

***Herstory* and the practice of innovative construction of female media image—The image of women from passive resistance to active definition**

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Abstract. Within the patriarchal hegemony of media ecosystems, female representations have historically manifested as passive objectifications and monodimensional semiotic constructs under the oppressive regime of the male gaze. While emerging digital platforms ostensibly expand discursive spaces for feminine expression, they paradoxically perpetuate gender stereotypes through algorithmic reinforcement. This phenomenon exemplifies a reversed spiral of silence: algorithmically curated opinion climates engender expressive dominance by privileged demographic cohorts. Director Shao Yihui's *Herstory* constitutes a paradigm-shifting intervention through its deployment of paradoxical discursive strategies, transfiguring women from spectatorial objects to enunciative subjects. By embedding taboo subjects—menstrual stigma and single motherhood—within quotidian narratives through comedic dispositifs, the film achieves critical balance between commercial viability and feminist praxis. This cinematic text facilitates a transformative shift from reactive resistance to proactive construction in media representations of femininity, simultaneously destabilizing traditional gender hierarchies and catalyzing public deliberation on cognitive dissonance in gender perceptions—thereby advancing contemporary feminist media scholarship. Through deconstructing *Herstory*'s narrative architecture, this study proposes “paradoxical representation” as an innovative feminist film theory that transcends the binary limitations of oppositional critique prevalent in conventional feminist cinema. The film's narrative dispositifs—including its deliberate effacement of male protagonists, nuanced portrayal of patriarchal complicity through the unemployed ex-husband archetype, and reconfiguration of gender relational networks—collectively illuminate the mutual emancipatory potential inherent in gender equality. Particular analytical emphasis is placed on the catalytic role of female child characters in redefining maturation narratives. These narrative strategies demonstrate practical significance in counteracting monodimensional feminine semiotics and mitigating the “broken windows effect” of systemic gender discrimination. Employing spatial narratological analysis, critical discourse deconstruction, and relational network theory, this investigation elucidates *Herstory*'s tripartite innovation mechanism: Spatial narratology transitions from dialectical confrontation to dynamic paradoxical articulation, capturing gender experience complexity; Discursive reconstruction visualizes power dynamics through agent-patient reversibility, with juvenile feminine narration establishing novel paradigms for gender pedagogy; Relational reconfiguration through “weakened masculinity-empowered femininity” interactions demonstrates bilateral liberation values. Crucially, the strategic attenuation of male characters functions not as antagonistic caricature but as structural oppression critique through empathetic narration, advancing societal aspirations for gender equity. This research not only amplifies *Herstory*'s case significance but also provides groundbreaking exemplars of “deconstructive-reconstructive praxis” and paradoxical representation for feminist media studies.

Keywords: feminine media representation, narrative space, paradoxical representation, discursive power, relational networks

1. Introduction

The paradigmatic shift in new media technologies has rendered the construction mechanisms of feminine media representations a critical concern in communication scholarship. Historically constrained by patriarchal imperatives, traditional cinematic portrayals of women remain codified within reductive archetypes of domesticated virtues and subjugated to the aesthetic hegemony of “pale-youthful-slender” norms [1]. Such representational regimes exacerbate the monodimensional semiotic reduction of femininity and the erasure of agential subjectivity, thereby perpetuating symbolic violence that recursively reproduces hierarchical gender power structures. A reversed spiral of silence emerges as an analytical paradox: while ostensibly democratizing feminine expression, contemporary digital platforms paradoxically engineer algorithmically mediated opinion climates that suppress male

users espousing non-hegemonic gender ideologies, culminating in pseudo-pluralistic spectacles of gender discourse. Director Shao Yihui's *Herstory* emerges as a seminal intervention in this context, offering an innovative cultural paradigm for reconstructing feminine media agency. Pragmatically, the film's narrative strategies hold direct implications for enhancing the efficacy of gender equity advocacy in mass communication.

Herstory's subversive semiotic system—particularly its deliberate anonymization of male characters—deconstructs traditional cinematic gender discourse hierarchies, foregrounding the reconfiguration of discursive authority and relational networks[2]. This case study provides a commercially viable template for integrating critical gender discourse into mainstream cinema while negotiating the dialectic between ideological critique and market imperatives.

