

Analyse the Development of Women's Status By Using Western Feminist Theory

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Abstract : This dissertation that is based on feminist theory and female film theory carries out textual analysis of the image of female figures, female themes and film narration to reveal the distinct female consciousness. Additionally, this research tries to use Western feminist theory to analyze the gender phenomenon throughout the history of western film could provide more insight for this research. This method of concept analysis study is suitable for this research as it allows a deep understanding of feminist theory and film theory to support the subsequent arguments.

Keywords: Female; Feminist theory; Male gaze

1. Feminist Movement Background

The first-wave feminist movement was initiated in the West in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The main appeal of the feminist movement was to strive for equal political rights between women and men, while various organisations for women's rights were established internationally to make sure women had equal employment opportunities (Rowbotham, 1992: 8)^[1]. The second-wave feminism movement originated in the 1960s; this movement had a wider range of influences than its predecessor, resulting in the emergence of well-known feminists like Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan and Sheila Rowbotham. The purpose of feminism was to explore the rights distribution and psychological mechanisms of a patriarchal society, and ultimately to change the social relationship of gender (Segal, 1999: 7)^[2]

In the second half of the 20th century, the political consciousness of women turned a critical eye towards the film industry under the impetus of a worldwide women's movement; scholars of feminism began to link feminism to film as an area for criticism (Hollows, 2000: 40)^[3]. Moreover, China has gradually diverged from the past feudal patriarchal society, and this has been followed by a gradual relaxation of art regulations, spawning many filmmakers. It is undeniable that there is still a series of problems: the portrayal of women in Chinese films is under the influence of male desires and most film industry workers are male. Therefore, this essay analyses the feminine characteristics of the Chinese film industry using Western feminist theory.

The aim of this research is to study Western feminist theories and feminist film theories, and through these theories to analyse the social status and image of women in Chinese film. In particular, the films of contemporary Chinese male directors after the 1990s are explored, analysing how they express female characters and images and whether they are progressive in shaping female images. Additionally, feminist theory is used to consider problems from a female perspective, exploring shots, scenes and plots involving women in films and gaining a better understanding of female characteristics in male-directed films.

2. The Feminist Theory at Different Times

The focus of this literature review is on feminist theory, which is mainly about the theories of female writers and female film theorists in the second-wave feminist movement. This movement is not only wide in scope but also has led to the emergence of many well-respected feminist theorists. Additionally, using the method of concept analysis to interpret Western feminist theory, the similarities and differences between different feminist theories can be compared, as well as how feminist theories relate to the notion of feminist film. The literature review is divided into two parts. The feminist theories of de Beauvoir, Friedan and Rowbotham are discussed and compared with Mulvey's feminist film theory. An explanation is then given for why their theories are useful for the analysis of female characteristics in the Chinese film industry and how they can help to reach a solution to this research problem.

2.1 De Beauvoir

An advocate for second-wave feminism, de Beauvoir was a French writer who approached writing more from a personal psychological point of view. De Beauvoir wrote the book *The Second Sex* (1949) in which sex and gender are regarded as different; a person is born with a biological sex, but gender is the result of a social construct that can be changed (Moi, 1994: 164)^[4]. A female body does not necessarily represent the biological sex a person is born with but is a gendered identity which is affected by the social environment and cultural construction; it is a formed concept of self-awareness. It is a more individual kind of reflection around

gender and relations; the concept of gender is the result of social impositions and distortions.

For de Beauvoir, a woman's body is always associated with negativity. For instance, every adult woman has a menstrual cycle every month, which makes women feel abdominal discomfort and pain. Furthermore, they not only experience the processes of pregnancy and childbirth but also undertake the maternal role of taking care of their children (Moi, 1994: 165). This unique physiological aspect makes the female body puts a burden on the female body. De Beauvoir stated that if women want to change their status in the face of gender inequality, they must rid themselves of their biological physical burdens. Transcendence of the body was regarded as a method of emancipation (Adams, 2007: 205)^[5]. So, de Beauvoir emphasised that the liberation of women should involve accepting physiological differences with men and controlling their bodies while working outside the home and being paid (Adams, 2007: 205). From the above, if women chose to work and emancipate themselves from the bounds of gender and maternal responsibility and transcend their bodies' limits, they could improve their social status and achieve gender equality. It is also known that female characters in film often work and earn their own money, which is an improvement of the female consciousness. The publication of de Beauvoir's feminist theory had a great impact in America.

