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## A Foucauldian Analysis of Dystopia in *The Last of Us*

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### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to critically analyze the video game turned television series *The Last of Us* in the lens of Michael Foucault's theory of power, which is fragmented within his larger discourse, particularly emphasising on his ideas surrounding discipline and surveillance. In the process of doing so, I will be attempting to convey the larger relevance of this dystopia as mirroring modern day American context and concerns. Moving beyond traditional concepts of power as a sole figure that is repressive or centralised, Foucault views power as existing in more complexity, acting primarily through social structures and knowledge. Foucault's expansive discourse is guided by an understanding of power as relational. *The Last of Us* embodies and complicates around these Foucauldian ideas, particularly through its depiction of post-apocalyptic governance, surveillance, biopolitics, and the negotiation of individual agency. The series centers on Joel and Ellie's journey through a dystopian America that has been pervaded by Cordyceps, a zombie-like entity brought from fungus and spread through bite from those infected, but beyond its narrative of survival, it offers a reflection on the ways power functions at both macro and micro levels. A qualitative method has been adopted for this research, which allows for the required understanding of how thematic and narrative elements of the series construct, reflect, and critique systems of power. The series, *The Last of Us*, is to be treated as the subject of analysis through which the Foucauldian power structure is motivated to critically understand American reality today and the mirroring nature of dystopia within the context. It foregrounds the constant tension between survival and control, showing how power circulates among various factions, and is internalized by characters who oscillate between resistance and submission. By conducting a qualitative analysis through the close reading of key episodes, character arcs, narrative choices and interpreting the power dynamics that are situated in the circumstances, this paper is motivated by the aim to reveal its relation to Foucauldian theory and America today.

**Keywords:** Biopolitics, Michel Foucault, Discipline, Punish, The Last of Us, Dystopia

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## Introduction

Dystopia has been a consistent theme of interest among American filmmakers. In the years leading to the pandemic and post this worldwide experience, the curiosity of a world grappling for and with resources in a wayward direction of political unrest and danger has been piqued. From films such as *Bird Box* and *Interstellar* to television series including *The Last of Us* and *Severance*, American media, to be specific, has been manifesting a reality that portrays a time and space farther from the present world. Some of these can be argued to be more science fiction than dystopia for its depiction of unnatural beings, but the circumstances with which they come to exist and appear to threaten human living, and conflict and contradictions that unsettle the bricks of safety and morality is what interests the subject of dystopia. It observes characteristics of oppressive regimes, environmental concerns and the question of freedom. *The Last of Us*, which is a video-game turned television series, depicts a world that is disrupted by humans infected by a specific kind of fungus, these infected beings who behave cannibalistically, feed on humans and turn them into one of them. What follows is the story of a teenage girl, Ellie and her assigned guardian, Joel. Ellie is expected to contain the cure against this fungal disease within her body. Their journey observes and tackles multiple and distinctive kinds of societal systems that govern people. Power is portrayed to exist between and within these systems that don't appear distant to the American reality. Michel Foucault, the French philosopher and critic, understands power to be constituted not merely in institutions but in the interrelations of humans, which is to say that power is not simply a possession of a superior or central figure of attention, but that which exists relationally between people. In *The Last of Us*, power appears to operate in this fashion, put forth by Foucault. The significance of this study lies in how such a framework of power in a dystopian series influences, or rather, mirrors the present state of the country, which has the world's largest economy. With preferential access to resources, manipulation of freedom, climate inaction, prejudiced surveillance of different races and religions, and evidential support to a genocidal state using the taxation of its people, it wouldn't appear as highly difficult to contest the present reality to a dystopian portrayal. This research thereby attempts to deeply understand the reflective nature of contemporary American dystopia in *The Last of Us* through the theory of power as proposed by Michel Foucault.

