

## Article

*2025 2nd International Conference on Business Economics, Education, Arts and Social Sciences (EASS 2025)***Gender Mirror: The Narrative and Metaphor of Feminist Films from the Perspective of Korean Male in “The Handmaiden”**Ruiling Liu <sup>1,\*</sup><sup>1</sup> Department of Audio-Visual Communication and Advertising, Autonomous University of Barcelona, Plaça Cívica, 08193, Bellaterra, Barcelona, Spain

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**Abstract:** The global feminist movement has evolved many times, from the first wave, which fought for fundamental rights, to the current fourth wave of feminism, which emphasizes diversity and inclusiveness, and which has made significant progress across the globe. However, the issue of gender equality has shown significant geographical differences across the region. As an important East Asian country, Korea's feminist movement has shown unique characteristics in the context of modernization and globalization. In this paper, we use multimodal metaphor analysis to select ‘The handmaiden’ (2016), a Korean female-themed film under the perspective of a male director, as a case study. This study aims to fill the gap in research on the application of multimodal metaphors in Korean women's perspective films and modern Korean feminist cinema, as well as to reveal the place of feminist issues in Korean film and television works in the international context.

**Keywords:** Korean cinema; female perspective; male gaze; gender power relations; multimodal metaphor analysis

**1. Introduction**

Against the backdrop of a booming global feminist movement, Korea has become one of the most active countries in East Asia in fighting for women's rights and promoting the spread of women's ideas. Since the United Nations proposed the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG5) in 2015, the issue of gender equality has gradually come into the global spotlight, with movements such as #MeToo, #YesAllWomen, and #HeForShe, in particular, kicking off widespread discussion and action. The rise of feminist movements in Korea, particularly in recent years through various social movements and the widespread use of social media, has galvanized young women's strong sense of rights and resistance to persistent gender inequality. However, despite the growing clamor for women's rights in Korea, traditional culture and social attitudes continue to create a great deal of resistance, resulting in the continued prominence of issues such as gender-based violence, the gender pay gap, and the solidification of gender roles, as well as an increasingly antagonistic situation. Instead of effectively narrowing the gender gap, the extreme gender antagonism has exacerbated social tensions, leading to a significant decline in Korea's marriage rate and fertility rate, which fell to a global low of 0.72 births in 2023. Moreover, the complexity of this contradiction is further emphasized by the regression in Korea's progress in gender political empowerment in the 2023 Global Gender Gap Report. Although the feminist movement has provided a platform for women to fight for more rights,

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it has also intensified gender conflicts in society to a certain extent, creating a situation that promotes equality while exacerbating divisions. This study will delve into the manifestations of feminism in Korean film and television, paying particular attention to the differences in creative styles between male and female directors and how these differences affect the development of the film industry and society's perception of women. By analyzing the multimodal metaphors of the film 'The Handmaiden', this paper aims to reveal the film's profound expression of gender issues and further explore how film and television works reflect and shape society's expectations and perceptions of women. Through these analyses, this study will provide new perspectives and reflections for understanding the performance of the Korean film industry in gender equality issues and its cultural impact.

## 2. The History and Present Situation of Korean Feminism

The Western feminist movement has its roots in the egalitarian ideology of the Age of Enlightenment and has experienced four waves, each accompanied by a specific social and political context, such as the Industrial Revolution, the Civil Rights Movement, and the wave of globalization. East Asian feminism, on the other hand, was heavily influenced by Confucianism and traditionally emphasized differences in gender roles and family values. modernization and colonial experiences in the early twentieth century further shaped the East Asian feminist movement. East Asian feminism is not a simple imitation of Western feminism. Unlike liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, and postmodern feminism, which focus on the intersectionality of gender, race, and class in the theoretical underpinnings of Western feminism, East Asian feminism emphasizes the concept of "differential universalism" [1] as a theoretical framework that promotes an inclusive approach. as a solution to the tension between universal feminist ideals and Asian cultural and social specificities. The prevalence of a male-dominated family system and patriarchal social organization in Korean society has led to the relatively low status of women in the family and society [2], and women's high level of education often does not translate into high levels of labor participation. This has resulted in Korea being one of the East Asian countries with the most severe gender disparities.

