

## GENDER GAZE REPRESENTATION IN AMERICAN AND SOUTH KOREAN CINEMA (A ROLAND BARTHES SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS)

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**Abstract:** This research is conducted to examine various representations of the gender gaze in cinema, specifically in American and South Korean cinemas, through the lens of Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. The objective of this study is to analyze how both the male gaze and the female gaze are visualized and communicated through various cinematographic perspectives, such as visual signs and symbols, narrative structures, and even the cinematic techniques. Specifically, Barthes' method of signification is used to interpret both explicit and implicit meanings constructed in the selected films from both countries. The results provide findings that American cinema tends to show more patriarchal visual ideology, which puts women as objects of the gaze, while South Korean cinema leans more toward women's incremental transformation toward representations that are more balanced. Furthermore, this research concludes that the gender gaze in cinemas is mostly influenced by cultural and social aspects of the signified countries, as it represents the ideology that has been implemented in the society. In conclusion, this research provided complex insights into how cultural and social settings influence the cinematic gender gaze, therefore enhancing the understanding of gender representation and cross-cultural visual studies and offering valuable contributions to contemporary film production and analysis.

**Keywords:** gender gaze; cinema; semiotics; Roland Barthes; cultural representation

### Introduction

In contemporary cinema, the concept of the gender gaze refers to the representation of gendered perspectives and power

relations in film, as constructed through the viewpoints of characters, filmmakers, and implied spectators, which often serves as a reflection of recurring social

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dynamics. This concept is commonly divided into the male gaze and the female gaze, which are central to understanding how gendered perspectives shape visual narratives and creative processes, as they are often reflecting and shaping social dynamics through the viewpoint of directors, characters, or implied audiences. According to Mulvey (1975), the male gaze is a visual model where a female is placed as the “object” of any heterosexual male’s desires, whereas a female’s emotions, thoughts, and agency are frequently overshadowed by her beauty and obedience towards a male’s masculinity. In addition to that, such representation also speaks to and reinforces the patriarchal norms that put women in a “weak” position and as subordinates to men (Veselinović, 2021; Dirze, 2013). The male gaze has long been considered dominating American cinema, where plotlines, cinematography, and character dynamics are focused on masculine desire and control. Responding to that, feminist scholars and creative actors challenged this paradigm through the “female gaze,” which provides an alternative approach that focuses on the female experience and subjectivity over objectification. The female gaze shifts the focus from objectification to female subjectivity, emphasizing women’s lived experiences, emotional depth, and narrative agency. Furthermore, the female gaze often highlights how women perceive and see the world despite the gendered constraints. For example, the film *Magic Mike* (2012) foregrounds male bodily display, repositioning men as objects of visual desire, while *Maleficent* (2014) and *Wonder Woman* (2017) emphasize emotional development and maternal subjectivity over traditional masculine power. According to Mulvey (1975), the male gaze refers to a way of seeing that positions women as objects of heterosexual male desire. Within this framework, women’s emotions, thoughts, and agency are often sidelined, with greater emphasis placed on their

physical appearance and conformity to male-defined standards of femininity. Such representations both reflect and reinforce patriarchal norms that frame women as weaker and subordinate to men (Veselinović, 2021; Dirze, 2013). In American cinema, the male gaze has long been dominant, evident in storylines, cinematographic techniques, and character relationships that center on male desire and control.

In response, feminist scholars and creative practitioners have introduced the concept of the female gaze as an alternative approach that prioritizes women’s experiences and subjectivity rather than reducing them to objects. This perspective shifts attention toward women’s lived realities, emotional depth, and active roles within narratives. It also highlights how women perceive and interpret the world within the constraints of gendered expectations. For example, *Magic Mike* (2012) presents the male body as an object of visual desire, while *Maleficent* (2014) emphasizes emotional development and maternal subjectivity over traditional forms of masculine power.

Since Mulvey’s initial formulation, feminist film theory has continued to evolve, offering more nuanced understandings of gender relations in cinema. Mulvey herself later acknowledged the possibility of viewing positions that are not entirely confined to a male-centered perspective. Building on this, E. Ann Kaplan introduced the idea of the female director’s gaze, emphasizing how women filmmakers create distinct visual narratives that challenge patriarchal representations. Meanwhile, Carol Clover argued that female audiences are not passive spectators but active interpreters of film. These developments suggest that the concept of the “gaze” is fluid and shaped by social and cultural contexts. Therefore, this study extends these perspectives by examining how gendered gaze is

constructed differently in American and South Korean cinema through a semiotic approach. These changes of focus contribute to the narrative representation of how gender, power, and subjectivity are displayed on the screen and heavily centered on the female subject. In addition to that, this concept offers critical discourse that challenges the dominance of masculine views in cinematography and provides a space for more complex representations from a female perspective.

In contrast, South Korean cinema operates within a context of rapid modernization where shifting gender roles and global culture build a significant cinematic evolution. The gender gaze used in South Korean cinema often shows broader social culture and function. While in the earlier era, such as, the Cold War era, sometimes featured intimate displays of the female body as a form of social control and entertainment (Namhee, 2020), contemporary South Korean cinema has shown significant evolution, such as being increasingly active in exploring and experimenting with themes of identity and visual representation that reflect the sociocultural shifts. A notable example is *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982* (2019), which explores the struggles faced by women in South Korea, including the male gaze, patriarchy, and social discrimination, through the specific lens of mental health (Tian, 2024).

