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THE SYMBOL OF THE SPIDER IN *SPIDER-MAN* FILM: CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS AND IDEOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS

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Abstract

Considering their specific form, comics are types of visual art and culture that transmit a message in a more straightforward and impressive way than other types of art. For instance, films that include comics often become successful, popular and cult following. In connection with this point, Spider-Man, the American superhero film, is based on comics and maintains their distinctive characteristics. The film is a true reflection of culture, which reveals some of dominating values and ideologies of the American society. Basically, besides the various themes and representations of ideologies in the film, the symbol of the spider, the eight- legged arachnid along with its web, is also a crucial aspect of the film's ideological meaning. The symbol of the spider in Spider-Man film communicates a lot of different things as it is tremendously common in Native American culture and appears in a number of myths and traditions. By adopting a semiotic-culturalist approach, the present article seeks to demonstrate the cultural implications and the ideological dimensions that the spider conveys in the film Spider-Man.

Keywords: *Spider, Culture, Ideology, American Hegemony*

Abstrak

Mengingat bentuknya yang spesifik, komik merupakan salah satu dari jenis seni visual dan budaya yang mengirimkan pesan dengan cara yang lebih lugas dan mengesankan daripada jenis seni lainnya. Misalnya, film yang menyertakan

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komik sering menjadi sukses, populer, dan pengikut kultus. Sehubungan dengan poin ini, Spider-Man adalah salah satu film yang bergender superhero nerara Amerika, didasarkan pada komik dan mempertahankan karakteristik khas mereka. Film ini adalah refleksi sejati dari budaya, yang mengungkapkan beberapa nilai dan ideologi yang mendominasi masyarakat Amerika. Pada dasarnya, selain berbagai tema dan representasi ideologi dalam film, simbol laba-laba, arakhnida berkaki delapan beserta jaringnya, juga merupakan aspek penting dari makna ideologis film tersebut. Simbol laba-laba dalam film Spider-Man mengkomunikasikan banyak hal yang berbeda karena sangat umum dalam budaya penduduk asli Amerika dan muncul dalam sejumlah mitos dan tradisi. Dengan mengadopsi pendekatan semiotik-kulturalis, artikel ini berusaha untuk menunjukkan implikasi budaya dan dimensi ideologis yang disampaikan laba-laba dalam film Spider-Man.

Kata kunci: Laba-laba, Budaya, Ideologi, Hegemoni Amerika

A. Introduction

Superhero films are undeniably films that focus on the actions of superheroes. Superheroes possess extraordinary superhuman capabilities beyond those of ordinary people and are committed to accomplish astonishing feats, such as fighting daily crimes, promoting common good, and saving humanity. Superheroes films came to enjoy enormous popularity, which goes far beyond the USA. The popularity of the superhero films can be explained by such factors as good storytelling, unique characters, visually stunning actions, truly amazing

adventures, strong casting, effective advertising, science elements, etc.

There have always been lots of films about superheroes since the first half of the twentieth century. The emergence of superheroes was highly inspired by popular fictional characters, such as the *Green Hornet* on radio, *Zorro* in prose and film, *Doc Savage* in pulp magazines, and the *Phantom* in Comics who were widely at vogue from 1900s through the 1930s. The *Clock* was indeed the first masked crime-fighter which was introduced in 1936 by the producers of comic books. Since its appearance in the Comics

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Magazine Company, stories of superheroes revolving around heroic characters; mainly, foregrounding their superpowers, have dominated comic books and warmed their way out into other media. In the 1940s a number of superheroes films were animated into existence on film in popular adventure serials, including “Captain Marvel(1941), The Batman(1943), Captain America(1944) and Superman(1948)”. (Brown, 2019, 1).

Such superheroes have captivated the audience over the years by providing a potent mix of thrilling entertainment, moral inspiration, and relatability. Moreover, “ What helps to make these movies more exciting is that they are not limited to just one genre. The plot structure can be applied to different scenarios, moods, and styles depending on what story is being told.”(Milo, 2023, 5)

By the same token, since its first release, *Spider-Man* film (2002) has also been acknowledged as one of the most

popular and iconic superhero films of our time.

