

Luce Irigaray's Body Theory and Film Rouge: Female Image of Courtesan Ruhua

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Abstract: The representation of charming female bodies is a distinct characteristic of feminine movies directed by Guan Jinpeng. *Rouge*, one of his representative works, illustrates the hope and despair of a courtesan named Ruhua. Although several studies revealed the political metaphor of her body image, few researchers put emphasis on the female sentiment behind it. Therefore, by means of textual analysis, this study explores the life experience of Ruhua mirrored by her body image based on three theoretical perspectives proposed by Luce Irigaray in *The Sex Which is Not One*, including market value, sexual pleasure and class oppression of the female body. The research finding is that in *Rouge*, lens languages such as compositions, lights and clothes are conceived elaborately to depict Ruhua's body feelings, which not only implies her disadvantaged position in terms of wealth, sex and power but also reflects her individual consciousness against her dominated body as she is craving for maintaining a relatively equal relationship with her lover. The body narrative in *Rouge* subverts traditional films made by other male directors that commodify the female body under the male gaze and sets an example for the future feminine movie of how the depiction of the female body destroys gender power.

Keywords: body theory, *Rouge*, Luce Irigaray

1. Introduction

Today, feminism plays a critical role in film criticism, with the feminine movie, in a broad sense, defined as film conveying feminist consciousness through “visible women” [1]. As a renowned Hong Kong feminist director, Guan Jinpeng (Stanley Kwan Kam-Pang) devoted himself to shooting feminine films, comprising of *Women* (1985), *Full Moon in New York* (1989) and more. These thought-provoking movies reflect the lives of women of different ages and classes, especially their dilemmas in love and freedom. *Rouge*, his well-known literary adaptation film based on Li Bihua's novella of the same title, has been widely praised since its first episode in 1987 and won 6 prizes at Hong Kong Film Award in 1989. It narrates a touching and appealing story about a female ghost named Ruhua, who died for love in 1932 and returned from the underworld to find her old flame Chan Chenpang after about 50 years. Through the narrative standpoint of Ruhua, *Rouge* showed not only the oppressed and dominated position of courtesans in the early 1990s in Hong Kong but also their strong subject and contending conscience against unfair fate, which is worthy of research and thought.

Hosts of authors have researched the film *Rouge* through the years. Thus far, in addition to studies on the adaption strategies of this movie, there have been two primary research perspectives applied by studies to analyze this film: postcolonialism and new historicism. Several studies have revealed that the restricted ghost's image of Ruhua had been used innovatively as a symbol for "exploring the problematic historical space of Hong Kong culture" in the context of post-colony [2]. They also emphasized the thick nostalgic atmosphere created by film sets and movie props in *Rouge*, which was precisely defined as "reflective nostalgia" instead of "restorative nostalgia" [3]. In addition, researchers introducing the new historicism theory to analyze *Rouge* interpreted the significant role of parody of the Chinese classic love story, which reflects the culture orientation of Hong Kong [4, 5]. To date, existing studies have regarded the body of Ruhua as a metaphor for politics and culture rather than intriguing access to uncover her life experience. More specifically, although a portion of the published studies mentioned above has revealed the relationship between the restricted ghost's body of Ruhua and the symbol of the problematic historical space of Hong Kong culture, less amount of literature has been conducted to unveil the female experience and desire behind Ruhua's body.

Therefore, this research seeks to analyze the body image of Ruhua based on French feminist Luce Irigaray's body theory. The specific objectives are as follows: 1) How *Rouge* shows the oppression and construction of male central discourse on Ruhua's body; 2) How *Rouge* expresses the female's own desire and subject resistance consciousness through the depiction of Ruhua's body image. To have clearer perspectives on the presentation of the female body, this study applies the method of textual analysis, which is a common approach for interpreting a film in depth. It is hoped that this research will contribute to a deeper understanding of the portrayal of female marginal groups in movies and the disruptive effects of body narrative on gender power.

2. Luce Irigaray's Body Theory

In human society, females have remained in a subordinated condition and have been forced to give unquestioned obedience to the patriarchy for ages [6]. Under this circumstance, feminists have made great efforts to express doubts about the value of the male-dominated social norm, as well as emphasizing the difference between the female experience and the male experience. A majority of them have proposed that in the male-power society, the female body is the object under male control and gaze, with females compelled to repeat the "gender identity" ruled by males [7].

