Reimagining Traditional Chinese Folktales: A Feminist Literary Critique of Mulan

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Abstract: This paper critically analyzes the evolving portrayals of Mulan through the lens of gender performativity, intersectionality, and postcolonial feminism. Using content and discourse analysis, the study compares the original Chinese Ballad of Mulan with Disney's 1998 animated and 2020 live-action adaptations. Mulan's gender performance, situated at the intersection of culture, identity, and power, is interpreted differently across societies. Western audiences largely view her as a feminist icon, while Eastern critiques emphasize her deviation from filial and cultural norms. The study reveals how global feminist ideals often clash with indigenous values, complicating efforts to construct universally accepted feminist narratives. Mulan emerges as a contested symbol of empowerment, identity, and cultural negotiation in intersectionality.
Keywords: Mulan, feminist criticism, gender performativity, cultural identity, intersectionality, postcolonial feminism.

Introduction

As narrated in the old Ballad of Mulan, the story of Hua Mulan has been an embodiment of sacrifice, filial piety, and bravery for centuries. The story of Mulan has been retold in myriad different cultural environments, though originally was recognized as a dutiful daughter who impersonates a male to enlist in the army in place of her father. Scholars have started to imagine her life in the context of gender roles, agency, and social norms ever since feminist literary criticism appeared. This strategy provides a means of examining Mulan's behavior and how these reinforce or subvert the patriarchy-caused restrictions in finer detail. While Mulan ultimately becomes responsible for her domestic duty, such earlier traditional readings may applaud her bravery but stop short of going beyond a patriarchal environment.

Feminist critics weigh such determination on the basis that it reinforces patriarchal gender roles thereby destabilizing her own independent self. Mulan's disruptive act and cultural imperative of a return to feminity create tension to serve to dramatize the restrictions conventionally imposed upon women and the impossibility of ever achieving long-term gender equality in traditional narratives. Disney films—especially the 1998 animation and 2020 live-action adaptations—reflect different feminist ideals based on Western and Eastern cultures. In line with Western feminist ideals, the 1998 film places stronger emphasis on individual freedom and indifference to gender stereotyping. The 2020 adaptation, while advocating women's emancipation, is more attentive to cultural authenticity and family values. These different depictions of Mulan mirror the difficulty of creating feminist narratives that are universally engaging for broad cultural constituencies.

The changing depictions of Mulan also pose more fundamental questions with the gender performativity theory—a theory put forward by scholar Judith Butler.

Mulan illustrates the ways in which gender is constructed socially and performed by using masculine behavior to enable her to co-exist in a traditionally men's society. Even as a success, the story has the tendency to reaffirm the conventional gender roles by alluding to the ongoing struggle for gender equality both historically and in the present context. Ultimately, the tale of Mulan—through conventional and modern reinterpretation—offers a fertile ground from which to examine gender, identity, and cultural expectation. Her myth, be it Disney movie or old ballad, is also followed by continued controversy regarding woman's agency, social standing, and global feminist principles. Her myth persists as familiar to us today as one of resistance and change, as much a reflection of the richness of women's roles in ancient times as in modern times.

Literature Review

Mulan's Images Shaping Gender Norms in Eastern and Western Societies

At its core grounded on the Ballad of Mulan, Mulan's narrative has also been a parable of sacrifice and filial piety in patriarchal China. Having Confucian ideals that limit women to domestic tasks, traditional versions highlight the bravery of Mulan but eventually re-include her into mundane gender roles (Kaka & Winarta, 2023; Shen & Yimwilai, 2022).
Reimagining Mulan as an independent feminist heroine who transcends gender norms, Disney's 1998 animated film embodies Western ideals of empowerment and independence (Susilowaty & Prastiwi, 2022). Her love subplot with Li Shang, however, takes away from this empowerment by subtly reinforcing gender norms (Puspitasari et al., 2022).

The figure of Mulan as being a blend of personal bravery and traditional virtues like honor and family obligation helps the 2020 live-action remake strike a cultural balance. Although still a cultural synthesis that was developed by commercial and ideological forces from both the East and West, this remake is trying to blend feminist concepts subtly in terms of Chinese cultural norms (Effendi & Sugiharti, 2023).

