

Power Relations in *The Iron Claw* (2023): A Foucauldian Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary cinema has become an important medium for examining power relations within social institutions, particularly the family. *The Iron Claw* (2023) portrays the tragic story of the Von Erich wrestling dynasty, highlighting how patriarchal authority, masculinity, and bodily discipline shape the lives of family members. Although Foucauldian perspectives have been widely applied in film studies, research specifically examining *The Iron Claw* through Michel Foucault's concepts of power remains limited, particularly regarding the interplay of disciplinary power, power/knowledge, biopower, governmentality, and resistance within the family institution. This study aims to analyze how patriarchal power is represented, reproduced, and contested in *The Iron Claw* using Michel Foucault's theoretical framework. The study employed a qualitative research design using Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA). The data corpus consisted of the full film, with selected scenes, dialogues, and visual elements, including cinematography, editing, lighting, and sound, purposively selected based on their representation of patriarchal authority, masculinity, bodily discipline, and resistance. The findings suggest that disciplinary power and power/knowledge constitute the dominant mechanisms through which Fritz Von Erich shapes his sons into disciplined subjects who internalize ideals of masculinity, achievement, and family loyalty. The analysis further indicates that bodily commodification represents how the sons' bodies become resources for preserving family legacy and achieving professional success within the wrestling industry, while governmentality encourages self-discipline and continuous competition. Resistance emerges through Kevin Von Erich's rejection of inherited patriarchal values and his construction of an alternative understanding of family, masculinity, and personal well-being. Overall, the film suggests that patriarchal power is sustained through discourse, bodily discipline, and self-governance rather than direct domination. This study contributes to Foucauldian film studies by extending the application of Foucault's theory to sports biopics and enriching scholarly discussions of masculinity and family power relations in contemporary cinema.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary cinema functions not only as a form of entertainment but also as a cultural text through which social structures, ideological systems, and mechanisms of power are represented and contested. Film narratives frequently reflect how institutions such as the family, education, sports, and media shape individual identities and regulate social behavior. Among these institutions, the family occupies a particularly significant position because it represents one of the earliest spaces where individuals encounter authority, discipline, expectations, and systems of value. Therefore, examining cinematic representations of family relations provides an opportunity to understand how power operates through everyday interactions, emotional attachments, and normalized social practices [1]–[3].

Sean Durkin's *The Iron Claw* (2023) provides a compelling case for examining these dynamics. Based on the tragic history of the Von Erich family, an American professional wrestling dynasty during the 1970s and 1980s, the film extends beyond the conventions of the sports biographical genre by exploring the relationship between patriarchal authority, masculine ideals, bodily discipline, and familial expectations [4]. Rather than presenting tragedy as merely the result of individual choices or unfortunate circumstances, the film reveals how specific cultural discourses surrounding strength, success, and masculinity shape the lives of the Von Erich sons. Through the figure of Fritz Von Erich, the film portrays how paternal authority functions as a mechanism that produces particular forms of masculine identity while simultaneously restricting emotional expression and personal autonomy.

The analysis of power relations in cultural texts has been significantly influenced by Michel Foucault's poststructuralist theory of power [5]–[7]. Unlike traditional approaches that conceptualize power as a centralized force possessed by dominant institutions, Foucault understands power as a relational network that operates through discourse, knowledge, institutions, and everyday practices [8], [9]. Power, from this perspective, operates most effectively when it becomes naturalized, when individuals voluntarily engage in practices that ultimately restrict their own freedom, as articulated in the concept of *governmentality*, or the art of governing [10]–[12]. Previous studies have demonstrated how films can serve as rich cultural texts for examining the operation of such power relations, for example through the depiction of authority dynamics between coaches and athletes characterized by abuses of power, or through the ways in which women's bodies become sites of struggle for control and resistance [13]–[15].

One of Foucault's central contributions is the concept of disciplinary power, which explains how bodies are trained, regulated, and transformed into useful and controllable objects. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes how modern power operates through techniques of observation, correction, and normalization that create what he calls "docile bodies", bodies that can be controlled, improved, and utilized within particular systems of power. In *The Iron Claw*, the bodies of the Von Erich sons become central sites where masculine expectations are imposed and reproduced. Their physical strength, wrestling abilities, and bodily appearance are treated as representations of family honor and professional success. The transformation of their bodies into symbols of masculine

excellence demonstrates how bodily discipline functions as a mechanism through which patriarchal values are maintained.

