

An Analysis of Disciplinary Power Through the Character of Paul Atreides in Dune (2021)

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ABSTRACT

This research analyzes how disciplinary power is represented through the character of Paul Atreides in the film Dune (2021) by drawing on Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power. As a political science fiction film, Dune (2021) depicts Paul's journey as the heir to House Atreides, who has been under strict supervision, training, and rules since his birth. This research uses a descriptive qualitative method to analyze scenes, dialogue, and visuals that demonstrate disciplinary practices such as surveillance, normalizing judgment, examinations, training of the body, habit formation, and internalization. The results show that power in Dune (2021) does not operate oppressively, but rather subtly through disciplinary mechanisms that shape Paul's behavior, identity, and self-awareness. This process transforms Paul from a young man under surveillance into someone who manages himself and is ready to become a leader. Overall, this research concludes that power in Dune (2021) plays a significant role in shaping Paul Atreides' identity through six mechanisms of disciplinary power.

Keywords: *disciplinary power, identity formation, surveillance, character development, film*

INTRODUCTION

Power in social life does not operate solely through coercion or violence, but often works subtly through rules, surveillance, and habituation. As Abdil (2021) states, Michel Foucault conceptualizes power as a pervasive relational force that operates through everyday practices, shaping individual behavior. In this sense, power functions not only as a force of repression but also as a productive force that forms bodies, behaviors, and identities. One of the most significant forms of this mechanism is disciplinary power, which operates through continuous training, surveillance, and normalization, encouraging individuals to internalize norms and regulate themselves.

Disciplinary power is commonly embedded within social institutions such as schools, the military, and families, where individuals are shaped through routine practices and structured supervision. This form of power can also be represented in cultural texts, including film. Film, as an audiovisual medium, can depict disciplinary practices through narrative structure, visual symbolism, and character development. Therefore, film becomes a relevant space for examining how disciplinary power operates within social and ideological frameworks.

One film that vividly portrays disciplinary practices is Denis Villeneuve's *Dune* (2021). In the film, Paul Atreides is depicted as the heir to House Atreides and is subjected to various disciplinary systems from an early age. He undergoes physical and mental training, leadership education, and constant supervision by authority figures such as Lady Jessica, Duke Leto, and the Bene Gesserit. These practices gradually shape Paul's way of thinking, self-control, and awareness

of his role as a future leader. This portrayal illustrates how disciplinary power functions through sustained training and surveillance until it becomes internalized within the subject.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the representation of disciplinary power in the film *Dune* (2021) through the character of Paul Atreides. This study examines how the mechanisms of disciplinary power operate through the practices of training, supervision, and rule application. These mechanisms are examined to understand how Paul Atreides' behavior and thinking are shaped. Furthermore, this study seeks to explain how disciplinary power influences the formation of Paul's identity and subjectivity as a potential leader. Thus, this study provides an analytical framework for understanding the role of disciplinary power in shaping the main character in the film's narrative.

Based on this context, this research analyzes the representation of disciplinary power in *Dune* (2021) through the character of Paul Atreides. The study focuses on addressing the following research questions: (1) How is disciplinary power represented through the character of Paul Atreides in *Dune* (2021)? (2) How do training, surveillance, and rules contribute to shaping Paul as a future leader? (3) How does disciplinary power influence the development of Paul Atreides' identity and subjectivity? Through this analysis, the research is expected to contribute to literary and film studies by providing a deeper understanding of how disciplinary power operates within cinematic narratives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Michel Foucault's Theory of Disciplinary Power

Michel Foucault developed the concept of disciplinary power to explain how power operates subtly through everyday practices rather than through direct coercion or physical violence. According to Foucault, as cited in Barasa (2023), disciplinary power functions through mechanisms such as surveillance, training, examination, and normalization to regulate individual behavior and shape bodies and identities into what he terms "docile bodies." These mechanisms operate continuously and systematically, allowing power to penetrate daily life and become embedded in routine practices.

