

## **“THE POWERS THAT DECIDE” IN THE J. R. WARD MESSAGE BOARD**

**ANDREEA PELE**

West University of Timișoara

Email: andreeapele@yahoo.com

**Abstract:** *Romance has the reputation of being an opiate for the masses. This paper intends to analyze if it is indeed a fantasy imposed from above or if there is room for negotiation. The chosen space is vampire romance writer J. R. Ward's forum. Power will be discussed through the lens of Foucault's Panopticon and de Certeau's productive consumption, among others.*

**Keywords:** *fan studies, power relations, romance, Panopticon, productive consumption*

### **1. Introduction**

The intention of this paper is to analyze if popular fiction is truly a one way street with writers producing and readers simply consuming, or if there is room for negotiation between those who write and those who read. In order to achieve this I will analyze the relationship of power between an author of vampire romance, J. R. Ward, and her readers, as this relationship transpires in a virtual community.

J. R. Ward and her marketing team set up a message board, or a forum back in 2006, where readers are invited to join and discuss the *Black Dagger Brotherhood* books, a contemporary, paranormal, vampire romance series. The forum is part of the BDB brand and it is in essence one of the “battlegrounds” between the will of the author and that of her readers. It is also the place where her fans can interact with her as the author but also among themselves. Like any virtual community it is monitored by moderators and administrators and it is governed by its own rules and regulations.

Because of the way in which the forum is organized and it functions, the relationships of power bear a strong similarity to some features of Michel Foucault's Panopticon as they appeared in his seminal *Discipline and Punish* (1995). In fact, the first element that drew my attention to this convergence was the designation that all forum members use to refer to one another, namely *cellie*, short from cell mate. Even more revealing is the author's username, The WARDen, a linguistic twist on the “stage” name the writer Jessica Bird uses as author of the *Black Dagger Brotherhood*, namely J. R. Ward.

The forum is not a prison, however, fans come and go, some join but do not participate at all, others participate but then migrate away after the novelty has worn off. Nonetheless, it is not a trouble-free community, allegiances to various characters occasionally flare up in various conflicts. Also, due to the sheer number of members, the rules governing the forum have grown more and more restrictive in order to curb unwanted behaviour.

Secondly, the nature of the forum makes users both constantly visible, even when one is not present in the forum, and invisible, more so if the user signs in as “invisible”. This in turn bestows power both to the moderator but also to the regular members and it is this mechanism that is analyzed by Foucault in relation to the Panopticon.

## **2. Short Overview of Michel Foucault's *Panopticism***

The Panopticon is discussed in one of Foucault's fundamental works, *Discipline and Punish* (1995) and is presented as a crossroads in the history of Western civilisation, a moment that marked the turning point for a new type of society. This crucial moment occurred in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the change it brought was closely linked to punishment for criminals: it was no longer conceived as a spectacle but applied as discipline. It is Enlightenment, which bequeathed human liberties to Western society, which also invented discipline. In turn, discipline linked people closely and inextricably to one another in ways that the law or the sovereign authority had not been able to up to that point (Foucault 1995:222).

The precursor of such a society can be found in the restrictive methods employed when human settlements were confronted with the plague; the breakthrough, however, came with the architectural design of the Panopticon, a type of prison envisaged by the English philosopher and theorist, Jeremy Bentham at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This new type of prison was meant to segregate the chaotic crowd of inmates in well-organized, isolated cubicles, arranged around a central tower and thus subjected to constant axial visibility in relation to this surveillance tower. At the same time, the inmates are denied lateral vision, i.e. they cannot see one another, or the guard surveying them, however the guard can see all of them.

At the same time, a cardinal feature of the Panopticon is that the inmates can never know when they are being watched, which automatically affects their behaviour: they behave as if they are surveyed at all times. This is the principal manifestation of power: the alert, omnipresent gaze (Foucault 1995:195) that exercises control even when it does not, because it is enough for the person at the other end, be it prisoner or forum member, to assume that s/he is being watched.

