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Female Gaze and Counter-Gaze Mechanisms in Decision to Leave

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Abstract. In recent years, feminist film theory has continued to reflect on the structures of the patriarchal gaze in mainstream cinema. This paper is based on Laura Mulvey's theory of the "male gaze" and combines it with bell hooks' concept of the "oppositional gaze". It examines the visual subjectivity and counter-gaze strategies of the female protagonist Song Seo-rae in Park Chan-wook's Decision to Leave. Using close reading to analyze camera language, character dynamics and narrative architecture, we reveal how Song Seo-rae negotiates her subjectivity through the act of seeing under the condition of being seen. The research is centered around the following questions: whether women can truly look, and whether Song Seo-rae's gaze constitutes a challenge to the gaze system of patriarchal hierarchy. The findings indicate that her "counter-gaze" operates as performative empowerment. Her scopic sovereignty is consistently obedient to patriarchal narratives. Her scopic sovereignty is consistently obedient to patriarchal narratives. While it satisfies a male's desires of her, it leads to her self-destructive endings. Decision to Leave thus articulates a complex, paradoxical feminist gaze praxis: one that simultaneously reinscribes patriarchal norms and lightens a female's awakening and negotiation of gaze sovereignty.

Keywords: Decision to Leave, Gaze and Counter-Gaze, Feminism

1. Introduction

Since 1975 when Laura Mulvey coined the "male gaze," mainstream movies concerning female issues has been retained for many years. She posits that women in classical narrative cinema are usually passive objects of scopophilic pleasure rather than active subjects to look [1]. Global cinema has witnessed emergent trends of counter-gaze, with female's resistance to this scopic hierarchy. In recent years, Park Chan-wook's narrative perspective has shifted from male to female [2]. As a significant work in Park's recent filmography, Decision to Leave not only continues his signature visual language and plot structure but also opens new spaces for reflection on the distribution of panopticonical power.

This study centers on the character Song Seo-rae to interrogate whether she genuinely possesses scopic subjectivity or is merely another pseudo-subject manipulated by the director. Integrating feminist film theory with close reading, we dissect the film's visual mechanics and gender dynamics.

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This paper revolves primarily around the question: Can women gain scopic rights? Does Song Seo-rae's gaze rupture the traditional patriarchal scopic structure? Can the lens of a male director develop the reconstruction of female subjectivity? This research not only supplements theoretical interpretations of Decision to Leave but also provides new theoretical pathways for the cinematic representation of female subjectivity in East Asian contexts.

2. From "male gaze" to "female counter-gaze"

In visual culture, the gaze is not merely an act of looking; it is a socio-political power structure. In her seminal 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey systematically proposed the concept of the "male gaze" for the first time. She argued that the scopic structure of mainstream Hollywood narrative cinema is male-dominated. Female characters are constructed as "Others" to be looked at, their existence primarily creating the visual pleasure of male characters and male audiences [1].

Mulvey contends that traditional cinema constructs a three-layer gaze where visual pleasure objects are male-as-active and female-as-passive—the camera's gaze, inter-character gaze, and audience gaze. Male characters propel narrative development and predominate action spaces, while women become images to be gazed upon, fragmented, and desired—rather than active subjects. This "active/male—passive/female" binary not only disciplines women's actions on screen but also prescribes how audiences legitimately view them [1].

However, Mulvey's theory has suffered numerous supplements and challenges. Black feminist scholar bell hooks, in The Oppositional Gaze, notes that Mulvey's argument assumes a white, heterosexual male spectator position, neglecting the scopic experiences of marginalized subjects. Hooks emphasizes that Black female audiences, forbidden from directly looking at white authority figures since childhood, develop an oppositional gaze from this socially prohibited looking experience. They do not accept gender and racial codings in mainstream imagery in a passive manner but re-gaze through critique and resistance [3].

This oppositional gaze not only ruptures the unidirectional structure of gazing but also exposes the inherent politicality of looking. The gaze is not merely to see; it embodies subject identification, social positioning, and power relations [3]. Hooks asserts that when the oppressed "look back," it constitutes symbolic resistance.

Simultaneously, Michel Foucault's theories of "panopticism" and "looking as discipline" provide a deep power analysis for cinematic gaze structures. In modern society, power no longer manifests through violent constructs but maintains order through invisible surveillance mechanisms [4]. In cinema, this mechanism materializes through detective systems, surveillance cameras, and gaze displacement. Looking becomes a tool of discipline, and the ability to control the power of looking becomes key to distinguishing subject from object.