Among numerous feminists, Luce Irigaray has committed herself to creating a female discourse of her body on the premise of sexual equality and differences. She condemns Phallogocentrism, which merely admits the penis as the sexual organ of recognized value, thus regarding the male as "one" and female as "lack", "atrophy" (of the phallic organ) and "penis envy" [8]. One representative of that is Sigmund Freud, who deems a successful marriage as "a wife replaces her husband's mother", showing that female is defined barely as a necessary complement to male sexuality under male discourse. To deconstruct such male discourse center, in *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977), one of the most critical works in the first phase of her creations [9], Irigaray not only explains the social attributes of the female body long disciplined by the male but also discusses explicitly and innovatively about its physical attributes, arguing that woman has substantially more sex organs than man [8]. In this argument, she described the sexuality of women as 'plural' instead of 'not one' with a view to getting rid of patriarchal ideology.

Overall, Irigaray's creative description of female sex characters contradicts the male deliberate misunderstanding of the female body and affirms its positive value [10], which exerts positive impacts on the construction of the subject mode of female sexuality, sensation and language.

3. 'Use Value' and Spiritual Transcendence

Females have been enslaved as sexual resources and child-bearers for thousands of years in the patriarchal society. According to Irigaray, women are marked phallically by their fathers, husbands and procurers who determine their value according to their sexual commerce [8]. For fathers, they expect to gain a high bride price and consolidate the family position by marrying daughters; for husbands, they need to rely on their wives' fertility to get their genes into the next generation; for procurers, they can receive a large amount of money in return for forcing women to provide sex services to men in power. The social standard of female worth is whether they are useful to males, to be more specific, how much sexual pleasure they can provide and how many boys they can give birth to.

Among all the social roles of women mentioned by Irigaray, the use value of prostitutes is the most noticeable. As a "commodity", only by seducing more rich men to "consume" them can prostitutes achieve higher value and maintain a comparatively decent life. In *Rouge*, the capital value of Ruhua's body is mentioned repeatedly. For instance, when Yuan Yongding is reluctant to lend money to her, Ruhua shows her delicate hands seductively to him and tells him that in previous times, it cost whoremasters 500 hundred yuan to touch her hands, which is echoed in the subsequent plot when a whoremaster spends twice as much money on touching her calves. In this regard, Ruhua has certain ideological limitations that identify with the patriarchal value due to the fact that she deems the capital value of her body as a source of pride and flaunts, equaling the 'self-objectification'.

On the other hand, Ruhua's utilization of her own body, corresponding with the description of Beauvoir on courtesan, is exactly a means of using her "entire person as exploitable capital" to gain higher interests [11]. The best example of this is the plot in that she plays hard-to-get with Chen Zhenbang when she keeps him waiting several times and meets him with bare face deliberately. The unique lens language at the scene of their first encounter also deserves analyzing. Guan Jinpeng uses the profile two-shot, which is usually applied to emphasize special relationships, to record the eye contact between Ruhua and Chen Zhenbang [12]. In this image, Ruhua wears men's clothes and confronts Chen Zhenbang's steady gaze, showing her impressive temperament. This behavior breaks the common stereotype of prostitutes as most of them may feel shy and quickly look away, thus deeply attracting Chen Zhenbang. Hence, Ruhua is the kind of woman that Beauvoir defines as hetaeras rather than a prostitute. She caters actively to admirers' preferences and endows passive femininity with "a magic power", which enables her to "take males into the trap of her presence". In this way, she "acquires a certain independence" in the patriarchal society [11].

In conclusion, Ruhua's body is representative of female market value, with the prices of her hands, ears and legs marked clearly by males. Despite her unavoidable tendency to take pride in the commercial value of the body, it is worth noting that Ruhua makes good use of her charming body to obtain a certain equal relationship with her lover, which to some extent, illustrates her dissatisfaction with her subservient status to men.

4. 'Not One' and Erotic Passion

The female has been afflicted with enormous prejudices about her body, capacity and feelings for a long time. In the past, Sigmund Freud compared women to "a dark continent", which implied his traditional ideology of Phallocentrism. In his view, the basic fact of gender difference was that men had distinct sexual organs, while women did not have them. Irigaray indicates that psychoanalysis materializes female sexuality from the perspective of the male and thus creates the norms of patriarchy in a phallus-centered discourse [13]. In order to confront it, Irigaray puts forward the famous metaphor of "two lips", by means of which she claims that the female body has its superiority, which is beneficial to the establishment of female body subjectivity.

The implication of “lip” mentioned above means the female sex organs and sexual pleasure. Irigaray describes female sexuality in this way: “Her sexuality, always at least double, goes even further: it is plural” [8]. In *Rouge*, the physical sensations and urges of Ruhua are emphasized through close-up shots of her ears, lips, neck, hands, breasts and other organs, which is consistent with Irigaray’s description of female sex organs. In addition, the sex scenes between Ruhua and Chen Zhenbang show her intense body feelings. For instance, in their first sexual act, Ruhua’s sexual desire and pleasure are represented aesthetically by using the sidelight moved from her face to the upper body in slow motion. With the movement of the camera, the body of Ruhua is delicately portrayed, which is filled with her strong emotions towards Chen Zhenbang and adds to the artistic appeal of the movie.

