

The traumatized body and the camera lens: Reading WATI in the context of female cinematography

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how cinematography, informed by the female gaze, functions as a medium for articulating women's trauma in the context of domestic violence, as exemplified by the short film *WATI*. The research utilizes a practice-based methodology, positioning the film creation process as the primary data source. The analysis centers on key still photographs, applying a descriptive-reflective approach to examine framing, lighting, blocking, and body gestures. Findings reveal that extended close-ups and asymmetrical framing foreground Wati's body as a locus of internal experience, while low-key and underlighting accentuate the psychological dimensions of trauma. Restrictive domestic compositions and passive gestures, such as silent submission, subtly communicate resistance. The faint smile in the after-credit scene operates as a mask of trauma, inviting viewers to engage with the character's internal wounds. Collectively, *WATI* advances the discourse on the female gaze by rejecting objectification and presenting the female body as a site of tension among wounds, resignation, and defiance.

Kata kunci: *Cinematography, female gaze, female trauma, short film, academic film*

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INTRODUCTION

This study investigates how the female gaze in cinematography can articulate the traumatic experiences of Indonesian women survivors of domestic violence. It addresses a critical void in visual strategies that foreground women as both subjects and empowered narrators of their own trauma (Wijaya et al., 2025). As a pivotal outcome of this practice-based research case study, the film *WATI* functions as the primary data source. Cinematic analysis reveals its deliberate integration of sadomasochistic conflict and domestic symbolism with intimate cinematic techniques, such as prolonged sustained close-ups, asymmetrical framing, low-key lighting, and restrictive blocking of the female protagonist, to depict trauma. These visual strategies compellingly position Wati's body as both a canvas for suffering and an eloquent narrator of pain, vulnerability, and subtle resistance against patriarchal structures (Li, 2024). The film thereby aligns with broader discussions on gender equality and the dismantling of sexual politicization within patriarchal contexts, highlighting the nuanced ways female characters navigate and challenge societal norms (Rachman & Febriana, 2024).

Theoretically, this study is fundamentally grounded in Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, which delineates how patriarchal cinematic conventions subjugate positions women as objects of spectacle, and in response, the female gaze emerged as an oppositional framework, emphasizing women's subjective viewpoints in visual storytelling. Through the lens of the female gaze, the female body is re-envisioned not merely as a source of visual pleasure, but as a complex relational space that encapsulates trauma, enacts subtle resistance, and gestures towards possibilities for healing, subtle resistance, and possibilities for healing. The film *WATI* is expected to enrich this discourse by offering an in-depth analysis of how cinematography can reduce the distance between the audience and suffering, reject objectification, and open a space for sensitivity and empathy (Basaran, 2021; Cao et al., 2024; Jacinto, 2021). This approach moves beyond conventional narratives, allowing for a deeper

exploration of the psychological and emotional landscapes of female characters (Esposito, 2003). In doing so, it challenges traditional voyeuristic perspectives by fostering an intimate engagement with the protagonist's inner world, thereby transforming the viewing experience into one of empathetic understanding rather than detached observation. This theoretical foundation, particularly Mulvey's articulation of the male gaze and the subsequent development of the female gaze, provides a critical lens for understanding the power dynamics inherent in cinematic representations of women (Bhattacharjee & Chakraborty, 2022). By focusing on the female gaze, this study aims to redefine the cinematic portrayal of women, shifting from passive objects to active subjects whose experiences are authentically rendered through intentional visual strategies (Fan, 2023). Mulvey's seminal essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," articulates how traditional Hollywood cinema is structured around a scopophilic male gaze that objectifies women, reducing them to passive spectacles for male pleasure (Mulvey, 1975). This perspective posits that the cinematic apparatus itself is designed to align the viewer with a masculine, heterosexual viewpoint, thereby perpetuating patriarchal norms and limiting the agency of female characters (Öztürk & Akbulut, 2022).

