

The Image and Evolution of the Cinematic Body in Pre-modern, Modern and Post-modern Perspectives

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Abstract: With the development of Western body studies, the film body has also been included as an important research category; feminism, power discipline, and the body of desire are all important horizons in film body studies. Contemporary body studies are interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary and have multiple narrative and symbolic functions in film writing. With the method of textual analysis, this paper takes the socio-cultural composition as an entry point to discuss the different images and functional evolutions of the film body in the pre-modern, modern and post-modern contexts, respectively. In pre-modern society, nature has not yet been demystified, and the cinematic body exists as an aesthetically oriented corporeal body; modern society has been stamped with rationality, order, and authority since the Enlightenment, and the cinematic body has become a symbolic body, a consumed and aphasic Other. The post-modern society's questioning of rationality, rebellion against modernity, and consciousness of de-anthropocentricity have led the cinematic body to carry, on the one hand, fear of the loss of subjectivity and, on the other hand, a fascination with the usurped gods of creation. According to Bazán, cinema is all about placing the body in space. The body is matter, and cinema is the restoration of material reality. Therefore, cinema is the body, and this article synchronises the cinematic body's evolution with the body's evolution from a new perspective of social process and gives a macroscopic interpretation of the "evolving body".

Keywords: pre-modern, modern, post-modern, film body

1. Introduction

In terms of research content, the study of the body has a fairly long historical lineage. In the history of Western philosophy, there has always existed an opposition between consciousness and the body, with consciousness playing a significant role and being an important object of philosophical research, while the body has either been suppressed, regarded as the source of evil, or considered insignificant. Traditional Western theory has marginalized the body, a phenomenon that did not change until Nietzsche. In his case, the will to power is the body and the body is everything. Nietzsche influenced Foucault in many ways, including history, the subject, power, and the body [1].

In Foucault, the importance of the body is reflected in all kinds of social control mechanisms. Micro-power and disciplinary institutions act on people through the body to achieve the purpose of disciplining and controlling people. He then introduced the notion of 'spaces of power', examining

the body within the history of punishment, while Baudrillard, Guy Debord's social critique of the body, highlights the visual position of the body in the landscape of consumer societies. Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, incorporates the body into the phenomenological realm, where the body, as a tactile experience, has an important connective position between the image and the viewer. Lacan's mirror theory also starts from the body, and the mirrored self is also a body image, and related to it are the theory of the desired body and the theory of the gaze.

From the perspective of film semiotics, the body, as a non-verbal symbol, contains complex humanistic references, and from the perspective of film phenomenology, the body, as a source of perception, has an important connecting position between the image and the audience.

The current body research mainly focuses on body aesthetics, body sociology, body writing, body and technology, cross-cultural, body research, gender and body, and more. This paper selects three directions, body aesthetics, body politics, and body and technology, to structure the research framework.

From a research perspective, the terms "pre-modern," "modern," and "post-modern" are used without a clear chronological point in time, and they are usually used to describe different stages in the development of society, culture, and thought. The concept of "modernity" emerged in the 18th century during the Age of Enlightenment and intensified with the Industrial Revolution, scientific progress and political change. "Pre-modern" can be taken to refer to the period prior to this one, which may include the Middle Ages and Antiquity, when social, cultural, political and economic structures differed markedly from those of modern societies. The concept of "post-modernity" originated in the twentieth century to reveal the limits of modernity and present a critical view of modern societies and cultures, emphasising relativity, diversity, and heterogeneity. The formulation and development of these concepts involved several scholars and thinkers, including Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault, and others.

The division of pre-modern, modern and post-modern provides a clearer overall character and direction for this film study, and it is also an attempt to combine sociology and film analysis, which, to a certain extent, avoids the phenomenon of over-interpretation that is commonly found in the study of cinema texts. In this paper, we will use the method of textual analysis to study the films *The Life of Oharu*, *Sakuran*, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, *Lust*, *Caution*, *Lost in Beijing*, *The Summer Palace*, *Crimes of the Future*, *Rabid* and *TITANE* as the research texts, aiming to use society to interpret film and film to project society, and to form a continuous observation between the two.

