Faces Amid the Mountains: A Barthesian Reading of a Photograph in *Sore*

Aninditya Ardhana Riswari[1], Febrian Putra[2], Novia Sisca Handayani[3],
I Putu Adi Putra Wiwana[4]
Faculty of Fine Arts and Design, Institut Seni Indonesia Surakarta,
Solo, Central Java, Indonesia
[1]anindityaar@isi-ska.ac.id, [2]febrianputraa.fp@isi-ska.ac.id, [3]siscaharyani@isi-ska.ac.id,
[4]wiwanaputu@isi-ska.ac.id

ABSTRACT

In an era characterized by media saturation, cinematic visuals possess considerable ideological and emotional significance. This study analyzes the portrait of a Ladakhi woman in *Sore* (2025), directed by Yandy Laurens, to investigate how visual elements in mainstream cinema serve as cultural representations and evoke emotional responses. Employing Roland Barthes's semiotic notions of *studium* and *punctum*, the photograph is examined as a locus of dual significance: intellectually comprehensible via cultural norms and emotionally resonant through subtle, unarticulated nuances. Utilizing a qualitative descriptive methodology, the analysis focuses on Barthes's semiotic framework as delineated in *Camera Lucida* (1980). Each visual component encompasses gesture, attire, look, color, and background, which are analyzed for their representational and emotional meaning. The theoretical foundation is grounded in Barthes's multiple semiotic layers and Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding paradigm, which emphasize that meaning is not fixed but is influenced by viewers through cultural and emotional settings. The findings underscore how *studium* elucidates the socio-cultural backdrop of Ladakh, gendered identity, and physical isolation, whereas *punctum* manifests in nuanced visual features, particularly the woman's partially obscured mouth, which elicit profound, personal responses. These characteristics show that the photograph is not just a decorative narrative, but also a place for international empathy and societal commentary. This research illustrates that visual components in movies can convey intricate cultural tales and emotional depth. Barthes posits that cinematic images function as affective texts that connect aesthetics and ethics, documentation and emotion, so cultivating critical awareness and empathic engagement with oppressed identities.

Keywords: Visual semiotics, Roland Barthes, studium *and* punctum, *Sore.*

INTRODUCTION

Visual elements in film can no longer be regarded merely as aesthetic components or narrative supplements (Guatri, 2023). Within the domain of visual culture studies, film is understood as a representational medium laden with ideological content, wherein each image, whether explicit or implicit, shapes the viewer's perception of social reality (Wahyuningsih, 2019). In other words, film does not merely tell a story; it constructs a world, determining who is seen, how they are portrayed, and which narratives are voiced or silenced.

Each cinematic scene is the result of selective processes of inclusion, exclusion, and meaning construction deeply informed by historical, political, and cultural contexts (SLAMET, 2023). Visual representation in film consistently operates within a logic that reflects, affirms, or even challenges prevailing power structures. Thus, a critical understanding of film requires moving beyond its aesthetic pleasure or narrative arc to interrogate how images speak: to whom, by what means, and for whose interests.

In this context, *Sore* (2025), a film by Yandy Laurens, presents a compelling site of inquiry. Beyond offering a personal journey and temporal reflection, the film unveils intercultural dynamics through its poetic visual landscape. One pivotal moment is the appearance of a photograph of a Ladakhi woman standing amidst a snow-covered landscape, captured by the character Jonathan (played by Dion Wiyoko). This photograph is not merely a narrative artifact; it functions as a visual anchor laden with emotional intensity and complex representational meaning. Its presence invites a deeper reading of how the visual operates not only as a narrative device but also as a generator of meaning.

In the current era of visual saturation, images, including photographs within film, hold a strategic role in shaping public perception. They are no longer neutral or innocent but are always embedded within specific social, cultural, and ideological contexts (Al Farizi et al., 2023). In popular media, photographs possess the power to frame reality, construct identity, and either reproduce or challenge dominant narratives of space, the body, and power relations. Therefore, reading images critically becomes crucial for unpacking how meaning is visually mediated and how affect functions within the domain of representation (Happy et al., 2025).

