

Reading Farewell My Concubine Through Mirror Stage and Gaze

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Abstract: *Farewell My Concubine* is a critical film, directed by Kaige Chen and based on the novel by Lilian Lee. The film takes a broader view of the novel and then brings out the tragedy of the history. In this work, I will use the mirror stage which introduced by Jacques Lacan and gaze theory which introduced by Laura Mulvey in 1975 to analyze the Chinese film called *Farewell My Concubine*. These two theory can explore the complex relationship between two major characters and discuss the effect of society traditional norms. Because the lack of the paper which analyzed this film do not refer to the anlysis in psychoanalysis, so I choose this title. From several theory and combine with some practical skill in making films, I summarize the process of change of Cheng Dieyi's gender identity which effect by many people. I also analyze the social environment's role in this film which caused the death of Cheng.

Keywords: *Farewell My Concubine*, Mirror Stage, Gender identity, Male gaze

1. Introduction

The film I analyze called *Farewell My Concubine* which is a Chinese movie and published in January 1, 1993. *Farewell My Concubine* is a critically acclaimed film, directed by Kaige Chen and based on a novel by Lilian Lee [1]. The background of this film based on the political upheavals and cultural changes in 20th century which divided into three parts—the late Qing dynasty, the Republican era and the cultural revolution. The film talks about the complex relationship between the two major characters, Cheng Dieyi and Duan Xiaolou, who are Peking Opera performers in the film. Young Cheng Dieyi and Duan Xiaolou both were abandoned children and are enrolled in a Peking Opera school. Cheng, a highly talented performer, excels in playing female roles, while Duan primarily portrays male characters. As they grow older, their stunning portrayals of the classic opera *Farewell My Concubine* [1].

Their lives are further entangled when they encounter a beautiful courtesan named Juxian. Both Juxian and Cheng fall in love with Duan, leading to a love triangle that challenges their friendship and complicates their emotional connections. Political turmoil and societal expectations add additional layers of complexity to their lives [1].

About the international, it is the first Chinese film to win the Palme d'or at the Cannes film festival. And this film delves into important periods of Chinese history. Through its narrative, the film offers a nuanced perspective on the impact of political and cultural changes on individuals and the arts.

In this paper, I read this film through the male gaze and mirror stage in psychoanalysis. According to influential essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in 1975 written by Laura Mulvey. Laura

Mulvey said that the psychoanalytic theory is thus appropriated here as a political weapon, demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form [2]. Male gaze is a concept in the feminist film theory. Women are the second sex to be seen, and men enjoy peeping pleasure through various media and channels, becoming the first to watch and gaze.

The mirror stage was introduced by Jacques Lacan who is a prominent French psychoanalyst. Mirror stage describes a critical developmental phase that occurs during the childhood of a people, especially during the 6 and 8 months. During this period, the child will appear the awareness of themselves, and take up a mental representation [3].

The importance of applying psychoanalytic theories is that we can critically analyze the challenge to traditional gender norms.

2. Literature Review

“Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” introduced the concept of male gaze. Mulvey argued that traditional cinema which employs a male perspective through the camera, objectify the women for visual pleasure of male audiences [2]. And Mulvey also pointed out the female character always play an image which need men to survive or act the vassal of men, they did not have the role of pushing the development of cinema [2]. This is a basic paper for my research which provide a concept of male gaze in the film, I can use this concept to analyze the complex relationship and emotion of characters and analyze *Farewell My Concubine*.

Mirror stage is another concept which I used to analyze this film; this is a concept in psychoanalysis which introduced by psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan [3]. Mirror stage occur during the child about 6 month and 8 moths, it can explain the formation of gender identity of Cheng and the process of changing of his gender identity. And from other scholars’ further analysis, they pointed out its implications for the information of subjectivity, self-identity, and the development of the psyche [3].

For gender identity, our gender identity is our sense of ourselves as a man, a woman, as genderqueer or as another genders. Gender identity first seems to objectionably exclude some severely cognitively disabled people form having genders. No connection views seem to be objectionably trans exclusionary [4,5].

From some paper written by Chinese, they analyze the feature of the characters by gender identity. The research gap is they did not analyze deeper of the process of gender identity and the reason of forming a different gender identity. So, I want to read this film by a new side and try to have a deeper analysis. [6,7]

3. Gender Performance and Cultural Context

The Cultural Revolution, also called Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution aim to prevent the restoration of capitalism and to seek China’s own path of building socialism. The Communist Party’s push for uniformity challenges the artistic freedom of Peking Opera performers. Cheng Dieyi was a popular performer before the Cultural Revolution but became criticized for being rooted in bourgeois culture and not conforming to revolutionary ideals.

The political and social upheavals during the Cultural Revolution also led to challenges to traditional gender norms. Cheng acted the female character challenge the binary understanding of gender, were viewed suspicion and judgement. In that period, the society showed completely the societal discomfort with non-conforming gender expressions. In that society, the female should be elegance, femininity and grace. For Duan’s performance, he performs the expectations of the people for a man which should embody the strength, heroism and assertiveness. Cheng does not follow this

expectation, his mastery of female roles reinforces the traditional ideal of the demure, submissive, and self-sacrificing woman, but he is a man which cannot be accepted by that society.

The mirror stage signifies Cheng's desire for unity and coherence in his self-image, which is further complicated by the societal expectation that he performs as a woman. This struggle is heightened by his growing emotional attachment to Duan, leading to a deep internal conflict as he grapples with his feelings and societal norms [3].

