

Power Relations In ‘*Spider-Man: Across The Spider-Verse*’ Movie (2023): A Foucauldian Analysis

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*“He gives strength to the weary and
increases the power of the weak.”*

- Isaiah 40:29 (NIV)

ABSTRACT

This study aims at unveiling the power issue found in the movie, “*Spider-Man: Across The Spider-Verse*,” a multi-layered story and profound symbolism. This study analyzed the movie’s thematic effects using a variety of literary theories and cinematic analysis. Furthermore, the study investigated how the film’s nuanced use of images and visual themes enhanced the overall story and elicits emotional resonance in the spectator. Having the movie analyzed, the theory of Power, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* by Mitchel Foucault (1977), was used to criticize the power dynamic issue in the movie. As a result, **1) Leadership Conflict and Sovereign Power:** The clash between Miles and Miguel highlights a conflict in ideals within the spider society. Miguel, as a leader, exerts sovereign power to control events, showcasing the dynamic of leadership struggles. **2) Resistance Against Anomaly and Exclusion:** The designation of Miles as an “*anomaly*” reveals the resistance within the spider-society against individuals who deviate from established norms. The effort to exclude anomalies reflects a form of resistance against those perceived as outliers. **3) Power Relations in Identity Discourses:** The discourses shaping Miles’ identity, such as the “*spider-society discourse*” and “*family discourse*,” contributes to shaping the dynamic power relations; Miles’ resistance to these discourses illustrates a struggle for individual recognition and acceptance. This analysis underlines the movie’s broader societal relevance and potential impact by studying the socio-cultural milieu in which it was produced.

Keyword: *foucault, power, resistance, identity, sovereign power, power dynamics*

INTRODUCTION

Power is like a strong force that affects how people live together. It is about being able to control and influence others, shaping how societies are organized, how people relate to each other, and how resources are shared. This study explores the different aspects of power and how it impacts our lives—how institutions are run and how people resist. By taking a close look at how power works, we aim to understand how it shapes communities and the way people live. Imagine this exploration like a journey, and for our guide, we turn to the movie “*Spider-Man: Across The Spider-Verse*,” where power and resistance play out in a captivating story.

The cinematic narrative often serves as a mirror reflecting societal issues, presenting narratives that extend beyond mere entertainment to capture profound social dynamics. “*Spider-Man: Across The Spider-Verse*,” the 2023 sequel to its predecessor, invites audiences to dive into a captivating multiverse

where the struggle for power and resistance takes center stage. This study employs the insightful framework of Michel Foucault's theory of power, with a particular focus on the binary opposition of 'power vs resistance,' to illuminate the nuanced interplay within the Spider-Verse.

Directed by Joaquim Dos Santos, Kemp Powers, and Justin K. Thompson, this Marvel masterpiece garnered acclaim, securing accolades such as the Hollywood Critics Association Midseason Awards for Best Picture and Best Director. The film's narrative unfolds a year after its forerunner, reuniting protagonists Miles Morales and Gwen Stacy, played by Shameik Moore and Hailee Steinfeld, respectively. The storyline catapults them across the Multiverse, where a group of Spider-People, entrusted with preserving the very fabric of reality, grapple with divergent perspectives on addressing a looming threat.

At its core, this cinematic sequel serves as a stage for the exploration of power dynamics, as exemplified by the character Miguel O'Hara, portrayed by Oscar Isaac, who leads the Spider-Society in a trans-dimensional realm known as The Lobby. Within this unique setting, O'Hara exercises authority by suppressing individuals deemed threatening or burdensome to the societal order. The narrative unfolds, revealing the tensions and conflicts that arise when differing perceptions of power collide among the Spider-People.

As we navigate the dynamics of "*Spider-Man: Across The Spider-Verse*," this study attempts to reveal the layers of power and resistance embedded in the storyline. By applying Foucault's theoretical framework, it aims to show the dynamic power issue that governs the actions and relationships of the characters, offering a nuanced understanding of the broader societal implications covered within this movie.

A relation between different agents or forces that can affect or resist each other. In the film, we can see how different versions of Spider-Man from different universes have different relations of power with each other, with their allies, and with their enemies. For example, Miles Morales has to learn how to use his power as a new Spider-Man, and how to relate to other Spider-People who have different experiences and abilities. He also has to face the power of the villain Spot, who can manipulate space and time across the multiverse.

Foucault's concept of power is to see it as a product of knowledge and discourse. In the film, we can see how different forms of knowledge and discourse shape the identities and actions of the characters. For example, Miles Morales is influenced by his family, his culture, his school, and his music. He also learns from other Spider-People who have different backgrounds and perspectives. He also challenges the knowledge and discourse of Spot, who wants to impose his own version of reality on the multiverse.

