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The Performance of Pain or the Consumption of Desire? On the Duality of Female Pain Narratives in East Asian Art Cinema

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines the ethical paradox inherent in the representation of female suffering in East Asian art cinema. Focusing on films such as Kim Ki-duk's The Bow and Philip Yung's Port of Call, it argues that while directors often employ prolonged gazing and aestheticized pain to critique social injustice, these very techniques risk transforming female pain into a consumable spectacle. Through a theoretical framework of "intersectional collusion" —which integrates gaze theory, gender performativity, and intersectionality—this study reveals how power axes such as gender, class, and festival-market mechanisms collaboratively shape the visual economy of suffering. Methodologically, it proposes a triangulated approach combining close formal analysis, quantitative measurement, and contextual discourse analysis, alongside four ethical principles for cinematic representation. The research contributes to film ethics by offering a critical toolkit to differentiate between the performance of pain and its consumption, advocating for a cinema that restores agency and dignity to the suffering subject.

KEYWORDS
Gaze; Intersectional Collusion; Female Suffering; Spectacle; Subjectivity; Art Cinema; Ethical Representation; Triangulation Method; *The Bow*; *Port of Call*

1 Introduction

If we savor the meaning behind the film slowly, we will find that in the darkness of the screen, pain is often magnified in the most naked way. It was a deep breath, a trembling gaze, and an inescapable stare. Directors often firmly believe that by directly presenting the suffering of women, they can expose the injustice of the social structure and gender oppression. However, when images are overly obsessed with such expressions, pain may transform from a "critical posture" into a "landscape of desire", becoming an object for the audience to admire and consume.

A heavy snowfall fell on a housing estate in Hong Kong, covering Wang Jiamei's young but warm body. A sharp arrow shot through the sky, streaking across the azure sea and ultimately hitting the girl's flawless skin - this was not a declaration of love, but a cold allegory about possession and sacrifice. The former is the urban tragedy in Wong Chi-kwong's "Seeking Plum Blossoms in the Snow", while the latter is the ritualized body in Kim Ki-duk's "Bow". The film, through poetic visual language, constructs a closed and static world, as if telling of her powerlessness and tragedy. But under such persistent gazes, do the audience truly sense her subjectivity, or are they merely immersed in a gaze at the "Oriental innocence and suppression"?Similarly, in Yung's Port of Call, Wong Ka-mui's tears, struggles, and marginalization are repeatedly magnified. Her pain becomes not only a driver of the plot but also a spectacle the audience cannot avoid: a constantly displayed image of female martyrdom. Gradually, the female body, through poeticization and symbolization, solidifies into the text itself: silent, fragile, yet perpetually watched.

This leads to a central question: when film intends to critique oppression, does it simultaneously, unintentionally, replicate or even reinforce another form of oppression? In other words, within these works, is female pain ultimately a "performance giving her voice," or an "object consumed by desire"?

It is within the tension of this contradiction that this article establishes its point of departure. Using The Bow and Port of Call as key cases, it aims to move beyond superficial interpretations of social themes and delve into the ethical politics of cinematic form. The following sections will further analyze the dual nature of female pain narratives, drawing on the recent trend of Asian art films represented by such works, and explore the underlying power structures and ethical paradoxes.

Within the East Asian art film market, directors, in the name of art, bring the camera relentlessly close to this pain, intending to stage a silent indictment, a critique of injustice. Yet, when this pain is meticulously framed, softened by lighting, and prolonged through slow motion, does it also inadvertently slide into another, more covert form of consumption? What are we truly watching: their unspeakable suffering, or the projection and satisfaction of our own desires?

This study unfolds precisely within this fissure between performance and consumption. Using the urban-commodified body of Wong Ka-mui in Port of Call and the ritualized body of the girl in The Bow as dual mirrors, it examines the intertwined network of power behind them—not merely the gendered gaze, but an intersectional collusion of capital, class, and even cultural voyeurism. This study aims to question: Is the narrative of women's pain in East Asian art films an

empowering compensation or a carefully packaged collective peeping? Can we find an ethical measure within the small frame of the camera, allowing pain to be spoken out rather than pawned again?

In recent years, a number of Asian art films represented by "The Bow" (directed by Kim Ki-duk, Republic of Korea) and "Seeking Plum Blossoms in the Snow" (directed by Wong Chi-kwong, Hong Kong, China) have received significant attention at international film festivals and in the critical circle. These films all focus their lenses on the bodies and sufferings of underprivileged women, aiming to reveal the structural violence and injustice in society through highly stylized images, especially the extensive use of close-ups and staring shots. However, while such aesthetic choices have gained empathy and recognition, they have also sparked a crucial academic controversy and ethical paradox: when a film intends to criticize one form of oppression, does its own visual language unconsciously replicate or even intensify another form of oppression?