Disciplinary power is productive rather than merely repressive, as it produces knowledge, skills, and subjectivities while simultaneously exercising control. Through repeated training, observation, and assessment, individuals are shaped to behave in accordance with established norms and expectations. This form of power functions most effectively when individuals internalize discipline and begin to regulate themselves without the need for external coercion. Consequently, disciplinary power plays a crucial role in shaping subjects within institutional, social, and political systems.

This theoretical framework is particularly relevant for analyzing representations of power in film, as cinematic narratives often depict how discipline operates through authority figures, institutional structures, and everyday practices. In this study, Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power serves as the main analytical framework for examining how mechanisms of surveillance, training, examination, and normalization shape the character formation of Paul Atreides in the film *Dune* (2021).

Several previous studies have applied Michel Foucault's theory of power to analyze films and literary works. These studies demonstrate the relevance of Foucauldian theory in understanding how power operates through discipline, surveillance, and normalization. However, each study focuses on different contexts and themes, which differ from the present research's focus.

Maharani and Nirmalawati (2019), in their study *Power and Madness: A Foucauldian Analysis of Disciplinary Mechanisms in Shutter Island*, analyze how disciplinary power operates within a mental hospital through strict surveillance, rigid spatial arrangements, and psychological control. Their findings show that disciplinary power functions repressively to subjugate individuals and impose institutional identities. While this study shares a similar theoretical framework, it differs from the present research, as *Dune* (2021) portrays disciplinary power not merely as oppression but as a process that shapes leadership capacity and identity.

Jannah (2022), in *Power Relations in The Best of Me*, applies Foucault's theory of power relations to examine authority and control within family structures. The study reveals that power operates subtly through systems of differentiation, goals, and instrumental modes, even in intimate relationships. Although this research confirms that power exists beyond formal institutions, it focuses on interpersonal domination rather than disciplinary mechanisms that systematically shape identity, as examined in the present study.

Kusuma (2023), in *The Impacts of Power Relations as Depicted in Dead Poets Society and The Pursuit of Happyness*, explores how power relations influence character development through education, family, and social structures. Drawing on Foucault's concepts of sovereign power, disciplinary power, and biopower, the study demonstrates that power operates through everyday practices rather than overt repression. However, this research broadly examines power relations, whereas the present study focuses specifically on disciplinary power as a mechanism for shaping leadership and subjectivity.

Rivai and Nafisah (2014), in *The Portrait of Teacher's Domination in Whiplash*, analyze the use of disciplinary practices within the teacher-student relationship. The study highlights how strict training, mental pressure, and rigid rules function as tools of domination, while also revealing forms of resistance. Unlike this study, which emphasizes conflict and oppression, the present research examines disciplinary power in *Dune* (2021) as a productive process of self-formation that prepares Paul Atreides for leadership.

Idris (2021), in *Resisting Power: Analyzing Power Abuse and Resistance in The Last Duel*, discusses how power operates through political authority, social hierarchy, and domination, while also highlighting resistance against oppressive systems. Although this study uses Foucauldian theory to examine power dynamics, it focuses on abuse of power and resistance, rather than on the internalization of discipline and identity formation.

Although previous studies confirm the relevance of Michel Foucault's theory for analyzing power relations in films, most focus on repression, domination, resistance, or interpersonal conflict. Research that specifically examines disciplinary power as a productive mechanism shaping leadership identity in science-fiction films remains limited. Moreover, few studies analyze how disciplinary mechanisms such as surveillance, training, examination, and normalization contribute to the formation of subjectivity in cinematic narratives. Therefore, this

study presents novelty by analyzing the representation of disciplinary power in *Dune* (2021) through the character of Paul Atreides. By focusing on how disciplinary mechanisms shape Paul's identity, obedience, and leadership readiness, this research contributes to film and literary studies by expanding the application of Foucauldian disciplinary power theory to contemporary science-fiction cinema.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a qualitative descriptive approach to examine and explain the film's representation of disciplinary power in depth, without resorting to statistical analysis. The qualitative approach allows researchers to interpret the meaning of the film's scenes, dialogue, and visual elements within the context of the story and the theoretical framework used. The descriptive method was chosen to present the research findings clearly and systematically, in a manner that adheres to the meaning of the film's text. This approach is considered appropriate for film and literary studies because it emphasizes interpretation and understanding of meaning. Therefore, this research design supports the research objective of uncovering how disciplinary power operates in the film *Dune* (2021).