Furthermore, Foucault's concept of power is to see it as a historical and social phenomenon that changes over time and space. In the film, we can see how different modes of power operate in different universes and eras. For example, some universes have more advanced or alternative technologies, such as Spider-Man 2099 or Spider-Punk. Some universes have more oppressive or dystopian societies, such

as Spider-Man Noir or Spider-Ham. Some universes have more diverse or inclusive representations, such as Spider-Gwen or Spider-Byte.

Sovereign power is the classical form of power that is exercised by monarchs, rulers or institutions over their subjects. Disciplinary power is the modern form of power that is shown by the exercise of giving punishment or consequences to shape and control individual behavior. Biopower is the contemporary form of power that controls lives to meet the ideals, such as population control, life and death. In this movie, Foucault's concept of power matches the critical power issue in the selected scenes.

BINARY OPPOSITION

Table 1

SOVEREIGN POWER	RESISTANCE
<p>"Power is not something that is simply 'exercised'; it is produced through a particular set of relations between the various actors involved." - Michel Foucault, <i>Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison</i> (Vintage Books, 1977), p. 27. Miguel (Oscar Isaac), who is the leader of the spider society, oppresses those who he thinks is a liability to the society. Peter and Gwen are not able to do anything when Miguel is chasing Miles because they are scared to interfere with how the spider-verse works. As someone who has also broken the canon, Miguel is concerned that if Miles is to save his dad, another multiverse will collapse.</p>	<p>"Resistance does not have to be 'organized' or 'conscious' to be effective; it can take many forms." - Michel Foucault, <i>The History of Sexuality: An Introduction</i> (Vintage Books, 1990), p. 96. Miles (Shameik Moore) questions the accepted belief that not everyone can be saved, while others like Gwen and Peter accept it. Hobie (Daniel Kaluuya) is the only Spider-Man supporting Miles. As Miles joins the spider-society, Hobie questions his choice. If Miles resists Miguel, Hobie supports him. When chased by the spider-society, Miles opts out and returns to his dimension.</p>

METHOD

Upon analyzing this movie, a qualitative method was used to describe the cinematography effects of the camera works, sounds, lighting, editing, animation of the parts being analyzed. Besides, the binary opposition was used to compare and contrast the forces of power and resistance among the characters. Hence, selected utterances derived from the movie were also discussed as part of the analysis. The theory of Power by Michel Foucault, *'Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison'* (2020) was employed to criticize and learn the relation between Foucault concepts with this film. Foucault highlighted the power into several categories, some are: disciplinary power, relational power, productive power, capillary power, power network as relation, bio-power, governmentality, power knowledge. According to Foucault, M (1972), power is a relation that is capable of affecting and influencing the actions, thoughts, or behaviors of others, or to resist being affected by them. Power is not only negative or repressive, but also positive or productive. It does not only limit or prohibit, but also enables or creates. Then, power produces knowledge, and knowledge reinforces power. Foucault

identified three major modes of power, nevertheless this study focuses on the *Sovereign Power* and the *Resistance*.

DISCUSSION

The movie starts with the *mise-en-scene* of the flashback of the main character Miles Morales narrated by Gwen Stacy, focusing on what happens in the prequel. The animation is highly comic stylized, featuring vibrant oil painting like images moving along as the drum blasting music swells in



the background. The complication arises during the climax of the movie when Miles and Miguel have a conflict in ideals and they fight each other in spider society. Being the leader in the society, Miguel insists on letting what is happening in Miles' world, however Miles wants to save his father. In this case, Miguel takes advantage of his

power to disrupt what is going to happen. *"I don't feel that it is necessary to know exactly what I am. The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning,"* says Miles. This suggests that identity is not a given or a goal, but rather a creative and transformative project for him. Identity is not something that is of possession or find, but something that is made and reshaped through actions and interactions. Identity also involves becoming something else than before, which implies change and transformation. *"Power is everywhere; not because it invests everybody, but because everybody is the investor of power. The individual is an agent of his own subjugation."* (Foucault, M., 1978). It suggests that each person contributes to how power works. The phrase "the individual is an agent of his own subjugation" means that people, through their actions and choices, can contribute to their own control or subordination by the power structures in place. In simpler terms, it encourages individuals to think about how all play a part in how power works, even if without realizing it.