This study examines how the male and female gaze are constructed and represented in contemporary American and South Korean cinema through a Barthesian semiotic framework. The male gaze concept refers to the visual representation where a woman is being seen as 'an object' for a man's eyes, as described in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (Mulvey, 1975). Furthermore, Scott MacKenzie also highlighted that a cinema could be treated as a resistance through an alternative representation that introduces the female gaze, which is a concept where a woman

is no longer 'an object' but an active subject who has agency to act as an individual (MacKenzie, 2014). Using Barthes' semiotic approach, both male gaze and female gaze can be depicted in 3 levels: denotation (gender gaze is shown through various visual techniques, such as camera angles), connotation (what the techniques represent implicitly, such as voyeurism and male domination), and myth (the ideology that normalizes patriarchy in female objectification). In contrast, the female gaze can also be presented in a similar manner, but with more highlights on the female subjectivity so that the myth is possible to provide more equivalent narratives. Using this visual semiotic as the approach, this research investigates the methods being used by cinematographic creators to encode gendered perspectives and how they communicate certain meanings to the audience. It is also focused on how these perspectives are embedded within the production process, and it evaluates their influence on audience perception and cultural impact. This research generated a few comparative questions to learn how a woman's agency is being visually constructed in such various cultural contexts, specifically in American and South Korean cinemas. Focusing on the visual techniques and narrative differences in shaping a female representation and subjectivity, this research looks deeper into how these differences influence the gender ideology in the community. Therefore, the focus in this research not only highlights the representation itself but also the relation between a context in a film and the socio-cultural influences surrounding it.

## **Methodology**

This study conducts a descriptive qualitative research method to investigate the representation of the male and female gaze in American and South Korean cine-

ma. The qualitative research is conducted to identify and analyze the implicit content of communication within a film. Furthermore, it has been defined that descriptive research provides a comprehensive overview or description of a phenomenon in its natural state without any manipulation of the subject under study (Janitra Dewanta, 2020; Deckert & Wilson, 2023). This approach is selected because it allows for a wider depiction of the semiotic analysis present in both American and South Korean films. Furthermore, the concept of male gaze itself is presented by Laura Mulvey (1975), which focuses on female objectification in cinema, while Scott MacKenzie (2014) plays a role in paving the way of more equivalent female representation in film and other media. Roland Barthes' semiotic approach is being used as it is decoding the sign system using denotation, connotation, and myth (1977), more accurately proving and explaining the gender gaze being constructed and told in the forms of visual and cultural signs.

The objects of this research are the films *Birds of Prey* and *If We Were a Season*, as they were chosen because of their contemporary relevance with distinct cultural contexts (Western versus Eastern) and their explicit engagement with themes related to the male and female gaze, thereby offering a rich basis for semiotic analysis, particularly with regard to the portrayal and revolution of female agency. In addition to that, the focus of study will include the character expressions (eyebrow motion, gaze direction, and facial muscle tension), body language, vocal intonations, and costume designs; this research extends to cinematographic elements such as camera movement, color grading (tone and grading) within specific scenes, and the selection of settings, including both physical locations and atmospheric backgrounds that support the representation of male and female gaze.

To ensure the criticality and transpar-

ency of the methodology, the films are curated based on specific criteria, such as representing a distinct cultural context comparison, especially between Western and Eastern cultures; thus, American and South Korean films are chosen as the suitable film origins. The perception exists because American cinema offers a loud, clear, globally dominant template for individualistic, modern Western values, while South Korean cinema offers a critically acclaimed, emotionally potent, and accessible template for collectivist, trauma-informed, modern Eastern values. They serve as the two most powerful and successful national cinematic brands for their respective cultural spheres in the global marketplace of ideas. Then, several American and South Korean films were selected, as they are considered to have relevance to the gender representations and have a strong semiotic influence. Finally, *Birds of Prey* and *If We Were a Season* are chosen, as they both have a contrasting female gaze subjectivity and significant relevance to the gender representation influenced by sociocultural context in such different film genres. While *Birds of Prey* reflected more of a female gaze in modern action film, *If We Were a Season* showed dynamics in romantic relationships in a more subtle and emotional way.

The data collection was conducted by tracing and analyzing documents related to the selected film, especially through scene fragments that represent the gender gaze as responses to various conflicts the character is experiencing. The data collection process is categorized into two stages as follows:

**1. Primary Data:** It includes the original data collected directly from *Birds of Prey* and *If We Were a Season*. The authors specifically obtained scenes that contain semiotic significance that is essential to the research.

**2. Secondary Data:** It includes other data obtained from other sources, such as academic articles, internet resources, and books that are relevant to the research topic.

Using the approach from Roland Barthes, the semiotic analysis is conducted in three stages: denotation, connotation, and myth.

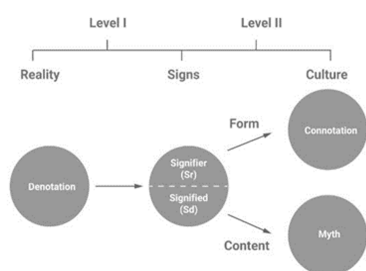


Figure 1. Roland Barthes Semiotic Model

In the denotative stage, which constitutes the first-order semiotic system, the structure consists of a chain of the signifier and the signified. According to Barthes, the language used at this stage shows social codes where the meaning of a sign is direct and clearly visible. Conversely, the connotative stage shows a deeper understanding of using implicit meanings behind the codes. Barthes' semiotic analysis involves denotation (literal meaning), connotation (associated cultural meaning), and myth (underlying ideology). While these categories apply broadly, in images or photographs denotation refers to what is objectively depicted, whereas connotation refers to the subjective interpretation of how the image is framed or captured (Rosita, 2019). Furthermore, the primary research data is based on documentation records that are analyzed systematically. Building upon the descriptive qualitative method outlined above, the scenes in *Birds of Prey* and *If We Were a Season* are analyzed using a descriptive qualitative approach through the following procedural steps:

**1. Observation and Monitoring:** It

includes a thorough viewing of the scenes, settings, dialogs, and characters within the films.