Specifically, this phenomenon is manifested as a predicament of "excessive gazing".

On the one hand, the director's creative intention is undoubtedly serious and full of social concern. By focusing intensely and proximally on the pained expressions and body parts of female characters, these films aim to forcefully draw the viewer's eye, compelling confrontation with harsh reality, thereby provoking moral outrage and social reflection. In this context, the gazing shot is endowed with a critical mission: to break silence and give voice to the voiceless.

On the other hand, such technical approaches can, in practice, slide into the opposite of their intended purpose. When the presentation of female suffering becomes too frequent, prolonged, or even tinged with a certain aesthetic fascination, the camera itself potentially transforms from a tool of critique into an instrument of consumptive voyeurism. The "male gaze" critiqued by Mulvey is not dissolved; rather, it is subtly repackaged and rationalized under a narrative of "progressive" intent. The female body and its pain become spectacularized, reduced and fragmented from a whole, subjective person into a suffering symbol for the audience to pity, fear, or subconsciously consume. This approach, to some extent, replicates the very logic of objectification it seeks to critique, once again relegating women to passive "objects-to-be-looked-at," their subjectivity and complexity eroded under persistent "being-looked-at-ness."

Thus, the current state of research reveals a significant gap: while scholarly discussion has extensively covered the social themes and directorial intentions of such films, there is a lack of systematic critical examination of the disconnect between their form and content, and the tension between their aesthetic methods and ethical consequences. Existing analyses often take the legitimacy of such "gazing" for granted, failing to sufficiently question: are these intensifying visual strategies the only effective means of expression, or have they merely become a new genre convention? Ultimately, whose perspective do they serve? That of the victim, or that of a middle-class audience seeking moral self-fulfillment under the guise of progressivism?

It is within this context that this study establishes its foundation. It aims to transcend superficial readings of social themes and delve into the ethical politics of cinematic form. By closely reading films like The Bow and Port of Call through the framework of gaze theory, feminist film criticism, and intersectionality, this research intends to answer the following core questions: To what extent do the gazing shots in these films achieve a profound critique of female suffering, and to what extent do they constitute a secondary exploitation of the female body? Does there exist a more reflective cinematic language capable of revealing hardship while avoiding its objectification, thereby truly restoring narrative agency and dignity to female characters?

Therefore, this research concerns not only the evaluation of specific films but also a reflection on the methodology of contemporary critical filmmaking in Asia itself. It seeks to contribute fresh perspectives and theoretical dialogue from an Eastern context to the perennial artistic question: "how to represent suffering ethically."

2 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Since Laura Mulvey introduced the concept of the "male gaze" in the 1970s, gaze theory has become a core discourse for analyzing the relationship between imagery and gender power. Employing a psychoanalytic framework, Mulvey argued that classical narrative cinema systematically places women as “to-be-looked-at” objects—through camera positioning, narrative alignment, and visual [1].

organization—turning them into vessels of visual pleasure. In this perspective, cinematic form is not a neutral medium but a site where ideology operates. Applying Mulvey’s insights to contemporary art cinema enables us to scrutinize how stylistic devices—such as close-ups, slow motion, and extended gaze—though seemingly critical, can nonetheless reproduce objectification at the level of form.

Intellectual engagement with Mulvey has taken two distinct trajectories. On the one hand, many scholars continue conducting close readings that trace how shots, edits, and sound shape the viewer’s position. On the other hand, critics remind us that the gaze cannot be regarded solely through a gender lens: race, class, region, and market or festival circuits also influence who is seen and how. Thus, gaze analysis must evolve beyond singular focus to embrace multidimensional perspectives—attuned both to cinematic form and to the institutional conditions of image production and circulation.

Judith Butler's concept of "gender performativity" adds a vital methodological complement. She contends that gender is not an innate essence but something constructed through ongoing, stylized repetition of acts. This theory shifts the gaze's focus from assessing whether an image objectifies women to examining how the cinematic representation performs—or disrupts—the construction of gender identities [2].

Butler reminds researchers that gender is not a pre-existing attribute but is constructed through repeated acts and visible practices. Translating this perspective into film studies, we should focus on how cinema participates in the formation of gender identity through repeated gestures, actions, and cinematic conventions. More importantly, the so-called "object of the gaze" is not entirely passive; its actions and performances may still harbor the possibility of resistance or the reclamation of agency. Thus, performativity theory allows gaze analysis to move beyond the binary of "objectified/non-objectified" and instead identify the inherent performativity and spectrum of agency within imagery.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality further expands the perspective: the cinematic situation of the female subject is often woven from multiple axes including gender, class, ethnicity, and region. For East Asian art cinema, this means we cannot explain how women are treated by the camera solely through the "male gaze." We must also identify how capital, market, and festival discourses participate in shaping the form of the imagery. In other words, the "schema of suffering" within imagery is a product of both internal textual choices (lens selection) and the external circulation context (e.g., film festival preferences).