Furthermore, in contrast with the first erotic scene where Ruhua is seen by Chen Zhenbang, the second one is dominated by Ruhua, which exchanges the dominant and dominated position in their relationship and shows Ruhua’s tremendous love and lust towards him. In the latter scene, Ruhua takes the initiative to undress and embrace Chen Zhenbang, who is having a snooze in bed, expressing her possessiveness toward her lover. The reason for this behavior is that only with Chen Zhenbang can Ruhua gain affection and pleasure from the bottom of her heart other than being valued and appraised as a commodity by a majority of whoremasters. This can be confirmed in another plot when a whoremaster preens himself on lying in Ruhua’s bed, presented by Chen Zhenbang, and molests her by asking whether he can take the place of her old lover as he is more powerful and wealthier, regardless of the risk of provoking him, Ruhua firmly and seriously rejects him by a brief response — “You are not Chen Zhenbang.” This explicitly illustrates the unique position of Chen Zhenbang in Ruhua’s mind, so she desperately maintains this relationship for her sense of pleasure. Besides, at that time, there is a switch in the economic status between Ruhua and Chen Zhenbang, as the financial support from Chen Zhenbang has been cut off by his family, and he does not have any job to make any income. That switch generates Ruhua’s eagerness for an equal relationship that is barely impossible for a prostitute, bringing her feelings of satisfaction and fulfillment.

To sum up, *Rouge* lays emphasis on the expression of Ruhua’s body sensation by means of overturning their unequal relationship of “seeing and being seen”. Though she has been decked out according to male desires for so long, Ruhua is not merely a passive carrier of male sexuality but a subject striving for her own sexual pleasures and desires [14].

5. ‘Class Nature’ and Unfeasible Liberation

The root cause of the commercialization and otherization of the female body is male-centered power. It is exerted not only by men but also by a range of women who “internalize” beliefs and standards constructed by males. Therefore, they turn into “members of the social police” that “monitor and judge other women for failing to embody male ideal” [15]. Sometimes it is women that are the most hypercritical of other women. Irigaray sharply pointed out such intractable obstacles against women’s liberation. She asserts that women disperse among different classes instead of constituting a whole class, which leads to their complex political struggle and contradictory demands [8]. In this way, it is scarcely impossible for women to unite against patriarchy.

In *Rouge*, lights are carefully organized to express the class oppression imposed on Ruhua, which is the direct reason for her unchangeable tragic destiny. When Ruhua works up the nerve to call on Chen Zhenbang’s mother, Ruhua is humiliated several times, even if she dresses plainly and tries her best to play up to his mother, who is a defender of traditional patriarchal society. In this scene, there is a sharp contrast between the light intensity on their bodies from beginning to end. In the beginning, Ruhua stands in the shallow, looks hopefully at Chen Zhenbang’s mother, who is standing in the light and prays that she can be acknowledged as her daughter-in-law. Nonetheless, after she sits down and begins to beg to marry Chen Zhenbang, she is in the light, while Chen Zhenbang’s mother is in the

shade, satirizing bitterly about the non-virgin and unchastity of Ruhua's body. The light and shade between the two females symbolize the class oppression inflicted by women at the top on those at the bottom.

Apart from this, the contrast of color is subtly used to express the class difference between Ruhua and Chen Zhenbang. When his parents meet the star-crossed lovers in the theatre and demand that their son should return home, the colors of their clothes show a striking contrast. The family members of Chen Zhenbang occupy a larger proportion of the picture and wear clothes in a dark or cool tone, which demonstrates their conventional authority and dignity. Unlike them, the lovers wear clothes with purplish-red flowers which match the bright red curtain behind them, as they are in the socially-despised roles of a prostitute and a minor stage performer [16]. These scenes present the impassable class gap between the lovers that is deeply hurtful to Ruhua. As a result, she makes a suicide pact with Chen Zhenbang and forges the illusion of die-for-love in a murderous manner, which is the only method she can use to dissolve the gap in love.

All in all, by means of lights and colors, *Rouge* shows the class discrimination against Ruhua, especially those conducted by the mother of Chen Zhenbang, who is also a woman. This corroborates Irigaray's worry about the contradictory demands among women [8] and reveals that no matter how Ruhua infatuates with Chen Zhenbang and what radical means of resistance Ruhua adopts, it is totally out of the question for her to obtain true and free love.

