

# The Dissolving Panopticon: Surveillance Culture and Liquid Modernity in Spider-Man Media

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## Abstract

Over the last two decades, across three film franchises, portrayals of Spider-Man have unwittingly charted fluctuations in American cultural attitudes toward surveillance. Michel Foucault's panoptical theory and Zygmunt Bauman's concept of "liquid modernity" can be productively combined to structure examinations of modern surveillance. The emergence of progressively more "liquid," mobile and digital, surveillance technologies has coincided with the continuing cultural shocks initiated by the 9/11 terrorist attacks. As technological devices become increasingly ubiquitous, and as data-collection becomes increasingly invisible, cultural concerns regarding both continue to diminish. By looking at the increasing engagement with technology that the *Spider-Man* films portray, a trajectory can be marked from the initial trilogy of films by Sam Rami to Spider-Man's introduction into the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

**Keywords:** Spider-Man, surveillance, panopticon, modernity, superhero

## Introduction: Finding Trouble

With the vast amount of space in New York City, how can a superhero like Spiderman always seem to know exactly where a crime is happening? In the 2002 film *Spider-Man* by Sam Raimi, Peter Parker patrols the city looking for trouble. He walks the streets, runs across rooftops, and swings through the city looking for criminals in action. He only seems to find them by random happenstance; more frequently, super-villains actually come looking for Spider-Man, whether directly or by baiting him with an imperiled loved one. With the ramping up of American governmental surveillance to fight the "War on Terror" following 9/11,<sup>1</sup> as well as with the explosion of corporate data-collection in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the film seems remarkably retrograde in its presentation of how technology might impact Spider-Man. The use of technological surveillance ramps up very slowly in the successive *Spider-Man* film franchises, considering that as late as 2007, with the premiere of *Spider-Man 3*, Parker has only gone as far as using basic radio scanners to help him observe the city, otherwise largely still stumbling upon criminality accidentally or when sought out by his foes. However, by the release of this final Raimi film, the superhero cinematic genre was poised upon the brink of irrevocable change, with the premiere of *Iron Man* and the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) in 2008. The films of the MCU took the gritty militaristic hyperreal style that has become prevalent in war films such as *Saving Private Ryan*, *Black Hawk Down*, and *Zero Dark Thirty* and bring it to the superhero genre. Obsessed

with post-9/11 culture,<sup>2</sup> the MCU has been largely driven by heroes like Iron Man who have embraced technologically enhanced surveillance and vigilantism in the service of state and corporate power as acceptable in all but the most extreme circumstances.<sup>3</sup> In *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, released in 2017, Spider-Man's first film as a part of the MCU, Parker possesses a technologically advanced suit. Designed, built, and provided by superhero business mogul Tony Stark, this gear digitalizes Spider-Man via networked surveillance and weapons technology, including A.I. and a drone, empowering him to better assist in monitoring and fighting crime. It also imprints upon him the signification of being yet another "suit" in Iron Man's collection of mobile weapons systems. Even the word *suit*, itself, is loaded with a variety of negative corporate and state significations.

Given the rapid release and reboot cycle by which the *Spider-Man* film franchises have been characterized for the last sixteen years, this intellectual property functions as a subsection of superhero media that showcases a rapidly evolving trajectory of popular thought concerning surveillance, as well as a societal shift in surveillance culture. The films can be used to track the growing understanding about, and acceptance of, state and corporate surveillance and surveillance technologies as tools of power, enclosure, and control in the post-9/11 zeitgeist.

### **Origin Story: Spider-Man's Emergence**

Originating in the anthology comic *Amazing Fantasy* #15 in August of 1962, "Spider-Man" was the product of writer-editor Stan Lee and writer-artist Steve Ditko. The hero's initial adventure was so successful that seven months later Marvel Comics launched the now-classic series *The Amazing Spider-Man*. Focusing on the misadventures of high school student Peter Parker as he struggles with life, love, and his studies, his origin story depicts the acquisition of his superpowers. Bitten by a radioactive spider, Parker develops arachnid-like abilities. These superhuman powers include literal "wallcrawling," enhanced strength and durability, and extrasensory danger perception, which Parker refers to as his "spider-sense." Already highly intelligent, after acquiring his powers, Parker designs and builds "web-shooters" with which to swing around Manhattan and restrain bad guys. Parker's cinematic portrayals are useful in tracking emerging mainstream American societal ideals, especially related to surveillance, from his debut onward.

