

Cyborgs, Feminism and Films in the Postmodernist Perspective: An Analysis of the Film Titane

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Abstract: The movie *Titane*, which won the *Palme d'Or* at *Cannes*, caught the attention of the general public as a genre film that explores topics such as the family of origin, mechanical life, gender boundaries, and moral turmoil, to name a few. There are a number of points in the film that are close to Haraway's assumptions in the *Cyborg Manifesto*, and this study is about to analyze its narrative textual content and significance from a postmodernist perspective, with a particular focus on postmodernist cyborgs, feminism, and cinematic works. It integrates postmodernist theories to analyze the narrative content, revealing the deconstruction of gender identity and the process of cyborg construction. The study engages in different dimensions of analysis as two parts: the first part is narrative analysis of the film on the theme of human-machine reproduction and life, the fluidity of identity politics; and the second part is the significant meaning of this film work in the postmodern perspective. It concludes that works of cyborg practice such as *Titane* are necessary for the postmodern key issues of present research and are far-reaching for the practice of cyborgs, feminism, and film culture. Furthermore, studying and interpreting the narrative and meaning of *Titan* serves as a secondary empowerment for the movie in itself.

Keywords: *Titane*, *Cyborg Manifesto*, feminism, postmodernist

1. Introduction

In the late twentieth century, when postmodernism became the mainstream of Western culture, the rapid progress of science and technology continued to change the habits and modes of thinking of human beings, that is, the concept of "the social relations of science and technology" mentioned by Haraway [1]. Ideologically, Hegel's ontology slowly collapsed in the twentieth century with the emergence of structuralism and deconstructionism, with dualism being widely questioned and the world of thought thrown into chaos. Feminism, which emerged in the 1960s, has fallen into the essentialism mud of the thought process due to its over-emphasis on the integrity of the theory.

It was also during this time period that the concept of "Cyborg" was created by Manfred Clynes and Nathan Cline at the first time. Cyborg is a combination of the words "Cybernetics" and "Organism", originally referring to the regenerative cooperation between human and machine through cybernetics [2]. As a constructivist, Haraway's cybernetics ideas are centralized in her *Cyborg Manifesto*. By proposing the Cyborg and its exploration of worldviews, she attempts to promote a perspective that breaks down the subject-object dichotomy and "illegitimately" fractures and integrates concepts such as human, nature, race, technology, history, identity, and story [2]. Since

then, the concept of the cyborg has generated heated discussions and research in the fields of politics, literature, cultural studies, and computer technology.

As the studies of postmodernist poetics, philosophy, and historical perspectives have been well-established, there has actually been a gap in the application research of postmodern literary and artistic practices under a cross-disciplinary vision. There's been a lot of great cyborg science fiction works since Haraway came up with the *Cyborg Manifesto* that was not valued and not thoroughly analyzed. The practice of these fictional works has produced few comprehensive monographic studies in the fields of creative writing, film theory, and philosophical research, but in fact as the most accessible and massively influential presence in the context of postmodernism, it has infinite potential for research.

In 2021, although *Titane* won the *Palme d'Or* at Cannes, its anti-conventional narrative mode and offensive visual expression triggered a large word-of-mouth controversy after its release [3]. With female film writers being increasingly valued, Julia Ducournau's *Titane* exhibition at the Cannes Film Festival was not simply a politically correct and judicious move. The symbolic meaning of the film to a certain extent exceeded its substantive meaning, and the "naming" of the film through the awarding of the prize at Cannes further elevated it to another dimension of broader discussion. A postmodernist narrative perspective on cyborg theory emerges in *Titane* as a figurative manifestation of the cyborg theory, which is also an intersectional practice of films, feminism, and cyborgs.

It should be noted in advance that the character of the movie is a person whose identity is ambiguous, lingering on the boundaries of cyborg-human and woman-man. Therefore, in this study, the character is referred to as "the protagonist" or "she". Moreover, in conducting the narrative analysis, this study disassembled the plot and then reorganized it according to the meanings revealed in it, rather than analyzing it in a linear chronological order as the story unfolds.

2. Reproduction and Life in Conjunction with Machinery: Cyborg Narratives

2.1. Fascination with Metal

The film begins with a close-up of the oil and metal pipes, depicting their materiality and shine, and then the camera turns to the little girl (the childhood heroine) sitting in the backseat of the car, implicitly pointing out the close connection between the protagonist and the automobile (machinery). The girl's conflict with her biological father while driving leads to a traffic accident, and the next image is a metal cochlea embedded in human flesh and blood. Doctors show the girl's parents the metal cochlea that she is implanted with, implying that modern medical technology has made the girl's functioning complete by the integration with the machine. Here we can find out how the original "Cyborg-Human" character in this story were developed.

The next shot goes straight to the heroine as an adult, dancing as a car model on the front hood of a car in a dimly lit and ambiguous car show, with sexual connotations [4]. The car show itself is a place of intense male gaze, gathering men who see "women" and "cars" as their own personal objects of accessory. First-time viewers might just take it as one of the common scenes in the porn genres, but an overall understanding of the movie reveals that this intuitive viewing sensations is a misunderstanding, a little trick, a kind of "parallax view" [5]. Her intimate sexual dance with the car does not serve male sexual fantasies, but arises from her interior sexual desire for the car. Here, in this Cyborg sexual foreplay, the onlooker's male gaze is cut off midway, and the subject-object relationship of the dominated and the dominant is invisibly dissolved and mocked.