2. Pre-modern Pastorals: The Aesthetic Body

The "pre-modern" refers to the historical period before the modern age. That was when the economic organisation was agrarian, the composition of society was organic, and the spirituality was classical. Marx Weber saw it as an age that had not yet been demystified. Nature was not yet demystified, and the relationship between human beings and nature was harmonious and intertwined. The body at this time also existed as natural flesh, unalienated. Periods that can be referenced and are more typical in film sources are the Edo period (1603-1868) in Japan and the medieval period in the West.

The origins of the Japanese kabukicho tradition can be traced back to the Edo period when the *tyonin* (a new class of wealthy, statusless citizens) replaced the culture dominated by samurai and monks in the Middle Ages, and became the creators of a new, vibrant urban culture. However, because of their low social status and lack of acceptance, they had to form a special society in *yuriku* (brothels), which was differed from the general society. They were characterised by a new aesthetic trend of violating moral traditions, challenging established family ethics, and seeking to transcend physical and spiritual freedom. During this period, the brothels in *Sakuran* were created, and the more

systematic Japanese aesthetics of the “way of the sex” were also formed. The secular body was given a metaphysical aesthetic orientation.

The body discourse has been given an interpretive aesthetic interpretation called “iki” by the Japanese philosopher Kuki Syuzou in accordance with the Edo period’s unique national character display. “Bitai” (Coquet), “Ikiji” (Similar to the spirit of Bushido), and “Akirame”(A state of Buddhism) are the three states that makeup “iki”, which is an organic integration of them. “Bitai” is a type of gender gravitation or implicit sexual tension that arises from the erroneous goal of subjugating the other sex, intensifies as men and women get close to one another, and vanishes when the goal is achieved. However, this possibility of dynamic proximity is always a possibility. “Ikiji” is comparable to the Bushido ideal, which is a robust stance against the other sex and is akin to “proud” and “backbone.” “Akirame” is a form of aesthetic reflection based on an aloof and detached mentality informed by the knowledge of self-destiny. The concept of “iki” denotes the aestheticisation and spiritualisation of the relationship between men and women [2].

The most oriental and feminine Japanese film master is Kenji Mizoguchi; he excels at portraying female characters full of “iki” with strong neo-realism and feminist colours and frequently reflects on traditional Japanese aesthetics. It is reflected in his *The Life of Oharu, A Geisha, Sisters of The Gion. The Life of Oharu* is adapted from Nishizuru Ihara’s novel “*The Lustful Generation Women*”, which features “the geisha woman” as the protagonist and tells the story of Oharu, a prostitute under the feudal etiquette system, who is miserable but does not miss her integrity in her life. In the image, Oharu’s body is wrapped in layers of vertical-patterned dark brown kimono, with white socks and wooden clogs, and only her neck is exposed in the light veil of the tent. The vertical-patterned kimono, the exposed neck, the grey, brown, and green clothing, and the negative residue of the gorgeous experience are all images of “iki”, but the truth of “iki” can only be seen in the enchanting, open smile, and in the tear stains of sincere, hot tears that have flowed through her eyes. After being sold to a brothel by her father, the rich whoremaster spill money all over the place, enjoying the vanity of the prostitutes who rush up to pick up the money, but only Oharu sits on the sidelines and watches coldly. When questioned by the whoremaster, she just says, “I am not a beggar”, and when she is insulted by the boss, she retorts “How dare you be so insolent with me”. This kind of confrontation between the “Ikiji” and the “Bitai” creates a tension that is mutually tugging at each other. In *Sakuran*, Mika Ninagawa stylistically recreates the Yuri of the Edo period, pointing the camera at the prostitutes and courtesan and completing the projection of themselves (prostitutes and courtesan) in the complicated flowers and swimming goldfish. From a young age, Sakuran was sold by her mother to Yoshiwara, where she was taught etiquette, music, and the koto, as well as how to please men, according to strict aesthetic standards. Ten years later, Sakuran has become the queen of Yoshiwara. Her body has the roundness and youthfulness of a young girl’s, with firm and full-coloured skin, pale skin, bare feet, and a slightly exposed neck, constituting a physical landscape of aesthetic meaning. However, when confronted with her lover’s questioning of her affections, she says, “Even though I made a vow and said I meant it, people still do not believe enough in prostitutes’ words.” Perhaps the idea of “iki” is born out of the decadence of the rotten.

