

Sweet Resistance: Chocolate, Monopoly, and Social Power in *Wonka* (2023)

¹Vera Febrianti*, ²M. Afifulloh

^{1,2}Universitas Bangka Belitung, Indonesia

* Corresponding Author, Email: verafebriantii94@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Although *Wonka* (2023), by Paul King, appears as a colorful family musical, the film presents socio-political issues related to power, monopoly, and resistance. Previous studies on food in film have predominantly focused on aesthetic and representational aspects. This study examines (1) the symbolism of chocolate in *Wonka* (2023), and (2) how chocolate functions as a medium of social resistance against monopolistic power. Using a qualitative approach and cinematic text analysis, the study applies cinematic gastronomy as the main analytical framework, supported by food semiotics, resistance theory, and cultural capital. Eight purposively selected scenes were analyzed through content, formal, and contextual dimensions. The findings show that chocolate functions as an ambivalent sign: it represents monopoly and institutional control while simultaneously enabling resistance against dominant power. The film also depicts public space as an arena where everyday gastronomic practices challenge established social and economic hierarchies.

This study demonstrates the potential of cinematic gastronomy to interpret mainstream popular films as socio-political texts, revealing how food functions not merely as visual ornamentation but as a cultural and political practice of resistance.



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Introduction

Food has long been understood not only as a means of biological consumption but also as a cultural and political sign through which societies construct meaning, identity, and social relations. In cultural studies, food functions as a symbolic language that reflects values, hierarchy, and structures of power. Lévi-Strauss (1966) argues that food practices communicate broader cultural systems, while Douglas (1972) explains that food consumption often reproduces social boundaries and distinctions. More recent discussions further emphasize that food is closely connected with economics, politics, emotions, and everyday social interaction (Patra, 2022). Therefore, food representation in film should not be interpreted merely as aesthetic decoration but as a meaningful cultural expression capable of revealing ideological tensions and social contestation.

This perspective becomes relevant in *Wonka* (2023), directed by Paul King. Although widely promoted as a family musical characterized by fantasy, color, and entertainment, the film also presents a narrative about unequal access, monopoly, and resistance. The story follows Willy Wonka, a young chocolatier who enters a city where chocolate production and distribution are controlled by an established cartel. The cartel maintains dominance not merely through economic control, but by dictating the cultural and institutional legitimacy of who is allowed to produce, circulate, and consume chocolate.. In contrast, Wonka enters this space with limited economic resources but strong creativity and culinary knowledge. Rather than confronting the system through direct political opposition, he mobilizes chocolate as a medium to create access, build public support, and challenge established structures. In this context, chocolate becomes more than a commodity; it functions as a symbolic and social instrument through which power relations are negotiated.

Previous studies demonstrate that food in film frequently carries meanings beyond culinary representation. Kuswantoro and Karkono (2022), in their analysis of *Madre*, argue that food production and preparation can express identity and alternative cultural values. Anjana (2025), through a study of *Axone*, shows that food operates as a semiotic system connected to migration, identity, and social belonging. Surur (2024), examining *The Menu*, concludes that culinary representation may also function as a critique of class relations and social inequality. In addition, recent scholarship in cinematic gastronomy suggests that food-centered films possess analytical potential for examining broader social issues, including exclusion, identity construction, and cultural negotiation (Doğan,



2024; Yılmaz & Aysun, 2021). These studies confirm that food can operate as a meaningful narrative device in cinema.

However, existing studies predominantly focus on food as representation, identity formation, or cultural symbolism. Relatively limited attention has been given to how food simultaneously functions as a symbolic language and as a mechanism of social resistance within mainstream cinema. Furthermore, studies applying cinematic gastronomy to examine the relationship between food, monopoly, and social power in *Wonka* (2023) remain limited. Most discussions of the film continue to emphasize entertainment, fantasy elements, or character development rather than exploring how chocolate mediates conflict between dominant and marginal actors. To substantiate this, a preliminary literature search across academic databases utilizing keywords such as "Wonka 2023," "food studies," and "film analysis" confirmed that scholarly attention on the socio-political dimensions of food in this specific film remains scarce. This gap indicates the need for a more critical reading that positions food as an active social and political element rather than a supporting visual object.

