

Hegemonic masculinity and genre mediation in contemporary religious cinema: A comparative Connellian-Freirean analysis of *Immaculate* (2024) and *Women Talking* (2022)

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ABSTRACT

Debates on gender inequality in Christian contexts often focus on doctrine and sociocultural patriarchy, yet genre's influence on these issues at the narrative level is rarely examined. This study investigates how *Immaculate* (2024) and *Women Talking* (2022) construct representations of masculinity, religious authority, and female resistance through horror and drama conventions. Using qualitative interpretive film analysis, the research involved repeated close viewing, scene logging, and iterative coding. Recurring patterns were identified inductively and examined through Raewyn Connell's (2005) framework of power, production, and cathexis, alongside Paulo Freire's (1970) concept of internalized oppression. The analysis indicates that biblical references within the films' narrative worlds become aligned with feminine-coded expectations of endurance and restraint through cinematic form rather than doctrinal meaning. Spatial confinement, sound design, dialogue, and visual framing contribute to this alignment. Horror externalizes patriarchal control through spectacle, while drama organizes authority through deliberation. In both cases, resistance emerges within, rather than outside, existing structures of power. The study contributes by positioning genre as a mediating framework through which religious authority and gender hierarchy are narratively organized in these texts. Given its focus on two films, further research is recommended across broader genres, global cinemas, and media forms.



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I. INTRODUCTION

Gender inequality in Christian contexts remains a sustained point of contention, particularly over whether religion functions as a resource for justice or a structure that legitimizes

hierarchy. Christian theology often articulates differentiated roles for men and women within divine purpose (Bulahari et al., 2024). Yet persistent asymmetries of authority within many Christian institutions indicate that these roles are frequently interpreted through sociocultural patriarchy, shaping practice and communal norms in ways that privilege male leadership (Agadjanian, 2024; Perry & McElroy, 2020; Vigdel et al., 2024; Zambrana-Tévar, 2022). Scholars therefore argue that discrimination does not arise from doctrine alone, but from the ways scripture is culturally mobilized and selectively emphasized to sustain patriarchal power (Alawode, 2024; Naidoo, 2025; Prasetyaningrum & Ahdiani, 2024). Within these interpretive tensions, biblical passages concerning gender are often approached through androcentric assumptions, where women's "submission" is foregrounded more strongly than women's agency or authority (Barron, 2021; Cambah & Sari, 2022; Lastu et al., 2024; Ndlovu et al., 2024). The central issue, therefore is not role differentiation per se, but the unequal valuation attached to it: male authority appears divinely necessary, while women's roles are reduced to obedience and restraint.

This concern extends beyond theology into popular media, where religion is repeatedly staged through stories that intertwine gender hierarchy with violence. Films, however, are not transparent records of religious life, but fictional constructions shaped by production contexts, storytelling strategies, and aesthetic choices (Usman et al., 2021). As such, religious cinema do not "represent" Christianity in any direct or objective sense; rather, the very non-authoritative subjects can construct cultural meanings about it. Nonetheless, film remains a significant site through which audiences encounter and imagine religion (Nurmansyah, 2023; Zahroh & Sari, 2025), insofar as storytelling conventions offer recognizable frameworks through which belief systems, social identities, moral values, and forms of social order are organized and interpreted. Religious films, especially those dealing with violence, often achieve broad circulation precisely because they function to fulfill a specific narrative (McGeough, 2016; Suandi, 2024). Hence, these cultural products serve as a critical medium through which Christian religious concepts intertwined with sociocultural contexts are constructed and disseminated. While some Christian-themed films reaffirm conventional gender expectations (Alola & Alola, 2020), others destabilize them through narrative reconstruction (Chavez, 2024; Globan, 2024; Murrah, 2021). Yet, across this spectrum, the role of genre conventions in shaping how Christian teachings, masculine expressions, and gender hierarchy become narratively persuasive remains underexamined.

Existing scholarship falls into three main strands. First, scholars have examined how religious narratives transform violence into aesthetic form. Matheny and Bohn (2024), for instance, read Judges 19-21 alongside *Evil Dead II* (1987), demonstrating how scriptural themes of violation and punishment re-emerge through horror conventions. Huang and Jin (2022) similarly critique the aestheticization of sexual trauma in literary narrative, questioning whether formal beauty risks making violence emotionally consumable. Second, research has

traced how religious identity becomes entangled with cultural anxieties about sexuality, power, and nationhood, often inscribing these tensions onto women's bodies as contested sites of meaning. Mathew (2021) shows how minority Christian women in Hindi cinema are sexualized and framed as moral threats, while Ray (2023) argues that Indian nationalism repeatedly organizes women's bodies as symbolic battlegrounds for hegemonic masculinity and cultural dominance. Third, feminist scholarship has foregrounded the structural entanglement of belief systems, textual representation, and gender oppression, as in Mavengano's (2024) call for radical feminist critique of religious discourse.

While these studies provide valuable insight into how patriarchal ideology circulates through cultural narratives, they tend to prioritize representation and thematic content, with limited attention to genre as a significant structuring force. This gap matters because genre does more than classify films. It organizes logic, expectation, and legitimacy. Genre conventions espouse artistic considerations, ranging from the violence-driven cycles of horror (Hernández-Santaolalla & Raya, 2022) to the grounded realism of drama. At times, genre dictates these creative choices in preference to the actual demands of the storyline. In others, they are defied (Matthews & Glitre, 2021), or provides "ideological contestation and empowerment," (Grant, 2007), especially when in dialogue with religious concepts.