Synthesizing these three theorists, we can understand the structure and transformation of the gaze through three dimensions. From Mulvey: Establishing the institutionalized existence of the male gaze; through hooks' lens: revealing how marginalized women reclaim subjectivity by looking back; using Foucault's model: Comprehending the spatial arrangements and disciplinary rules of who has the right to look and who is looked at.

Through these theoretical foundations, we analyze Song Seo-rae's character construction and gaze trajectory in Decision to Leave: Does she truly attain scopic subjectivity, or does she merely experience fleeting scopic power within a mirage constructed by a male director?

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3. Constructing female subjectivity in Decision to Leave

In feminist film criticism, "visibility," "seeing," and "gaze" represent more than merely simple narrative perspectives; they signify visual and psychological power relations [5]. Although women in mainstream cinema predominantly appear as gazed-upon “Others”, Park Chan-wook’s Decision to Leave attempts to reflect upon and partially resist this paradigm through its visual and narrative strategies. Song Seo-rae enters the narrative as a criminal suspect but gradually reclaims visual and narrative control, constructing a female subjectivity that is both believable and paradoxical. This chapter explores how Song Seo-rae acquires, exercises, and ultimately loses scopic subjectivity within a male-directed image system, from narrative and cinematographic dimensions. This process embodies the nested logic of Mulvey’s "male gaze" while resonating with hooks’ "oppositional gaze" theory and Foucault’s analysis of visibility/power relations.

3.1. Song Seo-rae’s agency and seeing initiative

The film’s structure clearly delineates the phased construction and dissolution of Song Seo-rae’s female subjectivity. She does not perpetually appear as a passive Other but demonstrates strong scopic subjectivity through specific plot points and audiovisual strategies. The dynamic generation and constraints of subjectivity within power structures can be identified by analyzing six key stages.

At her first appearance, the police summon her under the pretext of notifying her of husband’s death, actually placing her within the disciplinary field of judicial gaze. During the initial investigation, Song Seo-rae’s role as a passive visual object is particularly evident. Officers watch her eating via surveillance footage, scrutinize her bruises, and observe her facial reactions and silent posture during interrogation. These shots not only reinforce her "to-be-looked-at-ness" but also reveal how she becomes a dual projection surface for the male protagonist’s and audience’s desire and suspicion. At this stage, Song Seo-rae lacks visual subjectivity. As Laura Mulvey states, she becomes "to-be-looked-at-ness" in traditional narrative cinema. Her body, expressions, and silence constitute a visual text for male characters to interpret and gaze upon, reflecting the "being-looked-at" structure of female roles in patriarchal narrative mechanisms.

During the investigation, Song Seo-rae continually breaks through her passive identity as a suspect, constructing her own scopic disguises: she feigns grief over her husband’s death by lying face-down; invites Detective Jang Hae-joon to her home; or enters his residence to observe his life. These actions form what hooks terms the "oppositional gaze": women actively restructure looking relations to claim subject power [3].

In the later stages of the case, Seo-rae gradually transforms into an active gazer, manipulating her emotional relationship with Hae-joon. Here, Hae-joon confesses his attraction to her. However, when he discovers floor records inconsistent with an elderly person on her grandmother’s phone, he begins reconstructing Seo-rae’s movements that day. Her prior oppositional gaze is thus identified by Hae-joon’s investigative system and incorporated as evidence against her.

Before the second case, Hae-joon leaves Busan for Ipo; Seo-rae relocates to the same city. She infiltrates the local police station, covertly monitors Hae-joon’s movements, tampers with crime scene details, and fabricates clues to draw him close to her again. Here, Seo-rae ceases to be a passive observed object and becomes the manipulator of the entire surveillance apparatus—precisely weaponizing institutional monitoring tools and investigative logic to counter-control the system. This act constitutes a reversal of Foucault’s "panoptic" power structure.

After the second case, Hae-joon resumes surveillance of her life. Song Seo-rae again becomes an object of police scrutiny. Her "right to look" diminishes, relegating her back to a surveilled subject

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within the monitoring system. This precisely echoes Foucault's "disciplinary panoptic structure": her subjectivity is appropriated by cameras, surveillance systems, and male police authority, returning her to the observed status under power.

In summary, Song Seo-rae's subjectivity construction is phased. Although she reclaims visual power multiple times, this sovereignty remains constrained by the male director's framework embedded in patriarchal audiovisual logic.