Regarding festival discourse and the "aesthetics of suffering," academia has increasingly focused on the so-called "poverty porn / festival-driven suffering" phenomenon: international film festivals and distribution markets exhibit an institutional preference for "recognizable narratives of pathos," which may incentivize creators to cater to these expectations in their choice of subject matter and presentation 手法 (presentation methods). This can lead to complex social suffering being simplified into tradable visual symbols. Incorporating festival/market mechanisms into gaze analysis allows for connecting "form---ethics---circulation," revealing why certain cinematic strategies are constantly replicated and become conventional in the contemporary context.

At the level of East Asian textual studies, existing scholarship has examined how films like Kim Ki-duk's The Bow and Philip Yung's Port of Call incorporate the female body and suffering into their narratives. However, most existing discussions focus on themes and social context, lacking systematic, operationalized analysis of cinematic form (e. g., duration of close-ups, shot scale, sound-image disjunction) and its ethical consequences. Based on this, this article intends to retain the strengths of Mulvey's formal analysis while integrating perspectives of performativity and intersectionality. It will juxtapose observable indicators like lens/sound with the festival/market context to construct an "intersectional collusion" analytical framework, aiming to address the gap in existing research regarding the "form---ethics---circulation" relationship.

3 Analytical Framework:Intersectional Collusion

To answer this article's core question—"The Performance of Pain or the Consumption of Desire?"—it proposes and employs "Intersectional Collusion" as its primary theoretical framework. The core proposition of this framework is that the gaze on screen is not the product of a single dimension (e.g., the "male gaze") operating in isolation, but rather the result of the synergistic action of multiple axes of power—gender, class, capital/market, festival/curatorial discourse—within the chain of image production---distribution---reception. Consequently, studying the representation of female pain in imagery requires analyzing both how the lens organizes the viewing position at the micro-level (formal dimension) and examining the institutional and discursive environment in which the image is produced and circulates at the macro-level (contextual dimension). This proposition inherits Mulvey's insights into the relationship between cinematic form and power while incorporating Butler's performativity and Crenshaw's intersectionality, and introduces festival/market discourse as a key external variable [3-4].

On-site areas include:

(1) Cinematic form (shot scale, shot duration, camera movement, sound-image configuration) can directly shape viewing positions, thereby affecting the representation of the subjecthood of the filmed subject.

(2) Image production is not self-contained; festival, distribution, and market mechanisms participate in topic selection and aesthetic strategies.

(3) The intertwining of gender with class/region/cultural discourse imbues "the viewed pain" with multiple social meanings.

Based on these premises, this article adopts an analytical path that juxtaposes "form---discourse---circulation," conducting both micro-level shot-by-shot interpretations and contextualizing texts for comparison and verification.

4 Three Ethical-Methodological Principles

To ground ethical reflection in operable empirical analysis, this article proposes and applies four principles: Visual Internalization, Agency-Oriented Narration, De-Spectacularization, and Contextual Anchoring. Each principle includes theoretical basis, observable indicators within the film, and practical suggestions for creation/evaluation.

Principle 1: Visual Internalization — shifting from "him looking at her pain" to "her feeling pain"

· Theory/Empirical Basis: Subjective shots (POV) and subjective sound (inner monologue, heartbeat, etc.) are often used to orient the viewing position towards the character's interior, enhancing audience empathy and immersion. Experiments and film studies show that POV and movement kinetics can significantly affect viewers' emotional engagement and empathy.

· Observable Indicators: Frequency and duration of POV/subjective shots; occurrence and type of subjective sound (heartbeat, breathing, inner monologue); number of shot/reverse-shot sequences aligned with character sightlines; proportion of subjective perspective at key pain nodes.

· Practical Suggestion: Prioritize the use of subjective shots and sound-image disjunction in crucial pain scenes, allowing the audience to "enter" the character's feelings rather than viewing them aesthetically from the outside.

Principle 2: Agency-Oriented Narration — making pain the starting point for action

· Theory Basis: Inspired by Butler's "gender performativity," actions and repetitions participate in identity construction. Narrative should treat pain as a trigger for agency, allowing suffering to drive choices or resistance, not just serve as emotional display.