The character of "Spider-Man" is manifested by two key iterations of surveilling power. The very creature whose abilities he inherits from a radioactive spider's bite, and whom he thus takes for his avatar, is iconographic of stealthy intelligence-gathering and entrapment. The spider's webs are the formative metaphor for the modern intelligence network. Unlike other extremely popular superheroes, who are only metaphorically connected to the animals they have assumed as their totems, Spider-Man's possession of arachnid powers leads him to physically embody the spider's modus operandi. At the same time, the *radioactive* component that created

the unique effect of Parker's spider bite is imbued with the Cold War anxieties of the era in which he was conceived. By linking Spider-Man's origin to the nuclear byproduct of radiation, the comics—if only inadvertently—contain these anxieties by creating a fictional silver lining. This specific element of his origin is also the one most often updated and changed over the character's history. In more modern origins, rather than being radioactive, the spider has variously been genetically modified, exposed to alien DNA, or crossbred with other species of spider. This flexible metaphor allows the writers to continuously update Spider-Man's origins with newer and more relevant cultural anxieties.

Themselves flexible metaphors, Spider-Man's surveillance activities—and the cultural anxieties that they contain—are continually redefined by the era in which they are portrayed. Playing into the growing 1960s mythologization of the invisible hero saving the world from the shadows, the spy became a pop culture icon. As perceptions of danger grow, societies become increasingly willing to submit to, and revel in fantasies of, the clandestine activities of control that create the illusion of safety.<sup>4</sup> In the same way that millennial superhero media increasingly embrace digital surveillance as the threat of terrorism becomes more ubiquitous-seeming, the growing “Communist threat” during the 1960s engendered ever-more valorizing portrayals of Western espionage throughout popular culture. Already framed around secret identities and surveillance, superhero comics were uniquely positioned to capitalize on the fad and continue redefining it. Though later storylines would reveal that Peter's missing parents had been involved in espionage (alternately serving as spies, secret corporate researchers, and many other types of clandestine agents throughout subsequent iterations), this has little direct impact on the character's appeal during the 1960s. In an era in which average people felt particularly powerless regarding the fate of their world, Peter Parker invoked a fantasy that was largely unique within both contemporary comics and spy fare. Unlike James Bond, he did not answer to a state-authority figure. Unlike Bruce Wayne (Batman), he did not represent, however well-intended, corporate interests. Unlike both figures, he was destitute. Despite his superpowers, moreover, Parker's defining characteristic has always been his scientific genius, without which he could not defeat his villains. Spider-Man thus represented an everyman with whom the average comics readers could identify. His popularity was driven by a very specific subset of power fantasy: that of possessing the combined agency and intelligence with which to resist the larger forces of the world. It is sadly ironic, then, that modern interpretations of the character seem so invested in the tools of state and corporate power, utilizing them to defend the status-quo as neoliberal capitalism has thusly defined it.

Surveillance is further normativized within Spider-Man comics because of Parker's most frequent profession as a newspaper photographer. Rather than being a gung-ho reporter like *Superman's* Lois Lane, he takes a similar role to her denigrated sidekick, Jimmy Olsen. Both the disrespect and financial burdens that Parker endures strengthen his everyman mythos. Where Bruce Wayne and Tony Stark are privileged billionaire playboys, with the time and money to

play vigilante, Peter Parker is a starving student constantly torn between his need to support himself and to protect the people of Manhattan. His Christ-like self-abnegation strengthens Peter's pathos, especially given his choice not to use his powers for personal gain. As a further test of his humility, he is repeatedly forced to sell photos of Spider-Man to the *Daily Bugle* in order to subsist from one advance to the next. Surveilling his own alter-ego, Peter must sacrifice a part of himself in order to stay afloat, becoming complicit in newspaper mogul J.J. Jameson's abusive libeling of Spider-Man. Peter cannot control how the data about himself that he sells is then used by the authority figures in his life, or how it then influences his loved ones' opinions of Spider-Man. Rather than commenting on the act of surveillance, this alludes to the threat of its misuse by the powers that be.

The comics portray Spider-Man's snooping against criminals as unproblematic. Where J.J. libels Spider-Man out of personal vendetta coupled with a greedy desire to grab headlines, Parker uses his surveillance on behalf of the public. In early comics stories, Parker often relies on his camera to preemptively observe individuals and to plan for his ensuing crimefighting, as well as to document their criminality. Surveilling his targets and outwitting their plans are especially essential to Parker's eventual success against crime bosses such as his corporate foe Wilson "The Kingpin" Fisk, whose complex multistage capers are filled with obfuscation and misdirection. The plots of such corporate foes almost always have directly negative consequences for Manhattan's ordinary citizens, further mythologizing Spider-Man as a modern-day Robin Hood figure. Often representing himself as a "friendly, neighbor-hood Spider-Man," he uses both this title and his actions to legitimize his use of surveillance by positioning himself within—rather than above—the tightknit communities he has self-elected to protect.

