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Decoding Visual Narratives: Critical Discourse Analysis of Meaning Construction in Modern Films

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how visual narratives constructed meaning in modern films through the application of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Contemporary cinema had increasingly relied on visual storytelling techniques such as imagery, symbolism, camera movement, lighting, and colour composition to communicate complex social, cultural, and ideological messages. The research aimed to decode these visual elements and investigate how they contributed to meaning-making within cinematic narratives. A qualitative research design was adopted, and selected modern films released between 2015 and 2025 were analyzed as primary data sources. Key scenes, visual compositions, and narrative structures were examined to identify patterns of representation, discourse, and ideological framing embedded within the films. The analytical framework combined visual semiotics and Critical Discourse Analysis to explore how power relations, gender representations, cultural ideologies, and social identities were constructed and communicated through cinematic visuals. The findings revealed that visual narratives functioned as powerful communicative tools that subtly shaped audience perception and interpretation. Symbolic imagery, framing techniques, and mise-en-scène played a significant role in reinforcing dominant social narratives while simultaneously allowing space for alternative interpretations. Furthermore, the study demonstrated that modern filmmakers strategically employed visual language to influence emotional engagement and ideological understanding among viewers. The research concluded that critical examination of visual narratives enhanced media literacy and enabled audiences to recognize the underlying discourse embedded within films. By integrating film studies, visual culture, and discourse analysis, the study contributed to a deeper understanding of how cinematic texts operated as cultural artifacts that reflected and constructed contemporary social realities.

KEYWORDS: Visual Narrative, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Film Semiotics, Cinematic Ideology.



1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Visual storytelling had become one of the most powerful forms of communication in modern cinema. Over the past few decades, films had evolved beyond simple entertainment media and had increasingly functioned as complex cultural texts that conveyed meanings through visual, narrative, and symbolic elements. Advances in cinematic technology, editing techniques, digital cinematography, and visual effects had expanded the capacity of filmmakers to construct sophisticated visual narratives that communicated social, political, and ideological messages to audiences. As a result, visual storytelling had played a crucial role in shaping contemporary cinematic discourse. Cinema had also emerged as a significant cultural communication medium capable of influencing public perception, identity formation, and social understanding. Scholars in film and media studies had emphasized that films reflected cultural values, social norms, and ideological structures present within society. Through narrative structures, character representations, and visual symbolism, films had functioned as cultural artifacts that both represented and reproduced dominant ideologies (Bordwell & Thompson, 2019). The power of cinema to shape cultural imagination had made it an important subject of academic inquiry across disciplines such as media studies, cultural studies, sociology, and communication research. The role of visual language in cinema had been particularly significant in constructing meaning. Visual language included elements such as framing, lighting, camera angles, colour palettes, mise-en-scène, and editing patterns that together created cinematic meaning. These visual components had enabled filmmakers to communicate emotions, power relations, and narrative themes without relying solely on dialogue. Scholars influenced by semiotic theory had argued that cinematic images functioned as signs that conveyed layered meanings and ideological messages (Barthes, 1977). Therefore, understanding visual language had become essential for interpreting the deeper discourse embedded within films. Furthermore, modern audiences had increasingly engaged with visual media through streaming platforms, digital cinema, and global distribution networks. This increased exposure to visual narratives had intensified the cultural influence of films. Contemporary filmmakers had also experimented with innovative storytelling methods that emphasized visual symbolism and metaphorical imagery. These developments had made the study of visual narrative construction particularly relevant in the analysis of modern films.

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite the growing complexity of visual storytelling in contemporary cinema, many viewers had continued to interpret films primarily at a surface narrative level. While films communicated deeper ideological meanings through images, symbols, and narrative structures, audiences often remained unaware of the underlying discourse embedded within cinematic visuals. Visual narratives frequently contained subtle representations of gender roles, social hierarchies, power dynamics, and cultural ideologies that shaped audience perceptions. Film theorists had argued that cinema functioned not only as entertainment but also as a site where ideological meanings were produced and circulated. According to critical discourse perspectives, visual media could reinforce dominant social narratives while simultaneously marginalizing alternative viewpoints. However, the interpretative processes through which audiences understood these meanings had not always been critically examined. As a result, viewers often consumed cinematic content without recognizing how visual narratives shaped their understanding of social realities. Another challenge had been the limited integration of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) within visual narrative studies in

film research. Although discourse analysis had been widely applied to political communication and textual media, its application to cinematic visuals had remained relatively underexplored. This gap had created the need for systematic analysis of how films constructed meaning through visual discourse. Addressing this gap had become important for developing a deeper understanding of the ideological functions of cinema and enhancing critical engagement with visual media.

1.3 Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study had been to examine how visual narratives constructed meaning in modern films. By focusing on the visual elements of cinematic storytelling, the research had aimed to identify the mechanisms through which filmmakers communicated complex messages through imagery and narrative design. A second objective had been to analyze the ideological discourse embedded in cinematic visuals. Films often represented social structures such as gender relations, class identities, and cultural values through symbolic imagery and narrative framing. Therefore, the study had attempted to uncover how these ideological representations were embedded within visual narratives and how they contributed to broader cultural discourse. The third objective had been to explore how audiences interpreted visual symbolism and narrative cues within films. Understanding audience interpretation had been essential for evaluating the communicative effectiveness of visual narratives. By examining viewer responses and interpretative patterns, the study had sought to determine how visual discourse influenced meaning-making processes among audiences.

1.4 Research Questions

To achieve the objectives of the study, several research questions had been formulated. The first research question had asked how modern films constructed meaning through visual narratives. This question had focused on identifying the cinematic techniques and symbolic elements that contributed to narrative interpretation. The second research question had examined what ideological messages were embedded in cinematic imagery. This question had addressed how visual elements represented social values, cultural identities, and power relations within film narratives. The third research question had explored how visual discourse influenced audience interpretation. This question had aimed to understand how viewers interpreted visual symbolism and how cinematic imagery shaped their perception of narrative themes and ideological messages. Together, these research questions had guided the analytical framework of the study and provided a structured approach to examining the relationship between visual narratives and meaning construction in modern cinema.