In *Sore*, the photograph of the Ladakhi woman serves not merely as part of the protagonist's visual journey but also as a symbol of estrangement, resilience, and intercultural connectedness. Through the semiotic framework of Roland Barthes, particularly his concepts of *studium* and *punctum*, the image can be analyzed as a visual construction that encapsulates the tension between rationally interpreted cultural meaning and spontaneously felt emotional resonance. The Barthesian approach provides a means to investigate the role of images beyond narrative functions, serving as venues for the expression of emotion, identity, and social critique that are both affective and reflective.

Based on this theoretical grounding, the present study aims to analyze the latent meanings embedded in the photograph of the Ladakhi woman featured in *Sore* (2025) using Roland Barthes's semiotic approach. The emphasis is on elucidating how the visual components of the photograph function as both cultural and narrative signifiers, as well as emotional catalysts for individual viewer responses. This study seeks to demonstrate that visual representations in popular film possess the potential to convey layered

meanings beyond their explicit messages and to manifest the tension between what is seen and what is felt. The Barthesian framework was chosen for its capacity to bridge the realms of representation and subjective experience while also encouraging critical engagement with the visual construction of contemporary Indonesian cinema.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach using Roland Barthes's semiotic analysis as its central methodological framework. The choice of this approach stems from its capacity to explore the deeper, often concealed, layers of meaning embedded in visual representations, particularly in relation to affective and cultural dimensions that elude textual or narrative analysis. The focus is interpretative, seeking to decode visual signs within a single photographic image from the film Sore (2025) by Yandy Laurens. The selected image, depicting a Ladakhi woman, is treated not as a mere aesthetic or documentary element, but as a symbolic and affective visual site in which cultural narratives and emotional responses converge.

The object of analysis was chosen purposively due to its dense symbolic content and emotional resonance. In Barthesian terms, the image does not merely exist within the film's diegesis but emerges as a cultural text that demands critical engagement. The analytical process follows Barthes's semiotic principles as articulated in Camera Lucida (2012), focusing particularly on the dual concepts of studium and punctum. "Studium" refers to the culturally and socially legible aspects of an image that make those meanings accessible through historical and ideological frames. In contrast, punctum identifies the unpredictable emotional detail that "pierces" the viewer, generating an intimate, subjective reaction beyond rational comprehension.

Each visual component in the image, including composition, facial expression, geographical background, color palette, bodily gestures, and gaze direction, is read as part of a signifying system capable of producing multilayered meanings. Barthes's framework emphasizes that meaning comes from how and why something is arranged, not just what is shown. As such, this analysis aims to interrogate not merely the image's representational content but also its affective potential on how it operates emotionally and symbolically in relation to its viewers and broader cultural discourse.

Theoretically, this study draws on Roland Barthes's fundamental assumption that visual signs carry not only denotative meaning but also connotative dimensions of meanings shaped through cultural, historical, and affective processes (Åker, 2024). Barthes posits that photographs are not passive reflections of reality but open-ended texts subject to multiple interpretations. Through the interaction between signifier and signified, he asserts that meaning is not fixed but contingent on context and the subjectivity of the viewer (Barthes, 2012). This notion situates photography as an affective and

interpretive field, where image-viewer relations transcend fixed semiotic codes.

The tension between studium and punctum renders Barthesian analysis particularly relevant for unpacking the subtleties of visual imagery in cinema. Studium encourages cultural and intellectual interpretation, whereas punctum evokes emotional unpredictability and personal significance (Syauqi Alibasya Khisawa Shiddiqi, 2024; Zahar, 2010). This duality highlights the capacity of photography not merely to depict but also to elicit and unsettle. As Mathar (2022) suggests, this capacity makes the photograph a unique site for the production of both meaning and affect, allowing for a deeper examination of how images can articulate unspoken emotions or submerged cultural tensions within cinematic spaces.

