

# *Exploration of growth in feminist films: the evolution of subject matter and the presentation of female individual awakening*

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**Abstract:** With the continuous progress of the social economy, the social status of women has also undergone significant changes. With the further promotion of the women's rights movement, the subject matter and content of feminist films show a more diversified trend, and feminist films have experienced a course from the disappearance of the subject to the awakening of self-consciousness. In recent years, more and more films have tried to deeply explore the growth process of women, show the life experience of individual women in the form of films, highlight the struggle of women in society and compete for the right to speak. Digging deeply into the development process of feminist films can further analyze the characteristics and changes of female films in different periods and cultural backgrounds, which is conducive to a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of feminist films on audience cognition, social concepts and cultural identity. Through this study, we can better understand the evolution of women in film art, as well as the significance and enlightenment of feminist films to contemporary society.

## **1. The Evolution of Feminist Film**

Feminist film refers not only to film works directed by female directors, but also to films with the characteristics of feminist film theory, focusing on the existence of women and telling women's ideas and self-consciousness.<sup>[1]</sup> Traditional films are influenced by patriarchal consciousness, and women are either absent from the screen, or they play an unconscious "vase." Feminist films are very eager to break this form, trying to extend the awakened female consciousness to the film, enhance the voice of women in the film, and seek the possibility of women at different levels. When it comes to the birth of feminist films, we must mention several large-scale feminist movements, which provide the basic conditions for the birth of feminist films.

From the late 19th century to the early 20th century, the first large-scale movement to demand women's rights broke out. This movement was called the first wave of feminism, which focused on the acquisition of women's political rights, such as women's right to vote, education, and employment. The formation of this feminist movement was mainly rooted in the low status of women in the labour market. Although this movement did not delve deeply into the complex

mechanism of the formation of women's issues, it laid down the struggle goal of the feminist movement and was an influential women's social practice movement.

In 1949, French existentialist Simone de Beauvoir published *The Second Sex*. In the book, de Beauvoir used a lot of space to describe the living conditions of women. For example, women have long played the role of housewives. Women still need to do housework during their menstrual period. In order to stay married, women had to dress and maintain themselves to attract their husbands. Women also have to give birth and raise children, which greatly consumes women's energy. Beauvoir put forward the subject and object theory in the *Second Sex*, pointing out that men, as the subject, have always occupied the dominant position, and the male subject status also determines the objective "situation" of women. The theory of subject and object proposed by de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* played an enlightening role in the germination of the women's rights movement.

After World War II, society began to construct a code of women's values, encouraging women to become "happy housewives." In the 1960s, women scholars of the time launched the second feminist movement, and the critique of sexism, sexism, and men's rights centrism became the core of this wave.

After the rise of the second feminist wave, feminist film theory emerged and quickly formed a wave. In the 1970s, feminist film theory gradually emerged, and major Rosen, Molly Haskell, Claire Johnston, and other scholars began to explore feminist film theory.

Due to the influence of ideology at that time, the female image in the film only plays the role of a visual symbol. The real founder of feminist film is Laura Mulvey, a British feminist film theorist, director and producer. In her article *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Film*, she discusses the visual pleasure caused by the presence of women in films from the perspective of psychoanalysis. The publication of this article officially marks the beginning of the transfer of feminist film theory to the internal operating mechanism of films. Since then, feminist film theory has entered a new phase.

## **2. Three Stages of Western Feminist Film**

Western feminist film theory has undergone three stages, namely, the stage of image criticism, the stage of narrative structure criticism and the stage of cultural criticism.

### **2.1. Image Criticism Stage**

American film theorist Nick Brown summed up the early feminist films: "First, most American films were made by and for men, and women became a spectacle; second, from a narrative point of view, men in American films are active actors, while women are supporting actors." In his discussion, we can understand that Western culture is basically patriarchal, and Hollywood films make female images become objects of pornographic consumption. To criticize this argument, feminist film theorists focus on analyzing images of women in mainstream films, such as Majery Rosen and Molly Haskell.