6. Discussion

Generally, *Rouge* shows the awareness of female consciousness deep inside Ruhua's heart and her release of long-repressed female desire in a nearly true way by means of the demonstration of her body and the consequent reflection of her psychological activities and impulsive lust.

Ruhua is not a well-educated modern lady with intense female liberation consciousness but a prostitute who is confined in a "red light district" named Shi Tangzui in Hong Kong during the 1920s and 1930s. It is undeniable that she is not a feminist and cannot totally get rid of the ideological constraint of her age, owing to the fact that the only 'weapon' she can use is her own body. Consequently, it is inevitable for her to objectify herself in exchange for better living conditions. However, *Rouge* noticeably illustrates her stout resistance to the male gaze and sexual projection, as well as her magnificent and victorious attitude towards love. Despite the identity of a socially-disadvantaged prostitute, Ruhua expresses instinctive confrontation against the reality that her body is simply judged by its use value and the generation of self-consciousness, which is the most fascinating and moving characteristic of this movie.

Nowadays, it is still common for female bodies to be commodified and objectified. Entirely different from their promotional labels composed of 'Growth of female' or 'Liberation of female', a sizable minority of movies and TV shows adopt a stubborn and contemptuous attitude towards the description of the female body, contributing to a wide range of repulsive and conservative plots filled with body and appearance anxiety, female competition and slut-shaming. For example, *A Dream of Splendor* (2022), a recent prevalent Chinese television drama that also regards prostitutes, exposes such an alarming issue. This drama attaches weight to the chastity of the body of the main female character, who is a prostitute and her scorn on other prostitutes that provide sex services to whoremasters, instead of facing up to the inescapable dilemma and pain of prostitutes of that time, not to mention depicting the calm and poise of Ruhua. As a consequence, this TV program is full of aversion and discrimination within the female groups. More ridiculously, the female character says that 'It is lust that wins the favor of men by body and beauty.' in a positive tone without considering the real tragic fate of prostitutes. The producers attempt to shape such female images so as to preach the so-called 'female sense of independence', reflecting their subconscious misogyny.

It is incredible that after about five decades, there is almost no breakthrough in the representation of 'Ruhua' in film and television production. Even worse, she is dwarfed to the 'commodity' played by males, with her personality and spirit completely denied as soon as she loses her virginity. Unfortunately, even today, when the prostitution is no longer legal in China, slut-shaming continues to be a common means of exerting denigration and otherization on females, and thereby women's discourses are 'buried' in the criticism, and their rights of proclaiming freedom are negated and deprived. The factor behind this is still that the value of women is equated with the sexual and aesthetic value for men. In an attempt to combat such phenomenon, strict and effective censorship should be imposed on the misogynous attribute of publications, film and television works. Additionally, the audience should arouse our awareness of the 'fake feminism', which is commercially packaged as a sugar-coated cannonball and take a critical view on watching those works.

As Irigaray puts it during an interview, woman should find their own value of being a woman instead of being restricted by social roles defined by patriarchal culture [17]. Indeed, it is impossible for women to break away from the shackles of being appreciated, objectified and compared under the male gaze if they cannot find their own value. The film industry is not only a reflection of social trends but is also a medium for the transmission of values to the public. Hence, those producers and authors should establish the consciousness of recording women's life experiences and exploring women's value in their future works.

7. Conclusion

This essay has discussed the representation of Ruhua's body in the film *Rouge* on the theoretical basis of Luce Irigaray's body theory. Through the analyses of her body under various and elaborate lenses, lights and colors, this study has shown her underprivileged social position in terms of wealth, sex and power. Ruhua, a prostitute at the bottom of the social ladder, suffers from 'double' oppression from both males and females. On the other hand, she is a strong woman with a determined will and individual consciousness. She utilizes her body to obtain certain existence, freedom and equal relationships with her lover, endowing it with spiritual transcendence rather than complying to be a sort of commodity. Eventually, she breaks men's mythological world from a female perspective in a bold way.

Based on previous studies which put emphasis on the political metaphor of Ruhua's body, the contribution of this paper has been to confirm the contradiction between her dominated body and independent consciousness and gain greater insight into the narrative of the female body of *Rouge*. In future work, cross-media theories could be introduced to interpret the literary adaption of *Rouge* in terms of the female body. More specifically, researchers may discuss the resemblances and differences of female body narrative between Li Bihua, a female writer, and Guan Jinpeng, a male director, so that they can have a better sense of how film *Rouge* portrays the image of Ruhua and why it chooses a different way.

To summarize, through the body depiction, *Rouge* demonstrates an image of a courageous prostitute who develops a sense of self-consciousness spontaneously. Ideally, more and more producers should throw themselves into creating films that respect the female experience and explore feminine values. It is also expected that women will one day establish their subject status and obtain real freedom.

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