The Panopticon automatizes and disindividualizes power (Foucault 1995:202), which means that it no longer matters who exercises power, who sits in that guard tower. At the same time it amplifies power (Foucault 1995:207), its structure allowing it to spread to encompass as many bodies as possible, but also to intensify in strength and control. It comes as little surprise then that, despite Jeremy Bentham's unsuccessful efforts at the time to build this type of prison, its model has been adopted under various guises in Western society, defining macro and micro relationships of power in society: prisons have come to resemble schools, factories, barracks, hospitals and, why not, a virtual forum.

## **3. Relationships of Power in the J. R. Ward Message Board**

The Internet has been dubbed the great equalizer, bringing together people from all walks of life, offering platforms for community building, communities that could never have

been organized outside the virtual landscape, communities whose sheer number of members would have been impossible to round up offline. The J. R. Ward message board is such a community.

Apart from the much lauded lateral relationships which they facilitate, as well as creating brand communities, lovemarks, affinity spaces, affective alliances (Jenkins, 2006, loc. 1430-31) and collective intelligence, forums and virtual fan gatherings are also discreetly but thoroughly regulated. The authority levels of the J. R. Ward message board consist of administrators and moderators whose job is to oversee the forum's day to day running, to make sure that the rules are observed, to answer members' various queries and in general to supervise conversations and posts ensuring that various conflicts do not escalate.

The forum might not have the obvious structure of a panopticon, yet it manages to ensure one of panopticism's main tenets: constant, albeit discontinuous visibility (Foucault 1995:202), as well as, I would contend, simultaneous invisibility of authority. One such example would be the manner in which the rules of the forum are displayed. The physical organization of the forum is such that the rules are pinned, namely they appear at the top of each section and subsection, ensuring the same axial visibility of authority Foucault was mentioning.

The rules that govern the forum and fans' behaviour are mainly aimed at maintaining an environment conducive to civil discussions. Some of them censor profanity in the forum, others establish the maximum accepted size of avatars and signatures, some limit the language and visual content in the main forum to under PG-13 standards, others interestingly prohibit the fans from manifesting "ownership" over the fictional characters especially in their usernames (because "ownership" belongs to the writer).

So what exactly is J. R. Ward's position in the forum? Firstly, she does not appear to involve herself in matters that concern the rules, and rule-breaking, yet she does occasionally intervene to calm the fans' tempers. She also appears to interact laterally with the fans that are forum members and defer to the authority of the moderators. There is at least one instance when she admits to having been chastised for her "potty mouth".

Another important indication of her ambiguous position in the forum is her username: The WARDen, a pun on her *nom de plume*. Forum members also have unusual monikers; they do not address one another as members but as *cellies*, from cell mate. It is also an official label under their avatars. This perhaps unconscious distribution of relationships is a muted but startling connection to Foucault's discussion on panopticism.

The WARDen acts like the central axis around which the forum is built. It is in relation to her and her name that the *cellies* receive their appellation. In this respect she appears to be the sovereign body, even more so when we take into consideration the rule regarding "ownership" of the fictional characters and of the story. Infringing copyright is similar to what Foucault calls a violation of the sovereign body. Nevertheless, while J. R. Ward may be the central axis of the message board, much like the structure of discipline and punishment post-18<sup>th</sup> century, the power of authority lies in multiplicity (Foucault 1995:220), and in the forum, with the administrators and moderators. Discipline in the Panopticon-like structure is enforced by someone other than the sovereign.

In a panoptic system, power becomes automated and anonymous, and later when the

disciplinary system becomes incorporated in society, surveillance becomes faceless, invisible. However, a virtual forum does not operate like a panoptic prison with its vertical display and central guard tower. In the J. R. Ward message board, power manifests itself rather paradoxically.