In her book *Popcorn Venus*, Majery Rosen argues that Hollywood films, as the product of patriarchal ideology, have adopted a series of grossly unfair stereotypes about women when reflecting their lives. Majery Rosen believes that in Hollywood movies, the female image is absolutely reduced to two extremes, namely angels and demons. Women in films are either empty characters with beautiful looks but no connotation, or they appear in front of the audience in an evil face, which is a deliberate distortion of the female image in the film. In *From Awe to Rape*, Molly Haskell distilled the female images from the early silent films to the popular films of the 1960s, which are mainly divided into "sacrifice", "suffering", "choice" and "competition". Molly Haskell argues that patriarchal ideology leads men to want to embody their fantasies through images of

female celebrities. Majery Rosen and Molly Haskell both pointed out that the stereotyped female images in Hollywood films are a distortion of the real female images in reality and tend to have a negative impact on female audiences. Of course, feminist film theories in this period relied too much on the analysis of female images in film texts, lacked research on media characteristics, and had a certain disconnect with female audiences, so theories at this time mostly stayed on the surface and did not make deeper interpretations.

## 2.2. Stage of Narrative Structure Criticism

In the 1970s, feminist film criticism absorbed theoretical resources such as semiotics, ideological analysis, and psychoanalytic criticism, and began to focus on the relationship between film and audience, exploring the reasons for the formation of women's subject and object status in films shot from a male perspective, rather than focusing on female images. During this period, Laura Mulvey is a typical representative. In her article *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Film*, she uses the psychological mechanism of psychoanalysis to explain the reasons for the audience's visual pleasure.

Laura Mulvey makes it clear at the beginning of *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* that "the purpose of this essay is to discover psychoanalytically where and how the charm of cinema is due to the preexisting patterns of charm that already operate within the individual subject and the social structure that shapes it."<sup>[2]</sup> For a long time, psychoanalytic theory has mostly adopted the relationship between film and dream and the "Oedipus complex" in film criticism, but Laura Mulvey really takes a feminist stand and chooses to explain the charm of film from the psychoanalytic gender dimension.

Laura Mulvey calls film viewing "voyeuristic" and "worshipping." Voyeuristic viewers have a kind of controlling gaze when watching movies. This concept originates from Freud's description in "Three Theories of Gender", that is, voyeurs obtain satisfaction by voyeurizing the secrets of others, while women in movies are mostly under the "peep" of men. It becomes the object of the audience's desire, and thus produces the visual pleasure of "voyeurism", and when the audience gets the visual pleasure, it will also project the self-image onto the screen, making this pleasure develop into the pleasure of self-voyeurism, that is, narcissism. This theory is based on Lacan's mirror theory. The worshipping audience will have a higher evaluation of women on screen, and even produce worship of female movie stars. According to Laura Mulvey, moviegoers generally oscillate between two viewing modes: voyeurism and worship.

It is not difficult to see that when Laura Mulvey discusses "visual pleasure", she assumes that the film audience is mainly male, and takes Freud's theory of sexual instinct and Lacan's mirror theory as her theoretical weapons. In her article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Film", she does not discuss the problem of female audience visual pleasure at all, and she fails to explain the female audience's movie viewing experience. The establishment and research of female subjective "visual pleasure" is still a long process. Of course, it is undeniable that Laura Mulvey's criticism of mainstream films and their male supremacy has opened a new period of film research and feminist film practice.

## 2.3. Stage of Cultural Criticism

After the 1980s, feminist film theory began to pay attention to various complex elements within the cultural system, and cultural reflection on gender differences. During this period, feminist films moved from the earliest exploration of gender differences to the exploration of all aspects of social life. The representative figure at this stage is Teresa de Lauridis, and some scholars represented by her began to deny Lacan's mirror theory and Freud's psychoanalysis theory, believing that although these theories have certain exploratory value, they are still the embodiment of male discourse power,

and in essence, they still safeguard the ideology of male power. Teresa de Lauridis's view can be seen in her article "Guerrilla Walking the Middle Line – Feminist Films in the 1980s" that feminist films should not only be differentiated in terms of gender, but should be extended to class, race, color, age and other fields, and its research should be carried out at all levels of social life. Only in this way can we have a more accurate grasp of women's autonomy and subjectivity.