Examining *The Iron Claw* from a Foucauldian perspective is relevant for several reasons. First, the film has been discussed in relation to restrictive forms of masculinity, particularly expectations that associate male identity with strength, dominance, achievement, and emotional control, in which the patriarch, Fritz Von Erich, enforces the philosophy that being the most powerful, the bravest, in short, the best is the sole purpose of life. Fritz's authority is not exercised through physical violence alone, but through the formation of discourses about success, hierarchies between brothers (Kerry's my favorite, then Kev, then David, then Mike, but the rankings can always change), and the creation of an us-against-them mentality. This represents what Foucault calls power/knowledge, where knowledge about what it means to be a real man and a Von Erich is constructed to perpetuate existing power structures.

One of Foucault's central contributions is the concept of disciplinary power, which explains how bodies are trained, regulated, and transformed into useful and controllable objects. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes how modern power operates through techniques of observation, correction, and normalization that create what he calls "docile bodies", bodies that can be controlled, improved, and utilized within particular systems of power. In *The Iron Claw*, the bodies of the Von Erich sons become central sites where masculine expectations are imposed and reproduced. Their physical strength, wrestling abilities, and bodily appearance are treated as representations of family honor and professional success. The transformation of their bodies into symbols of masculine excellence demonstrates how bodily discipline functions as a mechanism through which patriarchal values are maintained [16].

Actor Zac Efron's physical transformation symbolizes how the body is disciplined to its extreme limits to meet his father's expectations. The body in this film becomes not only a locus of power but also a site where physical ability, vulnerability, and personal identity are negotiated according to family expectations and professional wrestling demands. Third, the film implicitly critiques the discourse of hegemonic masculinity that defines strength as the rejection of vulnerability. Scenes depicting the tragic deaths of three sons (David, Mike, and Kerry) and the prohibition on mourning demonstrate how patriarchal power stifles the possibility of becoming an authentic ethical subject. In Foucault's framework, the subject is not passive; there is room for resistance. This is evident in Kevin Von Erich's decision at the end of the film to break free from the curse by not passing on the same pressure to his children, a moment that demonstrates the possibility of forming alternative subjectivities outside the dominant discourse.

Furthermore, the film illustrates the Foucauldian concept of power/knowledge, in which power and knowledge are mutually dependent. According to Foucault, systems of power create specific forms of knowledge that define what is considered true, normal, or desirable [17]. Within the Von Erich family, Fritz constructs a particular "truth" about masculinity: a real man must be strong, victorious, emotionally controlled, and willing to sacrifice personal needs for family legacy. Statements such as "Kerry's my favorite, then Kev, then David, then Mike, but the rankings can always change" function not simply as

expressions of parental preference but as disciplinary strategies that create competition, insecurity, and the continuous pursuit of recognition. Through these practices, patriarchal authority becomes internalized by the sons themselves.

The film also demonstrates the operation of biopower, a concept through which Foucault explains how modern power regulates life, health, and human bodies [18]. In *The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, Foucault argues that modern forms of power increasingly operate through the management of life rather than through direct punishment or violence. Within the narrative of *The Iron Claw*, the physical and emotional well-being of the Von Erich sons becomes subordinated to the preservation of family reputation and professional success. Their bodies are managed as valuable resources within the wrestling industry, while suffering, injury, and emotional vulnerability are treated as obstacles to masculine achievement.

Beyond discipline and regulation, the film also raises questions about resistance and alternative forms of subjectivity. Although Foucault emphasizes the pervasive nature of power, he argues that resistance always exists within power relations [10]. Resistance does not necessarily appear as direct opposition; it may emerge through attempts to redefine oneself outside dominant systems of meaning. In *The Iron Claw*, Kevin Von Erich's decision at the end of the narrative to reject the continuation of the same pressures onto his own children represents a form of resistance. This moment demonstrates the possibility of creating alternative masculine identities based on care, emotional openness, and freedom from inherited expectations.

Previous studies have demonstrated the usefulness of Foucauldian approaches in analyzing film and media representations. Research applying Foucault's concepts has shown how cinematic narratives reveal the construction of subjects through social hierarchy, gender relations, institutional authority, and ideological discourse. Studies of films such as *Triangle of Sadness* (2022) demonstrate how power relations and social status influence subject formation, showing that discourse plays a significant role in producing identities and maintaining social structures. Similarly, research on *Heretic* (2024) highlights how governmentality and regimes of truth operate through ideological systems that regulate subjects and establish particular understandings of reality.

Other studies have examined the relationship between gender, bodies, and power in contemporary cinema. Research on award-winning films has demonstrated that representations of gender identity often remain influenced by dominant social structures, even when narratives appear to challenge traditional norms [21]. Meanwhile, studies examining marginalized identities have shown that resistance can emerge within spaces controlled by dominant power relations, demonstrating that subjects are not merely passive recipients of power but can negotiate and transform their identities [22].