This study addresses that limitation by comparatively analyzing two contemporary American films set within Christian institutional communities, Catholic and Mennonite, through different genre frameworks. Rather than evaluating theological accuracy, the study investigates how genre conventions organize gender hierarchy and violence as recurring narrative structures embedded within religious discourse. By positioning genre as the analytical lens, the study contributes to ongoing discussions about how formal and aesthetic dimensions of media actively shape, mediate, and circulate religious meaning.

To examine these dynamics, this study draws on Raewyn Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity, defined as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy" (p.77). Although developed from Australian sociological research rather than film studies, Connell's work operates as a structural level that exceeds its original empirical setting. Hegemonic masculinity is theorized not as a nationally bound phenomenon but as a trans-institutional configuration through which patriarchy secures legitimacy across cultural, religious, and social systems. Cinema, as a cultural institution embedded within broader ideological structures, participates in this process by narratively organizing gendered authority and moral hierarchy. In film, hegemonic masculinity becomes visible not only through character behavior but through narrative framing: who is granted moral legitimacy, who is punished, and whose suffering is narratively justified.

This framework is extended through Paulo Freire's (1970) concept of "prescription," wherein domination persists when the oppressed internalize the oppressor's worldview as natural.

While Freire developed this theory in relation to Brazilian literacy movements and educational struggle, his account of ideological internalization likewise exceeds its pedagogical origins. Freire theorizes how power sustains itself through cultural repetition and normalization, a mechanism applicable to any representational system that shapes moral perception. Film can thus operate as a form of cultural pedagogy, repeatedly teaching audiences what authority looks like and how submission should be understood. Through Connell and Freire, this study treats genre conventions as narrative “prescriptions” that may reinforce hegemonic masculinity within Christian settings, allowing patriarchal authority to appear not only culturally normal but religiously justified.

II. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative interpretive film analysis within a comparative case study design to examine how genre conventions mediate representations of masculinity, religious authority, and gendered oppression in two contemporary Christian-themed films, *Immaculate* (2024) and *Women Talking* (2022). The films were purposively selected because both foreground Christian institutional settings while operating through contrasting genre modes (horror and drama), allowing comparison of how formal and aesthetic strategies shape religious gender discourses.

Data were collected through repeated close viewing and systematic scene logging. A standardized log template recorded timestamps, narrative context, dialogue, visual composition, sound design, and preliminary thematic observations. Each film was viewed between 10 and 17 times and unfolded in three stages. First, exploratory viewing established an overview of narrative structure, character dynamics, and institutional configurations, to understand the complexity of issues being represented. In this stage, the authors found three major themes: religion, gender, and violence.

Second, targeted viewing involved systematic identification of scenes demonstrating thematic convergence of the three major themes that are intersected through causal development, cyclical reinforcement, or narrative progression. Across both films, this convergence consistently positioned religion as an organizing framework within narratives of oppression. Building from this, scene selection was structured into four analytical domains:

- (1) Religion (Authority): hierarchy, interpretation, moral values, and ritual practice,
- (2) Gender (Structure): performed masculinities and femininities, and divisions of labor,
- (3) Violence (Consequence): explicit bodily harm, symbolic regulation (e.g., sexual control, confinement, surveillance, forced pregnancy), and verbal or psychological coercion.
- (4) Resistance (Contestation): disobedience, escape, doctrinal questioning, and collective deliberation.

Transitional scenes lacking substantive relevance to these domains were excluded. Third, selected scenes were re-examined to sort identified patterns that were consistently supported by genre-specific techniques, including *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, sound design, editing, and narrative pacing, ensuring that interpretation rested on formal construction rather than only dialogue or any isolated cinematic element.

Coding proceeded iteratively. Inductive coding first identified recurring motifs and narrative sequences from scene logs without theoretical imposition. Once patterns stabilized across multiple scenes, they were grouped into thematic clusters (rituals, justification, surveillance, punishment, forced submission and fear, resistance and negotiation). Deductive coding then applied Connell's three-fold gender structure (power relations, production relations, cathexis) to examine institutional authority, gendered labour expectations, and sexual-emotional regulation. Freire's concept of "prescription" was subsequently used to interpret how religious discourse normalized domination through internalized obedience and fear. Findings tables were generated sequentially from documented scenes to inductive clusters, genre mediation, and finally theoretical alignment. Ambiguous cases were re-evaluated across multiple screenings; coding and analysis undertaken by the first author was systematically reviewed by the second author to strengthen analytical reliability.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Genre, Gender Structure, and Scriptural Citation

Constellated from Connell's (2005) theorems, the discursive foundation of gender distinction frequently derives from the social devaluation of femininity. *Immaculate* (2024) and *Women Talking* (2022) critically foreground how religious discourse and genre-specific narratives collaborate in reproducing female subordination while legitimizing male authority frequently through the enactment of violence. Across both films, femininity is consistently othered, moralized, and regulated through distinct yet structurally analogous genre mechanisms. This section clarifies how the category of cathexis, production relations, and power relations are operationalized in relation to genre conventions. Scenes were first identified inductively and coded according to (1) what form of gender relation was being structured and (2) which cinematic devices mediated that structuring. Only after recurrent patterns emerged were they placed within Connell's tripartite framework. These categories are used to clarify recurring patterns, allowing gender practices to be analyzed as structured rather than isolated moments. Across both films, repeated formations of emotional regulation, labor division, and institutional authority cohere into patterns legible within Connell's schema. The distinctions follow a functional logic: cathexis is identified where emotional or sexual attachment is regulated; production relations where gendered labor is organized; and power relations where patriarchy (legitimized by masculine rationality and institutionalized patriarchy) and feminism is constructed (Connell, 2005). Genre conventions

are categorized based on their narrative function rather than aesthetic form alone, mediating how such gendered arrangements are experienced, whether through horror's destabilization or drama's restraint.