This investigation aims to deconstruct *Herstory's* transformative trajectory from reactive resistance to proactive definition in feminine media representation. Through a triaxial analytical framework—narrative spatial strategies, discursive power structures, and relational network reconfiguration—we elucidate its innovative pathways for dismantling patriarchal symbolic violence. The analysis proceeds through three dimensions:

First, spatial narratological strategies are examined through the film's audiovisual orchestration. By inverting the scopis regime of the male gaze and deploying montage-driven sonic collages, the text transubstantiates abstract power dynamics into perceptible semiotic systems. Second, discursive power structures are decoded via speech-act analysis of dialogic exchanges involving female child characters, thereby illuminating the occluded mechanisms of authority distribution inherent to traditional discourse. The film constructs a tripartite enunciative matrix (juvenile female-mother-single woman), achieving intergenerational discursive permeation within feminist praxis. Third, relational network reconfiguration is interpreted through the logic of gender realignment. The symbiotic interplay between attenuated masculine semiotics and female-centric relational architectures facilitates the organic dissolution of patriarchal subjugation, thereby proposing sustainable frameworks for agentic feminine representation.

Only when feminist cinema evolves from passivity to activity, from oppositional resistance to dialogic engagement, can it catalyze the reconfiguration of gender hierarchies in the new media era. This tripartite analytical structure—spatial narratology, discursive deconstruction, and relational re-engineering—systematically demonstrates the paradigmatic shift in constructing feminine media identities, offering both theoretical and pragmatic contributions to gender-responsive communication strategies.

2. Literature review

Theoretical Foundations: As the theoretical cornerstone of feminist film criticism, Mulvey's (1975) seminal work *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* established the 'male gaze' paradigm, which systematically deconstructs how cinematography and editing techniques objectify female characters as visual spectacles. This theoretical framework elucidates the ontological passivity embedded in the female media representation of *HerStory*, providing critical insights into the historical constraints of patriarchal visual regimes. Building upon this foundation, Mayne (1993) advanced the concept of contradictory gaze in *Cinema and Spectatorship*, postulating that female spectators simultaneously internalize screen gazes and reconstruct subjectivity through counter-gazing practices. This dialectical perspective offers crucial theoretical scaffolding for analyzing the protagonist's dual identity in *HerStory* as both gaze subject and object.

Chion's (1994) audio-visual dissociation theory further deconstructs how gendered power dynamics are reinforced through strategic desynchronization of visual and auditory signifiers. This theoretical lens proves instrumental in decoding the film's innovative practice of transfiguring domestic labor sounds into poetic audio symbols, such as encoding clothesline friction as wind whispers through montage techniques.

Conceptual Innovations: Irigaray's (1996) philosophical critique of gender dualism in *To Be Two* dismantles the essentialist subject-object dichotomy, proposing fluid intersubjective relationality. This theoretical breakthrough provides epistemological grounding for interpreting the film's subversive "weakened masculinity-enhanced femininity" relational network construction. Kimmel's (2013) groundbreaking study in *The Gendered Society* exposes patriarchal oppression through 'achievement anxiety' mechanisms, offering critical analytical tools for decoding the unemployed ex-husband's symbolic metamorphosis. This theoretical perspective effectively bridges the analytical gap in understanding masculine vulnerability within feminist discourse.

Localized Theoretical Development: While Zhang's (2011) Otherness theory successfully mapped early cinematic female objectification, its explanatory power diminishes in new media contexts. Qin's (2022) analysis of *HerStory* reveals how gender politics are encoded into mundane cultural symbols through de-didactic strategies, resonating with Zhao's (2019) findings on reverse spiral of silence. Chen's (2023) identification of intergenerational discourse transfer through child-narrated storytelling expands feminist communication research into uncharted territories.

Research Gap Identification: Existing scholarship has yet to systematically address *HerStory's* tripartite innovation: audiovisual reconstruction of gaze power dynamics, anonymous male semiotics subverting traditional discourse structures, and gender relational matrix transcending binary oppositions. This study fills these theoretical lacunae through an interdisciplinary analytical framework combining feminist film theory with media sociology approaches.

