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Deconstructing Gender and Class Discourse in Satirical Cinematic Language through de Beauvoirian Lens

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ABSTRACT ENGLISH:

This paper aims to explore the utilization of Simone de Beauvoir's feminist-philosophical theory in a contemporary media context, specifically in Ruben Östlund's film *Triangle of Sadness*, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the mechanism of gender and class identity construction. The critical discourse analysis was then employed to analyse the data, allowing for the identification of language and symbolic patterns that reflect patriarchal and capitalist social norms. De Beauvoir's theories of gender and class act as the theoretical foundation for this paper, comprehend the constitution of identity as socially constructed, and provide a critical analytical tool for unravelling how established norms organize hierarchies and divisions of power within society. The results show that *Triangle of Sadness* is a satirical narrative that effectively deconstructs gender and class social structures. Through de Beauvoirian's analytical lens, the film demonstrates how extreme situation that challenge dominant norms could shake social constructions of identity. Scenes ranging from an argument over who pays for dinner to power dynamics on a cruise ship, vividly demonstrate how gender and class shape identity and social interactions. This study affirms that de Beauvoirian's theoretical framework remains relevant and pertinent for re-interpreting contemporary media discourse, particularly in comprehending the tension and conflict between social structures.

Keywords: Gender, Class, Discourse, Cinematic Language, de Beauvoirian

ABSTRACT INDONESIAN:

Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk mendapatkan pemahaman yang lebih dalam tentang mekanisme pembentukan identitas gender dan kelas melalui teori feminisme-filosofis Simone de Beauvoir dalam konteks media kontemporer, khususnya melalui film *Triangle of Sadness* yang disutradarai oleh Ruben Östlund. Data dikumpulkan melalui analisis teks naskah film, artikel dan ulasan kritis. Studi ini kemudian menggunakan analisis wacana kritis untuk menganalisis penggunaan bahasa dan pola simbolik yang mencerminkan standar sosial, kapitalis dan patriarki. Pemikiran de Beauvoir menjadi landasan teoretis untuk memahami konstruksi identitas dan sosial, dan menjadi alat analisis kritis untuk mengungkap bagaimana norma-norma yang mapan mengatur hierarki dan pembagian kekuasaan di komunitas atau masyarakat. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa film *Triangle of Sadness* memupuk narasi satir secara efektif dan mendekonstruksi struktur sosial dan kelas. Film ini menunjukkan juga bagaimana situasi ekstrem yang menantang norma-norma dominan dapat mengubah pemahaman sosial tentang identitas kelas dan gender. Adegan-adegan yang ditunjukkan dalam film, seperti perdebatan panjang antara pasangan (tentang siapa yang harus membayar makan malam), hingga pergolakan dominasi struktur sosial dan dinamika kekuasaan di dalam kapal pesiar memberikan interpretasi baru dalam konstruksi sosial yang sebenarnya. Sehingga, kerangka teori feminisme-filosofis de Beauvoir masih sangat relevan dan tepat untuk menafsirkan kembali wacana, terutama dalam konteks pemahaman konflik dan ketegangan antara struktur sosial.

Kata Kunci: Gender, Kelas Sosial, Wacana, Bahasa sinematik, pemikiran de Beauvoir

Introduction

Simone De Beauvoir's central concept—women as “the Other” — *L'Autre*—reveals the core mechanism of patriarchy: masculinity establishes itself as “the Absolute Self,” autonomous and essential, while femininity is reduced to “the Other,” defined solely through its relation to men, as a wife, a mother, or sexual object (Esalati & Hesamifar, 2023; Bauer, 2001; Chiwengo, 2003). This process of othering is political-epistemological; women are placed as passive objects in the discourse of power, judged by masculine values that are considered neutral and universal (Schoonheim, 2023; Zurriyati, Rahman & Alaqad, 2023). Patriarchy, according to de Beauvoir, maintains its dominance by trapping women in “immanence” (limitation to domestic/reproductive roles), while men access “transcendence” — freedom to create in the public sphere (Poyares, 2023). Her critique reveals how norms that appear “natural” — such as gendered division of labor or the ideal of motherhood — are actually hegemonic tools to perpetuate women's economic, psychological, or existential dependence (Mussett, 2019; Beauvoir, 2023). By uncovering the social construction of gender, *The Second Sex* opens space for emancipation through critical awareness and collective struggle against marginalizing structures (Inhorn et al., 2022).

