

A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis of *Anatomy of a Fall*

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Abstract: The film *Anatomy of a Fall* revolves around a judicial trial, with a pronounced focus on gender issues. It traces the complete trajectory of the case surrounding the death of Sandra's husband, Samuel—from the initial incident to the courtroom proceedings that ultimately result in Sandra's acquittal. Throughout the film, the discourses articulated by the prosecution, witnesses, and the defendant engage in strategic contestation, each striving to reinterpret the case and legitimize their respective versions of events as objective truth. Drawing upon Michel Foucault's theory of discourse, this paper aims to examine the constitutive function of these multiple voices in constructing reality within the cinematic narrative.

Keywords: *Anatomy of a Fall*, discourse, the Second Sex, power, identity reversal.

1. Introduction

In contemporary film scholarship, the relationship between cinematic narrative and social reality has increasingly been approached through the lens of discourse theory. Among the various theoretical frameworks available, Michel Foucault's conception of discourse—particularly its emphasis on the constitutive power of language in constructing objects, subjects, and truths—offers a particularly productive analytical tool for examining how films not only represent but also actively participate in the fabrication of social meaning. Foucault posits that discourse is not merely a vehicle for expressing pre-existing ideas but a productive force that generates the very realities it purports to describe. This insight has been fruitfully extended by scholars such as Zhou Xian (2013), who draws parallels between Foucauldian discourse theory and the social constructionism of Berger and Luckmann, and Li Zhi (2017), who critically examines the bidirectional relationship between discourse and power, arguing that discourse both generates and is shaped by power distributions in society.

The film *Anatomy of a Fall* (2023), directed by Justine Triet, presents an exceptionally apt case for such a discursive analysis. Centering on the trial of Sandra Voyter, a writer accused of murdering her husband Samuel, the film unfolds almost entirely through testimonies, legal arguments, and recorded conversations, deliberately withholding visual reconstructions of the alleged events. This stylistic choice foregrounds the linguistic and discursive dimensions of truth-making, compelling both the in-film jury and the viewing audience to navigate a labyrinth of competing narratives. The courtroom thus becomes a site where multiple discourses—prosecutorial, defensive, testimonial, and personal—engage in fierce contestation, each striving to objectify its own version of "reality" and secure institutional validation.

2. The Constitutive Nature of Discourse: The Generation and Contestation of "Truth"

Foucault posits that discourse plays a constitutive role in constructing the objective world. As Zhou Xian observes, Foucault's theory of discourse bears notable resemblance to the social constructionism advanced by sociologists Berger and Luckmann, who contend that our knowledge and

perceptions of the real world are, to a considerable extent, constructed through linguistic and communicative activities. It is only through conversational language use that the objective world becomes our concrete, lived reality.^[1] This objectifying function of language is brought to its fullest expression in this film, particularly throughout the courtroom proceedings.

Surveying the entire film, one finds that nearly every plot point is advanced through dialogue; key pieces of evidence are presented in court exclusively in audio recordings, while visual depictions of the relevant events are deliberately eschewed. This suggests that discourse assumes paramount importance in propelling the narrative forward—indeed, it has the power to directly construct the "reality" of the case itself. On one hand, the various parties in the courtroom engage in discursive contestation, each attempting to piece together and establish their own version of the "truth"; on the other, the audience is likewise compelled to reconstruct the events through these multiple discourses, thereby participating in the proceedings and effectively assuming the role of the jury. Admittedly, in a courtroom setting, the question-and-answer exchanges among lawyers, prosecutors, defendants, and witnesses constitute the primary means of presenting the case. As a cinematic work, however, this is by no means the only possible mode of representation. In *The Vanished Witness*, a film of similar subject matter, the director opts to supplement the characters' testimonies with corresponding visuals that re-enact the events as described. By contrast, *Anatomy of a Fall* deliberately withholds any such visual reconstruction, compelling the audience to immerse themselves entirely in a labyrinth of language and to rely far more heavily on verbal accounts in forming their judgments.