### **Theoretical Groundwork**

To better understand how the *Spider-Man* films can be used to chart the growing cultural engagement with surveillance technology, we must consider several theoretical lenses. For much of the last forty years, the work of post-structuralist theorist Michel Foucault has dominated the discussion within surveillance studies. His foundational book *Discipline and Punish* explores the theoretical work of philosopher Jeremy Bentham and his project: the panopticon. Devised as a prison structure, Bentham's panopticon is designed to keep the prisoner in constant view of the prison guard, while rendering the prisoner unable to know for certain whether the guard is watching. This forces the prisoners to conform to the behaviour standards of the prison under constant threat of punishment for misbehaviour that only *might* be observed. Foucault describes how the panopticon exemplifies the methods by which institutions—such as the family, the school, the barracks, and the factory—employ surveillance to consolidate power and change individual behaviour. He suggests that, beyond the brick-and-mortar structure, the panopticon can serve as a metaphor to explain how subjects, when they are knowingly being surveilled,

moderate and modulate their behaviour to, at first, avoid negative consequences tied to misbehaviour. After enough repetition, the new behaviour comes to seem natural; the subject, having adjusted to their confines, becomes docile. For Foucault, through the lens of the panopticon, power comes in the form of knowledge: the watcher gains power by being able to watch, and the subjects made powerless through their awareness of the possibility of being watched. This power structure is, however, a static and institutional one that oppresses its occupants into conforming to a known and strict moral code.<sup>5</sup>

Modern technology decentralizes the power that is key to the panoptical model of control, calling for redefinitions and expansions of its scope. In his “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” Gilles Deleuze explores the temporal specificity of Foucault’s “*disciplinary societies*”.<sup>6</sup> Endemic to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, these institution-bound forms of power “reach their height at the outset of the twentieth.”<sup>7</sup> Published in 1992, and largely predating the explosion of digital surveillance that would soon redefine modernity, Deleuze’s “Postscript” describes the “already in process... substitution for the disciplinary sites of enclosure.”<sup>8</sup> Describing the ongoing “crisis of institutions,” Deleuze outlines the societal shift away from the Foucauldian power of *disciplinary* structures toward the “states of perpetual metastability” (4) and “universal modulation” of the “societies of control.”<sup>9</sup> In Foucault’s pre-digital model, “the individual never ceases passing from one closed environment to another, each having its own laws,” which in turn condition behaviour.<sup>10</sup> Like the physical locations by which they are signified—the family, the school, the prison, the factory—these institutions are distinct from one another. This means that individual progress is discrete to the institution in which it is achieved, effectively resetting to zero with each transition. Deleuze’s computer-empowered *societies of control* replace the old, discontinuous “spaces of enclosure” with the new “network” that renders control “continuous and without limit.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, Foucault’s series of separate panopticons have been superseded by an all-encompassing meta-panopticon constantly redefining itself as the web of subsidiary-panopticons comprising it undulates.

Postmodern sociologist Zygmunt Bauman further nuances the Deleuzian model of social control. He suggests that modern society exists on a fluid spectrum, having transformed in recent years from a “Solid Modernity,” largely based on industrial production, to a “Liquid Modernity” which centers itself, instead, on the consumption of services and the generation of data. Like Deleuze, Bauman juxtaposes the *solid* “capitalism of concentration, for production and for property,” with the *liquid* “capitalism of higher-order production” oriented around marketing stocks rather than physical products.<sup>12</sup> The *solid* factory has been replaced by the nebulous *corporation*, without which the “light, fluid, diffuse, and network-like” *liquid modernity* could not exist.<sup>13</sup> The *solid*, unmoving, industrial institutions of the past were pioneered by business giants like Henry Ford, whose factory workers often stayed at the same jobs for most of their lives while still earning enough money to give them real purchasing power. Conversely, modern workers are expected to be extremely flexible, able to change jobs frequently, work more than

one job at a time, commute long distances, accept stagnant and inconsistent wages,<sup>14</sup> and carry with them the consequences of misbehaviour in previous institutions. Bauman indicates that *liquid modernity* privileges speed and mobility over space and production, stating that individuals who “move and act faster, who come closest to the momentariness of movement, are now the people who rule.”<sup>15</sup> Corporations that can expand quickly become more profitable than long-standing businesses, and companies that can capture and profit from social trends are extremely successful. This speed also creates a significant sense of risk and uncertainty, since the task of maintaining one’s social position has become increasingly difficult. The very concept of a “permanent record” from a school, job, or prison that carries beyond enclosure in that institution is fluid in its essence. Perceived threats to individual social standing combine into a societal willingness to submit to hyper-vigilant legislation that sacrifices personal privacy and autonomy upon the altar of alleged greater security and stability, especially in the immediate wake of national tragedy such as that of the September 11 terrorist attacks.