The two tables synthesize five interrelated dimensions across each film: biblical discourse as normative reference; its construction of gendered expectations; the articulation of those expectations through Connell's structural categories; their mediation via genre-specific conventions; and their materialization in concrete cinematic elements that render distinct configurations of masculinity visible on screen. Within this model, scripture functions as moral infrastructure within the narrative world; genre conventions shape how that moral order is affectively and narratively experienced; and cinematic form provides the observable evidence through which hegemonic masculinity emerges not merely as characterization but as embodied and institutionalized practice. The tables thus visualize the translation of gender structure into cinematic experience, without collapsing genre into gender theory, but rather illustrating how aesthetic form mediates structural masculinity within specific religious settings. As evidenced by Tables 1 and 2, five systematic rearticulations of hegemonic masculinity emerge in each film. The tables demonstrate how scriptural discourse, once activated within the narrative, is filtered through genre conventions that render particular gender arrangements perceptible and structurally coherent.

Table 1. Hegemonic masculinity in *Immaculate* (2024)

Connell's Gender Structure	Horror Convention	Reflected in Masculinity On-Screen	Manifested from Matthew 5:5's Interpretation
Cathexis (Consensual or coercive sexual acts)	Hidden verses, closed-up eyes, conflicting dialogues, silence indicating jump scares (Lead to satanic influences and ritualistic activities)	Women's submission	Forced Impregnation
Production Relations (Gendered allocation of tasks)	Whispered and weaponized religious prayers, dark symbolism, hymn rearrangements	Women's roles Men's headship	Nuns adhere to their religious roles Used to deceive
Power Relations (Patriarchy as the dominant structure)	Isolated convent, questioning God	Masculine rationality Institutional power	The root cause of the violence Manipulate women and serves as protection for men

Table 2. Hegemonic masculinity in *Women Talking* (2022)

Connell's Gender Structure	Drama Convention	Reflected in Masculinity On-Screen	Manifested from Philippians 4:8's Interpretation
Cathexis (Consensual or coercive sexual acts)	Mediates through emotional intensity, narration, gentle score, internal struggles, slow-burn pacing	Women's submission	Pacifism in rape violence
Production Relations (Gendered allocation of tasks)	Mediates through peaceful prayers, worship songs, lighter animal symbolism	Women's roles	Women adhere to their traditional roles
		Men's headship	Absent but used to manipulate
Power Relations (Patriarchy as the dominant structure)	Mediates through isolated setting	Masculine rationality	Where power and violence are taught and socialized
		Institutional power	Manipulate women and serves as protection for men

In both films, biblical discourse operates as moral infrastructure. *Immaculate* (2024) draws on Matthew 5:5 ("Blessed are the meek..."), while *Women Talking* (2022) resonates with Philippians 4:8 ("Whatever is pure... think on these things").

Father Tedeschi: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." (*Immaculate*, 36:16-36:23)

Agata: "I have done what the verse from Philippians instructed, which is to think about what is good, what is just, what is pure, and what is excellent. And I have arrived at an answer. Pacifism. Pacifism is good. Any violence is unjustifiable. By staying here, we women would be betraying the central tenet of our faith, which is pacifism, because by staying we would knowingly be placing ourselves in a direct collision course with violence, either by us or against us." (*Women Talking*, 55:24-55:16)

These verses function as discursive condensations of each film's theological atmosphere. In *Immaculate* (2024), meekness becomes cinematically aligned with obedience and corporeal vulnerability; in *Women Talking* (2022), purity and virtue are narratively aligned with pacifism and forgiveness. Importantly, these interpretations are not inherent to the verses themselves. Matt 5:5 does not intrinsically prescribe female bodily compliance, nor does Phil 4:8 mandate passive endurance of injustice. Within broader Christian theology, both passages orient believers toward devotion to God rather than female submission to male authority. However,

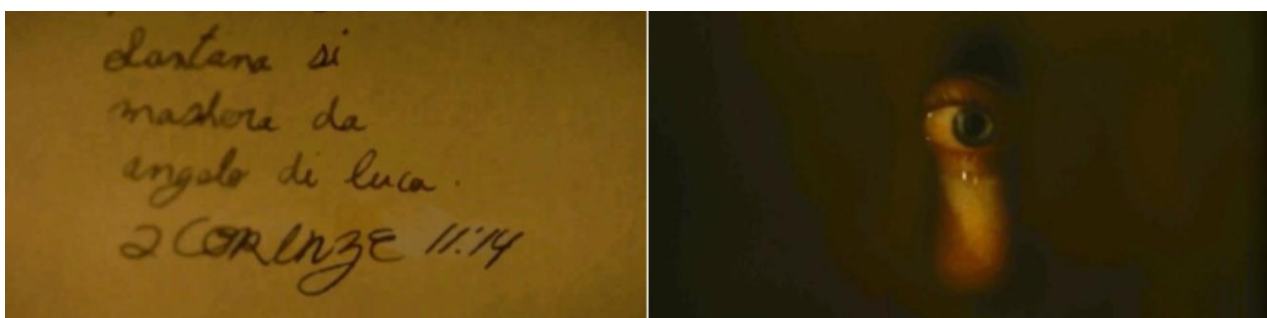
in the narrative contexts of these films, the verses are repeatedly mobilized in ways that discipline female conduct. Their moral imperatives are reframed as obligations imposed upon women's bodies and emotional responses.

