

The Glass Cul-de-Sac: Panoptic Surveillance, Social Discipline, and Suburban Visibility in McFadden's *The Housemaid is Watching*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Freida McFadden's *The Housemaid is Watching* using the concepts of panopticism by Michel Foucault; in order to reveal the way surveillance takes place in suburban domesticity. Although many academic works have considered surveillance as a social and psychological concept, relatively few scholars have focused on the spatial representation of surveillance in literature, particularly in suburban settings like cul-de-sac. Using qualitative analysis of the text, the study examines the selected quotations about visibility, social interactions and reactions to surveillance in the novel. Based on the results of the analysis, surveillance in the novel is shown as a decentralized and informal process where visibility, gossiping and close location produce social control. Furthermore, a cul-de-sac is represented as an organized space in which mutual surveillance takes place and breaks down the distinction between private and public space. The current study argues that surveillance does not only occur when people observe someone directly but also when individuals start to change their behavior while being aware of the fact that they can be observed.

KEYWORDS

Cul-de-Sac; Domestic Thriller; Foucauldian Theory; Informal Surveillance; Panopticism

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1. Introduction

The domestic thriller genre transforms the sense of place in the domestic sphere into an environment that induces anxiety rather than one that provides comfort. According to Cavallaro (2002), the depiction of vulnerability and exposure to intruders, scrutiny, and uneasiness in Gothic literature creates an environment that erodes the boundary between the domestic and public spaces. In *The Housemaid is Watching*, Freida McFadden (2024) places the story setting in an environment where

Millie Accardi is being watched, talked about, and judged by her neighbors Jonathan and Suzette Lowell, Janice Archer, and the housemaid Martha. Although Millie Accardi wishes for an ordinary life, she always feels like she's being watched all the time. She never escapes from the situation because there are no laws or any authorities watching over them.

Foucault's (1977) idea of panopticism, where behavior is shaped by the possibility of being observed, is an effective way to illustrate these principles. Although it was first introduced as a surveillance system in prisons, its conceptual development can also help to identify further examples of power exercised through visibility (Lyon, 2018). Initially conceived as an organizational mechanism, it can also be extended to social interactions, particularly when surveillance operates outside formal institutional structures. Suburban communities, especially enclosed spaces such as cul-de-sacs, create conditions for social surveillance based on proximity and mutual visibility. In McFadden's novel, these conditions establish a network of observation in which neighbors monitor, interpret, and influence one another's actions.

This research identifies a gap in the current body of knowledge about domestic thrillers, which has focused heavily on the themes of psychological and interpersonal drama. In particular, the use of space as an enabler for surveillance practices, especially with regard to the cul-de-sac, remains unexplored to some extent. It is precisely this gap in the literature that will be addressed in this research, which will look into how *The Housemaid is Watching* represents the cul-de-sac as a source of constant exposure and informal surveillance.

The overall objective of the investigation is to analyze how the cul-de-sac, as a particular arrangement of space, helps foster mechanisms of social surveillance that, in turn, influence the actions of characters in this movie. As such, this study will show through the application of Foucault's theories to the context of a suburban domestic thriller that surveillance does not necessarily happen through formal means; rather, it occurs during the daily social interactions between individuals. The main aim of this study is to analyze: In what way does *The Housemaid is Watching* depict the cul-de-sac as a mechanism of social surveillance?

2. Literature Review

This part of this literature review integrates perspectives from surveillance theory, sociology, and literary theory to discuss how surveillance operates in literary texts embedded in spaces with physical form. Scholars have conducted copious analysis of practices of surveillance and social control from both fields but done relatively little investigating the relationship of certain spatial formations such as the cul-de-sac architectural layout and surveillance in literary texts.

2.1 Panopticism and Contemporary Surveillance

The panoptic approach advocated by Foucault (1977) provides the fundamental theoretical framework for interpreting surveillance as an exercise in power that is based upon visibility and the policing of behavior by reference to the surveillance capacity. Formed institutionally, the model has been largely reframed in recent academic research and expanded to embrace a wider variety of surveillant practices.