We can consider Bauman’s *liquid modernity* as a way of making sense of the twenty-first century technological surveillance, especially in the context of Deleuzian societies of control. With greater mobility comes a sense of isolation and separation in the individual. They are driven from the communities of older *solid modernity* (often formed in workplaces, neighborhoods, or churches), and instead connect with others in online spaces, since physical interactions happen less frequently and are often fleeting. This, in part, has contributed to the great data-generation and -collection boom of the twenty-first century. Unlike panoptical theory, which is focused upon enforcing control and suppressing deviance, Bauman suggests that liquid modernity has extended its surveillance, a *liquid surveillance*, into every corner of society through data collection. Whether driven by institutional bureaucracy or digital consumerism, as technology advances, surveillance, likewise, keeps pace with the new range of activities that technology engenders. In short, surveillance tends to increase in both scope and intensity as technology widens the field of its vision.

Combining these theories of social surveillance and control, David Sarich suggests an evolution of the Foucauldian panopticon that can be adapted to our *liquid modernity*. He calls this the *dissolved panopticon*,<sup>16</sup> proposing a “synthesis of panoptic and liquid surveillance.”<sup>17</sup> Sarich states that this hybrid frees “the panoptic eye” from being “locked into any one given position”<sup>18</sup> or ideology. Instead, “the eye can be in many locations at once, while the singular operator has given way to multiple operators who may work concurrently,” which marks the *dissolved panopticon* as “simultaneously a panoptic and synoptic surveillance.”<sup>19</sup> It can employ both the oppressive reach of the state, and the market-driven power of data collection. The *dissolved panopticon* functions to both observe and police individuals at the discretion of the given observer, both state and corporate. We can then categorize various surveillance technologies in accordance with their technological sophistication as “a liquid technology, a solid technology, [or] a non-technolog[y].”<sup>20</sup> Each of these forms may be used in concert with, or

separately from, one another. *Liquid technology* is defined as any technology that can create a digital data point that can be collected algorithmically, or manually, and added to an individual's *data-effigy*, the representation of that person made up entirely of data points.<sup>21</sup> These *liquid technologies* represent the most recent, connected, and mobile of modern surveillance and recording tech. *Solid technology* is stationary or structural, requiring an operator, but still enhancing their ability to surveil. *Non-technology* is any type of surveillance done by a subject, without the assistance of technological enhancements.

In recent decades, superhero films have come to dominate a significant market-share of popular culture. In its most basic analysis, superhero work<sup>22</sup> depends on surveillance. A superhero, whether working outside the law or under its mandate, must observe, track, identify, and then act on criminal activity. Regardless of a person's (lack of) access to superpowers, it is the action of choosing to participate in superhero work that defines someone as a *superhero*. With the ever-increasing popularity and market saturation of superheroes, it thus becomes critical to consider *how* superheroes' performance of the surveillance upon which their acts of heroism depend is portrayed. Surveillance has always been a fundamental component of most superhero stories, to varying degrees. By his very nature Spider-Man is defined by his knack for clandestine observation, operation, and infiltration. While surveillance has always been a part of his comics, it has taken on increasingly real-world significations within contemporary media. Tracking the types of surveillance utilized in various *Spider-Man* media, combined with the cultural context of the specific historical moment each text inhabits demonstrates how surveillance and the thoughts concerning it have rapidly changed in the new millennium. Starting from the Raimi films, working through Sony's reboots, landing finally in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, it is possible to see the *dissolved panopticon* and its various technologies, implemented to full and terrifying effect.

### **Spider-Man on the Screen: An Industry Overview**

The film rights to the Spider-Man character were passed among a number of different studios during the 1970s and 1980s before ending up in the hands of Sony Pictures Entertainment in 1998. The studio infamously passed on the opportunity to purchase the rights to the entire Marvel Universe,<sup>23</sup> focusing instead on only Spider-Man. In 2000 Sony hired Sam Raimi to direct a series of films, resulting in *Spider-Man* (2002), *Spider-Man 2* (2004), and *Spider-Man 3* (2007). In 2010, still feeling the sting of the mixed critical reviews and failed box office expectations garnered by Raimi's final film, Sony decided to reboot its franchise, clearly updating Spider-Man in an attempt to capture the massive success of Marvel Studios' *Iron Man* and its gritty, topical, and technologically driven themes. The ensuing two films, *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012) and *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (2014) failed to successfully live up to unrealistically optimistic studio expectation that they would achieve the same massive profits

Marvel Studios was continuing to enjoy as they completed the MCU “Phase One” and transitioned into “Phase Two.” Late to the party, the first Spider-Man reboot opened during the same summer as *Marvel’s The Avengers* (2012); regardless of the fledgling franchise’s actual potential, it was hamstrung from the start by studio executives who insisted these two new, single-hero films compete with the MCU’s sixth and first cross-over film, and with those that would quickly follow as part of a highly anticipated continuation of Marvel Studios’ well-executed shared superhero universe.

