

Cinematic Mechanisms of Immersive Experience in Kapur's Elizabeth Duology

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Abstract

This research investigates the deployment of cinematic discourse mechanisms in Shekhar Kapur's Elizabeth duology as vehicles for constructing an immersive audience experience of Queen Elizabeth I's psychological transformation. Drawing on Chatman's story-discourse framework as its primary analytical lens, the study examines how Elizabeth (1998) and Elizabeth: The Golden Age (2007) systematically employ medium-specific techniques cinematography, editing, sound design, and mise-en-scène to position spectators as active experiential participants rather than detached observers of historical biography. Qualitative formalist analysis of key transformation sequences demonstrates that the psychological impact of both films derives not from their historical subject matter but from a coordinated orchestration of formal strategies engineered to produce perceptual alignment, emotional mirroring, and subjective spectatorship. Significantly, the deliberate narrative discontinuities between the two films emerge as sophisticated discourse mechanisms in their own right, formally enacting the dissociation inherent in sovereign identity formation and compelling audiences to undertake the same cognitive labor as Elizabeth's own psychological reconstruction. By integrating Smith's character engagement theory, Bordwell and Thompson's account of classical film technique, and Plantinga's embodied spectatorship model, the study establishes that Kapur's duology redefines the conventions of biographical cinema, converting historical representation into phenomenological encounter. The conclusion affirms cinema's singular capacity to generate experiential comprehension of complex psychological processes through deliberate formal manipulation, and offers a transferable methodological framework for analyzing discourse-driven narratives across historical and biographical film genres.

Keywords: Cinematic Discourse Mechanisms; Immersive Experience; Biographical Cinema; Chatman's Story-Discourse Framework; Audience Engagement

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji penerapan mekanisme diskursus sinematik dalam duologi Elizabeth karya Shekhar Kapur sebagai sarana konstruksi pengalaman penonton yang imersif terhadap transformasi psikologis Ratu Elizabeth I. Dengan berlandaskan kerangka cerita-diskursus Chatman sebagai lensa analitis utama, studi ini menelaah bagaimana Elizabeth (1998) dan Elizabeth: The Golden Age (2007) secara sistematis memanfaatkan teknik-teknik spesifik medium sinematografi, penyuntingan, desain suara, dan mise-en-scène untuk menempatkan penonton sebagai peserta pengalaman aktif, bukan pengamat pasif dari biografi historis. Analisis formalistik kualitatif terhadap adegan-adegan transformasi kunci menunjukkan bahwa dampak psikologis kedua film tidak bersumber dari materi historisnya, melainkan dari orkestrasi formal yang terkoordinasi untuk menghasilkan keselarasan persepsi, pencerminan emosi, dan subjektivitas penonton. Diskontinuitas naratif yang disengaja antara kedua film terbukti

berperan sebagai mekanisme diskursus canggih yang secara formal merepresentasikan disosiasi dalam pembentukan identitas suverén, sekaligus mendorong penonton untuk melakukan kerja kognitif yang mencerminkan rekonstruksi psikologis Elizabeth sendiri. Dengan mengintegrasikan teori keterlibatan karakter Smith, taksonomi teknik film klasik Bordwell dan Thompson, serta model penonton tertanam Plantinga, studi ini menetapkan bahwa duologi Kapur mendefinisikan ulang konvensi sinema biografis dengan mengubah representasi historis menjadi pertemuan fenomenologis. Penelitian ini menegaskan kemampuan unik sinema untuk menghasilkan pemahaman experiensial tentang proses psikologis yang kompleks melalui manipulasi formal yang disengaja, sekaligus menawarkan kerangka metodologis yang dapat ditransfer untuk analisis narasi berbasis diskursus dalam genre film historis dan biografis.

