



Amy Dunne, Spectacle, and Subversion: Interrogating the Male Gaze in *Gone Girl* (2014) through a Cross-Cultural Feminist Lens

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Abstract. *This study presents a feminist analysis of the film *Gone Girl* (2014) through the theoretical lens of the male gaze concept proposed by Laura Mulvey. The study explores how the film deconstructs traditional patriarchal cinematic structures by repositioning the female protagonist, Amy Dunne, from an object of visual pleasure to an active subject who controls the narrative and psychological manipulation. Using qualitative content analysis methods, the study identifies key scenes and visual strategies that challenge the conventions of female representation in mainstream Hollywood cinema. The findings suggest that *Gone Girl* does not simply symbolically reverse gender roles, but also critically questions the mechanisms of spectatorism, representation, and power embedded in cinematic language. This study contributes to the broader discourse on gender and visual culture, by showing how contemporary cinema can be a space of resistance to normative feminine representations and patriarchal ideologies embedded in film production.*

Keywords: *Feminist Film Theory, *Gone Girl*, Laura Mulvey, Male Gaze, Spectatorship.*

Abstrak. Penelitian ini menyajikan analisis feminis terhadap film *Gone Girl* (2014) melalui lensa teoretis konsep male gaze yang dikemukakan oleh Laura Mulvey. Kajian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana film tersebut mendekonstruksi struktur sinematik patriarkal tradisional dengan memosisikan ulang tokoh utama perempuan, Amy Dunne, dari objek kesenangan visual menjadi subjek aktif yang mengendalikan narasi dan manipulasi psikologis. Dengan menggunakan metode analisis konten kualitatif, penelitian ini mengidentifikasi adegan-adegan kunci dan strategi visual yang menantang konvensi representasi perempuan dalam sinema arus utama Hollywood. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa *Gone Girl* tidak sekadar membalik peran gender secara simbolis, tetapi juga secara kritis mempertanyakan mekanisme spektatorisme, representasi, dan kekuasaan yang tertanam dalam bahasa sinematik. Studi ini memberikan kontribusi terhadap wacana yang lebih luas mengenai gender dan budaya visual, dengan menunjukkan bagaimana sinema kontemporer dapat menjadi ruang resistensi terhadap representasi feminin yang normatif dan ideologi patriarkal yang melekat dalam produksi film.

Kata kunci: Teori Film Feminis, *Gone Girl*, Laura Mulvey, Male Gaze, Spektatorisme.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since Laura Mulvey's (1975) seminal essay on the male gaze and cinematic spectatorship, feminist film theory has continuously interrogated how women are positioned as passive subjects within patriarchal visual culture. Mulvey asserts that classical Hollywood cinema operates through scopophilic pleasure and voyeuristic control, producing a mode of looking in which female characters are objectified for male spectatorship. This theory, while rooted in Western cinematic traditions, remains influential for contemporary analyses of how female representation is constructed, subverted, or weaponized in modern film narratives.

Gone Girl (2014), directed by David Fincher and adapted from Gillian Flynn's novel, provides a provocative case study of female agency, media manipulation, and performative gender roles. The film explores how the central female protagonist, Amy Dunne, reclaims control over her narrative by deliberately manipulating both her husband and the broader public imagination. Scholars have frequently situated *Gone Girl* within postfeminist frameworks (Williams, 2021; Lopez, 2019), noting its ambiguous commentary on autonomy, victimhood, and the performativity of femininity. However, much of the existing literature has focused on its Western socio-cultural underpinnings, overlooking the potential for comparative discourse with patriarchal systems in Asian or Indonesian contexts.

In Indonesia, gender ideology is deeply intertwined with concepts such as *kodrat wanita* (a woman's "natural" role) and *ibu rumah tangga* (the idealized domestic mother), which are reinforced through state apparatuses and popular media (Kurnia, 2022; Rahmah, 2021). Representations of women in Indonesian television, film, and advertising often oscillate between the virtuous caregiver and the dangerous seductress, echoing Madonna-whore dichotomies prevalent in Western psychoanalytic theory. The tensions explored in *Gone Girl*—particularly the construction of the "cool girl" persona and the calculated inversion of victimhood—resonate strongly with these localized discourses of feminine performance and patriarchal expectation.

This study thus contributes a novel perspective by situating *Gone Girl* within a cross-cultural analysis of gendered spectatorship, drawing connections between Mulvey's theoretical framework and Indonesian visual and ideological constructs. Using qualitative-descriptive methods and visual discourse analysis, this article examines how Amy Dunne's character both embodies and subverts the male gaze, and how these strategies might reflect or disrupt gender norms beyond the Western sphere.

By juxtaposing Western postfeminist narratives with Southeast Asian gender ideologies, this paper aims to enrich ongoing discussions in global feminist media studies. In doing so, it highlights the importance of contextualizing visual analysis within culturally specific modes of patriarchy, thus extending the critical utility of Mulvey's theory into a broader transnational discourse.

2. METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative-descriptive research approach, which is particularly suited for analyzing representations, meaning construction, and symbolic power embedded in visual media (Neuman, 2014). The primary aim is not to measure frequency or audience response, but to uncover the underlying ideological structures and gendered dynamics operating within the film *Gone Girl* (2014). Through detailed textual and visual analysis, the research seeks to examine how narrative elements, character portrayal, and cinematographic techniques produce and contest the male gaze.

The primary data sources for this study include the film *Gone Girl* (directed by David Fincher) and its official screenplay, which provide both visual and verbal material for analysis. Supplementary data includes critical reviews, media commentaries, and scholarly interpretations of the film, which offer broader contextual grounding and illuminate the reception of the film within feminist discourse. These materials allow for an integrated examination of how the film has been read and discussed in various cultural and academic settings.

The main analytical tools employed are visual discourse analysis and semiotic analysis. Visual discourse analysis, as articulated by Rose (2016), emphasizes the interplay between visual composition, narrative form, and power relations in media texts. It is particularly effective in deconstructing how gaze, framing, and *mise-en-scène* contribute to ideological positioning. Semiotic analysis, drawing on Barthes (1977) and van Leeuwen (2008), is used to decode the signs and symbols embedded in the film's visual and narrative structure—particularly those that construct gendered meanings, such as costume, body language, camera angles, and color palettes.

In addition to these Western methodologies, the research also draws upon gender-critical frameworks relevant to Indonesian media studies (Kurnia, 2022; Zulkarnaen, 2019). This comparative dimension is vital in exploring how Western representations of gender—as exemplified by Amy Dunne—might intersect with or diverge from local ideological systems that position women within the dichotomy of domestic virtue and social transgression.

By triangulating feminist film theory, discourse analysis, and regional gender critique, the study seeks to produce a multilayered reading of *Gone Girl* that is attentive to both global theoretical paradigms and culturally situated interpretations. This approach enables a deeper interrogation of how female agency, spectatorship, and the gaze are constructed, contested, and re-signified within and beyond the cinematic frame.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Gone Girl (2014), directed by David Fincher, offers a provocative critique of gender roles, visual pleasure, and the performativity of femininity, effectively complicating Laura Mulvey's (1975) male gaze framework. Rather than conforming to the cinematic tradition of presenting women as passive objects for male visual consumption, the film foregrounds Amy Dunne as a self-aware subject who actively manipulates narrative and visual power. Amy is not merely seen—she sees, plans, performs, and ultimately controls the gaze of both characters within the diegesis and the audience itself.

One of the most compelling moments in the film occurs during Amy's voiceover diary, when she declares:

“I'm so much happier now that I'm dead. Technically, missing. Soon to be presumed dead. Gone. And my lazy, lying, cheating, oblivious husband will go to prison for my murder.” (Fincher, 2014).

This chilling opening monologue coincides with a series of rapid, detailed visuals: Amy writing in her diary, staging a crime scene, and leaving her own blood on the kitchen floor. Through the precise and calculating visual sequence, Amy ceases to be a victim; instead, she becomes the narrative architect. The slow zoom-in and static shots give the audience no room to project onto her—she confronts them with direct authorship, reversing the gaze that typically objectifies women.

Mulvey (1975) argues that classical Hollywood cinema relies on two forms of visual pleasure: scopophilia (pleasure in looking) and narcissistic identification with the male protagonist. In *Gone Girl*, however, both are disrupted. Nick Dunne, as a male character, is frequently rendered passive and confused, challenging traditional modes of male identification. In an early scene at the police station, Nick is framed awkwardly, slouching in a chair, while the two detectives loom over him. His lack of control—underscored by the camera's refusal to offer him authoritative visual space—strips him of the power traditionally granted to male leads.

Nick himself articulates his lack of understanding of his own wife, stating:

“When I think of my wife, I always think of her head. The shape of it. I picture cracking her lovely skull, unspooling her brain, trying to get answers. The primal questions of any marriage: What are you thinking? How are you feeling? What have we done to each other?” (Fincher, 2014).

The camera lingers on Amy's face in the pillow during this voiceover, inviting the audience to look at her while simultaneously questioning the legitimacy of that look. The result is a layered ambiguity: Is Amy a victim, a sociopath, or a reflection of societal gender expectations? The film refuses resolution, pushing the viewer to interrogate the construction of gendered narratives.

Amy's infamous "Cool Girl" monologue serves as both diegetic critique and extra-diegetic feminist intervention:

"Being the Cool Girl means I am a hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, dirty jokes, and burping, who plays video games, drinks cheap beer... Cool Girls never get angry; they only smile in a chagrined, loving manner... Men actually think this girl exists. Maybe they're fooled because so many women are willing to pretend to be this girl."

(Fincher, 2014).

