



THE PSYCHOLOGIST’S GAZE AND ACTION IN TARSEM SINGH’S  
*THE CELL* (2000)

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><b>Article History:</b></p> <p>Received 15.08.2024 Accepted 15.10.2024 Published 15.10.2024</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b></p> <p><i>Gaze in Film, Gendered Performance, Freudian Scopophilia, Tarsem Singh’s The Cell</i></p>	<p><i>This study focuses on narrative construction in the cinema produced by visual images. The theoretical consideration is based on the “act of looking” which is presented in Laura Mulvey’s thesis, Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema (1975), particularly in the context of Freudian scopophilia. A character’s act of looking can be analyzed through gendered power in the fundamental structure between the male subject and the female object. This binary structure is specified in the field of oil paintings, especially nakedness since the early Renaissance as “men act, and women appear” in John Berger’s Ways of Seeing (1972). In this context, this study addresses a gap in the existing literature by analyzing Indian director Tarsem Singh’s The Cell from the point of view of how the perspectives on gendered performance are produced and how his work deconstructs this binary structure through the psychologist’s gaze and action. This film presents the protagonist, Catherine Deane, a psychologist as an action heroine in terms of postmodern artistic characteristics since she enters the subconscious of the criminal and deciphers the schizophrenic memories from her perspective. The boundaries between the real and unreal, the conscious and unconscious become fluid whereby the surrealistic landscape is lent to the objects that are set in the film’s visualization of dreams.</i></p>

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**Introduction**

The portrayal of women in films—and in a broader sense, in oil paintings since the early Renaissance—has historically shared one characteristic tendency a structure between the subject, including spectators who look, and the object who is looked at, setting a clear perspective. As it is said that “seeing comes before words” (Berger, 1972, 7), seeing has a strong impact in visual arts. The seeing subject attempts to establish and control the narratives. The medium of film is particularly influenced by this dynamic. Singh’s debut film, *The Cell* (USA, 2000), reflects this gendered issue in a deconstructive way, particularly because his films tend to feature women, minorities, and characters with special abilities as the protagonists who are seeing and constructing narratives. *The Cell* presents the female psychologist,

Catherine Deane, as a main character and visualizes the subconscious mind of the criminal from her perspective.

Another of Singh's films, *The Fall* (USA, 2006), represents the fictional tale of five brave men who combat a dictatorial order. This story is told by the hospitalized stuntman, Roy Walker, who creates the entire story as an omniscient narrator. *Mirror Mirror* (USA, 2012) is a creative adaptation of the Brothers Grimm's *Snow White* (1812). The female empowerment is achieved in the film through balancing between the ideology in the 19<sup>th</sup> century on submissive femininity and the modern values of woman's self-consciousness. Gilbert and Gubar (1979) analyzed their study of female literary figures in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). The female characters in their study are divided, fundamentally, into two categories: an idealized woman as the "angel of the house" and an opposite of this specific image as a "madwoman." The film, *Mirror Mirror*, creates a female character regarding her active and passive roles.

*The Cell* has similarities with *Mirror Mirror* in terms of the protagonists' characterization through the aspect of gaze. This film's protagonist, Catherine Deane, acts as an intelligent and brave psychologist. The specific construction of her gaze demonstrates the deconstructive feature of gendered powers with visual pleasure. Namely, in Laura Mulvey's gaze theory on narrative cinema, a power relationship exists between the viewing (male) subject and the viewed (female) object: "woman as image, man as bearer of the look" (Mulvey, 1975, 838). Films unconsciously structured in a patriarchal society allow the male protagonists to control events by using "the active power of the erotic look" (Mulvey, 1975, 838). This structure is reversed between female and male characters in Singh's film: the female psychologist is presented as a viewing subject, and the subconscious of the serial killer, Carl Rudolph Stargher, as a viewed object. From this perspective, this study addresses a gap in the existing literature by analyzing how the progressive roles of the psychologist are produced in *The Cell* through the use of the gaze.

