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Reflections of the Soul: A Cinematic Trilogy of Forceful Women

—The Assassin, the Writer, and the Worker

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Abstract: When the film and television work in the form of a "big heroine" appears, it is known that a strong female image; the woman at the peak of life, even at the top of the world, is shaped as a "sense of power woman". But the life logic of these women, the ruling logic, and the fundamental victory of the narrative logic battle can all be attributed to the space of male logic. Therefore, the representation of women's sense of power in the films and documentaries examined by the author today does not involve women who merely simulate strength through male narrative logic. Instead, it focuses on women who authentically follow their own realities. These are women who are secretive and composed assassins, talented writers, and resilient workers. They are allowed to be emotionally vulnerable, have the right to make their own choices, and genuinely embody a sense of power.

Keywords: Power sense of women, non-violent assassin, Taoist philosophy, writer gender market, post-war female workers dilemma.

1. Introduction

Film is what Lenin called "the most important of all art" — A powerful means of communicating with illiterate people [1].In other words, movies can contribute to becoming "well-known."The emergence of pseudo-powerful women in cinema reveals that patriarchy remains, though more subtly concealed. These portrayals cater to women's consumer power rather than genuinely advancing feminism. The author views this as an illusion, reflecting a new dilemma for 21st-century women—striving to be "women like men," maintaining a perfect image that results in self-discipline and objectification. This quest for perfection traps women in a cycle of being gazed upon, leading to female competition and possible stigmatized resentment of men. However, feminism, to some extent, can be seen as neutralism, representing a positive societal stance. What is deemed radical may reflect a strong desire to be seen.

Hollywood's influence has shaped a new wave of "powerful women," like those in the James Bond series. However, their power is mainly symbolic, tied to masculine narratives involving guns and cars. These women become fashion items, awaiting rescue by male "saviors," with their attempts at self-rescue often depicted as comedic. Michelle Yeoh, who fights alongside Bond, is an exception,

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influenced by Hong Kong action films—a shift in Hollywood's perspective since the mid-to-late 1990s.

In Marvel films, female heroes are portrayed as functional bodies—mere weapons. As French director Jean-Luc Godard noted in *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1998), “American-style shots that frame at the waist are because of pistols; women are always framed up to the chest.” [2]. This highlights that so-called "powerful women" remain entrenched in a systematic gender division of gaze: men look, women are looked at; men act, women are acted upon. Female power is thus reduced to a label. However, the Paris Olympics presents Joan of Arc not as a victimized figure, but as a heroic one with practical attire. This contrasts with the aggressively assertive "strong female lead" films shaped by male logic, which feel forced rather than natural.

2. The Female Assassin

2.1. The Destiny of Sacrificing Life to Prove Resolve

There are three "Assassination" plays in the Kunqu opera repertoire: *Iron Crown Map: The Tiger Assassination*, *Fisherman’s Joy: The Liang Assassination*, and *A Handful of Snow: The Tang Assassination*. These plays require both the dignity and propriety of the "Guimen Dan" (a refined female role) and the fierce bravery of the "Daomadan"[3]. In *Fisherman’s Joy: The Liang Assassination*, Fei Zhen'e is portrayed as a woman who inspires others to resist tyranny, boldly declaring, "I vow to clear the unjust charges against the emperor and redress the grievances of the people under heaven! Only then will the Ming Dynasty have a true heroine!" In this, it is known that a spirit of chivalry, a valor that transcends gender. However, her fate is "skirt flying, she drinks the sword and falls dead," a scene constructed as an aesthetic performance on stage. Yet behind this aesthetic lies the “politics of the body” [4].