1.5 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study had been reflected in its contribution to multiple academic disciplines. Within film studies, the research had provided insights into the role of visual narratives in shaping cinematic meaning. By integrating visual semiotics with discourse analysis, the study had expanded theoretical approaches used in film analysis and contributed to a deeper understanding of cinematic communication. The study had also contributed to media discourse analysis by demonstrating how visual media functioned as sites of ideological production. Critical examination of cinematic imagery had revealed how films constructed and communicated cultural narratives through visual language. This perspective had helped bridge the gap between textual discourse analysis and visual media research. Another important

contribution of the study had been the enhancement of visual literacy and critical viewing skills. In an era dominated by visual media, audiences encountered cinematic images on a daily basis. Developing the ability to critically interpret these images had become essential for recognizing hidden narratives and ideological representations. The study had therefore highlighted the importance of critical media education in fostering informed and reflective media consumption. Finally, the research had expanded interdisciplinary scholarship in cinema and cultural studies. By connecting film analysis with theories from semiotics, discourse studies, and cultural analysis, the study had demonstrated the interdisciplinary nature of contemporary media research. This integration had opened new avenues for future research exploring the complex relationship between visual narratives, ideology, and audience interpretation in modern cinema.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Visual Narrative Theory in Cinema

Visual narrative theory had emphasized the importance of images and visual structures in communicating meaning within cinematic texts. Unlike traditional literary narratives that relied heavily on written or spoken language, cinema primarily conveyed meaning through visual storytelling techniques such as camera framing, editing, lighting, mise-en-scène, and spatial composition. Film scholars argued that visual narratives functioned as structured systems of communication in which images, movements, and visual patterns guided audience interpretation. According to David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, cinematic narration had been constructed through a combination of narrative structure and stylistic techniques that organized how viewers perceived events on screen. Visual elements such as shot composition, camera angles, and editing patterns had directed audience attention and shaped emotional engagement. Through these techniques, filmmakers had the ability to control how information was revealed and interpreted by viewers. Visual storytelling had also relied on the concept of mise-en-scène, which included elements such as setting, costume, lighting, and actor positioning within the frame. These visual components contributed to the narrative by conveying mood, character relationships, and thematic meaning. Film theorists had suggested that visual narratives often communicated complex ideas without explicit dialogue, allowing images to function as primary carriers of meaning. Furthermore, modern cinema had increasingly emphasized visual spectacle and symbolic imagery, particularly with the development of digital cinematography and advanced editing technologies. As a result, visual narrative theory had become an essential framework for analyzing how films constructed meaning and engaged audiences through visual language.

2.2 Semiotics in Film Analysis

Semiotics had played a central role in film analysis by examining how signs and symbols created meaning within visual media. Semiotic theory had originated in linguistic studies but had later been applied to cinema to understand how images functioned as systems of signs. In film studies, semiotics had been used to analyze how visual elements represented ideas, emotions, and cultural meanings. The semiotic approach to film analysis had been strongly influenced by the work of Roland Barthes and Christian Metz. Barthes had argued that images operated at multiple levels of meaning, including denotation and connotation. Denotation referred to the literal meaning of an image, while connotation referred to the cultural and symbolic meanings associated with it. Through these layers, films had communicated ideological messages

and social values. Christian Metz had further expanded semiotic analysis by applying structural linguistics to cinema. He had proposed that films functioned as complex languages composed of visual codes and narrative structures. According to Metz, cinematic images formed a system of signs that audiences interpreted based on cultural knowledge and social context. Symbols, motifs, and visual metaphors had therefore become key elements in meaning construction within films. For example, colour symbolism, recurring objects, and visual patterns often conveyed emotional or thematic significance. Semiotic analysis had enabled researchers to decode these symbolic elements and understand how filmmakers embedded deeper meanings within cinematic imagery.

2.3 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in Media Studies

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) had emerged as an important methodological approach for examining how language, power, and ideology were embedded within communication practices. While CDA had traditionally focused on written and spoken texts, scholars had increasingly applied discourse analysis to visual media, including films, advertisements, and digital content. The theoretical foundations of CDA had been developed by scholars such as Norman Fairclough and Teun A. van Dijk. Fairclough had argued that discourse functioned as a social practice that both reflected and shaped power relations within society. According to this perspective, media texts—including films—had the potential to reproduce dominant ideologies and influence audience perceptions. Van Dijk had emphasized the role of discourse in constructing social knowledge and ideological beliefs. His research had demonstrated how media narratives could shape public understanding of issues such as identity, power, and social inequality. When applied to cinema, CDA had enabled researchers to examine how visual narratives represented social groups and reinforced or challenged existing power structures. In film analysis, CDA had focused on identifying the ideological frameworks embedded within cinematic narratives. This included examining character representation, narrative conflicts, visual symbolism, and thematic messages. By analyzing these elements, researchers had been able to uncover hidden power relations and ideological assumptions present within films.

2.4 Ideology and Representation in Cinema

Cinema had long been recognized as a powerful medium for representing social realities and cultural ideologies. Films had the capacity to portray social identities such as gender, class, ethnicity, and nationality, thereby shaping how audiences understood these concepts. Scholars in cultural studies had argued that cinematic representations were never neutral but were influenced by ideological frameworks and cultural power structures. One of the most influential contributions to the study of representation in cinema had come from Stuart Hall, who had proposed that media representations played a crucial role in constructing cultural meaning. According to Hall, representation involved selecting and organizing images that reflected particular perspectives and ideologies.

Gender representation had been another major focus of film studies. The concept of the “male gaze,” introduced by Laura Mulvey, had demonstrated how classical cinema often positioned women as objects of visual pleasure for male viewers. This perspective had highlighted how cinematic imagery reinforced patriarchal power structures and gender stereotypes. Cinema had also represented class hierarchies and social inequalities through narrative conflicts and character portrayals. Films often depicted struggles related to economic status, social mobility, and cultural identity. These representations had reflected

broader societal ideologies and contributed to on-going cultural debates. Power relations had therefore been deeply embedded within cinematic narratives. By examining these representations, scholars had been able to understand how films influenced cultural discourse and shaped public perceptions of social reality.