Despite initially considering a third film in the *Amazing Spider-Man* series, in 2015 Sony reached a deal with Marvel Studios to share the character rights of Spider-Man,<sup>24</sup> at last allowing his integration into the well-entrenched MCU. *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017) saw the wall crawler forge a relationship with the star character of the MCU, Tony Stark. With *Spider-Man: Far From Home* and the next *Avengers* cross-over film set to release in 2019, *Spider-Man* media is more popular than ever.

### **Army of Dorkness: Sam Raimi’s Spider-Man**

The 2002 film *Spider-Man* presented an unprecedented shift in superhero media and is often credited with the increased interest in superhero films that would make the MCU’s success possible. Pre-millennial comic-book adaptations, such as those of the *Superman* and *Batman* franchises, tended to be overly campy, unfaithful to the subject material, produced cheaply, and/or targeted exclusively at children.<sup>25</sup> With the more serious take that Bryan Singer’s *X-Men* brought to the genre in 2000, the stage was set for Sam Raimi to produce a high budget and earnestly mature superhero film in *Spider-Man*. Raimi began to work on the project in January of 2000, with principal photography completed in June of 2001. Initial trailers for the film depicted Spider-Man trapping a helicopter in a massive web strung between the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 Sony pulled the trailer, as well as a poster prominently featuring the iconic buildings.<sup>26</sup> Sony tried to present an image of cultural sensitivity by withdrawing this marketing but without redefining the New York that Spider-Man inhabits. This presents New York’s, and by extension, Spider-Man’s, resilience to and acceptance of both power and responsibility in the face of the massive social upheaval following 9/11. In point of fact, the only major re-shoot added to the film was a scene in which a group of concerned citizens heckle the Goblin, saying that this is “their city,” while attempting to help Spider-Man save civilians.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the massive ramping up of governmental surveillance and military action in service of the “War on Terror,” Raimi’s *Spider-Man*—having completed the majority of its production prior to 9/11—evokes a distinctly pre-9/11 milieu. The film features very little *liquid technology* and very little deliberate surveillance, with Spider-Man utilizing almost no tech himself. Even his traditionally technological web-shooters have been replaced by organic glands

on his wrists. The one piece of *solid technology* that Peter Parker does use, his film camera, only serves to allow him to take pictures of and to surveil himself to negative effect. Parker sells these pictures to J.J. Jameson, who then uses them to villainize Spider-Man on the front page of the *Daily Bugle*. Scientist and businessman Norman Osborn, in contrast, experiments on himself with advanced technology to save his company, Oscorp, from losing military weapons development funding. This transforms him into the Green Goblin, who uses Oscorp weapons to commit theft and murder. Positioning him as the villain, the film puts the Green Goblin in striking contrast to later neoliberal corporate superheroes like Tony Stark,<sup>28</sup> who engages in similar weapons development and vigilantism but who is praised as a hero, since he targets Middle Eastern terrorists.

Early in *Spider-Man*, Peter Parker has an encounter with Mary Jane, his close friend and love interest, that ends with her walking away from him toward a dark alley. Unknown to Mary Jane, Peter watches and “non technologically surveils”<sup>29</sup> several men who follow her around the corner and attempt to sexually assault her. Having changed into his Spider-Man costume, Peter beats the men up and Mary Jane playfully jabs that Spider-Man is her “superhero stalker” before they share the now-iconic upside-down kiss.<sup>30</sup> Mary Jane’s joke aside, if Peter had not been watching her, he could not have perceived his friend being pursued. Throughout the film, his reliance upon such *direct surveillance* techniques remains instrumental, indispensable even, to his ability to act as a superhero.

Osborn later discovers Parker’s true identity by observing a wound that Osborn, as the Green Goblin, had inflicted upon Spider-Man. Osborn, visiting him for a Thanksgiving dinner, enters Peter’s room without permission and observes his belongings before sensing Peter hiding on the ceiling, still garbed as Spider-Man. These acts of *non-technological surveillance*, combined with Osborn’s lack of other surveillance methods, mark the film as only tacitly engaged with the social shifts brought on by the “War on Terror” that would contribute to the *dissolved panopticon*. From their limited engagement with emerging media technologies<sup>31</sup> to their clean, bright, and traditional aesthetic, the Raimi *Spider-Man* films attempt to maintain a distinctively pre-9/11 “timelessness” divorced from historical reality. By the release of *Spider-Man 3* in 2007, Raimi’s attempted “timelessness” comes to feel hopelessly outdated. Less than a year later, when Marvel Studios fires *Iron Man* as its opening shot, the shift to gritty “hyper-realistic” and incredibly timely superhero film reinvigorates the genre in the way that *Spider-Man* had done 6 years earlier. With its explicit reliance on terrorists and *liquid surveillance* networks as driving thematics, *Iron Man* is marked as distinctively post-9/11.