Throughout the trial dialogues, phrases such as "your subjective speculation" and "based on your logic" recur with notable frequency. This very repetition lays bare the essence of the so-called "objectification" process: each party in the courtroom articulates discourse from their respective standpoint, selecting and organizing fragmentary facts in a manner that serves their own position, and thereby renders the case "objective" according to their own narrative. In this context, truth tends to become obscured amid mutually contradictory—and even competing—interpretations. Consequently, the crux of the case shifts from objective truth per se to the subjective choice among, and identification with, competing interpretations. This is precisely what the defense

attorney, Mrs Berger, conveys to the perplexed Daniel when he observes: "When we lack an element to judge something, and the lack is unbearable, all we can do is decide... To overcome doubt, sometimes we have to decide to sway one way rather than the other." This counsel ultimately strengthens Daniel's conviction in his mother's innocence and serves to bolster Sandra's defense.

However, even the testimony of Daniel-which serves as the pivotal piece of evidence ultimately leading to Sandra's acquittal-is itself a form of Daniel's "discourse." In the final stage of the trial, Daniel recalls a past episode in which his father, under the influence of medication, accidentally caused the family dog to ingest a harmful substance. Although the scene visually presents a dialogue between father and son, the lines are entirely articulated by Daniel. This reminds us that this, too, remains a statement grounded in Daniel's own judgment-a discursive construction belonging to him alone. Yet, unlike the preceding testimonies in court, which were subject to cross-examination from multiple parties, this solitary recollection possesses an intrinsic quality of lived experience and emotional authenticity, thereby constructing a "reality" that others find difficult to subvert from within. Consequently, even though the prosecutor emphasizes that "this story is extremely subjective, and in no way does it qualify as any form of proof," this does not alter the outcome of Sandra's acquittal. Daniel's discourse has thus accomplished the objectification of a reality in which his father had attempted suicide.

I deliberately refrain here from using the phrasing "the truth of Sandra's innocence," for the film repeatedly suggests that the trial is not oriented toward the restoration of absolute truth (Sandra repeatedly contests the prosecution's discourse with the accusation that "that is not the truth"; those who stand in the courtroom can only speak of "a small part of the matter"). Rather, the trial is a process in which multiple parties engage in discursive competition based on limited information, and in which an institutional procedure ultimately confers validation upon one constructed version of reality over others.

3. The Inversion of Power in Private Relations: The Contest for "the First Sex" and Gender Reversal

At the post-screening Q&A session following the Peking University premiere of *Anatomy of a Fall*, Professor Dai Jinhua posed a question to director Justine Triet: "Do you consider gender issues to be a significant theme in your cinematic work?" The director responded in the affirmative. In the film, gender relations, too, are constructed through discourse.

In his critical engagement with Foucault's theoretical framework, Li Zhi places particular emphasis on the theory of power-discourse. He observes that discourse capable of constructing the objective world "generates both situational (randomized and individualized) and structural (i.e., institutionalized, sedimented into habits, conventions, and institutions) social effects, including participation in the distribution of power among individuals, the shaping of interpersonal (or intergroup) social relations, and the constraint of individual identity formation, volition, attitudes, and modes of thought and behavior."^[2] Concealed within this formulation is a bidirectional relationship between power and discourse. When discourse laden with subjective value

judgments produces objectifying effects, it "participates in the distribution of power among individuals"-discourse, in this sense, generates power. Moreover, when two individuals articulate their respective perspectives on the same matter, the discourse of the one who commands greater power tends to possess a stronger constitutive capacity. In this regard, discourse and power exhibit a profound internal coherence.

Within the relationship between Sandra and Samuel as depicted in the film, Sandra emerges as the one who wields discursive power. In the dynamic of this couple's interaction, we observe a form of gender reversal. As Simone de Beauvoir articulates in *The Second Sex*, "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman."^[3] This proposition posits that woman is shaped by man and by society into the "Second Sex" relative to man as the "First Sex." That is to say, the relation between First and Second Sex and that between man and woman is that "the First Sex is male, and the Second Sex is female," rather than "the male is the First Sex, and the female is the Second Sex." Since this relationship is socially constructed rather than innate, it follows that the First/Second Sex relation between male and female is susceptible to transformation. In the relationship between Sandra and Samuel, we witness precisely such a possibility.