Academics have focused on the shift from centralized surveillance to participatory observation via a network. In Zhao Liu's (2025) research, surveillance has been conceptualized as a participative process that emphasizes the agency of individuals who work as active participants in surveillance activities. Newell and Hughes (2025) have studied non-hierarchical and decentralized observation as well, noting that it manifests in everyday social interactions.

Drawing on prior literature, surveillance operates through socially constructed and informally constructed processes rather than formal institutional mechanisms. This approach aligns more closely with Foucauldian perspectives, where present-day models go on to develop notions of self-surveillance as the result of both observations of and shared visibility by members of a community.

Although much has been written about it within the study of surveillance, there also appears to be a dearth of focus on how the concept of surveillance is physically organised through literary spatial setups. This issue becomes more pronounced when examining suburban environments, particularly in relation to their use of cul-de-sac layouts.

2.2 Social Control, Visibility and Community

Recent scholarly works have shown that, in communities of the order of people, visibility within spaces and being seen by people within close proximity to one another help set an example of social control mechanisms. The view offered today in current literature is that modern surveillance operates throughout the activities of daily people rather than falling within any formal structure. In particular, Pandey (2025) shows how people gain social norms by being always under the influence of communal surveillance, leading to types of self-regulation and self-surveillance. Furthermore, a small number of recent analyses on community and network model of surveillance highlights the relevance of visibility in the process of social control. These studies demonstrate that control was attainable as people were in constant contact, were close spatially and shared social norms and judgments.

These are more liberal and social-cultural perspectives that focus more on what is real. This suggests that these (social) regulation mechanisms do not receive a significant amount of attention in literary works, particularly as to their place as they represent spatial ordering of environment. This phenomenon is especially salient when we engage with the notion of the suburban realm, where buildings such as a cul-de-sac inform operations of visibility, interaction, and surveillance.

2.3 Domestic Space, Surveillance and Literary Representation

This critical approach to domestic fiction highlights the fragility of private space and how it could be vulnerable to disruption of borders through invasion and examination. Cavallaro (2002) claims that Gothic literature makes the house's vulnerability a weakness for its characters. Contemporary studies (Karlsson & Dalipi, 2024; Rose et al., 2023) continue to examine the linkages between domestic spaces and their cultural implications related to issues of privacy and surveillance, and have offered deeper cultural and public discussions of household spaces as well. Although these sources address the issue of surveillance in literature, they focus primarily on psychological mechanisms of the problem and tend to skip over the concept of spaces. Therefore, the importance of the space organizational relation to the structure of surveillance activities has not been addressed sufficiently. So, we can say that the cul-de-sac, which is an example of suburban architecture, is important for its characteristics as an enclosed and restricted space where neighbors watch each other.

Existing scholarship taken together describes surveillance as an extended and socially constructed process grounded in visibility, proximity, and self-discipline. However, little is known about how these ways of knowing and acting come into conflict with the spatial form via fiction literature especially from suburban settings. It is this void that this paper offers by examining the ways in which *The Housemaid is Watching* constructs a cul-de-sac as a crafted site of visibility through which social surveillance may take place. Drawing on theories of surveillance, community sociology, and literary criticism examining the domestic space, this work discusses the architectural mediation of observation and coercion.

3 Methodology

Using qualitative textual analysis, this study scrutinizes the representation of social surveillance throughout *The Housemaid is Watching*. The analysis is influenced by Foucault's formulation of panopticism, along with significant developments in contemporary surveillance studies. By framing observation, visibility, and control in this way, a wider understanding emerges of the narrative.

3.1 Data Selection

The main data set includes carefully selected textual passages from the novel which either expressly or implicitly reflect surveillance practices. These passages were selected on the basis of three criteria:

1. Descriptions of the cul-de-sac and its spatial layout.
2. Interactions between characters involving observation, judgment, or monitoring, and
3. Instances reflecting the protagonist's awareness of being watched and corresponding behavioral responses.

