



An Imagery Analysis of the Short Film *Black Mamba* in the SM Culture Universe: An Aesthetic Feature of Films

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Abstract

This study examines the use of imagery in the short film *Aespa Ep.01: Black Mamba* within the SM Culture Universe, employing a qualitative descriptive method and a case study approach. Grounded in literary theory, the research conceptualizes imagery—visual, auditory, kinesthetic, organic, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile—as essential in constructing sensory and emotional meaning within a narrative. Drawing on the frameworks of Perrine, Klarer, and Abrams, the study treats film as a literary text capable of conveying complex messages through symbolic and sensory elements. Data were collected through repeated observation of the short film and analyzed by categorizing and interpreting the types of imagery. A total of 110 instances of imagery were identified. The findings reveal that visual imagery is the most dominant, contributing to the film's futuristic and digital atmosphere. Kinesthetic and organic imagery enhance the narrative by illustrating physical action and internal emotion, while auditory imagery supports both the storyline and philosophical themes. Olfactory, gustatory, and tactile imagery were found to be minimal or absent. The study concludes that imagery in the film serves not only as an aesthetic feature but also as a medium for expressing deeper meanings related to digital identity, emotional experience, and the convergence of virtual and real worlds. These findings underscore the potential of visual storytelling as a literary tool in contemporary media. Future research is encouraged to explore visual semiotics, spatial symbolism, and comparative media analysis to further illuminate the dynamics of digital narratives.

Keywords: Imagery; Digital identity; Short film; *Aespa*; Visual analysis; Culture universe

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INTRODUCTION

Literature is a vital mode of human expression, encapsulating the depth of thoughts, emotions, and lived experiences (Ladita & Jazadi, 2024; Prayuda & Merawati, 2025). Traditionally, literature has been framed around written forms such as poetry, prose, and drama. However, in the digital age, the boundaries of literature have expanded significantly. Film, as a multimodal medium, is now recognized as a legitimate form of literary expression due to its use of narrative structures, symbolism, and aesthetic devices that parallel those of traditional texts (Klarer, 2014; Ryan, 2015). This convergence of media facilitates a richer exploration of meaning and enhances the interpretive potential for both audiences and scholars (Jenkins, 2006; Mittell, 2015).

Among the most enduring literary devices across both traditional and digital narratives is imagery. Imagery involves the use of descriptive language or representational techniques that evoke sensory experiences. According to Perrine (in Johnson & Arp, 2017), imagery is not limited to visual perception but also includes auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, kinesthetic, and organic dimensions. These sensory representations enable readers or viewers to emotionally and cognitively engage with a

narrative world, thus forming a bridge between the creator's vision and the audience's interpretation. Scholars such as Barthes (1977) and Kress & van Leeuwen (2006) have extended the study of imagery into the visual and digital realms, demonstrating how signs and codes function in non-verbal texts.

In film, imagery gains additional depth through the interplay of visual, auditory, and kinetic elements. Films convey meaning not only through language, but through *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, sound design, and editing (Bordwell & Thompson, 2019). Visual elements like lighting, color, and setting combine with sound and movement to produce immersive, affective experiences. Klarer (2014) suggests that the narrative tools employed in film are structurally akin to those used in literature, thereby validating cinematic texts as subjects for literary analysis.

A salient example of such multimedia narrative is the short film *Aespa Ep.01: Black Mamba*, produced by SM Culture Universe. The film blends futuristic aesthetics with philosophical themes, portraying a world in which physical and virtual realities converge. While serving promotional functions for the K-pop group Aespa, the film also operates as a symbolic text exploring questions of digital identity, artificial intelligence, and the boundaries of human consciousness. Through visually saturated scenes, stylized performances, and metaphysical dialogue, it invites reflection on authenticity, embodiment, and selfhood in an increasingly mediated world (Seo, 2022; Oh & Park, 2021).

From a literary perspective, what makes *Aespa Ep.01: Black Mamba* compelling is its deliberate and layered use of imagery. Visual metaphors, chromatic contrasts, and symbolic gestures saturate the film, prompting interpretive engagement. Scenes depicting interactions between human characters and their digital counterparts ("ae") raise ontological questions about what it means to be human in an age of data-driven identity construction. The futuristic color palette, glitch effects, and synthetic textures mirror tensions between organic life and digital simulation (Lee & Jung, 2023). Meanwhile, dialogue about personality algorithms and emotional disconnection gestures toward deeper philosophical and psychological themes. Given the growing prevalence of multimedia storytelling, analyzing imagery within such digital texts is essential for contemporary literary and media studies. This study aims to explore how imagery functions in *Aespa Ep.01: Black Mamba* to construct meaning, evoke emotion, and shape narrative experience. Rather than treating visual elements as mere decoration, the analysis considers how each sensory cue contributes to the story's symbolic and thematic coherence.