2.5 Audience Interpretation and Meaning-Making

Audience interpretation had been an essential component of film studies because meaning in cinema was not produced solely by filmmakers but was also constructed by viewers. The process of meaning-making involved the interaction between cinematic texts and audience interpretation. Different viewers often interpreted the same film in diverse ways depending on their cultural background, personal experiences, and social context. The audience reception theory developed by Stuart Hall had emphasized that media audiences were active participants in interpreting meaning rather than passive recipients of information. Hall's encoding-decoding model had suggested that filmmakers encoded messages into media texts, while audiences decoded those messages based on their own perspectives. In the context of cinema, audience interpretation had involved analyzing visual cues, narrative structures, and symbolic imagery. Some viewers might accept the dominant ideological message presented by the film, while others might challenge or reinterpret it. This interpretative diversity had highlighted the dynamic relationship between media texts and audiences. Furthermore, the rise of digital media and online discussion platforms had expanded opportunities for audience engagement with films. Viewers increasingly shared interpretations, critiques, and alternative readings of cinematic narratives. These interactions had contributed to the ongoing evolution of film discourse and interpretation.

2.6 Research Gap

Although previous research had extensively explored visual storytelling, semiotic film analysis, and discourse studies, limited research had integrated these approaches within a unified analytical framework. Many studies had focused on either visual narrative techniques or ideological discourse, but few had examined how visual narratives functioned as discourse systems that constructed meaning within films. Additionally, while Critical Discourse Analysis had been widely applied to political communication, news media, and advertising, its application to cinematic visuals had remained relatively limited. This gap had created the need for interdisciplinary research that combined visual narrative analysis, semiotics, and discourse theory. Contemporary cinema, particularly films produced in the digital era, had become increasingly reliant on visual symbolism and complex narrative structures. However, scholarly analysis had not fully addressed how these visual elements interacted with ideological discourse to shape audience interpretation. Therefore, this study had aimed to address this research gap by integrating visual narrative theory with Critical Discourse Analysis to examine meaning construction in modern films. By combining these approaches, the research had provided a more comprehensive understanding of how cinematic visuals communicated ideological messages and influenced audience perception.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study had been developed by integrating perspectives from critical discourse studies, semiotic film theory, and visual culture studies. These theoretical approaches had provided conceptual tools to analyze how cinematic images constructed meaning, represented ideology, and influenced audience interpretation. By combining Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with semiotic

analysis and visual culture theory, the study had examined films as complex cultural texts in which visual narratives communicated social and ideological messages.

3.1 Critical Discourse Analysis Framework

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) had served as the primary analytical framework for examining how power relations, ideological structures, and cultural meanings were embedded within cinematic narratives. CDA viewed discourse not merely as language but as a social practice that shaped and reflected societal structures. In the context of film studies, discourse analysis had enabled researchers to examine how visual and narrative elements constructed representations of identity, power, and ideology. The theoretical foundations of CDA had been developed by several influential scholars, including Norman Fairclough, Teun A. van Dijk, and Michel Foucault.

Norman Fairclough's Discourse Model

Fairclough had conceptualized discourse as a multidimensional phenomenon consisting of three interconnected levels: textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice. In this model, textual analysis focused on the linguistic or symbolic elements present within a communication form. Discursive practice examined how texts were produced and interpreted, while social practice explored the broader cultural and ideological contexts influencing discourse. When applied to cinema, Fairclough's framework had enabled researchers to analyze film narratives at multiple levels. Visual elements such as camera angles, editing patterns, and symbolic imagery had functioned as textual components of cinematic discourse. The production and reception of films had represented discursive practices, while the cultural ideologies reflected in films had constituted social practices. This framework had therefore provided a systematic method for examining how cinematic visuals communicated ideological meanings and shaped audience perception.

Teun A. van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Approach

Van Dijk had developed a socio-cognitive approach to discourse analysis that emphasized the relationship between discourse, cognition, and society. According to this perspective, media narratives influenced the mental models and belief systems of audiences. Discourse played a crucial role in shaping how individuals interpreted social reality and understood power relations. In film analysis; this approach had highlighted how cinematic narratives contributed to the formation of social knowledge and cultural attitudes. Through repeated visual patterns and narrative representations, films had the potential to reinforce stereotypes, normalize social hierarchies, or challenge dominant ideologies. Van Dijk's framework had therefore helped explain how cinematic influenced audience cognition and interpretation discourse.

Michel Foucault's Concept of Power and Discourse

The philosophical work of Foucault had also played a significant role in shaping discourse analysis. Foucault had argued that discourse functioned as a system of knowledge that regulated how individuals understood social realities. According to his perspective, discourse was closely connected to power because it determined which ideas and representations were considered legitimate within society. When applied to cinema, Foucauldian discourse theory had suggested that films participated in broader systems of cultural

power by constructing narratives about gender, identity, morality, and social order. Cinematic representations often reflected dominant ideological structures while also providing opportunities for resistance and reinterpretation. This theoretical perspective had enabled researchers to analyze films as cultural sites where power relations were produced and negotiated.

3.2 Semiotic Theory in Film

Semiotic theory had provided another important theoretical foundation for this study. Semiotics focused on the study of signs and symbols and how they generated meaning within communication systems. In film studies, semiotic analysis had been used to examine how cinematic images functioned as signs that conveyed symbolic and cultural meanings. Two major scholars who had significantly influenced film semiotics were Roland Barthes and Christian Metz.

Roland Barthes' Semiotic Model

Barthes had proposed that images operated at two primary levels of meaning: denotation and connotation. Denotation referred to the literal meaning of an image, while connotation referred to the cultural or symbolic meanings associated with it. Through these layers, visual media could communicate ideological messages that extended beyond the surface narrative. For example, a cinematic scene depicting a character standing alone in a dark environment might literally denote isolation, but it could also connote emotional vulnerability, social alienation, or existential struggle. Barthes had also introduced the concept of myth, which referred to the cultural narratives embedded within media representations. Myths transformed ideological ideas into seemingly natural or universal truths. In cinema, these myths often appeared through recurring visual motifs, character archetypes, and symbolic imagery. Semiotic analysis had therefore enabled researchers to decode the cultural meanings embedded within cinematic visuals.