### Power through Discipline and Surveillance

Michel Foucault understands various relational mechanisms through which power operates. To understand what he means by power, it is essential to understand the means of control that fuels the existence of power. To draw his framework he reads through historical models of punishment and how it came to differ from the modern experience of punishment. He uses the example of the execution of Robert-François Damiens to explain how older systems conducted public displays of punishment to demand disciplinary behavior and prevent recurrence of the condemned action. Damiens was a French domestic servant who attempted to assassinate King Louis XV in 1757. The body of the condemned, as Foucault calls, is utilized to establish a type of order, and it is where the authority of the sovereign is held (Foucault 9). The torture of the guilty as a visual spectacle allowed the citizens to

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participate in the execution. This kind of participation gave the viewers a sense of control, which concerns the sovereign. Foucault understands this to have paved the pathway towards the birth of the prison. Power eventually felt threatened by a possible uprising to public execution, or a kind of resistance, which will be elaborately explored in a following chapter. Spectacle empowers people because it provides that they must be present for it to happen. The drift towards the logic of the prison is much more pervasive, and hence, much more powerful. This form of power, through the Foucauldian sense of discipline, aims to produce docile bodies that don't just obey, but who are shaped and whose behavior is extensively regulated (Foucault 135). This normative internalizes regarded behaviors in society. Examples he gives include the routines of prisons, schools, hospitals, and military barracks. Within such spaces, individuals are subject to timetables, systematic regimentation of daily life, and constant monitoring, all of which aim to correct, train, and productivise their behavior. These institutions became laboratories for the production of norm-abiding citizens, functioning not only to punish deviance but to actively encourage conformity. To better grasp the clever use of such disciplinary power, Foucault uses Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, the architectural design for a prison structured circularly where all inmates could potentially be observed by a guard or authority at any possible time. This situation produces self-discipline, or a kind of self-surveillance, where they act cordially with the assumption and awareness that they might be observed, eventually internalizing the gaze of the authority. The effect is that individuals become their own guards, inscribing the gaze within themselves as they work to ensure compliance without any external prodding (Foucault 201). This, for Foucault, is the true effectiveness of modern power. In contemporary times, the panopticon appears as more invasive but smaller in its form. For instance, the use of social media monitors one's behavior and subjects the body to adhere to a norm. The excessive use of filters and keeping up with trends on social media is an extended product of the idea of the panopticon. This also more notably includes the phenomena of the cancel culture, where individuals feel constant awareness of the opinions that they can and should hold lest they be 'cancelled' from fitting into the digital social space that occupies almost the entire world. Here, the very purpose of a platform and options of a private vs public account performs as the panopticon. It could be that there are only four people that view your post, but you are conscious of its reachable territory. The panopticon also de-individualizes power. There is no need for a particular person to be in charge, no need for constant direct intervention; the structure itself compels disciplined behavior. This marks a critical move away from the image of a ruler and toward a dispersed, impersonal, yet total form of authority. For this to persist through the passage of time, hierarchical observations are utilized. For instance, prison guards, teachers and doctors all serve to narrate how you should conduct your body and behavior (Foucault 304). However, power is not centralized by these hierarchical forces, rather, it works through the relational possibility that permits it to exist. You must revere your doctor's opinion in order to keep them in their regard. This occurs through a pattern of normalizing judgement, which is to establish norms of behaviour and classify people based on their 'adherence' to those norms (Foucault 183). Foucault also proceeds to understand the workings of power

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with relation to knowledge, as well as the discourse that makes certain knowledge powerful. The hierarchical figures mentioned posit a certain knowledge that grants the power to exist as the figures of significance. Knowledge is not about the content it comprises but about the frameworks that allow it to exist. Through this, the discourse that permits knowledge and its distribution, does so to enhance its own purpose. Thus, power perpetuates knowledge which asserts its own position (Foucault 52).

