

Power and Control in The Call of the Wild (2020): A Foucauldian Analysis

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"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

Philippians 4:13 (NIV)

ABSTRACT

This study is aimed at showing how power relations operate in a film, similarly what happens in real-life conditions. This study reads Foucault's 1977 theory of power relations against the 2020 film *The Call of the Wild*. Buck goes from house pet to wild animal over the course of the story, and the analysis follows that arc through three Foucauldian ideas: disciplinary power, governmentality, and resistance. Using a qualitative method and thematic approach, the narrative, dialogues, and cinematography of the film were analyzed. The findings show that: **1)** the power applied in the systems of discipline, hierarchy, and authority significantly influenced Buck's actions, identity, and survival. This was reinforced cinematically through techniques like contrast, composition, framing, and camera angles. Discipline was also shown to involve organization and routine, not just punishment, shaping behavior and identity within organized systems. **2)** Power operated through more than overt force. It also worked through routine practices and everyday interactions. Foucault's concept that power is "exercised rather than possessed" is evident as power shifts based on relationships and experience, particularly in Buck's development and his position within the sled dog group. **3)** The film illustrates that resistance is a natural component of power systems, as Buck's increasing independence and reduced human domination demonstrate a *"will not to be governed."* Buck's shift from domestication to self-determination suggests something broader: identity is not fixed, but takes shape through an ongoing relationship with power and environment. This research provides a deeper understanding of how power relations shape transformation and behavior, making it significant for demonstrating how films can convey complex concepts of power, identity, and behavior to a diverse audience. The study highlights that power is a generative force, not merely oppressive, and traces Buck's journey from an object of human discipline to a self-regulating agent dominating a wild pack. It also emphasizes that identity is not fixed but continuously formed through experience, discipline, and adaptation.

Keyword: *Power Relations, Discipline, Governmentality, Michel Foucault, Control.*

INTRODUCTION

Literature has been part of our everyday living; from novels, poems, drama, comics to graphic novels, illustrates the real human condition, even though it is a fable story. According to Wellek and Warren (1949), literature plays an important role in reflecting human experiences, social values, and conflicts within society. Stories enable readers to understand how individuals react to

challenges, authority, and change (Stanton, 1965). As a form of modern literature, films also present stories that reflect social issues and human behavior. Reading literary works and films against social conditions lets researchers trace how fictional characters and conflicts reflect real ones. That connection is what makes literature useful for studying power, identity, and survival.

The themes of power and control are popular in books and movies in which the use of power to influence how others behave and how they respond to authority and discipline. Many stories force their characters to follow rules, submit to control, or fight against a hostile setting. Through these experiences, the characters often change the way they think and act as “*power operates through relationships and systems*” that shape human behavior and identity (Foucault, 1977). Therefore, narratives about power can help audiences understand the impact of authority on identity, behavior, and survival.

The object of analysis in this research is *The Call of the Wild* (2020), directed by Chris Sanders. The film tells the story of Buck, a dog who lives in a house and is suddenly taken away from his comfortable life and forced to work as a sled dog in the harsh environment of Alaska during the Klondike Gold Rush (Britannica, n.d.). In the story, Buck experiences different forms of authority and discipline from humans and other sled dogs. These experiences gradually change him from a domesticated pet into an independent wild animal.

The film's portrayal of power and authority also mirrors real-life social dynamics. Michel Foucault said that power works through systems, institutions, and social relationships that affect how people act and react to authority (Foucault, 1977). People's lives are influenced by systems of rules, expectations, and hierarchies that guide their behavior and decision-making. So, studying stories that show how power works can help audiences understand how authority is part of society.

The work studied is *The Call of the Wild* (2020), an adventure film based on Jack London's novel of the same name. This work is different from illustrated books or comics. It is presented as a cinematic adaptation that combines live-action and computer-generated imagery. The title shows the main idea of the story: the natural call of the wild and the main character's change.

As the film family friendly labelled, the film has generally been recommended for viewers aged ten and above. The film sits in the adventure and family drama genres, built around survival and the relationship between humans, animals, and the natural world. It is set during the Klondike Gold Rush and follows Buck, a domesticated dog forced to adapt to the wilderness. In addition, the film was produced by 20th Century Studios, released on February 21, 2020, and directed by Chris Sanders. Although it did not receive major awards, it was recognized for its visual effects and modern adaptation of a classic literary work.