### **Theoretical Framework: Perspectives on Freudian Scopophilia, Surrealistic Landscape, and Gender Roles in Films**

Singh's film *The Cell* has been studied academically in comparison with the fields of psychoanalysis and contemporary art painting. Engel (2021) analyzed Singh's film in the context of the description of the dreams compared with Wilhelm Papst's (1885–1967) *Geheimnisse einer Seele. Ein psychoanalytischer Film* (Germany, 1926), in which the dreams were visualized psychoanalytically for the first time in the history of cinema (Engel, 2021, 139). Starting with *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), Sigmund Freud published his psychoanalytic writings in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The medium of film was experimentally used to visualize the unconscious. In the context of the intense connection between films and dreams, short films lasting only one to three minutes had already been produced and thematized before the 1920s; almost 200 films (Engel, 2021, 137). Papst's film was psychologically deepened through the aspect of the anonymous protagonist N.'s struggle with jealousy for his wife's cousin. N. was married and had no child; when his wife became a gift from her cousin, N. felt jealous because his wife played the role of his mother as it is defined in the Oedipus complex. Psychologist, Dr. Orth, treated N. several months because N. had nightmares and developed a phobia for

knives. Papst did not directly transform Freud's pattern of the dream as a wish fulfillment into his film (Engel, 2021, 145). The film cannot be interpreted as a direct staging of Freud's psychoanalysis, nevertheless, the cinematic representation of the dreams includes psychoanalytical elements; sexual symbolism such as Campanile, a walking stick, fingers, glass tubes, and drumsticks were represented visually in relation to the narrative and N's memories in his childhood were situated from different temporal levels (Engel, 2021, 144–146). *The Cell* is selected in his study and connected with the tendency of postmodern films which deals with a cinematic representation of the dreams. It is pointed out that the film clearly does not directly deal with Freud's psychology; instead, it exhibits the following characteristics: 1. The psychologist enters in Stargher's schizophrenic dream as an action heroine. 2. The dream becomes more coherent with the main character who can follow the plan. 3. Through the new digital CGI technique, the mindscapes are effectively visualized (Engel, 2021, 163).

The characteristics of the film include the surreal setting of the objects in Stargher's schizophrenic dreams. Their carnivalesque, absurd, and grotesque images are interpreted by Butz (2008) in terms of surrealistic design which can also be found in Salvador Dali's paintings (Butz, 2008, 207–208). Especially, the dolls collected by Stargher obtained a meaning of fetishism and the partly erotic shots in the film could have similarities with the surrealistic paintings such as Félix Labisse's *Das Glück, geliebt zu werden* (1943), Hans Bellmer's *La Poupée* (1934), or Wilhelm Freddie's *Zola and Jeanne Rozérot* (1938) (Butz, 2008, 210–217). While Freud intended to unravel the unconscious and to give meaning to an array of dreams in his psychoanalytic therapy, the surrealists created their works to puzzle the border between real and unreal and created hybrid, fantastical objects.

Through citing mixed reviews about *The Cell*, from praises for the visuals (Ebert) to critiques for the similarities between its plot and the stories of Jonathan Demme's *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) (Brayton) and the Wachowski brothers' *The Matrix* (1999) (Hunter), Sanna (2018) underlined the film's "gorgeous visuals, stunning imagery, grotesque scenes and surreal landscapes [that] will not be easily forgotten by the spectators" (Sanna, 2018, 164). For instance, the first scene of the film in Edward's dream where the protagonist wearing a white dress walks alone through the desert is explained to contribute to creating powerful atmospheres from the beginning and the film itself has "a special predilection for the smooth transition from a frame of an object to the following one" (Sanna, 2018, 161). In the same scene at the beginning of the film, a dynamic horse ride by the protagonist in the desert instantly turns into a static object the moment after she dismounts the horse. The important images of the opening ten minutes in the desert are underlined as essential concepts for the whole film because the audience can learn with the opening that images construct the psychological narratives (Brayton). However, this point of view reveals a weakness in the film. While the use of images for the visualization of the unconscious is considered significant, the discrepancy between the story's structure and the images is pointed out as a problem. Namely, the film makes realistic causal relationships unclear; for instance, Catherine's light clothing contradicts the narrative structure in the murderer's subconscious (Lozito).

In this connection, there is a perspective that has not yet been analyzed in previous studies: the interpretation of *The Cell* from a gender role and perspective of using the gaze. As previously mentioned, the film is based on the schizophrenic memories that are formed with

the various surrealistic objects; thus, the psychologist's perspective is significant in this sense because the narrative is constructed through her looking at these objects to unravel the unconscious. John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972) points out that as it is obvious in the tradition of European oil painting from the 15<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, particularly in paintings on nakedness, the women as the objects are symbolically displayed in front of the spectator-owner. Hence, the structure of binary opposition between men and women exists in these paintings as the foundation of the visual realm. According to Berger, this structure can be expressed as follows: "One might simplify this by saying: *men act* and *women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor in the woman herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus, she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight" (Berger, 1972, 47). Oil paintings, unlike other forms of art such as poetry and music, can be possessed. Oil paintings have become a symbol of knowledge as well as wealth and play the role of stimulating the desire to own the image as a collection through its relations with the depicted objects. According to Lévi-Strauss, this inclination can be found particularly in "Renaissance painting [...] that was only possible because of the immense fortunes which were being amassed in Florence and elsewhere" (Berger, 1972, 86). Therefore, the "analogy between *possessing* and the way of seeing which is incorporated in oil painting" (Berger, 1972, 83) is obvious in this art tradition. The reason why the woman depicted shows a facial expression that seems to be flattering to the man who possesses the painting is because the painting is drawn mainly from the perspective of the viewer.