**2. Recording and Visual Selection:** It includes collecting screenshots from the films at specific scenes and providing descriptive annotations for these visuals to be analyzed through the selected semiotic approach.

**3. Documentation Study:** It includes a comprehensive review of various literature related to the research topic and its findings to validate the analysis.

To enhance analytical rigor and ensure reproducibility, this study provides operational definitions for key analytical concepts. A "semiotically significant" scene is defined as one that fulfills at least one of the following criteria: (1) it represents a key turning point in the narrative, (2) it contains camera techniques that suggest gendered power relations, such as close-ups, framing, or point-of-view shots, or (3) it includes prominent visual symbols related to gender representation.

As previously stated, the focus on this research will also include a deep observation of some visual elements in the films used, such as character expressions and gestures. 'Character expression' refers to observable facial and emotional indicators, including eyebrow movement, gaze direction, and facial muscle tension, which reflect a character's internal state and relational positioning. Furthermore, 'gesture' is defined as bodily movement, including posture, spatial positioning, and physical interaction with other characters, which may indicate dominance, submission, or emotional proximity. These operational definitions are applied consistently across the analysis to reduce subjectivity and ensure transparency in the interpretation process.

## Findings

This research discusses a comparative study of two films, the American film *Birds of Prey* and the South Korean film *If We Were a Season*, that highlight the gender gaze. Despite the cultural and background differences, both films deliver meaningful narratives about what women are experiencing in their lives. This comparative study shows how these films address gender issues, pointing out the similarities and differences built by their specific social and regional contexts.

### 1. *If We Were a Season* (2017)



*If We Were a Season* (2017) is a South Korean film that is released as part of the KBS Drama Special anthology series. The story centers on the lives of two adolescents, Yoon Hae-rim and Uhm Gi-seok, who have been childhood friends and have grown up together ever since. As they mature, their relationship eventually develops into feelings that cross the boundaries of their friendship. It is then tested by the unexpected arrival of a new person, causing both Hae-Rim and Gi-Seok to question the nature of their relationship. This part discusses the semiotic analysis of the manifestations of the gender gaze, both female and male, within *If We Were a Season*, particularly as they are shaped by Eastern cultural values.

#### 1.1 Childhood and Teenagerhood

Yoon Hae-rim and Uhm Gi-seok have been together since birth. They've grown up together as neighbors as their friendship naturally grew over time. In the early stage of life, Hae-Rim and Gi-Seok were frequently involved in activities that deepened their friendship. However, as they transitioned into adolescence, their friendship was slowly turning into something more complicated as they now have more restrained interactions and feelings toward each other, which also caused a

more awkward situation.

Table 1. Semiotic Analysis on Behavioral Evolution of Hae-rim & Gi-seok

(1.A) Change of Reaction (A)	
	
<b>Denotation</b>	Young Hae-rim and Gi-seok are seen with sweet, smiling faces as they laugh and play
<b>Connotation</b>	This scene reflects a natural connection formed between two childhood friends.
<b>Myth</b>	It is often to find the untainted and unrestrained innocence of childhood dynamics as it hasn't yet been influenced by social burdens in South Korea; however, this representation reflects a romanticized cinematic myth, as sociological studies demonstrate that childhood in East Asian contexts is deeply shaped by early socialization processes, Confucian cultural values, and institutional pressures, where children actively internalize and reproduce societal norms rather than existing as socially unburdened individuals. (Jung & Honig, 2000)
(1.B) Change of Reaction (B)	
	
<b>Denotation</b>	Hae-rim seems to be visibly annoyed and irritated whenever she encounters Gi-seok.
<b>Connotation</b>	This scene shows typical childlike emotions, such as easily getting sulked at by someone they're close to. This

	close-up of a face captures the typical emotions of children, such as a face that easily looks downcast when facing someone close to them. This scene also shows signs of the transition from childhood to adolescence.
<b>Myth</b>	It suggests a sign of deep connection and familiarity, which also could be a defensive mask that covers affection through acts of defiance, mirroring how Asian mythological structures frame conflict and rebellion as narrative mechanisms that both conceal and reveal underlying relational bonds within culturally codified mythic theory. (Cheng'en, 1977)

**(1.C) Change of Behavior (A)**



<b>Denotation</b>	Young Hae-rim and Gi-seok are seen riding bicycles together during their childhood.
<b>Connotation</b>	Their constant presence in each other's lives suggests a strong friendship bond, reaching a state of familial domesticity.
<b>Myth</b>	This shows signs of friendship that is portrayed as sacred, as in we had with siblings that exceeded the complications of romantic love, reflecting how Asian mythological narratives encode kinship bonds as culturally sanctioned ideals grounded in early written cosmology and social order. (Yasumaro, 1982)

**(1.D) Change of Behavior (B)**





<b>Denotation</b>	Gi-seok and Hae-rim meet in the morning to go to school together, but keeping their distance and talking politely to each other.
<b>Connotation</b>	This scene shows the significant change from unrestrained intimacy into awkwardness because of social etiquette and personal boundaries.
<b>Myth</b>	In South Korean social culture, this transition reflects the internal struggle between deep familiarity and the emerging need for individual space and romantic hesitation, echoing kinship tensions codified in Korean mythological tradition where familial bonds and personal destiny are theorized through historically recorded narratives. (Iryeon, 1512)



The shift of behaviors between Hae-Rim and Gi-Seok represents the deconstruction of “Inevitable Relationships,” whereas the boundaryless childhood friendship is shifting into a restrained adolescence due to the emerging social norms. The need of privacy and awkwardness from the two characters is not necessarily weakening their bond, but it is evidence of the change they are having due to maturing and discovering new identities as young adults. This also confirms that in a South Korean cultural context, maturity is often marked by the change from blatant honesty to emotional restraint to maintain social boundaries.