Biblical authority is not presented as universal, but reinterpreted through gendered cinematic framing. Doctrine becomes the narrative foundation for hierarchical order, in which female characters are the primary targets of religious discipline. Gendered interpretations of the Bible in cinema risk preparing the audience to accept women's suffering as 'spiritual' rather than politically constructed. In this way, the films expose how religious discourse can be reinterpreted to naturalize gender hierarchy while maintaining the appearance of sacred legitimacy.

Cathexis in Both Films

Within this structure, cathexis concerns the social organization of desire, whether emotional and sexual attachment between men and women is coercive or consensual (Connell, 2005). Accordingly, cinematic devices are situated under 'cathexis' when they reorganize this coercive/consensual emotional attachment or sexual vulnerability within the narrative, whether through fear, forgiveness, vulnerability, or coercion, prior to or alongside bodily violation.

In *Immaculate* (2024), the malevolent logic of horror, per the symbolic cathexis elements in Table 1, mobilizes Matt 5:5 against the nuns. Cathexis becomes legible through four interlocking moments that are foreshadowed and symbolized by horror genre techniques of suspense-building. The concealed citation discovered by Cecilia ("Satan... masquerades as an angel of light") introduces deception within sacred language itself. The emphasis on masquerade, reinforced through repeated close-ups of Cecilia's eyes, converts vision into surveillance and epistemic instability. Cecilia's gaze, initially framed as radiant and devout, gradually becomes marked by fear and disorientation. This visual shift reorganizes devotional attachment into uncertainty (Picture 1).



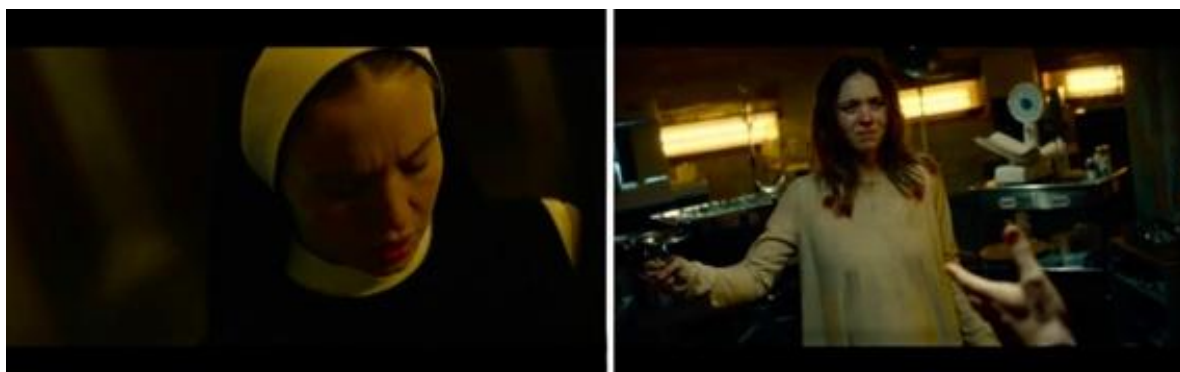
Picture 1. Hidden verses on Satanic deception; Cecilia's eyes witnessing the ritualistic actions of the convent (45:05; 49:52)

Competing invocations of divine forgiveness, from Isabelle's assurance that "God will forgive you" (11:35) and Cecilia's later declaration that "God will never forgive you" (56:12),

fracture theological certainty, symbolizing the two competing concepts of “God” in one religious place, and reposition doctrine as an instrument of emotional regulation rather than moral clarity. Horror aesthetics consolidate this affective discipline: silence before rupture and the progressive exposure of Cecilia’s body (Picture 2), reinforced by Dutch-angle distortions of convent space (Picture 3), translate spiritual obedience into physical vulnerability. Through this sequence, emotional destabilization precedes and followed the forced impregnation, rendering meekness not as abstract virtue but as regulated affective submission that culminates in reproductive control, thereby situating these formal devices within the structural logic of cathexis.



Picture 2. Female suffering: Cecilia’s increasingly exposed body is illustrated as the one who ‘seduces’ violence to emerge in the film (13:21; 37:24; 55:50)



Picture 3. Female suffering: Dutch angle shots in typical horror films amplify the upcoming twisted act of female suffering and the ongoing agony (21:50; 1:09:04)

In contrast to horror’s destabilizing intensity, *Women Talking* (2022) structures cathexis through the conventions of dramatic realism. Extended deliberative dialogue, slow-burn pacing, internal struggles, and subdued musical scoring frame discussions of rape, forgiveness, and spiritual duty. These formal elements are situated under cathexis because they regulate affective attachment in ways that are internalized, yet still coercive. Forgiveness, endurance, and moral self-examination become the emotional terrain through which women negotiate belonging within the community. Unlike horror, drama does not depend on spectacle or shock, but cultivates sustained ethical reflection.

Phil 4:8, interpreted within the film as a call to moral purity and pacifism, is invoked exclusively in relation to women forgiving male violence; it is never mobilized to prevent that

violence. This asymmetry is crucial. Emotional orientation, from the women's insistence that forgiveness is necessary for entry into the Kingdom of heaven, is framed as a prerequisite for remaining within the moral community.

Autje: "We were given two days to forgive the attackers before they returned. If we did not forgive them, we would be ordered to leave the colony and be denied entry into the kingdom of heaven." (Women Talking, 03:24-03:42)

Scarface Janz: "We have everything we want here"

Salome: "No."