Perhaps the unprecedented success of the Chinese wuxia film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* demonstrates an effort to liberate women from the confines of the inner chambers and grand estates. The director aimed to position women as subjects of desire in a world filled with intrigue and swordplay. The potential for cross-cultural communication in the film is recognized by the public, it can be more specifically referred to as "translatability" [5]. Fran Martin suggests that Ang Lee constructs the female warrior image through "parallel citation" in the context of both Chinese and Western cultural frameworks [6]. But what is the fate of the heroine, Jen Yu? She leaps off the cliff, seemingly falling yet flying, her destiny left unknown. This ambiguous ending, as some scholars suggest, can be interpreted either as Yu Jiaolong's guilt-driven suicide in reaffirmation of Confucian ethical norms or as her rebirth after plunging into the mist, embracing a new life [7]. The ending is driven by the "sword," which serves as the vessel for her desires—a symbol that can be concretely interpreted as power, still bound by the shackles of the feudal patriarchal society. However, if her final leap is defined as an empty symbol of 'freedom', the author believes that this concept of rebirth is still to some extent a form of redemption through death, reflecting the illusion that violence can liberate women from patriarchal oppression [8]. Even the heroine herself is teetering on the brink—what hope is there for others? Ultimately, in this "iron house," a core symbol of Chinese culture as described by Lu Xun [9], it is women who remain imprisoned. As Friedrich Engels once stated, "History is made up of countless self-sacrificing women"[10]. Here, the author believes that a powerful gaze ring is witnessed, an uninterrupted ring extending into the depths of history.

This brings us back to the lament after Fei Zhen’e’s assassination: “Fei Zhen’e, oh Fei Zhen’e, what a pity you’ve been overqualified for the task.” As a woman caught in the dust of the times, she ruefully reflects on her abundant talents that could have earned her a much broader stage. Instead, she ends up having to resort to extreme measures—assassination—to realize her value, which is truly tragic.

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Whether in traditional drama or modern film, the endings of female heroes across various media often employ the motif of "dying to assert one's principles."

2.2. The Tacit Acceptance of the Mulan Dilemma

Since the early 1980s, action films have emerged as one of the most mainstream genres. Yvonne Tasker describes the action genre as “almost exclusively male spaces where issues of gender and sexual identity are resolved through male bodies” [11]. Action heroines seem to contradict Laura Mulvey's 1975 groundbreaking essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, which divides pleasure in the gaze into active/male and passive/female categories [12]. However, within the binary gender code, heroines are seen as symbolic males, a form of 'cross-dressing,' which can be directly defined as the Mulan-like predicament proposed by Julia Kristeva [13]. Jeanine Basinger also noted that 'placing women in traditional male action roles without altering their psychology is merely cinematic cross-dressing'[14]."

The author argues that Huang Shuqin's film *Ghost Love* can be considered a feminist film. Based on the true story of Hebei Bangzi actress Pei Yanling, it portrays her "disguise" (as Pei Yanling is a female martial artist) in playing the idealized male figure of Zhong Kui from a female perspective, attempting to reconcile her multiple identities but ultimately finds herself lost in reality. The film reveals a fact: whether in historical narratives or personal lives, women's lived experiences seem always to be absent. Women, through their constant oscillation between disguise and authentic self, end up falling into their traps. Is this a rebellion against female destiny or a renewed reinforcement of patriarchal culture? Women are often unaware of this. Such a sharp approach seems akin to "opening an east-west window in a room facing north."

When the new woman once again ascended the Chinese screen with old representations, it could be said that what was reflected here was indeed a trace of pre-modern culture, or rather an acquiescence to pre-modern cultural conventions—such as female heroes standing in for their fathers or husbands, or female action figures similar to the traditional martial actresses [15]. However, rather than seeing the female heroes who once “dominated” the Chinese screen as ghosts from the old era, it is more accurate to view them as contemporary masks, embodying a female image that reflects an anticipation and call for the modern male subject.

2.3. The Realm Beyond Violence

Hou Hsiao-Hsien articulated his motivation for making *The Assassin* (2015): “I want to say that humanity should not kill; there is never any justification for killing” [16]. Feminists argue that the theory and philosophical concepts of "violence" within patriarchal systems fundamentally shape the nature of political violence, thereby producing and reproducing structural violence against women [17,18].

In an era where digital transformation has completely replaced film, Hou Hsiao-hsien directed this film using celluloid, capturing a top assassin's perspective and auditory experience through the minutiae of chirping insects, rustling grass, and blowing wind. The film presents a philosophical contemplation through its aesthetic duality: the luxury of the court is depicted with great grandeur, as if each character is a person of significance, while away from the court, the vast emptiness of humanity’s insignificance is portrayed. "People in the landscape are like fleeting mayflies" reflects the Chinese cosmology and values (from Chibi Fu) [19]. He subsequently portrays a female gaze, or rather a political gaze, as the assassin Nie Yinniang often observes from beneath the eaves.