Based on this gap, this study investigates how chocolate is constructed symbolically and how it operates as a form of social resistance in *Wonka* (2023). Specifically, this article addresses two research questions: (1) How is chocolate represented and interpreted symbolically in *Wonka* (2023)? and (2) How does chocolate function as a medium of resistance against monopolistic power? By positioning cinematic gastronomy as the primary analytical framework and supporting the analysis through food semiotics, resistance theory, and cultural capital, this study aims to contribute to film studies by expanding the understanding of food as a cultural practice that shapes meaning, social relations, and alternative forms of resistance.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

1. Cinematic Gastronomy

This study positions cinematic gastronomy as the primary analytical framework. Cinematic gastronomy extends the discussion of gastronomy beyond food consumption by examining how food is represented, narrated, and given meaning through cinematic language. Rather than treating food as a decorative visual element, cinematic gastronomy understands food as a cultural object capable of communicating values, identities, social relations, and ideological positions.

Doğan (2024) explains that cinematic gastronomy explores how food becomes meaningful through visual composition, narrative structure, and sensory



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representation in film. Food representation therefore should not be separated from cinematographic elements such as framing, color, movement, sound, and spatial organization. Similarly, Yilmaz and Aysun (2021) argue that food-centered films often function as cultural texts through which broader social concerns, including inequality, identity, and exclusion can be expressed. Within this perspective, chocolate in *Wonka* (2023) is approached not merely as an edible product but as a cinematic sign that organizes social relationships and structures narrative conflict. This framework allows the study to examine how food becomes a medium through which social power is challenged and alternative values are communicated.

2. Food Semiotics

To explain how chocolate produces meaning within the film, this study employs food semiotics as a supporting theoretical approach. Food semiotics assumes that food carries symbolic meanings that exceed its practical function as nourishment. Barthes (1997) argues that food operates as a sign system capable of expressing values, lifestyles, and ideological positions. Food therefore does not only indicate what people eat but also communicates how social worlds are organized. Through this perspective, meaning emerges not from food itself but from the cultural context in which it appears.

Applied to *Wonka* (2023), chocolate is interpreted as a symbolic object whose meaning changes depending on social position and narrative context. For the cartel, chocolate functions as an exclusive commodity and instrument of control. For Wonka, chocolate becomes a language of openness, imagination, and collective participation. Food semiotics is therefore used in this study to explain how cinematic representation transforms chocolate into a contested symbolic object.

3. Resistance and Infrapolitics

To understand how chocolate operates beyond symbolism and becomes a social practice, this study draws on resistance theory developed by Scott (1985). Resistance theory emphasizes that opposition to dominant power does not always appear through direct confrontation or open revolution. Everyday practices may also become effective forms of political action. Scott introduces the concept of “weapons of the weak,” referring to subtle and indirect strategies employed by marginalized actors to negotiate unequal social conditions. One important dimension of this perspective is infrapolitics, namely forms of hidden resistance that emerge outside formal political arenas.



Within *Wonka* (2023), resistance is represented through everyday gastronomic practices rather than institutional struggle. Wonka challenges monopoly through production, sharing, mobility, and alternative distribution of chocolate. These actions illustrate how ordinary cultural practices may generate symbolic and social disruption without relying on conventional political power.

4. Cultural Capital and Culinary Capital

To explain unequal access to power in the film, this study adopts Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital as an additional analytical framework. According to Bourdieu et al. (1984), social competition is not determined solely by economic resources but also by access to knowledge, skills, legitimacy, and social recognition. Cultural capital refers to forms of competence and embodied knowledge that enable individuals to gain influence within social fields. In addition to economic power, actors may possess social capital through networks and symbolic capital through public legitimacy and recognition.