These selected excerpts consist of narrative description, dialogue, and focalized perspectives. All passages are cited with page numbers for the sake of correctness, transparency, and traceability of analysis.

3.2 Analytical Procedure

The analysis follows a systematic, multi-stage interpretive process. First, a careful reading of the text is performed to unearth thematic motifs regarding surveillance, visibility, and social interaction. Relevant extracts are then selected to be coded and sorted according to their overriding thematic preoccupations. This is then followed by analyzing each theme with respect to surveillance, visibility, and self-regulation particularly through a Foucauldian lens. The study also considers the ways that surveillance shapes social norms and patterns of behavior with emphasis on the linguistic and structural properties of the extracts that are included. Finally, the article integrates these thematic details to reach broader conclusions. By doing so, it demonstrates how the cul-de-sac works within the novel as a spatial tool of surveillance, shaping both individual behavior and collective social dynamics.

3.3 Analytical Framework

The analysis is organized along three interconnected dimensions:

1. *Spatial Design*: This dimension investigates how the environment that is designed enables visibility and observation which in turn leads to the rise of panoptic techniques. In this section, the influence of architectural design, neighbor closeness, and other aspects that contribute to the creation of panopticism is discussed.
2. *Narrative Technique*: This dimension deals with how the storytelling takes shape in terms of observation in the story. We learn about how the author utilizes focalization and similar devices to create suspense around observation.
3. *Character Psychology*: This dimension includes how the main character experiences surveillance as part of his psychological functioning. Specifically, how the character adapts his behavior in response to the observation of other characters.

4. Data Analysis and Interpretation

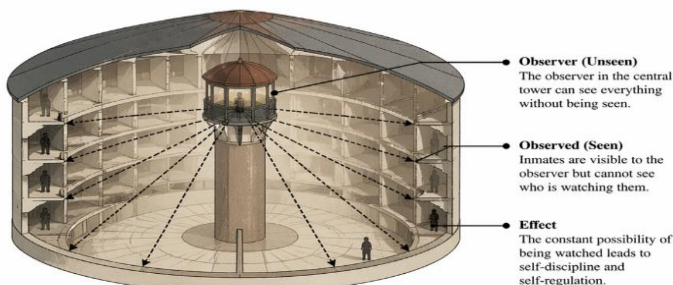
The analysis demonstrates that surveillance in *The Housemaid is Watching* operates through the interaction of spatial design, social practices, and individual perception. Rather than relying on formal authority, control emerges through continuous visibility, interpersonal observation, and the internalization of the gaze. In this sense, surveillance is both externally enacted and psychologically embedded. Contrary to institutional observation, in this situation, individuals simultaneously observe and are observed. This is shown early in the story, when Millie observes: “There’s still someone

staring at me from the window. The house is dark inside, so I can't see much, but that silhouette is still at the window" (p. 7). The use of the term "still" implies repetition, thus showing that watching continues throughout, unlike accidental observations. At the same time, using the word "someone," she introduces the idea of anonymity as is characteristic of panopticism, whereby the observer is anonymous but the observed remains known. He is referred to as a "silhouette," implying lack of clarity.

Figure 1

The Panoptic Principle of Surveillance
(Foucault, 1977)

The panopticon is a circular structure with a central watchtower from which an observer can see all surrounding cells without being seen. The possibility of constant visibility induces individuals to regulate their own behaviour, internalising the gaze and reproducing power relations voluntarily.

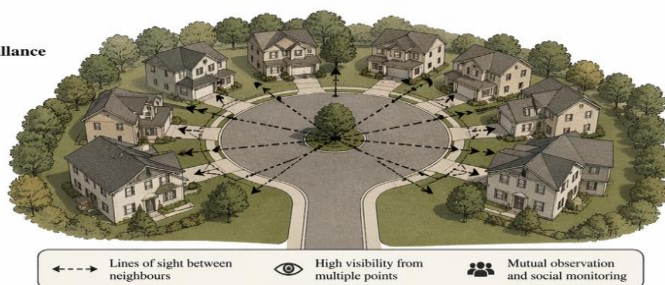


Source: Adapted from Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*.