The observation of the human body in the pre-modern West is particularly highlighted in art, whether it is painting or sculpture; the human body is always an important object of depiction, from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance and then to the seventeenth-century Baroque Caravaggio, all the depicted bodies are aesthetically meaningful and realistic sense of life. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* and *Girl with a Pearl Earring* show the social landscape of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, where the body was also a beautiful flesh with an aesthetic gaze. Both are formed in the art of painting the observation of the body, the former in the intimate contact between the painting and the painted, resulting in same-sex love; the latter shows the birth of the masterpieces of the Small Dutch Painting and the forbidden love behind it, in which the body serves as an important medium.

The body at this time, although deeply influenced by patriarchy, has not yet been alienated by technology and power, and it can be said that the pre-modern body image is still idyllic, mythic and stable.

3. Modern Repression: The Body Politic

Since the Enlightenment in the 18th century, human society has experienced the Industrial Revolution, Protestant ethics, modern science and democratic politics. The centrality and subjectivity of human beings have been established, and rationality and order have been exalted to the highest position. At this time, the composition of society is inorganic and atomised, the world is developing rapidly rather than being stable, and the relationship between human beings and nature has undergone a transformation in which nature has become the other to be used. At the same time, individual human beings begin to be alienated from each other, and modern humans often fall into a mood of loneliness, confusion and dissatisfaction. In such an authoritative society of grand narratives, the cinematic body gradually becomes a socio-cultural symbolic symbol, and becomes the consumed and aphasic Other. The body becomes the body of politics, social power regulates the struggling practices of the human body, “and the body becomes the target of pursuit for all kinds of power, which tries it, teases it, controls it, and produces it” [3].

In Taiwanese director Ang Lee's *Lust, Caution*, Wang Jiazhi's female body is the symbolic tool objectified under the grand narrative of statism and nationalism, embodied first and foremost in the expropriation of her body by the revolution as state power. In the film, Wang Jiazhi first joins a patriotic theatre troupe for a drama performance and feels unparalleled patriotic fervour in the audience's chants; this two-way gaze carries with it a kind of ideological hostage-taking, as Wang Jiazhi's body first becomes a performative symbol under the patriotic banner. After the team develops the motive to assassinate the traitor, Mr. Yi, Wang Jiazhi's body becomes a bargaining chip to lure Mr. Yi again. In order to better disguise herself as a married woman, Wang Jiazhi offers her first time by having sex with Liang Runsheng, the only person who has ever visited prostitutes, under the team's expectation. In the subsequent missions, the organisation ignores Wang Jiazhi's desperate state of mind and outlet for her emotions and only asks her to play the use of her body until the eradication of Mr. Yi. Since then, Wang Jiazhi's body is objectified and becomes a tool and means for the beautifully named revolution, a symbol sacrificed under the state's power. Secondly, embodied in the subjugation of her body by the phallus as male power, Mr Yi's violent plundering of Wang Jiazhi's body also violates of her power. Beauvoir once confessed, “the body is a situation, the body is a context” [4]. Gradually evolving, Wang Jiazhi's transformation unfolds as she shifts from passivity to activity. This transition is evidenced by her vocalisations and opposition, indicative of her progression towards a rational demeanor. This metamorphosis occurs within the framework of state influence and is catalysed by the liberation of her sensual desires. It's important to note, however, that this resistance is actualised through the dominance of male authority, highlighting the challenges the female form encounters within a patriarchal structure. Simultaneously, this subjugation encompasses a political aspect, paralleling the revolutionary failure portrayed in the theatrical production. Moreover, it establishes a sophisticated intertextual connection with director Ang Lee's artistic identity, crafting a skillful intertextual synergy.