This research investigates how framing, lighting, blocking, and body gestures construct the narrative of women's trauma from the perspective of the female gaze. It further examines how these cinematic choices reflect power dynamics within Indonesian domestic spaces and situates the findings within a socio-cultural context that compels women to conceal their trauma to maintain family harmony. By employing a practice-based research framework, this study contributes both theoretical and practical insights to the fields of cinematography and gender studies. It proposes an empowered, empathetic, and active model for representing women in visual narratives. This model aims to challenge the pervasive male gaze by offering alternative cinematic techniques that empower female subjects, thereby fostering a more nuanced and respectful portrayal of women's experiences on screen (Esposito, 2003). Furthermore, this research explores how the intentional manipulation of visual elements can transcend mere depiction, allowing the audience to engage with the protagonist's inner world in a manner that fosters profound empathy and understanding (Gray et al., 2004; Reavey, 2021).

METHOD

Practice-based research positions creative work at the core of the research process, where film creation is not merely an object, but also a method and data source for generating new knowledge (Gough-Brady, 2020; Nevill, 2019; Smith & Dean, 2009). This methodology aligns with film studies that focus on visual analysis of cinematography and mise-en-scène to explore cinematic representations, particularly concerning trauma and identity (Sutandio, 2020). Moreover, this methodology facilitates the examination of how cultural frameworks, such as modesty culture and gendered expectations, influence the portrayal of trauma and women's agency in Indonesian cinema (Susanti et al., 2023).

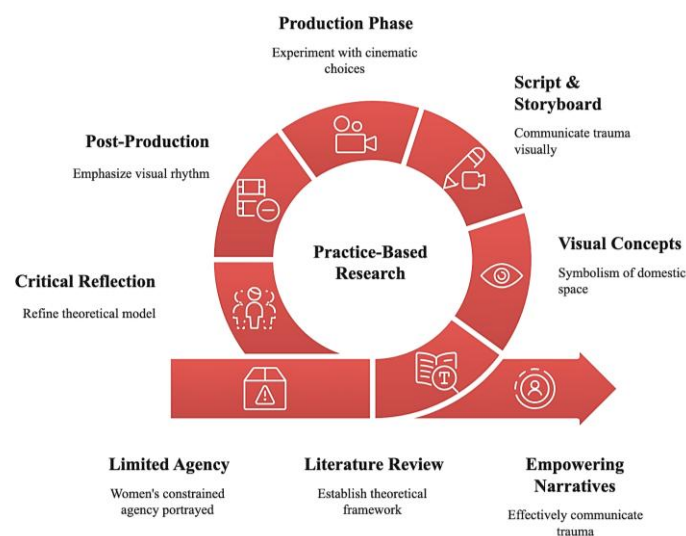


Figure 1. Visualizing Trauma through Film

In the initial planning and research phase, the researchers conducted a literature review on the female gaze, women's trauma, and cinematography techniques, establishing a theoretical framework that referenced Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory and the female gaze response. Subsequently, visual concepts were developed to assert the symbolism of domestic space as a metaphor for patriarchy. During scriptwriting and storyboarding, scenes were designed to communicate Wati's traumatic experiences without extensive dialogue, with storyboards visualizing asymmetrical framing, restrictive blocking, and low-key lighting for each key scene. These visual choices specifically aimed to convey Wati's constrained agency and the oppressive atmosphere she endures within the domestic sphere. This further aligns with studies that utilize film as a narrative text to visualize complex issues such as trauma through technological features and meticulous mise-en-scène (Mustaffa et al., 2021).

In the production phase, the director-researcher acted dually as practitioner and researcher, directly experimenting with close-ups, camera angles, and dramatic lighting, and documenting the creative process through logbooks and behind-the-scenes photos, which then became reflective data. This approach ensured that the cinematic choices were rigorously documented and analyzed in real-time, providing empirical evidence for the theoretical propositions concerning the portrayal of trauma and women's agency (Schlemowitz, 2019). Post-production involved editing to emphasize the visual rhythm of its duration, shadow intensity, and framing transitions, followed by critical reflection on each cinematic choice by analyzing logbook records and still photos to identify symbolic meanings and emotional effects. The iterative process of self-reflection and critical analysis of the creative output allowed for the refinement of the theoretical model, ensuring that the visual strategies effectively communicated the intended narratives of trauma and empowerment (Qeis & Ihwanny, 2025).