During the middle of this scene, once Miguel gets a chance to tell Miles the truth why he is never accepted into spider-society is because he is an "anomaly", someone who is not meant to be Spider-man. Throughout the movie, Miles is in pain for not being able to feel related to someone because everyone who is like him, is in a different dimension. His parents keep asking why he is always late but he can never tell them, so when Gwen comes back, he is relieved to finally be able to open up to the one person he thinks will understand him but in the end, all the lies unfold. He is never seen as one of them, he is always something that is never supposed to happen. Miguel makes sure he gets the gist of it and will do anything to keep anomalies out of the way. *"Power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of relations from which the simplistic alternative of masters and slaves, dominators and the dominated, is but one of the abstract extremes"* (Foucault, M., 1980). It means that power is not just about one group dominating another. Instead, it is about the many different ways

people relate to each other. Power is seen as a complex mix of relationships in order to be able to comprehend relationships in different situations.

In the case of Miles Morales, he is subjected to different discourses that shape his identity and experience as Spider-Man. One discourse is the “*spider-society discourse*”, which is based on the idea that there is a multiverse of Spider-People who share a common origin, destiny, and responsibility. This discourse establishes who can be a legitimate Spider-Person, what they can do with their powers, and how they should relate to each other. This discourse also creates an “*anomaly discourse*”, which labels Miles as an exception, a mistake, or a threat to the spider-society. This discourse excludes Miles from the spider-society and denies him the recognition and support he needs. “*The individual, with his identity and characteristics, is the product of a relation of power exercised over bodies, multiplicities, movements, desires, forces*” (Foucault, M., 1990). It suggests that an individual's identity and distinct characteristics are influenced by power dynamics. According to him, power extends beyond a simple effort by an individual or group and encompasses a broader influence over bodies, diverse elements, movements, desires, and forces within society. In other words, this perspective indicates that individuality is not solely determined by personal choices. Instead, it is shaped by the diverse ways in which power operates and impacts various aspects of lives. This viewpoint challenges the notion that our identities are entirely self-determined, highlighting the significant role of power relations in shaping our being, behavior, and pursued desires.

Another discourse that Miles faces is the “*family discourse*”, which is based on the idea that he belongs to a loving and caring family that expects him to be a good son, student, and citizen. This discourse defines what Miles should value, how he should behave, and what he should aspire to. This discourse also creates a “*secret identity discourse*”, which forces



Miles to hide his true self from his family and friends. This discourse isolates Miles from his loved ones and prevents him from expressing his feelings and desires. Foucault's theory here can be seen here as Miguel tells Miles that he never belongs with the other spider people. Miguel sees himself in Miles as making the mistake of breaking the canon which leads to the destruction of the universe his daughter lives in. The camera uses a close up shot focusing on Miguel who's trying to make a point that Miles is an anomaly saying “*You don't belong here, you never did.*”

In this case, the possible way to apply Foucault's theory to this case is to see it as an example of how power operates through discourse and normalization. Discourse is a system of statements that defines and produces the objects of our knowledge. Normalization is a process of establishing norms and standards that regulate our behavior and identity. Miguel is using a discourse of belonging and exclusion, based on the idea that there is only one true spider-man and that Miles is an impostor who violates the canon. He is trying to normalize his own version of reality and history, and to exclude Miles

from it. He is also projecting his own guilt and fear into Miles, as he feels responsible for endangering his daughter's life.

Miles, on the other hand, resists this discourse and normalization by asserting his own identity and agency. He does not accept Miguel's definition of who he is or what he can do. He embraces his diversity and uniqueness, as well as his connection to the other spider people. He challenges Miguel's authority and power, and proves himself to be a worthy hero. He also shows compassion and



forgiveness to Miguel, despite his hostility.

"People know what they do; frequently they know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what they do." (Foucault, M., 1972)

Foucault's statement suggests that while people are aware of their actions and often understand the reasons behind them, they may not fully grasp the broader societal and cultural influences or the

deeper, subconscious forces at play in shaping their behavior. It stresses the complexity of human actions within larger social contexts. This relates to the consequences of the actions of Miles, Peter, Gwen, Miguel, and the other spider people. They all do what they do for different reasons, but they do not know what their actions will do to the multiverse. For example, Miles wants to save his world and his friends, but he doesn't know if his actions will create new problems or paradoxes. Miguel wants to protect his timeline and his daughter, but he doesn't know if his actions will erase or alter other realities or lives.

In this scene, Miles was able to lure 1000s of Spider people away from the home go machine enabling him to escape, but Miguel chases him and is trying to stop Miles, Peter and Gwen tries to help Miles but as fear trembles they froze, fear of what could happen to them they stopped as they see their friend trying to deny the canon event. It can be seen here, Peter and Gwen are terrified of Miguel, that's why they never came to earth 1610. They tried to convince Miguel it's fine but he never allowed them. It's also been shown that not only Peter and Gwen has suffered the costs of being in the spider-society, such as Penny Parker

Miguel uses a discourse of canon and anomaly, based on the idea that there is only one true history and that any deviation from it is a threat to the order and stability of the universe. He exercises his power over Miles, Peter, Gwen, and the other spider people by trying to control their actions and decisions, and by using his knowledge and technology to manipulate them. He also constructs his subjectivity as a guardian of the timeline, who has a duty and a responsibility to prevent any changes that could affect his daughter's life.