Kata Kunci: *Mekanisme Diskursus Sinematik; Pengalaman Imersif; Sinema Biografis; Kerangka Cerita-Diskursus Chatman; Keterlibatan Penonton*

Introduction

A central challenge in historical biographical cinema is the problem of representing psychological interiority: how cinematic form can convey the inner transformation of a historical figure rather than merely reconstructing external events. Films operating within this genre increasingly employ what can be termed immersive cinematic mechanisms, technical and formal strategies designed not simply to depict historical narratives but to position viewers as active participants in the psychological journeys of their protagonists.

This formal concern reflects a broader development in biographical filmmaking, where the aim is to generate what Plantinga (2009) identifies as embodied spectatorship, wherein viewers experience emotional and cognitive responses that mirror the internal states of characters on screen. Shekhar Kapur's Elizabeth duology, comprising Elizabeth (1998) and Elizabeth: The Golden Age (2007) exemplifies this cinematic tendency through its sophisticated deployment of visual and auditory strategies that transform the viewing experience from passive observation into active psychological participation.

The films chronicle the transformation of Elizabeth I from a vulnerable young woman to the formidable sovereign known as Gloriana; yet their significance lies not merely in what story they tell but in how they tell it, specifically through cinematic mechanisms that compel audiences to phenomenologically experience the psychological fragmentation and reconstruction that constitute Elizabeth's journey toward sovereign identity.

Prior scholarship on Elizabeth I's cultural representation has examined her afterlife across literary and theatrical traditions Dobson and Watson (2002) and the feminist revisionism of English historical drama Howard and Rackin (2002) yet these studies attend primarily to discursive and ideological dimensions of her representation rather than to the formal cinematic mechanisms through which psychological experience is constructed in biographical film. This gap motivates the present study's formal approach.

The theoretical foundation for this analysis rests on Seymour Chatman's Story and Discourse (1978) which distinguishes between story the narrative's content: events, characters, settings and discourse, the formal techniques through which that content is communicated. Operationally, this study applies Chatman's framework by treating each cinematic technique camera positioning, editing rhythm, sound design, and mise-en-scène as a discourse-level mechanism directly analyzable in relation to how Kapur constructs

psychological interiority on screen. Rather than asking what the films say about Elizabeth, the analysis asks how specific formal choices actively position the viewer's perceptual and cognitive access to her internal transformation. Accordingly, the central research question addressed by this study is: How do specific cinematic discourse mechanisms in Kapur's Elizabeth duology construct an immersive audience experience of Queen Elizabeth I's psychological transformation from vulnerable woman to sovereign icon?.

Building upon Chatman's framework and informed by contemporary theories of character engagement and spectatorial alignment, this research argues that Kapur's Elizabeth duology systematically employs cinematic mechanisms to construct discursive strategies that position the viewer toward a phenomenological experience of Elizabeth's psychological transformation across both films. The analysis integrates Smith's (2022) theory of character engagement which delineates how cinema creates structures of alignment organizing the viewer's perceptual access to a character's situation with Bordwell and Thompson's (2017) taxonomy of classical film techniques that direct audience attention and emotional response.

The central proposition is that Kapur deploys specific discourse-level strategies, including subjective point-of-view cinematography during moments of crisis, sound design that aurally represents Elizabeth's psychological states, editing patterns that mirror her emotional volatility, and *mise-en-scène* elements such as costuming and spatial positioning that visually map her transformation, to systematically organize the viewer's discursive alignment with Elizabeth's subjective experience.

Accordingly, this study pursues three specific objectives: (1) to identify the primary cinematic discourse mechanisms deployed across key transformation sequences in both films; (2) to analyze how these mechanisms construct perceptual and cognitive alignment between viewers and Elizabeth's subjective psychological experience; and (3) to demonstrate how the narrative discontinuities between the two films function as sophisticated formal strategies that enact, rather than undermine, the duology's psychological coherence. By foregrounding Chatman's discourse-oriented analysis, this study demonstrates that the duology's enduring power emerges not from its historical content but from its sophisticated formal orchestration, which transforms the biographical film into a medium for shared psychological experience.

