

## FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY IN FLIGHTPLAN BY ROBERT SCHWENTKE

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### ABSTRACT

The historical underrepresentation and misrepresentation of women in the media have the potential to perpetuate gender inequalities and prejudices. This study aims to demonstrate how the film *Flightplan* by Robert Schwentke depicts female subjectivity and how masculine dominance is shown to affect the female main character's subjectivity, named Kyle Pratt. The researchers use the five C's of cinematographic theory to explore the portrayal of female subjectivity and feminism theory to analyze how the masculine manipulates the main character until her subjectivity arises. The study's findings indicate that although the movie places the female character in a field and situation traditionally dominated by men, it empowers her by portraying her as a character who, with her layered identity as a newly widowed woman, a single mother with one daughter, and a woman herself, who shows her capacity as an independent subject capable of performing qualities and traits normatively constructed as male.

**Keywords:** Film, Gender, Masculine Dominance.

## BACKGROUND

*Flightplan* (2005), a film by Robert Schwentke, empowers a female character and presents female subjectivity through the female main character, Kyle Pratt. Kyle Pratt is characterized as having a layered subjectivity: as a new single mother, as a propulsion engineer, and as a woman herself. She is depicted as a propulsion engineer, a traditionally masculine profession. She is also a mother figure to her only six-year-old daughter and is a recently widowed wife. In the story, Kyle experiences a double loss: that of her husband and her daughter, the latter suddenly disappearing during her flight. The death of her husband and the loss of her daughter are crimes committed by a sky marshal named Carson, who acts as the primary agent in carrying out his mission to hijack the plane.

The layered subjectivity possessed by the female main character in *Flightplan* indicates that she bears duties and responsibilities distinct from those aligned with patriarchal society. In a patriarchal society, gender is commonly constructed as stereotypical, placing men as figures who must earn a living to meet the needs of their families and women as figures who must take care of housework and children (Brannon, 2017). Under such stereotypes, men usually occupy public spheres, while women are domestic spheres. Because of gender stereotypes, women's responsibilities in a family consist of responsibility for themselves, the household, and the children they give birth to.

Those responsibilities will increase when women decide to pursue public work, which requires a more complex time management. If women also engage in public employment, they can be considered to have two full-time jobs (Brannon, 2017). This implies that a substantial amount of time is required to fulfill her duties and responsibilities as women. Furthermore, if the public employment involves spending more time outside domestic work, it adds an additional layer of time commitment. The more a woman is engaged in the public sphere, the less domestic role she plays. In other words, the more responsibilities women have, the less time she has to carry out those responsibilities.

Furthermore, Brannon explains how gender stereotypes typically lead men toward careers and technical education, while steering women toward administrative and childcare roles. These stereotypes undoubtedly constrain the aspirations of women who seek to venture into scientific professions, which traditionally fall within the masculine sphere. In many films, scientists are often portrayed by male characters. When a female scientist is depicted, the character tends to be unmarried or married but without children. Fortunately, the representation of women in the period from 1982 to 2017 has experienced an increase of 35% (Brannon, 2017). Considering the layered subjectivity of the female main character, *Flightplan*, the film which serves as the primary subject of discussion in this article, is one of the films featuring a female character employed in the field of science that was produced within that time range. The film portrays a female character who has been married and has a child.

Michael O'Mally (cited by Poos, 2019) stated that subjectivity refers to "sense of self". The individual exhibits self-concern or attentiveness to the self. The individuals are aware of what is in their minds and what they believe. The individuals are also aware of what is felt. So, all those thoughts and feelings combine to form the identity they want to show. Related to female subjectivity, Irigaray (1985) argues that female subjectivity is influenced by the masculine. Thus, what becomes female subjectivity is something that men intervene in. There is still male power in female

subjectivity. In line with that, feminist movements in the French feminist era tended to be based on situations where patriarchy was influential in determining what happened in a social construction (Ince, 2017). This shows that men, over the occurrence of female subjectivity, possess the power.

A number of studies on female subjectivity has been published. Zhao (2022), for example, talks about female subjectivity that appears as self-consciousness amid the generalization of Chinese women who have a duty as social people and as women. Safdar and Yasmin (2022) also discuss interstitial subjectivity in Pakistani Muslim women who live between secular and religious subjects. A study by Springer (2016) investigates how black women move beyond stereotypes of sexual perversion into a nuanced sense of self. Bond (2017) also discusses female subjectivity, in which memory forms a new model of female subjectivity that defies binary opposition. While previous research has been concerned with subjectivity that tries to escape binary opposition and stereotypes, this article is concerned with female subjectivity that is detached from binary (masculine-feminine) gender opposition but is still somehow influenced by the masculine.