This perspective is relevant to *Wonka* (2023) because the conflict between Wonka and the cartel cannot be reduced to economic competition alone. Wonka initially possesses limited economic resources but demonstrates strong cultural capital through creativity, craftsmanship, imagination, and culinary expertise. Meanwhile, the cartel maintains dominance not only through financial control but also through institutional relationships and symbolic authority. As a complementary concept, culinary capital (Naccarato & LeBesco, 2012) helps explain how culinary competence and food practices become sources of distinction and influence. However, culinary capital is treated only as a supporting concept rather than an independent theoretical framework in this study.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research design using cinematic text analysis as the primary method. Qualitative inquiry was selected because the objective of this research is not to measure audience response or quantify visual elements but to interpret meanings embedded within cinematic representation. The study positions film as a cultural text in which visual, narrative, and spatial elements interact to produce social meaning. Cinematic text analysis enables researchers to investigate how objects, actions, and audiovisual arrangements construct ideological messages within films. In this study, chocolate is examined not merely as a narrative object but as a cultural sign that mediates relations of power, exclusion, and resistance. Cinematic gastronomy functions as the principal analytical framework guiding interpretation throughout the analysis. The primary data



source of this study is *Wonka* (2023), directed by Paul King and produced by Warner Bros. Pictures, with a total runtime of approximately 116 minutes.

Data consist of visual, verbal, and spatial elements identified throughout repeated viewings of the film. Observation focused on scenes containing explicit interaction with chocolate and situations connected to monopoly, access, distribution, exclusion, or resistance. Data documentation was organized through structured observation notes consisting of: [1] scene timestamp; [2] Scene description; [3] Dialogue excerpts; [4] Visual composition; [5] Cinematic elements; [6] Preliminary analytical notes.

This study employed purposive sampling to select scenes that were directly relevant to the research objectives. Scene selection was conducted based on analytical significance rather than frequency of appearance. Five selection criteria were established to ensure consistency: [1] The scene contains explicit representation of chocolate as a visual or narrative object; [2] The scene shows interaction between chocolate and social hierarchy; [3] The scene presents conflict between Wonka and the chocolate cartel; [4] The scene illustrates spatial transformation produced through food-related practices; [5] The scene includes acts of sharing, selling, hiding, distributing, or controlling chocolate.

Based on these criteria, eight scenes were selected because they collectively represent the transformation of chocolate from a commercial commodity into a symbolic and social medium of resistance. The selected scenes include: (1) Wonka's first chocolate introduction; (2) public chocolate performance in the town square; (3) cartel reaction and restriction; (4) street distribution of chocolate; (5) cart seizure; (6) underground circulation; (7) poisoned chocolate sequence; and (8) factory opening.

Data analysis followed thematic coding procedures adapted from Braun and Clarke (2022). The objective of coding was to transform visual and narrative observations into broader interpretive categories connected to the research questions. The coding process was conducted in three stages. [1] Open Coding, At this stage, individual cinematic details were identified and labeled. Observation focused on recurring visual patterns, dialogue, actions, objects, spatial arrangements, and food-related interactions. [2] Axial Coding, Codes that showed conceptual similarity were grouped into broader analytical categories. This stage emphasized relationships among symbolic meaning, social interaction, and forms of resistance. [3] Selective



Coding, In the final stage, categories were synthesized into central themes that addressed the research questions and formed the structure of Findings and Discussion.

To strengthen methodological transparency, Table 1 provides an example of the coding process.

Table 1 Example of Coding Process

Selected Scene	Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective Coding
Public chocolate performance	free distribution, public gathering, spectacle, audience participation	community formation and symbolic disruption	Chocolate as symbolic opposition
Cartel confrontation	restriction, monopoly, exclusion, institutional control	unequal access and domination	Chocolate as cultural capital
Underground circulation	hidden routes, secrecy, alternative movement	everyday resistance practices	Underground distribution as infrapolitics
Factory opening	collective celebration, inclusivity, open access	alternative social organization	Ethical gastronomic utopia

To strengthen interpretive credibility, this study applies theoretical triangulation as proposed by Denzin and Lincoln (2018). The interpretation process was conducted by comparing findings through several complementary theoretical perspectives, namely cinematic gastronomy as the primary analytical framework, supported by food semiotics, resistance theory, and cultural capital. These perspectives were not employed to accumulate multiple theories, but rather to ensure that the interpretation of the data remained consistent, interconnected, and analytically coherent across different conceptual viewpoints. Furthermore, analytical consistency was maintained through repeated scene review and continuous comparison of thematic patterns emerging across different moments in the film, allowing interpretations to be refined and validated throughout the analysis process.