Scarface Janz: "Want less. Does entering the kingdom of heaven mean nothing to any of you?" (Women Talking, 1:05:47-1:06:38)

Violence itself remains largely off-screen, relocating coercion from the visible to the interior. The absence of spectacle does not eliminate regulation but renders it inward.

Both films position women as reproductive laborers. Although virginity inspections are not legitimate convent practice and are widely condemned as sexual assault (Olson & García-Moreno, 2017), *Immaculate* (2024) dramatizes invasive examinations and forced conception to foreground bodily control (33:56; 58:14). *Women Talking* (2022) similarly narrates repeated childbirth without reciprocity (21:27), framing reproduction as religious servitude. In each case, Christianity is framed as a mechanism through which ungendered scripture is selectively mobilized to legitimize female submission on bodily violation, structured according to each genre's affective and aesthetic logic.

Production Relations in Both Films

Each correspondence in the table is derived through a two-step analytical process: recurring cinematic patterns (sound design and the staging of task allocation) are first identified and examined, then mapped onto Connell's concept of production relations, understood as the gendered organization of labor within institutional structures. A convention is classified under 'production relations' only when it governs who performs devotional labor, administers doctrine, or controls reproduction.

In *Immaculate* (2024), whispered and weaponized prayers, hymn distortion, and dark animal symbolism are put under production relations based on patterned alignment with institutional control over female bodies. Nuns are repeatedly depicted whispering prayers in scenes of vulnerability or submission (00:35), whereas male clerical figures invoke sacred language in moments of coercion (1:15:35) (Picture 4). This asymmetry reflects gendered task allocation: women perform devotional and reproductive labor; men weaponize the authority they hold.



Picture 4. Difference on ways of praying across genders (00:35; 1:15:35)

Beyond differences in auditory levels, the altered arrangement of the sacred hymn *Te Deum* (14:05) which is shifted into minor modulation and intensified organ timbre (techniques common in horror scoring) reinforces this structure. While the distortion may register Cecilia's psychological unease, its recurrence during ritual scenes inducting new nuns, prior to her full awareness of the convent's operations, suggests a patterned association with moments of female initiation and obedience. The sonic shift therefore aligns with the film's organization of gendered production relations rather than functioning solely as atmospheric effect. Sound becomes gendered not by any explicit authorial declaration but by consistent synchronization with unequal narrative power in the film texts.

The resonance with Matt 5:5 emerges at the level of thematic structuring. Within the film's narrative logic, meekness appears as a form of disciplined compliance, where women's submission is framed as spiritually valorized, while clerical authority oversees reproductive governance under sacred justification. This reading does not assert that the verse definitively grounds the film's meaning. Rather, it is analytically foregrounded because its emphasis on meek endurance parallels the films' repeated demand for feminine compliance through the logic of obedience. Other scriptural references could also be plausibly be invoked, but this verse provides a concise lens through which the film's structuring of virtue and submission becomes legible.

In *Women Talking* (2022), production relations manifest through devotional prayers, caregiving, childbirth, and communal maintenance (Picture 5). Unlike the overt coercion of horror, drama organizes gender hierarchies through affective stability and moral discourse.



Picture 5. The women of all ages doing labor (33:05)

Similarly, women in the drama film still engage in prayers silently and properly for protection, and communal hymns accompany their collective decision-making spaces. Women sustain both the material and spiritual continuity of the colony, while male authority, though largely off-screen, remains juridically and doctrinally operative: bails is secured by male elders, and forgiveness is framed as a communal obligation under patriarchal governance. Labor is thus feminized, whereas institutional control remains masculinized. Phil 4:8, with its emphasis on purity and moral excellence, functions within the film as a thematic touchstone for this arrangement, as discourses of virtue and endurance coincide with the framing of women's suffering as spiritually meaningful

Animal symbolism further nuances these distinctions. The black crow in *Immaculate* (2024) and the sparrow in *Women Talking* (2022), each preceding narrative shifts, visually register tensions between communal vulnerability and transgressive disruption. (Picture 6).



Picture 6. Different animal symbolism (31:37; 35:25)

Read alongside genre conventions, these motifs contribute to broader constructions of feminized fragility that must initially coexist with the later disruption of masculinity, that are embedded from the outset of each narrative.

Importantly, the analysis does not presume authorial intention but proceeds from textual recurrence. Across both films. Genre conventions repeatedly coincide with the institutional organization of gendered labor. While alternative readings remain possible (e.g., sonic distortion as atmospheric design or psychological expression), the consistent alignment between soundscape modulation and moments of female submission across multiple scenes supports a structural, rather than individual, interpretation grounded in recurrence.

Power Relations in Both Films

Within Connell's (2005) schema, power relations designate the structuring of patriarchal authority (legitimated through institutionalized patriarchy and masculine rationality) alongside the emergence of feminist resistance. A cinematic element is therefore situated under 'power relations' only when it materially organizes institutional authority and the efforts undertaken by women to contest or exit that system. Under this criterion, spatial isolation in

both films is read not as neutral genre convention, but as a structural condition that concentrates male governance while limiting external scrutiny (Picture 7).



Picture 7. Isolated setting in both genres (07:57; 34:29)

In *Immaculate* (2024), the convent's geographic and administrative seclusion consolidates clerical authority. Confinement restricts secular oversight and centralizes decision-making within male religious figures, creating conditions in which theological doctrine and pseudo-scientific reasoning converge to justify reproductive intervention. Father Tedeschi's biological experimentation, that is "disregarded somewhere else and only accepted within the Church", and Cardinal Merola's invocation of divine authorization illustrated institutional power operating without external challenge. Masculine rationality, articulated through both scientific and doctrinal discourse, functions as a justificatory framework for regulating women's bodies. Because these practices govern reproduction, authorize coercion, and are protected by ecclesiastical hierarchy, they align with Connell's conception of institutionalized power relations.