From the Disney princess series animation, we can see the different attempts of Western feminist films on female images. In the early Disney princess animation, the princess often appears in the form of being saved. The most typical animations are Snow White and Sleeping Beauty. Snow White needs the prince's kiss to save her after taking the poisoned apple. The princess in Sleeping Beauty also waits for the prince to save her after she sleeps. This is a state of "female gaze," in which women are merely appendices of male consciousness and do not have the right to make their own choices. In Disney's golden age in the 1990s, women were no longer seen as appendages to male behavior, but transformed into princesses to save princes. The most typical animations were The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast and Mulan, in which the little mermaid saved the prince after he fell into the water. Belle in Beauty and the Beast redeemed the Beast with love and restored the Beast to the image of a prince. In Mulan, Mulan not only saves Li Xiang, but also saves the country. After the development of the Disney princess series theme, the male image has even been diluted, such as Disney's highest-grossing princess series film "Frozen", which mainly shows the sisterhood and redefines true love. From Disney princess animation alone, we can see that western feminist films have gradually attached importance to women's subjective status.

China is increasingly influenced by Western feminist film theory. In domestic women's films, it is not difficult to see the struggle made by women as subjects, and women speak out for their unfair treatment. More and more films in China are paying attention to the growth of women.

### **3. Exploration of the Growth of Chinese Feminist Films**

#### **3.1. The Spread and Influence of Western Feminist Theory in China**

With the improvement of the level of economic development in our country, the status of women has improved significantly. With the deepening of western feminist film theory and the attention of Chinese academic circles to the study of women's issues, the diversification of Chinese female film themes has also been promoted. From the end of the 20th century to the mid-1990s, some works on female film studies were translated into Chinese. The Second Sex, a pioneer of the Western feminist movement, was translated into Chinese and published by Tao Tiezhu in 1998, which expanded the thinking of Chinese feminist film theory research. Another example is Nick Brown's "Review of Film Theory History" and Gina Mattina's "Where Are Chinese Women's Films Going?" Peter Kramer's Hollywood and Female Audiences Since the 1960s and other scholars' works have also been translated into Chinese, which has caused a great cultural impact on Chinese feminist films and won more scholars' attention. In 2001, Sun Shaoyi translated and Zhou Lei wrote the famous book The Original Passion: Vision, Sexuality, Ethnography and Contemporary Chinese Cinema, a work devoted to the study of the films of Chinese directors of the fifth generation, integrates cultural studies and post-colonial history into the discussion of feminist films, and analyzes the plight of women in film texts by taking the films of directors of the fifth generation, such as Yellow Earth, Old Well and Red Sorghum, as examples. This paper explores the relationship between the original image of women and Chinese sexuality. In 2006, Hugh Solheim's book Alienation of Passion: An Introduction to Feminist Film was translated into Chinese, which combed the results of feminist film theory from the 1870s to the 1890s, exploring everything from women being "stared at" by men to women's fantasies, fears, and differences.

### 3.2. The Localization Reconstruction of Chinese Feminist Films

Chinese scholars have also carried out localization construction of feminist films. Ying Yuli's *History of Women's Films*, Qin Xiqing's *Western Feminist Films: Theory, Criticism and Practice*, and Liu Qin's *Growth After Transplantation -- A Glimpse into Feminist Film Criticism Since the New Era*, etc., have opened up a new path for Chinese feminist films in theory, criticism and practice.

In Chinese women's films, women's growth can be clearly seen, and women's films express to the audience the life experience and personality charm that women can show as independent individuals. From the perspective of the history of Chinese film development, women have gradually participated in the film from being unable to appear in front of the camera, and women's films not only have women as protagonists, but also show the content of creation from the perspective of women, breaking the male-dominated film situation and the single film perspective to a large extent. The ideological connotation of Chinese domestic films has been more diversified and rich in development.<sup>[3]</sup>

In 1987, *Ghost Love*, directed by Huang Shuqin and hailed by many critics as China's first truly "female film", set in the male-dominated environment of Peking Opera and through the life of Qiu Yun, a female Peking Opera artist known at home and abroad as Zhong Kui, expresses women's search for self-consciousness and their commitment to what they love.

*In Suzhou River*, directed by Lou Ye, Peony was originally a naive girl who did not know much about the world. Her father often met with different women at home and asked the hero Ma Da to take Peony away. Lacking her father's love, Peony gradually fell in love with Ma Da, but the motor used her trust to kidnap her. When Peony jumps into the dirty Suzhou River and becomes the "mermaid" in the Suzhou River, her female consciousness is completely awakened.

