

A Study of the Body Narrative in the Film Portrait de la Jeune Fille en Feu from a Feminist Perspective

Lanxin Guo^{1,a,*}

¹*International Business School, Chongqing Technology and Business University, Chongqing, China*
a. guolanxinsylvia@outlook.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: This article analyses the body narrative in the film Portrait de la Jeune Fille en Feu from a feminist perspective, exploring the gendered power structures implicit in the female characters' bodily expressions and discussing how it constructs and reflects feminist theories. The article reviews the development of feminist theory, emphasises the importance of body narrative theory and its application in film studies, and chooses the film Portrait de la Jeune Fille en Feu as the object of study. Through textual analysis and feminist critical theory, this study dissects the body narratives of the female characters to reveal how visual language and symbols shape the body's position in gendered power relations. It is found that the female body narratives in the film are not only an expression of subjectivity, but also a response to social power structures, demonstrating the deep connection between gender, power and self-identity.

Keywords: body narrative, Portrait de la Jeune Fille en Feu, feminist, female body narrative

1. Introduction

As an important form of cultural expression, film is not only a means of entertainment, but also an important channel for reflecting social concepts. Feminist perspectives provide a new framework for film interpretation, exploring complex gender issues by focusing on the existence status, power relations and body image of female characters. Taking the film Portrait de la Jeune Fille en Feu as an example, this study delves into the expression of body narratives in cinema, in the hope of enriching feminist film studies to a certain extent. In the past few decades, feminist film studies have gradually developed. Laura Mulvey's theory of visual pleasure reveals the phenomenon of the male gaze and the objectification of women in cinema, and she uses psychoanalysis as a critical tool to point out that the audience is controlled by the "economy of the gaze", which allows them to be conditioned by the media to be male, while "women are simultaneously looked at and shown in their traditional nudity-fetish roles, and their appearance is coded as intensely visually and erotically contagious in order to speak of them as having the connotations of being looked at [1]." Researchers such as Margaret Fuller and Jane Adams explore how cultural signs and symbols in film construct dominant perceptions of women through a cultural feminist perspective. These theories provide a foundation for understanding gender in the film.

With the emergence of postmodern feminism, film studies gained new perspectives. Judith Butler's theory of gender performance emphasises that gender is socially constructed, not biologically determined, and that the body and discourse acts together to construct gender. She states, the body is

not merely material, but the ongoing materialisation of identity. One does not simply have a body, but more importantly one performs(do) one's own body [2]. This theory has had a profound impact on deconstructing the gender identities of characters in the film. At the same time, post-structuralist feminism has highlighted the position of the body in power relations, revealing the body as a site where gendered power operates. Adopting a feminist framework, this study selects the film *Portrait de la Jeune Fille en Feu* as the object of study to explore its unique expression of the body narrative.

Portrait de la Jeune Fille en Feu, directed by French directress Céline Sciamma, tells the story of Marianne, a painter in 18th-century France, who is commissioned by the mother of the aristocratic young lady Héloïse to paint her without her realising it, in order to send the portrait to a Milanese merchant whom she has never met, but who is arranged to marry Héloïse. Héloïse is angry at this arrangement, and in the course of the painting, the two heroines gradually fall in love with each other, but are ultimately separated by an inescapable destiny. The film deliberately eschews the male perspective to create a female utopia of physical freedom and liberation. But even so, in a patriarchal society, the female characters in the film are still unable to escape from oppression, and ultimately have to compromise with their fate. Through in-depth analysis of this film, we can explore the multiple dimensions and profound meaning of female body narrative, which not only echoes the development of feminist theory, but also highlights the explicit application of the theory of body narrative in research, thus refracting and spreading socio-cultural and social significance, and forming a unique and deep narrative[3], and then understand the innovative expression of body narrative in feminist film. The purpose of this paper is to explore how to interpret body narratives in films from a feminist perspective, and how such narratives highlight gender politics and social change, to provide new perspectives and directions of thinking for feminist film studies, and at the same time to enhance the understanding of film as a cultural phenomenon.

2. Methods

Qualitative analysis: through an in-depth review of the film text, key plot points and dialogue were extracted to identify the ways in which the female figure is presented and to set the initial tone of the research.

Contextual analysis: Placing the film plot in social, historical and cultural contexts and analysing the changes and development of the female figure in these contexts, focusing on the impact of different periods and cultures on the body narrative. In this analytical process, Deleuze's perspective provides important theoretical support. He argues that emotions are body-to-body touches and encounters that are a kind of generation. Psychologists define moods as primitive feelings and feelings as higher level of emotions. In film, we see feelings as special reactions to the world by people with their own psychological experiences such as happiness, anger, sadness and joy[4]. This perspective helps us to understand the expression of feelings carried in the body narratives of female figures and their variations in different social, historical and cultural contexts.

Comparative Analysis: Comparison of *Portrait de la Jeune Fille en Feu*'s portrayal of women with the feminist works of other male directors, in order to reveal the individuality of the directress and the ways in which feminism is represented in different films.