Contemporary Chinese director Li Yu's *Lost in Beijing* shows a world of class exploitation, which has been unending since the birth of capitalism, while at the same time, consumerism has made its way into history. Baudrillard regarded the body as “the most beautiful consumer product” [5]. Under the lens of a female director, the female body becomes the carrier of exploitation. From the political economy perspective, Liu Pingguo's body as a foot-washing girl is firstly the body of labour, which creates and changes the world and also carries the economic significance generated by labour. Secondly, her body is also the body of desire, the ethical situation as the wife of An Kun, the wall-

painter, and the unethical situation as the object of sexual assault by Lin Dong, the boss, respectively. Further, as the body of power, any violence and objectification of the body involves a violation of power. Under the connotation of sexual politics, the rape of Liu Pingguo by Lin Dong represents a manifestation of oppression. Simultaneously, the monetary compensation provided to An Kun, aimed at resolving the incident, signifies an economic implication. This implication suggests that treating a woman as a man's possession fundamentally equates to trespassing upon a man's property. Furthermore, it underscores how the female body holds an economic attribute subject to quantitative exchange. After Liu Pingguo's accidental pregnancy, Lin Dong immediately changes his attitude and signs a sale and purchase agreement with An Kun for the ownership of the child, and the two become business partners as representatives of the husband's rights, while Liu Pingguo's acceptance is an acknowledgement of the logic of consumerism and the rules of the commodity economy of the woman's body under the husband's right, and the acceptance of the attributes of the woman's body's political economy, which simultaneously gives us a vision of both class exploitation and gender exploitation. In addition, besides the bodies of the characters in Liu Pingguo's play, the bodies of the stars are also the key to the attention paid to the film. The actors' bodies of desire are also economised and commodified under the attention of the mass media. Since then, the women's bodies in and out of the play have been formed to a certain degree of view under the logic of consumerism.

Lou Ye, China's sixth-generation director, is also extremely good at physical narratives, often focusing his camera on the marginalised people in the city, who are mentally independent and strong, but physically dependent on others. Unlike the vernacular narratives of fifth-generation directors, Lou Ye focuses his camera on the modern city, where individuals' alienation, loneliness and bitterness are expressed through the bodies of his characters. In *The Summer Palace*, the protagonist Yu Hong is withdrawn, silent, maverick, and not good at communicating with others and expressing her emotions. All her states of mind and thoughts are written in a diary, but the reader is only herself, but she will have intimate physical contact with her "boys" and make love without any morality. She says, "What is morality? Two people together, I think that's moral." She says, "Why am I always in a hurry to do that with you, my boys? It is because it is only in the doing of that thing that you understand that I am good. How many ways have I tried, but in the end, I settled on this extremely special, straightforward way." In the film, the body encapsulates the powerlessness inherent in emotion and language. The interaction of bodies becomes the avenue through which individuals entrust their feelings, undergo catharsis, express longing, and engage in exploration. The body transforms into a direct conduit for navigating the world, supplanting language as the medium through which characters connect with the external environment. Consequently, the body evolves into an instrument for fulfilling desires. According to Lacan, "desire is the desire of the Other, desire points to scarcity" [6], and in the search for fulfilment, the subject has to acknowledge and identify with the desire of the Other, which undoubtedly does not exacerbate the alienation of the subject in modern society.

According to Baudrillard, "modern society is the era of dissolving reality and eliminating the Other; men and women are only phantoms of each other, and people cannot reconcile with their bodies, themselves, the Other, and nature, and they cannot reconcile the male and the female, the good and the evil" [7]. This is perhaps the sore point of the human syndrome in modern society.