Furthermore, this study is informed by broader theories of representation, particularly the works of Stuart Hall. Hall (2006) challenges the idea that representation merely reflects reality; rather, he introduces the concept of a regime of representation, in which meaning is produced through symbolic systems, language, and cultural practices. His encoding/decoding model emphasizes that media messages are shaped by ideological forces at the production stage, but their meanings are ultimately interpreted, accepted, negotiated, or resisted by audiences according to their social and experiential contexts (Marditama et al., 2021). This negotiation opens space for resistance, subversion, and alternative readings within the consumption of media imagery.

When applied to the representation of women, Hall's theory offers a critical lens to examine how female bodies are constructed within visual media, not as neutral depictions, but as carriers of gendered ideologies (Dewi, 2024). Frequently encoded through stereotypes of femininity, passivity, or exoticism, female representations often reflect dominant cultural narratives. However, these images are also subject to reinterpretation. In the case of the Ladakhi woman's photo in Sore, the image resists passive objectification. Her presence in a stark, remote landscape disrupts conventional visual tropes and instead asserts agency, resilience, and intercultural connection (Andriani, 2024). This interpretive possibility allows the visual analysis to move beyond surface readings toward the affective, the contested, and the transformative potentials of representation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Studium: Reading Cultural Context

In Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, *studium* refers to the rational and cultural engagement of the viewer in interpreting a photograph. It reflects the viewer's ability to understand an image within a framework of collective knowledge as historical, social, and symbolic (Tan, 2024). In this context, *studium* is not merely an emotional response but rather an entry point to comprehend how visual elements function as widely recognized cultural codes through symbols, gestures, backgrounds, colors, and atmospheres.

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Figure 1.
Portrait of the Ladakhi Woman Taken by the
Character Jonathan in *Sore.*
(Source: @dionwiyoko)

The portrait of the Ladakhi woman in the film *Sore* (2025) exemplifies the framework of *studium* through its layered visual components. The background of a rough-textured stone wall indicates the geographic location of Ladakh, a remote mountainous region in northern India. Natural lighting that illuminates part of the subject's face and body creates a serene, cool, and intimate spatial impression, evoking a contemplative and personal visual atmosphere. The woman's clothing also conveys cultural information. The combination of a checkered vest, red knit hat, and beaded necklace reflects an integration of functional needs and cultural identity expression. Details such as an old wristwatch and metal bracelet add further dimension, referencing time and memory, marking an intersection between tradition and modernity. Within this context, clothing

functions not only as physical protection but also as a marker of social and spiritual position, as the colors and motifs of Ladakhi beads are often associated with local social structures and beliefs (Yola et al., 2021).

The woman's upright, symmetrical posture and her direct gaze toward the camera create a gesture that is visually ambiguous yet powerful, as she stands with her left hand partially covering her mouth. This gesture invites multiple interpretations: Is she shielding herself from the cold, suppressing emotion, or expressing discomfort? The eye-level camera angle strengthens an egalitarian relationship between subject and viewer, fostering a humanistic and non-hierarchical impression characteristic of *studium* readings.

B. Representation of Identity, Space, and Gender

Beyond aesthetics, the photograph carries complex representations related to ethnic identity, geographic isolation, and gender position within the visual space. As part of an Indonesian film, the Ladakhi woman appears as an "othered" figure visually marked as distinct through her clothing, ornaments, and geographic setting. Within Barthesian theory, the connotative meanings of these attributes function as ethnic identity markers constructed by dominant cultures. Drawing on Edward Said's ideas, such subjects are often framed exotically. However, *Sore* presents a different portrayal: the Ladakhi woman appears not as a passive or exoticized figure but as a fully present, autonomous individual who does not submit to dominant gazes.

The representation of space further reinforces this meaning. Ladakh, depicted as a quiet and cold backdrop, is not merely a geographic location but a metaphor for alienation and contemplation. The stone wall and dim lighting signify a harsh yet contemplative condition; this visual space forms an inner realm where emotions and identity are processed silently yet intensely.

The gesture of covering the mouth combined with the direct gaze suggests that the woman is not a passive object. She emerges as a subject possessing agency and meaning, creating a tension between silence and speech, visibility and concealment. Through Stuart Hall's framework, the scene is a moment of meaning negotiation between the encoded message of the film's narrative and the decoding by viewers (Hall, 2006; Nafi, 2021). Audiences may reinterpret this image as representing an autonomous woman who resists stereotypes and offers possibilities for alternative readings.