In this relationship, Sandra-the woman-has achieved success in the very writing career in which her husband has failed. She possesses a temperament that is more rational and composed than Samuel's-so much so that he accuses her of being a "monster" and "cold-blooded." Samuel, by contrast, suffers setbacks in both his teaching and writing endeavors, and even the accident that caused their son Daniel's blindness is attributable to him. This leaves Samuel emotionally volatile, even hysterical. Within such a dynamic, we observe in the female protagonist traits conventionally associated with masculinity under traditional gender paradigms, while the male exhibits precisely the opposite. Correspondingly, in the first half of the film, nearly all the effective information we receive about the victim, Samuel, is channeled through Sandra's narration or filtered through her perspective. Sandra effectively monopolizes the power to narrate and define Samuel. Samuel appears on screen in only four instances: at the scene of his death, in photographs scanned during the investigation, in the forensic pathologist's autopsy report, and in a silent video recording that Sandra watches after his death. In these visual fragments, the information conveyed about Samuel is limited to the fact of his death and his physical appearance-and even this is presented only piecemeal. His character, behavior, and personal history, by contrast, are entirely derived from Sandra's statements to her attorney, Maître Vincent. Whether it is the details of his renovations to the house, his cautious and methodical disposition, or his reclusive state while working-all are products of "secondary construction" articulated through Sandra's voice. The film deliberately forgoes the possibility of presenting Samuel through richer and more complete visual imagery, thereby positioning Sandra as the one who shapes Samuel-the one who "makes Samuel who he is."

It is not until the latter half of the film, when a witness presents Exhibit No. 31 in court-a recording of Samuel made shortly before his death-that Samuel formally appears in the film alongside the playback of the audio. In the first half of this recorded quarrel, Samuel incessantly complains about the inequitable allocation of time between himself and Sandra, attributing his professional stagnation and financial difficulties to this domestic imbalance. Through his

grievances, Samuel seizes the discursive initiative. Yet, as the argument escalates, Sandra mounts a sharp counterattack against Samuel regarding her own sacrifices in the marriage. She is not merely living in a foreign land to accommodate her husband, but also suffers from a profound sense of displacement due to the linguistic barrier-Sandra is by no means the sole beneficiary of this relationship. She retaliates against Samuel through her formidable rhetoric. Sandra emerges as the ultimate dominant figure in this quarrel. The film reinforces this shift with a telling tracking shot: Sandra moves from the dining table on the right side of the frame to the counter on the left, effecting a compositional reconfiguration of power-a framing that persists until the end of the couple's argument. At this juncture, Sandra definitively assumes discursive authority, consolidating her position as the "First Sex" in the marriage, while Samuel is relegated to the corresponding status of the "Second Sex."

4. Gender Rectification in the Public Order: Power Contestation and Female Agency within the Judicial System

Once entering the public juridical sphere, however, the logic of power that operated in the private domain is thoroughly overturned and rectified. When Sandra stands before the court, her identity is reconfigured as that of a murder suspect, a serial adulterer, and an author who plagiarized her husband's creative ideas. Ironically, the two most potent moral charges against her-infidelity and plagiarism-originate precisely from Samuel, who, within the marital relationship, was the one deprived of discursive power. After Samuel's death, the prosecutor and the publisher become his surrogate spokespersons, taking up these accusations and amplifying them in an attempt to render them the linchpin for Sandra's conviction. Through public discourse, Sandra is reinscribed into the traditional gender order, once again reduced to the "Second Sex" relative to the male "First Sex." More tellingly still, the film's framing of the charges against Sandra exhibits a profoundly gendered character: those who argue for Sandra's guilt-the prosecutor, the psychiatrist, the lead investigator, among others-are almost exclusively male, while those who advocate for her innocence or adopt a neutral/protective stance-the bloodstain analyst, the female lawyer, the female prosecutor's assistant, and Maître Berger, who safeguards Daniel's testimony-are all female. It should also be noted that even with Vincent serving as her defense attorney, Sandra remains acutely aware of his "judging gaze"-a reminder that, in the face of a macro-level gender structure, the professional role of an individual male cannot entirely divorce itself from his unconscious gendered positionality.