Methods

This study employs qualitative formalist analysis to examine how Kapur's Elizabeth duology deploys cinematic mechanisms to generate an immersive audience experience of Elizabeth I's psychological transformation. Data for analysis consists of key transformation sequences from both *Elizabeth* (1998) and *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (2007), specifically scenes depicting critical shifts in the protagonist's psychological or sovereign identity, including her coronation, her declaration of virginity, political confrontations with Cecil and Walsingham, and the Tilbury speech. The analytical procedure follows a four-stage sequence applied to each selected scene: first, the scene is identified and delimited as a transformation sequence; second, it undergoes shot-by-shot segmentation to establish its formal structure and compositional organization; third, each segmented shot is examined for three specific discourse parameters framing (camera angle, distance, and point-of-view positioning), shot duration (the temporal length of individual shots and its relationship to psychological pacing), and sound emphasis (the hierarchical relationship among dialogue, ambient sound, and musical scoring); and fourth, the cumulative findings from each scene's technical analysis are interpreted in terms of their narrative function, specifically how the combined discourse choices construct the viewer's perceptual alignment with Elizabeth's internal experience. A

comparative dimension runs throughout the analysis, tracking formal continuities and strategic ruptures between the two films to map how discourse mechanisms established in the first film are sustained or disrupted in the sequel. This diachronic formalist approach enables systematic examination of how Kapur's deployment of cinematic discourse across both productions transforms biographical content into an immersive psychological experience.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of Kapur's Elizabeth duology reveals a consistent and purposeful system of cinematic discourse mechanisms operating across both films to construct an immersive audience experience of Elizabeth I's psychological transformation. The findings are organized according to four primary discourse channels cinematography, sound design, editing, and *mise-en-scène* before addressing the formal function of the narrative discontinuities between the two films.

1. Cinematographic Alignment and Perceptual Positioning

Across both films, cinematography operates as the primary mechanism through which Kapur constructs what Smith (2022) terms perceptual alignment the organization of the viewer's spatial and cognitive access to a character's subjective situation. This alignment is most forcefully demonstrated in the climactic declaration sequence of Elizabeth (1998) in which Elizabeth announces that she has become a virgin. At this moment, the cinematography employs an extreme close-up of Elizabeth's face, eliminating spatial context and restricting the viewer's perceptual field entirely to her expression.

The discourse thereby confines the viewer to Elizabeth's immediate subjectivity, denying the distancing effect of wider spatial awareness. The lighting shifts simultaneously from the naturalistic warmth of preceding scenes to a harsh, flat illumination that drains color from her complexion, visually enacting through formal means the death of her private self. According to Chatman's (1978) framework, this coalescence of framing and lighting constitutes a discourse-level event not a record of story content but a mechanism that actively constructs the viewer's perceptual access to psychological dissociation.

The progressive consolidation of Elizabeth's authority is tracked through an evolving cinematographic strategy in the confrontation with Sir William Cecil, where she claims the heart of a man and identifies herself as her father's daughter. Camera positioning here shifts from a low angle on Cecil constructing a discourse of patriarchal authority through spatial subordination to a steady eye-level shot of Elizabeth as she speaks, formally neutralizing the power differential by granting the viewer a symmetrical perceptual position relative to her.

The blocking reinforces this formal argument: Elizabeth moves from a seated, spatially confined position to standing, asserting vertical dominance within the frame and registering, through the discourse, a transformation of sovereign agency rather than merely announcing it. The culmination of this cinematographic trajectory occurs in The Golden Age's Tilbury sequence, where Elizabeth delivers the historically resonant declaration invoking her weak and feeble woman's body against the heart and stomach of a king.

The composition places her on a white horse in gleaming armor at the center of the frame, sunlight constructing a luminous focal point while soldiers recede into comparative shadow. Strategic insert shots of soldiers registering awe function as what Smith (2022) identifies as structures of allegiance directing the viewer's cognitive

alignment by modeling the appropriate response within the diegesis itself. The formal effect is a sophisticated discursive positioning wherein viewers simultaneously recognize the performative, constructed nature of Elizabeth's sovereignty and are organized by the discourse to invest in that performance as a genuine transformation.