3. Body Narrative and Various Film Expression Methods

In the art of film, the interaction between body narrative and other elements plays a crucial role in the portrayal of female image. Scenes, costume design, music, and other elements of the film correspond to the body narrative, and work together to create a depiction of a complex, multidimensional image of women. In the process of perceiving and executing these practical or intellectual skills, our attention is shifted from those internal processes (the proximal terms such as character's inner world,

emotional changes, etc.) to the nature of the external things (such as the distal terms such as the scene layout, details of the costumes, and the music melody in the film). Moreover, it is only on the basis of the presentation of these external things that we can become more deeply aware of the existence and significance of internal processes. In the words of Michael Polanyi, therefore, the transfer of bodily experience to perceived external things may at this point become an instance of meaning moving away from us, and we find that, to some extent, they are all presented as tacit knowledge[5]. It is this interweaving and interaction of tacit knowledge that allows the image of women in the film to be vividly and solidly presented to the viewer.

3.1. Body portrayal

One of the core means of portraying the image of female characters in the film is body language. *Portrait de la Jeune Fille en Feu* vividly demonstrates the existence and actual status of women in a specific social context through the meticulous portrayal of the body. In the film, the plight of Sophie, the maid, who is accidentally pregnant, shows the constraints on women's reproductive freedom in the 18th century French society. Unable to have a legal abortion, she can only try various physically painful methods to terminate the pregnancy. Through delicate body portrayals, especially Sophie's painful expressions and twisted body, the film vividly shows her suffering, and then reflects the tragic reality of deprivation of reproductive rights and freedom that women generally face in society. It is worth paying attention to the fact that "image analysis is the first element in interpreting a film" [6], and as the core of the narrative ideogram of a film, there are various ways in which the image frame conveys information. In the film *Portrait de la Jeune Fille en Feu*, direct meaning factors such as the actresses' body language and implicit meanings such as screen layout and camera editing combinations[7] are intertwined to form the rich connotation of the film. It is this in-depth analysis and use of body language that enables the film to more accurately portray the female figure. Therefore, body language, as one of the core methods of portraying women's image in films, is of great significance. It can not only show women's living situation and emotional world vividly, but also arouse the public's in-depth thinking and concern about the issues of gender equality and women's rights.

3.2. Body and Expression

The film begins with Marianne, the painter, having to paint Héloïse's portrait to please her fiancé, whom Héloïse has never met, and who is at this point the very agent of the male gaze. All she has to do is paint Héloïse to look like an eligible wife, and such a piece of creation possesses almost no subjectivity whatsoever. And Héloïse, in revolt against the unequal power relationship that Marianne represents at this point, refuses to smile while being observed all the time, or even appears to be restraining her anger. Her limbs are stiffly upright, conveying her anger and resistance to the arranged marriage. This kind of method of revealing the inner world through subtle body movements and expressions is just like the character division and stylized techniques in Chinese opera performances. In Chinese opera, characterisation is not a simple reproduction of one's own personality, but a generalisation and refining of the character through the division of characters, and the use of stylized performance methods to regulate and shape the character. This kind of programme not only shapes the characters reasonably and suitably, but also keeps the performance under the basic aesthetic framework of the opera, so that the actors can follow the rules and create the characters. It is also because of this normative and inherited nature of the opera formula that it can be practiced and performed, and with the fixedness of its technique and the beauty of its alterable form, it creates figurative images of the characters, which are acknowledged and well received by the audience [8]. Similarly, in the film, the female characters, with their subtle body movements and expressions, show

in vivid detail the complexities and struggles of their inner worlds. These non-verbal expressions not only enrich the characterisation, but also provide a way for the audience to have a deeper understanding of the female characters.

3.3. Costumes

When Marianne first paints Héloïse, in order to express her own resistance and anger, Héloïse, who is supposed to sit across from the painter, is always absent, and Marianne can only paint against a gorgeous green dress, carefully arranging each and every pleat of the dress and tracing the nuances of light and shadow. But at this point, this splendid dress is just an exquisite hollow shell to please the male gaze, so Marianne can never depict the real version of Héloïse in her own mind. Similarly, “La Spirale”, a female artists group founded by Charlotte Calmis in France in 1972, held similar views, expressing their dissatisfaction with female art created under male domination. They sought an intercultural, more authentic and essential female voice, liberating themselves by unleashing a deeper “cosmic” energy source and writing an inner dialogue on white paper. For Calmis, this writing exercise is not only similar to the Surrealists’ “automatic writing”, but it is also a gendered practice, as it awakens women’s latent, untapped creative energies. As Céline Sciamma, the directress of this film, is trying to express, it is only in the pure space that breaks through the male perspective and focuses on the desires of the female subject that female artists like Marianne and Calmis’s “La Spirale” Group can truly realize the freedom and authenticity of their creations.