At this juncture, we see *Flightplan* as a film that shows the subjectivity of a woman in the face of a double loss. This film was initially planned with the main character being a man. Later, the main character's gender was changed to female because according to the director, the bond between a mother and her daughter differs from that between a father and his daughter (Bacardi, 2018). *Flightplan* received two wins and six nominations. In 2006, the film won the Top Box Office Films category at the ASCAP Film and Television Music Awards. In the same year, the film won the Outstanding Audio Post-Feature Film category at the HPA Award. Meanwhile, the six nominations the film has received include Best Action, Adventure, or Thriller Film nomination and Best Actress (for Jodie Foster) nomination at the 32nd Saturn Awards 2006; Movies - Choice Drama at the Teen Choice Awards 2006; Best International Actress (for Jodie Foster) at the Jupiter Awards 2006; Actress in Film (for Jodie Foster) and Actor in Film (for Peter Sarsgaard) at Women's Image Network Awards 2005 (*Flightplan (2005) - Awards - IMDb*, n.d.).

Our analysis focuses on the female main character, Kyle, and how female subjectivity is presented in the film. Through the five C's of cinematography theory and feminist perspective, this research also aims to show how female subjectivity is portrayed and how female subjectivity impacts the character who is subjected.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a methodological approach that involves the observation and analysis of Robert Schwentke's film *Flightplan* (2005) from multiple cinematic perspectives of cinematography: camera angles, continuity, cutting, close-ups, and composition (Mascelli, 1998). The data from the film are selected to find the portrayal of female subjectivity that arises through professional and maternal issues, which are most relevant in this study.

The concern also lies in exploring how the female subjectivity portrayed in the movie impacts the female main character. In doing so, the analysis is approached from a theory that focuses on subjectivity and gender domination. As Irigaray (1985) reveals, "any theory of the subject has always been appropriated by the "masculine". Subsequently, pertinent information pertaining to the study is meticulously compiled for presentation within this research.

## DISCUSSION

The discussion in this section is twofold. First, it explores how female subjectivity in the film is portrayed. In contrast, the second subsection investigates how masculine dominance manipulates the main female character in such a way that triggers her subjectivity to show.

### A. The Representation of Female Subjectivity

The character discussed in this section is Kyle, the female main character of the film. She is portrayed as a woman who becomes a single mother after her husband's death. This portrayal is seen in the following scene.



Figure 1. Kyle is looking into her husband's body (Source: Schwentke, 2005)

The scene above is taken using a low angle, and the camera's position is as objective as the eyes of an unseen. Using that angle, Kyle stands towards a in which her husband's dead body lies. Moreover, this scene uses a long horizontal lines composition, starting with Kyle's movement walking from the left side to the right side of the screen. As Mascelli (1998) describes, "long horizontal lines suggest quiet and restfulness." The quietness is realistically depicted in this scene where Kyle loses her beloved husband.

As a married woman, Kyle has a domestic role that requires her to do various kinds of work. Kyle's domestic role can be seen in different scenes where she is caring for her child. Emam (2018) stated that women are still positioned as mothers in a symbolic order. With Kyle's loss, taking care of her child becomes her responsibility. Kyle's circumstance of loss contributes to the formation of her subjectivity. Concurrence of multiple losses may be the one that leads to complicated grief reactions (Tobin et al., 2018). Having already lost her husband, Kyle is afraid of another loss, in this case, that of her daughter. Her anxiety can be seen in a scene when she finds out that her daughter is no longer by her side at the airport.



Figure 2. Kyle is realizing her daughter is not around shot 1 (Source: Schwentke, 2005)



Figure 3. Kyle is realizing her daughter is not around shot 2 (Source: Schwentke, 2005)

In the scenes, depicted in Figure 2 and Figure 3 above, a few shots show how Kyle is on her own. Figure 3 is taken using the Long Shot technique, which offers a wide view of the place she stands. Figure 3 is a shot preceded by Figure 2, a shot that is a Medium close-up and asymmetrical balance composition with Kyle as the focus of attention of the camera, which continues to move around showing the surrounding situation. In this scene, an effect of continuity is built using an asymmetrical balance composition, which creates a sense of complication in the surrounding atmosphere.