Spider-Man is a 2002 American superhero film based on the fictional Marvel comics character Spider-man. The film is written by David Koepp and directed by Sam Raimi. The main stars of the film are Tobey Maguire as Peter Parker/ Spider-Man, Willem Dafoe as Green Goblin, Kirsten Dunst, James Franco, Cliff Robertson and Rosemary Harris. The film was released on May 3, 2002 to reviews from critics, went on to break box office records and became the highest grossing film of 2002. The film has won many awards ranging from Teen Choice Awards to the Saturn Awards, and was even nominated for two Academy Awards Best Visual Effects and Best Sound. The success of the film led to many sequels, starting from *Spider-Man 1*, *Spider-Man 2* and *Spider-Man 3* to finally *Spider-Man: Far from Home* (2019).

The film tells the story of Peter Parker, an orphaned baby, who was raised by his elderly uncle, Ben and aunt May. Peter

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Porker was academically intelligent, but he was socially timid, geeky and the target of much inhuman treatment by his peers at high school. One day, while on an excursion to a genetics laboratory with his classmates, Peter was bitten on the hand by a radioactive spider, and his life changes in a way none could have imagined. Peter gained Spider-like mutant powers after being infected by such a genetically modified insect. He obtains a muscle-bound physique, clear vision, ability to cling to surfaces and crawl over walls, shooting webs from his wrist.

With such spider-like superpowers, as well as a new costume and name, Spider-Man becomes an overnight sensation on television. Spider-Man decides to use his newfound abilities to save people in hazardous situations, identify villains or potential hazards, prevent crimes and fight injustice. Spider-Man soon found himself facing a group of powerful thieves, gangsters and megalomaniacs. At the end, Spider-Man

defeated them all and saved the city that he vowed to defend. In fact, Spider-Man's victory over his enemies is replete with, and serves as a powerful reflection of, symbolic representations of American hegemony. To closely explore the manifestation of American hegemony in the film, the article, framed and guided by a semiotic analysis method, seeks to deconstruct the symbolism of the spider in the film and its connection to American cultural, ideological, and technological dominance and superiority.

B. Method of Research

In view of the above, this research topic is adopted from a semiotic analysis method. Semiotics, also called semiology, in its broader sense, is the study of signs, symbols, and signification. Semiotics focuses on understanding how people create and interpret the meaning of signs and symbols. For instance, the moment one sees the image of a skull and crossbones, s/he knows that there is a danger ahead without thinking a lot

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about it. One can also identify the symbols of colours; namely, red is often associated with sin, guilt, and anger while white is associated with peace, purity, and innocence. Vivaly, of the many religious signs and symbols that are commonly used is the cross which symbolizes the religion of Christianity. The cross represents and memorizes the Christ's 'death'. Further, the flags of most nations are good examples of symbolism too. On this basis, the United States flag has thirteen stripes representing the thirteen colonies that come together to form the nation and fifty stars representing the fifty states. In this sense, "Symbols facilitate understanding of the world by rendering complexity in ways much more easily understandable by reducing that complexity to simplified images". (Graeme & Ferrandez, 2018, 429).

Together with the study of signs, symbols and signification, semiotics is also concerned with the study of words, sounds, and 'body language.' (Babolin, 1999, 84-85). In fact, semiotics is a part

of the extensive study of communication that includes, but is not limited to, images, logos, sounds, gestures, objects, visual arts, graphic design, and other linguistic and nonlinguistic communication methods. The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure is one of the leading figures who helped develop the semiotics field. For de Saussure, the objective of semiotics is to understand the social function of signs.

A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable; it would be a part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it semiology (from Greek semeion 'sign'). Semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them. Since the science does not yet exist, no one can say what it would be; but it has a right to existence, a place staked out in advance. Linguistics is only a part of the general science of semiology; the laws discovered by semiology will be applicable to linguistics, and the latter will circumscribe a well-defined area

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within the mass of anthropological facts (Hurwitz, 1993, 4).

The semiotics' laws are not only applicable to linguistics, but also to other disciplines, including media. Semiotics comes in handy in the field of media studies with a view to understanding how media texts, narratives, and images are produced by the senders and how they are perceived and interpreted by the audience. Applied to media texts, semiotic analysis also throws light on the way media generate or reprocess signs to serve their own purposes. In other words, it aims at revealing "more of the underlying meaning of a text (content)." (Quail, 1994, 247). In this sense, Roland Barthes, the French Semiotician, explored the way in which texts make meanings. Building on the findings of linguistics, Barthes considered that all cultural forms, including media, are basically made up of a system of signs, which encodes particular ideologies. From the Saussurean perspective, Roland Barthes studied the signs within

two main semiotic concepts: the signifier and the signified.