These understandings are vividly portrayed as a critique of dystopian society in *The Last of Us*, which further manifests to an extent to contemporary American society. As the outbreak occurs, we are exposed to two factions within the first season that are at opposing ends competing for different ideals of control; the FEDRA and the Fireflies. FEDRA, the Federal Disaster Response Agency, is a military dictatorship that employs strict rules to contain the infection and mobility of its members. It appears to employ a combination of the traditional and modern system of punishment to exercise absolute control. This is to say that public executions in the quarantine zone (QZ) with a broad audience are noticed from the very first episode, while we also see more behind-the-scenes tactics of brutality ("When You're Lost in the Darkness," 38:32-44:35). FEDRA warning signs can be seen throughout the buildings in the show, indicating quarantine zones, and rules for dealing with the fungus outbreak. While these can be a manner for promising safety of all people, it becomes a pervasive method of control when its practices are carried out as a routine display of dominance rather than for genuine justice. Their power is embedded in the everyday fabric of the QZs. Like the all-seeing structure of the Panopticon described by Foucault, residents are under the constant gaze of armed soldiers, checkpoints, and curfews. This constant threat of surveillance coerces inhabitants into self-regulation, ensuring conformity and obedience. Citizens in the QZ are subjected to forced labor, such as burning bodies or cleaning sewers, and are organized into monitored work shifts. Even children, like Ellie and Riley, are trained in military schools, indoctrinated into FEDRA's worldview from a young age ("Left Behind," 4:10-6:45). Its rise as the dominant authority after the collapse of government pre-pandemic mirrors Foucault's notion of institutional crystallization, where diverse micro-level power relations and systems are solidified into a formalized regime of power. The quasi-medical-military function of it exemplifies how modern power not only punishes but produces reality by defining who belongs, who is healthy or infected, and who must be excluded or eliminated. A normative is then decided. The Fireflies operate as a revolutionary militia against, in the group leader Marlene's words, a military dictatorship, that is FEDRA, to restore democracy and freedom ("When You're Lost in the Darkness," 53:20-53:54:58). Their power is embedded in resistance, but also much in the knowledge of the cure that they possess. They observe disciplinary conduct within their organization that does not overtly monitor individuals mobility. They enforce codes of conduct, operational secrecy, and hierarchy to maintain continuity in their strife. This internal regulation nevertheless produces 'docile bodies' conditioned to obedience and sacrifice for a collective cause. This collective cause is internalized by all its members, even if they are unaware or skeptical of the

progression forward. When Marlene reveals to a doubtful Kim the plan ahead involving taking Ellie to the west to procure a cure, she requests the other two members in the group to leave, which again posits the hierarchy that further comments on who has access to knowledge, and how much of it. They define the terms of what it means to be a revolutionary subject by normalizing certain modes of perception that are central to their goal. This process creates new social norms and behavioral conducts internalized by its members. The graffiti slogans, “When you’re lost in the darkness, look for the light” serve not just as morale boosters but as symbolic tools for formation of identity and disciplinary norms. Such demand is not just prevalent within FEDRA or the Fireflies, but to other resistance groups that will to overpower. The lesser prominent factions in season 1 or resistance groups to FEDRA don’t necessarily differ largely in its manner of control but in its mode of survival choices. One such is that led by Kathleen Coghlan in Kansas City, which is primarily violent and rooted in a vengeance over her brother’s death by FEDRA. The character of Henry was forced to make a ‘bad guy’ choice by collaborating with FEDRA and giving up resistance leader Michael Coghlan, not because he was evil, but because the system compelled him to do so to obtain medicine for his brother Sam’s leukemia. This is once again a reflection of how punishment works to demand compliance (“Endure and Survive” 4:30-23:04). Kathleen imitates the traits of her opponent in the attempt to revolt. The Jackson community, on the other hand, appears as the only group of people living in mutual harmony and peace. That doesn’t mean that it dismisses any kind of surveillance or disciplinary measures. They do so using the same framework of normalizing judgements and creating subtle but productive equilibrium of power where internal resistance or disagreement is not pinned down (“Kin,” 20:15-22:13). In season two, the dynamic of the narrative shifts as the dystopian setting grows more accustomed to the existence of the pandemic and is at conflict with other systems of control. This primarily includes two groups; the Washington Liberation Front (WLF) and Seraphites. The Seraphites are devoted to a Prophet, which’s symbol involves a single watchful eye. This is to motivate the behavior of the group in favor of the belief that the infection came about as a punishment for humanity’s sins (“The Path,” 19:18-21:51). WLF came to exist as a joined force. FEDRA resistance groups including the surviving members of the Fireflies make up the WLF. After overthrowing FEDRA, they did not dismantle the system of control but instead internalized and modified it. Their own oppressive rule proves Foucault’s point that a shift in power doesn’t necessarily mean a shift toward less control. They justified its brutal methods through a specific ‘regime of truth’ that demonizes its enemies, particularly the Seraphites. By portraying the Seraphites as monstrous ‘Scars,’ the WLF can rationalize its war of extermination and consolidate internal support (“Day 1,” 23:13-23:33) . For the Seraphites, their social order is created entirely based on the knowledge of a prophet. Her visions declared the Cordyceps as a kind of divine retribution for humanity’s sins. The Elders maintain the continuum of the belief after the prophet’s death. Any alternative knowledge or dissent, is considered a betrayal punishable by death. The prophet symbolized by an eye serves as the panopticon. This spiritual surveillance conditions their behavior. The human characters of the show that are in constant conflict and