The study pursues two key objectives: (1) to identify and classify the types of imagery used in the film, drawing on traditional literary categories—visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, kinesthetic, and organic—and (2) to analyze the narrative and symbolic function of each type of imagery within the film's context.

The significance of this research lies in its interdisciplinary approach. It draws from literary theory, visual semiotics, and digital narrative analysis to position the short film as a text worthy of scholarly inquiry. While prior studies of K-pop media often center on fandom, globalization, or branding (Choi & Maliangkay, 2015; Jin, 2018), this research emphasizes artistic and symbolic dimensions. Furthermore, it addresses the need for updated critical frameworks capable of analyzing hybrid texts—those that operate at the intersection of literature, cinema, and digital culture (Manovich, 2020; Murray, 2017). In doing so, it highlights how classical literary concepts such as imagery remain relevant and adaptable within new media landscapes.

Review of Literature

Imagery has long been recognized as a fundamental component of literary expression, referring to the representation of sensory experiences in texts or media to stimulate the imagination of readers or viewers. Perrine (in Johnson & Arp, 2017) defines imagery as the use of language to depict objects, actions, feelings, thoughts, ideas, states of mind, and any sensory or extrasensory experience. This representation encompasses various forms, including visual (sight), auditory (sound), olfactory (smell), gustatory (taste), tactile (touch), kinesthetic (movement), and organic (internal sensations and emotions). Each type of imagery serves a distinct function in shaping the audience's experience and interpretation of narrative works. Klarer (2005) emphasizes that while imagery is traditionally linked to written literature, it also plays a vital role in film, which is considered a modern form of literary expression. He argues that literary criticism can be extended to film narratives because both media employ structural and symbolic tools to construct meaning. Unlike texts, film offers an immediate and immersive experience through direct presentation of images and sound. Nonetheless, the interpretive processes—such as identifying themes, symbols, and narrative strategies—remain consistent with literary analysis.

Supporting this view, Abrams (1999) notes that imagery as a literary device encompasses all sensory perceptions evoked by a text. In visual media like film, imagery becomes even more prominent as sensory experience is conveyed directly through visuals and sound rather than solely imagined. According to Abrams, imagery is crucial in establishing tone, mood, and theme, often used symbolically to suggest deeper meanings beyond the narrative surface. Suyudi (2021), in his analysis of imagery in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poetry, illustrates how different imagery types contribute to emotional impact and thematic depth. By categorizing and interpreting sensory images, Suyudi highlights the role of imagery in enhancing reader engagement and interpretive complexity. His research underscores the importance of identifying specific imagery types to reveal layers of meaning within literary works. Extending imagery analysis to visual media, the field of visual semiotics offers useful tools to decode the meanings behind images. Barthes (1977) explored how meaning is constructed through the interplay of visual elements, showing that images are embedded with cultural codes and ideologies rather than being neutral. In short films and music videos, these visual signs often symbolize abstract ideas such as identity, freedom, alienation, or transformation.

The concept of identity construction through digital representation is particularly relevant to this study. The rise of virtual personas and avatars in industries like K-pop blurs the boundary between real and digital selves. Pioneering scholars like Turkle (1995) and Haraway (1991) have discussed how digital technologies reshape notions of selfhood. In *Aespa Ep.01: Black Mamba*, the interaction between human characters and their digital "ae" counterparts reflects these concerns, providing rich material for imagery analysis.