Visual semiotics is an important factor that influences the representation of ethnic identity within transnational cinema (Radovic, 2014). According to Roland Barthes, the distinction between denotation and connotation allows for a layered reading of visual texts (Barthes, 1996). The traditional clothing, ornate accessories, and mountainous backdrop of the Ladakhi woman function as culturally encoded signs—markers that signify ethnic difference within a broader visual regime. However, *Sore* destabilizes fixed meanings by presenting the woman not as a static ethnic symbol but as an emotionally resonant presence. This resistance to dominant visual codes creates space for alternative narratives

of identity, complicating the viewer's expectations and challenging conventional portrayals of minority figures (Joseph, 2018).

The embodied gesture within the photograph, covering the mouth while maintaining direct eye contact, generates a productive ambiguity around gendered agency. While hand-over-mouth gestures can suggest suppression or silence in many cultural contexts, the assertive gaze resists such a reading. Drawing from visual theory, particularly the notion of the "return of the gaze" as articulated by bell hooks and Laura Mulvey, this moment can be read as a disruption of the male gaze. The subject confronts the viewer, not as a passive object but as an active participant in the scene. This confrontation reclaims visual space and challenges the hegemonic structure of representation that typically renders women, especially from peripheral cultures, as voiceless or ornamental.

Spatial representation further contributes to this renegotiation of meaning. The cold, isolated setting of Ladakh is more than just a neutral background; it becomes a space for expression and emotion. Henri Lefebvre's theory of social space informs how historical and ideological practices shape geography in this context (Middleton, 2013). The barren, quiet landscape constructs a setting for introspection and emotional depth, functioning metaphorically as a site of both alienation and resilience. This layered spatiality challenges binary constructs of center and periphery, visibility and invisibility, suggesting that identity formation occurs in complex, often contradictory terrains (van Lanen & Meij, 2025).

C. Punctum: The Detail That Touches Emotion

If *studium* enables cultural and social reading, then *punctum* appears as the element that emotionally affects a small detail that unexpectedly stirs the viewer's feelings (Mathar, 2022). In this photograph, the *punctum* lies in a simple gesture: the hand partially covering the mouth. There is no explicit explanation for this gesture, and precisely in its ambiguous meaning, a space for personal and profound affection emerges. *Punctum* works through silence. It does not convey a message explicitly but invites the viewer to engage emotionally through empathy, estrangement, or personal connection. Barthes describes *punctum* as a small wound: it is not conspicuous, yet it is present and leaves a disturbing trace. In the context of *Sore*, this detail strengthens the emotional impression not through dramatic narrative, but through a feeling that lingers in silence.

Beyond the gesture, the woman's gaze and facial wrinkles enhance the affective experience. Her direct look toward the camera is independent. She fully presents herself, inviting the viewer to gaze upon her and reciprocate the gaze. The wrinkles on her face are not merely signs of age but markers of lived experience: the body becomes a visual archive of time and labor. The contrast of colors also intensifies the *punctum*: the striking red knit hat stands out among the dark clothing and pale gray background. This color does not dominate but is enough to draw attention and emphasize the subject as the emotional center within the calm frame.

The power of *punctum* lies in its ability to bypass rational analysis and instead activate a visceral, affective response (Knuuttila, 2008). Unlike *studium*, which relies on shared codes and cultural literacy, *punctum* is deeply personal and idiosyncratic. Its effect cannot be predicted or generalized. The hand covering the mouth, though subtle, acts as a rupture in the otherwise composed image. This gesture introduces a dissonance, a moment of hesitation or emotional withholding that opens interpretive space for the viewer. It is precisely this ambiguity that allows *punctum* to function: it resists closure, refuses full comprehension, and instead lingers in the viewer's affective memory.