The characters' gender performance within the Peking Opera also reflects the objectification and vulnerability of performers [2]. Cheng Dieyi, who portrays female roles, becomes the object of the male gaze, catering to the desires and expectations of the audience. The societal context perpetuates the objectification of women, further influencing Cheng's identity struggles and experiences of vulnerability.

The political and social climate restricts personal desires and emotional connections between characters. Cheng and Duan's romantic relationship is suppressed and concealed due to societal norms and potential consequences, because it is forbidden in the context of the Cultural Revolution.

4. Character Analysis

Cheng Dieyi is the most important character in this film. He is a talented Peking Opera performer and acted concubine which is very popular at that time. When he was a child, his mother sent him to a drama school for surviving. In this school, his brother Duan Xiaolou took care of him, acted a 'mother' character in Cheng's childhood. When they become minors, Cheng fell in love with Duan which shaped their complex relationship. Cheng Dieyi shows the different gender identity with other people in that period and the performative nature of gender [4].

When his mom sent him to the drama school, the teacher did not want to accept the Douzi (who later becomes Cheng Dieyi). But his mother cannot afford him for surviving, so that cut his sixth finger in order to let Douzi can perform Peking Opera. He grew up without a father and had Oedipus complex, but he did not have the opportunity to have a competition with his father and directly monopolized his mother. This is why the gender identity of Douzi cannot form. So he would avoid conflict with his mother by weakening his ego. The small society which he lived only had the women. When he was sent to perform Peking Opera, he faces the trauma of being abandoned by his mother which causes the self-image he developed in the mirror stage of infancy to collapse. This process is a hint of castration of the male gender of Douzi.

Duan Xiaolou acts the Xiang Yu in Peking Opera—*Farewell My Concubine*. When they are famous for their performance, Duan married a beautiful courtesan named Juxian. After that, Duan and Cheng did not continue to perform the opera. During the cultural revolution, he betrays Cheng and drew a clear distinction. Duan mainly shows the transformation of human nature.

Duan acted the mother of Cheng when they were young, and he also is an important character during the process of forming gender identity of Douzi. He is the first person who took care of Cheng but he considers Cheng is his brother and partner in opera, and he married with Juxian. Cheng told him to keep his heart to opera to notice Duan to focus on the opera, and the second mean is that he wants to protect the private romantic relationship between them.

Analyzing Duan by human nature can uncover the reason of the ending of Cheng and Juxian's life. During the Cultural Revolution, Duan betrayed the two important people in his life, which cause them feel hopeless and end their life. He put his life in front of his friendship and romantic relationship with his wife.

A significant segment shows the gaze occurs during Cheng Dieyi's performances as female characters, where he captures the attention of the male audience, including Yuan Siye and a Japanese officer. This sequence uses the close-up shot and low-key lighting to show the male gaze on Cheng. Yuan's relationship with Cheng is marked by sexual exploitation and objectification. He effects the

Cheng's feminine performances and becomes enamored with him, reinforcing the male gaze that objectifies Cheng's femineity for male pleasure.

Another gaze occurs between the Cheng and Duan where their gaze reveals deep emotional connections and tensions, director used a medium shot which is a powerful tool for conveying emotions and desires. It also shows the complex love between them.

Another sequence which Yuan gaze the at Cheng in the mirror. In this sequence, Yuan Siye said Cheng is a proper people to play Yuji who is very powerful. Through the mirror, Cheng gaze at the female appearance of himself and Yuan change Cheng's gender identity by sexual exploitation and objectification [3].

5. Subversion and Resistance

In this film, the gender performances always challenge traditional norms. At the beginning of the film, Douzi (who later becomes Cheng Dieyi) performed as a female character in Peking Opera which challenges traditional norms by portraying a young boy effortlessly and convincingly embodying a female character, subverting the idea that only women can act female character [7].

And the complex romantic relationship between Duan and Cheng which goes beyond friendship. This challenges traditional norms of heteronormativity and explores the complexity of emotions and desires.

Through the gaze, this film also shows the character's agency and resistance against societal expectations. Cheng's performance subverts traditional gender norms, challenging the male audience's gaze and dictate how they perceive and interpret his performances. To resistance against the expectation of society, Cheng chose to end his life. At the end of film, Cheng and Duan went back to the theater, and then Cheng use the sword which is meaningful for them to end his life in front of Duan. Cheng do not want to change himself to satisfy the society and he refused the gaze which only accept the traditional gender identity from the other people. His final act becomes a profound statement of self-determination and agency [7].

6. Conclusion

I read some papers which analyze this film and characters in this film, but I found the limitation that is lack of applications of psychoanalytic theories. While existing studies have explored themes such as historical context, cultural significance, and character analysis so that it is a good way to gain deeper insights into the relationship between two major characters and their gender roles, emotions.

From the first film appeared in China, and showed the society constructed by men and women. But the dualism of gender of male and female is proper and logical. The sexual relation on the screen is highly consistent to the reality. The women always are vassals of men which have an absolute say in society. This film breaks the traditional norms of gender, use the actor to play female character in opera, and criticize the inequity of gender.

From the feminism, this film presents the critique of gender identity and culture. It has caused people to think deeply about gender power relations and social oppression. Through the *Farewell My Concubine*, people should realize the gender equity. The audience can think and reflect on the society's expectation and limitations on gender roles, as well as the challenges individuals face in seeking self-liberation and pursuing their desires.

For the future research, investigate the role of the body and embodiment in film narratives through psychoanalytic lenses. And the analysis of how gendered bodies are portrayed, and how desire is embodied, and how body-image issues are depicted in cinema is important.

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