Cinematic techniques also play a crucial role in shaping narrative meaning. Bordwell and Thompson (2013) highlight how visual composition, lighting, color, camera angles, and movement contribute to film storytelling. These elements are not mere stylistic choices; they carry narrative and emotional significance. For instance, high-contrast lighting can signify conflict or mystery, while low-angle shots may suggest dominance or power. Such features function as visual imagery guiding audience interpretation and emotional response. Previous research on K-pop media has

largely focused on cultural phenomena, fandom, and media influence. However, recent studies have begun to address narrative and artistic aspects. Oh and Park (2020) explore how K-pop music videos act as storytelling platforms and sites for identity formation, arguing that the integration of visual and musical elements creates complex semiotic systems that communicate meaning beyond lyrics and melody. Overall, this literature provides a solid foundation for analyzing imagery in film, especially within digital and hybrid narratives. Traditional literary theories of imagery remain highly relevant when applied to modern visual media. By combining insights from literary criticism, visual semiotics, and media studies, this research contributes to a richer understanding of how imagery functions in *Aespa Ep.01: Black Mamba*. This analysis is significant not only for literature and film studies but also for broader discussions on digital identity, cultural symbolism, and multimedia storytelling.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative methodology combined with a case study approach to investigate the types and meanings of imagery present in the short film *Aespa Ep.01: Black Mamba* within the SM Culture Universe. The qualitative paradigm is selected to enable a nuanced and interpretive exploration of the symbolic and sensory dimensions embedded in the film—dimensions that cannot be effectively captured through quantitative methods. The descriptive aspect seeks to articulate a comprehensive portrayal of how imagery operates in the narrative and visual composition of the film. The case study design focuses on this specific short film as a distinct artifact of digital storytelling, characterized by its hybrid use of live-action and digital animation, philosophical undertones, and artistic expression. This methodological combination allows for an in-depth understanding of a singular, context-rich phenomenon, making it suitable for dissecting the complex interplay of narrative structure and visual rhetoric in contemporary multimedia storytelling.

Research Object

The object of this research is the short film *Aespa Ep.01: Black Mamba*, a multimedia production that merges live-action footage with digital animation to construct a richly layered narrative. As the inaugural episode of the SM Culture Universe series, the film presents a futuristic and philosophical exploration of themes such as identity, duality, and human-technology interaction. These themes are embedded in both the narrative content and the stylistic choices of the film. Serving as the primary data source, the film provides a fertile ground for analyzing various types of imagery—particularly visual and auditory—within a confined yet multifaceted digital text. In addition to the primary visual material, secondary sources such as academic articles, books on literary and media theory, and previous studies on imagery and film analysis were utilized to inform the analytical framework. These theoretical resources underpin the interpretation of the film's symbols and sensory cues, thereby grounding the analysis in scholarly discourse.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using a **qualitative content analysis** technique, focusing on the identification, categorization, and interpretation of imagery elements throughout the short film. The researcher systematically examined the film through repeated viewings, during which significant scenes were isolated, transcribed, and annotated with descriptive notes and timestamps. Each instance of imagery was

categorized according to the seven types of literary imagery as defined by Laurence Perrine: visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, kinesthetic, and organic. Visual imagery was dissected through elements such as color schemes, scene composition, setting, and character expressions, while auditory imagery was analyzed via dialogue, sound effects, and background scores. Kinesthetic imagery was identified through character movements and action sequences, and organic imagery was explored through emotional expressions and internal monologues.

The interpretive process was supported by established theories from Perrine, Klarer, and Abrams to ensure analytical depth and theoretical rigor. Thematic connections were drawn between specific imagery types and overarching narrative concerns, such as digital identity, existential inquiry, and technological embodiment. Visual motifs like reflections, virtual avatars, and interdimensional environments were shown to symbolize the tension between the real and the constructed self. Auditory cues amplified the emotional and philosophical tone, while kinesthetic and organic imagery added layers of affect and embodiment to the storytelling. To reinforce the credibility of findings, strategies such as prolonged engagement with the material, peer discussion for interpretive validation, and triangulation with scholarly literature were employed. This meticulous and multi-angle approach ensures that the analysis captures both the aesthetic complexity and symbolic richness of the film, while also acknowledging interpretive limitations and avenues for future research.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

The analysis of Aespa Ep.01: Black Mamba revealed a total of 110 distinct imagery instances across four dominant types: visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and organic. The visual imagery emerged as the most prominent, characterized by cosmic backgrounds, futuristic architecture, digital user interfaces, and symbolic interactions between real characters and their digital avatars (ae). These visuals were more than just decorative; they were integral to the narrative structure, symbolizing the blurred boundary between reality and virtuality. For instance, scenes involving reflections in mirrors or floating data screens were interpreted as metaphors for digital identity, self-perception, and existential duality in a technologically saturated world.

