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INSTRUMENTALITY OF WOMEN IN *DAMSEL* MOVIE (2024)

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Abstract

In the film *Damsel* (2024), directed by Juan Carlos Fresnadillo, the traditional damsel in distress narrative is subverted by the character of Princess Elodie, who transforms from a passive pawn to an empowered individual. The film critiques societal structures that objectify women by exploring Elodie's journey from being a tool in an arranged marriage and a sacrificial victim to confronting a dragon. This study explores how the film portrays the instrumentality of Elodie through qualitative descriptive methods, grounded in Nussbaum's theory of objectification, particularly the concept of instrumentality. As a result, the study identifies three forms of Elodie's instrumentality: subjected to an arranged marriage, subjected to a life sacrifice, and subjected to a target for revenge. From these three forms of Elodie's instrumentality, this film shows Elodie's gradual assertion of autonomy and rejection of the roles assigned to her, deconstructing conventional girl tropes and highlighting the broader implications of challenging patriarchal norms. The finding of the instrumentality of Elodie in the film *Damsel* is shown to become more complex along with the resistance carried out to oppose the prevailing patriarchal norms.

Keywords: Instrumentality, Object, Female Roles

Abstrak

Dalam film Damsel (2024) yang disutradarai oleh Juan Carlos Fresnadillo, narasi gadis tradisional dalam kesusahan ditumbangkan oleh karakter Putri Elodie, yang bertransformasi dari pion pasif menjadi individu yang berdaya. Film ini mengkritik struktur masyarakat yang mengobjektifikasi perempuan dengan mengeksplorasi perjalanan Elodie dari alat dalam perjodohan dan korban pengorbanan hingga menghadapi naga. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana film tersebut menggambarkan instrumentalisasi Elodie melalui metode deskriptif kualitatif, yang berpijak pada teori objektifikasi Nussbaum, khususnya konsep instrumentalitas. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa ditemukannya tiga bentuk instrumentalisasi Elodie, yaitu: menjadi sasaran perjodohan, menjadi sasaran pengorbanan hidup, dan menjadi sasaran balas dendam. Dari tiga bentuk instrumentalisasi Elodie tersebut, film ini menunjukkan adanya penegasan bertahap Elodie atas otonomi dan penolakannya terhadap peran yang dibebankan padanya, mendekonstruksi kiasan gadis konvensional dan menyoroti implikasi yang lebih luas dari menantang norma-norma patriarki. Temuan bentuk instrumentalisasi terhadap Elodie di dalam film Damsel ditunjukkan menjadi lebih kompleks seiring dengan perlawanan yang dilakukan untuk menentang norma patriarki yang berlaku.

Kata kunci : instrumentalitas, objek, peran perempuan

1. Introduction

Damsel (2024) movie, directed by Juan Carlos Fresnadillo and written by Dan Mazeau, represents a significant departure from the traditional narrative of the damsel in distress. The film presents a female protagonist who confronts and subverts her instrumentality. The film star Millie Bobby Brown as Princess Elodie, who is thrust into a harrowing ordeal when she discovers that her marriage is a ruse to sacrifice her to a dragon. The plot of this film offers a critique of the archetypal narrative, providing a fresh perspective on the representation of women in media.

The narrative of *Damsel* revolves around Princess Elodie, who is deceived into believing that she is entering a royal marriage. However, she is ultimately bound as a sacrificial offering to a dragon. This plot twist immediately challenges the viewer's expectations, as the story transitions from a seemingly conventional fairy tale to a critique of the societal and narrative structures that objectify women. The transformation of Elodie from a pawn in a political alliance to an empowered individual who fights for her survival and autonomy constitutes the core of the film's thematic exploration.

The depiction of the narrative in this film resonates with feminist critiques of media that often highlight how women are depicted as passive objects rather than active subjects. As outlined by Laura Mulvey in her seminal work on the male gaze, women in cinema are often objectified and positioned as spectacles for the pleasure of male viewers (Mulvey, 1975). *Damsel* challenges this paradigm by transforming Elodie from an object of sacrifice into a subject of resistance.

The evolution of Elodie's character is pivotal to comprehending the film's critique of the exploitation of women. At the film's outset, Elodie is depicted as passive and compliant. However, as the narrative progresses, she begins to realize the extent of her situation and transforms. Subsequently, her actions demonstrate a refusal to be used as a mere instrument for others' purposes.