The object of this research is Denis Villeneuve's film *Dune* (2021), with a primary focus on the central character, Paul Atreides. The scope of the study is limited to the practice of disciplinary power as represented through physical and mental training, supervision by authority figures, the implementation of rules, the formation of habits, and the internalization of norms within Paul Atreides. This limitation of scope was implemented to maintain a focused, in-depth analysis aligned with the research focus. The research data consists of scenes, dialogue, and visual elements that demonstrate the film's disciplinary mechanisms. In addition to films as the primary data source, this research was also supported by literature, including Michel Foucault's theoretical works and relevant journal articles.

Data collection involved repeatedly watching the film *Dune* (2021) to gain a comprehensive understanding. During the observation, the researcher noted scenes, dialogue, and visuals related to the exercise of disciplinary power. The collected data were then selected and grouped according to indicators of disciplinary mechanisms, such as training of the body, surveillance, examination, Normalizing Judgment, Habit formation, and internalization. The research variable is disciplinary power, operationally defined as a form of power that operates through disciplinary practices that shape the subject's behavior and identity. This serves as the basis for identifying and classifying the research data.

Data analysis was conducted qualitatively in several stages: data identification, classification, and interpretation. The grouped data were analyzed using Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power to explain how disciplinary mechanisms operate in the film. The analysis focused on how disciplinary power shapes Paul Atreides's body, behavior, and subjectivity as a potential leader. The results of the study were then systematically organized to answer the research problem formulation. Through this process, the research is expected to provide a clear picture of the relationship between discipline, power, and identity formation in the film *Dune* (2021).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

Representation of Disciplinary Power

Based on the analysis, the film *Dune* (2021) represents disciplinary power as a form of power that systematically and continuously shapes individual behavior and awareness. Disciplinary power in this film is not exercised through physical violence or direct coercion, but rather through seemingly natural and structured daily practices. These practices include supervision, training, testing, norm assessment, habituation, and internalization. These six mechanisms are consistently present in Paul Atreides' life from the beginning of the film. Through these mechanisms, Paul is formed not only as an obedient individual but also as a subject aware of his role in the power structure.

The first and most prominent mechanism is surveillance. Paul Atreides lives in a situation in which he is constantly under the scrutiny of authority figures, including Lady Jessica, the Duke Leto, and the Bene Gesserit. This surveillance is not always direct, but comes through advice, direction, and expectations directed at him. This situation fosters in Paul the awareness that his every action and emotion can be judged at any time. In accordance with Foucault's view, this type of surveillance encourages individuals to exercise self-control without resorting to physical coercion.



Figure 1. Paul Atreides under the surveillance of an authority figure

In addition to surveillance, training of the body also serves as an essential disciplinary mechanism in the film. Paul undergoes regular physical and mental training as part of his preparation as heir to House Atreides. Combat training with Gurney Halleck emphasizes discipline, precision, and resilience under pressure. Meanwhile, mental training with Lady Jessica teaches Paul to control fear and emotions. Through these repetitive and structured exercises, Paul's body is shaped to be obedient, efficient, and ready to fulfill its assigned role.

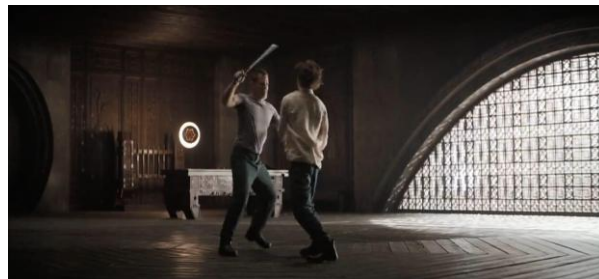


Figure 2. Paul Atreides is undergoing training of the body

The next mechanism is the examination, clearly represented in the Gom Jabbar scene. In this scene, Paul is tested on his ability to endure extreme pain while maintaining control of his bodily and emotional reactions. This process takes place under the direct supervision of the Reverend Mother, who has full authority over the examination's outcome. This examination serves not only as a physical test but also as a tool to classify Paul according to specific standards. Thus, Paul is positioned as both an object of knowledge and an object of power.