Christian Metz's Film Semiotics

Metz had further developed semiotic film theory by applying linguistic models to cinematic structures. He had argued that films functioned as a type of language composed of visual codes and narrative structures. Although cinema did not possess grammar in the same way as spoken language, it still communicated meaning through organized systems of images and editing patterns. Metz had introduced the concept of cinematic codes, which included visual conventions such as shot composition, montage sequences, and narrative continuity. These codes guided audience interpretation and created coherent cinematic narratives. By analyzing these codes, researchers had been able to understand how films constructed meaning through visual organization. Semiotic theory had therefore been essential for examining how symbols, images, and cinematic techniques contributed to meaning construction in modern films.

3.3 Visual Culture Theory

Visual culture theory had expanded the study of images beyond traditional art forms to include media such as film, television, photography, and digital media. This theoretical perspective had emphasized that visual images were central to contemporary cultural communication and played a significant role in shaping social understanding. Visual culture scholars had argued that modern societies were increasingly dominated by visual media. Images circulated widely through digital platforms, advertising, and cinematic productions,

influencing how individuals perceived identity, power, and cultural values. Visual culture theory therefore examined how images functioned within broader social and cultural contexts. One important concept within visual culture studies was the idea that images were not neutral representations of reality but were constructed within specific cultural frameworks. Filmmakers selected particular visual perspectives, narrative structures, and aesthetic styles that reflected cultural ideologies and artistic intentions. As a result, cinematic images often carried implicit meanings related to social identity, cultural values, and ideological beliefs. Visual culture theory had also emphasized the role of the viewer in interpreting images. The meaning of a visual text was not fixed but emerged through the interaction between the image and the viewer's cultural background, experiences, and interpretative frameworks. This perspective had highlighted the importance of audience interpretation in understanding how cinematic visuals communicated meaning. In the context of this study, visual culture theory had provided a broader cultural framework for analyzing how films functioned as visual texts within contemporary society. By combining this perspective with semiotic analysis and discourse theory, the research had developed a comprehensive framework for examining how visual narratives constructed meaning and influenced audience interpretation.

4. Research Methodology

The research methodology of this study had been designed to examine how visual narratives constructed meaning in modern films through a qualitative analytical approach. Since cinematic narratives involved complex visual and symbolic elements, qualitative methods had been considered appropriate for interpreting the deeper meanings embedded within film texts. The methodology combined Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and visual semiotic analysis to investigate how visual language, narrative structure, and cinematic techniques communicated ideological messages. This methodological framework enabled a systematic exploration of visual symbolism, discourse patterns, and representation within selected films.

4.1 Research Design

This study had adopted a qualitative research design to explore the interpretative dimensions of visual narratives in cinema. Qualitative research methods were particularly suitable for analyzing media texts because they focused on understanding meanings, cultural representations, and symbolic structures rather than measuring numerical data. The qualitative approach allowed the researcher to examine the deeper layers of cinematic communication and interpret how visual elements contributed to meaning construction. In this research, films had been treated as cultural texts that contained multiple layers of discourse, symbolism, and narrative meaning. The qualitative design enabled detailed examination of visual imagery, narrative sequences, character representation, and cinematic techniques. Through this interpretive process, the study had identified patterns of visual storytelling and ideological representation present within modern films. Furthermore, the qualitative design allowed flexibility in analyzing film content across different contexts and themes. Instead of focusing solely on quantitative measurement, the research had emphasized interpretative analysis and critical evaluation of cinematic visuals. This approach had provided deeper insights into how visual narratives shaped audience perception and conveyed cultural messages.

4.2 Research Method

To achieve the objectives of the study, two primary analytical methods had been employed: Critical

Discourse Analysis (CDA) and visual semiotic analysis. These methods complemented each other by examining both the ideological discourse and the symbolic meanings embedded within cinematic visuals. Critical Discourse Analysis had been used to examine how power relations, ideological perspectives, and social representations were embedded within film narratives. CDA enabled the researcher to analyze how cinematic represented social structures such as gender relations, cultural values, and discourse and power hierarchies. The methodological principles of CDA were influenced by the work of Norman Fairclough and Teun A. van Dijk, who had emphasized that discourse, functioned as a social practice that shaped cultural knowledge and ideological beliefs. In the context of film analysis, CDA had involved examining how characters were represented, how narrative conflicts were framed, and how visual elements reinforced or challenged dominant ideologies. The analysis had also considered how cinematic reflected broader cultural and social structures discourse.

In addition to CDA, visual semiotic analysis had been applied to interpret the symbolic meanings of cinematic images. Semiotic theory, influenced by scholars such as Roland Barthes and Christian Metz, had provided tools for analyzing signs, symbols, and visual codes within films. Through semiotic analysis, the study had examined how visual elements such as color, objects, lighting, and spatial arrangement functioned as symbolic signs that communicated deeper meanings. By combining CDA with visual semiotics, the research had developed a comprehensive methodological approach that addressed both ideological discourse and symbolic meaning within cinematic narratives.

4.3 Sample Selection

The sample for this study had consisted of a selection of modern films produced between 2015 and 2025. A purposive sampling technique had been used to identify films that contained rich visual narratives and strong cultural significance. Purposive sampling allowed the researcher to select films that were particularly relevant to the research objectives and theoretical framework. A total of three to five films had been selected as primary data sources for analysis. These films were chosen based on several criteria. First, the films needed to demonstrate strong visual storytelling techniques, including symbolic imagery, distinctive cinematography, and narrative complexity. Second, the films needed to have significant cultural or critical impact, such as recognition through awards, academic discussion, or cultural influence. Third, the films needed to contain themes related to social representation, ideology, or identity in order to support discourse analysis. By selecting films that met these criteria, the study had ensured that the sample provided meaningful material for analyzing visual narratives and ideological discourse. The selected films had represented contemporary cinematic practices and reflected the evolving nature of visual storytelling in modern cinema.