3. Body

3.1. From oppositional critique to paradoxical expression: power transference in narrative space

Oppositional critique, characterized by semiotic counter-decoding strategies, emerges as a reactive hermeneutic framework wherein female audiences subvert patriarchal ideologies by inversely interpreting representations forged under the male gaze[3]. This “deconstructive” mode foregrounds women’s rebellion against systemic oppression, framing gender dynamics through binary antagonisms between oppressor and resistance[4]. While such narratives aim to galvanize gender consciousness and societal transformation, their reductive dichotomies obscure intersectional complexities of power—notably the compounded effects of race, class, and cultural capital—thereby perpetuating monolithic feminist epistemologies.

Paradoxical expression, conversely, adopts a dialectical lens to interrogate the liminal spaces of female agency, illuminating the fluid contradictions inherent to negotiating oppression and compromise, silence and rupture. By refusing to essentialize femininity as either victimized or triumphant, this mode constructs polyphonic representations that mirror the heteroglossia of lived gender experiences. Crucially, narrative space operates as a dynamic conduit for power relations, rendering abstract hierarchies materially legible through spatialized storytelling.

Director Shao Yihui’s *Herstory* embeds this paradigm shift in its very nomenclature, centering women as narrative architects. Through a strategic inversion of the gaze—transmuting the male-dominated scopophilic subject-object dyad into a dialogic matrix of interrogative agency—the film crystallizes the contradictions inherent to feminine maturation. This bidirectional deconstruction resonates with Judith Mayne’s theorization of female spectatorship’s dual engagement with patriarchal visual regimes: when women simultaneously occupy positions of gazing subject and gazed-upon object, the fluid reversibility of power becomes discursively manifest. Such narrative strategies demand cinematic articulation of gender’s inherent multiplicity, rejecting static archetypes in favor of epistemologically richer portrayals.

The film materializes its paradoxical expression through avant-garde audiovisual dispositifs. Inverted gaze shots deliberately hyperbolize the muscular physiognomy of the male character “Xiao Ma,” forcing female viewers to viscerally inhabit the male gaze’s objectifying mechanics [5]. Simultaneously, montage-driven sonic collages enact a semiotic reconfiguration of quotidian acoustics: the protagonist Tie Mei’s domestic labor sounds—laundry rack creaks mimicking windstorms, sizzling pans evoking rainfall—are estranged through the diegetic child character’s imaginative reinterpretations [6]. This auditory defamiliarization critiques the naturalized invisibility of care work while allegorizing the epistemic violence of gendered labor erasure. Domestic implements become both sites of oppression and potential instruments of feminist epistemology. The film employs symbolic representations of domestic labor to critique the systemic oppression of women’s invisible labor. Through its artistic narrative techniques, it amplifies its critical discourse, thereby deconstructing entrenched gender stereotypes [7].

Further layering this paradox, Tie Mei’s dual embodiment as a career-reviving professional and shamed single mother exposes the schism between neoliberal postfeminist ideals and material precarity. Her public vulnerability following cyberbullying—a raw counterpoint to her corporate persona—incisively satirizes the cultural dissonance surrounding maternal identities: society simultaneously demands maternal omnipotence and pathologizes maternal visibility. Neither a didactic feminist manifesto nor a commercial concession, *Herstory* synthesizes paradoxical narrative strategies with experimental aesthetics to forge a cinematic lexicon for post-patriarchal subjectivity.

3.2. From “othering discourse” to “autoenunciation”: discursive reconfiguration in feminine media representation

The Hegelian construct of the “Other” — denoting all entities external to the self — here manifests as the epistemic violence of feminine objectification, wherein women are reduced to passive subjects of external description and judgment, systematically stripped of enunciative agency[8]. Autoenunciation, conversely, signifies the reclamation of agential subjectivity through discursive self-determination. This paradigm shift necessitates marginalized groups devising semiotic counterstrategies to dismantle hegemonic discourse monopolies, thereby constructing emancipatory epistemologies of self-representation.