**1.2 From Platonic to Romantic**

In the beginning, Hae-Rim and Gi-Seok's relationship is constructed by a stable routine that they do on a daily basis, as their bond is shaped by the nature of their childhood. However, this sanctuary is challenged by the emerging feelings that threaten their platonic relationship. This shift highlights a critical moment of emotional awakening, where both Hae-Rim and Gi-Seok must choose between their strong friendship or the newly found and vulnerable romance potential.

Table 2. Semiotic Analysis on Behavioral Changes of Hae-rim & Gi-seok

(2.A) Change in Tone and Expression (A)	
	
<b>Denotation</b>	This scene shows Gi-seok, who is being irritated and speaking in a raised tone while physically helping Hae-rim climb a wall after arriving late to school.
<b>Connotation</b>	His frustration shows that even in close friendships, requests for help can become a burden.
<b>Myth</b>	The display of annoyance in this scene shows a secure level of comfort that only exists in close relationships like friendship, rather than a formal one, resonating with relational dynamics embedded in Korean mythological where informality within close bonds reflects culturally theorized social intimacy grounded in early written tradition. (Iryeon, 1512)
(2.B) Change in Tone and Expression (B)	
	
<b>Denotation</b>	Hae-rim and Gi-seok are seen being engaged in conversation as Gi-seok begins to show romantic interest in her.
<b>Connotation</b>	The shift of his facial expression to a gentler one and a softer vocal tone suggests a transition from a platonic relationship to a romantic interest.


<b>Myth</b>	It suggests that romantic attraction acts as a behavioral filter, where individuals suppress their harsher traits to present a kinder and better version of themselves, reflecting moral self-regulation embedded in Korean mythic frameworks that interpersonal conduct is shaped by culturally theorized ideals grounded in recorded narratives. (Han, 1970)
(2.C) Behavioral Change (A)	
	
<b>Denotation</b>	The scene depicts Gi-seok giving a scarf to Hae-rim with visible irritation.
<b>Connotation</b>	The display of aggression acts as a mask to cover affection and care. It also shows gesture transitions from a platonic one to a more intimate one.
<b>Myth</b>	This suggests that usually in a close friendship, one can feel a strange feeling as to show care and will try to cover it with some normalcy so as to not make them seem vulnerable by being oversentimental, reflecting restrained emotional expression encoded in East Asian mythic traditions. (Iryeon, 1512) Affect is regulated through culturally theorized relational norms grounded in early written narratives.
(2.D) Behavioral Change (B)	
	
<b>Denotation</b>	Hae-rim seems to have fallen asleep, and Gi-seok carefully shields her head to prevent it from hitting a hard surface.

<b>Connotation</b>	This silent action from <i>Gi-Seok</i> shows that even when he treats his friend roughly, his sincerity is genuine enough to show a selfless desire to give comfort and security, even when Hae-Rim is unaware of it.
<b>Myth</b>	Within the romance genre, this act functions as a “soft revelation” marking a shift from adolescent ego to protective love, paralleling moral and relational maturation encoded in East Asian mythic texts. That says emotional transformation is grounded in culturally theorized and historically recorded narratives. (Birrell, 2000)

### 1.3 Shifts in Relationships and Feelings

The introduction of Oh Dong-Kyeong shows a significant disruption of the current domestic order. While *Gi-Seok* represents ‘comfort from the past,’ *Dong-Kyeong* represents ‘spontaneous possibility for the future.’ This dynamic situation changes Hae-Rim’s state of mind and behavior where she has to choose between her childhood safety and comfort or the possibility of a risky yet exciting new romantic relationship.

Table 3. Semiotic Analysis on the Introduction of the New Friend (The Disruptor)

(3.A) Shifting in Relationships (A)	
	
<b>Denotation</b>	The scene shows a heated argument between Hae-rim and Gi-seok fueled by confusion over the status of their current relationship.
<b>Connotation</b>	The argument reflects the burst of internal conflict and unexpressed feelings from both parties as they show frustration from the shift in their friendship.

<b>Myth</b>	This scene shows that unexpressed feelings in a relationship are destructive, while conflict signifies emotional progress toward honesty; however, this reflects a modern psychological myth rather than a universal truth, showing that emotional restraint and indirect communication are culturally structured practices where harmony is often valued over confrontation, meaning that suppressed expression does not inherently equate to relational dysfunction. (M.Kim, 2026)
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### (3.B) Shifting in Relationships (B)



<b>Denotation</b>	Hae-rim and Gi-seok are seen to share a hug after confessing and accepting their mutual romantic feelings.
<b>Connotation</b>	The hug marks their physical change in relationship as they accept each other’s feelings, which are more than friendship, and move to something more intimate.
<b>Myth</b>	This suggests that a strong romantic bond can be built on a friendship, with the embrace symbolizing a transition from friends to lovers; however, this reflects a culturally mediated myth, indicating that romantic relationships in many Asian societies are historically structured through social norms, family expectations, and gradual emotional negotiation, rather than emerging solely from organic friendship-based development. (Deuchler, 1992)

