Shared Knowledge Conference

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Grotesque Observation: The Importance of Architecture and Surveillance in Literature and Society

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Grotesque Observation: The Importance of Architecture and Surveillance in Literature and Society
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Abstract:

My poster will focus on the importance of American architecture and its ability to both allow for and encourages the surveillance of citizens. This surveillance is carried out with the intention of affecting an individual's behavior and upkeeps certain societal “norms.” To violate these norms would mean facing social alienation, and other such repercussions. This idea will be communicated by drawing upon a number of literary sources, some fiction and some non-fiction. Sherwood Anderson’s Winesburg, Ohio and Edith Wharton’s Summer will feature prominently as each text features characters that position themselves in front of a window and are then immediately assailed by concerns of what their fellow townspeople think of them. The transparency of windows allows for characters to be observed by others even in their private homes, and the peril of constant surveillance induces this anxious self-reflection. Characters are desperate to ensure their behavior is, at all times, deemed “acceptable.” Additionally, Anderson’s drawn map of Winesburg suggests that the views offered from the windows of houses and businesses are most often the building across the road and the road itself. Thus, those travelling through these public spaces are forced to expose themselves to means of observation and the accompanying judgement of the gaze. The theoretical framework for the poster will be supplied by Bentham’s Panopticon, Foucault’s Discipline and Punish, and Andrzejewski’s Building Power. Finally, the poster will briefly consider how this culture of surveillance has developed into its modern iteration which includes new inventions such as city-wide surveillance systems and opaque web-cameras.