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2.3.1. Female Assassins in Literature of the Tang Dynasty

The above content focuses on the limitations of female heroes, with a specific emphasis on assassins. Scholar Wang Ju-ying has elaborated on the correlation between female heroes and assassins in his work *Re-examination of the Origin of Chinese Heroes*, where he states that "the hero actually originated from the assassin, and the assassin is the direct source and prototype of the hero"[20]. This section primarily discusses Hou Hsiao-hsien's film *The Assassin* (2015).

Mr. Lu Xun once noted in *A Brief History of Chinese Novels* (1923) that "novels, like poetry, began to change from the Tang Dynasty [21]." Tang legends, a genre of prose fiction, belong to classical Chinese novels and are distinct from early strange tales. The Tang Dynasty was relatively open and inclusive, and women enjoyed a degree of freedom with their self-awareness gradually awakening. The ruling Xianbei lineage did not emphasize male superiority, which, to some extent, altered women's views on marriage and relationships, contributing to the evolution of the character Nie Yinniang. After the An-Shi Rebellion in the mid-to-late Tang Dynasty, a century-long political struggle between the central and local governments led to economic decline and political fragmentation. During this period, regional military governors experienced four stages of development: independence, submission, rebellion, and annexation. Their ambiguous yet antagonistic relationship with the imperial court resulted in economic decay and political disintegration [22]. The literary figures' commitment to improving society influenced the portrayal of female heroes in Tang dynasty legends. Li Jianguo, in Tales of the Strange and Marvelous in the Tang and Five Dynasties (1993), classifies chivalrous figures into categories such as the Shu Woman type, the Feng Yan type, the Hong Xian type, the Yi Xia type, the Gu Ya Ya type, the Tian Peng Lang type, the Qiu Ran Ke type, and the Hou Yi type [23]. Among these, the Shu Woman, Hong Xian, and Tian Peng Lang types are associated with female chivalrous figures. The Assassin (2015) is one such example.

2.3.2. Confronting Daoist Philosophy

The stereotypical image of Chinese female warriors in Chinese cinema can be seen as a continuation of the traditional story of *Mulan*, which is rooted in Confucian values from Confucian China (from 211 BCE to 1911 CE) (as previously mentioned). This does not reflect resistance to patriarchy; rather, it subtly suggests the hierarchical structure of Confucian society, where women are seen as sacrifices for their country, father, or husband. In contrast, Nie Yinniang presents a Daoist utopian vision of freedom, depicting a character who, within Confucian gender relations, embodies the role of a patriarchal victim reimagined in a liberating Daoist context [24].

The film, although rooted in the literary genre of Tang Tales, diverges significantly in its narrative, character development, and the resulting aesthetic and philosophical reflections. The “Nie Yinniang” from Pei Xing's *Chuanqi* (as recorded in *Taiping Guangji*) is a heroine of the late Tang dynasty, a figure embodying the people's aspirations for a carefree existence, characteristic of indigenous genre films, which are fantastical and non-realistic in nature. In Hou Hsiao-hsien's film, however, Nie Yinniang in Hou Hsiao-hsien's film is not a celebrated assassin but an ordinary killer, weighed down by the gravity of moral and ethical dilemmas. Her identity as an assassin does not lighten her burden but instead deepens the tragic sense, reflecting the pressing realities of society, culture, and politics within their respective contexts.

East Asian philosophy, particularly Daoism, upholds a holistic and non-dualistic perspective, which shapes the equal significance of both feminine and masculine qualities (as exemplified in the Daoist philosophy of Yin and Yang) [25]. In Chinese cultural discourse, female Daoist practitioners are often referred to as nüguan or Kundao, living in temples or mountains, thus escaping the Confucian stereotype of the virtuous wife and mother and the gender hierarchy of the "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" [26]. In the film, she defies Confucian norms by not kneeling before

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her parents—violating filial piety, not obeying her master—violating loyalty, and marrying a servant—violating propriety.