2. Sound Design as Psychological Discourse

Sound design functions throughout the duology as a mechanism for constructing the viewer's perceptual access to psychological interiority that cannot be rendered visually. In the declaration sequence of *Elizabeth* (1998) the sound design strategically muffles ambient noise while amplifying the echo of Elizabeth's voice, constructing a discursive auditory space that formally enacts her psychological isolation. This technique prioritizing echo over ambience positions the viewer within an acoustic environment that mirrors Elizabeth's dissociative experience rather than reporting it. The sound mixing in the Cecil confrontation similarly foregrounds Elizabeth's voice while suppressing ambient sound, establishing her declaration as the dominant discursive event in the auditory field.

As Plantinga (2009) argues, such orchestrated deployment of cinematic channels constructs cognitive-perceptual salience, directing audience attention and organizing interpretation while maintaining the formal appearance of unmediated access to story events. Across both films, the musical scoring coordinates with verbal content at moments of peak psychological significance, amplifying the discourse's claim on the viewer's attention. This coordination is most apparent in the Tilbury sequence, where the score builds beneath Elizabeth's speech in a pattern that structures the emotional trajectory of the scene independent of narrative information functioning, in Chatman's (1978) terms, as a discourse mechanism that shapes the viewer's psychological engagement with the content regardless of what that content explicitly states.

3. Editing Patterns and Temporal Manipulation

Editing rhythm constitutes a third primary discourse mechanism, functioning as a formal index of psychological state. In the declaration sequence of *Elizabeth* (1998) the editing decelerates, holding static shots for extended durations that sustain the viewer's positional alignment with Elizabeth's moment of self-annihilation rather than offering narrative relief through cut or movement. The temporal organization enacts the psychological stasis of the scene, compelling the viewer to inhabit its duration rather than advance through it. In the Cecil confrontation, the editing deploys a shot-reverse-shot pattern that gradually shortens Cecil's reaction shots while extending Elizabeth's speaking time within single takes, formally organizing the viewer's discursive access around her perspective and constructing an alignment that prioritizes her performance over his response. According to Bordwell and Thompson (2017) such systematic manipulation of editing rhythm constitutes a discourse system that directs audience cognition and organizes perceptual access.

In Elizabeth's final declaration affirming her identity as queen and as herself the editing rhythm adopts a measured, steady pace with longer take durations that contrast sharply with the fragmented, rapid cutting of crisis moments in both films. This formal contrast constructs psychological stability through temporal organization, signaling discursive closure through editing rhythm rather than through narrative statement. However, as Bordwell (2013) notes in his account of parametric narration, such mechanisms can simultaneously invite critical scrutiny of their own constructedness: the editing's deliberate steadiness reads as conspicuously controlled, exposing the artificiality of the closure it performs.

4. Mise-en-Scène and The Visual Construction of Sovereignty

The mise-en-scène of both films operates as a continuous visual argument about the relationship between identity and performance, consistently deploying costume, spatial arrangement, and lighting to externalize psychological states. In the Cecil confrontation, Elizabeth's movement from a confined seated position to a standing, spatially dominant one enacts through spatial discourse the very transformation her words claim the body performing sovereignty before the narrative endorses it.

In a pivotal scene from the first film in which Walsingham counsels Elizabeth on the necessity of divine performance, the two characters are positioned in profile facing opposite directions within the frame, formally enacting the split between private counsel and public execution that his words describe. Walsingham emerges from the shadow to speak while Elizabeth remains partially illuminated, positioning her discursively as suspended between human vulnerability and sovereign icon. As Chatman (1978) observes, such visual composition produces meaning through spatial relationships and lighting rather than verbal exposition.

In the Tilbury sequence of *The Golden Age*, the cumulative evolution of the mise-en-scène Elizabeth's white horse, gleaming armor, and compositional centrality achieves its full discursive significance only in relation to the earlier film's imagery of her vulnerability. The formal contrast between the spatially subordinate figure of Elizabeth (1998) and the luminous sovereign icon of the sequel constitutes, in itself, the discourse's primary argument about psychological transformation, making explicit through visual means what the narrative can only gesture toward.