Firstly, the moderators and administrators of the forum are known, high profile figures. Due to the nature of how a virtual community operates, any public post that they, or any other member, make is visible to anyone. They, of course, have additional controls that regular *cellies* do not have access to, and which allow them to manage the board by deleting posts and threads or closing discussions. They are generally able to make any modification necessary to any member or website software or content. Their power is considerable.

On the other hand, presence in a virtual community is communicated through a sign, usually an image and a text, an avatar and a username. Additionally, there is an unmitigated distance between the sign and the real-life referent, which allows for a high level of uncertainty, a gap between the forum member's persona and their offline identity. Foucault (1995:201) specifies that in the panoptic model of power, the inmates do not know or see their guards; more so, it matters little who is in the tower, behind the surveillance apparatus, who exercises power and especially when. It is enough for the object of surveillance to believe s/he is being watched.

Constant visibility of the inmate is a hallmark of the classic Panopticon. What is more, the inmate should see the tower of control at all times, but not who is inside. Power should be unverifiable (Foucault 1995:200, 201).

In the J. R Ward message board, much like in most virtual communities, surveillance operates a little differently. The moderators, and the users as a matter of fact, are trapped between being visible and invisible. There is also no central tower to constantly remind users that they are being monitored. Supervision does not rely on an axial component, but, rather, it comes from within the ranks, it is lateral. The moderators and administrators do not supervise from a separate space, but from among regular forum users. This can sometimes lead to apparent familiarity and approachability between moderators and fans, rather than distance.

The fans do not see one another's real selves in the forum. Neither do they see the real life moderators. So in that sense all of them are invisible to each other. What is more, one can join the forum without becoming the object of the field of visibility unless one decides to participate in the discussions. Therefore, due to its nature, the virtual world gives regular users power that the Panopticon inmates do not enjoy: it is the ability to witness the activities of other members and moderators without being seen, which is generally referred to as "lurking". Moderators and administrators enjoy this power as well since it allows them to supervise without being noticed most of the times. Not to mention that there is also the possibility of signing in the forum as invisible which makes it almost impossible to guess when someone is watching.

It is once a user posts that s/he subjects themselves to visibility. At the same time, unless a thread is deleted, posts remain visible for a long time, for anyone to read. danah boyd [sic], a long-time analyst of social networks, identifies it as one of the four main properties of the Internet: persistence (boyd 2008). Once something is released on the Web, it is nearly impossible to retrieve or delete. Thus, being active in a virtual community also means

subjecting yourself to visibility.

This invisibility of the authority figures in the forum occasionally gives users license and power to flout the rules in the idea that nobody might actually be watching at that moment. Authority is thus flexible most times in the forum. It does intervene when certain violations of conduct mostly become glaring and fans' affinities or dislikes for certain characters turn unruly. For instance, an entire subsection of the forum dedicated to one of the most popular vampire characters of the *Black Dagger Brotherhood*, Vishous, was removed because of fans' constant disregard for the rules.

The character was introduced to the readers in the very first book of the BDB series, *Dark Lover*, as one of the members of the Brotherhood, with a troubled past and a cursed gift of predicting the future. He develops a close friendship with the human detective, Butch O'Neal who will later become a vampire as well. As the series progresses, Vishous is revealed to be a very tortured character, with a preference for BDSM and a bisexual nature. His feelings for Butch evolve into more than just friendship even though, in his own novel, *Lover Unbound* (2007), he falls in love with a human, female doctor who saves his life, Jane.

It is this ambiguity and the readers' frustration surrounding the end to *Lover Unbound* that has kept interest for this character alive. Fans join communities not only to meet other fans and to share similar experiences, they also come on these fan pilgrimages seeking a connection with the fictional characters (Brooker qtd. in Gray 2007, loc. 3008). Fans' attitudes towards Vishous and the way in which J. R. Ward wrote his story is one of the bones of contention in the forum. There are two groups: one that favours the idea of Vishous in a gay relationship with his best friend, Butch, a former cop who, right before Vishous's story, became a happily mated vampire in *Lover Revealed* (2007); the other affective alliance cheers for Vishous in a heterosexual love story with Jane, as J. R. Ward wrote it in *Lover Unbound*.