However, some critics suggest that Nie Yinniang's silence and demeanor may hint at Asperger's Syndrome, a condition characterized by difficulties in verbal communication [27]. The author argues that there is an urgency in exploring the character of Nie Yinniang: her solitude (having no peers), which marks a departure from many previous portrayals of female assassins in film. Nie Yinniang indeed embodies a kind of silence—not just in her sparing use of words, but also in the fact that in the film, she is hardly ever called by her name (only the mirror polisher refers to her by her real name). This makes her a figure of absence, a true "hidden one." Yet, I don't see her as "cold"; her strength comes not from physical force but from the warmth of her inner resolve.

This sense of solitude is often portrayed by the director through a triangular relationship, positioning Nie Yinniang as the "extra". However, this triangular dynamic is not confined to the realm of desire; rather, it emphasizes a mirrored relationship among women. This triangle is introduced through an ancient anecdote—the Dance of the Green Phoenix. The story, originating from Fan Tai's *Preface to the Poem of the Phoenix* from the Southern Dynasties, tells of a solitary green phoenix that never dances until it sees its reflection in a mirror, mistakenly believing it has found a companion. This tale reflects the divergent political choices of the twin princesses, with Nie Yinniang serving as the third figure, the "lonely phoenix in the mirror."

Despite this "cold treatment", the public witnessed a "warm choice" in the movie: she avoided assassinating her target twice. The author believes that this is the source of her strength-not through the traditional display of male characteristics such as physical strength, but through her choice to build a broader perspective.

The first time Nie Yinniang refrains from assassination is when she sees her target playing with a child. This is not just a narrative detail, but a reflection of ecofeminist principles [28]. It resonates with Zhuangzi's "Butterfly Dream" which abandons an anthropocentric view (interpreted as personal desire) [29]. In Nie Yinniang, this is manifested as the highest form of ethical consideration, rejecting political violence and patriarchal ideology—this is a true feminist practice that opposes gender essentialism. However, her master, Princess Jiaxin, critiques this decision: "Your swordsmanship is perfect, but your Dao heart is unsteady." The following section will explore the so-called "sword Dao" through the lens of her second act of restraint.

Princess Jiaxin views violent assassination (militarism) as a means to solidify state power, which is a typical Confucian political stance and can also be considered a form of male-dominated politics. Jiaxin believes that a warrior should transform "tolerance of violence into a grand vision of peace," because the logic of the sword is "to sacrifice personal life for the greater good" [30]. However, the author argues that separating the sword from its philosophical path is crucial. If one projects a self-defined nation (serving the "Heavenly" duty) onto the sword path, it amounts to personal desire rather than genuine service.

Returning to the meaning of "the Dance of the Green Phoenix," the Green Phoenix ultimately seems to affirm its resolve through death (symbolizing Princess Jiaxin's sacrifice). However, this act of dying to assert one's resolve indirectly triggers the second abandonment of assassination, which signifies "escaping the dominance of others' interests". She realizes that despite her formidable martial skills, she would still be sacrificing her life as a political tool for male-oriented politics. Therefore, Nie Yinniang chooses to reject Confucian male-centric politics, renounce the privilege of violence, and liberate herself through Daoist practices, thus solidifying her mastery of the sword path (her swordsmanship is accomplished, and her heart is steadfast). In this powerful portrait, it can be seen that the assassin restrained himself from killing. This is the assassin's sense of righteousness, a demonstration of honor surpassing mere humanity. The assassin, within the context of that era, is not a cold-blooded machine; women need not boast of superhuman traits or disregard human ethics to

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demonstrate mastery of the sword. True strength lies in self-choice and, to some extent, in pride for one's entanglements and worldly emotions. Nie Yinniang fulfills the political scenario where "if the heir is young and Tian Jian is killed, the Wei state will certainly be in chaos," not being confined by the selfish desire for "the sword path being accomplished and the heart being steadfast." In the end, she chooses to descend the mountain, to defeat her master in one final move, and to walk her chosen path without turning back. Choosing is not the easy path; who says this is not the completion of a righteous female assassin?

