

# Narrative Differences of the Pearl Earring in the Film and Painting *Girl with a Pearl Earring*

Liangzhuo Chen

School of HONG KONG METROPOLITAN University, HONG KONG

## Abstract

This study investigates the narrative transformation of the core visual symbol—the pearl earring—across Johannes Vermeer’s iconic painting *Girl with a Pearl Earring* and its transmedial adaptation (Peter Webber’s film based on Tracy Chevalier’s novel). By integrating Kress and van Leeuwen’s visual grammar, Roland Barthes’ semiotic theory, and Laura Mulvey’s gendered gaze theory, the research constructs a triaxial analytical model (formal, semantic, and power strata) to systematically examine the rhetorical reconfiguration and power metaphors of the pearl earring in static painting and dynamic cinema. Findings reveal that while the film maintains aesthetic consistency with the painting in lighting and color—featuring crisp contrasts, chiaroscuro effects, and soft natural illumination—the pearl earring, as an anchoring symbol, carries divergent narrative significances across the two mediums. The study further elucidates that transmedial adaptation fundamentally involves the negotiation between signifiers and signifieds. Critically, it cautions against oversimplified cultural-political interpretations in translating artistic classics, advocating for equilibrium between aesthetic autonomy and ethical reflection. These conclusions provide novel theoretical perspectives for transmedial narrative studies and methodological insights for adapting historical symbols.

## Keywords

Transmedial narrative; visual grammar; semiotic transcoding; gendered gaze.

## 1. Introduction

Johannes Vermeer's 17th-century masterpiece "*Girl with a Pearl Earring*" has become a classic in art history due to its mysterious atmosphere and exquisite technique. In 1999, Tracy Chevalier's novel reinterpreted the enigma of this painting through fictional narrative techniques; in 2003, Peter Webber's eponymous film reconstructed the meaning of the pictorial symbols using cinematic language. As the core visual symbol, the pearl earring underwent a transformation from "aesthetic object" to "power carrier" during its cross-media adaptation. This study employs visual grammar, semiotics, and the theory of gendered gaze as analytical frameworks to systematically compare the narrative function differences of the pearl earring in static painting versus dynamic film, while revealing the underlying cultural-political contestation and ideology. The innovative contributions of this paper include:

1. Constructing a comprehensive theoretical model for cross-media semiotic analysis;
2. Deciphering the reconstruction of gender-power relations in adapted art classics;
3. Providing critical reflections on ethical issues in contemporary translations of historical symbols.

## 2. Formal Stratum: Visual Representation and Narrative Functions of the Earring in Painting and Film



Figure (1) The luster of the pearl is the visual center Figure (2) Griet and Vermeer are the visual

Griet harbored profound admiration for Vermeer, until one day he decided to use her as a model for his painting. He "borrowed" his wife's pearl earrings for Griet to wear. When his wife discovered this, she flew into a rage over the pearls and adamantly demanded Griet's dismissal. Yet Vermeer never defended Griet, leading to a pivotal turn in the narrative: the abrupt interruption of Griet's youthful infatuation and the ambiguous atmosphere between them in the film. Ultimately, Griet left Vermeer's household and married a butcher whose social standing matched her own.

The painting's composition is predominantly yellow and blue. Vermeer's application of bold brushstrokes to the blue headscarf's shadows contrasts with the broad, dynamic strokes of yellow. Her countenance exhibited refined gleams. With remarkable accuracy, Vermeer portrayed the pearl. The earrings in this painting are particularly interesting, and they make the crystal structure and visual effect look more hierarchical through light. The earrings worn alone not only make the composition of the picture look very balanced, but also bring a special sense of beauty to the whole painting. We can see Figure 1, Wei Mei used a triangular composition in the painting, placing the earrings in the golden proportions of the canvas, and the radial folds of the yellow headscarf will show our eyes to the luster of the pearl. The feeling.

Because the two types of storytelling are very different, the film must be particularly careful when dealing with details. There are not many close-ups of pearl earrings in the film, which is actually in line with the general practice of the film, because the items in the film are usually designed to promote the plot, not to make the audience feel good. The director uses the earrings to express jealousy and make the story look more tense, but the side effect of this is to make Vermeer's wife a thin character, and does not show her more complex side. The girl's expression in the painting is particularly quiet, and the earrings are flashing with a looming light, and these details make the whole painting particularly poetic. But the performance of the earrings in the film is not so prominent in the painting. In fact, the painting and the film use a completely different way to express the pair's earrings, in which the earrings are like a quiet spectator, silently recording the emotional changes and story development of the characters..