5. Narrative Discontinuity as Formal Strategy

The most analytically significant finding of this study concerns the narrative discontinuities between the two films, which function not as formal flaws but as deliberate discourse mechanisms enacting the psychological fragmentation they depict. The substantial temporal ellipsis between productions spanning nearly a decade of production time and an indeterminate gap in story time constructs what Herman (2017) identifies as a narrative gap that organizes cognitive labor from viewers, requiring active reconstruction of Elizabeth's psychological trajectory from fragmented discursive cues.

This gap is rendered meaningful by Walsingham's counsel in *Elizabeth* (1998) regarding the necessity of divine performance a scene whose formal composition embeds its argument about the dissociation of public and private identity within the visual arrangement of space, light, and body position rather than in its verbal content alone. The discourse strategy initiated in the first film is reinforced and complicated in *The Golden Age* when Walsingham observes that the emotionally erupting Elizabeth is no longer the queen he recognizes.

At this moment, the camera adopts a subjective point-of-view shot from his perspective, constructing a discursive alignment that positions viewers to experience his shock at witnessing the private self intrude upon the public performance. This formal choice confirms the central argument: the films' narrative discontinuities formally enact the profound dissociation inherent in sovereign identity formation, compelling audiences to undertake the cognitive and emotional labor of reconstructing Elizabeth's psychological trajectory across the gap thereby experiencing, at the level of spectatorship itself, the fragmentation that constitutes her journey.

The synthesis of cinematic mechanisms across both films culminates in Elizabeth's final declaration of identity as queen and as herself. The cinematography frames her in a perfectly symmetrical medium shot, balanced lighting eliminating the harsh contrasts that characterized earlier scenes; the costume has evolved toward

simplicity; the editing adopts a measured pace; the sound design presents her voice without echo or muffling. These coordinated discourse choices construct a claim of achieved wholeness.

Yet, consistent with the duology's formal sophistication, they simultaneously expose their own constructedness through an excess of control: the symmetry reads as too deliberate, the balance too engineered. Sophisticated viewers, engaging in what Plantinga (2009) terms cognitive monitoring, recognize that the integrated identity Elizabeth claims is itself a discourse effect not a return to authentic selfhood but the perfection of sovereign artifice. This recognition emerges not through thematic statement but through the formal orchestration of cinematic discourse itself, constituting the duology's most profound and distinctively cinematic achievement.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Shekhar Kapur's Elizabeth duology achieves its enduring power through the systematic and purposeful deployment of cinematic discourse mechanisms across cinematography, sound design, editing, and mise-en-scène mechanisms that transform biographical narrative into immersive psychological experience and position audiences as active participants in Elizabeth I's traumatic journey from vulnerable woman to sovereign icon. The analysis, grounded in Chatman's story-discourse framework and integrated with theories of character engagement, classical film technique, and embodied spectatorship, establishes that the films' psychological impact derives fundamentally from discourse-level orchestration rather than historical content: each formal choice constructs the viewer's perceptual alignment with Elizabeth's subjective experience, and the deliberate narrative discontinuities between the two films enact the profound dissociation inherent in sovereign identity formation rather than undermining the duology's coherence. The research further reveals that Kapur's most sophisticated achievement lies in the self-reflexive dimension of his formal strategy, wherein the cinematic mechanisms that construct a discourse of achieved wholeness simultaneously expose their own constructedness, positioning viewers to recognize that the unified identity Elizabeth ultimately claims is itself a performance sovereign artifice perfected rather than authentic selfhood recovered. These findings offer a productive methodological framework, grounded in discourse theory, for analyzing other serialized biographical and historical film cycles where psychological transformation is communicated not through narrative statement but through the deliberate manipulation of constitutive formal elements across multiple productions. More broadly, the study reaffirms cinema's singular capacity among narrative arts to generate experiential comprehension of complex psychological processes, bridging the distance between historical knowledge and embodied understanding.

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