The analogical construction of the gaze in film is explored by Laura Mulvey's gaze theory (1975) based on Freud's psychoanalysis. Between oil paintings and shots in film are similarities regarding the gender discourse. The function of the castrated woman is fulfilled in the patriarchal unconscious through her display as an image in front of the audience since only the image can give order and meaning to phallogocentrism's world: "[Her lack of phallus] produces the phallus as a symbolic presence, it is her desire to make good the lack that the phallus signifies" (Mulvey, 1975, 833). According to Freud, scopophilia can be acknowledged not only in the act of looking as a source of pleasure but also in the pleasure of being looked at. Scopophilia is "essentially active" and "a close working [...] of the relationship between the active instinct and its further development in a narcissistic form" (Mulvey, 1975, 835). Based on this fundamental structure of scopophilia, the image of the female characters in film is produced to satisfy the desire for pleasurable looking. They respond to male narrative control and play roles that resonate with the male gaze. Since the audience psychologically identifies with the heroes, female characters become objects to be viewed by the male protagonist and the audience. Therefore, female characters are "isolated, glamorous, on display, sexualized" (Mulvey, 1975, 840). For example, *River of No Return* (1954) recognizes this gendered relationship in narrative cinema as a clear case. The film was set in Northwestern United States in 1875. Marilyn Monroe performed with the dance hall singer Kay Weston. According to Mulvey's analysis of the film, it satisfies a "primordial wish for pleasurable looking" by constructing the viewing male audiences and viewed hall singers.

Focused on the gendered roles, Singh's *The Cell* uses this binary perspective of subject and object on seeing in a deconstructive way. Namely, Catherine as a dream invader looks and

acts. She appears as an “action heroine” (Engel, 2021, 163), and Stargher’s dreams become objects to be experienced and analyzed. Hence, Catherine in *The Cell* controls narrative events by effectively using her gaze.

### **Catherine’s Gaze on Visualization of Domestic Violence and Schizophrenia in *The Cell***

*The Cell* visualizes a woman’s challenge in entering the criminal’s subconscious. The psychologist Catherine’s perspective dominates the story. Notably, she has the mental strength to view fearful things others do not want to see. Viewed objects evoke anxiety and are connected to a sense of pleasure because the subconscious is filled with Stargher’s multiple repressed emotions. His psychopathy in continuing the murders of his victims can be found in the domestic violence that he experienced in his childhood. By murdering women and making them his property dolls, he attempts to achieve dictatorial power as his father did. Stargher experienced the psychological model of Freud’s Oedipus complex – the desire to gain the mother and, simultaneously, to feel anxious about the superior father. According to Freud, a son’s love for his mother is explained as the wish to return and to repay her for the gift of life he received (Freud, 1910, 172). In other words, this mental structure as the parental complex arises from the desire to give his mother a child just like himself in order to express gratitude to his mother (Freud, 1910, 172). However, in the film, as Stargher cannot overcome the emotions in the Oedipus complex, he continues to kill women and make them static objects in the shape of dumb dolls.

Catherine enters Stargher’s subconscious thrice. When she first enters his schizophrenic mind, she looks at objects of Stargher’s sexual pleasure: one of them is a young, almost naked, dumb girl who sits surrounded by a deer, a symbol of submissiveness (Fig. 1). The collected dolls are displayed in a hall, the atmosphere of which can be associated with the Quay Brothers’ screen setting, e.g., the psychological undertones produced by the dolls in *Street of Crocodiles* (*Collected Short Films*) from 1986. The horrific and the uncanny atmospheres are distinct features. In relation to this perspective, the film *Street of Crocodiles* is said to have influenced the supernatural horror film *The Ring* (2002) (Momiya, 2026, 52). The dark blue girl (Fig. 1) symbolizes a victimized object of his sexual desire. Catherine views this scenery as an observing subject since she needs to reconstruct the reason for the patient’s schizophrenia. Therefore, a double-edged aspect of looking can be highlighted in this scene: on the one hand, the victim doll is viewed (and created) by Stargher through reflecting the radicalized violence in phallogentrism, on the other hand, it is discovered by the psychologist to be analyzed.