## 3. The Application of Multimodal Metaphor Analysis in Film and Television Research

Multimodal discourse analysis is an important achievement in the development of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). In 1996, Foswell firstly put forward the theory of multimodal metaphors, which is defined as "metaphors in which two or more modalities characterize the source and target domains separately or mainly".

Given the exclusivity or ambiguity of the words "respectively" and "primarily" in this definition, it is difficult to operate in practical analysis, and this definition limits the scope of research on multimodal metaphors. Therefore, researchers in this field mostly adopt its broad definition: "a metaphor that is constructed by the joint participation of two or more modalities". Kress and Van Leeuwen pointed out in *Multimodal Discourse: Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication* that multimodal metaphor analysis can reveal the complexity of film and television works through the study of the interactions between different modalities [3]. Forceville further emphasizes that multimodal metaphor analysis can convey the inner emotions and psychological states of characters by analyzing their body language, facial expressions and voice intonation [4]. Multimodal metaphor analysis can also be used to analyze how films challenge traditional gender roles and power structures through different metaphorical symbols and unique narrative techniques. For example, in the scene where Hideko, the female protagonist of 'The handmaiden', reads erotic novels aloud to a group of men in the library. The camera switches from the male perspective to the female perspective, showing close-ups of Hideko's face

to reflect her emotional changes and inner struggles. By reading aloud the sexual descriptions in the novel, it reveals the passivity and repression of women in a male-dominated society. At this point, the background music gradually becomes tense, increasing the audience's psychological pressure. This scene, through Hideko's reading aloud and the men's reactions, is a metaphor for the objectification of women and the complexity of power relations under the male gaze.

#### 4. Methodology Introduction

In the previous chapter I made a detailed critical review of the literature related to the topic of this research as well as the research methodology. The history and current status of Korean feminism as well as the influence of the image of women in the Korean film and television industry on the topic of this study were explained to construct a theoretical foundation and framework for addressing the research questions of this dissertation. The content of this chapter will utilize multimodal metaphor analysis to the film *Miss*, to design and discuss the content expression and narrative techniques of women's films from a male director's perspective. As an important means of information dissemination media, any rhetorical strategy of information processing in the movie may affect the presentation of women's image. Metaphor is one of the rhetorical strategies used to portray women. According to Leckoff and Johnson's conceptual metaphor theory, metaphors not only exist in language, but can also be expressed through various modes such as vision, sound and body movement. These modes interact with each other in movies to form a complex system of meaning [5]. Therefore, this study will explore how metaphors are used to portray women and their gender narratives in the film 'The Handmaiden' through a multimodal metaphor analysis.

#### 5. Feminist Perspectives through the Eyes of Male Directors in "The Handmaiden"

This study was conducted to address the question, "What are the characteristics of the male director's creative style in feminist films? What are the implications of these characteristics for the film industry?" In the previous chapter, in my literature review of feminist studies, I mentioned the influence of the term "male gaze" on the image of women. However 'The Handmaiden', under the direction of Park Chan-wook, attempts to subvert the "male gaze" by transferring the dominance of the gaze to the female protagonist, and this unconventional narrative technique from a male perspective makes the image of women in *Miss* have unique research value. and their expressive techniques. It will also analyze how these creative styles affect the audience's perception of women's image and the development of the film industry.