Auditory imagery also played a significant role in shaping the philosophical tone of the narrative. Through carefully scripted dialogues and voiceovers, the film raised critical questions about data-driven identity, human existence, and technological alienation. Statements such as “Ae is formed from the data we uploaded” and references to Sartre’s existentialist idea that “existence precedes essence” added intellectual depth to the storyline. These auditory elements worked in tandem with the visual cues to create a multilayered experience, inviting viewers to reflect on the implications of artificial intelligence, social media, and post-human identity.

The film’s use of kinesthetic and organic imagery enhanced its emotional and psychological impact. Characters were portrayed through specific gestures, body movements, and facial expressions that conveyed fear, confusion, determination, and sadness—particularly during scenes of disconnection or confrontation with digital versions of themselves. The kinetic energy of high-speed transitions and interdimensional movements also contributed to a sense of urgency and tension. These elements allowed viewers to feel immersed in the characters’ internal and external struggles, reinforcing the theme of identity fragmentation and emotional alienation in a hyper-digital era.

The following table summarizes the number and proportion of each type of imagery identified in the short film.

Table 1. The Number and Proportion of Each Type of Imagery Identified

Type of Imagery	Number of Entries	Percentage (%)	Examples (Entry Numbers)
Visual	62	56.4%	1, 2, 4, 8, 23, 42, 43, 48, 52, 57, 78, 80–85
Auditory	20	18.2%	4, 13, 25, 43, 70–71, 74–75, 77–78, 91, 108–109
Kinesthetic	12	10.9%	11, 14, 34, 43, 59
Organic	16	14.5%	2, 4, 5, 14, 92
Olfactory	0	0.0%	Not detected
Gustatory	0	0.0%	Not detected
Tactile	0	0.0%	Not detected
Total	110	100%	

Interestingly, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile imagery were either absent or minimally present in the data. This suggests that while film as a medium can evoke multiple senses, it often prioritizes those most easily represented visually or aurally. The absence of certain imagery types does not diminish the effectiveness of the narrative but rather highlights the strategic use of specific sensory modes to convey particular themes. Overall, the findings indicate that *Aespa Ep.01: Black Mamba* successfully employs literary imagery to construct a futuristic narrative that is not only visually captivating but also rich in philosophical and emotional significance. The short film serves as a compelling example of how modern multimedia texts can function as literary artifacts through the purposeful use of imagery.

Discussion

The findings of this study offer a detailed and cohesive response to the core research questions, particularly those concerning the ways in which *Aespa Ep.01: Black Mamba* employs various forms of literary imagery to convey themes of digital identity, technological interaction, and human emotion. The dominant presence of visual and auditory imagery within the film clearly demonstrates its prioritization of sensory modes that are both immersive and symbolically potent. These two types of imagery work in tandem to create a richly layered sensory environment through which the audience can interpret the film's complex narrative (Marsela et al., 2024). Visual elements such as digital landscapes, reflections, and symbolic colors serve to construct and question the nature of identity in an age where physical and virtual realities are increasingly intertwined. Simultaneously, auditory components—such as dialogues filled with existential questions, ambient digital sounds, and thematic voiceovers—establish an emotional and philosophical tone that deepens the viewer's engagement with the narrative.

This alignment between the dominant imagery types and the film's narrative direction addresses the first major research inquiry: *Which sensory channels are most prominently used in constructing meaning in the film?* The study reveals that visual and auditory cues are not randomly employed but are carefully crafted to reinforce themes related to the duality of self, digital transformation, and human disconnection in technological spaces (Adhisa et al., 2024; Wilujeng et al., 2025). For instance, scenes where characters interact with their digital alter egos—known as “ae”—utilize mirrored imagery and refracted light to symbolize the fragmentation of identity. Similarly,

auditory phrases like “Ae is formed from the data we uploaded” invite the audience to reflect on the nature of personhood in a world increasingly shaped by data and algorithms.

The secondary research question—*How does the film evoke emotional engagement and character empathy through imagery?*—is addressed through the more subtle yet impactful use of kinesthetic and organic imagery. Kinesthetic imagery is particularly evident in sequences where character movements embody internal states of conflict, confusion, or resolve. For example, rapid and disoriented gestures may reflect a character's emotional turmoil, while still, poised stances may signify moments of realization or transformation. Organic imagery, meanwhile, emerges through expressions of anxiety, vulnerability, and curiosity. These are conveyed not only through facial expressions but also through internal monologues and visual cues such as darkened lighting or close-ups on emotionally charged moments (Marsella et al., 2024). Such imagery enables the viewer to access the characters' internal experiences, thus fostering empathy and emotional resonance.