The convent's isolation is thus mapped onto power relations not because seclusion is inherently ideological, but because its recurrence coincides with concentrated male governance and the vulnerability of female subjects. Although confinement may serve as another suspense within horror conventions, its repeated association with reproductive control suggests a patterned articulation of hierarchical control. While chastity traditionally marks the convent as a space symbolically detached from reproduction, the film recontextualizes the doctrine of the Virgin Mary's immaculateness within this very setting.

In *Women Talking* (2022), the Mennonite colony's separation from broader civic institutions similarly reinforces patriarchal authority. Spatial detachment enables the intergenerational transmission of doctrinal interpretation and restricts avenues for intervention. Authority circulates through male leadership structures that disseminate gendered exegesis, while perpetrators themselves appear as products of this entrenched order and are protected through communal mechanisms such as bail. Younger members are depicted as being socialized into these interpretive frameworks, suggesting continuity rather than aberration. Violence remains largely off-screen, embedded in the rhythms of daily life. Its invisibility does not diminish its force but signals normalization. In contrast to horror's overt coercion,

authority here operates through silence and routine, with isolation functioning as the structural condition that sustains uncontested patriarchal interpretation, which is consistent with Connell's model of institutionalized dominance.

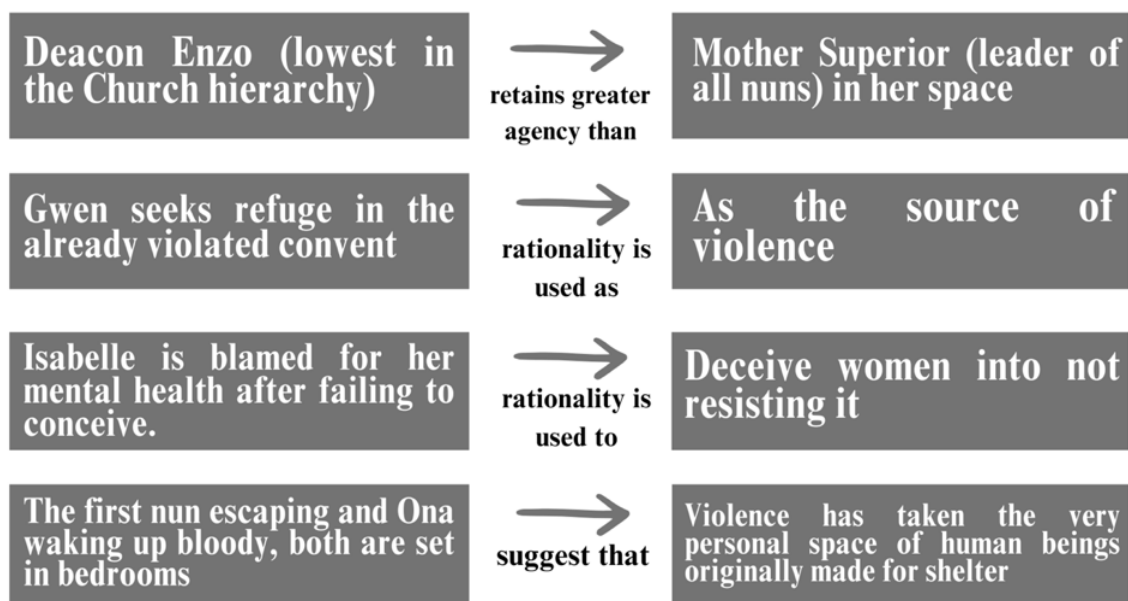


Figure 1. Inversion of roles

Across both narratives, men seek redemption of their power within spaces adhering to the traditional gender order. Convents and domestic spaces, traditionally designed as sanctuaries for women, are cinematically rendered not as sites of protection but rather as instruments reinforcing male authority (See Figure 1). In this manner, the conventional promise of female protection rooted from religious threads is entirely eroded by thematic fashioning that reflects prevailing social paradigms. Consequently, women find little protection from state, the Church, or even the very spaces meant to shelter them.

Bringing all the analysis to a close, the authors argue that Catholic and conservative Protestant institutional settings function in these films as narrative environments in which hegemonic masculinity becomes legible and normalize. Recognizing that dominance is most effective when unseen (Connell, 2005), both films situate male authority within enclosed, insular worlds. Through reconceptualization of God, faith, and separation from modern modernity as legitimizing frameworks, the narratives foreground forms of religious exclusivity that can accommodate restrictive gender interpretations. Both films, through their respective genre codes, highlight the rise of religious fundamentalism characterized by exclusivity. Such frameworks provide a fertile soil of contested religious interpretations, particularly those that justify exclusion or control. Within these spaces, hegemonic masculine ideologies are not only permitted, but may be normalized, sustained, and even strengthened by the very belief systems they help uphold.

This claim is supported by recurring alignment between isolation, male authority, and female vulnerability. Across both films, confinement repeatedly coincides with the regulation of female bodies, the centralization of male governance, and constrained avenues for resistance. The argument remains probabilistic rather than deterministic: seclusion may function as narrative economy. However, when spatial restriction consistently aligns with institutional control and feminine vulnerability across multiple scenes, the cumulative pattern supports its interpretative within Connell's framework of power relations rather than as a purely aesthetic device.