Since Vishous is a bisexual character, it is not difficult to see how fans' loyalty and dissatisfaction might have erupted in *Vishous's Villa* in what was deemed as sufficiently criminal behaviour to have administrators intervene decisively to delete an entire discussion hub. One Internet source mentions that this happened around Thanksgiving 2010, and it was due to the hate fans manifested towards Jane. Such a determined move was undoubtedly intended to reinstate order and cut off any other disputes. As a side effect, it also probably helped serve as a reminder of the administrators' and moderators' authority.

Although, at the moment, we can only speculate how the fans involved acted and reacted, the threads and questions about *Vishous's Villa* echoed for a long time afterward in the forum with moderators and administrators consistently replying that the subsection would remain closed. Such determination could be an indirect indication of the seriousness of offenses that must have taken place in the subsection.

Connected to this (in)visibility of power and authority is the discussion surrounding an important element of surveillance itself, namely the gaze. It gives power to the invisible guard in the visible tower. It is faceless, permanent and, paradoxically, always alert even when it is not there (Foucault 1995:195). And, due to the fact that the objects of the gaze cannot be certain of when they are being watched, they must needs behave as if they are being watched at all times.

As mentioned above, this does not mean that users will not test the bounds of this (in)visibility, searching for ways in which to trick surveillance. Indeed, this strategy of control cannot be perpetuated without the existence of escape hatches, loopholes within the texture of power that allow forum members to bend if not break the rules without attracting the gaze of the authorities.

Michel de Certeau analyzed these silent infringements of the controlled crowd in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), where he pointed out how the disenfranchised, the silent majority of everyday consumers (de Certeau 1984:xi) struggle against the top-down regulations, within the bounds imposed by them, to recreate, reuse, remake the world around them. He contends that consumers are *bricoleurs*, poachers; they do not just ingurgitate the images, signs and rules that surround them, they make them their own, by re-understanding, re-producing them from their own social, cultural or psychological framework (de Certeau 1984:xiii).

He goes on to emphasize that to the strategy of those in power, the silent masses will always oppose tactics of their own (de Certeau 1984:xiv). This claim seems to be substantiated in the J. R. Ward message board by fans who have devised ways to circumvent at least one of the major rules in the forum, namely not manifesting “ownership” over the brothers. The fans worked around this rule by using their avatars and signatures to make a statement. For instance, since they were forbidden to use the BDB characters' names in their usernames and thus manifest “ownership”, the forum members used avatars and, sometimes, matching signatures to show their preferences.

Other tactics that forum members employed were centered around a constant interest: trying to convince the author to write about the characters they would love to read about. One such example revolved around another gay vampire couple, Qhuinn and Blay, which took fans' efforts outside the forum, resulting in an apparent triumph when J. R. Ward finally acquiesced, announcing in 2012 that this unresolved couple will be written together, in a separate novel, called *Lover At Last*.

There has been a similar push inside the forum in connection to Butch and Vishous, whose friendship along the series had unmistakable homoerotic undertones. Even though the two were written off in happy heterosexual relationships, the fans' interest in them and especially in Vishous has not waned. Some fans felt betrayed by the fact that J. R. Ward misled their interest and hesitated to support Vishous and his newly-found female mate. What they took as a sign of the author's hesitation was the ending to *Lover Unbound*, where unlike other vampires' mates, or *shellans*, Jane dies only to be resurrected as a ghost. This “neither... nor” state left even Vishous/Jane supporters unhappy, since it left room to interpret this as Jane becoming insubstantial in the relationship and it fuelled the Vishous/Butch shippers, or supporters, who saw it as J. R. Ward reconsidering at the last moment and resurrecting Jane in order to placate more mainstream readers who prefer a traditional, heterosexual close to their romance.

