

Women Objectification, Male Gaze and Scopophilia in Fifth Generation Chinese Cinema: A Qualitative Analysis of *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) and *I Am Not Madame Bovary* (2016)

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Abstract: Through applying Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory, this research paper analyzes two films directed by Fifth Generation Chinese directors by textual analysis: *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) directed by Zhang Yimou, and *I Am Not Madame Bovary* (2016) directed by Feng Xiaogang. Besides, this paper will attempt to fill the research gap regarding fetishistic scopophilia, through offering new interpretations of symbolism and erotic signifiers. Moreover, this research paper discusses the controversy regarding the nature of the male gaze—whether the male gaze can function as a demonstrative approach to convey the directors' social criticisms or the accomplice of patriarchal oppression.

Keywords: female objectification, male gaze, fetishistic scopophilia, eroticism, Chinese cinema

1. Introduction

Through applying Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory, this research paper analyzes two films directed by Fifth Generation Chinese directors: *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) directed by Zhang Yimou and *I Am Not Madame Bovary* (2016) directed by Feng Xiaogang [1,2]. Fifth Generation directors were born after 1949, which was the year of the establishment of the People's Republic of China, and all directors had a first-hand comprehension of the rustic communities during the Cultural Revolution [1]. Besides, they adopted an experimental approach to convey their social criticisms of Communist policies through symbolism in cinema, as well as testing the borders of political tolerance and conforming with the censorship rules of films. Similarly, both films selected in this research paper are set in a time that involved significant social and cultural shifts. By disclosing the plight of underprivileged communities, both directors produce a miniature of the society agonized by patriarchal oppression and values in the Chinese traditional culture [3]. The film *Raise the Red Lantern* displays the sexual oppression of women within matrilinies in the patriarchal society by portraying the feuds among Chen's concubines in a 1920s feudal household, a period following the May Fourth Movement in 1919 that involved intellectual revolution and socio-political reform [1, 4]. The film *I Am Not Madame Bovary* narrates how the female protagonist Li Xuelian seeks justice to overturn the fake divorce and eradicate the slur of "Pan Jinlian" given by her ex-husband Qin during the period of Chinese economic reform in the late 20th century [2].

Currently, there is a lack of analysis on fetishistic scopophilia, which involves female objectification associated with an object or a body part in Chinese cinema [5, 6]. In this case, this paper will attempt to fill this research gap, through offering new interpretations of symbolism and erotic signifiers in the Fifth Generation Chinese Cinema. Moreover, this research paper will discuss the controversy regarding the nature of the male gaze—whether the male gaze can function as a demonstrative approach to help directors convey their social criticisms or the complicit of patriarchal oppression.

2. Methodology

2.1. Literature Review

The relevant research papers and books were collected from sources like ResearchGate, JSTOR, and Academia.edu. According to a study by Deppman, the film *Raise the Red Lantern* demonstrates how the Chen compound represents the feudal society in 1920s China [1]. In the research study conducted by Liu, the author focuses on distinct interpretations of the symbolism of red lanterns at the beginning and end of the film [2]. In the research study of Yang, it presents the function of the red lantern in narration which forebodes Lotus's predestined tragedy in the phallogentric society [7]. In the study by Wang, the author delves into the male gaze in four films directed by Feng Xiaogang: *A Sign* (2000) and *Cell Phone* (2003), *The Banquet* (2006), and *I Am Not Madame Bovary*, in which Feng's mixed mindsets of females is presented by a contradiction between female empowerment and male dominance [2]. In the study by Liang, the author discloses the symbolism of both circular and perfect square frames with regard to the rigidity and flexibility of regulations and how the circular frame elicits a sense of voyeurism [8].