Figure 2

The Cul-de-Sac as a Space of Mutual Surveillance
(*The Housemaid Is Watching*)

The cul-de-sac neighbourhood is designed in a way that enables high visibility and continuous mutual observation. Houses face one another, driveways converge at a single point, and there are no through roads. This spatial arrangement creates a contained environment where residents are constantly aware of being seen by others.



Source: AI-generated illustration based on the spatial description in *The Housemaid Is Watching*.

This imbalance intensifies the psychological impact of surveillance. Because the watcher cannot be clearly identified, the uncertainty itself becomes a mechanism of control. This reflects a Foucauldian dynamic in which the possibility of observation, rather than observation itself, is sufficient to regulate behavior.

A similar effect is evident when Millie notes: "I swear I can make out a pair of eyes on my body... Watching us" (p. 27). The disparity between the watcher and the watched only serves to heighten the psychological impact of surveillance. Since the watcher cannot be identified easily, the ensuing lack of certainty serves as a tool of control. This reflects the application of Foucauldian principles of power, wherein surveillance occurs regardless of whether the observer observes.

"On my body" implies a sense of intrusion through physical as well as visual gaze. The ellipsis serves not only to create a certain tempo in the sentence but also to create a sense of hesitation. Transition from "me" to "us" implies a broadening of surveillance beyond the level of the individual to include other members of the community. By these narrative techniques, the novel manages to establish that the cul-de-sac functions as a site where surveillance has become inherent in the everyday spatial relations.

4.1 Gossip and Reputation

Surveillance does not just mean watching in the cul-de-sac; rather, it includes gossip and interpretation. Observation, in itself, does not gain significance until it is communicated and shared by the residents, who interpret it and make a story out of it. Through this process, gossip turns partial visibility into socially constructed stories that discipline the community's behavior. This process is reflected in Millie's uncertainty regarding her husband: "Maybe there are things I don't know about my husband, but I know for sure that he is a good man" (p. 75).

The use of the word "maybe" suggests that knowledge cannot be derived from experience alone but comes from speculation and outside sources. The fact of the matter is; perception here is filtered through social conversation instead of facts. As a result, identity itself becomes conditional, formed by what can be observed, said, and speculated on by others in the community. In this context, gossip serves as a way for surveillance to continue. Not only does it explain the observed behavior but it also reinforces society's rules by interpreting it, which means that gossip defines the person being surveilled according to society's expectations.

4.2 Domestic Space and the Instability of Privacy

The novel unsettles the traditional notion of home as a private, safe place, revealing domestic spaces as porous and vulnerable. But it is also a spatial construction, especially from the standpoint of architectural elements, particularly the "window structures," that serve as means of realizing what is happening beyond the lines, we have long relied on to separate the public from the private realm. Rather than functioning as sites of shelter, such boundaries become zones through which a person can be seen and interpreted. The presence of someone watching implies the absence of true privacy, which can be defined as being protected from the gaze of the other.

This then challenges the notion of domestic space by framing it as a transparent space where one remains physically present but visible to others. From this Foucauldian perspective, the described change is related to moving from enclosed, private spaces in the home to systems in which visibility is utilized as the primary instrument of control.

4.3 Internalized Surveillance and Behavioral Regulation

As the narrative unfolds, surveillance is more often internalized, moulding not just what is put out there as behavior but self-perception as well. Characters start regulating their behavior in expectation of the gaze, which is the internalization of the gaze as outlined by Michel Foucault. Millie's yearning for normalcy highlights this process: "All I ever wanted was a normal, quiet sort of existence" (p. 25).

"Normative behavior" denotes an awareness of pre-established social norms and attitudes,

implying that actions are shaped by the desire to conform to shared expectations. Further, the adjective ‘quiet’ reinforces the idea that characters prefer to remain unnoticed rather than visible, as visibility invites scrutiny. This is the idea that such behavior is not an inherent quality but an ideal achieved through external observation. This aligns with Foucauldian analysis, which proposes that individuals internalize discipline and regulate themselves accordingly, even in the absence of direct coercive forces.