Mulan's story emphasizes the changing role of women between society expectations war and inner self, thereby rendering intelligent analysis of the intersection of gender norms between civilizations, according to Narti and Sari (2022).

Globally Acceptable Mulan

Global reception of Mulan emphasizes several points of view. Feminist discussion shapes Western viewers who enjoy the 1998 iteration of female autonomy for its representation (Shen & Yimwilai, 2022.). Eastern viewers, especially in China, were unhappy with the 2020 remake's apparent deviation from foundational values like filial piety and social deference (Usman et al., 2021).

Disney's feminist approach is criticized by opponents as defying Confucian values, which prioritize family duty over self-independence (Kaka & Winarta, 2023).

Rising Asia Journal (2024) sees that the effort to make both cultural paradigms enjoyable for one another brings about a diluted narrative that neither group fully enjoys.

Effendi and Sugiharti (2023) and other feminist authors highlight the impossibility of generating a message for all feminists. Mulan's diverse interpretations bring to light the contradictions between universal feminism and particular cultural norms, as indicated by Narti and Sari (2022).

Mulans Gender Performativity: Impact on Feminist Discourse

According to Judith Butler's theory, Mulan's self demonstrates gender performativity—that is, she adopts masculine traits in an attempt to be successful in male-dominated careers, such as the military (Mulvey, 1975; Shen & Yimwilai, 2022.). Although her achievement initially results from playing macho, her real worth comes from striking a balance between male and female traits.

Although Mulan's value in terms of her love story narrative (Puspitasari et al., 2022) the 1998 film focuses on rejecting femininity for power. Nevertheless, the 2020 film seeks to illustrate power without rejecting femininity, hence exhibiting a more compassionate but balanced feminist message with cultural regard (Effendi & Sugiharti, 2023).

Mulan's gender performance, according to Narti and Sari (2022), is the larger problem faced by women: being admired for challenging gender stereotypes while judged according to wise tradition. Mulan provides duality in both challenge and confirmation of gender stereotypes.

Throughout all its incarnations, Mulan is rich terrain for gender, culture, and power analysis. Mulan remains the site of the constant tension between tradition and change in gendered discourse whether in the Confucian society of the original ballad or in the feminized, globalized spectacles of Disney's films.

Theoretical Framework

Most clearly articulated in Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (1990), Judith Butler's performativity theory of gender is the most appropriate theoretical model for analyzing Mulan's character throughout classic Chinese folktale and the Disney films. In Butler's view, gender is a repetitive, culturally constructed performance into which individuals enter on the basis of cultural expectations and not a natural or biological category. From this view, gender is not something one is but something one does, a performance that, again and again, produces the illusion of fixed genders.

From this concept, reflection on Mulan's image through various media relies because it illustrates the way she performs masculinity to be accepted and effective in contexts under the control of men such as the military. She portrays a male character in the traditional Ballad of Mulan to protect her father and uphold family honor, thus assuming characteristics usually fitting for masculinity—bravery, leadership, and strength. These enactments produce performativity that challenges gender, but the narrative brings her back to traditional femininity with her return home and resumption of household work. According to Mulvey (1975), this return to the feminine strengthens patriarchal ideology that even subversive women are now expected to conform to conventional gender expectations (Shen & Yimwilai, 2022.). Disney's 1998 animated movie, however, introduces Mulan as a freer and clearly rebellious figure whose path fits Western feminist ideals.

She not only performs masculinity to ensure war victory but also subverts the accompanying expectations of being a woman by appropriating herself through capability and braveness. The movie ends with her reunited with Li Shang, thus softly affirming heteronormative relationships and orthodox gender roles by constructing her worth in opposition to a love interest male counterpart (Puspitasari et al., 2022).

All this despite this rescue narrative. Illustrating Mulan's inner conflict between her chi—a symbol of inner strength and manliness—and cultural notions of femininity, the 2020 live-action reimagining is more subtly not so simplistic in its message. This reading implies empowerment through integrating both masculine and feminine qualities rather than discarding femininity altogether. Her journey illustrates the tension between social conformity and personal freedom, thus providing a more mature view of gender performativity (Effendi & Sugiharti, 2023). Butler's approach is also applicable to the research gap on the construction of Mulan images under varying historical and cultural circumstances.

