which is completely without a purpose; so the human being is stuck in a place in which every detail is completely without a purpose; there is an extra level of a sort of oppression in the uselessness that characterises this space.

"The most disquietingly obvious fact about all these dungeons is the perfect pointlessness which reigns throughout." It is true because if you look at them and try to fix or establish some points in the perspective of the spaces, it is quite hard to find them.

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staircases lead nowhere, the vaults support nothing but their own weight and enclose vast spaces that are never truly rooms, but only ante-rooms, lumber-rooms, vestibules, outhouses. And this magnificence of cyclopean stone is everywhere made squalid by wooden ladders, by flimsy gangways and cat-walks. And the squalor is for squalor's sake, since all these rickety roads through space are manifestly without destination. Below them, on the floor, stand great machines incapable of doing anything in particular, and from the arches overhead hang ropes that carry nothing except a sickening suggestion of torture. Some of the *Prisons* are lighted only by narrow windows. Others are half open to the sky, with hints of yet other vaults and walls in the distance. But even where the enclosure is more or less complete, Piranesi always contrives to give the impression that this colossal pointlessness goes on indefinitely, and is co-extensive with the universe. Engaged in no recognizable activity, paying no attention to one another, a few small, faceless figures haunt the shadows. Their insignificant presence merely emphasizes the fact that there is nobody at home.

"Yes, without a purpose: for the staircases lead nowhere, the vaults support nothing but their own weight and enclose vast spaces that are never truly rooms, but only ante-rooms, lumber-rooms, vestibules, outhouses." This is interesting in terms of dispersion, a sort of anarchy of spaces. You have enormous and very heavy pieces of architecture enclosing vast spaces that are never truly rooms. So, there is a flow of space between these walls which are walls made without purpose.

"And this magnificence of cyclopean stone is everywhere made squalid by wooden ladders, by flimsy gangways and cat-walks. And the squalor is for squalor's sake, since all these rickety roads through space are manifestly without destination." So, form follows function is not that direct. Which is the function? If the function is oppressing the prisoner probably makes sense but in a completely different way, not in the straightway of correspondence between form and function. It is a deeper function.

"Below them, on the floor, stand great machines incapable of doing anything in particular, and from the arches overhead hang ropes that carry nothing except a sickening suggestion of torture." It is a suggestion again, a mental pressure.

"Some of the Prisons are lighted only by narrow windows. Others are half open to the sky, with hints of yet other vaults and walks in the distance." Again, we do not have a clear perspective or view because we have the view of something that could be a window, but it is actually a window on an inner space (a window on another interior). You have no enclosed room but hybrid spaces, vaults supporting nothing, spaces designed for no purpose... It is a sort of mental mess, unbearable probably for the human beings confined in it.

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Physiologically, every human being is always alone, suffering in solitude, enjoying in solitude, incapable of participating in the vital processes of his fellows. But, though self-contained, this island-organism is never self-sufficient. Each living solitude is dependent upon other living solitudes and, more completely still, upon the ocean of being from which it lifts its little reef of individuality. The realization of this paradox of solitude in the midst of dependence, isolation accompanied by insufficiency, is one of the principal causes of confusion and *acedia* and anxiety. And in their turn, of course, confusion and *acedia* and anxiety intensify the sense of loneliness and make the human paradox seem yet more tragic. The occupants of

Piranesi's *Prisons* are the hopeless spectators of *this pomp of worlds, this pain of birth* — this magnificence without meaning, this incomprehensible misery without end and beyond the power of man to understand or to bear.

"Physiologically, every human being is always alone, suffering in solitude, enjoying in solitude, incapable of participating in the vital processes of his fellows." Luckily this are a huge gap but a sort of cathartic process of psychoanalysis. Professor wonders if these pictures can help us with the relationship with our recent past conditions and our spaces, rooms where we were supposed to be confined and hopefully not in the future. But professor thinks that mixing Piranesi's pictures and Huxley and Foucault interpretations

(analysis), probably something comes out and helps us to do a more critical and profound interpretation of our spaces and living conditions. Not in a pessimistic sense but in the idea of analysing the balance and consequences, the exchange between rooms and feelings (inevitable conditions) and the design of space.

"But, though self-contained, this island-organism is never self-sufficient. Each living solitude is dependent upon other living solitudes and, more completely still, upon the ocean of being from which it lifts its little reef of individuality." Again, a relationship of individuality and something else, between interiors and exteriors, between individuals and community.

"The realization of this paradox of solitude in the midst of dependence, isolation accompanied by insufficiency, is one of the principal causes of confusion and acedia and anxiety. And in their turn, of course, confusion and acedia and anxiety intensify the sense of loneliness and make the human paradox seem yet more tragic. The occupants of Piranesi's Prisons are the hopeless spectators of this pomp of worlds, this pain of birth – this magnificence without meaning, this incomprehensible misery without end and beyond the power of man to understand or to bear."

Considered from a purely formal standpoint, the *Prisons*, are remarkable as being the nearest eighteenth-century approach to abstract art. The raw material of Piranesi's designs consists of architectural forms; but, because the *Prisons* are images of confusion, because their essence is pointlessness, the combination of architectural forms never adds up to an architectural drawing, but remains a free design, untrammelled by any considerations of utility or even possibility, and limited only by the necessity of evoking the general idea of a building. In other words, Piranesi uses architectural forms to produce a series of beautifully intricate designs — designs which resemble the abstractions of the Cubists in being composed of geometrical elements, but which have the advantage of combining pure

geometry with enough subject matter, enough literature, to express more forcibly than a mere pattern can do, the obscure and terrible states of spiritual confusion and *acedia*.

Of natural, as opposed to geometrical forms, Piranesi, in his *Prisons*, makes hardly any use. There is not a leaf or a blade of grass in the whole series, not a bird or an animal. Here and there, irrelevantly alive in the midst of the stony abstractions, stand a few human figures, dark, cloaked, featureless and impassive.

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