Stargher’s desire to see the collected naked dolls—in the reality of the film, to see dead women’s naked bodies—can be interpreted as a case of obsessive neurosis which is caused by the parental complex. His scopophilia, a troubling curiosity to see women’s bodies, is the result of anxiety toward his father whose domestic power he cannot overcome. The mental problem of obsessive neurosis towards the father is reconstructed by Freud in the case history of the Rat Man who experienced in his childhood his scopophilia to a very pretty young governess called Fräulein Peter (Freud, 1909, 160). Rat Man was afraid that if his sexual curiosity was satisfied, his father would die. The father’s role is here “an interferer with the patient’s sexual enjoyment” (Freud, 1909, 205). In this sense, because he is trapped by feelings for his father, he suffers from neurosis caused by the obsessive fear of his father’s death. Stargher’s case can be analyzed

as a radicalized form of this mental structure because by killing women and seeing their naked bodies, he hopes to be freed from the obsessive fear of his father.

Among his collected dolls, the psychologist looks at the shadow of a muscular woman who reflects his morbid aggression. Her body is associated with a trained bodybuilder who has an exaggerated bust, while her face is excessively made up (Fig. 2). The terrifying woman is an associate of the criminal whose physique symbolizes violence, and she takes Catherine away. This embodiment created through the excessive hybrid sexualities of man and woman symbolizes the insanity of abuse. Catherine's struggle with the collected dolls causes unsolvability that is visualized as the cell in which she is trapped and can neither verbally communicate with the real world, nor feel accurate human emotions (Fig. 3). Only her looking around emphasizes her crisis. In this scene about the cell, the way she uses her gaze shapes the narrative structure without verbal expressions.



Fig. 1 Catherine looks at the victims of Stargher's sexual pleasure (*The Cell*, 00:48:23).

Fig. 2 A muscular, aggressive woman lets Catherine fall down in a faint (*The Cell*, 00:48:39).

Fig. 3 Catherine's characteristic eye movement in the cell (*The Cell*, 01:00:44).

After this scene of viewing collected dolls, Catherine meets Carl, who is Stargher as a child, and experiences his father's domestic violence in memories of the past. She views this scene from the closest perspective, not from his father's perspective. As the camera closes Catherine's eyes, the scene marks her as a viewer (Fig. 4). Stargher's father abused Carl and his remarried wife through violence. Carl's biological mother did not appear in this scene of the domestic violence; however, she appears at the beginning of Stargher's second dream (Fig. 5). The mother's voices are heard as triple agony because the mother speaks out about the abuses of her husband and son imitated by the three figures: [The first mother] Have you seen him? My boy? My little one? His father took him from me. [The second mother] I spit it out my hole. Big deal. Don't mean anything. [The third mother] My child's an abomination. He has no soul (*The Cell*, 01:15:30–01:15:47). The gray sand set like waves and the black sky express melancholy, and the mother copied in three persons who look at the sky with their mouths open in pain echoes the image of the female victim, Julia Hickson, who is suffocating underwater in the reality of the film.

When Catherine enters Stargher's subconscious for the second time, her character is divided into two parts: good and evil. The following scene (Fig. 6) represents the evil personality of the psychologist who manipulates the narrative events with the male character, an FBI agent Peter Novak, through her gaze. Novak, her coworker, enters Stargher's subconscious to rescue Catherine because she is exploited by the criminal's egocentric mind and cannot recognize the border between the real and the unreal. The disappearance of strict boundaries between real and unreal is one of the contributing factors in producing the

surrealistic landscape. The scene in Figure 6 is connected to her sexual pleasure. Immediately after the scene in which she tortures Novak, she comes to her senses, worries about him, and tries to help him. As has been suggested regarding “the smooth transitions” of the scenes in the film (Sanna, 2018, 161), changeover between the real and the unreal is also fluid in this scene.

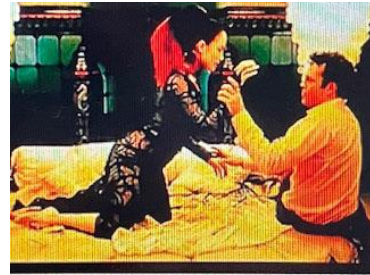
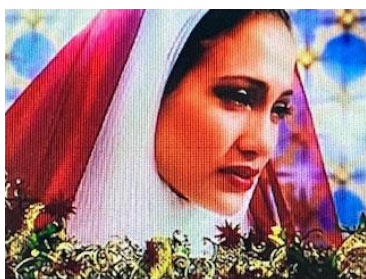


Fig. 4 Catherine looks at the scene of the domestic violence by Stargher's father (*The Cell*, 01:00:44).  
Fig. 5 Stargher's mother confesses to the existence of domestic violence as a victim (*The Cell*, 01:15:33).  
Fig. 6 The evil Catherine is manipulated in Stargher's subconscious and attempts to charm Novak for her sexual pleasure (*The Cell*, 01:17:14).

