A Study of the Image of Women in Film Themes from a Feminist Perspective

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Abstract: Film, as an essential mass media resource, has a significant social, political, economic, and cultural impact. This essay will examine the process and reasons for the transformation of female representations on the screen by combining cultural notions and ideals of female roles in Chinese and Western film works. At the same time, it examines the role of film in society from a feminist standpoint. This study investigates the genesis and transition of feminism, as well as the development trend of the female image, through literature research, case analysis, and comparative description. It can be found that China has increasingly acknowledged the influence of Western feminist ideals in the long process of creating the image of women through network resources, historical documents, and other information transmission methods, resulting in a significant change in the image of female characters in Chinese films.

Keywords: feminism, female figures, movie, mirror image

1.   Introduction

When researching the image of female characters in Western films, the author discovered that some documents primarily combine one or more specific cases to analyze feminist films in China, Europe, and the United States, whereas another section of the literature focuses on the ideas and values of female images in feminist films in relation to the history of feminist development. The molding of female roles in film has a significant historical and cultural tendency, and a huge number of literature has examined and proved the relationship between film and feminism, although there are few studies on the historical effect of Chinese feminism by Western feminism. This paper will begin with the large-scale impact of the Western feminist movement on China's feminist culture in 1990, argue that the transformation of the image of women in Chinese films is related to the Western feminist movement, and cite some cases to compare the image of women displayed on the screen in order to further investigate the development trend of feminist films.

While debating, this paper seeks to compare the implications provided to the image of women in different periods, present some thoughts on current women and feminism, and make some recommendations for film industry practitioners to shoot more good movies.

2.   Feminist Film Theory

2.1.   Interpretation of Feminism

The definition of feminism in the encyclopedia online is that it is a social theory, as well as a political movement. It criticizes gender inequality and appeals to women's rights and interests.

In 1986, the Encyclopedia of Feminism argued that Feminism appeared in the 90s of the 19th century to summarize gender equality theory and the women's equal rights movement, and it was only in the 20th century that it became widely used [1]. Feminism involves politics, economy, education and other fields, emphasizing women's rights and status demands, pursuing equality between men and women in society, and eventually leading to the feminist movement.

2.2.   A Mirror Representation of the Film

Lacan first formally proposed the mirror theory in 1936. Following that, Lacan supplemented this theory further, so that Lacan's theory gradually became perfect and mature. He believes that at first, babies will think the image in the mirror is someone else, and that it is not until the baby is 6 to 18 months old that he realizes it is himself in the mirror, and that at this stage, the baby can fully recognize himself for the first time. Until now, infants had not developed a sense of self [2]. From the mirror stage, the infant establishes the antithesis between the self and the other [3]. During this process, the baby not only learns to move in front of the mirror but also forms a bond with the mirror image and misidentifies the image in the mirror as its own unity through imagination. It can be seen that man's self-construction begins with a mirror image and expands into the dimension of self-imagination, which will accompany the subject throughout his or her life and will not end with the end of mirroring.

The impact of feminist films on women's images and society will be explained using Lacan's mirror theory.

2.3.   Feminism Film Theory

The feminism film theory is the most important branch of feminism theory. It provides a profound explanation on the female image in the film, the internal construction of the film, the audience reaction, and the distinction of sexes on cultural limitations through sociology, psychoanalysis, and culture analysis [4]. Combining feminist development history with feminist film theory can aid in the development of society and guide women's social behavior.

3.   The Origin and Development of Feminist Films

3.1.   The Female Image's Aesthetic Qualities in Western Feminist Films

Feminism first emerged in Western society, accompanied by a women's political, economic, and other rights movement for gender equality, and gradually evolved from a political movement to a cultural trend. It has gone through four stages of development as a political movement and ideology:

The first phase lasted from 1840 to 1925. The Enlightenment thinkers represented by Montesquieu, Rousseau, and others held high the theoretical banner of freedom, equality, and natural human rights in the 18th century, and also put forward more thinking about the value and status of women, laying the ideological foundation for gender equality and women's liberation for the feminist movement in the 19th century.

The second stage occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, beginning in the United States and gradually spreading to Western countries. The representative school is radical feminism, which advocates a

radical gender revolution and emphasizes the elimination of gender differences on the basis of the first wave.

The third stage appeared between the mid-80s and the mid-90s of the twentieth century. On the one hand, economic globalization and the advancement of information technology have provided a material foundation for the feminist movement, while postmodernism and postcolonialist culture have provided an ideological foundation for the development of third feminism.

Feminist films liberate women from the image of gentleness, frailty, and male appendages in these four waves of feminist thinking, steadily emphasizing that women's rights are independent individuals with self-needs and values, and urging the awakening of women's consciousness. Using the transformation process of the image of Bond girls in the "007" series of films as an example, from the first and second simple-minded angel images to the third becoming partners who fought alongside Bond, and then to the fourth as the image of the bad girl who killed Bond, the film gradually reflects the improvement of the status of Bond girls. In short, Western films develop a diverse manifestation of women's ideology, with both powerful and stoic female images and the idea of men and women growing equally. These films all use the unique medium of video to announce feminism's perspective, which is a film that aspires for the transcendence and sublimation of the female ego and is the best interpretation of sharing rights and responsibilities with males [5].