### (3.C) The Presence of Someone New (A)



<b>Denotation</b>	Hae-rim and Dong-kyeong seem to have a deep conversation after discovering something about their parents' lives.
<b>Connotation</b>	The physical closeness between the two of them represents a shift from curiosity to emotional solidarity and mutual empathy by sharing a secret.
<b>Myth</b>	In many narratives across Asian societies, there is a myth that shared suffering can instantly forge emotional bonds stronger than those formed through long-term friendships; although this idea is often portrayed in films as a "deep and authentic" connection, scientific studies show that emotional closeness remains the result of a gradual social process and is influenced by cultural norms such as relational harmony and emotional regulation. Intimate relationships in an Asian context are shaped through social construction and cultural practices, not solely by the intensity of fleeting experiences. (Benson, 2001)

**(3.D) The Presence of Someone New (B)**



<b>Denotation</b>	Oh Dong-kyeong is seen to confess his feelings to Yoon Hae-rim, but she rejects him and finally realizes her true feelings.
<b>Connotation</b>	Dong-kyeong's confession serves as a catalyst for Hae-Rim to shake off her hesitation and take a clear action.
<b>Myth</b>	In Asian societies, there is a myth that emotional clarity and self-identity emerge precisely through moments of crisis or urgent decisions; this narrative is often portrayed in films as a turning point in a character's development, but academically, it can be explained through the concepts of emotional construction and social regulation, in which emotions do not arise spontaneously but are shaped by cultural norms, situational pressures, and practices of self-reflection. Extreme

decisions such as rejection are not merely "revelations of inner truth," but the result of complex interactions between the individual and the social structures that shape how a person understands and expresses their emotions. (Ko, 2025)



**2. Birds of Prey (2020)**



*Birds of Prey* is an American film released in 2020 as a sequel to *Suicide Squad* (2016), centering on the journey of Harley Quinn after her broken relationship with the Joker. This part discusses the manifestation of the gender gaze within the film using Barthes' semiotic theory. By analyzing the semiotic signs, this part explores how the gender gaze is implemented through the Western gaze which often emphasizes individual rebellion and physical liberation. In contrast to the shifts found in Eastern cinema, as mentioned before, the Western female gaze in *Birds of Prey* appears to be loud, colorful, and disruptive to patriarchal structures.

**2.1 The Impact of Major Life Transitions**

The story begins with a brief overview of Harley Quinn's early life, which can only be described as a disturbing and sad life. Despite these hardships, she successfully granted an academic achievement by earning a doctorate degree in psychology. She also works as a professional psychiatrist at Arkham Asylum, where she falls in love with one of her patients, the Joker. Her early times with the Joker reflect the male gaze, where the female is viewed as a complementary object. However, she starts her journey of self-liberation when their relationship ends and the Joker leaves her. This marks her transformation from just a passive object of someone else's into an active subject of her own.

Table 4. Behavioral Analysis of Harley Quinn

(4.A) The Post-Breakup Transition	
	
<b>Denotation</b>	The scene depicts Harley standing outside a house, looking through a window while crying.
<b>Connotation</b>	This scene suggests emotional and social separation. The physical barrier of the window symbolizes her exclusion from a space to which she once belonged. Her visible distress reflects a loss of relational status and emotional attachment, indicating a transition from intimacy to marginalization.
<b>Myth</b>	This incident exemplifies a larger patriarchal mentality where a woman's worth is determined by how valuable she is in a romantic partnership. The cultural idea that female identity and social placement depend on male recognition—a pattern frequently linked to the logic of the male gaze—can be seen as being reinforced by Harley's exclusion (Mulvey, 1975).
	
<b>Denotation</b>	The scene depicts Harley stabbing a portrait of the Joker, followed by her relaxing in a disordered room.
<b>Connotation</b>	This sequence suggests an emotional release and a symbolic detachment from a prior relationship. The act of stabbing the portrait represents the rejection of a former emotional attachment, while her relaxed posture within a messy environment indicates a shift away from imposed expectations of order, control, and relational dependency.

<b>Myth</b>	A larger story of female autonomy and struggle within a patriarchal framework is reflected in this scene. By focusing on autonomy and self-definition, Harley's activities might be seen as a rejection of the conventional view of women as passive objects in love relationships. This change is consistent with criticisms of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975), in which female characters transition from objectification to active subjectivity.
(4.B) The Shift in Personal Aesthetics	
	
<b>Denotation</b>	The scene depicts Harley Quinn cutting her hair in an erratic manner while looking into a mirror, displaying shifting emotions between crying and visible distress.
<b>Connotation</b>	This act suggests a symbolic rupture with her former identity. The cutting of hair, often associated with traditional markers of femininity, indicates a rejection of previously constructed roles. Her fluctuating emotional expression reflects an internal conflict and a process of detachment from past relational dependency.
<b>Myth</b>	Cutting her hair represents a shift away from a previous identity in this moment, which depicts a culturally identifiable act of personal regeneration. The act might be interpreted as signifying emotional closure and the process of moving on rather than merely rejecting normative femininity. This is consistent with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (Butler, 2002), which holds that identity is constantly rebuilt through embodied behaviors.
	



<b>Denotation</b>	Harley Quinn is seen visiting an exotic pet shop to adopt a predatory animal rather than a conventional pet.
<b>Connotation</b>	This signifies a desire to reduce emotional isolation. Her choice of a wild beast reflects her eccentric identity and shows that she needs an untamable companion to match her personality.
<b>Myth</b>	One's ability to control their emotions is sometimes implied by having a pet, but when someone picks a sign of chaos instead, they are probably further separating themselves from the customs and traditions of the home.
	