Released in 2024, the film *Damsel* is still very fresh to study. No research has been found that specifically uses this film as its research object. The issue of objectification towards women, one of which is about instrumentality, has been used in many previous studies. In general, analysis related to objectification towards women is used to analyze weak, powerless female characters in a patriarchal society system. These women usually do not show resistance to the forms of objectification they experience. Interestingly, different from depictions of women in general, Elodie as the main female character in the film *Damsel* (2024), who is depicted as experiencing acts of instrumentality, actually shows resistance to patriarchal

domination. This then becomes a gap in this research. Therefore, this article aims to examine how the film depicts Elodie's instrumentality in the film *Damsel* (2024). Analyzing the form of Elodie's instrumentality in the film *Damsel* can increase the reader's understanding of other forms of objectification of women, particularly resistance to patriarchal norms.

2. Literature Review

Objectification can be understood as the arbitrary attitude of an objectifier (Calogero, 2012). The act of objectifying something means put something in the position that can be used, manipulated, controlled, and known through its physical properties not essential assessment of something complex, but is created and treated as an object (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Nussbaum, 1995). It can be misused as an act of demeaning individual status and limiting human rights (Poetri, et al., 2023).

According to Martha Nussbaum's 5 theory of Objectification is relevant to the instrumentality of women. The concept of objectification, as defined by Martha Nussbaum, is a crucial aspect of understanding how women are portrayed in various contexts, including in the context of the *Damsel* trope. Nussbaum's theory identifies seven categories of objectification: instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, denial of subjectivity, fungibility, violability, and reducibility. These categories provide a framework for the analysis of how women are treated as objects rather than as individuals with agency and dignity. In Nussbaum's view, this article's research will use the category of instrumentality, because she argues that a person is objectified when they are treated as a mere tool or means to an end, rather than a being with their own inherent value and desires (Nussbaum, 1999).

This negates the individual's capacity for self-determination and uniqueness, effectively transforming them into an object whose worth is determined solely by their usefulness to another person. This process results in the loss of the individual's autonomy and the perception of the person as a mere instrument for the achievement of an end, rather than as an end in themselves. Nussbaum's theory of objectification, including instrumentality, is situated within a broader ethical framework that prioritizes the recognition and respect for the humanity and dignity of all individuals. She posits that objectification is inherently dehumanizing, as it fails to recognize the intrinsic worth of the person and treats them as subservient to the needs and desires of others.

The concept of instrumentality has been identified in several previous studies examining film analysis. To fully comprehend the elements of film, it is essential to have a working knowledge of cinematography, which is the art and technology of making movies. It

entails the utilization of diverse techniques to convey the narrative, ambiance, and sentiment of a motion picture. The primary components of cinematography are composition, camera angles, and lighting. For example, Tazkia Safira (2020) discussed gender and sexuality in the frame of the male gaze, Safira's study reveals Nussbaum's concept of instrumentality, which posits that not only do men utilize women as sexual objects, but women also treat their bodies as a means to an end, a stepping stone to achieve their desires. In its depiction of female nudity, the film *The Favourite* makes a statement about the participation of women in such pictures. It is a common misconception that nude pictures are solely intended to gratify male audiences. They can serve as a means of empowering female actors by demonstrating their confidence in their bodies.

Ismi Putri Budiawan (2022) also discussed sexual objectification toward women in Indonesian films, Budiawan's study proves Nussbaum's concept of instrumentality, where a female character is frequently depicted in attire that is considered revealing, which contributes to the perception of male characters as sexual objects. This choice, when juxtaposed with the male character's attire, can convey a clear and unambiguous message. This portrayal suggests that her physical appearance is of greater importance than her personality or actions. The emphasis on her body positions her as an object of male desire, fulfilling the "male gaze" where female characters exist to be seen and judged based on their attractiveness. This narrow portrayal not only diminishes her autonomy but also reduces her to a mere assemblage of physical attributes.

In conclusion, Martha Nussbaum's theory of objectification, particularly the concept of instrumentality, helps analyze the portrayal of women in various contexts, including film and media. Nussbaum says objectification happens when people are treated as tools or means to an end, taking away their value and autonomy. This process is shown in film literature, where women are often shown as objects of desire, especially in terms of their appearance and sexuality. Studies by Tazkia Safira and Ismi Putri Budiawan show how films make women into objects for men. These portrayals not only make women less equal but also make them less important, as Nussbaum says.