Simone de Beauvoir, in seminal work, *The Second Sex*, rejected the essentialist idea that women's gender roles are biological determined (De Beauvoir, 2023). Through an existentialist-phenomenological lens, she argued that “One is not born a woman, one becomes one” — *On ne naît pas femme, on le devient* (O'Brien & Embree, 2001; Mussett, 2019; Oksala, 2022). This process of “becoming” is a complex social-historical construction, in which institutions such as family, education, religion, law, and cultural practices systematically shape women's subjectivity. Women, born into a civilization that shapes identity as something between men and eunuchs—that is, what is referred to as feminine — play a fundamental role in the formation and development of gender concepts (Beauvoir, 2023). Thus, in this context, language plays a crucial role as an ideological medium that naturalizes gender hierarchies—for example, through myths, stereotypes, vocabulary, and narrative structures that position men as universal subjects (e.g., “man” representing human beings) while women are seen as deviations (Yuzar et al., 2023; Fought & Eisenhauer, 2022; Tang, 2022). Thus, gender inequality is not a biological destiny, but rather a product of the dialectic between individuals and power structures that are continuously reproduced through daily interactions and symbolic systems.

Ruben Östlund's *Triangle of Sadness* serves as a contemporary critique of the construction of gender and class hierarchies through a satirical and incisive cinematic lens (Valenza, 2022). The 2022 Cannes Film Festival's Palme d'Or winner transcends entertainment by systematically deconstructing entrenched social norms (Dargis, 2022), exposing how patriarchal and capitalist power structures can be dismantled in extreme circumstances (Zou, Tang & Wallis, 2025; Östlund, 2022; Loi, 2023; Özer & Özer, 2025; Mylonas, 2024; Thunberg, 2023; Harjoni, 2021). Östlund meticulously employs language, symbols, and character representation to create a narrative that engages directly with de Beauvoir's feminist philosophy (Azmy et al., 2024). The critique of societal structure that prioritizes luxury, appearance and status as measures of success is conveyed through irony and absurdity, engaging the audience's consciousness of the social realities frequently ‘disguised’ by ‘the facade of wealth’.

The interplay between gender and class construction could be seen in how the characters in *Triangle of Sadness* convey their identities through their lifestyle, social interactions, and the way they articulate themselves in such extreme situations. As power and hierarchical structures begin to crumble, language that originally served as a tool of class distinction begin to crumble (Thurlow, 2021), forcing individuals to reinvent themselves to be more authentic and free from social pressure. This paradox reflects de Beauvoir's notion of human freedom, which should not be confined by patriarchal frameworks or capitalism that perpetuates gender and class-based power detachments. The film, through its multi-dimensional representation, invites us to question the validity and sustainability of traditional-social norms and opens up opportunities for a new discourse (Rahman et al., 2024; Tao, 2022, Azmy et al., 2024).

Östlund's satirical approach in *Triangle of Sadness* offers an incisive look at the injustices that occur at the intersection of gender and class (Mylonas, 2024). In the movie, shifting power dynamics are not only seen in the relationship between individuals from different social classes, but also in the transformation of gender identities when social positions change drastically. For instance, characters who initially appear to be grounded in the privileges of an elite class, find themselves having to adjust to a completely different role when external conditions force them to adapt to situations that negate the advantages of their social status (Mills, 2019; Östlund, 2022). This phenomenon is in line to de Beauvoir's argument that identity is not fixed or inherent, but rather fluid and always in the process of being reshaped through dynamic social interactions (James & Loaiza, 2020). As a consequence, the film serves as the subject of the research, demonstrating how the idealization of gender and class might collapse in an instant when confronted with a context in which these boundaries lose meaning.