Although Foucauldian perspectives have been widely applied in film studies, several limitations remain. Existing research has primarily focused on psychological thrillers, social dramas, political narratives, and representations of marginalized groups. Comparatively less attention has been given to sports biographical films, particularly narratives where family authority, athletic discipline, and masculine ideology operate simultaneously in shaping subject formation. Furthermore, while critics have discussed *The Iron Claw* in relation to

grief, toxic masculinity, and family tragedy, limited academic research has systematically examined how Foucauldian mechanisms of power operate within the film.

This study addresses this gap by applying Foucauldian Discourse Analysis to examine the representation of patriarchal power in *The Iron Claw* (2023). The originality of this study lies in its examination of a sports biographical film as a site where family relations, bodily discipline, and masculine discourse intersect. By applying key Foucauldian concepts, including disciplinary power, biopower, governmentality, power/knowledge, and resistance, this research expands the application of Foucauldian film studies beyond traditional genres and demonstrates how cinema represents the production and negotiation of subjectivity.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze how power relations are represented in *The Iron Claw* (2023) through a Foucauldian perspective. Specifically, this study examines: (1) how discourses of masculinity, success, and family obligation function as mechanisms of power; (2) how the body becomes a site of discipline and control; and (3) how resistance emerges through alternative forms of subject formation.

The significance of this study lies in its theoretical and cultural contributions. Theoretically, it contributes to film and media studies by demonstrating the relevance of Foucauldian concepts for understanding the relationship between discourse, power, and identity construction. Culturally, it highlights how cinematic narratives can reveal hidden mechanisms through which social institutions reproduce expectations, normalize particular behaviors, and influence individual experiences. By examining *The Iron Claw*, this study demonstrates how film can function as a critical space for understanding the continuing influence of patriarchal power in contemporary society.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design using Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) to examine the representation of power relations in Sean Durkin's *The Iron Claw* (2023). FDA was selected because this approach is suitable for analyzing how discourse produces knowledge, constructs subjectivities, establishes norms, and maintains power relations. The analysis was guided by Michel Foucault's concepts of disciplinary power, docile body, power/knowledge, biopower, governmentality, and resistance [23].

The object of this study was *The Iron Claw* (2023), directed by Sean Durkin. Data collection and analysis were conducted from February to March 2026. The primary data consisted of scenes, dialogues, character interactions, visual representations, sound elements, and narrative structures from the film. Secondary data included scholarly works on Foucault's theory of power, previous Foucauldian film studies, interviews with the director and cast, film reviews, and historical materials related to the Von Erich family. Secondary sources were used only to provide contextual information, while interpretations were primarily based on evidence from the film.

The study employed purposive sampling by selecting scenes that represented patriarchal authority, masculinity, bodily discipline, normalization, subject formation, and resistance. Data were collected through repeated viewing of the film, transcription of

relevant dialogues, documentation of scenes with timestamps, and identification of visual, auditory, and narrative elements.

The analysis was conducted through several stages. First, the film was viewed repeatedly to identify recurring discourses of masculinity, family duty, success, bodily strength, and vulnerability. Second, relevant scenes were selected, transcribed, and documented with timestamps. Third, verbal, visual, auditory, and narrative elements were coded. Fourth, the initial codes were categorized according to Foucauldian concepts, including disciplinary power, docile body, power/knowledge, biopower, governmentality, and resistance. Fifth, contradictory scenes and alternative interpretations were examined. Finally, the findings were compared with relevant scholarship and production materials to support contextual understanding.

The researcher served as the primary research instrument, using a coding framework based on Foucault's theoretical concepts. The scene analysis was organized through a matrix consisting of timestamp, scene description, dialogue, visual or auditory features, Foucauldian concept, and interpretation.

The trustworthiness of the findings was established through credibility and confirmability. Credibility was maintained through repeated viewing, systematic documentation of scenes, and triangulation between film evidence and relevant scholarly sources. Confirmability was ensured by grounding interpretations in observable elements from the film and maintaining consistency with Foucauldian concepts.

This study acknowledges that the findings represent a theory-guided interpretation rather than an objective account of the film. The researcher recognizes that different theoretical perspectives may produce alternative interpretations; therefore, the analysis was continuously grounded in textual evidence from *The Iron Claw* and the selected Foucauldian framework [24], [25].

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Result

This section presents the findings of the Foucauldian Discourse Analysis of *The Iron Claw* (2023). The analysis identified five interconnected patterns of power relations: disciplinary power, power/knowledge, bodily commodification, governmentality, and resistance. Each finding is discussed through specific scenes from the film, including dialogue, visual composition, sound elements, and narrative structures. The analysis distinguishes between primary film evidence and secondary contextual information; interpretations are based primarily on cinematic representations rather than external historical accounts.