Miles, Peter, Gwen, and the other spider people use a discourse of diversity and creativity, based on the idea that there are multiple realities and possibilities, and that each one of them has something unique and valuable to offer. They resist Miguel's power by asserting their own agency and legitimacy,

and by using their skills and talents to fight against him. They also construct their subjectivity as spider people, who have a common bond and a shared mission, but also as individuals, who have their own personalities and styles.



In the first movie, Penny was this kind hearted child who just wanted to go home but after the events of *Into The Spider-Verse*, Penny is seen to be sad and tired of everything that's happened in the span of a year. So we're able to see that Miguel uses a method of fear to tag along all the spider people. There was a time where he thought about stuff besides the fate of the multiverse but

after the demise of his daughter he makes it clear that something like that will never happen again.

"Where there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault, Michel., 2012). It means that wherever there is someone or something in control, there will be people pushing back or resisting. Power and resistance go hand in hand, showing how they are connected in society. It's like a dynamic dance between those in charge and those who oppose them. The spider-society faces power and resistance from various sources and forces in the Spider-Verse. They have power over the canon and its preservation, but they also face resistance from those who challenge or disrupt the canon, such as the Sisterhood of the Wasp, the Spider-Geddon event, or other Spider-Men who have different experiences and perspectives. They also resist the power of the Inheritors, who seek to destroy all Spider-Totems and consume their life force. The spider-society has to balance their own power and resistance in order to survive and protect their values.



The spider-society's role in the universe are the basically the protectors, to keep things the way they are, as Miguel establishes that to make sure that the canon stays in tact so that every Spider-man goes through what they have to such as the death of Gwen Stacy, Spider-man no more and etc. As scary as the canon can be, it's not something to be avoided. In Foucault's theory, this case could be related to his concepts of power, discourse, and resistance. Foucault argues that power is not a monolithic entity that is possessed by a single group or individual, but rather a complex network of relations that operates through various practices, institutions, and discourses. Power produces knowledge, and knowledge produces power. Power also produces resistance, and resistance produces counter-power.

One way to apply Foucault's theory to the spider-society is to see it as a form of discourse that constructs and maintains a certain version of reality, namely the canon. The canon is the set of events and stories that are considered to be the official and authentic history of the Spider-Verse. The spider-society tries to preserve the canon by preventing any changes or disruptions that might alter or

erase it. The spider-society also tries to enforce the canon by making sure that every Spider-Man goes through what they have to, such as the death of Gwen Stacy, Spider-Man no more, and so on.

However, the canon is not a fixed or objective truth, but rather a product of power and knowledge. The canon is shaped by the dominant forces and interests that control the Spider-Verse, such as the Inheritors, a family of vampiric beings that feed on the life force of Spider-Totems. The canon is also challenged by various forms of resistance and counter-power, such as the Sisterhood of the Wasp, a rival secret society that worships the Wasp-Totems, or the Spider-Geddon event, a massive crossover that involved multiple Spider-Men from different realities fighting against the Inheritors.

Therefore, Foucault's theory can help us understand how spider-society and its role in the multiverse are not natural or inevitable, but rather contingent and contested. The spider-society is not simply a group of protectors, but also a group of enforcers and regulators. The spider-society is not only preserving the canon, but also imposing it. The spider-society is not facing a static or stable reality, but rather a dynamic and diverse one.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the Spider-Verse story shows a few important things about who is in charge and who resists. Firstly, there is a clash of ideas and leadership. Miles and Miguel argue about how things should be in the spider society. Miguel, being a leader, uses his power to control what happens in Miles' world. This shows how leaders can influence outcomes based on what they want. Secondly, there is a struggle against being different. Miles is called an "*anomaly*," someone who does not fit in. The spider society does not like anomalies, and Miguel tries to keep them away. This shows a kind of resistance within the group against people who are different. The leaders want to keep things the same and exclude those who do not fit in. Lastly, there are different stories shaping Miles' identity. The spider society has certain ideas about who Miles should be. But Miles resists these ideas and wants to be himself. This reflects the power struggle between what society expects and what individuals want. It is like a tug-of-war between fitting in and being true to oneself. The Spider-Verse story tells about the power leaders have, the pushback from those who are different, and the struggle to be true to oneself in the face of societal expectations. It is a complex dance between who is in charge and who resists, showing how these dynamics shape the spider society.

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