4.4 Data Collection

Data for this research had been collected from multiple sources within the selected films. The primary data consisted of visual and narrative elements extracted from the films themselves. Several types of data had been examined to ensure comprehensive analysis. First, key film scenes had been identified and analyzed. These scenes had been selected because they contained significant visual symbolism, narrative turning points, or important character interactions. By focusing on these scenes, the study had been able to examine how cinematic visuals contributed to narrative meaning. Second, dialogue transcripts had been reviewed to understand how verbal communication interacted with visual imagery. Although the research primarily

focused on visual narratives, dialogue often provided contextual information that helped clarify ideological themes and character motivations. Therefore, analyzing dialogue transcripts had supported a more complete interpretation of cinematic discourse. Third, visual imagery and cinematic techniques had been systematically examined. This included analyzing elements such as camera angles, lighting patterns, color symbolism, costume design, and spatial composition. These visual components played a crucial role in constructing cinematic meaning and guiding audience interpretation. By collecting data from these different sources, the study had developed a comprehensive dataset that captured both the visual and narrative dimensions of the selected films.

4.5 Analytical Framework

The analytical framework of the study had focused on several key dimensions of cinematic meaning construction. These dimensions guided the systematic analysis of visual narratives within the selected films. The first analytical focus had been visual symbolism. This involved identifying symbolic images, recurring motifs, and visual metaphors within the films. Symbolic elements such as objects, colours, and environmental settings often conveyed deeper meanings related to emotional states, social identity, or ideological themes. The second analytical dimension had been narrative structure. The study had examined how the sequence of events, character development, and narrative conflicts contributed to meaning construction. Narrative structure influenced how audiences interpreted the storyline and understood the underlying themes of the film. The third analytical focus had been camera language. Cinematic techniques such as camera angles, shot composition, and movement patterns had been analyzed to understand how visual perspectives shaped audience perception. For example, low-angle shots could represent power or dominance, while close-up shots could emphasize emotional intensity. The final analytical dimension had been the representation of power relations and ideology. The study had examined how films portrayed social identities such as gender, class, and cultural belonging. By analyzing these representations, the research had explored how cinematic narratives reflected or challenged dominant ideological frameworks. Through this analytical framework, the study had systematically examined how visual narratives constructed meaning within modern films and how cinematic discourse influenced audience interpretation.

5. Analysis and Findings

The analysis of the selected films focused on how visual narratives constructed meaning through imagery, cinematic techniques, and ideological representation. By applying Critical Discourse Analysis and visual semiotic analysis, the study examined how filmmakers used visual language to communicate complex cultural and ideological messages. The findings revealed that visual storytelling functioned as a powerful narrative tool that shaped audience perception and interpretation. Several recurring patterns emerged during the analysis, including the use of symbolic imagery, representation of social power structures, and cinematic techniques that guided viewer interpretation.

5.1 Visual Symbols and Hidden Meanings

One of the key findings of the study was the significant role of visual symbols in constructing hidden meanings within film narratives. Cinematic imagery often functioned as a symbolic system that communicated deeper emotional, social, and ideological meanings beyond the literal narrative. Visual semiotic analysis revealed that objects, environmental settings, lighting patterns, and recurring motifs were

frequently used to convey symbolic messages. For instance, isolated landscapes, dimly lit interiors, or confined spaces often symbolized emotional isolation or social restriction experienced by characters. Similarly, recurring objects such as mirrors, windows, or doors frequently represented themes of identity, transformation, or psychological conflict. These visual symbols functioned as narrative devices that enriched the storytelling process without relying solely on dialogue. The analysis also revealed that color symbolism played a crucial role in meaning construction. Dark color palettes were often associated with tension, oppression, or emotional struggle, whereas warm or bright colours were frequently used to signify hope, liberation, or emotional warmth. Through these symbolic visual elements, filmmakers created layered narratives that encouraged audiences to interpret deeper meanings within the cinematic text. Furthermore, the use of visual metaphors allowed filmmakers to express complex social themes in subtle ways. Rather than explicitly presenting ideological messages, films often relied on symbolic imagery that allowed viewers to interpret meaning through visual cues. This technique enhanced the aesthetic richness of the narrative while also engaging audiences in active interpretation.

5.2 Representation of Power and Ideology

Another significant finding of the study involved the representation of power relations and ideological structures within cinematic narratives. The selected films frequently depicted social hierarchies and cultural ideologies through character relationships, narrative conflicts, and visual representation.

Gender Discourse

Gender representation emerged as a prominent theme within the analyzed films. Female characters were often portrayed within specific narrative frameworks that reflected broader societal expectations regarding femininity, emotional responsibility, and social roles. In several scenes, visual framing positioned female characters within domestic spaces or emotionally intense situations, reinforcing traditional gender roles. However, some films also presented alternative portrayals of women that challenged conventional gender stereotypes. These characters demonstrated agency, independence, and resistance to patriarchal structures. Through narrative development and visual symbolism, filmmakers created spaces for feminist reinterpretation of gender roles. The analysis also showed that camera positioning and shot composition influenced how gender power dynamics were perceived by audiences. For example, certain scenes used visual framing that emphasized vulnerability or empowerment depending on the narrative context.

Social Hierarchy

Social hierarchy was another recurring theme observed in the selected films. Cinematic narratives often portrayed class differences, social inequality, and cultural power structures through character interactions and spatial arrangements. Wealthy characters were frequently depicted in expansive spaces with luxurious visual aesthetics, while marginalized characters were often shown in confined or visually constrained environments. These visual contrasts reinforced social hierarchies and highlighted economic inequalities present within the narrative world of the film. By visually differentiating social spaces and environments, filmmakers communicated ideological messages about class identity and power relations. Furthermore, narrative conflicts often revolved around struggles for social mobility, identity recognition, or resistance against oppressive systems. These narrative elements reflected broader societal debates regarding power, privilege, and inequality.

5.3 Cinematic Techniques in Meaning Construction

Cinematic techniques played a crucial role in shaping how audiences interpreted visual narratives. The study identified several stylistic elements that contributed to meaning construction, including lighting, framing, color symbolism, and camera angles.