2.2 Friedan

Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) analyses psychology and culture to explore the sociological dilemmas of American women at the time. She was a very important feminist and writer in the United States who realised that family is important in the pursuit of equal rights and full personality in the feminist movement. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to the family to break the shackles of traditional gender views and to build a harmonious relationship between the sexes. Her thoughts broke through previous feminist ideas and provided a theoretical basis for solving America's gender issues (Friedan, 2010: 294)^[6]. Friedan discussed the impact of the second-wave feminist movement on American society, especially on housewives. She encouraged women to treat education and family problems seriously and to aim to become more educated in order to become independent women and realise their value.

The *Feminine Mystique* is also a discussion of women's self-positioning as housewives. Friedan stated that women who were housewives often passed on the realisation of their own values to others through caring for their husbands and children (Horowitz, 1996: 19)^[7]. However, the spiritual sustenance of women at the expense of self-sacrifice could lead to the destruction of their individuality and even the elimination of self-humanity. Therefore, Friedan denounced the idea of women being accessories to men, whilst she demanded that women have the same rights as men in education, work and politics. Additionally, Friedan focused on the economic aspect of women's work.

Capitalism broke down the old form of social relation both at work and between men and women in the family. The consequences were, however, different for the working class than for the middle class. Middle-class women found themselves cut off from production and economically dependent on a man: working-class women were forced into the factory and became wage-labourers (Rowbotham, 1973: 55).

Friedan admitted that women who wanted to abandon the female mystery to achieve personal fulfilment would have to withstand societal pressures, but as long as they were still striving for fulfilment, they would feel happy and satisfied. Friedan's theory inspired American women to question the patriarchal social consciousness and to challenge the gender culture of American society at that time, breaking the myth that society set women in the 'happy housewife' role to scream for the American women who were comfortable with the status quo or suffering to promote the awakening of a new generation of American women. It greatly promoted the development of the American women's liberation movement in the 1960s and 1970s. However, Friedan's theory only analysed the social problems faced by white women in the middle class and ignored the lower classes and black women.

Friedan's feminist theory has important implications for the construction of feminist theory in contemporary Chinese society. With the development of China's social economy, everyone has more choices, especially if more women choose to be working women. At the same time, it reminds people that under the premise of truly understanding the social roles, happiness can be found in the progress brought by economic prosperity. Friedan's theory can assist this research in leading to an understanding of female workers in the film industry and female characters on screen. Many Chinese films reinforce the idea of only women contributing to the family and self-sacrificing to focus on and care for the family. It is worth noting that if women in society can choose to work to gain economic independence, why are women on the screen still restricted? Can it be said that the image of women in film culture is not as quick to change as social acceptance?

2.3 Rowbotham

In the 1970s, the goal of awakening the female consciousness was revolutionary and critical. Rowbotham is a feminist representative of the United Kingdom who wrote *Hidden from History* (1973), combining Marxist and feminist ideas to criticise capitalism not only for its oppression of the working class but also of women (Blackwelder and Rowbotham, 2000: 681)^[8]. Rowbotham's theory complements the issues in the female working class that Friedan ignored. Rowbotham believes that the oppression of women is not only caused by the patriarchal system but also the capitalist and class-division systems. She claims that the gender characteristics of the restored class while comprehensively considers the relationship between men and women and explores how the consciousness of working-class women can be established or awakened.

2.4 Mulvey

Feminism as a social movement has also had a tremendous impact on film theory and creation and has emerged as an independent feminist film theory. British feminist film theorist Mulvey states that film is representative of the male gaze in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975)^[9], which became an important document in early feminist film theory. Mulvey's theories are close to de Beauvoir's work; they are based on persona rather than class or colonial ideas. De Beauvoir discussed how to use literary means to express and explain female representation and to criticise gender freedom in literature from literary perspectives, while Mulvey's

theory criticises the portrayal of women on screen from cinematic perspectives:

Not only did it provide a way of understanding how the image of women on the screen served the needs of men, but it was also important in making a debate about gender and spectatorship central within feminist film criticism (Hollows, 2000: 46).