### **The Not-So-Amazing Spider-Man**

Sony’s attempted reboot of the *Spider-Man* franchise in 2012 came much more quickly than has been typical of the reboot culture in the superhero genre.<sup>32</sup> Despite its partially updated aesthetic

and themes, this blatant attempt to cash in on Marvel Studios' popular and financial success in the MCU largely failed. *The Amazing Spider-Man* and *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* managed to update and modernize both Peter Parker and his villains. These villains abandon any sense of individual code, and attack civilians at random in order to cause destruction *en masse*. Green Goblin in *Spider-Man* first appears in a targeted attack on the board of directors of Oscorp, who are attempting to force Norman Osborn out of the company. While this attack takes place during a large festival, the damage is mostly contained to Osborn's intended targets. In *The Amazing Spider-Man*, by contrast, Dr. Connors, transformed into the monstrous Lizard, attempts to mutate the entire city of New York by using a toxic gas attack. In other words, he exploits weapons that were banned from use by the Chemical Weapons convention of 1992,<sup>33</sup> and whose use is considered a war crime, in the process murdering police Captain George Stacy, a *first responder*, simply for trying to stop him.

In *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*, Max Dillon is presented as being obviously mentally unstable, isolated, and angry. He becomes enamoured with Spider-Man after a brief encounter with the hero where Spider-Man calls Max his “*eyes and ears out here.*”<sup>34</sup> Though likely unintentional on the part of the filmmakers, it is nevertheless ironic that this single phrase of Spider-Man's, to which Dillon latches on, directly pertains to his own role as an observer. Once Dillon is transformed into the powerful Electro, he wanders, confused and afraid, into an altercation with the police in Times Square. Spider-Man attempts to de-escalate the situation and talk Max down, the way a hostage negotiator might with a domestic terrorist. With a news camera trained on Electro, every screen in Times Square is painted blue with his face, and he mentions that he only wants everyone, all the people who previously ignored him, to “*see.*”<sup>35</sup> Dressed in a black hoodie, and violently lashing out in order to gain attention, particularly through the mass media, Electro cannot help but evoke the mass shooters that have become increasingly ubiquitous in the new millennium. Electro becomes enraged after a police officer attacks him, and further angered as Spider-Man, saving the officer from his retribution, replaces Electro on the screens of Time Square. His brief spotlight stolen, Electro lashes out at the public more violently not only in anger, but in an attempt to refocus the attention onto himself. Engaging with the rapid and viral way that news reporting—itsself a form of public surveillance—and media proliferate on the internet, the film could be read as critiquing the role that mass media has in driving the attention-seeking<sup>36</sup> actions of such domestic terrorists. However, the racial implications inherent to the casting of Jamie Foxx as Max Dillon cannot be ignored, since the film premiered two years after the shooting of Trayvon Martin. Dillon paradoxically exemplifies the attention-seeking mass shooter, while being potentially conflated with the seemingly invisible young black men in America who are repeatedly victimized. And yet, the change of Max Dillon into Electro redefines him, and steers very directly away from this sense of victimization toward the direction of the mass shooter.

Beyond these few examples, the *Amazing Spider-Man* films are largely still out of step with the way the MCU had begun to reflect the full breadth of the *dissolved panopticon*. Sony's reboot franchise continues to rely most heavily on non-technological surveillance methods, despite the revelation of Peter's parents' involvement in clandestine experimental science, and his frequent use of the internet to do research. Sarich indicates that “[w]hile Spider Man came to rely on technology more often in *The Amazing Spider-Man*, he still scaled the heights to watch over New York, still finding a use for direct surveillance.”<sup>37</sup>

### **Spider-Man's Homecoming**

2017's reboot of Spider-Man, *Spider-Man: Homecoming* finally sees the wall-crawler integrated into the MCU, though he made a passing appearance in 2016's *Captain America: Civil War*. Recruited by Tony Stark and given a technologically advanced crimefighting suit, Peter is more potent than ever in his ability to battle and surveil criminals. Stark, however, feeling cautious considering Peter's young age of 15, limits his access to the suit's deadlier features; it is notable, however, that despite this sort of child-locking, Stark nevertheless includes the features. The new costume has an A.I. named Karen, built into it, not unlike Tony Stark's own Iron Man suits, which enables Peter to activate and track the suit's advanced systems, including a “Spider Drone” that can autonomously track targets of Peter's choosing. The drone is also used in the suit's “enhanced interrogation mode,” an obvious reference to the military euphemism for *torture*. On multiple occasions Parker uses the drone and his suit's other *liquid technology* in order to assess situations, track suspects, and locate crimes in progress. Since the suit was designed and produced by Stark, and functions in much the same way as an Iron Man suit would, the film reaffirms the MCU's engagement with the full spectrum of the *dissolved panopticon*. At a point when Spider-Man film history moves into an over-reliance on *liquid technology*, it is handed down to Peter by a member of the previous generation, and in this case, the man who started it all for the MCU: Tony Stark.