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surveillance, despite having a mutual threat of the Cordyceps, orchestrate the kind of Foucauldian power relations that permits themselves to exist.

This theory as observed in dystopian fiction is further actualized in contemporary American society. That which birthed America, the occupation of indigenous regions, slavery, and settler colonialism are all challenges to the belief that America's inherent goodness and worthiness elevated it to first-world status (Lockhart). In a sense this reveals the current day apparent American exceptionalism that prides itself on politics. In the series, every single group that Joel and Ellie travel by also embody this kind of exceptionalist belief that their way is the rightest of all, and justifications are made by citing the characteristics that position American identity, such as the manipulation of religion one side, and the idea of freedom and liberty. Observing the presidential elections feels cyclic in this realm. Every leader is posing as a mythical creature which's effect wears off in the years in office. This kind of exceptionalism is also used to justify the kind of violence directed at other nations by characterising them as a force of threat, even if they are not. American politics draw concerns on nuclear weaponry in countries except itself when it is the only country to have ever used it, killing approximately 210000 people in Hiroshima and Nagasaki(Sierra). Returning to a more contemporary reference, the US and multiple companies, majority based in the US, are responsible for funding and supporting the zionist mission of Israel to occupy Palestine, which has been effective in continuum for more than seven decades, and only recently at the escalation of a genocide received significant attention (Marsi). In a Foucauldian sense, this is caused to happen due to the hegemonic disciplinary strategies utilized by the country's power relations. In order for the power to have been misused to inhumane extents it should have been allowed so by the people that make up the socio-economic bubble. The concept of zionism is appropriated with a justice for jewish descent. The dangers of this false notion is that this makes condemning zionism equate with antisemitism, which hold different definitions. Antisemitism by definition involves the polarising discrimination of individuals of the Jewish faith and is a historically relevant concern that must be confronted, but it is not the same as zionism, which is driven by political goals and the ethnic cleansing of an indigenous population (Beinart). This manipulation occurs through a consistent surveilling of popular narrative, social media exposure to resonating ideas, local groups that preach purpose and detaining the bodies that refuse to comply. This is not all. The country's internal workings are also coupled with conservative ideals that threaten the safety and liberty of its citizens. In the second season of *The Last of Us*, a romance is witnessed between Ellie and Dina, who is faced with the disgust of a slur from Seth during their first kiss. Here, contrary to reality, he is brought to accountability. However, it posits the existing threat of battling the 'norm' of heterosexuality in settings as Republican America. The people that are at the hierarchical privileged front of the country maintain a normative judgement that manifest dangerous crimes against those that do not comply. The FBI released a report last October revealing that they had registered 2,936 anti-LGBTQ+ hate crimes in 2023, up approximately 8.6 percent from 2022 (Alfonseca). This

leads to monitoring behavior and acceptance by establishing a sense of fear to dissent. Hence, the panoptical eye in America is envisioned by its contemporary politics.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this research project examines how *The Last of Us* stands as a site for Foucauldian analysis of dystopia, exposing the systems of power in a setting of collapse, which is reflective of American realities of the moment. Through a critique of various factions, the series reveals power not as a centralized domination but as dispersed, relational, and embedded in everyday practices and contribution to existing systems, consistent with Foucault's theory of power as observed in his seminal works on discipline and governmentality. Each faction enacts distinct modalities of control and surveillance while simultaneously breeding diverse forms of resistance, affirming Foucault's insight that the location of power invites the existence of resistance. From comprehensive understanding of the theory and dystopia, the concern is brought to examine and criticise contemporary realities.

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