From an intrinsic perspective, the plot of *The Call of the Wild* (2020) can be understood through the lens of power relations as proposed by Michel Foucault. The story begins with Buck living in a domesticated environment where power is stable and controlled by humans in a protective way. However, this condition changes when he is kidnapped and forced into the harsh setting of Alaska during the Klondike Gold Rush. In this new environment, Buck is exposed to competing systems of power, in which authority rests on discipline, punishment, and hierarchy. Humans exercise control over the sled dogs, while within the group of dogs, power is also distributed through dominance and physical strength.

As the plot develops, Buck's transformation reflects Foucault's idea that power is not only imposed from above but also operates through everyday interactions and relationships. Buck learns to adapt by observing, responding to, and eventually participating in these systems of control. Rather than remaining a passive subject of power, he gradually internalizes and navigates these structures, which leads to his growth in strength and independence. By the end of the story, Buck no longer exists fully under human control but instead forms his own position within the natural order, illustrating how power shapes identity and behavior. The plot is more than a survival story. It also traces how power relations drive transformation, discipline, and the pursuit of autonomy.

His study examines power and control in *The Call of the Wild* (2020) through Michel Foucault's theory of power, developed largely in the 1970s and most fully articulated in *Discipline and Punish* (1977). According to Foucault, power is not something that is only possessed by individuals or institutions, but something that operates through relationships and social systems (Foucault, 1977, p. 26). Power operates through discipline, control, and hierarchy, structuring how individuals behave and interact within an institutional setting.

Foucault also argued that power is present in everyday interactions and is not limited to a single authority (Foucault, 1977, p. 27). This means that power can be seen not only in dominant figures but also in the relationships between individuals. In addition, Foucault explained that power is productive because it shapes identity, behavior, and the way individuals respond to their environment (Foucault, 1977, p. 194). This theoretical perspective is relevant to the film because the main character, Buck, is constantly placed within systems of discipline and control that influence his transformation. By applying Foucauldian theory, this study aims to examine how power operates within the relationships between humans, animals, and the environment, and how it shapes the process of adaptation and survival throughout the narrative.

Foucauldian theory provides a strong framework to analyze power relations in *The Call of the Wild* (2020). According to Michel Foucault, "*A body is docile that may be subjected, used,*

transformed and perfected” (Foucault, 1977, p. 138). This idea shows that individuals can be shaped through discipline to become useful and productive. In the film, this is reflected in Buck’s early experience when he is physically punished and trained to become a sled dog. The harsh treatment he receives is not only cruelty, but also a form of discipline that transforms him from a domesticated pet into a working animal who can survive in a controlled system.

Foucault also explains that discipline organizes individuals into structured systems where each has a specific role. He states that “each individual has his own place” (Foucault, 1977, p. 143), which highlights how power controls movement and behavior. This can be seen in the sled dog team, where each dog is assigned a fixed position in the line, limiting their freedom while increasing efficiency. In addition, Foucault argues that “*power is exercised rather than possessed*” (Foucault, 1977, p. 26), meaning that power shifts depending on relationships. This is evident in Buck’s development, as he gradually gains power through experience and his position within the group.

Finally, Foucault introduces the idea of resistance through “*the will not to be governed*” (Foucault, 2007, p. 201), which refers to the refusal to submit to authority. In the film, this is reflected in Buck’s actions when he begins to challenge dominance and move toward independence. His transformation shows that power not only controls individuals but also creates the possibility of resistance. These concepts show how power, discipline, and resistance shape identity and behavior in *The Call of the Wild* (2020).

Previous study on Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* through a Foucauldian lens has stayed within two domains: the spatial dynamics of capitalist control via Foucault's concept of heterotopia (Higginson, 1998), and the external application of top-down disciplinary power through “*The Law of Club and Fang*.” Both readings treat power as a coercive, unidirectional instrument, wielded by human captors to enforce compliance and reduce the subject to a functional “docile body” within the Klondike's socio-economic system. What gets left out is Foucault's own point: power is productive, relational, and something subjects absorb over time rather than something imposed on them from outside.

That omission leaves an obvious question unasked: how does external discipline become self-subjectification and biopolitical governance? Existing studies establish how Buck is subjugated by human institutions well enough, but none ask how Buck takes those same techniques of discipline and turns them into his own regime of power-knowledge within the wilderness. Power and Control in *The Call of the Wild* (2020): A Foucauldian Analysis takes up that question. It reads power as a generative force rather than a purely oppressive one, and traces how Buck moves from an object of

human discipline to a self-regulating agent of biopower who dominates and re-establishes control over the wild pack.