On this matter, the terms denotation and connotation, two elements of a sign, have a big say. Denotation conveys the explicit or referential meaning of a sign whereas connotation represents the cultural implications or the ideological dimensions associated with a sign. In this regard, the Barthesian semiological approach has been applied to study the symbol of the spider in *Spider-Man* film.

Analyzing an image

According to Barthes, the image below



Fig.1 Spider's shape

Denotative meaning

Spider (the signifier) in this case would refer to the physical

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characteristics of a small creature that has eight legs, eight eyes, two main body parts- the head and thorax combined called the cephalothorax and an abdomen-, pair of pedipalps, and has the ability to produce silk, make webs to catch preys, and climb to relatively high points. This literal perception serves as the visual and tactile representation of the spider and is known technically as denotation.

Connotative meaning

The signified relationship associated with the same creature 'spider' can vary depending on cultural, personal, and contextual factors as well as on the semiotic power of receivers, who are situated in time and space, to experience, interpret, understand, and decode meanings from their own perspectives. In reference to spider in *SpiderMan* film, its choice is not arbitrary. It is rather a crucial aspect

of the film's cultural and ideological meanings. The spider in the film tells a lot about American cultural, ideological, and technological dominance and superiority. This research paper underlines the significance of the semiotic analysis method in decoding and unmasking the hidden and the connotative meanings and messages associated with the symbol of the spider in the *Spider-Man* film.

C. Result and Discussion

The Symbol of the Spider in Different Cultures

Before discussing and analyzing the cultural implications and the ideological dimensions that the spider represents in the film, it is vital to take into account the presence of the spider and its symbolism in different cultures worldwide. Throughout the world and since ancient time, spiders have been featured in popular culture, mythological fables, artistic spiritual depictions, cosmology

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and oral traditions, symbolizing both positive and negative attitudes. Spiders have been considered benevolent creatures in many cultures, including Chinese, Indian and Ancient Egyptian, bringing good luck, wealth, success, happiness, and money. For Frederica (2002), Spiders have also symbolized creativity, patience and persistence due to their hunting techniques of setting webs and waiting for their prey to become ensnared.

Significantly, and from an Islamic perspective, spiders are considered as a source of protection and safety. This is because fourteen hundred years ago, the prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) and Abu Bakr Siddiq, the first Islamic caliph and the companion of the prophet, were being chased by 'Quraysh', the enemies, near Mecca when they hid in a cave. A spider made its web across the cave entrance, so it was worthless to search the cave because the web showed that no one could have entered. As a result, the prophet and Abu Bakr Siddiq

were saved. Still, in other cultures, particularly in some African cultures, spiders have gained an evil reputation because they have been the focus of fears, harm, mischief and malice for their toxic venom and the slow death they cause, which is regarded as a curse. (Jana, 1973, 143).

The Spider as a Symbol of American Hegemony in *Spider-Man* Film

Spiders have also been present in philosophy, in literature, in music, in information technology, and in films for different motives. One of the first films that comes to mind is the superhero classic *Spider-Man*. For the use of the symbol of the spider in this film, one must have a very narrow vision to consider it as an arbitrary choice. Understandably, the spider's amazing equilibrium, organization, and adaptability may aim to capture and keep the viewers' attention easily; however, its symbol in the design of Spiderman's costume is actually an evidence of a hidden intention that is not

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being revealed. Of the hidden motives regarding the symbol of the spider in the film, one is that it is merely a mirror that reflects what the Italian scholar Antonio Gramsci (1999) labeled “Cultural Hegemony.” Initially, cultural hegemony is a concept developed by Gramsci out of Karl Marx’s theory to refer to domination or rule achieved through both repressive and “Ideological state apparatuses.” (Althusser, 1971, 96). As it is a process of domination, which allows one range of values undermines others, it practically makes one class lead and control all others. “ We have seen the ways in which superheroes and their narratives tend to look, act, and think in a certain way. That image-typically very male, very Western-clearly tends to marginalize other ways to conceive of a hero.” (Natalie & Underberg, 2023, 20). With respect to American cultural hegemony and how it is displayed in the film, one can consider the following spider’s shape.