Mulvey analysed the cinematic dominance of fetishism:

fetishism turns a woman into an image that is safe, enjoyable and unthreatening by turning some part of her body into a fetish—that is, by focusing on some aspect of her that can be made pleasurable in itself—for example, the leg or the hair (Hollows, 2000: 47).

Further analysis was made on voyeurism: ‘by activating these modes of looking in the male spectator cinematic structures make a woman as an image a source of male pleasure rather than a threat’ (Hollows, 2000: 47). Undeniably, the gender distribution of visual pleasure is unbalanced as men’s visual delight is active but women’s is passive; Berger (1972: 47) stated: ‘men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves’. Both Berger and Mulvey are considering the relationship between seeing and being seen in men and women. They both think that men dominate the right to see the woman.

Through the male gaze, their fantasies are projected onto the female body; cover girls and strippers are examples of products that cater to male desires. In Hollywood films, women are often objects of sexual desire in the film narrative to attract the viewer’s attention; this is called ‘male desire’ (Mulvey, 1975: 8). Some critics argue that despite there being strong female characters in American films, such as *The Hunger Games* (2008) and *Avatar* (2009), these female characters still cannot control the camera’s gaze, or the male gaze. Therefore, economic and political power do not change the way that men control women as objects in movies, even if women play very powerful roles (Simmons, 2016: 1)^[10]. Mulvey discusses a specific cinematographic structure where a film will cut from a shot of a man to look to what he sees next. Essentially, he controls the shot and the camera since the next shot is his point of view (Mulvey, 1975: 10). Even films with women playing stronger roles are not usually driven by the female gaze and what she sees. In films dominated by the patriarchal form, not only the autonomy of female characters is lacking, but also the autonomy of female audiences. Mulvey’s theory focuses on the discussion of male perspectives and male audiences while Mulvey’s theory ignores this the visual pleasure of female audiences. Therefore, the study of male-directed Chinese films should not only analyse the perspectives of men in the films as in Mulvey’s analysis of Hollywood films but also talk about whether there are lenses that can show the female gaze and whether the structure of the male gaze remains unchanged.

Generally speaking, the aforementioned feminist theorists are not advocating for a radical society where females overtake males to obtain power. Their purpose is simply to eliminate social prejudices towards women and build a fair platform for women. Besides, these Western feminist ideas and critical concepts can be used to analyse the characteristics of female characters in films and the status of women in the film industry and consider whether this feminist theory has changed the way people treat films. At the same time, Mulvey’s feminist film theory can assist in the next step, which is to understand male desires in film and analyse shooting angles in male-directed films, as well as how female images and characteristics are presented on screen.

The theories of de Beauvoir, Friedan and Rowbotham became part of the second-wave feminist movement and women’s liberation movement in the 1960s and 1970s. They analyse women’s issues from different contexts and extend women’s issues from social movements for women’s rights to social and cultural levels, to evoke a collective female consciousness that would establish a feminist ideology. Therefore, this study will help the author to better outline feminist theory and be more critical when choosing a film. This also made me more aware of the existence of gender ideology in film, and to criticise directors’ shaping of the female image. It can be more aware of the existence of gender ideology in the film and can better criticise the female images in male directors’ films.

3. Conclusion

From de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* to Mulvey’s *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, feminist research has continually progressed and has received increasing public attention. Meanwhile, women in film are still typical of male culture. In this research, it is found that male directors have shown insight into the female thinking and they have worked hard to reduce gender roles and stereotypes by showing the damage caused by patriarchal society on women and creating positive female roles. The studied directors’ works reflect the courage and responsibility for the social life that women have, and they develop female consciousness through constant self-resistance in social. This can help people better understand the current survival and development of women, and further understand the confusion that women encounter off screen.

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