3. Research Method

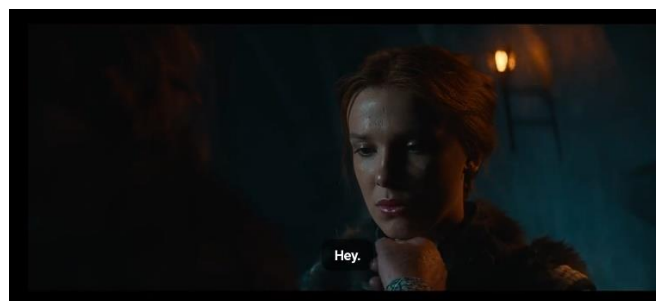
This research article employs qualitative descriptive methods by using a close reading of the film. The qualitative approach allows for a detailed analysis of the film's characters, themes, and cinematographic techniques, thereby uncovering the various ways in which the protagonist, Princess Elodie, is objectified and used as a means to an end. Martha Nussbaum's theory of objectification, particularly the concept of instrumentality, is used to identify key scenes and visual compositions highlighting the instrumentality of women as depicted in the film *Damsel* (2024).

4. Results and Discussion

The *Damsel* (2024) movie examines the themes of power, control, and the subjugation of women. The narrative explores how the protagonist, Elodie, is repeatedly treated as a means to an end by various characters and entities, thereby illustrating a broader critique of women's instrumentality within patriarchal and hierarchical structures. This article will examine three specific examples from the film to illustrate how Elodie's character is subjected to different forms of instrumentality.

4.1. Subjected to an Arranged Marriage

Elodie is compelled to enter into an arranged marriage with a prince, which serves to illustrate a clear instance of her being utilized as a means to achieve her parents' objectives. Her parents, driven by political and economic considerations, view Elodie not as an autonomous individual with her aspirations but as a strategic asset to be utilized to secure alliances and enhance the standing of their kingdom.



Picture 1 (06.35 minute)

This picture serves as a powerful illustration of the ways in which women are often viewed as strategic assets rather than autonomous individuals with their own aspirations. The composition of the picture plays a significant role in articulating the themes of instrumentality and objectification. The filmmakers strategically position the camera at a

low angle, thereby creating a visual dynamic that emphasizes Elodie's vulnerability and powerlessness. This angle not only makes her appear smaller and more submissive, but also reinforces the sense of dominance and control exerted by her parents or unseen forces in the narrative. This perspective choice serves to reinforce the objectification of the woman, reducing her presence and agency to the status of an object within the frame rather than a subject with autonomy. The film's meticulous composition serves to elucidate the overarching thematic concerns of the narrative, which pertain to the dehumanization and instrumentality of individuals, particularly women, for the benefit of their parents.

Besides, the camera angle in this picture is a significant element in the conveyance of the theme of instrumentality and manipulation. The use of a low-angle shot of Elodie in the film creates a powerful visual metaphor for her vulnerability and submission. This perspective serves to reduce her height, both literally and figuratively, making her appear smaller and more helpless in the frame. The low angle subtly suggests that she is looked down upon, underscoring her lack of freedom and the oppressive forces that dominate her life. This visual cue serves to highlight Elodie's role as a pawn in her parents' machinations, thereby underscoring her lack of power and freedom in the face of their control. This perspective reflects how she is manipulated and used to serve the interests of her parents, resulting in the loss of her identity and autonomy. This angle not only physically demeans her in the eyes of the viewer but also symbolically relegates her to a position of insignificance and exploitation.

In addition, the deliberate and slow motion of the camera serves to amplify the oppressive atmosphere surrounding Elodie, thereby casting a spotlight on her vulnerability and the precariousness of her situation. As the camera glides carefully through the picture, it mirrors Elodie's own hesitant and uneasy navigation of a complex and intimidating environment. Each deliberate camera movement is calculated to maintain a consistent sense of unease, effectively directing the audience's attention to Elodie's predicament. This languid pace serves to underscore her lack of control and autonomy, as she is subtly maneuvered and constrained within the picture, much like a pawn in a larger game orchestrated by her parents.

4.2. Subjected to a Life Sacrifice

In a dramatic turn of events, Elodie is sacrificed by the royal family, thrown into a chasm to be devoured by a dragon as a means of repaying an ancient debt. This act starkly

reveals how she is regarded as a mere instrument to fulfill obligations, with no regard for her own life or desires.



Picture 2 (32.37 minute)

This act, intended to settle an ancient debt, starkly reveals how Elodie is perceived merely as a means to an end, devoid of any consideration for her own life or desires. The composition of the picture is meticulously crafted to emphasize Elodie's isolation and vulnerability. In the initial frames, Elodie is positioned centrally, surrounded by the imposing figures of the royal family and guards, symbolizing her entrapment within societal and familial expectations. The stark contrast between her delicate, white gown and the dark, foreboding cave entrance serves to accentuate her purity and innocence against the backdrop of impending doom. The use of deep focus allows the audience to perceive the entirety of the cavernous setting, thereby emphasizing the vastness and inescapability of her fate. This compositional choice not only draws attention to Elodie as the focal point but also underscores the enormity of the sacrifice being demanded of her.