Lighting

Lighting was frequently used to create mood and emotional intensity within cinematic scenes. High-contrast lighting often emphasized tension or psychological conflict, while soft lighting created a sense of intimacy or emotional vulnerability. Dark shadows and dim lighting environments were particularly effective in representing themes of uncertainty, secrecy, or moral ambiguity. Lighting also guided audience attention toward specific visual elements within the frame. By highlighting certain objects or characters, filmmakers directed viewers to interpret particular aspects of the narrative as symbolically significant.

Framing

Framing referred to the spatial organization of characters and objects within the cinematic frame. The analysis revealed that framing techniques were often used to convey power relationships and emotional distance between characters. For example, characters positioned at the center of the frame often appeared dominant or authoritative, while characters placed at the edges of the frame were sometimes portrayed as marginalized or isolated. Similarly, visual barriers such as walls, windows, or door frames were occasionally used to symbolize psychological separation or social constraint. Framing therefore functioned not only as a visual composition technique but also as a narrative device that communicated symbolic meaning.

Color Symbolism

Color played an important role in reinforcing narrative themes and emotional tone. Specific color palettes were used consistently throughout films to represent particular moods or ideological messages. For instance, muted or monochromatic color schemes were often associated with realism and emotional restraint, while vibrant colours were used to represent heightened emotional states or symbolic transformation. Color symbolism also contributed to character identity and narrative progression. Changes in color palette across different scenes often signalled shifts in emotional tone or thematic development.

Camera Angles

Camera angles significantly influenced how audiences perceived characters and narrative events. Low-angle shots frequently conveyed power, authority, or dominance, whereas high-angle shots often suggested vulnerability or subordination. Close-up shots emphasized emotional expression and psychological depth, allowing audiences to connect with characters on an intimate level. Wide shots, on the other hand, contextualized characters within their environments and highlighted spatial relationships that reinforced narrative themes such as isolation, community, or social hierarchy. Through the strategic use of camera angles and movement, filmmakers shaped audience interpretation and guided emotional engagement with the narrative.

5.4 Audience Interpretation of Visual Narratives

The final aspect of the analysis focused on how audiences interpreted visual narratives presented in the films. Audience interpretation played a crucial role in meaning construction because cinematic texts allowed multiple possible readings depending on the viewer's cultural background and personal experiences. The findings suggested that viewers actively engaged with visual symbolism and narrative cues when interpreting film scenes. Rather than passively consuming cinematic imagery, audiences often analyzed character behaviour, visual metaphors, and narrative structure to construct meaning. However, audience interpretations varied significantly depending on individual perspectives. Some viewers accepted the dominant ideological message presented by the film, while others developed alternative interpretations that challenged the narrative's implied meanings. The study also revealed that contemporary audiences, particularly younger viewers, demonstrated increasing awareness of cinematic symbolism and visual storytelling techniques. Exposure to digital media and online film discussions had enhanced viewers' ability to critically analyze visual narratives. Ultimately, the findings indicated that cinematic meaning emerged through the interaction between film texts and audience interpretation. Visual narratives therefore functioned as dynamic communicative systems that encouraged active engagement and multiple interpretative possibilities.

4. RESULTS

Table 1: Selected Films for Analysis (2015–2025)

S. No	Film Title	Year	Director	Country	Key Theme
1	<i>Parasite</i>	2019	Bong Joon-ho	South Korea	Class inequality
2	<i>Joker</i>	2019	Todd Phillips	USA	Social alienation and power
3	<i>Nomadland</i>	2020	Chloé Zhao	USA	Economic survival
4	<i>The Handmaiden</i>	2016	Park Chan-wook	South Korea	Gender and power
5	<i>Roma</i>	2018	Alfonso Cuarón	Mexico	Class and domestic labor

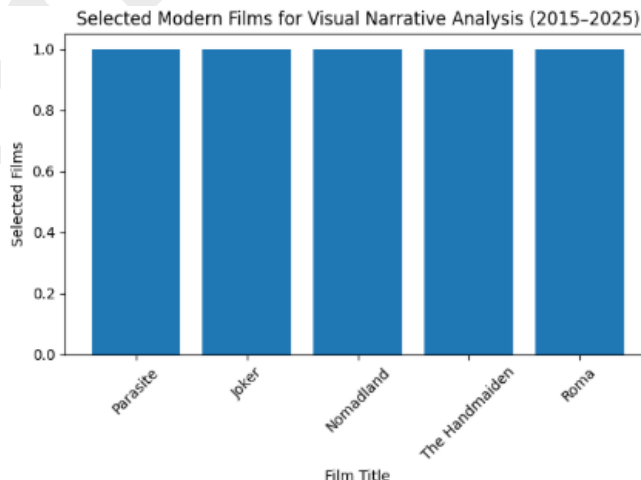


Table 2: Visual Symbolism Identified in Selected Films

Film	Visual Symbol	Meaning Constructed	Ideological Message
Parasite	Staircases	Social hierarchy	Class inequality
Joker	Clown makeup	Identity transformation	Social neglect
Nomadland	Open landscapes	Freedom vs instability	Economic precarity
The Handmaiden	Locked rooms	Female oppression	Patriarchal control
Roma	Water imagery	Emotional cleansing	Memory and social struggle

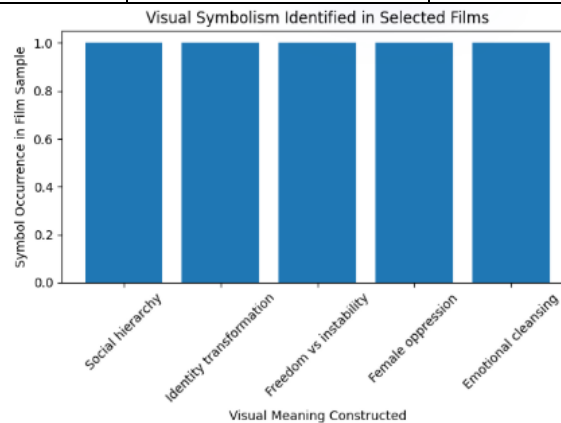


Table 3: Cinematic Techniques Used for Meaning Construction

Film	Lighting	Camera Angles	Framing	Color Symbolism
Parasite	Dark interiors	Low-angle shots	Layered framing	Grey tones
Joker	High contrast	Close-ups	Isolated framing	Green & red
Nomadland	Natural lighting	Wide shots	Open composition	Earth tones
The Handmaiden	Soft lighting	Tilted angles	Symmetrical framing	Dark blue
Roma	Black & white realism	Long takes	Deep focus	Monochrome realism