In the first half of *Anatomy of a Fall*, the discourse of women, as represented by Sandra, is placed under conspicuous suppression. Although Sandra continuously engages in the construction of Samuel's image-pointing, for instance, to his depression and suicidal tendencies-her own subjective self-narrative remains conspicuously absent. This lacuna allows the male discourse of the prosecutor to intervene in this process, further constricting the space available to female discourse. At the outset of the trial, the prosecutor, drawing upon Samuel's pre-mortem accusations of Sandra's "repeated infidelity," actively steers the witnesses' testimony with a view to reinforcing Sandra's image as

"unfaithful," casting her as a woman who has deviated from traditional morality. Concurrently, the prosecutor and other male figures repeatedly negate Sandra's discursive statements and undertake a more systematic reconstruction of her account. For instance, when Sandra mentions Samuel's depression and his suicide attempts during her testimony, the prosecutor, in concert with the psychiatrist, effects a subtle discursive transformation: "depression" is reframed as "emotional defensiveness," and "suicide attempts" are minimized-thereby substantively deconstructing Sandra's tragic narrative discourse concerning Samuel. The two formulations are, in essence, remarkably similar in meaning, yet the latter attenuates Samuel's negative emotional state, thereby dismantling Sandra's discursive construction of his image and replacing it with a comparatively positive one. Through this process, Samuel's image is objectified by the male-dominated discourse-represented by the prosecutor-into that of a "vigorous" man incapable of suicide, while Sandra's original account is marginalized as unreliable "subjective speculation."

This state of discursive suppression, however, begins to reverse from the second half of the film onward. The turning point is precisely the audio recording that had already established Sandra's position as the "First Sex" in her relationship with Samuel. When the lead investigator interprets the chaotic sounds at the end of the recording as Sandra violently assaulting Samuel in a fit of rage-attempting to forge a direct link between this quarrel and Samuel's death the following day-this constitutes yet another instance of violent interpretation by male discourse operating under a presumption of guilt. Sandra offers a forceful rebuttal, presenting relevant evidence and pointing out that the sounds in question originated from Samuel's self-harming behavior. Consequently, the investigator's attempt to construct an objective reality of "Sandra as murderer" collapses. Sandra not only refutes this singular interpretation but also regains the capacity to initiate her own reconstruction of the facts. This transfer of power lays the groundwork for the eventual acquittal. On this basis, Daniel's recollection of his father's words-which bear the quality of a final testament-completes the "objectification" of the reality that "Samuel may have committed suicide," acquiring an irrefutable weight of "reality" and ultimately securing Sandra's acquittal.

In essence, the entire trial process in the film unfolds as a contest of power between male and female discourse. Through fierce counterargument, female discourse painstakingly carves out a space-within a juridical discursive system dominated by males-where it can be heard and recognized. Significantly, however, the ultimate victory of female discourse is not entirely complete; it remains partially dependent on the testimony of another male figure-her son. This acutely reveals the complexity and pervasiveness of gender structures. At the outset of the trial, the prosecutor attempts to interpret Samuel's act of playing the misogynistic song "P.I.M.P." while Sandra was being interviewed by a female student as an accusation against Sandra's alleged infidelity with that student-given that the lyrics of "P.I.M.P." are replete with derogatory references to women. To this, Sandra's female defense counsel offers a crisp rebuttal: "It was an instrumental version." In a sense, the entire film can be read as an act of composing lyrics for that very instrumental version of "P.I.M.P."

5. Conclusion

Proceeding from Foucault's theory of discourse, this paper has undertaken an analysis of the film *Anatomy of a Fall*, examining the process by which “reality” within the film is “objectified” through the discursive constructions of multiple parties, as well as the interplay between gender order and discursive power. The “reality” in the film is by no means an objective, pre-existing truth; rather, it is a product of continuous reinterpretation through discursive contestation. The final acquittal, far from representing an outright victory of female discourse, is more aptly characterized as a difficult breakthrough achieved by women within an entrenched system. The provisional and contingent nature of this victory precisely mirrors the deep-seated stability and complexity of

gender structures. It is precisely this tension that elevates *Anatomy of a Fall* beyond the framework of a genre film and renders it a work of profound and far-reaching reflection.

References

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