*Angels Wear White*, a film with a strong feminist color directed by Wen Yan, a female director from Taiwan, covers the plight of women of many ages. The film examines the incidents of the president of the Chamber of Commerce sexually assaulting two girls, Xiao Wen and Xiao Xin, from a female perspective, and shapes different female images: Xiao Wen, a young girl, was sexually assaulted by her father, a high-ranking official, and her family was bullied and seduced by officials and lied to by investigators. Incident witness working sister millet to keep a job to choose to hide the truth, later hurt by violence, and finally wake up to tell the truth. The content reflected in the film is the current reality of abuse of women. In real life, victims of sexual assault often suffer pressure from the abuser or public opinion, so they choose to remain silent. Wen Yan, the director of *Angels wearing white*, keenly discovered this social phenomenon, deeply concerned about the individual fate of women in social reality, and integrated the theme of female survival with the theme of realism, leaving the audience to think about how to understand and care for women.

Aija Chang's *"Blind Date"* features three female characters: middle-aged professional Yue Huiying, young daughter Weiwei and waiting for the lover's Zu, three generations of women around the "move the grave", a series of conflicts. Zhang Aijia played Yue Huiying after his mother's death determined to move his father's grave in the countryside back to the city with his mother to be buried together, but the father's original match Zu strongly opposed. Yue Huiying is on her way to "bury her parents together", while being tortured by their increasingly estranged relationship with her husband. Young spirited daughter Weiwei can't understand mother Yue Huiying's practices and ideas, and her mother broke out in conflict many times, and even ran away from home. Vivian in the TV work inadvertently "move the grave" things revealed, leading to family affairs becoming a matter of public concern, TV people continue to Vivian grandfather cemetery to crouch, also invited to the TV station to record the program, the emotional collapse of the program, mother Yue Huiying more embarrassed, which aggravated the conflict between Yue Huiying and Vivian mother and

daughter. Vivian and her boyfriend's feelings also suffered a crisis of trust. In such an encounter Vivian on the grandfather generation of the Zu produced a feeling of dependence. The three women in the film have experienced persistence and confusion, constantly reconciling with their lovers, families, and themselves, in search of self-identity and their position in gender relations. The film shows the different growth and persistence of three generations of women, explores the difficulties and disciplines encountered in the process of women's growth from the perspective of women's development, and fills the gap in women's life experience through the lens.<sup>[4]</sup>

Produced and starring Yao Chen, and written and directed by Teng Cong Cong, *Send me to the cloud* (Figure 1), sportray Sheng Nan, an independent and motivated woman who longs for true love but remains alone. In an accident, Sheng male learned that he has ovarian cancer and needs surgery, but the father of the original family derailed. The naive mother can't rely on her dislike of work to raise surgery. After the protagonist, Sheng male learned that he was suffering from ovarian cancer, compared to the survival problem, but more worried about whether he would lose the unique characteristics of the ovary. In the fear of death and female characteristics are deprived of dual push. Sheng male really began to face their own body and desire, she decided to embark on a journey of courtship, experience real sex. After meeting Liu Guangming and having love for him, she expressed it directly and invited Liu Guangming, which is a direct look at self-desire. After Liu Guangming was scared away, Sheng male did not give up the pursuit of lust, but instead turned his eyes to friends four hairs, and after satirizing four hairs, masturbated. This is also a bold breakthrough for the Chinese screen, and female desire is completely released at this moment.



Figure 1: Send me to the clouds

Chinese films have made great progress. Films can show women's desires, struggles and opinions from a women's perspective, present women's problems in current social life, and speak for women. It is believed that the continuous development of feminism will continuously promote the innovation and progress of feminist films.

#### 4. Conclusions

With the continuous development of feminist thought, it is believed that feminist films will continue to innovate and progress. This trend will further stimulate creators to delve deeper into women's topics and provide audiences with more rich and thought-provoking works. Through film, women's voices will be heard and society will have a deeper understanding of the concept of gender equality. In conclusion, the vigorous development of feminist films has brought new thinking and

inspiration to society, indicating that this field will continue to contribute to the development of women and social change in the future.

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