3.2. Subverting the female gaze through cinematography

Within feminist film theory, constructing female subjectivity manifests not only narratively but also through cinematography and audiovisual codes. Decision to Leave reflects upon and partially subverts the male-gaze-dominated visual narrative system through photographic composition, editing rhythm, and formal techniques.

The visual structure of the two-way mirror serves as a powerful metaphor for dominance and control. When Seo-rae's reflection sharpens, Hae-joon's blurs; when Hae-joon's face clarifies, Seo-rae's fades. This shifting focus implies Song Seo-rae's covert observation of Hae-joon. She is not a passive "female object of looking" but a strategic visual operator. Mulvey notes women are "bearers of the look" in traditional narratives; here, the director uses mirror language to rupture this division, showcasing women's "potential counter-gaze" power. Song Seo-rae's calm gaze piercing the mirror embodies hooks' "oppositional gaze," transforming her—with multiple marginalized identities (woman/foreigner/suspect/widow)—from a disciplined object of power structures into an acting subject-challenging gaze relations, foreshadowing later shifts in scopic power.

Decision to Leave utilizes cross-cutting montage, creating "asynchronous sound-image" in some sequences [6]. For example, at 25 minutes, while Hae-joon chases a suspect, the shots show the suspect desperately running, but the audio presents a female officer discussing Seo-rae's grandfather. The image points to male-enforced mechanisms of violence and state power, while the sound surreptitiously embeds female history and ethno-political identity. This perceptual tension makes the audience's gaze oscillate between visual and auditory channels. The female subject ceases to be merely "seen"; she seizes narrative position through auditory channels. At 45 minutes, the visuals depict Hong Sang-ho's arrest, but the audio persists with the protagonists' room conversation. Spatiotemporal deconstruction through editing allows Song Seo-rae's voice to dominate rhythm and meaning off-screen. This "displaced voice" empowers her even when she is absent. At 117 minutes, as Seo-rae visits a patient with flowers, the voiceover narrates Sae-jin's recollections. Though visually centered, her linguistic subjectivity is stripped; her actions become visual representations of male discourse. This "spoken subject" structure illustrates subjects' inability to fully control their image under others' gaze [7]; the gaze ultimately reverts to male reinscription. Thus, through asynchronous sound-image editing, Decision to Leave creates fissures within the viewing mechanism, enabling the female subject to momentarily destabilize the power logic of visual structures. The gaze ceases to be a static act of looking; it becomes an audiovisual struggle of constant negotiation, transference, and questioning within the image.

4. Gender tensions and paradoxes in the image: the illusion of counter-gaze and punishment mechanisms

Though Decision to Leave grants Song Seo-rae unprecedented narrative weight and visual centrality in the state of female characters. However, this does not signify her genuine possession of gazing power or mastery over her destiny, as Dicision to Leave presents a facade of empowering female

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subjectivity. Contrarily, her acquired "subject position" is largely an illusion meticulously arranged by male creators. Her subjectivity remains cyclically exploited and punished within the film's structure and gender-power network. This section explores the complex tensions between gender power and subjectivity through three aspects: "counter-gaze illusion," contemporary expressions of the "femme fatale" motif, and "death" as the gaze's culminating conclusion.

4.1. The illusion of counter-gaze

Within the narrative, Song Seo-rae exhibits extreme initiative. She not only discerns police investigative paths but also inversely manipulates Jang Hae-joon's psychology and emotions, becoming the party controlling information and rhythm in the relationship. However, this emergence of active gazing stems not from absolute freedom but from a visual facade orchestrated by the director as perspective dominator. As feminist film theory notes, gender is "manufactured" through narrative and visual techniques—a culturally encoded, consumable constructed subjectivity [8].

Song Seo-rae's "subjectivity" embodies this paradox: she appears dominant yet remains under the male narrative lens—watched, defined, and suppressed. Her displayed traits—silence, mystery, fragility mixed with intelligence, initiative without excess, and allure without transgression—are archetypal projections of male-desired femininity. All her actions, seemingly subjective manipulations, ultimately serve the male character's emotional arc, transmuting into trauma aesthetics. In fact, the film places her under specific male perspectives, rendering her a visual object for scrutiny. Even her displayed control, as an action of subjectivity, relies on catering to male desire. Male characters' emotional vulnerabilities do not undermine their narrative dominance, while female characters' temporary influence via sexual appeal cannot escape eventual objectification and discipline. Female manipulative acts in film are often diluted as "comedic" or "plot devices" because when women attempt to "capture" men, they themselves are "captured" by the image. This reveals women's fundamental dilemma in patriarchal scopic structures: any seemingly anti-conquered act is absorbed, neutralized, and reinforces their object status conversely [9].