In parallel with the examination, the normalizing judgment mechanism also shapes Paul's behavior. Paul is constantly assessed against the norms and standards established by House Atreides and the Bene Gesserit. He is expected to be rational, calm, and emotionally in control in any situation. When Paul successfully meets these standards, he is deemed worthy and conforms to the image of an ideal future leader. This normative assessment gradually encourages Paul to adapt his behavior to align with the expectations of power.

Through continuous supervision, training, and examination, the habit-formation mechanism develops. Paul begins to exhibit automatic responses, such as calmness, alertness, and the ability to think strategically in dangerous situations. This habit did not emerge instantly but rather through a prolonged, repeated disciplinary process. At this stage, discipline was no longer perceived as external pressure. Instead, it had become part of Paul's daily routine and behavioral patterns.

The final stage of disciplinary power is internalization. At this stage, Paul no longer relied entirely on external supervision or commands to maintain discipline. He began to control himself and make decisions based on internal awareness. Discipline had become ingrained in his identity and subjectivity as a potential leader. This demonstrates that power reaches its peak effectiveness when individuals voluntarily discipline themselves.

Overall, the representation of disciplinary power in the film *Dune* (2021) demonstrates how power operates through a gradual and interconnected process. These six disciplinary mechanisms shape Paul Atreides not only as a rule-abiding individual but also as a self-controlled subject. Discipline in the film functions as a productive power, not merely a repressive one. This finding supports Michel Foucault's view that disciplinary power plays a crucial role in the formation of individual identity and subjectivity. Thus, the film *Dune* (2021) presents discipline as the primary foundation for Paul Atreides' leadership.

Disciplinary Mechanisms in Shaping Paul Atreides as a Future Leader

Based on the analysis, the disciplinary power mechanism in the film *Dune* (2021) plays a crucial role in shaping Paul Atreides as a future leader. Discipline is not implemented instantly but rather through a gradual, ongoing process. Each disciplinary mechanism shapes Paul's physical, mental, and emotional abilities. This process demonstrates that leadership is not solely determined by hereditary status but also by character development through discipline. Thus, disciplinary power is crucial in preparing Paul for his future leadership role.

One of the most prominent mechanisms is the training of the body. Paul undergoes regular combat training with Gurney Halleck as part of his physical preparation. This training emphasizes precision of movement, endurance, and the ability to withstand pressure. Through repeated training, Paul's body is shaped to obey commands and react efficiently. This aligns with Foucault's

concept of the formation of a valuable and controlled disciplinary body.



Figure 3. Paul Atreides is undergoing combat training with Gurney Halleck

In addition to training of the body, the disciplinary mechanism also operates through mental and emotional training. Lady Jessica plays a crucial role in shaping Paul's ability to control his fear, emotions, and instincts. Through Bene Gesserit techniques, Paul is taught to remain calm in stressful situations. This training enables Paul to think clearly and not act impulsively. Thus, discipline not only shapes his body but also his mindset and emotional control.



Figure 4. Paul is practicing self-control with Lady Jessica

The habit formation mechanism began to emerge when Paul's physical and mental training became habitual. He no longer needed constant direction to be disciplined. His responses to threats became more controlled and strategic. This habit emerged because discipline had been consistently applied in his life. At this stage, discipline shifted from external pressure to a routine ingrained in Paul's behavior.

Through continuous practice, Paul slowly entered the internalization stage of the leadership development process. Discipline, previously derived from external supervision and training, has now become part of his self-awareness. Paul began making decisions based on self-control and personal responsibility. He not only followed orders but also understood the reasons behind his actions. This demonstrated that the disciplinary mechanism had successfully shaped Paul into a self-disciplined leader.