Moreover, Vishous is one of the fans' favourite vampire character, his popularity being another example of fans trying to exercise side pressure on the writer, not by suggesting storylines, which is considered fanfiction and is therefore prohibited, but by discussing the character among themselves in the forum. One such example would be the *Introduction*

section where newcomers present themselves; one of the most common ways to establish a link with other fans and at the same time communicate details about who one is (or wishes to be) is to tell the others what characters are one's favourites. Aficionados of the characters usually chime in with similar opinions, likes and dislikes.

Another illustrative example is the “Who is your favourite brother?” poll, where Vishous currently has the highest number of votes. Voting is usually accompanied by the fans' thoughts on what makes Vishous such an interesting and attractive character and on his relationships with other characters, especially Butch, his mate, Jane, and recently his sister, Payne. It is an ideal occasion for fans to put their impressions across and express either their dissatisfaction with the Vishous/Butch outcome or to endorse J. R. Ward's decision for Vishous. The general sentiment, however, was that they wanted to read more about the three characters, Vishous, Butch and Jane, especially with the ninth installment in the series, *Lover Unleashed* (2011), built around Vishous's sister.

Apparently, this indirect pressure bore fruit again, since the trio feature prominently in this latest release. There is a sexually charged scene between Butch and Vishous, as well as a segue into Jane and Vishous's life as a couple after the ghost ending of *Lover Unbound*, almost as if to show the fans how such a relationship would work.

In other words, it seems the readers, the *cellies*, the non-producers of culture have managed to use the strategies of the strong to their own advantage. Despite the rules of the forum and the writer's efforts not to let her fans influence her writing, the members of the J. R. Ward board have succeeded in obtaining small victories when it comes to what they want to read, perhaps without even being aware of their own ways of operating.

Why does this happen? Why are the fans so involved in the books they read? The answers to these questions entail another discussion of power, and, with J. R. Ward being so adamant about protecting it, one of ownership of the fictional world and its characters.

In his detailed analysis of the faceless mass of consumers as “victims” of the money-making system (e.g. the J. R. Ward message board as a marketing tool), Michel de Certeau (1984, loc.115-18) points out that even if consumers are duped, consumption is not uniform. Consumers, although they are what he calls “non-producers of culture”, will make something out of what they consume and that “something” may not be what the initial producers of the text/image had in mind.

At the same time, he points out that reading has become an exacerbated activity in a society obsessed with images and text and, probably more than any other activity, reading is a sign of silent production. Because, while engrossed in this activity, the reader and the world of his/her imagination will slip into the author's place. In this way, readers poach on what they are reading, the text becomes habitable, the readers are renters who change the spaces they inhabit (de Certeau 1984:xxi).

Following de Certeau's line of thinking, we can say that J. R. Ward's readers make the Black Dagger Brotherhood their own. They picture the way Caldwell, the vampires, the lessers, and especially the main characters are supposed to look, which is further corroborated by the threads in the forum where the members post pictures, some hand drawn, some of actors, models or celebrities, to show what they imagine the characters to look like. The manner in which each visualizes the stories is not identical to the others', and it stands to

reason that it differs from what the writer had in mind. In this way, the readers create something new out of what they consume.

It could be further argued that, in the end, and despite J. R. Ward and her team's efforts, the characters and the stories no longer pertain to them alone since each fan, each reader has their own variant of the same world. This is why there are rules in place forbidding fans from appropriating the characters. Nevertheless, it is an undisputed side-effect of coming in contact with the fans: one side cannot exist without being impacted on and influenced by the other.

Foucault calls the Panopticon “a privileged place for experiments” (1995:204), it is a laboratory of power just like forum can be seen as a fertile ground for experimentation. It is the space where J. R. Ward can test ideas, test the market, making sure that her fans remain with her by offering additional information, teaser chapters, slices of life that they can't find in the books; by stoking their affinities, like in Blay and Qhuinn's case, or their curiousness, like she did prior to Payne's book being released or by (non)confirming her fans' guesses with her trademark “Keep Reading”.