Herstory operationalizes this reconfiguration through systematic anonymization strategies that nullify masculine nominative privilege. Far from erasing male presence, this dispositif strategically recenters discursive authority within feminine subjectivity. The film’s female characters embody contemporary femininity’s dialectical tensions — simultaneously resolute and vulnerable, pioneering and uncertain. Protagonist Wang Tiemei’s dual embodiment as a courageous single mother publicly documenting her struggles and a private self grappling with online vitriol epitomizes this complexity. Her performance of “masculinized” domestic labor — hauling heavy objects during relocation, repairing lighting systems. These corporeal semiotics simultaneously deconstruct essentialist narratives of feminine fragility and expose the ideological scaffolding sustaining the gendered bifurcation of affective care work versus manual labor [9].

The film’s discursive interventions crystallize in intergenerational dialogues. When Tiemei’s ex-husband seeks validation for basic childcare, their daughter Wang Molly retorts, “Dad, am I biologically yours? Isn’t this your obligation?” — a piercing indictment of patriarchal paternalism disguised as “breadwinner” exceptionalism. Molly’s characterization as an autoenunciative subject further destabilizes traditional coming-of-age tropes. Her existential query during drumming lessons — “How should girls play drums?” — met with mentor Xiao Ye’s emancipatory riposte, “You play drums however girls play drums,” enacts a

Foucauldian rupture in gendered disciplinary regimes. This exchange metaphorizes the transition from objectified Other to self-defining subject, cultivating feminist consciousness through performative speech acts. Also, this dialogue transcends simple role reversal, fundamentally reconfiguring the relationship between gender identity and artistic expression.

Molly's narrative arc culminates in her drumming performance — a semiotic ritual of self-actualization that transposes her from marginality to protagonism. Crucially, her agency transcends plot device functionality; as both narrative catalyst and philosophical interlocutor, she exemplifies innovative strategies for feminist character development. This intergenerational autoenunciation framework — synthesizing maternal resilience with juvenile rebellion — constructs a polyphonic discourse that resists monolithic gender prescriptions while modeling intersectional feminist pedagogy.

3.3. From “adversarial identity” to “generative subjectivity”: praxis of relational network reconfiguration

The construct of adversarial identity operates as a deconstructive instrument, foregrounding self-actualization through direct contestation of oppressive systems. Within feminist cinema, this historically manifested as dichotomous antagonisms between feminine resistance and patriarchal authority. Generative subjectivity, conversely, embodies a reconstructive paradigm that transcends binary oppositions through proactive reimagination of symbolic codes, social practices, and relational architectures. These modalities are not mutually exclusive but constitute dialectically intertwined strategies for innovative identity construction. The praxis of relational network reconfiguration necessitates dismantling ossified power hierarchies while architecting emancipatory intersubjective frameworks.

Amid China's evolving sociocultural landscape, contemporary feminist cinema is undergoing a tectonic shift: female auteurs are transcending victimhood narratives to explore multidimensional subjectivities and reconfigure gender relationalities [10]. *HerStory* epitomizes this transition through protagonist Wang Tiemei's non-antagonistic yet agentic navigation of male-female dynamics. Rather than replicating the patriarchal script of male dominance/female passivity, the film inverts this dyad: Tiemei's professional ascendancy contrasts with her ex-husband's unemployment-induced existential precarity, destabilizing the “male breadwinner” archetype. This narrative dispositif neither vilifies nor erases masculinity but recontextualizes it within post-patriarchal relational networks.

The film's radical intervention lies in its demasculinized male characterizations—a deliberate deconstruction of hegemonic gender performativity. In a meta-discursive scene, Tiemei's ex-husband and suitor Xiao Ma engage in self-reflexive dialogue about male privilege, satirizing their complicity in patriarchal systems while acknowledging structural barriers to gender equity. Their colloquy— “We've basked in unearned gender dividends, yet women's survival remains precarious”—functions as both autocritique and epistemic bridge, exemplifying the film's commitment to intersectional solidarity over divisive identity politics [11].