3. The Female Writer

The “Orange Prize”, established in 1996 and now known as the “Women’s Prize for Fiction”, is an annual British literary award given to outstanding female novelists. The prize has faced criticism for its gender-specific focus, with some arguing that it emphasizes the authors' gender rather than the quality of their work. Virginia Woolf discussed the relationship between gender and creativity in her book *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), suggesting that female writers should cultivate a mind encompassing both masculine and feminine qualities [31]. Margaret Atwood’s *Negotiating with the dead: A writer on writing* (2002) provides profound insights into the gendered nature of the grand theme of "writing or being a writer": “A man playing the role of Great Artist was expected to Live Life – this chore was part of his consecration to his art – and Living Life meant, among other things wine, women, and song. But if a female writer tried the wine and the men, she was likely to be considered a slut and a drunk, so she was stuck with the song; and better still if it was a swan song” [32].

While controversy continues regarding female writers, one consensus is the discipline and even self-discipline imposed on them. Reflecting on the issue of gender labels for writers, it is not a problem per se, as the profession was not normalized as a male occupation before the so-called “tyranny of the woman writer” was not widely discussed [33]. This discussion encompasses not only literary writers but also film screenwriters. This section focuses on three aspects: the profession of writing as male-dominated, the exploration of gender-reversed narratives in the female writer role in the film *Anatomy of a Fall*(2023), and historical female directors.

3.1. The 'Market' Invaded by Men

Guy Tuchman argues that before 1840, novel writing was among the few fields educated women could engage in. Similarly, screenwriting was a female-dominated profession in the early days of cinema, with many successful silent film scripts written by women [34]. While precise statistics are lacking, research estimates that women may have comprised between 50% and 90% of screenwriters during the silent film era [35]. This explains why women screenwriters were generally seen as playing a significant role before the establishment of conventional film narrative practices [36]. According to records from the U.S. Copyright Office at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., over 25,000 film scenarios and scripts were registered between 1911 and 1929, the period during which "talkies" were introduced, with at least half authored by women. In terms of pay, *Frances Marion* became one of the highest-paid screenwriters of the 1920s.

However, with the onset of the Great Depression, the dual crises of economy and employment led to male encroachment in this field. Additionally, the industrialization of the publishing industry caused a concentration and rationalization of production and distribution, allowing male screenwriters to gradually take control of the profession. The advent of sound films further changed the skill requirements, shifting the focus of screenwriting from plot creation to crafting clear and engaging dialogue. By the mid-1930s, the infiltration of male screenwriters had become an established fact. According to membership statistics from the Writers Guild of America (West), by the late 1930s, the

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proportion of female screenwriters had dropped to less than 15%. This shift was institutionalized and legitimized when male screenwriters began viewing women who were assigned to story adjustments, scene polishing, and dialogue rewrites as suffering under the "tyranny of women screenwriters". Although women were considered particularly suited to writing "women's pictures" and crafting dialogue for female stars, many of these films were written by men [36].

From the 1950s to the early 1960s, the proportion of women in screenwriting remained between 12% and 13%. During the period from 1962 to 1971, the percentage of new female entrants into screenwriting fell to its lowest in history, a period that film critic Molly Haskell referred to as "the most depressing time in screen history," as she believed the portrayal and significance of women in film reached a nadir during this era [37].

3.2. The New Dilemma Under a Narrow Sky: The "Scapegoat"

The power of female success can sometimes unsettle men in the same profession. Under the corrosive influence of toxic masculinity, they may attribute their own lack of success to the achievements of women.

Some scholars argue that certain Chinese directors project "essential deficiencies" onto the "cultural bodies" of peasants and women, making them symbols of a "heavy national consciousness" to mitigate the impact of cross-cultural modernity on themselves [38] This can be understood as a form of surrogate gaze, satisfying the need for scrutiny through "national allegory. "For example, in the classic film *Raise the Red Lantern*, an educated woman is similarly confined within the oppressive Cai family mansion. The reason for the pervading darkness in this patriarchal domain is that women vie for the gaze of power holders. This is their battleground. What is alarming is that the man at the center of power never actually appears. Instead, the symbolic element of "hanging red lanterns" replaces the visible "success" of being observed. The architectural space of the courtyard, resembling a prison, encloses the psychological space of the women. Despite their past exposure to broader horizons, they are now relegated to a space that was never truly theirs, reduced to one role: being gazed upon.