Simultaneously, Song Seo-rae's self-erasure is not a genuine "free choice" but perpetuates the romanticized narrative trope of "female sacrifice for love" in patriarchal culture [10]. Song Seo-rae does not exit the image as a true "gazer" with scopic sovereignty; she regresses into a structural object through self-obliteration for his sake. This romanticized sacrifice suggests subjectivity at a superficial level, but ultimately consolidates her destiny as a structural "object."

4.2. Contemporary expressions of the femme fatale motif

Song Seo-rae's complexity makes her hardly meet traditional female film tropes. She is neither a conventional gentle victim nor a clear-cut witch-style manipulator. Oscillating between danger and vulnerability, she becomes a "hybrid female character" of intense tension in modern genre cinema. This characterization extends the classic femme fatale paradigm through implanting the paradigm within the character more subtly. In classic film noir, the femme fatale is a temptress tampering with male fates, ultimately punished to restore order. In Decision to Leave, Song Seo-rae similarly embodies the major figure who evokes desire and fear. She is too intelligent, too composed, and too captivating—thus systematically marginalized as unclassifiable.

This aligns with noir's classic narrative strategy toward "complex women": restoring equilibrium by re-enacting primal trauma—investigating the woman, deconstructing her mystery, and ultimately rebuilding order through devaluaing, punishing, and saving the guilty female object [1]. Under this logic, female complexity itself is deemed a narrative threat requiring systematic "resolution."

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Song Seo-rae's complexity signifies structural instability; thus, she must be eliminated to restore textual balance. Female characters' "unreadability" is often recognized as redundancy aside from narrative closure. Therefore, they are removed from the storyline through sacrifice, silence, or death [9]. Her fate stems not from "sin" but from her untenable position that shows "the hybrid subjectivity" within male narratives.

4.3. Death as the terminus of the gaze

In the finale, the director employs a low-angle shot framing Seo-rae standing above a sand pit, visually positioning her superiorly. She then descends, sinking in seawater and in sand. Filmed from Hae-joon's low-angle perspective, his gaze inherits Seo-rae's visual power. Seo-rae vanishes, but her mode of gazing transfers, forming a visual loop. This shot is not simple separation but a reversal of the core question: "Who is looking at whom?" Song Seo-rae becomes both the object and endpoint of the gaze—she actively disappears, terminating the power game.

This visual design carries magnificent symbolism. The low-angle shot implies the "converse subjectification" of the gazed-upon, while submersion by sea and sand symbolizes her visual testament as a female subject—not escape, but rejecting discipline and punishment through silence. As Tania Modleski emphasizes, in patriarchal narratives, women are constantly expelled from structural centers via violence; their power is systematically suppressed and removed while constantly being evoked [11]. Song Seo-rae's "disappearance" is a mechanism of removal that has both visual and structural meanings.

This death is not a passive tragic end but an ultimate protest with subjectivity: when the gaze ceases to be a space for negotiation, silence and disappearance become the only viable subjectivity acts.

5. Conclusion

Taking director Park Chan-wook's Decision to Leave as a case study, this study systematically analyses the visual practices and subjectivity construction of female character Song Seo-rae under the guidance of feminist film theory, psychoanalysis, and scopic power theory to systematically analyze Through textual analysis and cinematographic interpretation, it traces Seo-rae's gaze trajectory from "being looked at" to "looking," revealing its complexity and phased evolution. The study found that although Song Seo-rae has strong visual sovereignty and emotional control on the surface, and she repeatedly performs a reverse gaze on the male characters by manipulating information, sightline guidance, and constructed viewing scenarios—her "counter-gaze" strategies remain embedded in patriarchal narrative logic. This female looking is not wholly free but a limited strategic subjectivity that, while satisfying the male protagonist's desire, constructs a tragic female subjectivity.

This paper answers the core question "Can women look?" Within the current male-directed visual system, the possibility of female gazing is delivered yet is often accompanied by moral punishment or emotional sacrifice. Song Seo-rae's final silence and disappearance may symbolize the "cost" of this gazing right. Female scopic subjectivity is permitted to germinate yet structurally suppressed and disciplined. This tension epitomizes a paradox manufactured by modern patriarchal cinematic narratives.

A limitation of this research is its focus on a single text without conducting a comparative study of female gaze strategies in other cinematic contexts. Future work could expand to more East Asian

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films, particularly those directed by women, further contrasting manifestations of female visual sovereignty across creators of different genders.

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