Furthermore, Kyle is also portrayed as a propulsion engineer, an occupation traditionally viewed as masculine. Such portrayal shows Kyle's independence from gender-based occupational stereotypes. Despite her independence from gender stereotypes, her expertise in propulsion engineering has led Carson, a sky marshal, to exploit her identity for criminal purposes. The crime starts when Kyle loses her daughter on the plane where they are supposed to stick together. Later, the plot escalates to further complication when the flight attendant says that the total number of passengers on board matches that reported in the flight manifesto. On the plane, Kyle is dominated by her unconsciousness and by the sky marshal, who takes advantage of the situation to exploit her identity. Kyle, however, is fully aware of her identity being manipulated. The awareness of the identity manipulation makes Kyle assert her subjectivity and recognize the impact of her actions on her future.

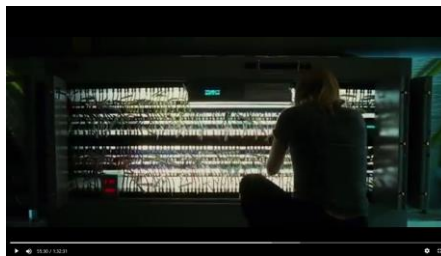


Figure 4. Kyle is changing the flight system (Source: Schwentke, 2005)

Combining an objective camera angle and an eye-level shot, which positions the viewer's eye parallel with the object being shown, this scene highlights Kyle's subjectivity as a propulsion engineer. The dynamic composition used makes the depiction of the character Kyle as a propulsion engineer more evident because the position of the object of the camera or Kyle is on the right side of the screen. In contrast, the left side is the part of the plane that Kyle was tinkering with. Kyle's actions result from her belief that her daughter was kidnapped, and she suspects the crew's involvement in the abduction. Moreover, Kyle has been experiencing a loss position in which all people around her do not believe that her daughter is kidnapped. To overcome the loss position, Kyle fiddled with the system to make the oxygen masks appear so that the people on board would think there had been a change in the pressure in the

cabin. They will focus on wearing oxygen masks, allowing Kyle to enter the hold without being noticed despite being forbidden.

Kyle's knowledge about propulsion intricacies is essential in forming her subjectivity as a mother and propulsion engineer. Her subjectivity as a mother is foregrounded after her husband's by showing her sense of necessity and responsibility to take care of her daughter. When her daughter is found to be missing, Kyle initially shows her subjectivity as a mother, which alternates with her subjectivity as a propulsion engineer. She uses her ability to find her child even though she has to violate flight regulations.

Furthermore, when the plane made an emergency landing and Kyle discovers that Carson, the sky marshal, has hidden her child, her subjectivity as a strong woman takes over her. She knows that Carson has a detonator that can set off an explosion at any time. Carson has placed the explosives in the avionics bay. In her confusion, Kyle is convinced her child is hidden in the avionics bay. Her conviction results from her sense of loss, which puts her in a situation where there is no one she can fully trust other than herself. She realizes that her child and herself must be safe from this moment. At this moment, Kyle is depicted as an intelligent woman and full of strategy. This depiction can be seen in Figure 5 as follows.



Figure 5. Kyle is holding the detonator (Source: Schwentke, 2005)

This shot was taken at a subjective angle as it shows how Carson, in the camera position, is looking at Kyle. This shot also uses a medium close-up showing the head area to the chest area. The composition used is suspenseful, in which there is a hidden significant action, the action performed by Carson. The shot continues with Kyle's hand on the left of the screen, pulling the door closed, while the right hand of the screen activates the detonator until an explosion occurs.

Her subjectivity is clearly visible in this scene as a strong and strategic woman. Despite seeing explosives nearby, she is still trying to save herself and her daughter. Because she knew this plane's details, she managed to protect herself and her daughter in a white box in the avionics bay. She is aware that the box can withstand bullets fired by Carson and explosions, ensuring her safety when inside it.

Despite the film's portrayal of Kyle as a highly-skilled propulsion engineer, the depiction of women as mother figures and the woman herself is not necessarily reduced. All of these depictions are depicted in a balanced way, so it forms what kind of character the director wants to show in the film. Kyle's ability to know how the engine works on the plane supports her other subjectivity. Her expertise as a propulsion engineer enables her to prove her belief that her daughter was kidnapped, contrary to the passengers' misconception.