Subsequently, visual concepts were developed to assert the symbolism of domestic space as a metaphor for patriarchy. During scriptwriting and storyboarding, scenes were designed to communicate Wati's traumatic experiences without extensive dialogue, with storyboards visualizing asymmetrical framing, restrictive blocking, and low-key lighting for each key scene. In the production phase, the director-researcher acted dually as practitioner and researcher, directly experimenting with close-ups, camera angles, and dramatic lighting, and documenting the creative process through logbooks and behind-the-scenes photos, which then became reflective data. Post-production involved editing to emphasize the visual rhythm of its duration, shadow intensity, and framing transitions, followed by critical reflection on each cinematic choice by analyzing logbook records and still photos to identify symbolic meanings and emotional effects. Descriptive-reflective analysis was conducted on still photos as primary visual artifacts, focusing on elements of framing, lighting, blocking, and body gestures, alongside reflection on the creation process that yielded new insights into how visual narratives can articulate women's trauma.

Through this method, the research on *WATI* generates new discourse on trauma cinematography, asserting that visual strategies such as intense close-ups, asymmetrical framing, low-key lighting, restrictive blocking, and passive gestures are not merely aesthetics but narrative tools to represent the inner wounds of domestic violence victims, thereby enriching the female gaze discourse by affirming the authenticity of women's subjective perspectives that reject objectification. Unlike traditional research that relies on external observation or action research focused on practical changes, practice-based research in *WATI* positions the filmmaking process as a creative laboratory and empirical data source, producing innovative cinematic knowledge. This approach allows for a deep, experiential understanding of how cinematic elements can be intentionally manipulated to communicate complex emotional and psychological states, moving beyond purely theoretical discussions (Jung & Cho, 2022). This methodology intrinsically links the creative act with critical inquiry, demonstrating how the "making" process itself becomes a form of rigorous research that challenges and refines conceptual models. This integration of artistic practice and academic rigor allows for the generation of novel insights that might be inaccessible through conventional qualitative or quantitative research methods alone (Jung & Trischler, 2021). Furthermore, this iterative and reflective process enables the development of a nuanced understanding of cinematic language, allowing for the articulation of otherwise inexpressible traumatic experiences through visual and auditory means.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Feminism in cinematography emphasizes that the representation of women is not solely about visual aesthetics but also relates to women's empowerment and a critique of patriarchal structures. The female gaze serves as a tool to deconstruct objectification and restore agency to female characters. This perspective emerged as a response to Laura Mulvey's male gaze concept, which described how patriarchal cinema positions women merely as objects of spectacle, and was further developed by Brey Iris and Vidya Aisya Kamila to highlight women's subjective viewpoints in visual storytelling. Within the female gaze framework, framing techniques, camera angles, and lighting are chosen not to emphasize the sensuality of the female body but to articulate inner experiences, resistance, and the narrative of power navigated by women. For instance, asymmetrical framing and intensive close-ups in the film *WATI* function to isolate the female subject, concentrating attention on the expression of trauma and compelling the audience to build empathy through active emotional involvement. Low-key and underlighting create dramatic shadows that reveal the contradiction between a façade of domestic harmony and hidden violence, transforming aesthetic function into visual critique. Through this practice, the female gaze not only presents a more authentic and empowered representation but also systematically challenges and dismantles patriarchal narratives that have historically silenced women's voices in media mediation.

The female gaze in film has undergone significant development since its popularization by Laura Mulvey's theory in the late 1970s, which critiqued the representation of women as sexual objects in classical cinema. In the 1980s and 1990s, directors such as Agnès Varda and Jane Campion began to apply subjective female perspectives by presenting complex, diverse, and empowered female characters, while exploring their emotional and psychological relationships. In the early 2000s, the emergence of Kathryn Bigelow and Sofia Coppola established the female gaze in mainstream cinema, with cinematography that presented intimate and personal viewpoints without sacrificing narrative depth. In the contemporary era, directors like Ava DuVernay, Céline Sciamma, and Chloé Zhao continue to broaden the scope of the female gaze, including the representation of women from various cultural backgrounds and identities, as well as issues such as race, class, and gender-based violence.