Table 1. Summary of Foucauldian Analysis in *The Iron Claw* (2023)

Scene/Representation	Film Evidence	Foucauldian Concept	Interpretation
Fritz's construction of wrestling success and family identity	Fritz repeatedly emphasizes winning, family legacy, and the importance of becoming a successful wrestler. His statement about ranking his sons ("Kerry's my favorite, then Kev, then David, then Mike, but the rankings can always change") creates competition and insecurity among the brothers.	Power/knowledge; Governmentality	The scene represents how masculinity and success are produced as "truths" within the family. The sons internalize these expectations and regulate their own behavior to gain recognition.
Wrestling training and physical preparation	The sons undergo intense physical training and are expected to maintain strong, powerful bodies as representatives of the Von Erich name.	Disciplinary power; Docile body	The body becomes a site of discipline where physical strength is produced, monitored, and connected to masculine identity.
Suppression of emotional vulnerability	The family environment discourages expressions of sadness and weakness, particularly after traumatic events.	Normalization; Disciplinary power	Masculinity is constructed through emotional control, making vulnerability appear incompatible with being a "strong" man.
Mike and Kerry's struggles with physical limitations	Injuries and bodily limitations are presented in tension with expectations to continue performing as wrestlers.	Bodily commodification; Biopolitical control	The film represents how athletic bodies become valued according to productivity, public image, and usefulness to family legacy.
Kevin's decision to raise his children differently	Kevin rejects repeating the same pressures and prioritizes emotional connection with his children.	Resistance; Alternative subject formation	The film presents resistance as the creation of a different identity outside inherited patriarchal expectations.

3.1.1 Disciplinary Power and the Docile Body

The Von Erich family narrative presents the body as the primary site where patriarchal expectations are imposed, negotiated, and reproduced. In *The Iron Claw* (2023), physical strength is not merely portrayed as an athletic requirement but as a marker of masculinity, family loyalty, and personal worth. The findings demonstrate that the bodies of the Von Erich sons are continuously shaped through practices of training, discipline, and emotional regulation, transforming them into instruments that serve both familial ambitions and the professional wrestling industry.

David, Kerry, and Mike. Their bodies are continuously constructed through repetitive exercise. The representation of bodily discipline is evident in the training practices experienced by Kevin, wrestling preparation, and expectations of physical perfection. The

muscular body becomes a symbol of success and family honor, particularly because the Von Erich identity is closely connected to achievement in the wrestling industry. Kevin Von Erich's physical transformation represents this process most clearly. His body is developed not only to become competitive in the ring but also to fulfill his father's expectation of what a successful Von Erich should represent.

This finding reflects Michel Foucault's concept of the docile body, referring to bodies that are trained, controlled, and optimized to become productive within a particular system of power. In *The Iron Claw*, the sons' bodies become productive resources for both Fritz's patriarchal authority and the professional wrestling business. Their physical abilities generate recognition, economic value, and family prestige. However, this productivity comes at the cost of individual freedom, as their bodies are increasingly separated from their personal desires and emotional needs.

The analysis also shows that disciplinary power functions effectively because it becomes internalized by the subjects themselves. Kevin, for example, continues to train and maintain his physical condition even without Fritz's direct supervision. This demonstrates that power does not operate only through external commands but also through self-discipline. Kevin appears to internalize the expectation that wrestling success is closely connected to recognition and the preservation of the Von Erich legacy. Therefore, he becomes both the object and the agent of disciplinary power.

Furthermore, the film illustrates that bodily discipline extends beyond physical training into the regulation of emotions. Fritz's prohibition against expressing grief, particularly during David's funeral, demonstrates that masculine identity is also produced through emotional control. The male body must not only appear strong but must also suppress vulnerability. Crying, fear, and emotional weakness are constructed as failures of masculinity. As a result, the sons' bodies become sites where physical and psychological discipline operate simultaneously.

The findings demonstrate that *The Iron Claw* portrays disciplinary power as a productive but destructive mechanism. The Von Erich sons are transformed into powerful athletes, yet the same disciplinary system that creates their success also contributes to their suffering. Through the concept of the docile body, the film reveals how patriarchal power operates by shaping individuals who willingly participate in their own regulation while believing that discipline is necessary for achieving identity, recognition, and success.