It facilitates how the research will show how Mulan's gender identity is constructed rather than being innate and in response to culture and society, both in the original Chinese setting and in international media settings.

The various versions conceal the fraught discourses of feminism and cultural heritage since Mulan's performative manhood both troubles and maintains patriarchal norms based on the cultural perspective one utilizes in viewing her (Narti & Sari, 2022). The theory also enables one to ask about how Mulan's gender performances constitute the

worldwide reception of her character. The differential responses generated by Eastern and Western audiences come into view the cultural contradictions of exporting feminist ideology overseas. Mulan's transgression from mainstream femininity might inspire Western audiences, but for Chinese audiences, it's a departure from beliefs such as social harmony and filial piety (Usman et al., 2021).

It refers to the challenge of constructing an international appealing feminist rhetoric which is attentive to indigenous traditions but continues to advocate for gender equality. Butler's gender performativity offers a critical framework of perception through which one can observe Mulan's actions—through the Ballad, the 1998 animated film, and the 2020 live action reimagining—as performative acts conditioned by and against cultural norms. Her story comes to represent the changing discourse on gender, power, and identity in local and global realities (Shen & Yimwilai, 2022; Narti & Sari, 2022). In terms of Butler's theory, this book makes a meaningful contribution to scholarship on how media stories construct and subvert gender norms and how various cultural paradigms read such portrayals.
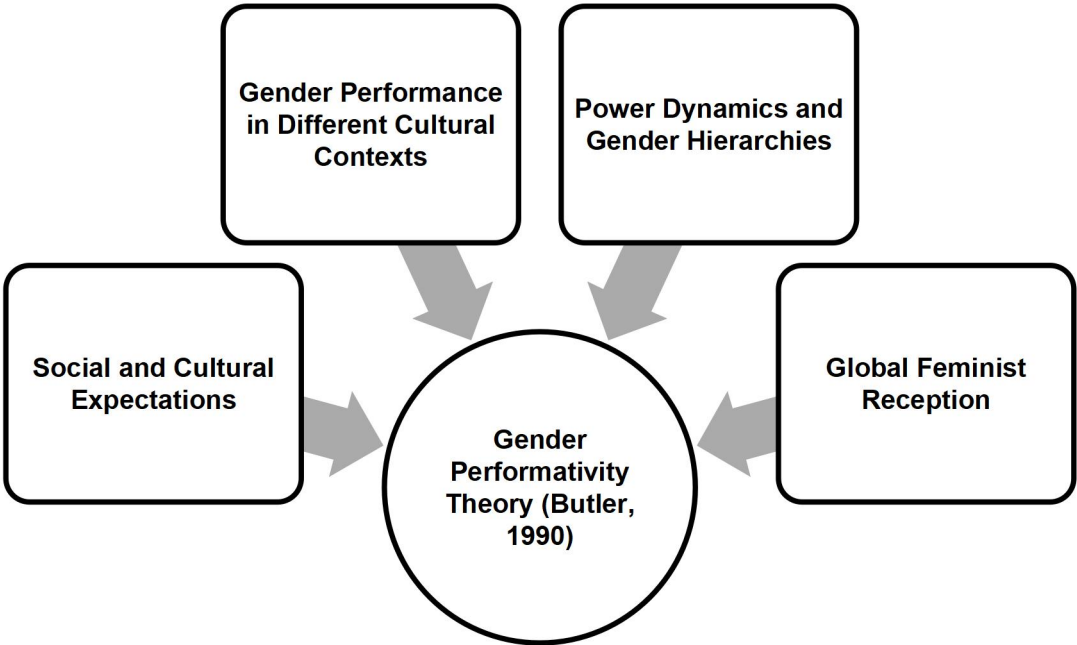

Table 1. Framework

Methodology

This study examined the depiction of Mulan across various cultural contexts, such as the initial Chinese myth and Disney's animated and live-action movies. Drawing from Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which serves as a central lens alongside broader feminist theories, the research explained how Mulan's gender performance problematized, reaffirmed, or negotiated gender norms and expectations. The research utilized a qualitative design incorporating content and discourse analysis, comparative analysis, and critical feminist theory in the comparison of the content of the source texts, the ancient Chinese fable, Disney's animated movie, and Disney's 2020 live-action remake.