Director Shao Yihui's axiomatic assertion elucidates this philosophical underpinning: “Male anguish and pressure equally stem from structural imperatives of hyper-competitive masculinity. Gender liberation's dialectical unity necessitates transcending oppositional frameworks to achieve mutual emancipation.” *HerStory* thus transcends adversarial posturing, instead modeling relational symbiosis as the foundation for post-patriarchal sociality. Tiemei's negotiation of professional authority and maternal vulnerability, alongside male characters' grappling with obsolete gender roles, collectively choreograph a relational ballet that redefines empowerment not as zero-sum dominance but as collaborative rehumanization.

This reconfiguration practice achieves dual objectives: it liberates feminine media representations from reactive identity politics while expanding masculine subjectivities beyond toxic archetypes. By situating gender equity as a shared existential project rather than a battleground, *HerStory* crystallizes cinema's capacity to prefigure emancipatory social imaginaries—one where adversarial binaries dissolve into generative intersubjectivities.

4. Conclusion

Within the reconfigured gender communication ecology shaped by emergent media technologies, this study elucidates innovative pathways for dismantling patriarchal symbolic violence through a granular semiotic decoding of *HerStory*. The investigation transcends the limitations of oppositional feminist cinema by theorizing a triaxial framework—paradoxical expression, discursive reconfiguration, and relational network restructuring—that collectively enable the transition from externally imposed femininity to agentic self-construction. The film's groundbreaking intervention lies in its semiotic transubstantiation of domestic labor through montage aesthetics, transmuting mundane care work into politicized artistic signifiers. This dispositif not only circumvents the didacticism of traditional resistance narratives but also pioneers a paradigm of “critical delight”—a synthesis of ideological critique and affective engagement that expands feminist cinema's cultural resonance.

Three structural innovations emerge as particularly consequential: Anonymized Masculinity: The systematic erasure of male nominal identities functions as a radical equalizer, recalibrating discursive power geometries while exposing patriarchy's collateral damage on male subjects through the unemployed ex-husband's vulnerability; Non-Antagonistic Relationality: The “weakened masculinity-empowered femininity” dyad, visualized through network analysis, models post-patriarchal symbiosis that dissolves zero-sum gender competitions into collaborative humanization. Intergenerational Autoenunciation: Child protagonists' catalytic

role in articulating gender dissonance—epitomized by the drumming lesson’s epistemic rupture—establishes emancipatory pedagogies for youth gender consciousness cultivation.

The study’s academic contribution manifests through its intersectional hermeneutics that localize Western critical theories within China’s media-cultural context, constructing an analytical matrix of sign-space-power interdependencies. Practically, it offers transdisciplinary applications: Commercial Cinematics, Demonstrates market viability of gender-conscious storytelling through *Herstory*’s box office-validation of paradoxical representation strategies; Educational Praxis, The “How should girls play drums?” motif provides actionable templates for gender sensitivity curricula; Cultural Production, Charts methodologies for embedding feminist critique within mainstream audiovisual syntax.

Societally, the research catalyzes discursive democratization by transposing gender discourse from academic enclaves into public imaginaries. Through its theorization of relational network fluidity and non-binary power dynamics, the study ultimately advocates for dialectical humanization—a cultural ecosystem where gender liberation is reimagined not as sectional triumph but as collective transcendence of oppressive archetypes.

Expands Laura Mulvey’s gaze theory through East Asian media context-specific reformulations; Proposes “critical delight” as a viable mechanism for balancing ideological rigor with mass appeal. Theoretical Implications: Validates “paradoxical representation” as a third-way epistemology beyond feminist cinema’s traditional resistance-accommodation binary. Policy Considerations: Recommends funding mechanisms for films employing gender-conscious narrative innovations; Advocates institutional integration of feminist media analysis into communication curricula; Urges algorithmic transparency reforms to mitigate platform-mediated opinion climate distortions.

As media ecosystems increasingly mediate gender politics, *Herstory*’s analytic blueprint provides both a diagnostic framework for interrogating symbolic violence and a generative toolkit for architecting emancipatory representations—a dual imperative for scholars and practitioners navigating the paradoxes of digital-age feminisms.

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