3.1.2 The Construction of Masculine Truth and Von Erich Identity through Power/Knowledge

Beyond the control of the physical body, *The Iron Claw* (2023) demonstrates that power also operates through the production of meanings, beliefs, and social truths. The film illustrates how Fritz Von Erich constructs particular discourses about masculinity, success, and family identity that shape how his sons understand themselves and their responsibilities. Through these discourses, the Von Erich sons are not only controlled by external authority but also formed as subjects who internalize and reproduce the values imposed upon them.

One of the strongest representations of power/knowledge appears in Fritz's definition of success. Throughout the film, success is associated almost exclusively with wrestling

achievement, championship victories, and the expansion of the Von Erich name. Alternative forms of achievement, such as personal happiness, emotional well-being, or individual interests, are positioned as less valuable. This discourse becomes especially significant in Mike Von Erich's storyline. Although Mike initially desires to pursue music rather than wrestling, he eventually enters the wrestling world because he has internalized the belief that being a Von Erich means continuing the family tradition.

This finding reflects Foucault's concept of power/knowledge, which explains that knowledge is not neutral but produced within relations of power. In the Von Erich family, knowledge about masculinity and success is constructed according to Fritz's interests and values. The definition of a successful man is not naturally existing but created through a discourse that privileges physical strength, competition, and emotional control. Because this discourse is repeatedly reinforced within the family, the sons gradually accept it as an unquestionable truth.

The scene in which Fritz reveals his ranking of his sons, "Kerry's my favorite, then Kev, then David, then Mike, but the rankings can always change", illustrates how discourse becomes a mechanism of control. This statement is not merely an expression of personal preference but a strategy that creates continuous competition among the brothers. By presenting affection as something unstable and dependent on performance, Fritz encourages his sons to seek approval constantly. The uncertainty surrounding their position within the family hierarchy becomes a powerful mechanism that maintains their obedience.

The analysis further indicates that Fritz constructs masculinity through a series of expectations and prohibitions. The idea that "real men do not cry" demonstrates how masculinity functions as a disciplinary discourse. Emotional restraint becomes treated as evidence of strength, while vulnerability is interpreted as weakness. This discourse is particularly visible during David's funeral, when the sons are expected to suppress their grief. Through this moment, the film shows that power operates not only by controlling physical actions but also by shaping emotional responses and personal identities.

The sons' acceptance of these ideas demonstrates the effectiveness of power/knowledge. They do not simply follow Fritz's instructions because of external pressure; they reproduce the same values by believing that these values represent reality itself. Kevin, for example, views the championship belt as proof of hard work, worth, and recognition. However, the film reveals that this understanding has been shaped by a system of values created through Fritz's authority and the wrestling industry.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that *The Iron Claw* represents power/knowledge as a process of subject formation. Fritz's authority is sustained because he controls not only the actions of his sons but also the meanings attached to masculinity, success, and family identity. Through discourse, the Von Erich sons become subjects who willingly reproduce the very system that limits them.

3.1.3 Bodily Commodification and the Regulation of Vulnerable Bodies

The Iron Claw (2023) represents the wrestler's body not only as a personal identity but also as a valuable object connected to family reputation, professional success, and public recognition. The findings indicate that the Von Erich sons' bodies are continuously evaluated

according to their ability to perform, endure physical demands, and maintain the image of the wrestling dynasty. Within this system, the body becomes a site where personal vulnerability is negotiated against expectations of strength and productivity.

This representation can be observed through the experiences of Mike and Kerry Von Erich. After Mike suffers a serious injury, the narrative presents the tension between bodily vulnerability and the expectation to continue contributing to the family legacy. The film visually emphasizes Mike's physical weakness and difficulty in returning to his previous condition, creating a contrast between his vulnerable body and the expectation that he continues representing the Von Erich wrestling identity. Although the film does not directly suggest that external pressure alone determines his later tragedy, it represents a cultural environment in which physical limitations are difficult to acknowledge because the wrestler's value is closely associated with performance and endurance.

Similarly, Kerry's storyline after his motorcycle accident demonstrates the symbolic importance attached to the wrestling body. His return to the ring despite physical limitations illustrates how the wrestler's body is expected to maintain an image of strength. Through visual emphasis on Kerry's injured body alongside his continued wrestling performance and public appearance, the film highlights the tension between bodily vulnerability and the expectation to embody masculine strength. From a Foucauldian perspective, this representation relates to the regulation of bodies through systems of value and normalization.

Visually, the film emphasizes the contrast between Kerry's injured body and his public image as a wrestler by showing his physical limitation alongside his continued performance in the ring. This contrast highlights the tension between bodily vulnerability and the expectation of maintaining masculine strength.

From a Foucauldian perspective, this representation relates to the regulation of bodies through systems of value and normalization. The wrestling body is not controlled only through direct commands but also through expectations regarding what a successful athlete should look like and what a Von Erich should represent. The sons appear to internalize these expectations, interpreting physical sacrifice and endurance as necessary expressions of commitment to family and profession.