Under the layers of irony and dark humor, *Triangle of Sadness* invites viewers to consider the language and symbolic practices that perpetuate gender stereotypes and class. Language, as the medium of social communication, plays an important role in upholding certain standards. The film's narrative and character interactions reveal how language could reinforce gender roles established by society's patriarchal structure (Zou, Tang & Wallis, 2025). The film's main (male and female) characters communicate not only verbally but also through gestures, visual symbols, and artistic decisions that reflect their position in the interconnected social hierarchy (Östlund, 2022; Febriani, 2024). This study aims to reveal the layers of ideology hidden behind media representations by examining how language is used to construct and critique these norms.

Therefore, a critical study focusing on the use of language in *Triangle of Sadness* film could reveal the mechanisms of internalization of gender norms that are often considered natural but are actually the result of social construction. For example, in this film, the representation of femininity and masculinity are not presented as essential, but rather as products of cultural and economic conditioning that continuously reproduce certain social roles (Febriani, 2024). Hence, an analysis of the film will touch on how these constructions are questioned and even broken in a crisis situation, where the boundaries between what is considered "masculine" and "feminine" are becoming increasingly blurred.

This is in line with de Beauvoir's argument that emphasizes the significant of awareness of "the other" in the deconstruction of gender identity that restricts individual freedom. The satirical approach used by Östlund offers a sharp picture of the injustices that occur at the intersection of gender and class. In the movie, shifting power dynamics are not only seen in the relationship between individuals from different social classes, but also in the transformation of gender identities when social positions change drastically. For instance, characters who initially appear to be grounded in the privileges of an elite class, find themselves having to adjust to a completely different role when external conditions force them (Thunberg, 2023).

Furthermore, the movie is an interesting depiction of the tension between capitalist values and human existential needs (Ripley, 2024). In a situation where wealth and social status determine the structure of life, the crisis that occurs in the film opens up space for a paradigm shift. At the core of conflict depicted is a system that not only accumulates wealth but also reproduces forms of inequality. Investigating how changing social situations could encourage the reconfiguration of gender roles and liberate individuals from the burden of rejecting norms.

Departing from Simone de Beauvoir's (2023) feminist framework that revolutionized the way we understand gender identity and power relations in society, this paper attempts to explore the dynamics and interplay between gender and class in shaping individual experiences and overarching social structures. The theory provides a theoretical framework for comprehending the socially constructed nature, serve as a critical analytical instrument for dissecting how established norms structure the hierarchy and distribution of power within society (Schoonheim, 2023; Zurriyati, Rahman & Alaqad, 2023). Within the framework of this research, the main objective is to explore how the approach of Beauvoir's feminist-philosophical thought in a contemporary media context, specifically through the film *Triangle of Sadness*, might provide a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of gender and class identity construction.

Further, by analyzing the language elements contained in the film, this study is projected to reveal how representations of gender and social hierarchy are maintained through language and symbols, and at the same time, how these representations could be shifted or even demystified through sharp social criticism. Thus, the aim of this research is to create a dialogue between classical feminist theories and contemporary discourse, resulting in new perspectives that are relevant to addressing gender oppression and class disparity.

Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a critical discourse analysis to explore gender and class representations in the Ruben Östlund's *Triangle of Sadness* film (Hall, 2007; Rojek, 2009). The method was selected because it allows for in-depth analysis of the cinematic language within the film through the lens of Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminist theory (Collins, 2017; De Beauvoir, 2023). This approach emphasizes contextual and interpretive understanding of the construction of meaning that emerges in language, symbols, and character representations, particularly in relation to patriarchal-capitalist social class structures (Özer & Özer, 2025; Qing, 2024). Further, critical reviews from academic literature were then conducted to support the main data from the film.