Fig.2 Spider’s shape

Building on a semiotic-culturalist analysis of the spider’s image above, it would be fair to say that the spider spins the web as an extension of its body. However, such extension can also be interpreted as the American extension throughout the world. While the spider’s body can be the ‘center’ which is represented by America, its web that binds all things together stands for the American hegemony over all nations. Truthfully, America has not abandoned its efforts to set up a world dominated by itself. It assumes the responsibility of leading the world, promoting its values and safeguarding its interests. The real meaning of the so-called American responsibility for leadership is mirrored negatively in its hegemonic position in

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the world. The formation of American centralism is based on the sense of superiority and dominance. It denies the diversity of various cultures and their ability to decide their own development path without being hegemonically represented. Cultural hegemony, according to Edward Said (1993), is just another indirect form of imperialism that is not about a specific moment in history, but rather a continuing interdependent dialogue between subject peoples and the dominant hegemony of the empire.

Consequently, any cultural development process or self-determining thinking contrary to the American cultural and ideological values is regarded as a rebellious act that is punishable. In this case, the spider's web that circuitously represents the American cultural extension, it symbolically traps the rebellious (the enemies of America) and put an end to their lives. The violent images, scenes and narratives in the film make it absolutely true that America is powerful, unbeatable and indispensable

nation. America's status as a superpower is portrayed and expressed in Spiderman's character. The latter, whose costume is in red, blue and white- the colours of the American flag-, does not hesitate to defend the whole society against its foes- the foes of America. It is thanks to his unique fighting style that is mainly based on the usage of his strength, speed, flexibility, wits and intelligence- typical qualities of the spider- that Spider-Man overcomes all harsh conditions and triumphs over his enemies.

Even when Spider-Man is physically tortured by Green Goblin, he soon recovers from his injuries and reshapes himself as the strongest and the most assertive. Of particular note in this scene is the fact that America, symbolized by Spider-Man, never remains in defeat, but it can instantly restore to its place of victory. For this reason, Spider-Man's victory over Green Goblin at the end of the film indeed signifies America's victory over its enemies. Critically, the tragic

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ending of Green Goblin brings with it (Orwell's 1984) concept of "Big brother." Spider-Man presented himself as a Big Brother who watches over people. The symbol of the spider in the film cunningly serves as a visual representation of Big Brother idea, reinforcing American hegemony. Instead of limiting surveillance to the country's secret agents and security cameras, the spider, with eight eyes, also acts to capture all aspects of people's life in *Spider-Man* film. Eyes are not only associated with qualities such as: light, vigilance, intelligence, moral conscience and truth, but are also means of social control, surveillance, and spying activities.

Having eight-eyes around his head, the jumping spider is tasked with seeing more of the world around him, ensuring the safety of society, implementing security designs and obtaining secret or confidential information. Throughout the whole film, one gets the impression that s/he is constantly reminded of this slogan 'Look! Spider-man is watching you.' This

slogan ideally reveals the fact that the eyes of America are on the world through its various institutions especially the worldwide secret agencies and their association with dominant power structures and social control.

The Spider's Web Symbolism in *Spider-Man* Film

With its thought-provoking story and complex characters, the symbol of the spider especially its web in the film also touches on the issue of ideological and philosophical beliefs based on contemporary religious practice of Satanism, which is predominantly an American phenomenon. Believably the most distinguishing feature of Spider-Man is his ability to shoot webs. He uses his webs to catch a falling car, to scale walls, and to jump across buildings. While doing so, Spider-Man frequently makes use of the 'Horned Hand' gesture, which is also known as the devil's horns or sign of the horns. The horned hand gesture, which represents one's devotion to Satan

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and all that is unholy is frequently practiced and used by Satanists. In this context, Spider-Man is accused of promoting Satanism.



Fig.3 Spider-Man spinning his web

By repeatedly using the hand gesture above, Spider-Man indirectly conveys the following message to viewers.

We are tired of denying ourselves the pleasures of life which we deserve. Today, as always, man needs to enjoy himself here and now, instead of waiting for his rewards in heaven. So, why not have a religion based on indulgence? We are no longer supplicating, weaklings, trembling before an unmerciful 'God' who cares not whether we live or die. We are self-respecting, prideful people. We are Satanists. (Lewis, 2001, 6).

The other message that Spider-Man implicitly conveys to the film's viewers is that if you are in trouble or have big problems, Satan will help you. Satan is here to look out for you and take care of big problems that you cannot handle. Life can be really hard; but when it comes to Satan, he makes your lives happier and safer. Such principles and qualities are vividly translated and demonstrated in Spider-Man's actions. He does everything to offer help to people and make their lives happy. Spider-Man saves children's and Mary's lives when they were kidnapped. He also solves the city that he vowed to defend. When viewers, particularly young people, see their most attractive and powerful hero features aspects of Satanism, they may become unconsciously interested in it, accepting demonic things and changing their negative attitudes towards Satanism.