Overall, this subchapter demonstrates that the disciplinary power mechanism in the film *Dune* (2021) shapes Paul Atreides as a future leader. Discipline operates through interconnected physical training, mental conditioning, habituation, and internalization. This process demonstrates that Paul's leadership is not simply a matter of heredity but instead a lengthy disciplinary process. Thus, the film portrays discipline as a crucial element in character formation and leadership readiness.

The Formation of Paul Atreides' Identity and Subjectivity through Disciplinary Power

This subchapter discusses how disciplinary power operates not only through external

control but also internally within Paul Atreides as a subject. According to Michel Foucault, as cited in Villadsen (2024), disciplinary power reaches its peak effectiveness when individuals begin to supervise, control, and discipline themselves without the need for direct coercion. In the film *Dune* (2021), Paul is not always physically forced to comply; instead, he gradually learns to understand the expectations and responsibilities inherent in his position as heir to House Atreides. This process demonstrates that disciplinary power operates subtly and continuously. Thus, Paul is not only an object of power but also a subject who reproduces that power through his self-awareness.

This internalization is evident in how Paul controls his emotions, body, and mind in dangerous situations. Bene Gesserit training, particularly through the figure of Lady Jessica, teaches Paul to master fear and pain as part of self-discipline. This practice aligns with Foucault's concept of docile bodies, bodies trained to be obedient, efficient, and controlled. Paul begins to accept this discipline not as external pressure, but as a personal need to survive and lead. This signifies that power has transformed into an internal consciousness. In other words, discipline has become part of Paul's own identity.

Furthermore, Paul's visions of the future also play a role in strengthening the internalization of disciplinary power. These visions serve not only as supernatural abilities but also as a mechanism for controlling behavior. Paul begins to adjust his actions in anticipation of potential future consequences, demonstrating constant self-surveillance. From Michel Foucault's perspective, as cited in Sahakyan et al. (2025), this condition is similar to the panopticon principle, in which individuals feel constantly watched even when no actual supervisor is present. Consequently, Paul disciplines himself to fulfill the role expected of him. Power operates without the need for direct authority.

Thus, this subchapter demonstrates that Paul Atreides' formation as a future leader is determined not only by physical training or explicit commands, but also by the process of internalizing disciplinary power. Paul learns to understand the norms, values, and responsibilities inherent in him, then uses them as guidelines for his actions. This process demonstrates how disciplinary power profoundly shapes individual subjectivity. In the context of the film *Dune* (2021), Paul represents a subject who has been successfully "shaped" by power to the point of being able to exercise control over himself. This confirms Foucault's view that the most effective power resides within the subject itself.

Discussion

Representation of Disciplinary Power in the Film Dune (2021)

The findings of this research demonstrate that *Dune* (2021) represents disciplinary power as a systematic, continuous, and comprehensive force shaping individual behavior, consciousness, and identity. This representation aligns closely with Michel Foucault's theory of power, which challenges traditional views of power as merely repressive and reliant on physical violence. Instead, power is depicted as a productive mechanism that operates subtly through structured and institutionalized social practices. The film vividly portrays six interrelated

disciplinary mechanisms: surveillance, training of the body, examination, normalizing judgment, habit formation, and internalization, which are consistently embedded in Paul Atreides' life.

The depiction of surveillance extends beyond direct observation to include invisible forms of control through advice, expectations, and guidance from authority figures such as Lady Jessica, Duke Leto, and the Bene Gesserit. This fosters Paul's heightened self-awareness and encourages self-discipline without overt coercion, reinforcing Foucault's notion of panoptic power. Repetitive and structured physical and mental training shape Paul's body and mind into what Foucault terms "docile bodies," ready to respond efficiently to the demands of power. The Gom Jabbar examination scene further illustrates power as a classificatory tool, positioning Paul simultaneously as an object of knowledge and a subject of power.

Moreover, the continuous normative assessment of Paul's behavior enforces normalization, compelling him to conform emotionally and behaviorally to the expectations of his social environment. Habit formation emerges from these repeated disciplinary practices, transforming discipline from an external imposition into an internalized routine. This process culminates in internalization, the apex of disciplinary power, where Paul exercises self-control through personal responsibility rather than external supervision.