A significant strength of this study lies in its systematic mapping of each imagery type back to the research questions. By explicitly linking the forms of imagery—visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and organic—to specific narrative functions, the analysis substantiates the argument that the film's narrative strategy is not merely aesthetic but intentionally structured. This intentionality aligns with the theoretical frameworks established earlier in the study, particularly those derived from Turkle's (1995) exploration of virtual identity and Haraway's (1991) cyborg theory. Turkle posits that digital environments allow individuals to fragment and reconfigure their identities, a concept mirrored in the film's portrayal of characters navigating multiple selves across real and virtual domains. Haraway's notion of the cyborg as a hybrid of human and machine is also visibly illustrated in the interactions between Aespa's members and their ae counterparts, who are extensions of their consciousness formed through data.

The study demonstrates that *Aespa Ep.01: Black Mamba* uses literary imagery not simply as an artistic embellishment, but as a central narrative mechanism. Imagery becomes the medium through which the film articulates its core message: the evolving and often disorienting relationship between humanity and technology (Khoirunnisa et al., 2025; Suryadewi & Skolastika, 2025). The integration of these symbolic elements is deliberate and meaningful, offering viewers not just a visually stimulating experience, but a deeply reflective one. This strategy of embedding philosophical concerns within aesthetic choices reflects a growing trend in multimedia storytelling, where digital texts are designed to operate on both emotional and intellectual levels.

A broader interpretation of the film situates it within the framework of posthumanist discourse, which questions the traditional boundaries of human identity in an era increasingly dominated by technological systems. In this narrative landscape, the characters' relationships with their ae figures become metaphors for the loss—or transformation—of the authentic self (Putri & Ayomi, 2024; Prayuda & Merawati, 2025). Rather than presenting a binary opposition between human and machine, the film suggests that identity is now a composite of biological presence and digital data, a notion that resonates with both Turkle's and Haraway's theories. The sense of technological alienation expressed through the film's imagery adds emotional gravity to its speculative narrative, making it relevant not only as entertainment but also as a commentary on the human condition in the digital age.

Reflecting on the structure of this study, it becomes clear that future research could benefit from articulating the research questions more explicitly at the beginning of the analysis. This clarity would foster a tighter connection between theoretical framing,

analytical method, and interpretive outcome (Adhisa et al., 2024). Additionally, making these connections more visible would enhance the study's methodological rigor and accessibility to interdisciplinary audiences, including those in literary studies, media theory, and digital humanities.

Ultimately, this research highlights the potential of short multimedia texts to function as modern literary works—capable of complex symbolic expression, emotional depth, and critical reflection (Afifa et al., 2024; Al abid et al., 2024). In the case of *Aespa Ep.01: Black Mamba*, the use of imagery transcends conventional narrative tools to become the very architecture of the story itself. Through its integration of visuals, soundscapes, and emotional cues, the film invites viewers into a world where identity is fluid, reality is multilayered, and technology is both enabler and disruptor. These findings reinforce the growing importance of literary and artistic analysis in understanding contemporary digital narratives and their implications for how we perceive selfhood and connection in an increasingly virtual world.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis conducted, it can be concluded that *Aespa Ep.01: Black Mamba* from the SM Culture Universe effectively employs various forms of imagery—particularly visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and organic—to construct a rich, multilayered narrative exploring themes of identity, technology, and emotional experience in the digital age. Visual imagery predominates, symbolizing the tension between the real and virtual self, while auditory elements reinforce the film's philosophical undertones. Kinesthetic and organic imagery humanize the characters by conveying movement and emotional depth. Although olfactory, gustatory, and tactile imagery were notably absent, the film's narrative remains powerful due to its strategic focus on specific sensory modes. This study affirms that multimedia narratives within contemporary digital culture can be fruitfully analyzed through literary frameworks to reveal deeper meanings and emotional resonance. Furthermore, it underscores the increasing relevance of literary analysis for non-traditional texts, such as digital short films, which serve as modern extensions of literary storytelling.

Future research might build on these findings by exploring imagery across different genres of digital media, or by incorporating cross-cultural perspectives to understand how varied audiences interpret and engage with such multimedia narratives. Expanding the scope in this way could further illuminate the evolving role of imagery in shaping identity and meaning within global digital cultures.

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