To ensure procedural transparency, the film was viewed a total of three times across the data collection and analysis stages. The first viewing focused on overall narrative comprehension, while subsequent viewings were directed specifically at identifying and verifying scenes meeting the five selection criteria. As this study was conducted by a single researcher, coding was performed solely by one coder, the first author.



Findings and Discussion

Analysis of the selected scenes shows that chocolate in *Wonka* (2023) functions beyond its material role as food. Through cinematic representation, chocolate becomes a symbolic and social medium through which monopoly, exclusion, resistance, and alternative forms of social participation are negotiated. Rather than serving merely as visual spectacle, chocolate operates as a cultural object that shapes relations between dominant and marginal actors.

The findings are organized into six interconnected themes derived from eight purposively selected scenes. The selected scenes represent key moments that illustrate interactions between chocolate, social hierarchy, conflict, and spatial transformation throughout the film. The corpus of scenes and their analytical functions is presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2 Corpus of Key Scenes from *Wonka* (2023)

No	Timestamp	Scene Description	Cinematic Evidence	Analytical Function
1	00:03:15	Wonka introduces handmade chocolate at the pier	Warm color contrast, handmade props, medium framing	Chocolate as symbolic opposition
2	00:11:42	First public chocolate demonstration in the town squares.	Floating chocolate effect, warm colors contrasted with cold urban tones	Chocolate as symbolic disruption and counter-space
3	00:24:07	The cartel reacts negatively after tasting Wonka's chocolate.	Close-up reaction shots, slowed editing rhythm	Chocolate as cultural capital
4	00:38:55	Wonka distributes free chocolate to towns people	Warm lighting, close-up of collective reactions	Chocolate as inclusivity and alternative social participation
5	00:52:18	Police seize Wonka's chocolate cart following cartel intervention	Cold color palette, low-angle framing emphasizing authority	Hegemonic violence and spatial exclusion
6	01:07:33	Underground chocolate circulation beneath the city	Dark enclosed setting, controlled camera movement, gradual musical build	Hidden mobility and everyday resista
7	01:21:44	The cartel poisons Wonka's chocolate	Visual disruption through artificial color contrast and fragmented	Cultural monopoly and symbolic violence



No	Timestamp	Scene Description	Cinematic Evidence	Analytical Function
reactions				
8	01:44:28	Opening of the new chocolate factory and public celebration	Inclusive wide framing, saturated color palette, collective choreography	Ethical gastronomic utopia and social reconstruction

After establishing the corpus of selected scenes, the following sections discuss how each sequence contributes to the broader representation of chocolate as a medium of symbolic struggle, cultural negotiation, and social transformation.

1. Chocolate as Symbolic Opposition

The first finding indicates that chocolate functions as a symbolic opposition to the existing social order. This opposition becomes visible from the opening sequence when Wonka introduces his handmade chocolate within public space.

From a cinematic perspective, the sequence emphasizes contrast through mise-en-scène. Wonka appears in modest clothing carrying handmade products, while the surrounding city environment is organized through rigid architecture, muted color tones, and regulated commercial spaces. Warm gold and bright accents associated with chocolate interrupt the colder visual environment that characterizes the city and its dominant order.

Camera framing strengthens this symbolic distinction. Medium and close shots repeatedly isolate Wonka and his chocolate from surrounding crowds, emphasizing difference rather than integration. Musical performance further transforms ordinary selling activity into a public event that temporarily disrupts everyday order.

Through food semiotics, chocolate functions as a second-order sign that exceeds consumption and acquires ideological meaning. It represents imagination, openness, and alternative values entering a space governed by regulation and scarcity. The conflict therefore emerges not because chocolate is economically superior, but because it introduces a competing social logic into a system already structured through exclusion and control. Chocolate becomes disruptive because it redefines access, pleasure, and participation, challenging established assumptions regarding who may produce, circulate, and enjoy food within the city.

2. Chocolate as Cultural and Culinary Capital

The second finding demonstrates that chocolate becomes a form of cultural and culinary capital capable of challenging established authority. One of the clearest examples appears when members of the cartel react negatively after encountering Wonka's chocolate. Importantly, the sequence does not portray rejection caused by poor quality. Instead, discomfort emerges from confronting a product that



operates according to values outside dominant commercial expectations. The scene relies heavily on filmic construction. Facial close-ups extend reaction time and emphasize emotional discomfort rather than objective evaluation. Editing slows audience attention toward expressions and hesitation, while costume design reinforces social distinction. The cartel appears through formal attire and controlled movement, whereas Wonka is represented through experimentation, mobility, and improvisation.