#### 6. Film Introduction

*The Handmaiden* (Korean: 0741) is a 2016 South Korean psychological thriller directed by Park Chan-wook directed and produced by Park Chan-wook, based on Sarah Waters' 2002 novel *The Finger Peach Maker*. Set during the period of Japanese colonial rule, the film tells the story of a con man (played by Ha Jung-woo) who calls himself Count Fujiwara, who devises a plot to marry a Japanese aristocrat, Miss Hideko (played by Kim Min-hee), in order to seize her fortune. To carry out this plan, he has a young thief, Nam Sook-hee (Kim Tae-ri), infiltrate Hideko's home disguised as a maid in an attempt to manipulate her into marrying Fujiwara, and ultimately have her committed to a mental institution. At first, Nam Sook-hee sees Hideko as naïve and vulnerable, but over time, genuine feelings develop between the two, and Nam Sook-hee grows increasingly disgusted with Fujiwara's greed and deceit. Despite her growing feelings for Hideko, Nam Suk-hee eventually chooses to betray her and convinces Hideko to run away with Fujiwara. However, the plot takes an unexpected turn, leading everyone to face unforeseen consequences.

## 7. Multimodal Metaphor Analysis

Utilizing multimodal metaphor analysis, focus on the visual elements of key scenes in the film "The Handmaiden" such as camera language and scene setting. Examine how these changes convey the shift in power and the evolution of the characters' identities through color, texture, and style. And analyze how these visual elements construct the image of women, revealing Park Chan-wook's unique style as a male director in dealing with feminist themes. Explore the use of the camera, especially how it is used to show women's strength and autonomy, and analyze how the camera angle challenges and subverts the "male gaze". The film explores the role of color contrast in the characters' emotional expression and power dynamics, and analyzes how different scene settings affect the characters' psychological state and the audience's understanding.

The movie adopts the classic three-act structure of a multi-stranded narrative, and in this study I will choose a representative scene from each section. Using Forceville's theory of multimodal interaction analysis to examine the collaborative roles of the different modalities (visual, auditory, and verbal) in each scene and the ways in which they work together to construct metaphorical meanings, Forceville states that in both nonverbal and multimodal metaphors the signals that imply metaphorical similarity between the two phenomena are different and will necessarily be different depending on how the metaphorical terms are represented [4]. In the case of visual similarity, there are a range of options: Two things can be similar to each other because they have the same size, color, position, pose, texture, material etc. But similarity does not necessarily exist in the 'things' themselves, but may also be expressed in the way they are presented. I will use scene interpretation in my research design to clearly show the interaction of modalities in the same scene in order to achieve my goal of analyzing the role of metaphors in the film for the purpose of solving the research problem.

## 8. Research Design limitations

This study mainly relies on secondary data (e.g., existing movie reviews, academic articles, audience comments, and director interviews, etc.) rather than feedback obtained directly through primary data (e.g., interviews, questionnaires, etc.), which may lead to some limitations in understanding the true audience response and movie impact. At the same time, secondary data can be selectively biased and limited by the subjective perspective and interpretation of the data provider. Secondary data also fails to capture immediate audience or scholarly responses, and findings may lack a dynamic connection to the current social context, especially if social changes after a movie's release are not adequately reflected.

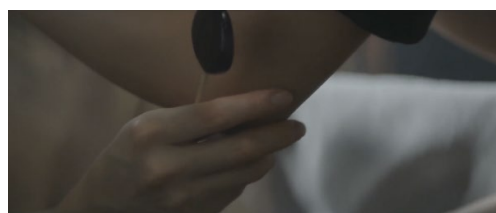
### 8.1. Perspective from Sook-Hee

The first part of the film unfolds from Sook-hee's perspective, and this part of the narrative is linear, as Nam Sook-hee begins by being hired and gradually approaches Sooja and tries to win her trust. This part of the narrative unfolds from Nam Sook-hee's subjective point of view, and the viewer follows her perspective as the plot unfolds. At the heart of this section are the emotional changes in Sooja and Hideko, so I chose one of the scenes in which the protagonists' emotional shifts are expressed most clearly through the metaphorical interaction of different modalities. The theory of the male gaze may be correct in interpreting most male-created images of women, but it can also act as an unconscious proxy for the power of surveillance, so that elements of the gaze that resist being understood as patriarchal, ideological, and erotically motivated are obscured [6]. Certain scenes in film are often described in terms of the 'male gaze', where the camera may sexualize and objectify women, a common trope in many cinematic traditions. In erotic thrillers, it is common for the camera to sexualise female characters. High angle photography allows the viewer to look down on the object of the gaze, suggesting that they are secondary. This is often used to emphasise the male gaze and objectify the women on screen.