Disciplinary Mechanisms in Shaping Paul Atreides as a Future Leader

Further analysis reveals that disciplinary power in *Dune* (2021) functions not merely as a tool of control but as a fundamental process shaping Paul Atreides' readiness for leadership. The film emphasizes that leadership is not simply inherited but cultivated through prolonged, rigorous physical and mental discipline. Physical training, focused on precision, endurance, and resilience, prepares Paul to meet the demands of leadership that require consistent self-control and the ability to perform effectively under pressure. Alongside this, mental and emotional conditioning, especially through Bene Gesserit techniques, equips Paul with the skills to manage fear, regulate emotions, and maintain clarity of thought in high-stress situations, enabling strategic, calm decision-making.

This comprehensive disciplinary process shapes both Paul's body and mind, fostering a leader capable of self-regulation, emotional stability, and resilience. The repeated practice of these disciplines leads to the formation of automatic, controlled responses, demonstrating how discipline becomes deeply ingrained in his behavior and identity. This internalization shows that true leadership depends on mastering oneself, achieved through persistent, intensive training. Paul's transformation into a self-disciplined individual exemplifies the power of disciplinary mechanisms to produce not only obedience but also autonomous and responsible leadership.

The Formation of Paul Atreides' Identity and Subjectivity through Disciplinary Power

This study explains in detail how disciplinary power works both from outside and within, shaping a person's identity and self-awareness. According to Foucault, power reaches its greatest effectiveness when individuals transition from passive objects under surveillance to active agents who consciously supervise, regulate, and discipline themselves. This transformation entails a profound shift in the power dynamic, with the locus of control moving inward. In *Dune* (2021), Paul Atreides' evolution from a youth under constant external observation to a self-aware, self-

regulating subject who internalizes and enacts the norms and responsibilities expected of him exemplifies this process. This internalization reveals that power is not simply imposed from outside but absorbed and reproduced within the individual's own consciousness.

The mental and emotional training Paul undergoes, especially under Lady Jessica's guidance, plays a pivotal role in this internal disciplinary process. Through rigorous instruction in mastering fear, controlling pain, and regulating emotional responses, Paul's body and mind are transformed into what Foucault terms a "docile body," obedient, efficient, and controlled. Additionally, Paul's prophetic visions serve a dual function: in addition to their supernatural significance, they act as mechanisms for continuous self-surveillance, allowing Paul to anticipate possible future outcomes and modify his behavior accordingly. This creates a form of internal panoptic discipline, where the ever-present gaze is no longer solely external but resides within the subject himself. This shift highlights a subtle yet profound change in how power operates in *Dune*: rather than relying on overt physical coercion or visible authority, power is deeply embedded in the gradual, continuous cultivation of self-awareness, self-discipline, and self-control. Consequently, Paul's identity and subjectivity as a leader are not simply granted or imposed; they are actively constructed through an ongoing and comprehensive disciplinary process that integrates social norms, cultural values, and personal responsibility into his very being.

CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion, it can be concluded that the film *Dune* (2021) presents disciplinary power not as a harsh form of coercion but as a subtle, systematic operation through various disciplinary processes. Through the application of six mechanisms of disciplinary power, Paul Atreides is gradually shaped to understand and carry out his role and responsibilities as a future leader. This process shapes how Paul controls his attitudes, emotions, and actions in responding to the various situations he encounters. This research also shows that Paul is not merely an object of power but also a subject exercising power through self-surveillance. Once disciplinary values are internalized, Paul acts as if he were constantly under surveillance, even in the absence of direct authority. This finding aligns with Michel Foucault's concept of the panopticon, which explains that power operates effectively through individual awareness and self-control. Overall, the film *Dune* (2021) demonstrates that power can subtly shape individual identity and behavior without always manifesting as visible control. Through its narrative and visual representation, the film illustrates how modern practices of power operate in a disciplinary manner and are internalized within the subject. Therefore, this research is expected to help readers understand how power is represented and operated in film as part of popular cultural practices. Future research can examine films and other media to broaden our understanding of the relationship between power, discipline, and identity formation.

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