In the works popular during the 1990s, this projection continued as male writers shifted their own traumatic experiences and societal anxieties onto women, casting a new layer of dark clouds over the already narrow sky that women inhabited. Women became symbols and bearers of negative emotions, stereotyped as scapegoats for various social issues. Male writers, through the creation of insidious, hysterical, and insatiable female characters—such as those in Su Tong's *Guide to Divorce* (2011) or Wang Shuo's *The Life of an Addict*—portrayed women as entities that perpetually bring disaster into men's lives [39][40][41]. In these narratives, women are clearly seen as the root of suffering and anxiety, becoming the main culprits of men's tragic destinies. Scholar Dai Jin Hua has described this phenomenon as: the narrator's achievement of a form of male absolution and self-liberation through the expulsion of women.

Should such literary expressions of scapegoating be conveyed in film? In *Anatomy of a Fall*(2023), the discussion of "gender reversal" prompts a reevaluation of default values and narratives. The film primarily depicts the story of successful writer Sandra, whose husband Samuel falls to his death, leaving her as the sole suspect and their nearly blind son as the only witness. Sandra, bewildered, is brought to trial, where the director employs gender differentiation to create a clear division in the courtroom. Men predominantly play the role of accusing Sandra of murdering her husband, while the only male who supports Sandra—the lawyer—has a less prominent role in the defense. It is later revealed in a post-trial conversation that his support for Sandra is complicated by an unresolved "romantic motive."

Throughout the trial, everyone constructs favorable but fictional narratives for themselves while the truth of their lives remains obscured. This grand skepticism undermines the real marital

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relationship. In the final interview recording, Sandra's honesty wounds Samuel, as a clever man knows his wife should not be held responsible for his failures, yet he feels that his wife should not be a "bystander" to his struggles. In the film's portrayal, Sandra, like traditional male characters, is depicted with a "cold and indifferent" demeanor, while Samuel, like traditional female characters, is shown as "deeply affected" and "crying."

But is this truly a trial or merely an exercise in imaginative suspicion against women, ignoring genuine morality from a supposed moral high ground? The film explores how, when intimate relationships are made public, the imbalance of power between a successful woman and a weaker man can lead to a male victim mentality, habitually viewing women as "villains." The film raises a critical question: What does a woman face when she no longer depends on others? The film avoids traditional victimizing overhead shots and frequently uses low-angle shots of Sandra, creating a sense of rational detachment. The film defines the true "fall" as a collapse of psychological stability and imbalance in relationships.

Although Samuel dies at the beginning of the film, his death triggers the narrative. He remains like a ghost hovering over the entire film. The film continuously questions whether men can accept a partner who is more successful than themselves (both Samuel and his wife are writers). Samuel instinctively maintains male dignity and desperately seeks someone to blame for his situation. This issue remains unresolved as Samuel avoids it through his death. Sandra, as a wife, a mother, and a writer, is constantly judged not for concrete evidence but for her overwhelming success. This sense of female success becomes the source of insecurity in a male-dominated society.

3.3. Female director in History: Not Muses, but Selves

Sandra rejects the roles of both persecutor and victim. The public did not see a hysterical woman driven mad by trial, nor did it see a femme fatale as a criminal. She defies male imagination, and her strength, which breaks free from male discipline, faces comprehensive skepticism and attacks. Men seem unwilling or unable to believe that a woman can be fully self-coherent, independent, and clear-cut in her self-possession.

But women in history erase the mosaic-like blurring of women in patriarchal cinema, repainting and completing the image to create a full portrait.

3.3.1. True pioneer

Lois Weber, in her film *Suspense* (1913), created a chilling suspenseful atmosphere through the perspective of a rearview mirror, a technique ahead of Hitchcock’s time. Although Alice Guy-Blaché's film *The Cabbage Fairy* (1896) is the first fictional film, this significant achievement is often mistakenly attributed to Georges Méliès' *Le voyage dans la lune* (1902). Even though some historians once misidentified a short film found in a warehouse as a work by the Lumière brothers, it was eventually confirmed to be her own. Guy-Blaché had an advanced insight into gender issues, having filmed *Les résultats du féminisme* (1906), boldly envisioning a world with reversed gender roles to satirize and challenge traditional gender stereotypes. Maya Deren’s short film *At Land* (1944) seems to have inspired the classic "game of death" scene in Ingmar Bergman's *Det sjunde inseglet* (1957), where a man plays chess with Death on a beach. She is acclaimed as the "Prometheus of cinema," having stolen the "fire" from Hollywood’s mainstream production system to illuminate overlooked marginalized figures [42]. Her cinematic aesthetics are characterized by a fluid intuition, showcasing the dynamic movement of the female body through time and space, sometimes bravely fearless, other times struggling onward. Agnès Varda, known as the "grandmother of the French New Wave," significantly influenced Bergman’s classic shots and compositions in *Persona* (1966) with her early work *La Pointe-Courte* (1955). Even in her eighties, she maintained her distinctive, colorful