Based on Simone de Beauvoir's notion—particularly the concept of “the Other” in *The Second Sex*—this study focuses on how women and subordinate groups are constructed as passive subjects in the film's narrative and visual structure (Qing, 2024; De Beauvoir, 2023). Gender identity in the film is analyzed as a social construction that is not fixed but is shaped through power relations and dominant discourse. Therefore, the representation of characters and inter-character relationships are examined to reveal how the film questions and deconstructs hegemonic norms of masculinity and social class.

To ensure the validity of the results, data triangulation was conducted by comparing findings from various sources (Schlunegger, 2024). The analysis process was carried out iteratively, with continuous reflection to maintain the consistency of interpretation with the theoretical framework. The analysis results were integrated to understand how the film represents gender and class dynamics. Thus, this research not only maps textual representations but also demonstrates how language and symbols in movie function as ideological tools that shape identities and power relations in contemporary society, which is in line with Simone de Beauvoir's thinking.

Result and Discussion

The Disruption of Established Gender Norms

The movie “Triangle of Sadness” opened with the introduction of Carl (Harris Dickinson) and Yaya (Charlbi Dean), a couple who work as model and influencer. The first half of the movie quickly explores the tensions in their relationship that are rooted in economic inequities and gender expectations. The couple's debate over who should pay the bill at a fancy restaurant becomes a tipping point that reveals the complexity of gender expectations in contemporary romantic relationships. Their interactions are often punctuated with witty conversation that highlights the absurdities of societal expectations for men and women.

For example, the tension of discussing who should pay the dinner bill has created comedic moments and elements that simultaneously illustrate the discomfort that arises from shifting traditional gender roles. In the scene, Carl wishes it was Yaya who paid their bills. The reason is that Yaya has more promising career opportunities than him. With greater earnings, Carl thought it was only natural for Yaya to take on that role in their relationship. Specifically, for Carl, the situation was really awkward because Yaya did not offer to pay, even though her income was higher than his. He feels that the partitioning of their roles in the relationship should be a rational consideration of economic factors. This incongruity creates tension between Carl's expectations and the gender norms that are still inherent in their very own relationship dynamics (Wenhold & Harrison, 2021; Stanaland, Gaither & Gassman-Pines, 2023).

Ruben Östlund presents a sharp critique of the contradiction between modern gender equality values and traditional gender roles that remain ingrained in contemporary society (Valenza, 2022). Carl feels threatened by the discrepancy between his inherited masculine role—as provider and decision-maker—and the fact that he is in a lower economic position than his partner. This creates internal tension that reflects how social change has not completely erased old norms, but rather places individuals in a state of confusion over conflicting identities and expectations.

Simone de Beauvoir's approach to gender roles provides a sharp critical analytical framework for understanding the dynamics of power relations in *The Triangle of Sadness*. In "*The Second Sex*", De Beauvoir argues that women have historically been constructed as "the Other"—that is, as figures defined not by themselves, but as the opposite or complement of men, who are considered the universal subject. This concept not only shows how women are reduced to objects in patriarchal social structures, but also describes the ideological process that normalizes this inequality as something natural or inevitable. However, Östlund subversively reverses this role: Carl now becomes the "Other" in the relationship, occupying a more passive and economically powerless position (de Beauvoir, 2023). Carl's insecurity and his arguments with Yaya not only reveal personal conflicts but also mirror how gender social constructions work in two directions—not only limiting women but also creating pressure on men to meet increasingly demanding ideals of masculinity (Segal & Segal, 2007; Lorber, 2018). Thus, the movie raised significant marks about who is truly free in relationships that are supposedly egalitarian in the modern era (Bidadanure, J., & Axelsen, 2025).