In Indonesia, this movement has gained prominence over the last decade through the works of female directors who bravely address themes of female identity and trauma. Nia Dinata brought a critical perspective on social norms through films like *Arisan!*, which explored the dynamics of urban women, while Mouly Surya combined horror and psychological drama genres to explore women's fears and violence in *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts*. Kamila Andini also portrayed the experiences of indigenous and modern women in *The Seen and Unseen*, using poetic aesthetics to highlight the relationship between body, space, and memory. These works position women as subjects of the narrative, showcasing their inner perspectives, emotional experiences, and efforts to resist patriarchal structures.

The development of the female gaze globally and in Indonesia demonstrates the transformation of women's cinematography from merely protesting patriarchal dominance to embodying broad artistic and political visions. With increasing recognition of female directors at international festivals and support from local film institutions, this perspective is gaining traction within the industry. Its impact extends beyond the quality of women's representation on screen, affecting production practices such as the involvement of female crew in technical and creative positions, and audience awareness of the diversity of women's experiences as agents of cultural change.

The film *WATI*, as the main product of this creative practice, illustrates how women's trauma can be represented through symbolic and cinematic visual choices. Still photographs from key scenes demonstrate how the female body becomes a site of tension, wounds, and power, while also implying a subtle yet sharp form of resistance. Through the female gaze approach, Wati is presented not as an erotic visual object but as a subject of trauma and entrapment.

The Body as a Space of Power



Figure 2. Wati's hair is being pulled by her husband

In this still photograph, the body of the female character, Wati, dominates the frame, serving as an arena. Wati's upper body is bent forward, with one hand behind her head, while the male character, Dadang, stands behind her, holding money in his hand as a symbol of economic power. The narrow framing, highlighting Wati's face and body, emphasizes her physical vulnerability under the control of another, namely Dadang. The blocking positions Dadang in the foreground and above, indicating his domination of the space and Wati's body, which is cornered within the narrow frame, with no room to move.



Figure 3. Wati's hair is being pulled by her husband

In a different scene with an identical shot, Wati's face becomes the primary focus. A medium close-up, exposing her head tilted back and mouth agape, holding back a scream. The framing is very dense and tight, capturing details of pain or suffering such as taut neck lines, clenched jaw, and eyes closed in inner torment. Soft yet dramatic lighting illuminates the contours of her face and neck, while the background and Dadang's figure on the right are blurred and obscured by shadow. This composition emphasizes Dadang's role as a looming shadow of violence. As noted in brief cinematography theory, elements of lighting, framing, composition, and camera movement are arranged to convey a story. In this image, all these elements are used to underscore the oppressive situation of domination experienced by the victim's body.

Resistance in Silence

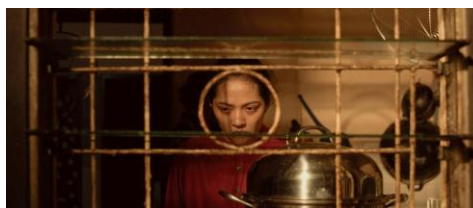


Figure 4. Wati is standing facing out the window

In this still photograph, resistance is portrayed without words. Wati stands behind a barred kitchen window, her body seemingly confined within the domestic sphere. She looks down with a gloomy expression, not facing the camera. The blocking presents Wati silently in the center of the frame. Her hands are clasped tightly in front of her body in a passive stance, signifying internal tension despite showing no explicit defiance.

Her silence and symbolic expression represent a form of covert resistance. As explained by Sartika and Pramulia, this kind of resistance is "shown in the form of rejection through behavior, harboring sadness, and tears." Although Wati appears passive, her dim eyes and stiff body indicate a

subtle refusal of the violence that entraps her. Her silence is an unspoken manifestation of rejection against the oppressive power structure.

A Smile as a Gesture of Trauma



Figure 4. Wati on the bed

This still photograph shows an overhead perspective of Wati lying supine. The very close framing centers on her face, cropping from the neck to the shoulders, making her lips and eyes dominant elements. Lighting originates from below her face, creating dramatic shadows and illuminating the area from her chin to the crease of her lips. The static camera movement from above emphasizes her passive body, as if only her face is capable of "speaking" of her inner wounds.

Psychological context reveals that a smile can be a mask of trauma. As Amanda Burns notes, "the smile and external façade are defense mechanisms, attempting to conceal their true experiences." With blocking that positions her body openly yet passively, and dramatic lighting that highlights a faint smile from below, this image visualizes the smile as a defense mechanism. The faint smile at the film's end appears as a thin mask; hidden behind the upturned lips is something profound.