This study aims to critically analyze how the character of Hua Mulan, as portrayed in traditional Chinese literature and postcolonial feminism, reflects and challenges gender norms across cultural contexts. Grounded in Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, the study specifically investigates how Mulan's representations negotiate feminist ideals and cultural expectations in both Eastern and Western societies.

1. How is gender constructed and performed in the original Chinese Ballad of Mulan compared to Disney's 1998 animated and 2020 live-action adaptations?
2. In what ways do Disney's portrayals of Mulan challenge or reinforce patriarchal and cultural gender expectations?
3. How does the global reception of Mulan reflect differing feminist interpretations in Eastern and Western cultures?
4. What implications does Mulan's gender performativity have on contemporary feminist discourse and cross-cultural identity construction?

The Chinese myth from The Ballad of Mulan was a fertile cultural source for understandings of gender and its relationship with family values in ancient China. Disney's animated film, Mulan, was examined with regard to how the character portrayed and gender roles were constructed within the Western feminist script. The live film explored Mulan's internal conflict of being male and female, and its Western and Eastern audience reception gave a glimpse into the meeting of world feminism and cultural authenticity.

Qualitative content analysis was used in the analysis of the gender performance of the protagonist, gender representation of the roles, and overall societal ideals depicted in the films and folktale. Comparative analysis was used in comparing narrative structure, language, and visual content of the two films and observing how the conduct and interaction with other characters by Mulan were consonant with or violated societal expectations.

The study aimed at examining the authentic Chinese legend, Hua Mulan, compared to postcolonial feminism of her, with particular emphasis on Mulan's character development and how varying cultural backgrounds (Western and Chinese)

impacted this. The study also examined how the western and eastern audience interpreted Mulan's gender performance, with the aid of scholarly works, reception and critique questionnaires developed around Western and Eastern perspectives. Feminist critical discourse analysis was employed in the analysis of Mulan's representation in various versions and its impact on current feminist movements. The research incorporated scholarly journals and media criticism in analyzing Mulan's gender performance in relation to wider discourse on gender equality, autonomy, and cultural identity.

Sources of data were the original film, the 1998 animated film, and the 2020 remake. A coding system was developed to place instances of gender performance, family roles, and independence in each of the films. Reception data were gathered from surveys, audience response, and media critique to survey the world reception of the character of Mulan in both films. The study itself had focused on Disney's adaptations of Mulan and the ancient Chinese legend, but not on a close examination of all the versions of Mulan in the media. The study was conducted within the complex context of gender theory, cultural identity, and media representation within globalization, which was significant in the grasp of shifting representation of Mulan in contemporary society.

This research applied Mulan's tale according to Judith Butler's theory on gender performativity, which posited that gender was a series of performative acts by which one performed according to cultural expectation. In classical Chinese retelling, Mulan acted man in order to earn her living and settle her father's debt, yet her playing at malehood devolved into traditional womanhood and recorded the limits imposed on women by patriarchal structures. Disney's adaptations offered distinct interpretations of gender performativity, with the 1998 animated film deriving itself from Mulan's rejection of womanhood roles as empowerment and the 2020 live-action film finding it difficult to reconcile feminist ideals and cultural faithfulness.

The global reception of the multicultural representations of Mulan was studied, with Disney's 1998 animated classic as the global phenomenon, and the 2020 live action attempting to balance feminist ideology with cultural authenticity. The study bridged the literature gap for how global feminist discourse interacted with local norms in representing Mulan, specifically on how Eastern v. Western influences shaped Mulan's gender performance.

The research applied Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which serves as a central lens alongside broader feminist theories for the deconstruction of Mulan's gender subversion and her narrative being transcontextualized in intersectionality to fit with modern feminist visions. The current research aimed to contribute to debates on how intersectionality portrays gender, culture, and feminism, discovering about the construction and deconstruction of gender identity in narratives of Eastern and Western cultures.

This research analyzed Mulan's representation in early Chinese literature, Disney films, and contemporary feminist literary reviews. The early Chinese folk poem, the Ballad of Mulan, served as a point of reference, following the themes of filial piety, sacrifice, and gender. Disney animated feature film and live-action films provided rich sources to utilize while understanding Mulan's character's reinterpretation in contemporary movie versions.