Using Bourdieu's framework, the conflict should not be interpreted merely as opposition between poverty and wealth. Rather, it illustrates competition between different forms of capital.

Table 3 (based on Bourdieu et al., 1984)

Dimension	Wonka	Cartel
Cultural Capital	Creativity, recipes, imagination	Standardization and industrial control
Culinary Capital	Craftsmanship and sensory innovation	Product exclusivity
Social Capital	Alliances with townspeople	Networks with police and elites
Food Logic	Sharing and accessibility	Scarcity and exclusivity

This interpretation suggests that Wonka's success does not emerge from replacing economic power but from converting cultural and culinary capital into social legitimacy. Creativity, gastronomic expertise, and collective participation become alternative resources capable of challenging authority without reproducing the cartel's mechanisms of control.

3. The Chocolate Cart as Counter-Space

The third finding reveals that resistance in *Wonka* is spatially organized. Public demonstrations and chocolate distribution scenes transform ordinary urban spaces into temporary zones of participation. Streets, alleys, and open squares become locations where alternative economic and social relations emerge.

From a cinematic perspective, spatial arrangement becomes central. Wide shots repeatedly position the cart at the center of the frame despite surrounding authority figures. Blocking and movement encourage visual attention toward chocolate rather than official institutions.

Props also perform symbolic work. The cart is represented not merely as transportation equipment but as mobile infrastructure enabling circulation beyond dominant commercial channels.



Using resistance theory, this spatial practice reflects everyday resistance. Rather than confronting institutions directly, Wonka reorganizes access and interaction through repeated small actions. The cart therefore becomes more than a selling device; it temporarily reorganizes public space and redistributes participation outside institutional control.

4. Underground Distribution as Infrapolitics

Another major finding concerns the underground circulation of chocolate. When formal access becomes restricted, movement shifts into hidden routes beneath the city. The underground sequence provides one of the strongest visual examples of infrapolitics.

Lighting design becomes especially important. Although the environment is visually dark and enclosed, chocolate repeatedly appears as a source of illumination. This contrast transforms hidden movement into a metaphor for maintaining collective possibility under conditions of restriction.

Camera movement becomes narrower and more controlled than earlier public scenes. Editing rhythm slows while musical intensity gradually increases, creating tension while maintaining forward momentum.

Scott's concept of infrapolitics helps explain this process. Resistance here does not seek public confrontation but develops through hidden circulation and tactical mobility. Chocolate becomes politically effective precisely because it circulates beyond visible systems of surveillance, demonstrating that resistance may persist through mobility, concealment, and alternative networks of exchange.

5. Poisoned Chocolate and Hegemonic Violence

The film's portrayal of the chocolate cartel extends beyond a simple narrative trope, functioning instead as a deliberate critique of monopoly capitalism and systemic exclusion. Recent academic analyses within political economy and film studies emphasize that the cartel in *Wonka* operates through recognizable antitrust violations to maintain hegemonic control. As Waller (2024) observes, the cartel actively restricts output, inflates prices, and uses violence to suppress culinary innovation, all while corrupting local political institutions to shield their market dominance. Therefore, the monopoly in *Wonka* represents more than just commercial greed; it illustrates how dominant economic actors consolidate power by manipulating both the legal framework and the cultural environment to exclude marginal competitors and maintain unequal social relations.

Dialogue and performance also shift significantly. Communication becomes shorter, more controlled, and increasingly strategic, reflecting efforts to manage public perception rather than solve material problems. This sequence suggests that



hegemonic power maintains itself not solely through ownership but through the ability to regulate meaning. Chocolate becomes dangerous not because of its material form but because of the alternative values attached to it.