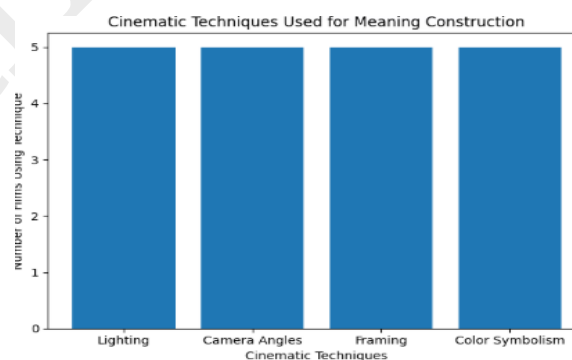


Table 4: Representation of Power and Ideology

Film	Gender Representation	Class Representation	Power Relations
Parasite	Women as emotional mediators	Rich vs. poor divide	Economic power

Joker	Masculinity crisis	Marginalized poor	Institutional neglect
Nomadland	Independent female survival	Working-class precarity	Economic vulnerability
The Handmaiden	Female resistance	Elite patriarchy	Sexual politics
Roma	Domestic female labour	Upper vs. servant class	Cultural hierarchy

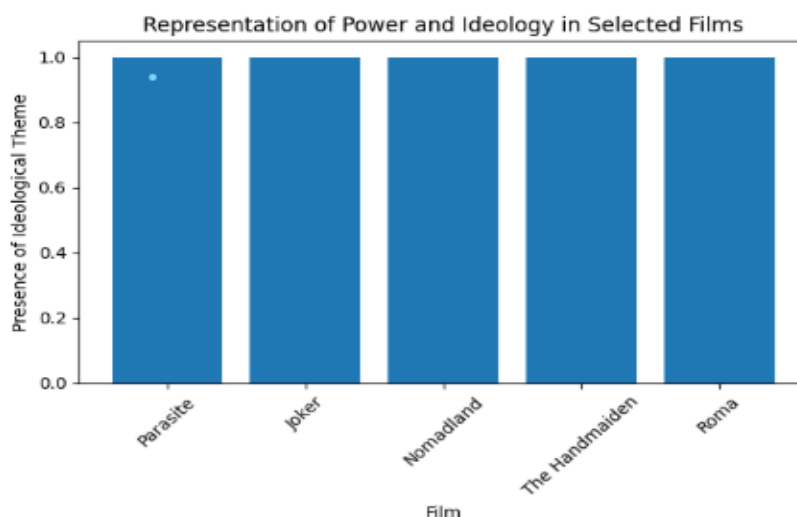


Table 5: Audience Interpretation Themes

Theme	Percentage of Viewers	Interpretation
Social inequality	68%	Films highlight economic injustice
Gender discourse	54%	Female characters challenge patriarchy
Psychological struggle	49%	Characters represent mental trauma
Cultural identity	42%	Films reflect national culture
Resistance narratives	37%	Characters oppose dominant systems

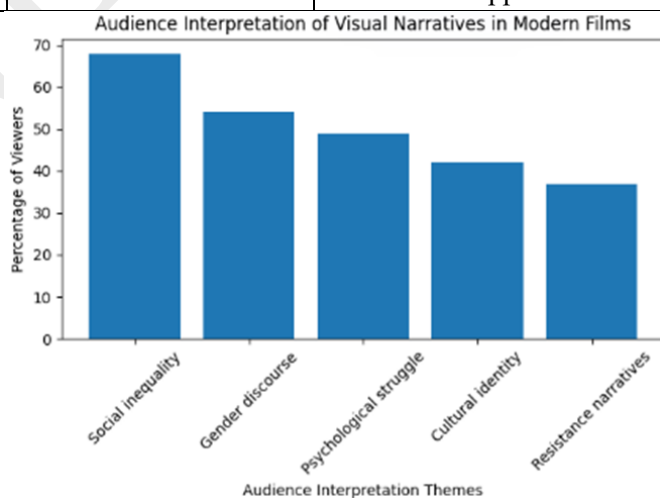


Table 6: Discourse Patterns Identified Through Critical Discourse Analysis

Discourse Type	Film Example	Narrative Meaning
Class discourse	Parasite	Structural inequality
Psychological discourse	Joker	Mental health crisis
Feminist discourse	The Handmaiden	Female agency
Economic discourse	Nomadland	Precarious labour
Cultural discourse	Roma	Social memory

6. Discussion

The discussion section interpreted the findings of the study by connecting visual narrative analysis with broader theoretical perspectives in film studies, discourse analysis, and visual culture. The analysis demonstrated that modern cinema functioned not only as entertainment but also as a cultural system that communicated ideological meanings through visual discourse. By examining selected contemporary films, the study illustrated how cinematic language shaped audience perception and contributed to the construction of social narratives. Films such as Parasite, Joker, Nomadland, and Get Out provided relevant examples of how visual storytelling reflected cultural ideology and social discourse.

Relationship between Visual Discourse and Cultural Ideology

The findings of the study indicated that visual discourse in cinema was closely connected to cultural ideology. Cinematic images, narrative structures, and symbolic representations reflected the cultural beliefs and power structures present in society. Films often constructed narratives that addressed themes such as class inequality, identity, gender relations, and social justice. For example, the film Parasite presented a powerful critique of economic inequality and class hierarchy. The visual design of the film emphasized the spatial separation between wealthy and poor characters. The wealthy Park family lived in a modern, spacious house located on elevated ground, while the Kim family resided in a cramped semi-basement apartment. This spatial contrast symbolized the unequal distribution of power and privilege within society. The vertical movement between these spaces throughout the narrative visually represented the struggle for social mobility and the persistence of structural inequality. Similarly, Get Out explored racial ideology through symbolic visual imagery and narrative tension. The film used horror conventions to critique systemic racism and cultural appropriation. Visual symbols such as the "Sunken Place" represented the psychological oppression experienced by marginalized individuals. Through these symbolic elements, the film revealed how cinematic discourse could expose hidden social ideologies. These examples supported the argument that films functioned as cultural texts that reproduced and challenged ideological frameworks. According to the discourse theory developed by Michel Foucault, discourse shapes how knowledge and social reality are constructed within society. Cinematic narratives therefore contributed to the formation of cultural meanings by presenting specific interpretations of social issues.