Besides, the camera angles employed in this picture are instrumental in conveying the power dynamics at play. The use of high-angle shots, which place the subject at a lower elevation than the camera, serves to diminish the subject's perceived power and authority. This is evident in the case of Elodie, who is depicted as a small and powerless figure as she is thrown into the cave. Conversely, low-angle shots of the prince and the royal family members serve to enhance their authority and dominance, thereby reinforcing their control over Elodie's fate. The camera angles employed in this picture create a visual hierarchy that mirrors the social hierarchy within the narrative. Elodie is positioned at the bottom of this hierarchy, subjected to the whims of those above her.

In addition, the role of lighting in enhancing the emotional and thematic resonance of a picture is of paramount importance. The dim, flickering torchlight within the cave creates an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty, casting ominous shadows that dance across the walls. This effect of light and shadow symbolizes the moral ambiguity and darkness of the act being committed. Elodie, bathed in a soft, ethereal light, appears almost angelic,

emphasizing her innocence and the injustice of her fate. The contrast between the warm, golden light of the torches and the cold, blue-tinged darkness of the cave serves to accentuate the dichotomy between the warmth of life and the coldness of death.

4.3. Subjected to a Target for Revenge

The dragon mother, an important character in the film, also regards Elodie as a mere instrument. The dragon mother views Elodie as a way to take revenge and fulfill her own goals, such as avenging her children who were killed by their royal ancestors.



Picture 3 (01.24.56 minute)

This picture is a critical point in the narrative, highlighting the themes of manipulation and objectification. The composition of the picture is meticulously crafted to emphasize the power dynamics between Elodie and the dragon mother. Elodie is frequently positioned in the foreground, appearing vulnerable and isolated, while the dragon mother is situated in the background, symbolizing her dominance and control. This spatial arrangement serves to visually reinforce Elodie's subjugation and the dragon mother's authority. The use of close-up framing around Elodie serves to accentuate her entrapment, both physically and metaphorically. She is confined within the dragon's lair and the dragon mother's schemes.

Besides, the role of lighting in the creation of mood and theme is of paramount importance. The dragon mother is frequently depicted in a shadowy environment, with her features partially obscured. This contributes to her enigmatic and ominous character. This use of chiaroscuro not only enhances the visual drama but also symbolizes the moral ambiguity and darkness of her intentions. In contrast, Elodie is illuminated by a gentler, more diffused light, which serves to accentuate her innocence and vulnerability. The interplay of light and shadow not only creates a visually striking contrast but also reinforces the narrative dichotomy between the oppressor and the oppressed.

In addition, the camera movement in this picture is purposeful and deliberate, contributing to the emotional weight and the sense of tension. The camera employs a series

of deliberate pans and tilts to accompany the dragon mother's movements, thereby creating a sense of foreboding and inevitability. In contrast, the camera's movements around Elodie are more erratic and shakier, reflecting her inner turmoil and fear. The juxtaposition of smooth and jittery camera work effectively conveys the psychological states of the characters, with the dragon mother's calculated demeanor in contrast to Elodie's anxiety and desperation.

5. Conclusion

The 2024 film *Damsel* illustrates how others exploit women. The film illustrates how others frequently exploit women for their benefit. The film *Damsel* prompts viewers to reflect on the pervasiveness of women being used by others and the significance of recognizing women's rights. The film also urges societies to reform the systems that perpetuate gender inequality and mistreatment of women. The film prompts reflection on the continued mistreatment of women and the potential for change. The film depicts at least three forms of Elodie's instrumentality. Elodie as a mere instrument is subjected to an arranged marriage, a life sacrifice, and a target for revenge. The film uses different types of camera shots to show how women are treated and to criticize traditional gender roles. The camera angles and composition show Elodie as vulnerable and without power in her arranged marriage. The high-angle shots and dim lighting show Elodie as a thing to be used to pay an old debt. She has no value. Finally, the dragon's plan is shown with different camera movements and lighting. This shows the dragon mother's power and Elodie's weakness. It also shows how Elodie is used for revenge. The finding of instrumentality of Elodie as the main character in the film *Damsel* is shown to be increasingly complex along with the resistance carried out to challenge the prevailing patriarchal norms.

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