Stark has always relied on his Iron Man tech, but in 2013's *Iron Man 3* he learns the valuable lesson that technology alone cannot make him a hero, and that he can be a hero even without it. Tony, operating without his armor, is forced to solve a complex plot against him with nothing more than his wits. Despite the fact that he dons the Iron Man armor again almost immediately, Stark supposedly has learned a valuable lesson about personal responsibility and overreliance on technology, as well as gaining new insight about himself. In *Spider-Man: Homecoming* Peter realizes that Stark is tracking his every movement through his spider suit and chooses to hack it to prevent Tony from surveilling him. He then ambitiously tries to stop the illegal sale of alien arms by Adrian Toomes, also known as the Vulture, and inadvertently endangers a large number of civilians. Stark, feeling Peter to be too immature to wield the power that his advanced costume gives him, confiscates it and tries to prevent Parker from engaging in

further hero work. When Peter begs him not to take the suit, saying, “I’m nothing without this suit,” Stark, dismayed, can only respond, “If you’re nothing without this suit, then you shouldn’t have it.”<sup>38</sup> This reflects Stark’s attitude that the person at the centre of the technology is what legitimizes its use. He had no issue with handing a fifteen-year-old an advanced piece of surveillance and weapons technology, until that literal child proved to be irresponsible with it. Peter must then earn back the right to use this *liquid technology* through acts of selfless heroism in the face of great danger, without the assistance of said technology. Earning the “right” to use *liquid technology* functions as a literal rite of passage for the MCU’s Peter Parker. He is rewarded by Stark in *Avengers: Infinity War* with an even more technologically advanced and deadly “Iron Spider” suit.

### Conclusions: A Troubling Future

Over the sixteen years of *Spider-Man* media in the twenty-first century the property has inadvertently charted the rapid emergence of post-9/11 surveillance culture and fantasies of control. Sony’s first attempt at a Spider-Man franchise became increasingly unsuccessful as it failed to reflect the changing political and social landscape surrounding it. Their *Amazing* reboot released only five years after the final Raimi film, *Spider-Man 3*, transparently sought to capitalize on the financial and aesthetic success of the edgier modern Marvel Cinematic Universe. These films only partially updated Sony’s *Spider-Man* franchise, successfully including smartphones and the internet, but without addressing surveillance culture. When Spider-Man finally became an official part of the MCU, his film fully reflected the culture of the *dissolved panopticon*, while still testing the ethics of the power imbued by it. In the new 2019 video game *Marvel’s Spider-Man* by Insomniac Games, players are presented with a world in which Spider-Man has embraced open mass surveillance of the citizens of New York. He and thus the player utilizes a mobile and *liquid technology* in the form of police surveillance towers. Because *Marvel’s Spider-Man* is indicative of the continuing normativization of the *dissolved panopticon* within superhero media, the time has come for both scholars and media consumers to reassess—and potentially redress—the genre’s and the medium’s future directions.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The NSA, in cooperation with American telecommunications companies, illegally collected and collated American internet and cellular usage. For more see Babu Kurra, “How 9/11 Completely Changed Surveillance in U.S.,” *Wired*, September 11, 2011, [www.wired.com/2011/09/911-surveillance](http://www.wired.com/2011/09/911-surveillance).

<sup>2</sup> Leah Schnelbach, “Giving History a Better Ending: Marvel, Terrorism, and the Aftermath of 9/11,” *Tor.com*, August 22, 2017, [www.tor.com/2017/08/22/the-marvel-cinematic-universe-confronts-terrorism/](http://www.tor.com/2017/08/22/the-marvel-cinematic-universe-confronts-terrorism/).

<sup>3</sup> While it is possible to explore the MCU’s numerous attempts at deconstructing and redefining Tony Stark (see *Iron Man 3* and *Avengers: Age of Ultron*), his subsequent appearances in films like *Spider-Man: Homecoming* and

*Avengers: Infinity War* reset the clock, undoing character progression and leaving Tony's ideology ultimately where it started. Further discussion of this dynamic is warranted, but beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>4</sup> Fedyashin explains that "Cold War espionage fiction acted both as a barometer of international tensions and a means for societies to face collective anxieties about foreign and domestic threats." For more see Anton Fedyashin, "The First Cold War Spy Novel: The Origins and Afterlife of Humphrey Slater's Conspirator," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 3 (2017): 134-59.

<sup>5</sup> In Foucault's discussion of power in *History of Sexuality, vol. 1*, power is a fluid relationship (rather than top-down oppression) and a force that is constantly circulating rather than static. For more see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Random House, 1975).