3.4. Image Composition

The most important turning point in the film is the departure of Héloïse’s mother, who is the mouthpiece of the patriarchy, leaving only three young women in the house - Héloïse, Marianne and Sophie, the maid. There are no male characters in this section of the film, and the three girls, no longer formal, sorrowful figures in a painting, are suddenly able to speak to each other openly and without inhibitions: “Have you ever tasted love?” Céline Sciamma, the directress, uses the isolation of time and space to create a female utopia that is completely divorced from the male gaze. In this utopia, women’s bodies are not only the fundamental source of all their consciousness and actions, but also the core of their capacity for expression[9], where the language and postures of the body become the cornerstone of their communication and expression. Without men, then the patriarchal-based hierarchy dissolve. The film presents this ideal in a small depth-of-field shot: the lady, the painter and the maid each occupy a third of the frame; the maid embroiders, the painter pours wine, the lady cuts and washes vegetables, doing things that do not seem to correspond to their status in the patriarchal hierarchy, while the composition conveys a sense of balance and tranquillity, a sense of a female utopia in which each woman is free to express herself without male scrutiny or constraints.

3.5. Soundtrack

The soundtrack is mainly soothing classical music, but in the middle of the film, when the two heroines look at each other across the campfire, a purely vocal a cappella is used, with rising and falling female voices singing a rising melody through short repetitive phrases that climb up Héloïse’s dress as the campfire blazes on. Their faces sway and burn in the flames, their mutual enquiring gazes are confirmed at this moment, when the emotion reaches its peak as the chant grows in intensity. This is the highest point of the emotional intensity of the two heroines in the whole film, through the weak to strong pure vocal soundtrack and burning dress to express the strong and uncontrollable but unable to express the emotions between the two characters, and their destiny under the patriarchal society is doomed to not be able to get what they want, the audience can more intuitively feel the pain, happiness and the pursuit of women, so as to enhance the attention and understanding to the fate of women.

4. Conclusion

This study approaches the body narrative in the film *Portrait de la Jeune Fille en Feu* from a feminist perspective. Through a meticulous interpretation of the way the female characters' bodies are presented in the film, and an in-depth exploration of the interweaving of information and socio-cultural and power relations contained in the body language, this study reveals in depth the important role of body narratives in constructing the image of women, displaying the mental world of women, and mapping gender issues in society. These female characters show a certain degree of progressive thinking and self-determined power, they take the initiative to search for the value of self-existence, and present the pursuit of bodily freedom and power. Feminist scholar Luce Irigaray's theory of gender difference provides strong theoretical support for this conclusion. She celebrates the pleasures of the female body, transforming it from a static semiotic code of passive viewing to an active and positive subject of behaviour, and constructing it affirmatively, thus forming a body morphology for the feminist field. This theoretical perspective helps us to understand that the female body is not a mere occupant of space, and that the spatiality of the body is not a spatiality of location, as in the case of the spatiality of external objects or the spatiality of 'spatial sensation', but rather a spatiality of circumstance that is full of complexity and polysemy[10]. However, through a deeper reading, it is found that in a patriarchal society, these female characters are ultimately unable to free themselves from the hegemony of male discourse. Marianne remains a female painter who, despite her talent, can only sign her father's name, while Héloïse remains a patrician lady who must marry and give birth to children. The endings of the two female protagonists reveal the constraints and limitations imposed on women by a patriarchal society, making their quest for physical freedom and strength a difficult and challenging one.

Through the ingeniously designed body narrative techniques, the film has successfully portrayed the image of independent, tough and richly emotional females. The body words in the film not only reveal the inner affective world of the characters, but also reflect the situation of women in a complex social environment. Especially when viewed from a feminist perspective, Céline Sciamma, the directress, uses delicate and tender audio-visual language to show the natural and healthy body image of women, breaking away from the traditional male gaze and giving the body a more profound social and cultural connotation, thus enabling a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the female image.

References

- [1] Boyd-Barrett O, Newbold C. *Approaches to Media* [M]. Wang Kai, Liu Xiaohong, Translation. Beijing: Xinhua Publishing House, 2004: 440.
- [2] Butler J. *Performative acts and gender constitution*[J]. *The performance studies reader*, 2004: 154-166.
- [3] Zhou X D. *A Study of Female Body Narratives in Zhang Yimou's Films* [D]. Hohhot: Inner Mongolia Normal University, 2020.6.
- [4] Fu X Y, Huang P. *The Emotional Factor in Literary Critical Thinking*[J]. *Jiangxi Social Science*, 1988(5): 107-112.
- [5] Polanyi M. *The tacit dimension*[M]. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009:14.
- [6] Song J L. *Narratology of Film and Television* [M]. Beijing: Communication University of China press, 2007.
- [7] Jia L L. *Introduction to Film Linguistics* [M]. Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2011.
- [8] Zhu W X. *Zhu wenxiang Chinese opera anthology* [M]. China Drama Press, 2004. 423.
- [9] Shusterman R. *Body consciousness: A philosophy of mindfulness and somaesthetics*[M]. Trans. Cheng Xiangzhan. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2011.76.
- [10] Merleau-Ponty M, Landes D, Carman T, et al. *Phenomenology of perception*[M]. Routledge, 2013.