Another factor that makes the phenomenon regarded as internalized, is that there are always watchful figures nearby. Characters also learn not only that they are being watched, but that they are judged, and this makes them feel self-conscious and changes their way of acting. But what matters more, even when it is unnecessary to observe someone, just the prospect of the observation leads individuals to alter their behavioral tendencies. At its core, the story indicates that surveillance functions best on a psychological front, as it is the fear of being watched from all around that governs people.

5. Discussion

Based on findings of this analysis, we can observe that surveillance in *The Housemaid is Watching* does not seem to be an established form of regulation imposed by the authorities. Instead, it becomes an organic element of life emerging from the social processes unfolding in the neighborhood. In other words, surveillance becomes a socially embedded phenomenon, which relies on visibility and proximity and gossip in the cul-de-sac.

Indeed, the notion of surveillance offered in the book also transcends Foucauldian formulations of panopticism, which argue for hierarchical surveillance and its application in specific institutionalized contexts. Instead, it becomes a social phenomenon signifying decentralization and horizontal dissemination of surveillance. This aligns with Zhao Liu’s (2025) notion of a participatory panopticon, where surveillance is sustained through collective involvement rather than hierarchical control. This means the cul-de-sac serves as a particular configuration of space, such that surveillance is everywhere. In this regard, the novel suggests that surveillance in literature means more than observation but even implies the expectation of interpretation. For gossiping in this situation involves more than sharing information because it refers to a process of making social sense from perceptions-creating and determining who other people are, what they are and how they are judged.

Thus, there is an easy way to control people with the social interpretation aspect. In addition, this work demonstrates that spatial design is not only a setting of surveillance practices but a producer of social control as well. Specifically, the arrangement of the cul-de-sac and the ability to see inside homes make living very visibly observable. So, there are situations where individuals modify their behavior - due to being controlled.

In short, the findings of this study suggest that McFadden's novel reconceptualizes surveillance in literature by shifting it from a strictly structural power arrangement to a socially constructed reality. The central takeaway from this perspective is that social control becomes effective only when it is internalized within everyday social interactions. In this sense, the novel represents a departure within surveillance studies, particularly in the context of domestic literature.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that *The Housemaid is Watching* reconfigures the suburban cul-de-sac space as a form of decentralization of surveillance under this analysis in which the control over social relations occurs through visibility, gossip, and the management of reputation. Building upon Michel Foucault's concept of the panopticism, the analysis proposes that the cul-de-sac creates a space of constant surveillance and mutual observation, where community members function simultaneously as observers and the observed.

Surveillance in the novel emerges from neighborhood-based monitoring processes embedded within everyday social interactions. This constant stream of observations robs domestic space of privacy and everyone is subject to outside surveillance. And so, every character begins to feel more pressure and self-awareness due to this gradual development of observation into self-surveillance.

This research makes an extra contribution to both surveillance and literature scholarship by applying Foucauldian thought to suburbia and domestic novels. In contrast to the typical panoptic paradigm of authority, which relies on the presence of authority, this novel makes a model of distributed power based on power dispersed through a system of popular visibility and involvement in society. Taking such an approach allows us to appreciate the relevance of panoptic dynamics even at present even to (though traditionally-meaningfully) private spaces like private homes and other so-called private places.

Altogether, the above analysis implies that surveillance in *The Housemaid is Watching* is neither anomalous nor foreign but rather an everyday act interlocked deeply into social connections and environments.

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Disclosure statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Declaration

This manuscript is original work and has not been submitted or published elsewhere in full or in part. The research, analysis, and arguments presented in this article are the author's own. AI tools, if used, were solely for language refinement, grammatical clarity, and formatting assistance. No AI tool was used for generating the core ideas, analysis, interpretations, or findings of the research.

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