Feminist Disruption within Gendered Power Structures

In Connell's (2005) framework, power relations denote institutionalized forms of authority that structure gender hierarchy. Feminism is situated within this domain as a mode of resistance of the system. However, such resistance is structurally immanent, because it challenged domination while remaining embedded within the very system that sustains it. In both films, feminist agency unsettles male authority rooted in religious institutions. Yet this destabilization produces ambivalence rather than clean rupture. Power is not simply overturned, but is exposed as relational and recursive. Authority persists through internalized belief.

This dynamic becomes clearer when read alongside Paulo Freire's theory of internalized oppression. Freire (1970) argues that the oppressed frequently absorb the consciousness of their oppressors, such as that domination is not only externally imposed but also reproduced from within. Oppression thus operates through participation as well as coercion. Read together, Connell and Freire illuminate a central paradox of hegemonic masculinity: its endurance depends as much on normalized compliance as on overt control. While resistance may interrupt this pattern, it cannot instantaneously transcend it. Feminist action in both films therefore remains entangled with the system it seeks to undo. These theoretical premises ground the comparative analysis that follows, demonstrating how genre conventions shape distinct yet interconnected articulations of female resistance within a shared framework of ambivalent power

Entanglement and the Circulation of Oppression

While Connell distinguishes hegemonic, complicit, marginalized, and subordinated masculinities, and Freire addresses internalized oppression, neither offers a granular typology of character positioning within narrative texts. Table 3 therefore proposes an interpretive extension derived from the two main frameworks, designed to distinguish degrees of agency and consciousness in the reproduction of gender domination. Authority, enforcement, internalization, and resistance occupy different structural positions within the same system. These categories are used to clarify narrative positioning rather than to reclassify theoretical constructs, since both frameworks of Connell and Freire is layered and relational.

Table 3. Hierarchy of oppression

Hierarchy	<i>Immaculate</i> (2024)	<i>Women Talking</i> (2022)
The Authoritative Oppressors (consciously oppressing)	Male Religious Authorities (Cardinal Merola, Father Tedeschi, Deacon Enzo)	Male Religious Authorities (Unidentified)
The Instrumental Enforcers (consciously oppressing, unconsciously oppressed)	Female Authorities (Mother Superior)	Masculine Male Civilians & Conservative Woman (Unidentified Men, Janz)
The Subjugated Perpetuators (unconsciously oppressing, consciously oppressed)	Infertile Nuns (Isabelle)	Female Civilians (Ona, Mariche, Mejal, Salome, Autje)
The Object Oppressed (consciously oppressed)	Resistant Nuns (Cecilia, Gwen, The First Anonymous Nun)	Subordinated Male Civilians & Female Civilians (August, Aaron, Agata, Greta, Neitje, Anna, Helena, Miep)

In *Immaculate* (2024), male clerical figures in the first-row exercise interpretive control and institutional dominance. Yet the stability of that authority depends on women who reproduce its logic. Mother Superior enforces doctrine within constrained agency, while Isabelle exemplifies internalized reproduction: her devotion sustains hierarchy despite her subordination. By contrast, the trajectory of several nuns in the final data row, most notably Cecilia, shifts over the course of the narrative. Their differentiation lies not in the degree of suffering endured, but in orientation: moving from compliance to active resistance, even when such resistance culminates in lethal confrontation with authority.



Picture 8. Cecilia's final lethal force (1:16:21)

In *Women Talking* (2022), male authority is largely absent in physical terms yet remains structurally operative. The perpetrators act according to inherited doctrinal frameworks, while Scarface Janz embodies internalized submission by defending tradition rather than

challenging abuse, demonstrating how ideology is reproduced from within the oppressed community. At another level of the hierarchy, several women begin to organize collective resistance; however, their trauma is at times redirected toward August (a non-hegemonic male figure) who becomes a verbal recipient of grievances because he shares the perpetrators' gender. This displacement underscores the complexity of resentment and constrained agency within gendered systems. Those categorized as the abject oppressed are individuals who have not fully internalized dominant ideology but lack the structural position or capacity to contest it. Often represented by children or figures who do not project trauma onto August, they signify not empowerment but structural immobility.

August: "Forgive me. Please excuse me. Forgive me. May I request that you take turns speaking so that I can understand what each of you is saying. It takes me a few seconds to transcribe...I'm a little behind here. I have to catch up."

Mariche: "Shall we put up our hands? As though we are children in your schoolhouse?"

August: "Should we add, thriving as a collective, literate community?"

Mariche: "Literate is your word. Not ours. We don't need your university language to make our plans." (Women Talking, 14:51)

These configurations illustrate Freire's notion of internalized oppression: domination operates through consciousness before manifesting as force. The analytical distinction hinges on narrative orientation, whether characters reproduce or interrupt the governing logic. Feminist awakening, therefore, emerges not from ideological neutrality but from within already embedded belief systems. Acknowledging women's participation in sustaining hierarchy does not equate victims with oppressors. Rather, it demonstrated how oppression circulates across varying levels of awareness, and how hegemonic masculinity depends simultaneously on dominance and reproduction.

Genre Logic, Feminist Ambivalence, and Divergent Endings

Genre conventions do more than frame how power is represented. They delimit how it can be resolved. The endings of *Immaculate* (2024) and *Women Talking* (2022) are inseparable from their formal logics, which shape the imaginable outcomes of feminist resistance.