<sup>6</sup> Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *L'Autre journal*, no. 1 (May 1990): 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Z. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 25.

<sup>14</sup> Or, to accept, in Deleuzian terms, the "modulation of each salary," which imposes upon workers "states of perpetual metastability that operate through challenges, contests, and highly comic [game show-esque] group sessions"; the "equilibrium" of the factory, which allowed workers to unite to mutual benefit, has been displaced by the metastability which divides their interests. For more see Deleuze, "Postscript," 4-5.

<sup>15</sup> Z. Bauman and D. Lyon, *Liquid Surveillance: A Conversation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 119.

<sup>16</sup> David Sarich, "The Normalization of Surveillance in Superhero Films," Master's Thesis (Saskatoon: University of Saskatchewan, 2016), 38.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> These "data points" continuously chart and redefine the universally modulated, inescapable Deleuzian network of control. For more see Deleuze, "Postscript," 4-5.

<sup>22</sup> Though beyond the scope of this paper, much remains to be said regarding the theoretical implications of defining superhero labour as "real" work. The efforts of many traditional heroes, especially those of impoverished individuals such as Peter Parker, might fall within Daniels' conception of "invisible work," which is not deemed socially valid because it is not done for pay. With the emergence of newer superhero universes, such as that of *My Hero Academia*, in which most individuals are "powered," and in which "hero work" forms actual professions, there are increasing nuances to consider.

<sup>23</sup> Sam Barsanti, "Sony Once Turned down a Chance to Buy All of Marvel's Movie Rights for Only \$25 Million," *The A.V. Club*, February 15, 2018, [www.avclub.com/sony-once-turned-down-a-chance-to-buy-all-of-marvels-mo-1823048876](http://www.avclub.com/sony-once-turned-down-a-chance-to-buy-all-of-marvels-mo-1823048876).

<sup>24</sup> Adam Chitwood, "Marvel and Sony 'Spider-Man' Rights Explained: What's MCU and What's Not?" *Collider*, July 3, 2017, [www.collider.com/spider-man-marvel-sony-deal-explained/](http://www.collider.com/spider-man-marvel-sony-deal-explained/).

<sup>25</sup> Aaron Couch, "'Batman Forever': The Story Behind the Surprise Hit 'Nobody Really Wanted,'" *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 17, 2015, [www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/batman-forever-story-behind-surprise-802804](http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/batman-forever-story-behind-surprise-802804).

<sup>26</sup> Drew Grant, "10 Year Time Capsule: 'Spider-Man' and the Erasing of the World Trade Centers," *Salon*, May 11, 2011, [www.salon.com/2011/05/10/10\\_year\\_time\\_capsule\\_spiderman\\_wtc/](http://www.salon.com/2011/05/10/10_year_time_capsule_spiderman_wtc/).

<sup>27</sup> *Spider-Man*, directed by Sam Raimi (Culver City: Sony Pictures Releasing, 2002), DVD.

<sup>28</sup> Kyle Smith, "Iron Man, Capitalist Hero," *New York Post*, May 9, 2010, [nypost.com/2010/05/09/iron-man-capitalist-hero/](http://nypost.com/2010/05/09/iron-man-capitalist-hero/).

<sup>29</sup> Sarich, "Normalization of Surveillance," 73-77.

<sup>30</sup> *Spider-Man* (2002).

<sup>31</sup> Sarich indicates that *Spider-Man* has more non-technological surveillance than any other superhero film except those set in the past or on alien worlds. Sarich, "Normalization of Surveillance," 62.

<sup>32</sup> Eliana Dockterman, "Here's Why Hollywood Will Never Stop Making Spider-Man Movies," *Time*, June 20, 2017, [time.com/4784729/spiderman-homecoming-sony-marvel-reboot/](http://time.com/4784729/spiderman-homecoming-sony-marvel-reboot/).

<sup>33</sup> Signed in the United Nations, this arms treaty is administered by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) an intergovernmental organization based in The Hague, The Netherlands. It has been signed by all UN members except Egypt, Israel, North Korea, and South Sudan.

<sup>34</sup> *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*, directed by Marc Webb (Culver City: Sony Pictures Releasing, 2014), DVD, emphasis mine.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Jennifer L. Murray says that "Many of these infamous killers reference/discuss their well-publicized prior homicidal role models... they do not just copycat prior killers, they often relate to them, are inspired by them, and want to outdo them. The entertainment form and logic of mass mediated news provides the inspiration and fuel for later killings" (114). For more see Jennifer L. Murray, "Mass Media Reporting and Enabling of Mass Shootings," *Cultural Studies: Critical Methodologies* 17, no. 2: 114-24.

<sup>37</sup> Sarich, "Normalization of Surveillance," 62.

<sup>38</sup> *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, directed Jon Watts (Culver City: Sony Pictures Releasing, 2017), DVD.