## B. Masculine Dominance in Influencing Kyle's subjectivity

This section will discuss masculine influences on the formation of Kyle's subjectivity. Kyle is depicted as a female character who has been separated from gender stereotypes that tend to make women feminine and men masculine. Kyle has an occupation as an engineer that is typically in the masculine realm (Rice & Barth, 2017). Her identity as a propulsion engineer becomes a depiction that a woman is not always as feminine as echoed by gender stereotypes. Additionally, she is also depicted as a mother with one daughter. Irigaray (1985) said that all theories about the subject are always customized by the masculine. Therefore, this section will show how Kyle, who has been separated from binary gender standards, is still manipulated by males toward forming her subjectivity.



Figure 6. Kyle is educating her daughter (Source: Schwentke, 2005)

Kyle shows her subjectivity as a propulsion engineer, a mother, and also as a strong-strategic woman. She plays a vital role in forming her subjectivity regardless of masculine influence. From Kyle's identities, her subjectivity is formed when she is in a loss position. Her identity as a mother and a propulsion engineer has been known since the beginning of the film, showing her educating her daughter with her knowledge about a big plane in front of them as shown by Figure 6. Her identity as a propulsion engineer plays the most significant role in shaping her subjectivity. It has been known when Kyle answers her daughter's questions about the plane they will be traveling on. Her daughter asked, "*Did you make it?*" (00.10.31). This question indicated that the child also knew her mother's profession. However, Kyle's subjectivity has not yet been formed in this section.

Kyle's subjectivity is formed when she is on the plane when she becomes the object of a man who is going to hijack the plane. The formation of her subjectivity is not purely the result of her own consciousness. At first, Kyle is not aware that she becomes the object of a man to carry out his action of hijacking an airplane using her identity. Then, she realizes it herself after she sees an Arab man and suspects him as the perpetrator (00:44:00). In this part, she realizes she becomes an object of someone by kidnapping her daughter because her job is a propulsion engineer and there is a crew involved. However, she does not know yet is subjected by who and which crew is involved in this abduction. Her unconsciousness, being the object of Carson for crime, makes her subjectivity appear.

As quoted from Irigaray (1985), man will transform the unconscious into a component of his language. In this case, power comes into play. Foucault defines power as a form of influence that does not immediately impact individuals but instead exerts its influence on action that can be action upon action, current actions, or ones that may emerge in the future (cited by Portschy, 2020). Carson, in his role as a sky marshal, wields significant power. He abused his identity and position to gain money from the airline. As a sky marshal, he possesses the authority to oversee the plane's

security. Therefore, when he exploits Kyle's identity, it gives him an advantage in carrying out his criminal actions. Piedalue et al. (2020), when talking about gender-based violence, stated that the act of gender-based violence and social norms results from institutional reinforcement of men's power. In this way, the power possessed by men is also an impact produced by social norms that are traditionally more inclined towards men. Carson strategically exploits Kyle's loss of her husband and child in the film for his mission. Carson realized that this lost position could make Kyle reveal her subjectivity. When the subjectivity comes in, Kyle would be the best person to suspect when Carson asks for some money from the pilot. Therefore, Kyle's unconsciousness becomes a valuable thing he can control for Carson.

Carson's role as a sky marshal affords him a strategic advantage in manipulating and controlling Kyle. Following the kidnapping of Kyle's child, Carson cunningly positions himself as the one holding responsibility for Kyle's actions. Constant surveillance becomes Carson's tool, ensuring that Kyle is under his watchful eye at all times. In this manipulative dynamic, Kyle remains oblivious to the fact that she is being objectified by Carson, who exercises absolute control over every facet of her behavior. This orchestrated control extends beyond mere physical surveillance, infiltrating the very fabric of Kyle's subjectivity, shaping her responses and decisions according to Carson's calculated design.

Kyle's strategic move to divert attention, illustrated by her skillful deployment of the oxygen mask, as in Figure 4, inadvertently becomes an abuse of her identity and profound understanding of the aircraft. Unbeknownst to her, this act inadvertently aligns with Carson's sinister plans. Despite her genuine intention to inspect the hold directly and expedite the search for her child, Carson skilfully exploits the situation. By manipulating her subjectivity as a propulsion engineer, Carson cunningly implicates Kyle as the potential perpetrator in the eyes of the passengers and crew. This twist further underscores the depth of Carson's calculated machinations, manipulating not only events but also perceptions within the confined space of the aircraft.