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"mushroom haircut." As she glided through the Louvre in her wheelchair, her presence itself became a part of film history.

3.3.2. The Allure of Reversal

Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993) reveals a woman's sharp gaze scrutinizing the male body and the world he inhabits. Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman* (1975) was voted the greatest film of the 21st century in the Sight & Sound magazine's list of the top 100 films. People are used to looking at violence on screen, but rarely see the camera focus on the quagmire of women's daily lives. Akerman loops the almost unbearable length of domestic chores in her film, placing equal importance on mundane tasks like dishwashing and the sensationalized moments of murder. Céline Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) uses the texture of oil painting to capture every exchange of glances, transforming the flowing emotions between women into an eternal gaze: a delicate yet fervent bond of same-sex intimacy. Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* (2008) and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) present some of the finest war films ever made through their restrained and chilling imagery. Young Woman and the Sea-Feminist Films by Male Directors (2024) breaks the narrative of *The Old Man (1952) and the Sea*, introducing a powerful female figure attempting to cross the English Channel, while women in households across the globe turn on their lights, like a relay of women emerging from history's shadows [43]

4. The Female Worker

On August 26, 1970, on International Women's Day, a poignant banner was displayed on the Arc de Triomphe, a symbol of France's war and victory: 'To the wives of the Unknown Soldiers, even more unknown.' These unseen women played significant roles during wartime, largely as female workers, who nearly became the only visible wage earners [44].

4.1. Ephemeral Employment Rate of Women

World War II marked a turning point in the employment of women workers, both in terms of their entry into and exit from the labor market. During the war, the massive influx of women into the workforce represented one of the largest civilian labor reorganizations in American history, particularly in munitions factories, shipyards, and government offices, all of which were central to the war effort. However, after the war, the rate at which women left the workforce was almost as rapid as their entry [45]. This can be attributed primarily to the return of male labor, which continued to dominate social resources, especially in the post-war scarcity of these resources. For instance, the Austrian film *Lebenslinien II - Marianne - Ein Recht für alle* (1983) illustrates how, after 1914-1918, men returning to society and seeking employment aimed to displace women who had already established themselves in workshops. In this demand for and redistribution of employment resources, women found themselves in a passive position, constantly filling and vacating positions according to societal needs, often leaving behind countless unnoticed figures. *Union Maid* (1977) highlights how women workers fought against the gender biases of male workers and union representatives with whom they had been struggling side by side.

During World War II, approximately 6.7 million women began working, leading to a nearly 50% increase in the female labor force within a few years [46]. However, with the advent of peace, female employment rates plummeted in the fall of 1945 and the spring of 1946, with female labor force participation (FLFP) almost returning to pre-war levels [47]. This entire process focused on providing labor rather than promoting female employment, making the discussion of female employment seem like a futile change.

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Leslie Howard's novel-based film *The Gentle Sex* (1943) tells the story of seven wartime working women who, whether voluntarily or passively, become "wartime workers" coming from different social classes. Although their labor (paid) is hailed as a significant contribution to the war effort, it is still portrayed as a historical anomaly—in other words, women's work remains a spectacle, subconsciously perceived as merely a wartime necessity. The film addresses the paradox of the female worker's professional identity through extensive use of "cyclical narration," which ostensibly conveys the film's theme: women are no less capable than men. More importantly, it subtly aims to get men to accept the normalcy of strong women. Interestingly, this "deliberate" narration in women's films or documentaries often serves to placate men, who are typically portrayed as stubbornly skeptical of female strength. In short, the deliberate expression of strong women is not due to a lack of such women but rather due to a lack of men willing to accept them. This necessitates the double insurance of both narration and visual emphasis on female strength.