<b>Denotation</b>	The scene shows Harley Quinn enjoying a festive party with some acquaintances and drinking a heavy amount of alcohol.
<b>Connotation</b>	This act serves as an escape to temporarily forget grief and emotional trauma from the real world.
<b>Myth</b>	Alcohol drinking in this scene might be seen as an assertion of agency and a claim to personal freedom rather than just as carelessness. According to feminist viewpoints on female subjectivity and lived experience, this act represents a negotiation of autonomy and emotional coping within the context of the female gaze (Mulvey, 1975; Kaplan, 1983).
<b>(4.C) Taking Extreme Action</b>	
	
<b>Denotation</b>	The scene shows Harley Quinn walking calmly away from the massive explosion at the site of her memorable place with the Joker confidently.


<b>Connotation</b>	The explosion represents the destruction of her emotional dependency, and her composure in the middle of the chaos demonstrates a newfound control and the courage to leave the past without regret.
<b>Myth</b>	This scene illustrates a story of female empowerment when self-definition is sparked by emotional upheaval. In line with criticisms of the masculine gaze (Mulvey, 1975) and postfeminist viewpoints on identity reconstruction (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009), Harley's departure from the explosion represents a rejection of relationship dependency and the formation of independent subjectivity. At this point, Harley also symbolically ends her relationship with the Joker by giving up the identity of "the Joker's girlfriend," which had previously served as evidence of their relationship. She shows a deliberate act of letting go by deliberately demolishing this common area, turning the remains of that relationship into a place of personal closure and redefining.

## 2.2 Disparities in Social Perception and Treatment

Social treatment critically shapes the perception of female figures who have experienced a significant loss, such as a failed relationship and abandonment by a loved one. In this film, once Harley Quinn destroys the physical symbols of her relationship with the Joker, society views her as vulnerable and stripped of his protection. Consequently, individuals who were previously aggrieved by her (or who held grievances against the Joker) perceive her as an exposed target, feeling empowered to pursue her and exact their revenge. This section examines how society's perception of the female subject shifts based on her association with male power. It also indicates that in a patriarchal social structure, a woman's safety is often viewed as "borrowed" rather than inherent.

Table 5. Semiotic Analysis of *Birds of Prey* as of the Disparities in Social Perception and Treatment

(5.A) The Hunt for Harley Quinn	
	
<b>Denotation</b>	Harley is surrounded by enemies and then shown restrained and captive in a dark, confined space.
<b>Connotation</b>	This signifies the shift from "untouchable" to "vulnerable" and reveals that her previous safety was not her own but was "borrowed" from the Joker's reputation.
<b>Myth</b>	This scene illustrates a patriarchal system where a woman's security is created by her affiliation with male authority. In line with the idea of women as the "Other" (de Beauvoir, 1949/2011) and the idea of hegemonic masculinity, where male dominance structures social power relations, Harley's vulnerability after losing this association reinforces gendered assumptions of female dependency (Connell, 2005).
(5.B) The Absence of "the Master"	
	
<b>Denotation</b>	The scene depicts Harley Quinn confiding in Black Canary, explaining that she has lost the "master" figure in her life.



<b>Connotation</b>	This represents the realization of lost identity. Harley acknowledges that she was previously a "jester" defined only by her proximity to the Joker. It highlights the disorientation of a subject moving from a male-defined existence to sudden autonomy.
<b>Myth</b>	A larger patriarchal structure, in which female identity is created via devotion to male authority, is reflected in this scene. In line with the idea of women as the "Other" (de Beauvoir, 1949/2011) and feminist viewpoints on identity formation outside of male-defined systems, Harley's loss of this defining relationship represents both bewilderment and a crucial moment of reconfiguration.
(5.C) The Hunt for Harley Quinn (2)	
	
<b>Denotation</b>	Harley grieves her breakup and is later shown being held by a predatory stranger while semi-conscious.
<b>Connotation</b>	Harley is at her "lowest point." Her loss of external protection and her internal grief are weaponized by others. This illustrates how a woman's lack of agency is often viewed as an opportunity for exploitation.
<b>Myth</b>	This scene illustrates a patriarchal system where women's vulnerability, especially during times of emotional upheaval, becomes a condition that encourages exploitation. Harley's loss male affiliation frequently determines social legitimacy and safety. By exposing how women's lessened agency is not merely unprotected but actively exploited inside such frameworks, this representation challenges gendered power relations through the female gaze.


### 2.3 Masculine Dimensions of Female Identity

In discussing the manifestation of masculinity within the female subjects of this film, a significant shift in perspective is observable across various characters, not limited to Harley Quinn alone. Furthermore, several other instances that illustrate this transition toward masculine-coded agency are explained in Table 6.