Monopoly in *Wonka* therefore extends beyond economic domination and operates as cultural regulation. The cartel controls not only production and market access but also the social meaning attached to chocolate itself. Through institutional corruption, cooperation with police authority, and regulation of public space, the cartel determines who may sell chocolate, under what conditions, and who is considered worthy of consuming it. Their fear toward *Wonka* emerges not simply from commercial competition but from the possibility that alternative forms of pleasure and consumption may destabilize established hierarchies. In this sense, monopoly functions simultaneously as economic control and cultural control

6. Factory Opening and Ethical Gastronomic Utopia

The final finding demonstrates that resistance in *Wonka* ultimately moves beyond opposition toward reconstruction. The factory opening sequence does not simply celebrate victory. Instead, it presents an alternative social imagination organized around participation and accessibility.

From a cinematic perspective, this sequence differs markedly from earlier scenes. Wider framing includes multiple social groups within a shared composition. Color becomes more saturated and movement becomes collective rather than individualized.

Music and choreography also shift in function. Rather than emphasizing spectacle alone, performance creates a sense of communal celebration and collective ownership. Through cinematic gastronomy, this moment represents an ethical gastronomic utopia in which food is no longer controlled as an exclusive commodity but reorganized as a shared social experience.

However, the ending also introduces an important analytical tension. Although *Wonka* resists cartel domination throughout the narrative, he ultimately becomes a factory owner and enters the economic structure he initially challenged. This ambiguity complicates a simple interpretation of the film as anti-capitalist. Rather than rejecting capitalism entirely, *Wonka* distinguishes extractive monopoly capitalism from an ethical, imaginative, and socially inclusive form of entrepreneurship. *Wonka* does not abolish markets but reconstructs them through creativity, accessibility, and shared pleasure. Resistance in this context is therefore reformist rather than revolutionary, offering a vision of economic participation without monopolistic control.



Conclusion

This study demonstrates that *Wonka* (2023) extends beyond the conventions of a family musical and can be interpreted as a cinematic text that negotiates questions of food, power, and social relations. Through qualitative cinematic text analysis and the framework of cinematic gastronomy, supported by food semiotics, resistance theory, and cultural capital, this study examined how chocolate functions symbolically and socially throughout the film.

The findings indicate that chocolate in *Wonka* operates in at least two interconnected ways. First, chocolate functions as a symbolic language through which alternative values such as imagination, accessibility, participation, and collective belonging are expressed. Through visual composition, spatial organization, narrative movement, and food-related practices, chocolate becomes more than a consumable object and instead emerges as a medium for constructing social meaning.

Second, chocolate functions as a mechanism of social resistance. The analysis suggests that resistance in the film does not occur through direct political confrontation but through everyday cultural practices including production, circulation, sharing, and the creation of alternative spaces. Rather than portraying a simple victory of creativity over economic domination, *Wonka* presents a more complex transformation of capital. Although the cartel initially maintains dominance through economic, social, and symbolic capital, *Wonka* gradually accumulates cultural legitimacy and public support through creativity, collaboration, and collective participation. Resistance therefore appears as a process of reorganizing access and social relations rather than replacing one form of power with another.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of cinematic gastronomy by demonstrating that food in film should not be understood solely as visual representation or narrative decoration. Instead, food may operate simultaneously as a symbolic object, a cultural resource, and a medium through which social contestation becomes visible. This study also contributes to expanding discussions of food studies into mainstream popular cinema by showing how everyday gastronomic practices can communicate broader issues of monopoly, inequality, and alternative social imagination.

However, this study has several limitations. First, as the cinematic coding and text analysis were conducted solely by a single researcher, the study lacks inter-rater reliability checks, meaning the thematic interpretation carries a potential for subjective bias. Second, the analysis is limited to a single film text and does not



include audience reception or production context. In addition, interpretation relies on qualitative reading of cinematic elements, meaning that alternative interpretations remain possible. Finally, the study focuses primarily on symbolic and social dimensions of food and therefore does not explore industrial, economic, or historical aspects of film production.

Future research may expand this discussion by comparing Wonka with other food-centered films across different genres and cultural contexts. Comparative studies involving films such as *Ratatouille* (2007), *The Menu* (2022), *Madre* (2013), or *Aruna and Her Palate* (2018) may provide broader understanding of how food functions as a medium of identity formation, social critique, and cultural negotiation. Future studies may also integrate audience studies, multimodal approaches, or utilize multiple coders to investigate how viewers interpret food symbolism and resistance narratives in contemporary cinema with higher analytical objectivity.

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