As a horror film, *Immaculate* (2024) renders hierarchy through spectacle, corporeal violation, and claustrophobic confinement. Authority appears excessive, embodied, and ritualized in violence. Resistance therefore unfolds in equally heightened form. Cecilia's final act stages a catastrophic rupture: the institution collapses from within, and the reproductive machinery of clerical control is destroyed. Within horror's logic, annihilation becomes a plausible mode of narrative closure. Yet this resolution is not unambiguous. The film relies heavily on sacred imagery (the cross, the rosary, the *Ave Maria*) even as it overturns clerical authority (1:05:47; 1:07:32; 1:16:17). Religion initially operates as mechanism of intimidation, where the violence appears divinely authorized; subsequently, the same symbolic vocabulary

becomes the vehicle of reversal. The system is contested through its own theological lexicon. Liberation occurs, but not external to belief. Horror enables explosive resistance, yet it cannot fully detach emancipation from the sacred framework that authorized domination in the first place.

Within this genre, oppression appears totalizing and isolating. Patriarchy is depicted as absolute, sustained by religious inevitability and supernatural dread. Fear disciplines both characters and spectators, presenting male domination as a closed system that only lethal force can dismantle. The gender order is thus framed as catastrophic, and its end equally catastrophic.

By contrast, as a drama *Women Talking* (2022) diffuses authority rather than staging it spectacularly. Violence is largely displaced off-screen, while an ethical deliberation occupies the center. The genre privileges dialogue, moral reasoning, and communal discernment. Resistance culminates not in destruction but in departure, as the women leave the colony and redefine freedom as withdrawal rather than confrontation. Patriarchal dominance is not theatrically eradicated but morally delegitimized.

Greta: "Leaving is how we demonstrate our faith. We are leaving because our faith is stronger than the rules. Bigger than our life." (*Women Talking*, 01:01:25)

Nevertheless, ambivalence persists. The women's reflections on establishing "new authority" in a future settlement suggest that hierarchy may be reconfigured rather than eliminated. Religion here functions less as an instrument of terror and more as a terrain of interpretation. Scripture becomes open to negotiation and ethical reassessment. Oppression appears woven into daily life, less visually shocking than in horror, but perhaps more persistent. Male authority is questioned and reconsidered, but not violently dismantled. The melancholic style of drama thus stages transformation alongside continuity.

The divergence between these endings is therefore genre-determined. Horror permits rupture through annihilation, while drama permits transformation through migration. In one, liberation risks reproducing the violence it opposes. In the other, ethical endurance risks preserving the structures of hierarchy. Neither film offers total and definitive emancipation. Both underscore the complexity of disengaging from institutionalized gender order.

Genre, then, operates as a mediating structure of power. It influences not only representation but the conceptual boundaries of resistance itself. Feminist intervention disrupts hierarchy in both films, yet formal and aesthetic logic determines whether that disruption appears catastrophic, negotiated, or partial. Authority is unsettled, though its traces remain.

By resonating with motifs associated with Matt 5:5 and Phil 4:8, the films evoke longstanding theological associations between feminine virtue, submission, and endurance. Such intertextual echoes need not presume authorial intent, but rather, they highlight how

cinematic storytelling intersects with religious discourse. Film becomes a space where religious discourses may intersect and negotiate, functioning as the arena in which theological meaning is circulated, contested, and rearticulated within the politics of belief.

Connell (2005) situates these dynamics with broader historical processes. Global formations (colonial expansions, economic transformation, and media circulation) have been deeply gendered, consolidating masculinity as normative authority. Masculinity emerges as the efficacious mode of social organization, structurally dependent on femininity as its subordinated counterpart. Just as the oppressor's position presupposes the oppressed, hegemonic masculinity relies on patterned consent and internalization to endure.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study has comparatively examined how *Immaculate* (2024) and *Women Talking* (2022) organize masculinity, religious authority, and gendered violence through genre-specific conventions. Rather than treating the films as transparent reflections of Catholic or Mennonite institutions, the analysis approached them as constructed narrative worlds in which scripture, space, sound, and character positioning interact to produce patterned meanings. The findings are therefore interpretive and text-specific.

Across both films, biblical verses, Matthew 5:5 and Philippians 4:8, are explicitly cited and thematically foregrounded. The verses become narratively associated with feminine endurance, restraint, and moral obligation. The study does not claim that these verses inherently prescribe submission, nor that the films represent institutional theology. Instead, it demonstrates that within these cinematic contexts, recurring formal strategies align virtue with regulated female compliance. This alignment becomes visible through spatial confinement, gendered divisions of labor, affective discipline, and the structuring of resistance. Taken together, these findings suggest that gendered interpretations of religious discourse in film emerge not only from narrative content but from the interaction between genre form and institutional representation.

Genre proves central to this mediation. In *Immaculate* (2024), horror conventions intensify bodily vulnerability and institutional coercion, culminating in violent rupture. In *Women Talking* (2022), dramatic realism organizes ethical deliberation and collective withdrawal as modes of resistance. These divergent endings reflect genre logics rather than doctrinal claims: horror permits annihilation, while drama privileged negotiation and migration. In both cases, resistance emerges from within the religious framework rather than outside it, producing ambivalence rather than total emancipation.

This study contributes to film, gender, and religious studies by demonstrating that genre functions as a key site where ideological meaning is produced, shaping how hegemonic masculinity is mediated through cinematic form and how scriptural references are recontextualized within narrative systems, rather than simply reflected through isolated

cinema or doctrinal aspects alone. The scope of this study is limited to two contemporary American texts and does not generalize across Christian traditions or global cinema. Future research may extend this analytical framework to additional genres, denominational contexts, production contexts or audience reception, contributing to a broader understanding of how cinema participates in negotiating the gendered politics of belief.

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