Furthermore, the film illustrates how bodily discipline intersects with economic and symbolic interests. As a wrestling promoter and father, Fritz occupies a position where family affection and professional ambition become closely connected. This creates a situation in which care, responsibility, and control are difficult to separate. The sons' bodies become central to maintaining the visibility and reputation of the Von Erich name.

However, the film also provides a more complex representation by showing moments of vulnerability and emotional suffering. These moments challenge the idealized image of the invulnerable male wrestler and reveal the limitations of defining personal worth through physical achievement. Rather than presenting bodily sacrifice as a simple consequence of patriarchal power, *The Iron Claw* portrays the tension between individual vulnerability and a cultural system that rewards strength and endurance.

Overall, the findings suggest that *The Iron Claw* represents the wrestler's body as a contested space where identity, family expectations, and professional value intersect.

Through the concept of bodily commodification and bodily regulation, the film reveals how masculine ideals transform the body into both a source of achievement and a site of pressure.

3.1.4 Governmentality and Neoliberal Rationality

Fritz Von Erich's authority becomes most effective not when he directly forces his sons to obey, but when they begin to regulate their own behavior according to the expectations he has created. The findings demonstrate that *The Iron Claw* (2023) represents governmentality through the internalization of patriarchal values, competitive self-improvement, and continuous self-surveillance among the Von Erich sons. Rather than operating through constant external control, power functions by shaping how individuals understand their responsibilities, desires, and identities.

The film illustrates that Fritz creates a system in which his sons gradually internalize and reproduce the expectations imposed upon them. Kevin, David, Kerry, and Mike are not constantly shown being physically forced into wrestling. Instead, they gradually accept the belief that success in wrestling is their obligation as members of the Von Erich family. The pressure to become champions, maintain the family reputation, and gain paternal recognition becomes internalized as a personal goal, although these aspirations remain shaped by familial authority and broader wrestling culture. As a result, they continue pursuing the standards established by Fritz because these expectations have become connected to their understanding of family identity, masculinity, and personal worth.

This pattern reflects Foucault's concept of governmentality, which refers to the techniques through which subjects are guided to govern themselves according to particular rationalities. Power becomes more effective when individuals perceive imposed expectations as personal choices rather than external demands. In *The Iron Claw*, Fritz does not always need to command his sons because he has already shaped the conditions under which they make decisions. Wrestling becomes understood not simply as a career choice but as a moral responsibility connected to family identity.

The scene in which Fritz ranks his sons according to his personal preference demonstrates this mechanism of self-government. By stating that the rankings can always change, Fritz creates a continuous competition among the brothers. The uncertainty of their position encourages them to work harder, improve themselves, and seek approval. They become responsible for proving their own worth within the family hierarchy. Through this process, control is transferred from Fritz's direct authority into the sons' own thoughts and actions.

The influence of neoliberal rationality can also be observed in how the sons understand success and failure. Within this logic, individuals are encouraged to view themselves as projects that must constantly be improved. The Von Erich sons treat their bodies, wrestling abilities, and public identities as forms of personal investment. Kevin, for example, believes that becoming a champion depends on discipline, effort, and determination. However, the film reveals that this belief ignores the larger power structures surrounding him, including Fritz's expectations and the demands of the wrestling industry.

Governmentality also operates through internal surveillance. The sons do not need Fritz's constant observation because they have developed their own mechanisms of self-

monitoring. Kevin constantly compares himself with his brothers and questions whether he is strong enough or successful enough. This creates what can be understood through Foucault's idea of the panopticon: a condition in which individuals regulate themselves because they have internalized the possibility of judgment. The most effective form of control is therefore not external observation but the subject's own continuous evaluation of himself.

The film further demonstrates how governmentality limits alternative identities. Mike's desire to become a musician illustrates the difficulty of resisting the rationality established by the family. Although Fritz does not completely prohibit Mike from pursuing music, the discourse surrounding the Von Erich identity makes wrestling appear as the only meaningful path. Mike eventually accepts wrestling because he has internalized the belief that fulfilling family expectations is more important than pursuing personal interests.

Overall, *The Iron Claw* portrays governmentality as a subtle form of power that operates through self-regulation rather than direct domination. Fritz's greatest influence lies not only in controlling his sons' actions but in shaping the way they understand themselves. By transforming family expectations into personal responsibilities, patriarchal power continues to reproduce itself through the subjects it creates.