Although *The Call of the Wild* (2020) comes as a survival film, there is also a very clear means of further examination of power and control. This study is significant because it demonstrates that films can convey concepts of power, identity, and behavior in a manner that is easily comprehended by a diverse group of viewers. The film exposes the role of rules, discipline, and hierarchy in determining how people behave and adjust to the surroundings by putting the main character in various structures of authority. Based on the above issues, the paper investigates how disciplinary power is represented in *The Call of the Wild*; how governmentality is represented through the relationship between obedience, control, and survival in the film; how power relations shape Buck's behavior, identity, and survival throughout the narrative. By examining narrative, dialogues, and cinematography through Foucauldian theory, it provides a deeper understanding of how power relations shaped the transformation and behavior of the main character.

Binary Opposition

Civilization	Wilderness
Civilization in <i>The Call of the Wild</i> (2020) represents domestication, discipline, and human control. In Buck's early life, he lived within a structured environment where humans regulated his behavior and provided protection, reflecting what Michel Foucault described as disciplinary power, where individuals are shaped through systems of order and control. " <i>Discipline 'makes' individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise</i> " (Foucault, 1977, p. 170).	Wilderness represents instinct, survival, and independence from structured authority. As Buck moved deeper into the wilderness, he gradually separated himself from human systems of control and adapted to a world governed by natural instinct and survival. This transformation reflected resistance toward imposed systems of discipline and demonstrated Foucault's idea that power relations also create the possibility of autonomy and self-determination. " <i>Power is exercised rather than possessed</i> " (Foucault, 1977, p. 26).

METHOD

This study used a qualitative research method to analyze the representation of power relations in *The Call of the Wild* (2020). Qualitative research focuses on understanding meaning, interpretation, and social phenomena through descriptive analysis rather than numerical data (Creswell, 2014). This method was chosen because the study focused on examining the behaviors, actions, and interactions of characters within the film, particularly in relation to systems of authority and control using Michel Foucault's theory of power, *Discipline and Punish* (1977). Moreover, the

study applied a content-based analysis with a thematic approach. Thematic analysis identifies and interprets recurring patterns in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This study used it to trace themes of power, authority, discipline, and resistance across the film, focusing on how these themes shaped the main character's development. Additionally, the data for this study were collected from the film *The Call of the Wild* (2020). The primary data included selected scenes, dialogues, and visual elements that represented power relations. These elements were chosen because they revealed how authority, discipline, and hierarchy take shape on screen. The analysis drew on three types of data: narrative, dialogue, and cinematography. The narrative was analyzed to understand the development of the plot and the transformation of Buck. Dialogue was read for expressions of authority, control, and resistance. Cinematography, particularly camera positioning, framing, and movement, was read for how it staged power between characters.

DISCUSSION

1. Discipline and Control in Buck's Early Transformation

In the beginning of *The Call of the Wild* (2020), Buck is shown as a house dog living in a nice home with people taking care of him. His early life is stable, safe, and controlled. Humans are in charge of his behavior. But things change a lot when Buck is kidnapped and taken to Alaska during the Klondike Gold Rush. In this new place, Buck has learned about a stricter way of doing things that focus on discipline, punishment, and obedience. One of the best examples of this system is the scene with the man in the red sweater. He physically punishes Buck to make him obey. This moment echoes what Foucault calls disciplinary power: training and controlling individuals through correction and punishment. He argues that "*A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and perfected*" (Foucault, 1977, p. 138). Buck changes over time. He starts to believe that he is a pet, but at the same time, he is a sled dog who is conditioned to survive in a controlled environment.

The cinematography in this scene also depicts the idea of disciplinary power. During the fight between Buck and the man in the red sweater, the movie often uses close-up shots to show Buck's fear, confusion, and physical pain. These close-up shots allow the audience to see Buck's emotional reaction and show how intense the punishment is. The dim lighting and cold colors make it seem scary and lonely. This shows how Buck is losing his freedom. The way the camera is positioned also shows who is more dominant in power. The man in the red sweater is frequently filmed from the bottom, making him look powerful and in control. In contrast, this is the opposite of how Buck is filmed. He is shown from higher up to make him look weak and submissive. These movie techniques make the story's message of discipline and control stronger.