Beyond the narration, the depiction of female strength is mainly focused on scenes where women transport war supplies through the night in the rain and shoot down enemy planes. This is described as an unnoticed "superpower" and the impossibility of women with such traits. The author considers this deification to be derogatory. Howard then exclaims in amazement, "It now seems that without women, we simply couldn't continue. You must realize that we are a small nation trying to do the work of a big one, and without women, we couldn't do it." This statement reveals the wartime male, or on a broader scale, the societal and national need for female workers, but when combined with the imagery and narration, it also reflects a sense of fear—a fear of the unassimilable otherness of female strength. Although the film advocates for the centrality and importance of women in the war effort, these "superpowers" ultimately emphasize the fundamental incompatibility between women and wage labor. Ultimately, Howard encourages men to "admit that we are truly proud of you, you strange, marvelous, incalculable creatures." The author views this as a typical expression of power dynamics, stressing that the greatest achievement for female workers is to receive temporary male approval. Marcia Landy once commented on such pervasive narration: "ubiquitous commentary ... adds an uncomfortable condescending element to the narrative [48]."

Finally, after the women have fulfilled their wartime roles, Howard bids farewell to each of the seven women and predicts their post-war futures. Maggie will "become Alexander's good wife," while refugee Erna will gain something "sweeter" than anti-fascist revenge: "a home in your own country." These highlighted elements focus on "home," portraying the household as the woman's "true workplace," implying the temporary nature of women's large-scale entry into production and government work. Thus, female workers are defined as necessary but temporary wartime demands, with an inevitable end. Perhaps "wartime" is merely a rhetorical device, masking a narrative of the Mulan dilemma and a rewriting of Joan of Arc's fate. As summarised by a woman in the documentary *Quand les femmes ont pris la colère* (1977): "I found that we had minor conflicts with men, workers, unionists, and even political radicals. They find it hard to acknowledge the power women can bring to certain struggles. When men are afraid of being pushed to the limit, women are ready to push open that door (excerpt).

4.2. Career Women: The Deception of the Perfect Woman

Paid female workers mentioned earlier eventually returned in large numbers to the realm of unpaid domestic romanticized labor, a contribution that is often romanticized. However, as times changed, female workers gradually transformed into career women. This section will continue with a brief analysis of their situation.

Nowadays, unpaid domestic labor also seems to be increasingly undermined, which may appear to support the image of strong women. However, the underlying patriarchal social structure has not

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been dismantled; it merely manifests as a form of utopianism. In my view, this has become a gentle way for a patriarchal society to create dreams for women.

Indeed, the number of working women has significantly increased, but the reality of domestic chores and responsibilities such as childcare and eldercare cannot simply disappear. This burden has now shifted onto career women. This phenomenon requires women to balance work and family life. This research finds that, this is a new form of discipline: women must become 'like men' to ensure their social and economic value while also being 'gentle and virtuous housewives' who meet the demands of family life. This ideal of the perfect woman is not a reflection of female strength; it is an Eden-like deception and a deconstruction of feminism.

5. Conclusion

Traversing the temporal and visual realms, this paper explores how three female figures—an assassin, a writer, and a worker—each carve out a unique chapter of genuine strength on the cinematic canvas. The assassin, burdened by the shadows of fate, breaks free from the grime of discipline, delineating a profound Daoist realm that transcends brute force. The writer, struggling in the face of male encroachment, lets her talent bloom like faint glimmers of light in a sky thick with clouds. The worker, entangled in a Mulan-like predicament during wartime, recounts countless unfaded female silhouettes in the merciless tide of post-war history.

The luminous spirit of these female figures shapes a true sense of strength. Perhaps the journey women undertake to break through layer upon layer of restrictions is 'the loneliest endeavor in the world.' But history proves that women do not need to 'deify' themselves in the manner dictated by male logic; they have already created their own narratives within history. The true injustice lies in removing their names from history under the guise of 'being female,' falsely attributing to them the label of 'inability.' And when women do succeed, a new argument arises: the distinction has always been about winning or losing, not gender.

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