In *The Handmaiden*, we only see this camera angle when shooting directly from Hideko or Sook-hee's point of view. Both characters see each other in the same way, and the power dynamic remains in balance despite class and racial barriers. In this case, the gaze both equalises them and helps them recognise their sexuality. In this scene, where Sook-hee bathes Hideko because of the Count's arrival, Hideko complains of a sharp tooth, and Sook-hee uses a thimble to help her grind it off (Figure 1), a complex metaphorical message is conveyed in this scene through multiple modalities, including visual, auditory, and verbal. This scene shows Sook-hee's gaze all through close-ups, subjective shots, and zoom shots. As soft music plays and the atmosphere between the two begins to subtly change, the music stops and the sounds of panting and teeth grinding are deliberately amplified. Hideko keeps rubbing his hand against Sook-hee's elbow (Figure 2). While the camera does explicitly show the characters' bodies, we see and understand that this is what the women see in each other's eyes. The camera remains neutral throughout, as it does not highlight features or see the women as objects, but rather shows us what Hideko or Sook-Hee see: the raw, unadorned female form. This is clearly intentional, as the other female characters are neither sexualised nor objectified.



**Figure 1.** Sook-hee helping Hideko with her sharp tooth.



**Figure 2.** Hideko rubs Sook-hee's elbow.

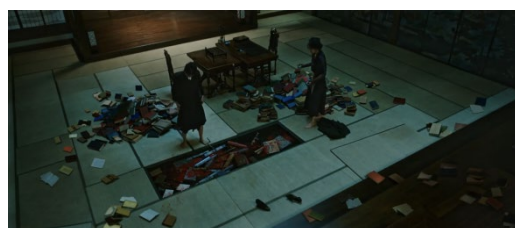
In this scene, the emotional connection between the women becomes the main signal conveyed, and the interactions between the multiple modalities will break the convention of objectifying and sexualising women in traditional cinema. Through unique camera language and sound design, the director avoids the simplification and objectification of women's images in the film, and also shows how women understand and identify with each other despite gender, class and racial barriers. This narrative technique effectively reveals the versatility and complexity of female characters, breaking the traditional gender power structure and providing the audience with a more delicate and diverse expression of female image.

### *8.2. Perspective from Lady Hideko*

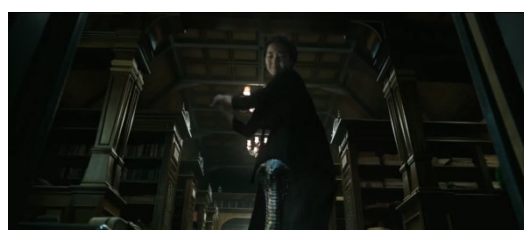
The narrative perspective of the second part shifts to Hideko's perspective. This part re-tells some of the events of Part 1 (Figure 3 and Figure 4), but from Hideko's point of view, and through flashbacks and additions, shows the context of the events and Hideko's true thoughts that the audience was not able to understand in Part 1. In the scene I chose for this part, Hideko takes Sook-hee to see the library where she reads erotic novels and shows her one of the books. Sook-hee knew before that Hideko hated reading Japanese, but for some reason, when she fully realises this, she starts tearing the book apart. Soon, with Sook-hee leading the way, the two of them begin destroying all of Mitsuki's sexist,



perverted literature. In Raewyn Connell's *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics*, she explores how women's position in different social structures is positioned as 'secondary' or 'subordinate' through the process of socialisation, power relations and cultural norms. 'or "subordinate' gender roles through socialisation processes, power relations and cultural norms. From an early age, women are expected by society to be docile and submissive. This socialisation of gender roles fixes women's social position on the margins of the family and society, making it difficult for them to achieve equality with men. And in this scene, books symbolize societal norms. In an earlier scene, Hideko reads these books, which depict women as passive and submissive, using graphic and violent language. And in destroying these words and pictures, Sook-hee and Hideko use their power and violence to revolt and take revenge on their longstanding situation of patriarchal oppression.