Discussion

The results of the practice-based research analysis of the film *WATI* reveal the use of cinematic techniques consistent with previous research findings on the representation of women's trauma in film. These findings can be understood through several comparative dimensions with prior research.

The Effectiveness of Close-ups in Representing Trauma

The prolonged use of close-ups on Wati's face aligns with Adib's findings, which indicate that extreme close-up techniques on eyes and faces function to "invade the intimate space of characters" and convey emotions without words. Research on the film *Hereditary* proves that close-ups can visually translate a character's internal psychological suffering into cinematic language, particularly for PTSD symptoms such as intrusive memories and affective inability. This strengthens the argument that prolonged close-ups in *WATI* are not merely an aesthetic technique but a narrative strategy to express hidden domestic trauma.

Asymmetrical Framing as a Manifestation of Patriarchal Power

This study's findings regarding asymmetrical framing, which places Dadang in the foreground and Wati cornered within a narrow frame, support Maradia et al.'s argument that cinematic techniques can shape audience perception and contribute to the objectification of women. However, in the context of the female gaze, asymmetrical framing serves as a visual critique of patriarchal power structures. Unlike Maradia's research, which showed that close-up shots were more effective in directing attention to sexualized body areas, *WATI* uses tight framing to highlight Wati's expression of emotional suffering, not for visual pleasure.

Low-Key Lighting and the Representation of Domestic Violence

The use of low-key and underlighting in *WATI* aligns with Poland's research, which empirically proves that low-key lighting significantly evokes feelings of mystery, tension, and suspicion in the audience. Poland's findings show that viewers watching films with low-key lighting reported significantly higher feelings of "malice, intrigue, and other uncomfortable feelings." In the context of *WATI*, this dramatic lighting not only creates a psychological atmosphere of trauma but also reinforces the nuance of domestic violence hidden beneath the façade of family harmony.

Passive Gestures as Covert Resistance

The findings on Wati's passive gestures—bowed head, clasped hands, silent expression—enrich the discourse on forms of female resistance put forward by Sartika and Pramulia. They demonstrate that women's resistance is often "shown in the form of rejection through behavior, harboring sadness, and tears." This study expands that understanding by showing how cinematography can visualize implicit resistance through restrictive blocking and spatial composition.

A Smile as a Mask of Trauma

The analysis of Wati's faint smile in the after-credit scene reinforces Burns' findings on the phenomenon of "smiling as an external façade" as a "defense mechanism to hide true experiences." This finding contributes to understanding how cinematography can explore the psychological complexities of domestic violence victims who are forced to display amiability publicly while harboring inner wounds. The underlighting that illuminates Wati's thin smile creates visual ambivalence between false happiness and hidden suffering.

The Female Gaze Perspective in Trauma Representation

This study's findings enrich the discussion about the female gaze, as put forward by Riebe, as "a perceptive rebellion against the hegemonic male gaze that is capable of showing the most intimate parts of female characters without any trace of hypersexualization." Unlike criticisms of a false female gaze in previous research, where directors only changed the gender of the protagonist without changing the narrative perspective, *WATI* demonstrates authentic female gaze characteristics through its focus on the subjective and emotional experiences of the female character.

Visual Symbolism in the Indonesian Cultural Context

The findings on the restrictive composition of domestic space complement Febrianto's research on the representation of violence against women in Indonesian films, which uses "cinematography concepts, adaptations, and narratives in constructing visual violence." This study shows that the symbolism of domestic space in the Indonesian context functions not only as a setting but as a visual metaphor for patriarchal structures that limit women's autonomy. Overall, this research contributes to the development of female gaze theory in cinematography by demonstrating how visual elements of framing, lighting, blocking, and gestures can serve as a medium for expressing women's trauma that rejects objectification and promotes empathy and audience sensitivity toward the experiences of domestic violence victims.