Feminist literary criticism and gender theory provided the theoretical paradigms according to which Mulan's character could be explained, namely how she has assumed masculine traits and then come back to feminine positions. Writers like Narti & Sari, Shen & Yimwilai, and Kaka & Winarta have provided critical analyses on how feminist theory would intersect with the narrative of Mulan and address the global and cross-cultural implications of her gender performance in the media.

The reception studies contrasted the responses of the audiences for the 1998 animated feature and the 2020 live action feature among Western and Eastern audience. Usman et al. (2021), Narti & Sari (2022), and Rising Asia Journal (2024) have produced comparative critical reviews of the responses of the audience, pointing towards contrasting meanings of Mulan as construed based on cultural values and expectations.

Media accounts and interviews provided valuable insight into the conceptualization and production of Mulan that enabled the films to be placed in the overall context of Hollywood's response to the foreign market and how the tale of Mulan was constructed around conforming to Western feminist and Chinese cultural norms.

Materials discussed included classical texts, cartoon films, live-action films, feminist literary criticism, journal articles, movie critiques, interviews, and audience reception studies. Classical Chinese myths, live-action and cartoon films of Disney, academic journals, and feminist theories provided hints about how Mulan's gender roles, filial piety, and social expectations were constructed. The blending of Eastern and Western values rendered it hard to conduct research and some meanings subjective depending on the researcher's stand.

Constraints of source material were classical Chinese mythology, Disney live-action and animated films, books on scholarship, and feminist theoretical frameworks. Availability and quality of primary source material posed challenges in presenting a monolithic understanding due to differences in translations and changes that impacted the representation of Mulan as a character and woman. Judith Butler's performativity theory of gender was the primary theory to employ in analyzing Mulan's gender identity, but it did not embrace other applicable feminist theories such as intersectionality, which addressed issues of race, class, and culture. Heterogeneity in the responses of the audience was a limitation because there were several responses with varying dimensions that were dictated by social, political, and cultural factors.

Comparative research was restricted to Disney films of Mulan and the original Chinese legend, and profit and political aims complicated the research by introducing concerns of profitability, international diplomacy, and cultural contention.

Table 2. Materials Analyzed

Type of Material	Title/Source	Description	Purpose of Analysis
Traditional Text	*The Ballad of Mulan*	A classic Chinese folk poem recounting the story of Mulan's self-	Analyze the representation of gender roles, filial

		sacrifice and disguised service in the military.	piety, and societal expectations in traditional Chinese culture.
Animated Film	*Mulan* (1998) by Walt Disney	The animated version of Mulan, reinterpreting her as a self-reliant hero who challenges traditional gender norms.	Investigate how Western feminist ideals shape Mulan's autonomy and rejection of traditional femininity.
Live-Action Film	*Mulan* (2020) by Walt Disney	A live-action adaptation of Mulan that integrates Chinese cultural values with a more grounded depiction of Mulan.	Examine the balance between gender performativity and cultural authenticity, with a focus on empowerment.
Feminist Literary Criticism	*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* by Judith Butler	Judith Butler's seminal work on gender performativity and its impact on feminist discourse.	Provide a theoretical framework for understanding Mulan's gender performance across different versions.
Feminist Literary Criticism	*Visual and Other Pleasures* by Laura Mulvey	An influential work in feminist film theory exploring the representation of women in visual media.	Analyze how Mulan's character challenges or reinforces traditional gender norms within cinematic narratives.
Scholarly Journal Articles	*"Gender, Identity, and Cultural Representation in Mulan", Rising Asia Journal*	A journal article exploring feminist readings of Mulan in both the original folktale and modern adaptations.	Understand the intersection of gender identity and cultural representation in Mulan's evolving portrayals.
Scholarly Journal Articles	*"The Feminist Reception of Disney's Mulan", Asian Feminist Studies Journal*	Critical reception of Disney's Mulan, analyzing feminist responses in both Western and Eastern contexts.	Investigate how global and local audiences interpret feminist themes in Disney's adaptations of Mulan.
Film Reviews	*"Mulan: A Feminist Reimagining?"* by various film critics	Film reviews from both Eastern and Western media outlets evaluating the feminist aspects of Disney's adaptations.	Assess how film critics interpret Mulan's gender performativity and empowerment through their cultural lenses.
Interviews	Director and Cast Interviews from Disney's Mulan (2020)	Interviews with the filmmakers and cast of the 2020 live-action film, discussing the cultural authenticity and gender issues.	Analyze the filmmakers' intentions in creating a balanced portrayal of Mulan's gender and cultural identity.
Audience Reception Studies	*"Audience Reactions to Mulan: A Comparative Analysis of Eastern and Western Audiences"*	Survey data and academic papers examining audience reception of Mulan across global contexts.	Explore how different audiences perceive Mulan's portrayal of gender and identity, particularly in feminist terms.