2.2. Theoretical Framework

This research paper uses Mulvey's male gaze theory as the theoretical framework. According to Mulvey, the male gaze involves a sense of sexual imbalance and subject-object dualism, in which the males project their sexual fantasy onto the females who serve the erotic contemplation [5]. In other words, men can acquire a sense of visual pleasure from the sexual objectification of females. This incurs the dichotomy between males as the bearer of the look and females as the bearer of being-looked-at who are viewed as spectacles erotically. Besides, fetishistic scopophilia is a means to counter males' castration anxiety, which is the substitution of women's lack of phallus with a fetish object like high heels or a female body part, thus rendering women reassuring to men [5, 6]. Through this avenue, males project their erotic instinct onto females in order to gratify their sexual desire. Moreover, Mulvey suggests three subjects of the male gaze: the sexualizing gaze projected by the camera of the director, the audience of the film, and the characters within the film [5].

2.3. Methodology

In this research paper, textual analysis is used to analyze the cinematography of the two films selected, involving the evaluation of composition, angle and the pattern of the types of shots used. In order to delve into the connotations of each shot, the actors' lines and the voiceover will be analyzed as well. Moreover, the analysis of symbolism and implication will be related to the context in which the film is set, the message that the director may be delivering, and the government censorship of films in China. Therefore, based on existing research conducted on Fifth Generation Chinese Cinema, this research paper will offer interpretations from different perspectives of the two films—*Raise the Red Lantern* and *I Am Not Madame Bovary*.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Textual Analysis of *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991)

In the film *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) directed by Zhang Yimou, female objectification and sexualization is demonstrated under the male gaze in the 1920s feudal family. In the close-up of Lotus's feet in Fig 1, the camera's sexualizing gaze is displayed. Feet massage and raising red lantern are two rituals before consummation, which can be regarded as a reward for women as well [1, 3]. Covered in an embroidered blanket, the feet can be regarded as a symbol of fetishistic scopophilia for delivering an erotic sense that objectifies women's sexuality in the consolidated gender norms. Tracing back to the correlation between females' feet and sexuality, only rich women had the privilege of foot binding in the Song Dynasty [3]. Moreover, based on the line of the Master, "when the feet are comfortable, she is healthier and more able to serve the man", female objectification is reinforced by associating women's values with their functionality in matrimonies, thus dehumanizing females as servants and sex slaves in an inferior status in the feudal household.



Figure 1: Feet Massage [9]

In Fig 2, this long shot displays the male gaze projected onto Lotus from Chen. From the Master's point of view, Lotus's body is the focal point of sexual, erotic attention. In this case, the ritual of raising the red lantern not only mimics the shopwindow lighting that presents Lotus as a commodity that serves to gratify males' sexual desire, thus emphasizing the hierarchy of power relations in chauvinistic feudalism [1]. In addition, the rectangular frame of the wedding bed in the background stresses the rigidity of social chains on women in the feudal society and symbolizes a shopwindow that alludes to female objectification and dehumanization under the male gaze, thus implying Lotus's lack of personal agency and autonomy in the patriarchal society.



Figure 2: Wedding Bed [9]

In Fig 3, by presenting Lotus as the focal point, this medium close-up portrays the image of Lotus as an emotionless and resigned girl, revealing the unwillingness of a nineteen-year-old girl to be the fourth concubine of Chen. Besides, this shot discloses her passivity as she averts making eye contact with the Master, which would arouse a sense of pathos from the audience, especially since this shot is taken from the eye level. Along with the camera's sexualizing gaze on Lotus's face, the Master's commentary regarding this educated girl demonstrates his narcissistic contentment with his

possession, thus delineating female objectification and commodification that women are seen as subsidiary to men [1]. Ironically, while the red color of the lantern denotes the pride of the patriarch, it forebodes danger and a tragic undertone for Lotus's enslavement in marital practices [7]. In particular, the disposable nature of the red lantern symbolizes the inferior nature and predestined fate of females who serve as sex slaves and can be discarded by the Master at his pleasure. On the other hand, the red lantern could symbolize the paternal authority of Chen, who lights the lantern to deliver the message regarding with whom he wants to spend the night [3]. More importantly, the pattern of Lotus's wedding gown resembles the pattern of the frame of the wedding bed, which reinforces female objectification and sexualization under the male gaze in the sense of how this matrimony enslaves and sexualizes her by seeing her as Chen's property [1].