The Performative Role of Language, Power and Satire in Constructing Gender Identities and Shifting Social Class

The language used in the exchanges between Carl and Yaya serves as a tool for analyzing how gender is "performed" in a modern social context. Their dialogue reveals the moral ambivalence and discomfort that arise when traditional norms collide with contemporary economics. The film carefully demonstrates how language becomes a battleground where gender expectations are negotiated and contested. For example, when Yaya openly reveals that her relationship with Carl is partly motivated by her ambition as an influencer, the film uses that admission to deconstruct conventional romantic narratives and expose the transactional dynamics that underlie many modern relationships. Östlund serves up a sharp critique of gender performativity through his portrayal of Carl as a male model who must adjust his expressions and body posture to meet the expectations of the fashion industry. The film's opening scene, which shows Carl at a modelling audition, directly echoes De Beauvoir's notion that "One is not born, but becomes, a woman"—in this case, the film demonstrates how masculinity is also a construction produced through social and cultural practices (Keerthiraj, 2019; Stanaland, Gaither & Gassman-Pines, 2023).

This film uses humor and satire as tools to convey social criticism of traditional gender roles. This approach makes the message feel lighter but still sharp and thought-provoking. By incorporating elements of comedy into the narrative, the film successfully attracts the audience's attention while inviting them to reflect on social realities that are often taken for granted, especially regarding the roles of men and women in society (Ripley, 2024). One of the most prominent examples is the character of Yaya, who is portrayed as a strong, independent, and intelligent woman. However, despite her independence, Yaya remains trapped in patriarchal relationship dynamics, where decisions and control are often still dominated by men. The film uses this contradiction to show how difficult it is to break free from deep-rooted social structures, as well as to illustrate the complexity of women's experiences in facing double standards in everyday life (Lorber, 2018; Nadirra & Nadilla, 2023; Lorber, 2018).

Through this approach, the film reflects feminist thinking that gender roles are not fixed or natural, but rather the result of social constructs that can be changed. By presenting characters and situations that challenge norms, the film not only entertains but also educates and encourages viewers to question and rethink how they understand gender (Özer & Özer, 2025). Humor serves as a bridge to open up dialogue about inequality and the potential for social change (Chattoo, 2019).

Equally significant, this movie carefully articulates how language reflects and reinforces power relations between social classes. The interactions between wealthy guests and the ship's staff, led by Paula (Vicki Berlin), reveal the power dynamics inherent in the language of service. The film delivers how polite language and etiquette often function as mechanisms to maintain social hierarchies. The yacht's captain, played by Woody Harrelson, an alcoholic Marxist-Communist, provides an ideological counterpoint to the luxury that surrounds him (Jestrovic, 2023). Although not explicitly mentioned in the search results, this character is often present in discussions about the film as a critical voice against capitalism and class inequality, which are characteristic of life on a cruise ship. This portrayal of the captain offers a perspective that aligns with De Beauvoir's analysis of how economic structures shape social relationships and power dynamics.

The second act of the movie—set on a luxury cruise ship—delivers a sharp satire on the capitalist social class structure. The film meticulously highlights the status differences between the wealthy guests and the crew who serve them, creating a microcosm of a society stratified by class. The wealthy passengers include Russian oligarchs, tech entrepreneurs, and an elderly couple who manufacture weapons—all representing various facets of the global elite (Qing, 2024). In this context, the film explores how wealth and privilege create a social hierarchy that influences all interactions between the characters. Further, the bourgeois characters are depicted through a satirical lens, exhibiting behavior that is “embarrassing, bad, sycophantic, power-hungry, honor-bound, calculating, and more,” as outlined by Östlund in the film's structuring (Kruks, 2013). This approach aligns with De Beauvoir's notion about how social and economic structures influence the formation of identity and power dynamics. The film exposes the hypocrisy of the elite and how they rely on a system that maintains their privileged positions while exploiting those below them in the social hierarchy (Loi, 2023).