**Figure 3.** Hideko spilled ink on the book.



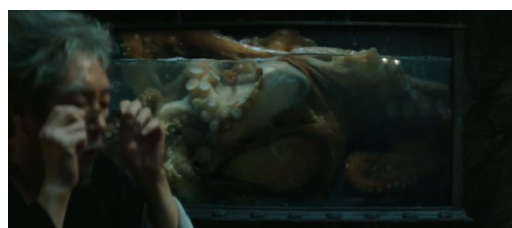
**Figure 4.** Sook-hee smashed the snake.

Halfway through the scene, the camera performs a familiar routine: first, we see the two women from above, and then the camera begins to rotate. This shot is identical to one from earlier in the film when the two first have sex. It is a moment of equal intimacy between Hideko and Sook-hee, and reflects the same atmosphere of symmetry and completeness. In this action, they are one. The screen shows a literal twist on the established narrative. The women push a pile of books into a sink and splash red ink on them. The bright red ink contrasts with the mouldy brown paper (Figure 3), evoking violence, rupture, and desire. It is Hideko who splashes the ink here; with Sook-hee's help, she reclaims the sensuality that was previously corrupted and imposed upon her. Hideko spills ink on the book. Finally, Sook-hee she is walking towards the porcelain snake that guards the entrance to the library. She raises a metal rod toward the symbol of patriarchy, representing a confrontation with male dominance. When she puts the metal rod down, the snake is smashed along with the written legacy of female oppression; it epitomises violent feminist retaliation.

The tearing of the book, the splashing of red ink, and the destruction of the snake are metaphorically symbolic acts and elements that constitute a strong protest against gender oppression. Through these acts, Hideko and Sook-hee physically destroy objects that symbolise male power, while at the same time psychologically and emotionally achieving a redefinition and mastery of their gender identity. This scene provides the audience with a visual expression of female resistance and liberation, and becomes one of the climaxes of feminist expression throughout the film.

### 8.3. Perspective from Count Fujiwara

The third part of the narrative perspective is unfolded by the Count. This part shows the Count's involvement in the whole conspiracy and his fate in the final stage (Figure 5 and Figure 6). This part reveals truths that were not shown in the previous parts, especially the Count's final plan and his view of Hideko and Nam Suk-hee. Through the Count's perspective, the audience sees how he tries to take control of the situation but is ultimately used in turn by the two female characters. This part of the narrative is more complex and shows the Count's past plots, his manipulation of Su-ja, and his ultimate failure through a non-linear narrative technique. There are many retrospectives and reflections in the narrative that show the motivations and psychological states that lie behind his. The symbolised symbolic metaphors from the multimodal metaphor analysis are all shown and answered in this section. The Count is taken to Mitsuki's basement and tortured. This basement that put Hideko under threat is revealed. The live octopus that caused Hideko's aunt's death is stuffed in a tank of water (Figure 5), and jars of genital specimens are displayed on a display shelf next to it. The octopus recurs as a symbol in the film. In contrast to the erotic imagery, the further restoration of male fantasies and how representations of female sexuality are embodied in the film, Kristeva proposes to understand the construction of gender symbols and their role in culture and society through the concept of "misogyny" [7]. The symbolic position of women in society is constructed as a 'necessary other' that defines the male subject and the integrity of the social order through their 'aversion'. This semiotic mechanism is achieved through the control, regulation and marginalisation of the female body, thus consolidating patriarchal social structures. And the erotic symbolism of this scene acts as a synecdoche for the theme of voyeurism, pointing to the pleasure of the gaze in the film [8].