The film also shows that discipline in the sled dog environment is enforced not only through violence, but also through rules and behavioral expectations. Buck learns that survival means obeying the hierarchy of the human pack. Each dog on the sled team has a job, and the team holds together only if everyone pulls their weight, literally, in the Alaskan cold. This is in line with Foucault's idea that discipline organizes people into systems that control how they move and behave. As Buck adapts to these rules, he learns to be more disciplined. His transformation shows how power transforms a person's identity and behavior through repeated interactions and systems of control.

The cinematography, or the way the film is shot in a particular angle of a camerawork, also supports this idea by visually organizing the sled dogs within the frame. The wide shots often show the dogs moving in straight lines while pulling the sled. This makes it clear that the dogs are working together and following orders. The dogs' positions show who is in charge, with each dog having a specific place in the group. The dogs' regular, predictable movements, running in a line, mirrors the strict schedule imposed by their human drivers. The camera tracks the sled team across the snow, staying close enough to catch the strain in the dogs' movement.. These images make it clear that discipline is about more than just punishment. Discipline also involves organization and routine.

At the same time, Buck's early transformation shows both positive and negative impacts of discipline. At first, discipline means less freedom for Buck and he has to obey authority. But these experiences also make him a stronger person. He learns to survive in the wilderness. Through punishment, watching others, and experience, Buck learns how to survive and follow rules. So, the film shows that discipline does not only control people, but it also changes them by shaping how they act and who they are in organized systems. Furthermore, the cinematography contributes to show Buck's transformation; in the beginning of the film, Buck is frequently shown in warm, bright places that makes him look comfortable and like a pet. As he settles into life in Alaska, the colors turn colder, the landscapes harsher, and the movement more restless. The difference between Buck's early life and the wild is a visual symbol of his change from being a pet to being a survivor and a free person. This idea that power through discipline and control over time helps shape one's transformation through continuous or repeated interaction with systems of discipline and control is supported by this cinematic progression.

2. Systems of Authority and Survival in the Sled Dog Environment

When Buck joins the sled dog team, he joins a social system that operates through authority, obedience, and survival. Each dog has a specific role and responsibility that helps the group work better. Handlers train the dogs through commands, routine, and discipline, and the dogs obey because obedience is what survival requires. That dynamic gestures toward Foucault's governmentality:

control that works by getting subjects to regulate themselves rather than through constant, direct force. In the movie, survival depends on more than just physical strength. It also depends on being able to work together in an organized way.

The portrayal from the movie towards these different systems of authority by arranging the characters and how space is used in each scene. In many scenes with the sled dog team, the camera uses wide shots to show the dogs moving together as a group under the guidance of the drivers. These photos make it seem like they have an organized system and are all working together. The team's repetitive movement across the snowy landscape represents routine and regulation. Besides, the film occasionally shows the human drivers in a better position than the dogs. This creates the nuance of making the drivers look more powerful. This way of arranging things shows the different levels of power between humans and animals.

The relationships among the sled dogs also shows how power works within social hierarchies. Spitz rules through intimidation. Fear, not respect, is what keeps the other dogs in line. Buck watches this closely, picking up on how authority moves between the dogs and the humans who command them, not just from Spitz downward. It's a small illustration of Foucault's claim that power isn't something one figure holds and dispenses; it circulates through the relationships themselves. Power constantly changes depending on position, experience, and influence within the group (Foucault, 1976/1978, p. 93)

The film's cinematography strengthens this hierarchy through visual contrasts between Buck and Spitz. Spitz is frequently drawn in a dominant position, either standing above the other dogs or in the center of the frame. Close-up shots of Spitz's aggressive expressions show that he is the boss of the other sled dogs. On the other hand, Buck is initially shown as unsure and reactive, and he is positioned lower in the group. As the story continues and Buck becomes more confident, the way the movie is filmed slowly changes. Buck starts getting stronger framing and more centered compositions, showing his growing influence and authority within the sled dog team.



The environment of sled dogs also shows how control and survival become connected. The dogs obey rules and commands not just because they are forced to, but because obedience increases their chances of survival in extreme conditions. This is an example of how the government controls people by encouraging them to follow the rules. The sled dogs learn to follow the routines and rules,

showing that authority can be established through normal processes rather than through direct violence.

The film reinforces this link between obedience and survival visually. Wide shots of snowstorms, freezing temperatures, and unforgiving terrain make the wilderness itself feel like an antagonist, one the dogs can only survive by falling in line. These images remind the audience that



survival depends on working together, having rules, and being organized. The fast-paced editing in these travel scenes puts pressure on the viewer too, mirroring the urgency Buck and the team feel to hold together and not fall apart mid-run. The way the sled dogs are filmed makes it clear that authority in their environment wasn't

just about punishment. It is also about making sure they can survive and stay stable.