Visually, this monologue is delivered during a sequence of Amy driving, wearing sunglasses and shedding her former identity. The dynamic use of motion, combined with reflective surfaces in the car, metaphorically represents her movement away from patriarchal expectations. As Butler (1990) asserts, gender is a performative act—not an essence but a repetition of stylized behaviors. Amy embodies this notion by actively reconstructing and discarding identities to manipulate perception and survive.

The use of unreliable narration in *Gone Girl* demands a critical reading of spectatorship. Initially, viewers are aligned with Nick's narrative, seeing Amy through his bewilderment. However, the film abruptly shifts—presenting Amy's diary and actions as potentially deceptive. This narrative rupture reflects what Williams (2021) terms "spectatorial slippage," wherein audience identification shifts between sympathy and distrust. Such destabilization encourages viewers to reflect on their own interpretive biases.

In cultural comparison, Amy's rejection of submissive femininity resonates with critiques of patriarchal systems beyond the West. In the Indonesian context, as discussed by Kurnia (2022), state-sponsored ideals such as "perempuan kodrat" (women's natural role) and "ibu rumah tangga" (housewife ideology) continue to frame women as domestic caregivers. A figure like Amy—intelligent, manipulative, unapologetic—contrasts sharply with this paradigm. Though ethically problematic, her agency challenges both American and Indonesian norms of ideal womanhood.

Moreover, the media's role in shaping public perception—another central theme of the film—offers a critique of both Western tabloid culture and similar phenomena in Indonesian infotainment. As Nick states bitterly after a televised interview:

“The whole world will hate me. I’ll be the most hated man in America.”

(Fincher, 2014).

This perception management reflects the power of media narratives in defining guilt, innocence, and morality—phenomena observed globally.

Visually, the climactic moment in which Amy returns home covered in blood exemplifies the film’s subversion of feminine visual tropes. Traditionally, such imagery would indicate trauma or victimhood; instead, Fincher frames Amy in a low-angle tracking shot, her body upright, determined, and imposing. The use of harsh lighting and slow-motion elevates her reentrance into something both mythic and monstrous. In contrast to horror film victims or romantic reunions, this scene deconstructs the notion that women’s suffering should be beautified or redemptive.

Thus, *Gone Girl* does not simply invert the male gaze—it deconstructs it through narrative ambiguity, visual subversion, and character complexity. It invites viewers to question the ideological operations behind looking, gender performance, and storytelling. In both Western and Southeast Asian contexts, the film disrupts the normative scripts of femininity, making visible the constructed nature of “acceptable” womanhood.

4. CONCLUSION

The film *Gone Girl* (2014) exemplifies a complex negotiation of gendered power, spectatorship, and narrative agency. Through the character of Amy Dunne, the film both adheres to and subverts Laura Mulvey’s (1975) concept of the male gaze. Amy’s performance of the “cool girl,” her strategic deployment of victimhood, and her manipulation of visual perception construct a layered critique of postfeminist media culture. By reclaiming narrative control, Amy inverts the gaze, destabilizing the male spectator’s power while simultaneously reinforcing certain patriarchal fears about female autonomy and deception.

The study’s use of visual discourse and semiotic analysis has demonstrated how specific cinematic techniques—such as the recurring use of close-ups, contrasting lighting, and point-of-view framing—construct Amy not merely as a passive object but as an active producer of spectacle. Dialogues such as Amy’s “cool girl” monologue or Nick’s media-rehearsed speech operate as critical texts that reveal tensions between authenticity, manipulation, and gendered expectation.

Importantly, when contextualized within Southeast Asian and Indonesian gender ideologies—particularly the normative constructs of *kodrat wanita* and *ibu rumah tangga*—the film’s thematic resonance becomes increasingly transnational. The ambivalence surrounding

female performance, obedience, and resistance that permeates *Gone Girl* mirrors cultural anxieties found in Indonesian visual and narrative media. Thus, this study offers an original contribution by extending the scope of Mulvey's male gaze theory into a broader cross-cultural analytical frame.

Future research may benefit from a comparative analysis between Western and Southeast Asian cinematic texts that deploy similar gendered tropes, such as the femme fatale, the victim-wife, or the manipulative seductress. Such work could offer deeper insights into how the male gaze operates under different cultural, religious, and ideological regimes.

Additionally, greater attention should be paid to audience reception studies in Indonesia and the wider Southeast Asian region to evaluate how local viewers interpret and internalize these visual gender performances. Investigating how women negotiate media messages across platforms such as film, television, and social media could expand feminist media theory beyond its Western-dominated origins.

Finally, integrating intersectional analysis—particularly involving class, race, and religion—would enrich understandings of how gendered spectatorship is complicated by other axes of identity and power. This is particularly relevant in diverse and plural societies such as Indonesia, where gender roles are shaped by a confluence of traditional, religious, and global modernist discourses.

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