Prominently, in regard to Spider-Man's costume, it is designed to be sexually eye-catching. It is too tight that

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shows Spider-Man's bigger biceps, his sculptured body, and physical power. Spiderman is portrayed as "sexual icon", as a virility figure who draws female admiration for male strength. Moreover, the film focuses on the more physical aspects of love. For example, Mary Jane has exposed parts of her body and dressed and behaved in ways considered sexually provocative. Mary Jane and Spider-Man hug a number of times and also kiss each other on the mouth. The following shot clearly shows them driven emotionally mad with lust for each other; they exchange kisses while Spider-Man is in an upside down pose.



Fig.4 Spider-Man and Mary Jane kissing each other in the rain

The kiss, symbolizing both love and commitment, occurs after Spiderman has rescued Mary Jane from muggers for the second time and only a few moments after Peter Parker has tried to reveal his romantic interest in her. The two exchanged brief words, "You are amazing" said Mary Jane to Spider-Man and then she took off Spiderman's mask to kiss him on the mouth, without showing his true identity. She then leaves the superhero, refusing to take the opportunity to discover the true identity of the man behind the mask. In other scenes, they are shown lying next to each other while exchanging kisses in a giant spider web. Furthermore, while attempting to make Mary Jane jealous, Peter dances in a sensuous manner with an attractive woman. In fact, Spider-Man film creates the illusion that "If everyone felt free to make love however and whenever they saw it fit, so the argument went, the world could be transformed from a hate-filled violent sphere onto a

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loving, utopian space.” (Benshoff & Griffin, 2009, 319).

Sex may be part of reality, but it does not mean that is appropriate for people, especially teenagers to view films filled with this type of content. According to social cognitive theory, individuals do mimic what they see more than what they hear. Teenagers who view more sexual-based content are more likely to engage in highly developed sexual activities. This is because a key period of sexual exploration and development take places during adolescence. Many teenagers become sexually active during this period. Yet, “It has been reported that superheroes are unlikely to be held accountable or to experience consequences of their negative behaviors.” (Bauer, et., 2017, 30)

The Spider as a Symbol of American Technological Hegemony

In a world which is technologically oriented, the interconnections of the spider’s web have become a symbol for

the interconnections of the globe. The innovative idea of the World Wide Web, that was originally imagined and developed to enable documents and other web resources to be accessed over the internet, would not have been possible without previous knowledge about the spider’s web. The spider has artistically played a range of roles in the human imagination. It has always been an enduring source of inspiration to automated information advancement. People’s online world is connected in so many levels almost as the spider’s web. Though the World Wide Web, known as the Web, does not look like a spider web, but they are analogous in the sense of connections.

The symbol of the spider’s web in the film is essentially related to American technological hegemony and sends the message, especially to China which is believed to be in hegemonic technological competition with America, that America is a world-leading technology superpower, and its leading position will

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remain unchallenged for the coming years. Therefore, any attempt from other countries to climb the ladder of technological progress will be prevented since America is aware that technological innovation is as precious as its applicability and that it is an all- powerful source of national and international power as well. On the grounds of this, America invests a lot of money in science, technology, the media industry, and education to remain the leader and the most innovative country in information technology field. Through the spider's web, the viewers are continuously reminded of the phrase "who owns information technology, as the case of America, rules the world and makes it under its control" as illustrated by Spider-Man, the ideal man, in relation to his opponents.

D. Conclusion

Through the lens of semiotic analysis, the article specifically offers a deconstructive critique of the symbolism

of the spider, spiderweb, spider's eyes and the colours of Spider-Man's costumes in the 2002 film. The article argues that the use of the symbol of the spider in the film perfectly mirrors American cultural and ideological dominance and its interconnectedness with power, control, and technology. It depicts America as powerfully capable of achieving its cultural, ideological, and technological aims in a way that other nations do not. The article concludes that the design and symbolism of the spider in the film perpetuate problematic power dynamics and highlight structural inequalities between the 'center' represented by America and the 'periphery', represented by the rest of the world. In fact, this model of center/ periphery dichotomy is of fundamental importance in the film for understanding how power structures and manifestations are mapped and distributed around the world.

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