Table 6. Semiotic Analysis of Female Masculinity in *Birds of Prey*

(6.A) Courage and Determination	
	
<b>Denotation</b>	Harley infiltrates a police station with an exuberant smile, followed by a close-up of her face against a backdrop of thick blue and magenta smoke.
<b>Connotation</b>	This imagery signifies playful subversion of authority. Her smile during the destabilization of a power structure represents a celebration of "freedom of action." The blue and magenta smoke serves as a visual marker of her reconstructed identity, suggesting she has found clarity and selfhood within chaos.
<b>Myth</b>	It presents her antisocial behavior as an act of regaining autonomy and self-definition, reflecting a narrative in which female liberation is linked to the disruption of established social standards.
(6.B) Canary Saved Harley	

	
<b>Denotation</b>	Black Canary observes a semi-conscious Harley being cornered by male strangers in an alley; Canary intervenes, using physical combat to rescue her.
<b>Connotation</b>	It represents an acute recognition of a "shared emergency," where danger is a collective reality for women, necessitating a protective and immediate response.
<b>Myth</b>	It supports the notion that women will put one another's safety first in an emergency, using "masculine-coded" violence to challenge conventional notions of female passivity.
(6.C) Assembling Strength	
	
<b>Denotation</b>	Harley Quinn negotiates with her former adversaries (Black Canary, Huntress, and Renee Montoya) to rescue Cassandra and confront a common enemy.
<b>Connotation</b>	Personal conflicts are marginalized in favor of a shared objective. It demonstrates that under extreme pressure, mutual reliance becomes the only viable path to survival.
<b>Myth</b>	By emphasizing a kind of strategic solidarity and arguing that female strength results from the alignment of individual agency within a collective dynamic, it undermines the patriarchal cliché of women as innate rivals.

	
<b>Denotation</b>	The scene depicts Harley and her newly formed team directly engaging with the challenges and physical confrontations initiated by their enemies.
<b>Connotation</b>	The characters' expressions of enjoyment during the conflict signify a shift from victimhood to active agency.
<b>Myth</b>	It suggests that, within hostile environments, physical resistance can function as a means of asserting safety and autonomy. This representation challenges the traditional "damsel in distress" trope by portraying women as active agents who derive empowerment from their capacity to resist.

## 2.4 The Inherent Feminine Dimension


Although Harley and her companions appear predominantly dominant and masculine in this film, they remain female characters who possess an inherent "soft side" or feminine sensibility. This multidimensionality demonstrates that the female gaze does not merely seek to replicate masculine traits but rather to present a complete emotional spectrum where strength and vulnerability coexist.

Table 7. Semiotic Analysis of the Inherent Feminine Dimensions in *Birds of Prey*


<b>(7.A) The Domestic Act</b>	
	
<b>Denotation</b>	Harley and Cassandra Cain engage in a casual shopping excursion, browsing for items like a typical guardian and child.

<b>Connotation</b>	It portrays a mundane, nurturing side of Harley, signifying that she retains a capacity for caretaking and traditional social behaviors despite her chaotic lifestyle.
<b>Myth</b>	It suggests that Harley's identity is not fixed or singular but composed of multiple and shifting roles. By integrating maternal and domestic elements into her independent life, the scene challenges the trope of the "lone outlaw" and reflects the fluid construction of gendered identity (Butler, 2002; McRobbie, 2009).

### (7.B) Signs of Affections

	
<b>Denotation</b>	Harley affectionately kisses the cheek of Doc, the elderly shopkeeper who provided her with food and refuge.
<b>Connotation</b>	It reveals that Harley's aggressive persona is a situational response to a hostile environment, rather than a total loss of her emotional humanity or capacity for genuine gratitude.
<b>Myth</b>	It suggests that feminine-coded qualities such as tenderness can coexist with expressions of strength or violence, rather than being mutually exclusive. This representation challenges binary constructions of gender roles and reflects the fluid and performative nature of identity (Butler, 2000; Connell, 2005).

### (7.C) The Hollowness of the Lost One

	
<b>Denotation</b>	Harley is running in distress; she is weeping openly with smeared, ruined makeup and a facial expression of deep sorrow.
<b>Connotation</b>	The ruined makeup serves as a metaphor for the downfall of her "tough" persona and exposes her raw emotional state that reflects fear and loss.

Myth	This scene suggests that a female character who displays dominance or traditionally masculine traits remains a complex subject with internal conflict. Within the framework of the female gaze, emotional expression, such as tears, is not positioned as weakness, but as an articulation of authentic subjectivity and lived experience.
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## Discussion

This section discusses the visual semiotic findings presented previously, focusing on the manifestation of the gender gaze through *If We Were a Season* and *Birds of Prey*.

### 1. Socio-Cultural Influence and Ideology

In general, feminine women are described as graceful and elegant (Khansa, 2022) and often are depicted with specific attributes, such as poise, unique skill sets, a sophisticated fashion sense, and an approachable demeanor. Moreover, these women are highly associated with self-hygiene, diligence, a high sense of empathy, a distinct aesthetic aura, sharp intuition, patience, and emotional sensitivity. Beyond physical appearance, the modern visualization of feminine women could be recognized from several marks, including having the rejection of restrictive beauty standards, a high regard for education, freedom in career choices, gentle emotional control, and a tendency to have a large circle of female friends.

In *If We Were a Season*, the female protagonist is portrayed through the lens of this traditional femininity. Through Hae-Rim, the femininity is manifested through a girl that is elegant, graceful, and polite, which allows these standards to dominate the plot. Hae-Rim radiates feminine energy as the main catalyst for the romantic connection between the characters. Mean-

while, *Birds of Prey* features female characters who are crucial within the realms of action and adventure. It showcases the strength, independence, and courage of women to dismantle existing patriarchal systems. Through the heroine and her allies, the film highlights both physical powers and strong sisterhood.

In comparison, while *Birds of Prey* challenges the gender stereotypes through an overt female gaze that emphasizes women's autonomy, *If We Were a Season* employs a more subtle female gaze focused on interpersonal dynamics (as seen in Tables 1, 2, and 3). The film revolves around the feelings, vulnerabilities, and complexities of the female emotional experience within a more traditional society. Moreover, the film also pivots on the struggles and conflicts in relationships faced by women, indicating the length of gender roles in a social environment that often prioritizes tradition, which still heavily revolves around masculine patriarchy.