The use of pearl earrings in this film is particularly dramatic. This prop is particularly important in promoting the development of the story, and through the picture, it directly allows us to see the changes in the feelings of the characters. The whole story is actually followed by the earrings, which revolve between Griet, Vermeer and his wife, and each time there is an emotional conflict, and the story will change. The film uses this dynamic way to express the earrings, making it more prominent and obvious to the plot.

The paper mainly examines how the work "Girl with Pearl Earrings" is expressed in visual art and in film. The artists play an important role in different art forms by carefully designing the element of pearl earrings. Whether it is a painting or a film, the pearl earrings can convey similar story content and arouse different emotional resonance and aesthetic experience in the audience..

For hundreds of years, Vermeer's "Girl with Pearl Earrings" painting has fascinated many people, and the young girl who is a little away from the audience gives a particularly mysterious feeling. The most attractive thing about this painting is that the painter uses very detailed brush strokes and soft colors, plus the girl's inscrutable eyes, which makes the painter can't help but guess who she is and what story is behind her.

### 3. Meaning level: narrative strategies and differences in perspectives of cross-media adaptation



Figure (3) The girl in the ornate frame gazing at an unknown direction



Figure (4) gazes at his beloved Griet

In this painting, called "The Girl with the Pearl Earring", the female writer portrays the protagonist Griet as a particularly attractive and very living image, and her character, as well as the stubbornness and independence of the unyielding, the most impressive place in the character. At the beginning of the story, Griet is full of admiration for the painter Vermeer, and she especially hopes to get the other person's attention, and hopes that her artistic talent is recognized. But as the plot develops, she slowly discovers that Vermeer's appreciation of her is actually only the pursuit of beauty. The earrings pay off the money owed to the butcher, which shows that she does not want to be inferior after marriage, but wants to be on an equal part with her husband, and also expresses her desire to continue to be a free and comfortable maid. At the end of the film, there is a particularly good shot, that is, Griet staring straight at the camera, which is particularly impactful, like retelling the story with a female perspective against the male-dominated perspective.

The main thing I want to say in this paper is that the female creator feels that pearl earrings are not just simple decorations or iconic objects in the painting. At first, the protagonist paid a great price to get earrings, and this sacrifice later became a turning point in her own inner thoughts. In the process of getting the earrings, she experienced a lot of moments of fear and confusion, which made her into the painter's eyes, which made her a particularly perfect image.

He is a male painter who paints pearl earrings with a male perspective, and paints girls with a particularly pure and natural, and the white skin feels particularly simple and beautiful. The

girl wears very simple clothes, but the earrings are shiny, so that the contrast seems that she is a little mysterious and gives people a different artistic feeling. The pearl earrings are not only an ornament, it makes the girl look like the whole person looks like a moonlight. It has a clean and refreshing feeling. The painting gives a sense of silence. The person who looks at the painting is first attracted by the lyrical atmosphere of the picture, so that they can easily ignore the girl's eyes. But if you look at the painting a few times, you will find that there are actually pearls shining in the dark background, and the girl's particularly bright eyes. The shiny part just proves that the painter really has a very high painting skills.

The discrepancy in gender viewpoints between Tracy and Vermeer is the impetus for the pearl earring's unique allure in both their literary pieces. The painting amplifies visual and emotional intensity, in contrast, the film employs Rembrandtesque lighting to render studio scenes, deliberately toning down the earring's brilliance to serve the narrative's thematic portrayal of class conflict. The painting amplifies visual and emotional intensity, in contrast, the film employs Rembrandtesque lighting to render studio scenes, deliberately toning down the earring's brilliance to serve the narrative's thematic portrayal of class conflict.

The paper mainly analyzes how the contrasting narratives of the novel and the painting show the different characteristics of Griet's character, as well as the important role of the pearl earrings. Tracy's novel details the process of Griet's emotional change and the story of her pursuit of self-worth, the earrings are here as a sign that she has experienced various difficulties to finally find herself. The Vermeer painting focuses on the beautiful appearance and simple temperament of the girl. Emphasis on visual effects..

From a gender perspective, the way earrings are described in the work has a lot to do with the theme that each piece wants to express. Tracy's novel is particularly interesting, it does not follow the old gender concept, nor does it cater to the male view of women, which allows the heroine Griet to make her own decisions and maintain her independence. Although the painting looks beautiful and attractive, the women in the painting are always in a passive position, and they are more like the artworks to be admired, rather than the protagonists who can actively participate in their own life.