Young audiences may experience strong emotional resonance due to their familiarity with visually intense storytelling. Close-ups and asymmetrical framing facilitate immersion into Wati's perspective, fostering empathy and prompting critical discussions about domestic violence prevention. Adult viewers, particularly men less exposed to victim narratives, may encounter cognitive dissonance when confronted with honest depictions of domestic violence, potentially challenging established attitudes. For mature female viewers who have experienced violence, the film may validate their experiences and create opportunities for healing dialogue. Cross-cultural audiences, including traditional rural communities and the Indonesian diaspora, may interpret the representation of domestic space and body symbolism as contextually significant, generating new insights into the cultural roots of domestic violence. These varied interpretations position *WATI* as a catalyst for transforming understandings of violence and women's trauma, facilitating intergenerational, gender, and cultural dialogue to promote solidarity and advocacy.

The short film *WATI* highlights the narrative of women's trauma through asymmetrical framing, intensive close-ups, low-key lighting, and passive gestures that center the subjective experience of domestic violence victims, rejecting objectification and affirming the autonomy of the subject. This approach can be compared with several other cinematic works that adopt the female gaze in depicting women's trauma. Kornél Mundruczó's *Pieces of a Woman* addresses the theme of tragic post-birth trauma. The director uses a long take lasting over ten minutes in the opening birthing scene to reveal an intensely intimate physical and emotional sensation. This technique aligns with the prolonged close-ups in *WATI* in deepening audience empathy through full engagement in moments of the protagonist's psychological crisis. However, unlike *WATI*, which utilizes framing asymmetry to highlight the power

imbalance between perpetrator and victim, *Pieces of a Woman* emphasizes the journey of healing through reflective montage and internal dialogue, thus shifting the gaze from the object of trauma to the process of identity reconstruction after loss.

In the context of Indonesian cinema, Mouly Surya's *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* also applies the female gaze to subvert patriarchal narratives. After becoming a victim of mass rape, Marlina takes control of the narrative by hunting down perpetrators in a remote landscape. The director places Marlina at the center of the frame in wide shots that emphasize the dominance of her body as an agent of action, contrasting with Wati's cornered framing that expresses vulnerability. Although both reject objectification, *Marlina* highlights active resistance and revenge, whereas *WATI* showcases passive resistance and psychological reflection as subtle forms of defiance.

Internationally, films like Deniz Gamze Ergüven's *Mustang* also highlight the trauma of adolescent girls within a patriarchal structure, with symmetrical compositions shifting to asymmetrical ones as their freedom is stripped away. The framing technique in *Mustang*, ranging from veil frames of the group depicting solidarity to individual close-ups showing inner tension, reflects the dynamic between collectivity and individuality, similar to how *WATI* uses close-ups to isolate Wati's individual experience. However, *Mustang* emphasizes collective empowerment through a collective narrative, while *WATI* emphasizes singular experience as a mirror of often-overlooked domestic trauma.

These three films—*Pieces of a Woman*, *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts*, and *Mustang*—utilize the female gaze to empathetically present women's trauma. *WATI* differentiates itself by combining intense visual intimacy and the limitations of domestic space as a metaphor for patriarchy, delivering a dense psychological resonance without relying on action narratives or extensive dialogue, thereby enriching the diversity of cinematic approaches in addressing women's trauma.

CONCLUSION

The female gaze in cinematography facilitates the construction of a transformative narrative framework by centering the lived experiences of domestic violence survivors through subjective female perspectives. The analytical engagement with *WATI* demonstrates that elements such as asymmetrical framing, extended close-ups, low-key lighting, and passive body gestures function primarily as narrative instruments, rather than mere aesthetic features, positioning Wati's body as a visual locus of trauma and resistance. By integrating practice-based filmmaking with critical reflection, this study advances the theoretical discourse on the female gaze, underscoring the importance of authentic female subjectivity and deploying domestic spatial symbolism as an index of patriarchal constraints. These findings urge filmmakers to eschew sensationalized depictions of violence in favor of approaches that foreground psychological complexity and promote social advocacy. Building on these insights, future research should investigate how the female gaze operates across diverse cultural contexts, cinematic genres, and modes of spectatorship. Comparative studies might examine the intersection of the female gaze with other marginalized perspectives, or the effectiveness of alternative visual strategies in fostering empathy and mobilizing audiences toward advocacy. Further interdisciplinary inquiry is warranted to explore the potential of practice-based cinematic methodologies in articulating complex forms of trauma and agency, thereby enriching both theoretical and practical engagements with gendered visual narratives.

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