The differences between the two films are influenced by regional ideologies dictating the construction of the gaze:

#### A. Cinematic Ideology in American Cinema

In *Birds of Prey*, the "female gaze" is used as a tool to dismantle the typical male gaze of the superhero film genre. It centers on individual control and liberation. Visually, they are encoded through the use of vibrant colors, female fatale energy, and even the physical capabilities of a woman. The heroine and her allies are the "subjects" of their own action as a response to reject the role of "passive objects" of the male gaze.

#### B. Socio-Cultural Dynamics in South Korean Cinema

In *If We Were a Season*, the gender gaze is deeply represented in a collection

of traditional values and cultural morals. The female gaze in this film is not manifested as a direct rebellion but as an exploration of emotional liberty by women. The traditional moral structure in South Korea acts as a signifying system that dictates physical distance and silence over speech, yet the plot focuses on the female experience, acknowledging females as people with minds and will, not as objects of obedience.

## **2. Deconstructing the Passive Object and the Evolution of Agency**

As has been mentioned before above, the manifesting of feminine characters through the gender gaze in cinematography is often to position women as passive objects (Sari, 2022). Mulvey's concept of the male gaze supports this claim by pinpointing that the female is often seen and constructed from a masculine perspective so as to emphasize male dominance in society (Chen, 2024). Initially, *Birds of Prey* demonstrates how Harley Quinn is framed within conventional gendered roles, as shown in Table 4 and Table 5, particularly through her relation to the Joker. However, the film subverts these stereotypes and traces her transformation into an autonomous subject. Such portrayals are in line with common gender stereotypes, where women are assigned to have conventional roles, such as being the romantic interest, someone who needs saving, and merely being the supporting characters for male heroes in films (Afifah & Febriana, 2024). Initially, the film starts with how Harley Quinn is being treated as someone whose success and existence are defined only by her relationship with the Joker, despite her advanced educational background and excellent combat skills. According to Wilk (2024), these kinds of representations often fail to capture the real diverse living experiences and identities of women in the real world.

However, in modern American cinema, the representation and visualization of female characters are already significantly evolving. Nowadays, women are being depicted as having more power and freedom compared to their male counterparts (Chen, 2024). Women's typical traits as seen in the male gaze, such as innocence and being submissive, are now being reconstructed as a strategic tactic for women to achieve certain goals, effectively strategically utilizing men's masculine arrogance and their tendency to underestimate women's capabilities (Mustafaj, 2023). As can be seen in Table 6, this shift in character traits and the manifestation of female resistance redirect both physical and emotional behavioral changes. This shift is often triggered by environmental pressure that implies women are no longer represented in the traditional femininity, which is being gentler and dependent on men, but rather as individuals who have problem-solving abilities and intelligence that often surpass men's. And as can be seen in *Birds of Prey*, this characterization is emphasized directly, as the storyline focuses on character growth, the evolution of female traits, and the transformative power of female solidarity.

The difference between *Birds of Prey* and *If We Were a Season* highlights the cultural changes affected by the female gaze. In the American context, power is represented through the display of intelligence, as women strategically leverage both perceived vulnerability and inherent strength to challenge and dismantle patriarchal structures in modern society. Meanwhile, South Korean cinema defines power as being represented through internal conflict and subjectivity, where the female character is constructed by being able to manage her emotional surge and struggles with the tradition. Both films have successfully shifted the perspective of seeing a woman as 'an object to be looked at' to 'someone who feels and

acts,' as in line with the concept of a modernized gender gaze. The analysis of visual semiotics of *Birds of Prey* and *If We Were a Season* show that the female gaze is not just about the aesthetic, but also a deeper understanding of a woman's mind and subjectivity. Whether it's seen through the rebellion acts, as can be seen in *Birds of Prey*, or through the depth of internal emotional strength, as can be seen in *If We Were a Season*, these cinematic experiences have reflected the movement of true diversity and potential female identity.

## Conclusion

This study proves that the representation of the gender gaze in modern cinema is complex and heavily influenced by the ideology from a certain culture. Furthermore, it is evident that both American and South Korean cinemas are increasingly engaging with the gender gaze to be used as satire and criticism towards the patriarchal narratives of a society. The findings in this study also show that American cinema, as seen in *Birds of Prey*, highlights the female gaze, where the freedom and reclamation of power of a woman are the priority rather than mere objectification. In contrast to that, the South Korean methods in *If We Were a Season* mainly highlight emotional growth rather than the traditional masculine display of power. And while the former focuses on the female gaze that overthrows the male gaze, the latter pivots to internal experience and interpersonal intimacy. The semiotic model of Roland Barthes demonstrates how cinematic signs are more often than not embedded with gendered meanings. These research findings suggest that the "gaze" is a more complex tool to define or redefine power, identity, and other representations. By providing a space for female subjectivity and highlighting how women perceive the world, contemporary cinema continues to

evolve as a medium for critical social reflection and narrative reconstruction. The present study provides a snapshot based on films released in 2017 and 2020 but does not address the historical evolution of gendered visual representation over time. Although the analysis of two films is valuable as a case study, it has inherent limitations in supporting broader generalizations about trends across the film industry. Lastly, it is recommended for future research to examine films from the 1970s onward in order to trace changes in the gender gaze across time and across shifting sociocultural contexts and apply more theoretical frameworks that would be potentially useful, such as feminist criticism, psychoanalytic gaze theory, and others.

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