It is in the forum that she takes pains to inure her readers to her decisions, especially if these run against her fans' wishes, like in the case of Vishous and Jane, or again Blay and Qhuinn. In return, it is the fans who unwittingly work for her as brand advocates (Roberts 2004:170) that lay the groundwork for other readers by carrying words of the newest developments into other social networks and Internet message boards. Thus, by the time the latest book is ready to come out, fans will have already had time to adjust to the author's decisions.

Therefore, we can contend that the forum also functions as an amplifier. Foucault also refers to the Panopticon as a structure that augments and propagates power allowing discipline to penetrate all layers and levels of society. It gives power to minds over minds (Foucault 1995:206, 207).

For all its almost 50,000 members, the forum has only a handful of moderators and administrators. The community operates on self-discipline and is to a certain degree self-regulatory, with the exception of the occasional flareups. Regular *cellies* will warn and admonish one another if they overstep long before the authorities intervene, so we can say that discipline is internalized. Secondly, as already discussed above, the forum amplifies J. R. Ward's auctorial choices, becoming the launchpad for future books, with her loyalists spreading the word and, unbeknownst to them, doing part of her marketing. Thirdly, the forum amplifies the author's own cachet. It is her realm. She is The WARDen. Her central position does enhance her status as creator of the Black Dagger Brotherhood universe and she is considered the source of all knowledge about the characters.

One final element I would like to mention in connection to the Panopticon and the manner in which it endorses discipline is that a byproduct of the system are the techniques it employs for making what Foucault (1995:211) calls useful individuals. The ultimate purpose of the site is to sell the fictional world and the characters of the *Black Dagger Brotherhood* and *Fallen Angels*. True to the principles of narrowcasting, it acts like a funnel drawing readers in and, ideally, keeping them as active members and customers. Beyond world building and author-reader interaction, the truth is that part of the effort the author and her

team put in is geared also towards making a profit, by turning fans into buyers. Yet, it would be a mistake to believe that the forum limits itself only to that.

It is worth pointing out the mechanisms by which the forum achieves this goal. Drawing on panopticism again, it tells us that these relationships of discipline and power carefully fabricate the individual within the system (Foucault 1995:217). Thus, keeping the fans involved in the fictional universe of the Black Dagger Brotherhood and that of the forum will give fans the feeling that they are an active part in the creation of a novel, that they have a stake in the stories, and that ultimately they do influence the end result. It is what keeps them anticipating a new release and eventually buying the book to confirm the outcome of their efforts.

#### 4. Conclusions

This paper set out to analyze the relationship between J. R. Ward, as an embodiment of a large branch of popular fiction, namely romance, and her readers, her fans. With the help of Michel Foucault's theory on the Panopticon and Michel de Certeau's ideas of *bricolage*, or poaching on the lives of others, I have pointed out that the balance of power among writer and audience is not as one-sided as previously thought. Consumption may be one way, J. R. Ward's main goal may be financially motivated, nevertheless, the consumers, her readers are simply passive receptors. The process of producing meaning is not the privilege of the writer. In fact, what the fans read may very well be quite different from what the writer had in mind when she put the story down on paper.

Neither are the readers helpless when it comes to what they want to read. With the Internet offering so many community-building facilities, and so many bridges being built between writers and their readers, the latter have gained some unexpected leverage to use the power of the community as a means of pushing back and imposing their will on the writer. And while it may not be a widespread practice or it may not be always successful, they all, individually, have one power that no source of authority can deny them – the power to switch off.

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**Notes on the author**

**Andreea Pele** is currently an assistant at the Faculty of Psychology and Sociology, with the West University of Timisoara. She has a B.A. in English and French Philology, and an M.A. in British and American Studies. Her main interests are popular fiction, fan studies, media culture, blogging and gender studies. She is currently enrolled in a PhD programme at the West University with the thesis *Reader/Author Dynamics in Popular Fiction*.