The temporal dimension of punctum also enhances its emotional charge. As Barthes notes, the experience of *punctum* often arrives belatedly; it is not always felt immediately but returns unexpectedly, like a haunting (Fried, 2005). In *Sore*, the image continues to reverberate after the scene has passed, suggesting that affect in visual media does not always operate synchronously with narrative time. The gesture of the hand, the woman's gaze, and the texture of her skin collectively construct an emotional delay, a kind of resonance that stretches across time. This quality distinguishes *punctum* from narrative emotion; it is not tied to plot progression but exists in the stillness between images, in what remains unsaid.

From a feminist visual perspective, the *punctum* in this image also challenges conventional depictions of women in visual culture (Buikema & Zarzycka, 2012). Rather than highlighting beauty, youth, or passivity traits often emphasized in mainstream cinematic aesthetics, the emotional depth here stems from age, experience, and emotional opacity. The wrinkles are not

hidden; instead, they are highlighted as part of the emotional landscape. The woman's face thus resists objectification; it is not a surface to be consumed but a field of emotional complexity. In this way, *punctum* acts as a feminist intervention disrupting dominant visual economies and calling attention to bodies and faces that are often marginalized or rendered invisible.

Moreover, the formal composition of the photograph heightens its affective intensity. The muted tones of the stone wall and clothing create a subdued atmosphere, allowing the red hat to subtly puncture the visual field. This chromatic interruption works as a visual *punctum*, a detail that is neither ornamental nor symbolic but emotionally resonant. The red stands out not as a metaphor but as a sensory trigger. It captures the viewer's attention, then guides it towards the face and gesture, thereby initiating a cycle of emotional involvement. In this way, *punctum* is not just a singular detail but a dynamic relationship between elements, between color and gesture, and between gaze and silence that together evoke a deeply affective response (Jenkins, 2013).

Visual Effect as a Space for Viewer Reflection

The photograph of the Ladakhi woman in *Sore* functions not only as a narrative signifier but also as an affective reflective space for the viewer. Visual elements like the gaze, hand gesture, facial wrinkles, and color composition create an emotional field that verbal language cannot fully explain. Within Barthes' framework, this is the power of *punctum*: a detail that opens personal and spiritual experiences, creating an intimate and contemplative emotional resonance.

This affective charge allows the photo to transcend the film's narrative. It is not only part of the story but also forms a reflective moment for the viewer, opening new awareness about representation, humanity, and how we perceive the "other." In the space between the image and the viewer's gaze, an active and open interpretative space emerges, where meaning is not only consumed but also deeply contemplated.

Photographs as Spaces of Dual Reading: Between Narrative Objectivity and Affective Subjectivity

Photographs are often perceived as mediums that capture reality "as it is." This belief stems from their ability to freeze moments with remarkable detail and precision, seemingly presenting the world in a neutral and objective manner. Within this framework, photographs are regarded as visual narratives that convey facts and events with a certain distance and objectivity grounded in documentary values. However, such an approach tends to overlook other dimensions of the photographic experience, particularly the affective and personal aspects that cannot be fully articulated through rational explanation.

From this perspective, a photograph can be understood as a space of dual reading, containing layers of representation that are both public and narrative, while simultaneously holding the potential for highly individual, subjective, and affective interpretations (Bryant, 1996). The objectivity offered by visual narratives through contextual cues such as place, time, or event does not negate the possibility of unspoken yet powerful personal emotional experiences. Often, the strength of a photograph lies

precisely in the tension between what is seen and what is felt. This dual reading suggests that photographs serve not merely as archives or documentation, but as dynamic interpretative frameworks that can be analyzed from historical, political, and social viewpoints, while also impacting psychological, existential, and emotional aspects. Photographs become sites of convergence between the collective and the intimate, evoking memory, touching on trauma, or igniting imagination (Good, 2020).

D. The Capacity of Popular Media to Convey Social Critique and Cultural Empathy

Popular media, such as film, possess a unique ability to communicate complex ideas through familiar and emotionally resonant forms. In the film *Sore*, the photograph of the Ladakh woman functions not only as a narrative element but also as a reflective device that invites viewers to engage with broader issues such as alienation, intercultural relations, and the marginalization of women within social spaces. This visual representation implies a subtle form of social critique; it does not convey protest overtly but operates through deep emotional resonance. By portraying a woman from a remote geographic region with intimacy and respect, the film creates space for reinterpreting dominant central narratives and the stereotypes often embedded in mainstream visual discourse (Faradilla, 2024).