3.1.5 Resistance: Possibilities Amidst Power

Although *The Iron Claw* (2023) portrays a powerful patriarchal system that shapes the lives of the Von Erich sons, the film does not represent power as completely dominant or impossible to challenge. Instead, the findings demonstrate that resistance emerges within the same network of power relations that produces domination. Through Kevin Von Erich's transformation, the film illustrates how individuals can negotiate, reject, and reconstruct the identities imposed upon them. Resistance in the film does not appear as a direct confrontation against Fritz's authority, but rather through personal choices that challenge the values and expectations inherited from the patriarchal system.

The most significant form of resistance is represented through Kevin's decision to break the cycle of pressure and suffering that has defined the Von Erich legacy. Throughout the narrative, Kevin experiences the consequences of the family's obsession with strength, success, and wrestling achievement. Unlike Fritz, who defines legacy through championships and public recognition, Kevin gradually develops an alternative understanding of what family and success mean. His survival after losing three brothers becomes an important moment of resistance because continuing to live represents a rejection of the destructive logic that has shaped the family.

This finding reflects Foucault's argument that "where there is power, there is resistance." Resistance does not exist outside power relations but emerges from within them. In *The Iron Claw*, Kevin cannot completely escape the influence of the Von Erich legacy; his identity is still shaped by years of discipline, expectations, and trauma. However, he creates a different relationship with that legacy by refusing to reproduce the same system for the next generation. His resistance therefore takes the form of transforming subjectivity rather than simply rejecting authority.

Kevin's decision to prioritize his children and family life over wrestling success represents another important form of resistance. The final scenes of the film present a contrast between Fritz's definition of achievement and Kevin's new understanding of happiness. While Fritz associates value with fame, championships, and the continuation of the Von Erich name, Kevin chooses emotional connection, presence, and family stability. This choice challenges the dominant discourse of masculinity that previously defined strength as emotional suppression and endless competition.

The change of his children's surname from Von Erich back to Adkisson also functions as a symbolic act of resistance. The Von Erich name carries both prestige and trauma, representing a legacy built through achievement but also associated with suffering and loss. By removing this inherited identity from his children, Kevin rejects the expectation that future generations must continue carrying the same burden. This action demonstrates an attempt to create an alternative subject position outside the patriarchal framework established by Fritz.

The film also presents emotional expression as a form of resistance. Throughout the narrative, the sons are taught that vulnerability represents weakness and that real men must suppress pain. Kevin's ability to grieve, express sadness, and accept emotional vulnerability challenges this masculine discourse. His tears do not represent failure but rather the rejection of a system that has demanded emotional silence. Through vulnerability, Kevin reconstructs masculinity in a way that allows care, connection, and emotional honesty.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that resistance in *The Iron Claw* operates through the creation of alternative ways of being rather than through direct opposition. Kevin's choices reveal that subjects shaped by power are still capable of transforming themselves and producing new meanings. The film therefore supports Foucault's understanding of resistance as an essential element within power relations. While patriarchal power attempts to define the Von Erich sons' identities, Kevin's transformation demonstrates the possibility of forming a subjectivity beyond inherited expectations.

3.2 Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that *The Iron Claw* (2023) represents patriarchal power not as an authority possessed solely by Fritz Von Erich, but as a network of relations operating through family expectations, masculine norms, bodily discipline, and professional wrestling culture. From a Foucauldian perspective, power circulates through multiple actors and practices, including Fritz as a father figure, the sons who internalize dominant expectations, the wrestling institution that rewards physical achievement, audience expectations of heroic masculinity, and broader cultural discourses about male success. Therefore, the film presents patriarchy as a system reproduced through everyday practices rather than merely through individual domination.

The five Foucauldian concepts identified in this study operate together in producing Von Erich's masculine subjectivity. Disciplinary power functions through the regulation of the sons' bodies, training routines, and emotional expression. Power/knowledge operates through the construction of particular truths about masculinity, success, and family responsibility. Bodily commodification demonstrates how the wrestler's body becomes

connected to family reputation and professional value. Governmentality explains how these expectations become internalized, causing the sons to regulate themselves even without direct supervision. Meanwhile, resistance appears through Kevin Von Erich's attempt to create an alternative identity based on emotional connection and family care rather than competition and physical achievement.

These findings support previous Foucauldian studies showing that power operates through discourse, normalization, and subject formation. Özer and Özer (2025) demonstrate that identities are produced through changing power relations, while Çelik (2025) highlights how regimes of truth regulate individual behavior. Similarly, research on sports environments by Gearity et al. (2023) and Lin (2025) shows that athletic cultures often normalize sacrifice, discipline, and performance-based identities. This study extends these discussions by demonstrating that such mechanisms also operate within family relationships, where professional expectations become intertwined with emotional attachment and the desire for parental recognition.