Findings
Masculinity as Performance**Masculinity as Performance**
Filial Piety vs. Western Individualism**Filial Piety vs. Western Individualism**

Audience Reactions and Cultural Clash
This study analyzes the way Mulan's character, in the original Chinese Ballad of Mulan and Disney's 1998 animated and 2020 live-action films, negotiates and materializes gender norms, feminist values, and cultural values in Eastern and Western culture.

Significant themes that were identified through theme analysis and coding are Masculinity and Femininity, Heroism and Famicial Duty, Cultural Expectations, and Gender Fluidity.

a. Masculinity and Femininity: Masculinity in the Chinese version of Mulan fulfills her filial duty according to Eastern expectations. Disney's Mulan subverts traditional femininity, although the 1998 film places her value in terms of a romantic interest, thereby maintaining Western gender norms. While postcolonial feminism of Mulan embody the figure as one of assertiveness personally, in keeping with Western feminism, the Chinese story presents self-sacrifice and family honor.

   Although Disney stresses expanded identity and personal freedom, both adaptations feature Mulan enacting masculinity.

b. Gender Fluidity. Preaching inner harmony, the 2020 live-action version combines feminine and masculine traits.

c. Global response to Mulan testifies to cultural difference in feminist reading: Mulan is perceived by Westerners as a feminist heroine, and by Easterners as a family-oriented sacrifice. Global Feminism & Cultural Tensions. The 2020 live-action version tries to synthesize all the views.

d. Filial Piety vs. Individualism: While the West believes in individual growth, in the East family is the priority. This influences the way each society addresses gender equality.

   Disney's attempts at harmonizing the live-action film with Chinese customs contributed to mixed opinions because part of the audience felt that the adaptation lacked depth or imposed upon foreign values.

Mulan greatly contributes to feminist arguments in the following ways:

Mulan overcomes binary norms through gender performance and thereby illustrates Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which serves as a central lens alongside broader feminist theories.

The image of Mulan as a strong, independent woman overcomes conventional womanhood in mass culture, yet Disney interpretations still express some homogeneity.

Her journey from obedient daughter to warrior represents the promise of altering society's gender norms, thereby making her a most popular topic of conversation regarding international gender equality.

Through increased, sustained control over media and global cultural feminism, Mulan's narrative, in cultural and cinematic terms—international and transcultural—offers a revolutionary, changing symbol of gender identity, leaving behind cultural values and feminist liberation at its end.

Conclusion and Recommendation

A look at Mulan's character through a variety of cinematic and cultural contexts provides rich new perspectives on feminism, gender roles, and cultural tradition. From the Chinese Ballad of Mulan, it has been radically transformed in Disney's animated film of 1998 and in the live-action film of 2020. Particularly regarding gender and empowerment, these transformations show contradictions between the East and the West.

Mulan defies gender roles in the original tale only momentarily but retains Confucian virtues of filial obedience. Apart from a romantic plotline connecting empowerment and homonormative validation, Disney's 1998 version prioritizes Western feminist virtues such as autonomy. As consistent with new feminist values of inclusivity and gender fluidity, the 2020 remake depicts an equal balance of masculine and feminine attributes.

Whereas the Eastern audience is concerned with the erosion of traditional morality, there are Western audiences who see Mulan as a symbol of female empowerment. That dichotomy is reflective of the challenge in translating universal feminist theory to every kind of diverse culture.

Future study could explore:

1. Mulan and other feminist stories of reception around cultures.
2. Broader effects of gender fluidity in the media.
3. Especially among children, media structure gender expectation.
4. Postcolonial feminists criticize intersectionality such as Disney.

The role played by romance subplots in the formation of feminist ideas about films.

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