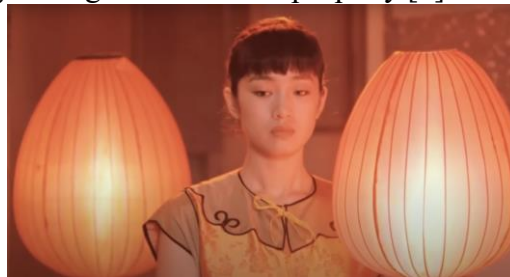


Figure 3: Lotus Raising a Red Lantern [9]

In the medium close-up in Fig 4, both characters are situated in the foreground. Zhang's use of the chiaroscuro technique creates a stark contrast between the disclosures of Lotus with concealments of the Master: Lotus occupies more than three-quarters of this shot, while Chen's arm is displayed as he metonymical representation of his body [1]. Notably, Lotus's body language of covering up delineates her victimhood and vulnerability, and the dim lighting creates a sinister mood that reflects Lotus's inner discomfort. Throughout the film, Zhang uses constant close-ups of Lotus's face and torso to highlight her entrapment in Chen's carnal desire within feudal marital practice under masculine control, thus marking Lotus as a scopophilic symbol for the patriarch's authority through fetishization of her sexualized image. However, apart from Chen's intonation that reveals his dictatorial role, Chen's obscure, indefinable identity, marked by the absence of a frontal shot to disclose his features, not only emphasizes his mystique and intimidation but also functions as a symbol of the patriarchy under the Chinese Confucian system that consolidates gender inequality and power imbalance [1, 3].



Figure 4: Consummation of Lotus and Chen [9]

3.2. Textual Analysis of *I Am Not Madame Bovary* (2016)

In the film *I Am Not Madame Bovary* (2016) directed by Feng Xiaogang, Pan Jinlian is an adulterous female character and a murderer of her husband in *Jinpingmei* (the Ming Dynasty), who completely violates the ethical codes enforced on Chinese women, and she is a similar character with Madame Bovary [2]. In Fig 5, the circular frame connotes the flexibility of rules in Li's hometown, as well as rendering the audience like voyeur [2, 8]. In this case, the audience is projecting their male gaze onto

Li. In this medium shot, the focal point is Li's facial expression of discomfort and helplessness. Along with the shot taken from the eye level, this medium shot would arouse a sense of pathos among the audience for Li's agony from sexual assault. In this scene, Hu's male gaze is projected onto Li as well, which can be seen from his tight hug of Li that elicits an erotic sense and female sexualization derived from his carnal desire of Li. More importantly, this shot involves two paradoxes. Firstly, Li asks for help to murder her ex-husband and several government officials from Hu in exchange for sex, and her plan is aligned with the felonies of Pan Jinlian, while she attempts to eradicate such slur. Secondly, the patriarchal society incurs Li's misery, but she requests help from this system, thus creating a tragic undertone and foreshadowing Li's doomed failure in seeking justice [2]. However, Feng renders Li, the female character, the subject of sadism due to her violent plan, which mirrors Chinese women's awakening of personal agency and empowerment.

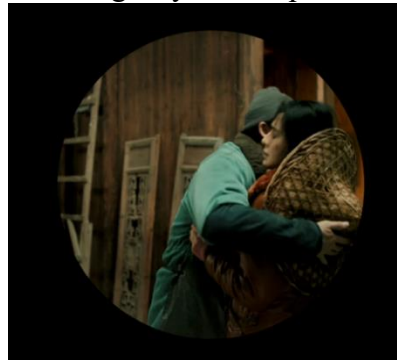


Figure 5: Li Being Sexually Harassed [10]

In the full shot in Fig 6, Li sleeps on a bed in the foreground. The perfect square frame connotes the rigidity of social hierarchy in Beijing, where the central government is located, thus visualizing Li's entry into this merciless system and foreboding her predestined failure [2]. Particularly, the male gaze is projected from the male character Zhao, who stares at Li's face when she falls asleep and objectifies Li as a visual spectacle. Through his male perspective, his erotic instinct is revealed, thus presenting Li's face as a scopophilic symbol gratifying Zhao's fetishistic fascination. In this case, the subject-object dichotomy is delineated, in which Li is the bearer of being-looked-at under the male gaze of male characters within the film, who is portrayed as the erotic fulfilment of male sexual desire. Moreover, the use of cold tone creates a sense of distress, which may imply the power imbalance between Zhao and Li [11].