As Buck adapts to these systems, he becomes more aware of how leadership and discipline influence both the group and his own behavior. His experiences show him that the balance of power between groups is always changing. Through watching and adapting, Buck learns how authority works in organized systems and how survival often depends on using those systems well. So, the film shows that the government controls sled dogs and also regulates them internally.

4.3 Power Relations and Buck's Transformation of Identity

Throughout *The Call of the Wild* (2020), Buck's identity gradually changes because of the power relations surrounding him. At the beginning of the film, Buck is shown as a domesticated dog who depends on humans and lives within a controlled environment. However, after experiencing discipline, authority, and survival in the wilderness, his behavior and mindset slowly transform. According to Michel Foucault, power shapes individuals through continuous interactions and social systems rather than through direct domination alone (Foucault, 1977, p. 26). Buck's identity takes shape through repeated exposure to control, hierarchy, and the demands of survival, and the cinematography tracks that shift.

Early on, warm lighting and wide, balanced compositions give his world a sense of safety. Buck is often placed at the center of the frame inside large and comfortable spaces, symbolizing the structured and protected environment in which he lives. However, after Buck is kidnapped and transported to Alaska, the visual style changes significantly. The film begins using colder colors, darker lighting, and tighter framing to emphasize Buck's loss of freedom and the harshness of his

new environment. These visual contrasts reflect the shift from domestication to discipline and survival.

As Buck adapts to the wilderness, obedience stops coming easily. Instead, he begins to challenge existing power structures, particularly through his rivalry with Spitz. This idea reflects Foucault's concept of resistance, which explains that wherever power exists, the possibility of resistance also emerges (Foucault, 1978, p. 95). Buck's actions show that he is not simply following orders, but is also learning how to navigate and eventually reshape the hierarchy around him. His growth demonstrates that power relations are constantly changing because individuals can both be



influenced by power and resist it through their own actions and decisions. The film's cinematography visually reinforces Buck's growing resistance and independence. Scenes between Buck and Spitz favor low angles and tight close-ups, shots that put their rivalry at eye level and make the competition feel physical. Fast-paced editing and

unstable camera movement during their confrontations create tension and reflect the unstable power struggle within the sled dog hierarchy. In contrast, later scenes of Buck alone in nature used wide landscape shots and natural lighting to emphasize freedom and self-discovery. These visual elements symbolize Buck's gradual separation from systems of human control and his movement toward independence.

By the end of the film, Buck's transformation represents a movement from domestication toward independence and self-determination. Although discipline and authority initially shape his behavior, these experiences also prepare him to survive without direct human control. The wilderness is where Buck finally becomes himself, shaped by instinct and experience rather than command. The final scenes place him within vast, open landscapes, no longer boxed in by the human hierarchy that once defined him. By the end, it's clear that power hasn't just constrained Buck. It has made him who he is. His journey shows that identity is continuously shaped through interaction with systems of power and the environment surrounding the individual.



CONCLUSION

The Call of the Wild (2020) is not only a survival-adventure film, but also a story that shows how power, discipline, and control can shape identity and behavior. Through Buck's journey from a

domesticated pet to an independent animal in the wilderness, the film reflects Michel Foucault's theory of power relations, especially disciplinary power and governmentality. Buck spends the story learning to obey, to survive the cold, and to read whatever system of authority happens to be running things at the time. However, these systems of control also become part of the process that strengthens him and develops his independence.

Power here isn't only about commands or punishment. It's in the routines, the small daily interactions, the pecking order nobody has to announce. Buck picks up on all of it, through the humans who direct him, the team he runs with, and Spitz, who he's still working out how to stand up to. As he gradually understands and challenges these structures, the film reflects Foucault's idea that resistance can emerge wherever power exists. What Buck's arc really shows is that identity was never fixed to begin with. It gets built, and rebuilt, through discipline and experience.

In addition, the cinematography supports the representation of power relations throughout the narrative. The contrast between warm and stable scenes in Buck's early domesticated life and the colder, wider, and more dynamic visuals of the wilderness emphasizes his transformation from controlled obedience to independence and freedom. By the end of the film, Buck's decision to live within the wilderness symbolizes his movement beyond human systems of authority toward self-determination. Therefore, *The Call of the Wild* (2020) illustrates how power relations influence behavior, survival, and the continuous formation of identity.

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