4. Postmodern Subversion: The Post-human Body

Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, postmodernist thinking emerged, questioning the modern society where rationality is the guiding principle, arguing that the world is fluid, without order or authority, and criticising and deconstructing the ways of thinking such as subjectivity, wholeness, centrality and homogeneity that have emerged in the process of modernisation, arguing that people should take part in such a chaotic and disorganised society instead of attempting to establish a new god of "rationality".

Post-humanism, a “post-modern” approach to human beings, emerged. Post-humanism attempts to go beyond the traditional anthropocentric view and explore the possible future evolution of human beings and the possibility of transcending human beings in technological development and evolution. At the same time, the post-human body deconstructs the Cartesian view of mind-body dualism, resulting in a ternary structure of body, mind, and technology. In the history of the former, the body is always the suppressed and despised party, while in the post-human body, the most prominent manifestation is the return of the suppressed. Mechanical body, genetic modification, virtual body, clone body, and fusion body are all technological modifications based on the body, which are permeated with the subversive power of the post-modern era.

Compared to the aesthetics of the body under the pre-modern traditional culture, the transformation of the postmodern body aesthetic paradigm dominated by the West seems to be more interesting. Canadian director David Cronenberg, who is famous for his body horror, has created sequences that show people one body mutation, body transgression, body disorder, body disintegration, and body fusion after another. “The alienation of these bodies expresses human fear of instinctive desire; fear of subject loss and fear of gender anxiety” [8]. The instinctive desires of the body are seen as dangerous following the suppression of the body by the rational civilisation of modern society to control it more effectively. In the previous work *Rabid*, Rose’s body, which has grown a penis in her armpit due to the recurrence of the rabies virus, is the embodiment of monstrous desires, as she penetrates and sucks blood in her contact with others, while the mad dog disease spreads rapidly as a result. At the end of the film, Rose’s stiff body lies in a rubbish heap in the corner of an apartment building, torn by mad dogs. Then her body is thrown by the anti-epidemiological personnel into a rubbish truck for strangulation. The film is a pessimistic demonstration of the fatal end of human beings when they are controlled by instinctive desires that are seen as dangerous. In addition, the perception of the body as a boundary isolates the outside world and protects the stability of one’s identity, and the destruction of the body’s boundaries points to the crisis of subject loss and the anxiety of identity loss. David Cronenberg’s new film *Crimes of the Future* shows a body invaded by technology. The film tells the story of a future in which the accelerated evolutionary syndrome of human beings is spreading rapidly, with new and unexpected organs growing spontaneously in the body, and the process of removing these organs evolved into a performance art spectacle by artist Saul Tenser and his partner. Here, the constant growth of new organs signifies the loss of control over one’s body, while the removal of foreign organs symbolises the return of control to the subject. The dark and treacherous style of the images conveys an emotion of fear, the fear of losing control over one’s own body and not knowing how to interconnect with one’s own body. According to Foucault, the body disciplined by the discourse of power has political implications, and politics is a form of control. In the film, the harvesting of organs by capitalist forces is also about the power to control and proclaim the body, and the death of bodies that are technologically altered and unable to adapt to the new body represents the existential crisis of the new order in the existing society.

Finally, the deconstruction of gender in post-modern society has on the one hand, enriched the diversity of human existential patterns and, on the other hand, intensified people’s confusion about their identities. The anxiety about gender is reflected in the non-male, non-female, bisexual and homoerotic bodies in David Cronenberg’s *Videodrome*, *Naked Lunch*, *Rabid*, and *M. Butterfly*. In *Videodrome*, a vagina grows on the man’s body, a penis grows on the woman’s body in *Rabid*, and the blurring of the boundaries between male and female gender identities is aesthetically demonstrated in *M. Butterfly*. Haraway points out that “the post-human cyborg body signifies the uncertainty of the origins of the human race, the ambiguity and arbitrariness of male and female genders, and is a deconstruction of the traditional binaries” [9], gives a feminist perspective to post-human body studies. Julia Ducournau, a French female director deeply influenced by David Cronenberg, on the other hand, expressed her misgivings about female identity in *TITANE* through