Figure 6: Zhao staring at Li [10]

In the medium shot in Fig 7, Feng uses a long take of Li's bare back to show the sexual relationship between Li and Zhao, which may imply the male gaze projected by the director's camera. Resembling a peephole, the circular frame offers a peeping, scopophilic experience for the audience, the bearer of

the look, to observe an intimate relationship [2, 8]. Besides, Li's bare back is an erotic signifier of her body, which can satisfy the fetishistic scopophilia of the audience who are the subject of male gaze. Functioning as the focal point in this wide shot, Li's bare back reinforces the sexualization and dehumanization of women. Moreover, as she is no more than a naked body to both the male characters and audience, she loses her identity as a human being with personal agency. In short, the switch between circular and square frame implies Li's diminishing authority in the phallogentric society, thus conveying a tragic undertone and eliciting empathy among the audience [2].



Figure 7: Li's Bare Back [10]

3.3. Discussion of the Nature of Male Gaze in Cinema

There has been an ongoing debate regarding whether the male gaze in cinema is a demonstrative approach to disclosing a social issue or it is the complicity of patriarchy. Arguably, the male gaze can be an objective approach. In *Raise the Red Lantern*, despite of the repeated use of close-ups of Lotus's face and torso, Zhang regards such exploitation of the female body as a humanist approach out of critical consciousness [12]. According to Zhang stated in an interview, women express the "backwardness" of China "more clearly on their bodies because they bear a heavier burden than men" [13]. Therefore, through the avenue of critical realism, Zhang advocates for social change [14]. Besides, through the representation of ordinary, seemingly insignificant characters who tend to be marginalized in socialist realist films, Feng implicitly conveys his social criticism regarding the depravity of the rich and materialism through the non-political scenes in order to avert discouragement of film censorship [15]. Specifically, in *I Am Not Madame Bovary*, Feng distresses the conflict between Li and both the government officials and the legal system [2].

On the other hand, it can be argued that the male gaze is the accomplice of patriarchal oppression. In the novel *Wives and Concubines* (1990) written by Su Tong, females' sexually liberated image is portrayed by caricaturing Chen's body as a symbol of women's erotic fascination [1]. However, in Zhang's adaptation, he deemphasizes feminist liberation but instead delineates women's victimhood and tragic fate in an aesthetic way by demonstrating Lotus' face and body as the focal point in repeated close-ups, which could be owing to his drive for profit or the aim to gratify the audience's scopophilic eroticism. Moreover, in the medium close-up in Fig 8, Li becomes the bearer of the male gaze on herself since she makes jokes of her own story. The voiceover creates a didactic tone as well, delivering the recurring message that appears in other films directed by Feng as well: females who challenge the patriarchy are doomed to failure [2]. In addition, under the Chinese censorship of cinema, it is unacceptable to see a woman's success in challenging the authoritative government. Therefore, Feng's use of the male gaze can be regarded as the complicity of the patriarchy for discouraging female empowerment.



Figure 8: End of the Film [10]

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, both *Raise the Red Lantern* and *I Am Not Madame Bovary* demonstrate women's objectification and sexualization under the male gaze through close-ups of the female characters' faces and bodies which function as the erotic, scopophilic signifier of the males' sexual desire. Besides, both films in Fifth Generation Chinese cinema convey the directors' social criticisms of patriarchal order and sexual oppression, which agonize females, through the three subjects of the male gaze stated by Mulvey. Nevertheless, there are several drawbacks and limitations of this research paper: this research study could analyze more films created by other directors in the Fifth Generation, like Chen Kaige, in order to offer a comprehensive picture of the evidence of the male gaze in Chinese cinema. In short, this study offers potential for future research on Fifth Generation Chinese cinema by expanding the scope of analysis, such as focusing on the avenue of sadism and punitive actions of males in the theory of the male gaze by Mulvey.

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