Moreover, the photograph facilitates a realm of cultural empathy, an affective process whereby viewers from diverse backgrounds are invited to experience the lives of others without erasing those differences. This form of empathy transcends pity; it constitutes an acknowledgment of human diversity and complexity. In this context, popular media functions as a bridge: connecting center and periphery, self and other, and aesthetics and ethics. In its simplicity, the image carries a symbolic weight that facilitates encounters across identities, not through dominance, but through mutual recognition on an equal basis. This is the power of visual media: it not only entertains but also awakens awareness and stimulates social sensitivity in a non-pedantic manner.

The ethical dimension of visual representation in popular media is crucial when addressing issues of marginality and difference. Rather than speaking *about* the marginalized, *Sore* allows the subject to be seen *with* dignity, thus shifting the viewer's position from voyeur to witness. This distinction is significant: it reframes the act of looking from one of consumption to one of ethical engagement. The photograph of the Ladakh woman resists reduction to an ethnographic spectacle; instead, it cultivates an ethical gaze that acknowledges the subject's humanity, complexity, and interiority. In doing so, the film critiques visual hierarchies that often render peripheral identities as objects of fascination or pity and instead proposes a more relational, reciprocal mode of seeing.

Aesthetic experience within popular media can also serve as a site of transformation. As Jacques Rancière suggests, artistic means reconfigure the distribution of the sensible, which organizes visibility and invisibility (Rancière, 2013). In

Sore, the photograph subtly alters what is made visible: not through spectacle, but through stillness, presence, and emotional subtlety. The audience is not told how to feel; instead, they are gently led to stay with the image, letting their feelings do the work of criticism. This approach resists didacticism and instead trusts in the viewer's capacity for reflection. Here, the film exemplifies how popular media can engage audiences in acts of critical empathy, encouraging them to question normative assumptions without alienating them through overt moralizing (Lobb, 2017).

Furthermore, *Sore* illustrates how popular media can function as a discursive space where dominant cultural narratives are negotiated and reimagined. The photograph becomes a site of encounter between global and local, tradition and modernity, and visibility and erasure. In an increasingly interconnected media landscape, such moments carry political potential: they invite audiences to imagine new relationalities that are not grounded in assimilation but in respectful recognition of difference. The film's quiet subversion and its refusal to exoticize or victimize models a form of cultural storytelling that is both accessible and critical. In doing so, it expands the role of popular media beyond entertainment, positioning it as a vital tool for fostering intercultural understanding and social consciousness.

CONCLUSION

The photograph featured in Yandy Laurens' *Sore* serves as a richly layered medium of meaning when interpreted through Roland Barthes' semiotic framework. By applying the dual concepts of *studium* and *punctum*, the analysis demonstrates how a single image in film can operate beyond its narrative function, acting instead as a site where cultural codes and emotional resonances converge. *Studium* enables a reading of the image through social, historical, and symbolic lenses, allowing audiences to recognize cultural markers such as geography, clothing, and gesture, while *punctum* disrupts this rational decoding by introducing personal and affective intensities that provoke subjective engagement.

This study shows that visual elements in popular cinema are never ideologically neutral. Rather, they participate in the construction of meaning, identity, and power. The photo of the Ladakhi woman becomes a subtle critique of visual representation: instead of reinforcing exotic or passive stereotypes, it presents a subject with presence, agency, and emotional depth. Her gaze, posture, and cultural markers resist simplification and invite a more ethical, empathetic encounter with "the other." The interplay between distance and intimacy, documentation and feeling, positions the photo as a space for reflection both for the character within the film and for the viewer beyond it.

In emphasizing the duality of narrative objectivity and affective subjectivity, this research affirms the importance of critically engaging with visual media. In the age of image saturation, film and photography remain powerful tools not only for storytelling but also for cultivating awareness, empathy, and social critique. Through a Barthesian lens, visual media can be understood not merely as vehicles of

entertainment or documentation, but as affective texts that invite us to reflect on the complexities of culture, identity, and human connection.

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