By studying the two different art forms of fiction and painting, we can better understand the importance of the element of pearl earrings in art. In the process, we also found that the interpretation of the art by gender has a significant impact on the interpretation of the work of art

#### 4. The power layer: the difference in symbolism



Figure (5) Griet's earlobe is still sore and she wears an earring



Figure (6) Griet working in the background

The meaning of the pearl earrings in this film is much more direct than the painting, it is not only an ornament, but also a huge gap between rich and poor, and how those who hold power bully people. There is a particularly uncomfortable scene, that is, the painter Vermeer himself gave the maid Gritt a hole, obviously very painful to wear the pair of pearl earrings. This plot is particularly important, the relationship between men and women, rich and poor people are very clear. Evidence of how he was overbearing. Gretel's family was poor, and had never had a chance to wear such an expensive thing, but on the orders of the rich, she could only bear the pain to wear it, so that she looked more beautiful and could serve her master better..

In the film, the scene where Vermeer personally places the pearl earring on Griet imbues the earring with a deeper meaning, transforming it into an independent and suggestive symbol. Whenever viewers see this earring, they are reminded of Griet's suffering, her hardships, and the tragic love she endured despite her sincere devotion. By returning the earring, Griet rejects the "gift" bestowed by a man, achieving a transformation from being the "object of the gaze" to an "active agent."

Although it is difficult to understand exactly what the pearl earrings are trying to express from the painting, this man is very clever to hide the pearl and the less glorious colonial history of the Dutch East India Company, making it look like a simple work of art. But in the film, the pearl earrings are different, and it can express a lot of interesting things in different scenes. Even if you look at the pearl earrings in the painting alone, it also has a special attraction, which makes people feel that it is not only so simple on the surface. The pearl earrings in the painting, like the slightly open lips of the girl, are like an inexplicable mystery, which may be the source of the "unfinished meaning" of the expert. In the painting, the pearl earrings are more representative of a pure beauty. But in the film, the beauty of the pearl earrings is not the same, the beauty of the pearl earrings is pressed by class differences, and it has to express too much, but it makes people unable to appreciate its own beauty.

The depiction of the pearl earring in the painting is concrete, showcasing the artist's technical mastery, while its treatment in the film is abstract, requiring viewers to understand the social, economic, and cultural context of 17th-century Netherlands. In the painting, the pearl earring functions as a formal rhetorical device, whereas in the film, it carries symbolic meaning in terms of content. From these two perspectives, the symbolic significance of the pearl earring differs between the film and the painting.

The film uses the object of pearl earrings to express the inequities of society, especially the power gap between different classes. The pearl earrings not only represent good-looking and beautiful in the film, but also imply the oppression of power. The audience will involuntarily notice these details when watching the movie, they will feel sorry for the heroine Gritt, and will also think of the social class problems that have been in our lives and are difficult to change.

The film and painting have a distinctly different way of dealing with the symbol of pearl earrings, which reflects the characteristics of the two art forms. Vermeer's original paintings pay more attention to how to show real beauty, and the painter uses particularly delicate brush strokes and well-designed lighting to make the pearl earrings look real and attractive. The film focuses on the content of the story, and the director's change in the relationship between the characters, so that the pearl earrings carry more symbolic meaning.

This paper mainly examines the different meanings represented by pearl earrings in film and painting, and through comparative analysis, they are found to be very different in terms of the relationship between expressive power. The two art forms of film and painting have their own characteristics, so the symbolism of pearl earrings they show is not the same. From these differences, we can see the inequality between social class and power structure.

When we study the symbolism of pearl earrings in painting and film, we can find that there is a very complicated relationship between art and real life. When Wei Li painted the painting, he

painted the earrings particularly carefully, which made it feel particularly beautiful, but when it was made into a film, the director added more meaning to the social and political issues. Whether it is painting or film, this pearl earring is like a bridge, which brings the artist's own ideas and the era in which they live. So the pearl earrings are interesting, and it allows us to think about things from the arts, history, and society. Everyone can think differently.