**Figure 5.** Octopus in the basement.



**Figure 6.** Genital preparation.

The symbolism in this scene culminates in this narrative and is closely linked to the gender power dynamics in the film [9]. The octopus symbolizes the objectification of women by men, as well as the coercive fantasies and gender violence embedded in patriarchal systems. Such symbols recur in previous narratives as metaphors for female oppression, and in this section, with the Count's defeat and punishment, they reveal the shattering of male illusions and the triumph of female resistance. Through Kristeva's theory of misogyny, it is possible to understand how these symbols are constructed and used in the semiotics of gender [10]. This control is ultimately reversed in the Count's defeat, as the female characters regain control of these symbols. In this narrative, semiotic metaphors are used to deconstruct and critique patriarchal power structures, demonstrating how women take back control of their bodies and identities by redefining these symbols.

This ending reinforces a critical reading of gender semiotics and ultimately reveals the fragility of patriarchal society and the power of female resistance [11,12].

In the literature review section, it is mentioned that Laura Mulvey's theory of the "male gaze" in her classic article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" ("Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 1975) argues that traditional cinema often uses the language of the camera to reinforcing male control and objectification of women through the language of the camera. This study finds that male directors avoid objectifying women through camera language, which is in contrast to Mulvey's theory, but also reflects the subtlety and diversity of contemporary cinema's treatment of gender issues, which is consistent with the trend of "deobjectification" emphasized by modern feminist film theory. The use of symbolic metaphors has been widely discussed in film studies, such as Raewyn Connell's exploration of how gender symbols are reproduced and reinforced through cultural and social structures in *Gender and Power* ("Gender and Power," 1987). The director's representation of female awakening through symbols in this study resonates with Connell's discussion of how gender symbols are used to maintain or challenge gender power relations. However, this study also identified some aspects that differed from the existing literature; this study found that male directors used techniques such as multi-perspective narratives as well as symbolic metaphors to construct more complex gender power dynamics when dealing with feminist films, rather than limiting themselves to the visual dimension. This is a departure from traditional studies that have focused primarily on the visual and narrative dimensions of gender analysis.

In the analysis of this study, the temporal dimension is limited to certain key scenes of the film and fails to cover the entirety of the film's narrative. This may lead to a deficiency in the comprehensiveness of the study's findings, especially the failure to analyze the evolution of multimodal metaphors throughout the film and their overall role in the narrative. The contrast between the before and after scenes, the linear or non-linear process of plot development, and the gradual rendering of the emotional atmosphere are all important factors that may affect the interpretation of metaphors, which may have been neglected in the current analysis.

## 9. Conclusion

The male director Park Chan-wook's film *Miss* is deeply analysed through the method of multimodal metaphor analysis. As an internationally influential work, *Miss* is not only a great achievement in visual art, but also a profound exploration of gender power relations through a complex narrative structure and multiple perspectives. The study finds that Park Chan-wook tries to subvert the traditional theory of 'male gaze' in the film through carefully designed camera language and symbolic metaphors, challenging the audience's inherent perceptions of female characters. The multimodal metaphors in the film are not only symbols of the objects themselves, but also metaphors of gender power, suggesting that the female characters are seeking their own identities through resistance and awakening in a male-dominated world. However, this study also reveals that even in these attempts, it is still difficult for male directors to completely escape the influence of the male perspective when dealing with feminist themes. Park Chan-wook's camera language, though delicate, still cannot completely break away from the control of the male power structure. The impact of this creative trait on the film industry is twofold: on the one hand, it promotes the diversity and complexity of feminist films, making them more layered and deeper in their representation of women's themes; on the other hand, it reminds us that male directors still face the challenge of fully shedding male-centric perspectives, despite their attempts to engage with feminist themes. Overall, the film *Miss* provides a complex case study for male directors when dealing with feminist themes. The study suggests that male directors can partially sidestep traditional gender stereotypes through the use of multimodal metaphors and semiotics, but it remains challenging to completely detach themselves from the influence of male-centrism. The implication of this



finding for the film industry is to push male directors to reflect more consciously on their own perspectives and narrative strategies when creating feminist films, thereby promoting the expression of gender equality on a broader scale.

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