Ruben Östlund's film *Triangle of Sadness* reaches its climax in a catastrophic event that radically shakes the social structure of its characters. A luxury cruise ship, previously a symbol of power and privilege, is destroyed by a storm, forcing its passengers—including billionaires, models, influencers, and ship workers—to survive on a remote island. This crisis becomes a transformative moment that deconstructs the previously established social hierarchy, creating a space where status, wealth, and gender no longer determine a person's value or position (Qing, 2024). In this new, minimalist environment, survival skills become the new form of currency, forcing the characters to rebuild their identities based on real abilities rather than external symbols of power. This situation offers an opportunity to see how social constructs that have long been considered natural are actually highly vulnerable to changing conditions.

From the perspective of Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist philosophy, this situation affirms that social structures and gender identities are not innate but rather the result of social construction that can be broken down and reshaped. De Beauvoir states that “one is not born a woman, but becomes one,” indicating that identity is the result of social and historical processes, not biological endowment (Keerthiraj, 2019). In the context of the film, characters who were previously defined by their social status—whether as billionaires or ship staff—are forced to confront the reality that their roles in society are not inherently fixed. When characters like Abigail, a ship worker who was previously considered unimportant, become dominant figures because of their cooking and fishing skills, it is clear that identity and power can undergo drastic reversals depending on the social context (Blau, 2017; Zurriyati et al., 2023). This serves as evidence that power relations are fluid and can change when the social-political conditions that support them collapse.

Beyond aspects of identity and power, *Triangle of Sadness* also demonstrates how language serves as a crucial tool in maintaining or challenging existing social structures. For instances, at the beginning of the film, the characters' communication is overloaded with status symbols, such as fashion industry jargon, elitist small talk, and one-sided orders from superiors to subordinates (Mylonas, 2024). However, after the crisis, this pattern of communication changes significantly. Abigail, who was previously only part of the background, begins to take control of discussions and decision-making. Language becomes a new tool of domination, but also a reflection of the changing social reality. From a De Beauvoirian perspective, this reflects how language not only mirrors the social world but also has the capacity to shape and transform it (de Beauvoir, 2011; Crawford, 2013). In the new social order, language becomes a medium for redefining roles and relationships (Rawls, 1989), while also revealing the tension between old norms and new adaptive needs (Buckley, 2017).

Furthermore, the film uses visual and verbal language as a way to critique the capitalist and patriarchal systems that shape social identity (Esposito, 2024). Through the sharp contrast between the absurd luxury on the ship and the brutal reality on the island, the movie conveys the message that the systems we consider stable are actually fragile and can collapse at any moment. When characters can no longer rely on status or gender as tools for negotiating power, they must face the reality that their identities must be renegotiated. The resulting dialogue becomes more honest yet also filled with ambiguity, revealing the uncertainty in redefining gender and social roles. In this context, *Triangle of Sadness* is not only a social satire but also an existential experiment on how humans respond to radical changes in their social structures. The film effectively shows that in the collapse of the (old fashion) system, there is always the potential for the formation of a new, more equitable and humane world, in line with De Beauvoir's idea of liberation from oppressively constructed identities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Ruben Östlund's *Triangle of Sadness* effectively represents the deconstruction of gender and class through extreme situations that expose social constructs that have been accepted as normal. From a De Beauvoirian perspective, this film emphasizes that identity is not essential or fixed, but rather shaped by social relations, language, and power. When capitalist and patriarchal social structures are shaken by crisis, the film shows how roles that are typically considered “natural” can be challenged and reversed, creating space for more egalitarian transformations of identity and social relations.

More than just satirical entertainment, *Triangle of Sadness*'s victory at Cannes solidifies its position as an important discourse in contemporary cultural criticism. Through a blend of sharp visual language and meaningful dialogue, the film invites viewers not only to laugh at the absurdity of the existing social system but also to reflect on their participation in maintaining or challenging it. Thus, the film serves as a powerful call to reimagine a society unbound by outdated gender and class norms, one that is more open to the formation of fairer and more dynamic identities.

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