As the hijacker, Carson demanded a ransom from the pilot in Kyle's name. In this section, Carson gives many reasons for the pilot to believe Kyle asked for this money. The pilot could not believe his words and wanted to talk to Kyle directly. However, Carson can convince the pilot that he does not have to speak with Kyle by saying, "*She does not want that. No approaches by any member of the crew.*" (1:08:18). From the cut scene above, I argue that there is male dominance which makes the pilot completely trust the sky marshal. Furthermore, from the moment Kyle lost her child, Carson, in his role as a sky marshal responsible for onboard security, has remained in close proximity to her. Male dominance (Minnich, 2020) is when men have great power or influence. He mentioned that male dominance is synonymous with masculine dominance.

Furthermore, Minnich (2020) also explained the characteristics of male dominance according to Hoy, which include authoritarian aggression by men towards women, women's authoritarian submission to men, and a hierarchical social structure in which men predominantly wield control of political power. Based on Foucault analysis, power is more than an exercise of force; instead, it encompasses the symbolic loyalty of individuals to categories, collections of norms, and codes of conduct (cited by Sarseke, 2018). Carson, in his capacity as an air marshal, follows regulations to ensure the safety of the plane.

Carson, leveraging his authority as a sky marshal, exploits not only Kyle's identity but also enlists the collaboration of a female flight attendant in orchestrating



the hijacking. This abuse of power underscores Carson's intentional manipulation, emphasizing a pervasive pattern of authority misuse. The collaboration with the flight attendant deepens the complexity of the unfolding crisis. According to Braithwaite (2022), when a scapegoating occurs, a fact emerges that the greater the severity of the abuse, the higher the probability that numerous individuals will be implicated. In the context of this film, the party involved in scapegoating Kyle is a female flight attendant. Carson introduces the involvement of others to perpetuate the kidnapping scheme and shapes Kyle's image as a daring individual, prompting everyone to cast suspicion upon Kyle. Carson also utilizes his abuse of power to persuade the pilot. As a sky marshal tasked with ensuring the safety of air travel, Carson can easily garner trust from the pilot. Similar to how Carson persuaded the pilot, he also manages to convince the plane's crew. In the dialogue between the two, Carson says, "*Now it is all working. Get it together.*" (01:10:02). This particular scene underscores that Carson's domination is not solely directed at Kyle. Rather, it encompasses the flight attendant as well, highlighting a broader pattern of control exerted by Carson over Kyle. This domination of the crew contributes to the overall tension and sense of unease within the confined space of the aircraft, further illustrating Carson's pervasive abuse of power and manipulation to achieve his nefarious objectives.

Towards the end of the film, Kyle finally realizes that the person kidnapping her child is Carson, and the flight attendant assists. Kyle's subjectivity when she does not know Carson is the perpetrator and when she already knows, in my opinion, does not have a significant change. Kyle adheres to her conviction in locating her daughter, maintaining her strategic approach, and leveraging her understanding of the aircraft's complexities. However, the trajectory of Kyle's loss evolves into complete solitude, refusing compliance with Carson's directives. She is compelled to rely solely on her own judgement and capabilities until her daughter is found. This shift underscores the transformation of Kyle's character from a compliant figure to an assertive and self-reliant force, symbolizing her resilience amid adversity.

## CONCLUSION

*Flightplan* (2005), portrays female subjectivity through the main female character, who is shown as having layered identity and subjectivity, which encompasses both domestic (female) and public (male) roles. The main character is placed in a male-dominated situation where the masculinity norms adopted by people around her tend to marginalize and disregard her inherent qualities, which are traditionally constructed as masculine. Seen in this light, the film presents an attitude that continues to perceive women as inferior, despite the qualities they have. This attitude implies that self-qualities are not detached from the attachment of binary gender labels that are undesirably kept separate.

Nevertheless, on the other hand, the film does not allow the female character to be utterly marginalized. The film appears to empower women by demonstrating that women can carry out their roles without needing to conform to whether these roles are traditionally associated with the masculine or feminine sphere. The female main character in the film can perform these roles without relying on gender stereotypes.

Overall, however, some degree of bias remains in that the film still cannot entirely free itself from the persistent grip of male domination, which is shown to still have a strong influence on the formation of the female character's subjectivity. This

male dominance places the female character under masculine control, thereby influencing the subjectivity that emerges from this influence.

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