Alexia's technologically invaded body. After being implanted with a titanium microchip, Alexia's half-human, half-mechanical, post-human body gradually tends to be a neutral, genderless character trait, and the instability of this identity is also manifested in the organic and inorganic fusion body. The repressed and alienated female body in engine oil, with its lack of sexuality and confused sexual orientation, reflects to some extent the human fear of instinctual desire and gender anxiety, while at the end of the film, Alexia is born a woman through pregnancy. In the stagnant, almost snotty face we see the return of the body, and thus the transcendence of the boundaries of identity.

The history of modern technological development is accelerated and explosive, the history of the evolution of the human body outside the body, a period in which one feels the alienation of emotions during technological expansion, whereas in the broken, deconstructed, and hybridised post-human era, "it is the history of the evolution of the body inside itself under the dominance of technology" [10], in which one feels the fear and rejection of the power of the alien. The post-human body has always been a combination of human fascination and fear of usurping the God of creation, anticipation and anxiety about the mingling of humanity with the exoteric, and rhapsodising and worrying about the constant dissipation of the boundaries of the corporeal body [10].

5. Conclusions

Based on the analysis of the film texts, which are based on the social characteristics of the pre-modern, modern and post-modern societies, and the research perspectives of power discipline, feminism, desire for the body, and the logic of consumption, this paper draws the following conclusions:

In the pre-modern agrarian society, closely integrated with nature, the body was also a part of nature, a fleshly body with a sense of life. It was given an aesthetic tendency of spiritualisation, which was particularly typical in the Edo period of Japan, where Kabuki was the popular culture, and in the Western medieval period, where the human body was painted and sculpted as an artistic expression and afterwards. Although the aesthetic bodies in *The Life of Oharu*, *Sakuran*, *A Geisha*, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, and *Girl with a Pearl Earring* have been influenced by patriarchy to a certain extent, they have not yet been alienated by technology and power. It can be argued that pre-modern body images are still idyllic, mythic, and stable.

In modern industrial societies, rationality, established since the Enlightenment, is the central concept of modernity, a period in which people have endured the rapid development of technology and the rapid expansion of state power, in which the natural sciences and modern politics have re-structured people's understanding of the world and their identification with the forms of social organisation in such a way as to make them no longer believe in the mythic picture of the classical era. In such a society with an authoritative order of grand narratives, the cinematic body gradually becomes a socio-cultural symbolic symbol with political implications, disciplined by power, and even becomes the consumed, disembodied Other.

Postmodernist thinking, on the other hand, is a subversion of modern society's order, authority and rationality, which critically deconstructs sameness, subjectivity and anthropocentrism. The creation of the post-human body, as a production of desire and as a specimen of aestheticised reproduction of humanity, is the result of the disciplining and aestheticisation of human society and expresses humanity's aesthetic aspirations and intrinsic desires. In terms of religious logic, these post-human bodies spawned by the revolutionary technology of biology essentially demonstrate mankind's fascination with usurping the God of creation, and the picture of body horror in the film interprets the fear behind this fascination. The post-human body carries the fear of the intrusion of alien forces, the anxiety of losing subjectivity, and the doubt of identity.

This paper has a certain revelation and originality for combining film sociology and body research. However, this paper still has some limitations due to the length, the selection of film examples is typical, and it does not do a more systematic elaboration from the perspective of general historical

theory. The sociology of the body believes that the difference between the body and the flesh lies in the fact that the body is socially constructed, and future film studies can start from this perspective, linking the evolution of the body with the social process and making more systematic, in-depth and universal conclusions of the principle class.

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