· Observable Indicators: Whether pain scenes are immediately followed by shots of character decision-making or action; whether pain is narrativized as a turning point; whether the character exhibits active verbal or behavioral responses.

· Practical Suggestion: Script and editing design should ensure that pain narratively leads to action or social response, avoiding letting pain remain mere emotional consumption.

· Theory Basis: The combination of "slow motion + beautiful soundtrack + soft lighting" is often criticized for turning violence or pain into an aesthetic spectacle (i.e., "poverty porn / suffering as spectacle"), thereby simplifying complex social issues into consumable visual symbols. Festival/market discourse can sometimes reinforce this trend.

· Observable Indicators: Frequency of slow motion and aestheticized treatment; ratio of presentation of the violent process vs. its consequences; duration of shots lingering on painful details.

· Practical Suggestion: Prioritize restrained cinematography (medium-long shots, natural light, handheld), emphasize consequences and processes of recovery, rather than extended aestheticization of the violence/pain process itself.

Principle 3: Contextual Anchoring — Situating Personal Suffering within Institutional Structures

Empowered by intersectional theory, this principle recognizes that individual suffering often stems from broader institutional frameworks—such as class inequality, migration policies, and urban governance. Understanding personal pain in context prevents it from becoming a detached symbol of individual tragedy. In cinema, this requires weaving institutional markers—like housing conditions, labor environments, legal constraints, or cultural norms—into the visual narrative. For instance, alternating between environmental and character-focused shots can reveal how personal suffering is embedded within larger social systems [5].

5 Research Method

Research Method: Triangulated Analysis across Form, Numbers, and Context.

To operationalize this ethical framework, the study employs a micro–quant–context triangulation, integrating three complementary methods:

5.1 Micro-level Close Reading

Every shot is logged—its framing, duration, perspective (subjective or objective), sound type (internal, ambient, or musical), camera movement, and narrative function (does it motivate character action?). This transforms "gaze" into measurable, empirical data.

5.2 Quantitative Assessment

Key scenes are statistically analyzed—for example, recording the total length of close-ups, the share of slow-motion shots, or the proportion of subjective perspectives. This provides objective indicators of whether the film's formal strategies emphasize "excessive gazing," moving beyond intuition into measurable critique.

5.3 Contextual Evidence Gathering

The study also collects interviews, festival commentary, reviews, and distribution information to assess whether certain visual choices were influenced by external expectations—particularly those emanating from festival or market—thus revealing how institutional pressures can affect formal decisions.

According to social science methods, triangulation is widely used to enhance credibility and validate findings by drawing evidence from multiple angles (Denzin, 2006; Cohen & Manion, 2000). Applied to film studies, this mix of close reading, quantification, and contextual framing helps balance analysis, ensuring that cinematic form and its societal implications are examined in dialogue rather than isolation.

Then, juxtapose contextual evidence for cross-analysis. Finally, conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the texts based on the four principles (e. g., using a 0-2 scale to rate the fulfillment level of each principle). Perform a horizontal comparison between the two cases to locate their positions on the "performance---consumption" spectrum.

6 Research Contribution

6.1 Theoretical Contribution

Proposes the concept of "intersectional collusion," expanding gaze analysis from a single gender axis to encompass the collusion of multiple powers including capital, festival, and class, thereby enhancing explanatory power for East Asian and Global South cinematic contexts.

6.2 Methodological Contribution

Translates cinematic ethics into an operable system of indicators (shot duration statistics, subjective sound counts, narrative function categorization, contextual discourse comparison), enabling ethical criticism to be verifiable and comparable.

6.3 Practical Contribution

This study offers a tangible contribution by distilling four actionable ethical principles into a structured evaluation framework—designed for filmmakers, curators, and critics alike—to mitigate the institutional risk of "suffering being consumed." By transforming abstract ethical concerns into concrete cinematic guidelines, the framework moves from theoretical aspiration to practical utility.

7 Conclusion

Yet beyond pragmatic instruction, the conclusion adopts a literary tone that bridges form and meaning:

Light and shadow may fade, but a lingering warmth can remain in the human heart. When cinema approaches truth, our response must be guided by ethics: may the camera become not only a recorder of suffering but also a testament to the subject's inherent dignity. Absent care, pain is transformed into spectacle, consumed by a voyeuristic gaze. However, when cinematic choices intentionally internalize perspective, empower agency, de-spectacularize, and frame pain within its institutional roots, film achieves its potential as an ethical space.

In envisioning cinema this way—through the prism of intersectional collusion—this framework not only aids creation and critique but also offers a moral compass to assess how other people's suffering is portrayed on screen. Let this be where "seeing" stops being an act of voyeuristic power and becomes, instead, the commencement of responsibility and understanding.

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