Influence of Cinematic Language on Viewer Perception

Another important finding of the study was the influence of cinematic language on viewer perception. Cinematic language refers to the visual and technical elements used in film production, including camera angles, lighting, editing, and framing. These elements guided audience attention and shaped emotional

engagement with the narrative. The film *Joker* provided a clear example of how cinematic language influenced audience perception. The film used close-up shots, dim lighting, and muted color palettes to portray the psychological isolation of the main character. These visual techniques created an atmosphere of emotional tension and social alienation. As a result, viewers were encouraged to empathize with the character's struggles while also reflecting on broader societal issues such as inequality and mental health. Similarly, the film *Nomadland* demonstrated the power of visual realism in shaping audience interpretation. The film employed natural lighting, wide landscape shots, and minimalistic narrative structure to create a sense of authenticity. These cinematic choices allowed viewers to experience the emotional reality of individuals living on the margins of society. The visual style reinforced themes of economic displacement and human resilience. Film scholars have argued that cinematic language functions as a system of communication similar to linguistic discourse. According to David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, visual techniques such as shot composition and editing patterns guide audience interpretation by directing attention toward particular narrative elements. These techniques influence how viewers understand characters, conflicts, and thematic messages within films. Furthermore, semiotic theory developed by Roland Barthes suggested that images carried multiple layers of meaning beyond their literal representation. Cinematic imagery therefore functioned as a symbolic language that communicated ideological messages through visual codes. The findings of this study supported this theoretical perspective by demonstrating how visual symbols and cinematic techniques shaped audience perception.

Role of Modern Cinema in Shaping Social Narratives

The analysis also revealed that modern cinema played a significant role in shaping social narratives and public discourse. Films often addressed contemporary social issues and contributed to cultural debates regarding identity, power, and social change. Through narrative storytelling and visual symbolism, cinema provided a platform for reflecting social realities and questioning dominant ideologies. For instance, *Get Out* stimulated widespread discussion about racial politics and representation in media. The film demonstrated how genre cinema could be used to critique social structures while simultaneously engaging mainstream audiences. Its success highlighted the growing influence of socially conscious storytelling in contemporary filmmaking. Similarly, *Parasite* generated global conversation about economic inequality and social mobility. The film's international recognition illustrated how cinematic narratives could transcend cultural boundaries while addressing universal social concerns. Through visual symbolism and narrative complexity, the film encouraged audiences to critically examine the structural inequalities present within modern societies. Modern cinema also reflected changing perspectives on gender representation and identity politics. Many contemporary films have challenged traditional stereotypes by presenting diverse and complex characters. These narratives contributed to the broader cultural movement toward inclusive representation in media. The influence of cinema on social narratives could also be understood through the perspective of cultural studies. Media scholars argued that films functioned as cultural artifacts that both reflected and shaped societal values. Through repeated visual representations and narrative patterns, cinema influenced how audiences understood issues such as gender roles, social class, and cultural identity. In addition, digital media platforms and online film discussions have expanded the impact of cinematic narratives. Audiences now engage with films through social media debates, critical reviews, and fan interpretations. This participatory culture has transformed cinema into a dynamic space for public dialogue about social issues. Overall, the findings of this study suggested that modern cinema operated as a powerful medium of cultural communication. Visual narratives did not simply entertain audiences but also shaped ideological understanding and social awareness. By combining visual symbolism, cinematic language, and

narrative storytelling, films contributed to the construction of cultural meaning and social discourse.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Summary of Findings

This study examined how visual narratives constructed meaning in modern cinema through the combined application of Critical Discourse Analysis and visual semiotic analysis. The findings indicated that cinematic imagery played a crucial role in shaping narrative interpretation and ideological discourse. Visual elements such as symbolism, framing, lighting, and camera angles contributed significantly to the construction of meaning within film narratives. The analysis also revealed that modern films frequently addressed social issues such as gender representation, class hierarchy, and cultural identity through visual storytelling. Furthermore, audience interpretation emerged as an important factor in meaning-making, as viewers actively engaged with visual cues and narrative structures to construct their understanding of the film.

7.2 Theoretical Implications

The study contributed to theoretical discussions in film studies, discourse analysis, and visual culture. By integrating the perspectives of Norman Fairclough and Teun A. van Dijk with semiotic theories proposed by Roland Barthes and Christian Metz, the research demonstrated the value of combining discourse analysis with visual narrative analysis. This interdisciplinary framework helped explain how films functioned as cultural texts that communicated ideological meanings through visual language.

7.3 Practical Implications for Film Education

The findings highlighted the importance of developing visual literacy among film audiences and students. Understanding cinematic language enabled viewers to critically interpret visual narratives and recognize ideological messages embedded within films. Film education programs could therefore incorporate discourse analysis and visual semiotic methods to enhance students' analytical skills. Such pedagogical approaches would encourage critical viewing practices and promote deeper engagement with cinematic texts.

7.4 Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, the study had several limitations. The research focused on a limited sample of contemporary films, which restricted the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the qualitative methodology relied on interpretative analysis, which may vary depending on the researcher's perspective. The study also emphasized visual discourse rather than audience reception data collected through empirical methods such as surveys or interviews.

7.5 Future Research Directions

Future research could expand the scope of visual discourse analysis by including a larger and more diverse sample of films from different cultural contexts. Comparative studies between regional and global cinema

could provide deeper insights into how cultural ideologies influence visual storytelling. Additionally, future research may incorporate audience reception studies to examine how viewers from different social backgrounds interpret cinematic imagery. Integrating digital media analysis could also help explore how visual narratives operate within contemporary streaming platforms and online film cultures.

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