3.2. The Dilemma and Breakthrough of the Image of Modern Chinese Women in Film

3.2.1. The Influence of Western Feminist Movements on Feminism in Modern China

Because men had natural physiological advantages, they held a prominent status and voice in the household as the main work productivity in ancient China. Women are dependent on men, and in a patriarchal social setting, the ideological paradigm of male dominance and female inferiority develops gradually. Because China's feudal system endured for 5,000 years, the notion that women were merely accessories to males was strongly ingrained. Until the introduction of Western feminist theory into China, which, coupled with the development of Chinese society, created the ideological and economic circumstances for China to attain women's liberation.

The female image in early Chinese films can be split into two types: the mother or wife, who relies on the male image to exist; and the image of oppressed and bullied women, which is mostly represented in the degradation of women at the bottom into prostitutes and concubines. In addition, in early films, there were new smart women, such as courtesans, who bowed to male control[6]. It can be observed that the role of women on the screen was still not liberated in old China.

Feminist concepts were officially brought to China in the early twentieth century when Spencer's "Feminist Chapter" was released as the first feminist text translated in modern China in 1902. When the May Fourth Movement erupted in 1919, more Western ideas were introduced into China, and women's freedom and rights received increased attention, igniting an ideological movement in China to liberate women.

3.2.2. The Alteration of Women's Screen Images Following the Establishment of the People's Republic of China.

Gender is the foundation of the film's personality, and a film that loses its gender cannot generate or discuss identity [7]. The image of women in Chinese film topics has also evolved as a result of the influence of Western feminist theory. The degendered female figure vanished from the screen, and the independent female figure was born, with the film also expressing women's gender characteristics. Women in love films, particularly since the creation of New China, have shifted from the image of ultimate loyalty to the family without thought to the image of daring to love and hate, completely independent, and never connected to men.

With the expansion of Chinese society and the improvement of the market-oriented economic system, Chinese films have displayed a commercial development model and begun to be made based on market demand, presenting a consumerization tendency in the image of women on the screen. Male creators have traditionally favored extremes, creating both goddesses and sluts to define female images that appeal to the male community [8]. The consumer woman's image is wealthy and nude, and the common contrast is utilized to portray the image of both a saint and a demon woman in the woman, creating a strong contrast to suit male audiences' expectations for women.

Studying the development process of female images in Chinese films in the new era leads to the conclusion that, while the female image on the screen has broken the single and stereotypical model and presented a diversified development trend, it is still in the male gaze and the image of consumer women is widespread, implying that Chinese women's films have a long way to go in shaping modern female roles.

4. Classic Cases of Female Image Transformation

4.1. Witch Identity Shift - Consider *The Little Mermaid*

4.1.1. Definition of a Witch Image

Witches, as a mysterious classic figure in the west, occur not only in history, but also in numerous dramas, literary works, and cinema [9]. In the film subject, the image of the witch indicates a strange and dangerous lady, and the story of witchcraft is frequently associated with female society. Witches are frequently depicted in literary works as ugly and malevolent creatures, reflecting women's degradation on a beauty, sexual, and moral level. Witches were the female spokespeople of the feminist movement until the twentieth century, and the connotation of witch was given a potent symbol of feminist independence.

4.1.2. The Transformation of the Witch's Image in Disney Animated Films

Both the queen in *Snow White* and Ursula in *The Little Mermaid* were characterized as wicked villains during the production of Disney animated films, and the figures were unattractive and shady. With the feminist movement's continued influence and spread on the ideas of animation creators, creators have gradually given witch characters more opportunities to show normalcy, increased the audience's spontaneous interaction with the characters, and even reshaped the role positioning to break the stereotype that witches are villains [10]. For example, *Maleficent* defies the stereotype of a witch, and the black witch Marlene Faith becomes the film's heroine, lending it a sweet motherly tone.

4.2. Take *Red Sorghum* as an Illustration of the Revival of the Female Figure

Although the heroine Jiu'er was forced into marriage in *Red Sorghum*, she did not submit to fate, not only lost in the grief of her original husband's death but began a passionate love affair with Yu Zhanao, shattering the shackles and tyranny of women in earlier movie themes.

5. Conclusion

From the standpoint of feminism, the image of women in film themes continues to change with the development of the feminist movement, and Chinese films continue to absorb Western feminist ideas and internalize them into Chinese feminist ideas, and the portrayal of female roles is becoming more and more specific, and women are increasingly encouraged to pursue independent development. Due to the age of the data, this thesis provides a less extensive explanation of the feminist movement's

development process, and the future direction of writing may be compared to the contrasts and similarities between Chinese and Western feminist films.

Acknowledgement

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