## 5. Discussion: The Ethical Dilemmas of Cross-Media Translation

### (1) The Tension between Historical Authenticity and Contemporary Projection

The essence of cross-media translation resides in the renegotiation of historical symbols within contemporary cultural contexts. The film *"Girl with a Pearl Earring,"* through the fictionalized perspective of the maid Griet, reconstructs the act of gifting the pearl earring as an instance of male dominance over the female body. The close-up shot of the ear-piercing scene (Figure 4) employs the metaphor of physical pain to symbolize gender oppression. This narrative strategy is clearly rooted in 21st-century feminism's emphasis on bodily autonomy. However, historical research indicates that in 17th-century Holland, women's wearing of earrings was more closely associated with marital status and religious devotion, rather than serving as a direct symbol of gender oppression (Schama, 1987). The film imposes contemporary gender-political discourses onto historical narratives, effectively constituting what Stephen Greenblatt terms "the violence of New Historicism"—a teleological reconstruction of history through the power of textual interpretation (Greenblatt, 1988). This tension reveals a cognitive paradox inherent in cross-media adaptation: when artistic classics are transformed into commodities for mass cultural consumption, historical authenticity often yields to the immediacy of ideological expression.

### (2) The Contest between Artistic Autonomy and Mass Reception

Vermeer's painting elevates the pearl earring to a transcendent aesthetic symbol through the precise application of visual grammar. Analysis of the pigment composition indicates that the combined use of lead white and ultramarine intensifies the optical illusion of the pearl, employing a "dematerialization" technique that resonates with Kant's concept of art as "purposiveness without purpose." In contrast, the film, in catering to the audience's desire for dramatic conflict, diminishes the earring to a mere instrument for class critique. For instance, while Vermeer's wife, Catharina, is absent from the painting, the film depicts her as a hysterical "accomplice of patriarchy," oversimplifying the complex historical institution of marriage through her expressions of jealousy. Although this adaptation strategy improves narrative accessibility, it succumbs to the cultural industry syndrome Adorno criticized—the substitution of artistic depth with consumable spectacles of symbolic fascination (Adorno, 1991). Even more troubling is that the film, through its fetishized close-ups of the earring, reproduces the very logic of visual exploitation it aims to critique, thereby exposing the structural contradiction within commercial cinema between artistic ethics and market demands.

## 6. Conclusion

The paper focused on the evolution of the symbol of pearl earrings in different media. Vermeer's famous painting made the pearl earrings a matter of aesthetic interest to ponder through a unique visual expression, and later the film adapted turned it into a key prop to promote the development of the story, used to express the criticism of social power. This change is related to the characteristics of different art forms, but also reflects the changes in the social thinking of the time. From the point of view of the meaning of expression, because the creator's ideas are different, so the way of processing is not the same, the painting pays more attention to the beauty of the appearance of the pearl earrings, while the film pays more attention to the deep meaning behind it. From the perspective of social power, the film

completely turns the pearl earring into a symbol of class contradiction, adding a lot of cultural and political interpretation to it.

This paper mainly discusses the use of symbols in the work will directly affect the author's narrative methods. In the process of cross-media adaptation, the creator must consider the specific expression of the symbol itself, but also pay attention to the symbolism behind the symbol, so as to ensure that the rich connotation contained in the symbol will not be lost too much in the process of adaptation.

The main point of this paper is the expression of pearl earrings in different works of art, which shows us that there are many uses of art symbols. Pearl earrings appear in different ways in painting and film, and by comparing these differences, we can better understand how artists use symbols to tell stories.

## References

- [1] Huang, C. H. (2022). An Analysis of the Emotional Expression of Color in Girl with a Pearl Earring. *Masterpieces of Renowned Artists*, 4, 69–71. <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.2095-8854.2022.04.027>
- [2] Chen, W. J., & Xu, H. (2019). Interpretation of Female Characters in Girl with a Pearl Earring from a Feminist Perspective. *Journal of Luoyang Normal University*, 38(9), 48–50.
- [3] Li, K. (2015). A Baroque Scroll Painting: An Intertextual Analysis of Three Underlying Texts in Girl with a Pearl Earring. *Art & Life*, 2, 16–19.
- [4] Liu, Y. Y. (2010). The Imagery Beyond Representation in Vermeer's Girl with a Pearl Earring. *Art Panorama*, 6, 52. <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1002-2953.2010.06.017>
- [5] Liu Yuanyuan. (2010). A Brief Analysis of the Image beyond the Image in Vermeer's Girl with a Pearl Earring. *Mei shu da guan*, 6, 52-52. <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1002-2953.2010.06.017>
- [6] Barthes, R. (1977). *Image-Music-Text*. Hill and Wang.