The last time she attempts to recognize Stargher's schizophrenic memories, the location changes to aesthetic scenery surrounded by vegetation. This unreal scene is framed by decorations that symbolize the narrative's climax. By reconstructing the patient's memories, this scene can be interpreted as a similar effect caused by Freud's therapy “talking cure” or “chimney sweeping” between a doctor and a patient (Figs. 7 and 8). Berta Pappenheim, known as Anna O., coined this therapy term (Breuer, 1895, 30). In joint research with Joseph Breuer in *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), Freud discovered that the pathological symptoms of hysteria can be cured if the repressed unconscious was verbalized and reconstructed, rather than being expressed as physical symptoms. Freud's therapy “talking cure” is practiced in *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (1905 [1901]), known as the case of Dora in which her dreams were analyzed as the source materials to heal her symptoms (Freud, 1905).

Stargher begins talking about one of his childhood memories connected to his father's domestic violence. This highlights that psychoanalytic therapy is necessary for the ultimate solution to the problem of his criminal behavior. The additional parallel to psychoanalytic therapy is the protagonist who looks at the patient and lets him talk about his repressed childhood experiences. Their facial expressions were mild in contrast to the brutality of the former scenes.



Figs. 7 and 8 Catherine, as a saint-dressed psychologist, is talking with the patient, Stargher (*The Cell*, 01:29:07-01:30:50).  
Fig. 9 “It” comes (*The Cell*, 01:31:50).

Through the story he tells in this analogical scene to psychological therapy, the significance of the verbal expression increases parallel to the visual expression. Stargher talks about a story from his childhood as follows:

[Stargher] *When I was a little boy...  
I found this bird. He was injured and had a broken leg or something. Well, my father found out that I had it. And I knew that he would do something horrible to it. It was just a matter of time. So I took it to the sink, and I—I held it under. It was better for the bird. I saved him.*  
[Catherine] *I can't do that, Carl. I won't.*  
[Carl] *It found me. It always finds me (The Cell, 01:29:07-01:30:50).*

The “it” in this quotation can be interpreted as symbolizing the dictatorial order that can result latently from domestic violence in daily life. Catherine and Carl observe how the dictatorial order obtains its shape from the water (Fig. 9). At first, it was a black cloak with individual prongs floating in the water, however, it gradually began to take the form of a human being that is Stargher in the unconscious dreams. In the last scene, Catherine changes from the psychoanalyst to an action heroine, inspired by the postmodern cinematic tendency, who defeats the dictatorial order through the sword.

## **Conclusion**

This paper examined the psychologist's gaze and action in *The Cell* based on Mulvey's consideration of the use of gaze in narrative cinema and Berger's analysis of the binary structure between men and women composed in oil paintings. The protagonist, Catherine, is visualized in this film as the viewing subject who reconstructs the narrative by entering the patient's schizophrenic memories. In the history of hysteria which began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, this mental illness was thought to be unique to women, except for Freud's cases of male hysteria. A structure between the subject as a conscious analyst and the object as an unconscious patient exists in the discourse of hysteria. According to Mulvey, women's desire to possess a penis, and at the same time, men's visual pleasure is influenced by women's display in narrative cinema because the castrated women's lack paradoxically produces the phallus as a symbolic presence. *The Cell* thematized the connection between film and dreams as had already begun in the history of cinema in the 1920s whereby *The Cell* created a modern image of a woman as a female psychologist through the deconstructive manner by crossing the perspectives on the viewing subject and the viewed object. Parallel to this aspect, Catherine was visualized as an action heroine who looked at a serial killer's subconscious and investigated the cause of murders; Stargher had the Oedipus complex in his adolescence that could not be overcome by anything in his life other than murder.

## **Filmography**

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*River of No Return*. Directed by Otto Preminger, performances by Robert Mitchum, Marilyn Monroe, Rory Calhoun, Tommy Rettig, Murvyn Vye, Douglas Spencer. 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox, 1954.



*The Cell*. Directed by Tarsem Singh, performances by Jennifer Lopez, Vincent D' Onofrio, Vince Vaughn. RadicalMedia, 2000.

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