The findings also contribute to masculinity studies by showing that the film's representation of toxic masculinity should not be understood simply as a personal characteristic of Fritz Von Erich. Rather, it reflects broader cultural expectations associated with hegemonic masculinity, where strength, achievement, emotional control, and dominance become standards for evaluating male identity. Through this perspective, the sons' struggles are not only caused by an individual father's actions but also by a social system that defines masculine success in restrictive ways.

An alternative reading of the film is that Fritz Von Erich's actions can also be understood within the broader cultural context of professional wrestling, where physical sacrifice, competition, and emotional toughness have historically been normalized as part of athletic identity. From this perspective, Fritz is not only an individual source of domination but also a subject shaped by the same cultural values that he reproduces. This interpretation does not excuse the consequences of his actions; rather, it highlights how patriarchal norms operate through individuals who participate in and reproduce broader systems of meaning.

However, the experiences of the Von Erich family should be interpreted with caution. The tragic deaths depicted in the film cannot be explained solely as direct consequences of patriarchal power, bodily discipline, or masculine expectations. Instead, the film represents a complex interaction between personal suffering, family dynamics, cultural ideals, and professional pressures. A Foucauldian analysis does not attempt to provide a single causal explanation of these events but examines how certain discourses and practices shape the conditions in which individuals understand themselves and their experiences.

Theoretically, this study contributes to Foucauldian film studies by applying concepts of power, discipline, and subject formation to a sports biographical film centered on family relations. The study demonstrates that cinema can reveal how power operates within intimate spaces and how dominant identities are produced through everyday practices. Practically, the findings encourage critical reflection on forms of authority in families and sports institutions that normalize excessive competition, emotional suppression, and achievement-based self-worth.

This study has several limitations. First, the analysis focuses on a single film, meaning that the findings represent a contextual interpretation of *The Iron Claw* (2023) rather than a general explanation of all representations of masculinity and family power. Second, the study relies on textual and cinematic interpretation without examining audience reception or production perspectives. Third, the findings represent a theory-guided interpretation rather than an objective account of the film. Future research may combine Foucauldian analysis with audience studies, trauma studies, or masculinity studies to explore broader understandings of power, vulnerability, and resistance in sports-related narratives.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined the representation of power relations in *The Iron Claw* (2023) through Michel Foucault's concepts of disciplinary power, power/knowledge, biopower, governmentality, and resistance. By applying a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, the study aimed to explain how patriarchal power is constructed, reproduced, and contested within the Von Erich family and the broader context of professional wrestling.

The findings demonstrate that patriarchal power in the film operates primarily through productive rather than overtly coercive mechanisms. Fritz Von Erich's authority is maintained through the disciplining of the body, the construction of dominant discourses of masculinity, the regulation of life and family legacy, and the internalization of self-governance by his sons. At the same time, the film illustrates that resistance remains possible through the transformation of subjectivity, as reflected in Kevin Von Erich's decision to reject the patriarchal legacy and establish alternative values centered on emotional openness, family, and personal well-being. These findings answer the research objective by showing that power in *The Iron Claw* is embedded in everyday family practices and sustained through discourse, bodily discipline, and self-regulation rather than through direct domination alone.

Theoretically, this study contributes to Foucauldian film studies by extending the application of Foucault's concepts to the analysis of sports biopics and family narratives. While previous studies have primarily examined power in institutional, political, or religious contexts, this research demonstrates that family relationships can also function as sites where disciplinary power, biopower, and governmentality intersect to produce particular forms of masculine subjectivity. The study therefore broadens the understanding of how cinema represents the operation of power within intimate social institutions.

Practically, the findings encourage scholars, filmmakers, educators, parents, and sports practitioners to critically reflect on forms of authority that normalize excessive competition, emotional suppression, and achievement-based definitions of self-worth. The study also highlights the importance of promoting healthier models of masculinity that recognize emotional expression, mutual care, and individual well-being as essential aspects of personal development.

This study has several limitations. First, the analysis focuses on a single film, which limits the transferability of the findings to other cinematic representations of family and masculinity. Second, the study relies on textual and cinematic analysis without incorporating audience reception or production perspectives. Finally, the research is limited to a Foucauldian framework and does not engage with complementary perspectives such as

trauma studies, psychoanalysis, or intersectional gender theory that may provide additional insights.

Future research is recommended to conduct comparative analyses of sports biopics or family-centered films to examine how patriarchal power and resistance are represented across different cultural and historical contexts. Further studies may also integrate Foucauldian analysis with audience reception research or interdisciplinary perspectives to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how cinematic representations of power influence social perceptions of masculinity, family, and identity.

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