There are other consistent details in the film that show the protagonist's fascination with machinery and metal. The heroine takes her first bath next to a girl who flirts with her, she isn't get interested until she accidentally tangles her hair in that girl's nipple stud. Even when they proceed to "lesbian" sexual touching, the protagonist is only obsessed with the girl's nipple stud, even biting and nibbling

on it. Another metal object is the metal hairpin that the protagonist always carries around with her, which she uses as a weapon to kill people, and is also a metaphor in the film for the protagonist's stab at patriarchy, social morality and ethics with its sharp and acute image.

2.2. Breeding with Cars

There are two scenes in the film where the main character has sex with cars. "Far from signaling a walling off of people from other living beings, cyborgs signal disturbingly and pleurably tight coupling. Bestiality has a new status in this cycle of marriage exchange [1]." Indeed, Ducournau presents such a combination in a disturbing way as well.

If the details of the protagonist's earlier fascination with metal machinery and automobiles don't reveal her Cyborg identity to the first-time viewer, it is inevitable that the first time she has sex with the car will be extremely shocking. As the protagonist takes the second shower to wash away the dirt left by the killing, the door is rhythmically shaken and the naked protagonist walks to the back seat of the car. The graphic treatment here is subtle, not overly detailed, but almost the whole of this sexual encounter is filmed from a third point of view in a fixed camera position, only from the brightness of the car light, the frequency the car chugs up and down and bumps around, convincing the semi-skeptical viewer: this is a stunning sex. And throughout this sexual intercourse, the sound of the scene is the sacred music of the church, which creates an extremely strong contrast and conflict. It is clear from this that Ducournau's use of film scores isn't redundant and vulgar, merely standardizing repetitive music into images, but rather using sound as part of the text for expression. This sound and picture arrangement makes the unconventional "bestiality" images even more bizarre. And the combination of the calmness of the camera's perspective and the sanctity of the soundtrack creates a strong conflict with the viewer's understanding of the plot, which is to say, it mocks all the preconceived notions of heterosexuality, homosexuality, and the existence of the human ontology.

If the first sex is an exposition of the event itself, the second sex with the fire truck gives a more involved perspective on cyborg's intercourse. After her stepfather denies the femininity displayed in the protagonist's dance, out of sadness and anger, she has a violent encounter with the fire truck. It is interesting to note that at the end of the encounter, the camera looks down and shoots the protagonist through the top window of the truck. In this shot, the camera's point of view and the car's point of view overlap for a moment, so that the viewer gets the perspective of the "truck", the other side of the sexual process.

2.3. The Birth of Cyborg Life

The movie's narrative covers almost the entirety of the birth of cyborg life, and unlike Haraway's "lovely replicative baroque of ferns and invertebrates (such nice organic prophylactics against heterosexism)" [1]. *Titane* continues to be traditional in its approach to cyborg reproduction, female fertilization, lactation (oil), with female pregnancy and lactation, uterus-to-vagina, umbilical cord-connected, and completely organic reproduction. In reality, it's just a difference in the movie's setting for the Cyborg, and everyone's assumption of Cyborg can be different, but it's so much more than that. Here I will analyze how the cyborg setting and its effects are shown in *Titane*.

As mentioned earlier how Ducournau uses a combination of sound and images, there is also used in several places in portraying the whole process of the protagonist's pregnancy and the birth of the child. First of all, there are two places in the movie where there are special sound effects, the first is when the protagonist feels exhausted after killing; the second is when the protagonist relaxes herself and dances with her stepfather during a firehouse party, where the sound of the image is turned into a blur of the outside world accompanied by the sound of the heartbeat inside. As Stam's literary-theoretical interpretation of Guy Rosalto, Didier Anzieu's psychoanalysis in *Film Theory: An*

Introduction, “Sound plays a necessary and integral role in the composition of the subject. The fetus is wrapped in the sound envelope of the womb, confusing itself with others, inside with outside” [6]. Such an analysis put into the medium of film still plays its part. In both cases, the director can be seen to be doing exactly the same thing, constantly reminding and emphasizing the protagonist’s subjectivity and the existence of a new cyborg life, which finds the most agile paths to make the audience empathize and understand the incomprehensible narrative and the complex protagonist’s portrayal. The other is the painful sensations throughout the whole process. The director portrays metal pins jabbing through the protagonist in the early stages of pregnancy, the oil that leaks out of her belly at times. And the itchiness in the middle of the pregnancy that even makes the belly scratched through, the scarring left by the chest and belly wraps, the belly that bursts right open during the delivery are spine-chilling. These scenes are undoubtedly shocking, frightening, and numbing, and it is precisely this expression of this extreme pain in the image that prevents the viewer from being able to fully critique the morally confused cyborg protagonist as a total spectator.

3. The Fluidity of Identities: Gender Narratives

3.1. Breaking down Traditional Gender Stereotypes of Men and Women

As early as 1949, Simone de Beauvoir stated that “Women are not born, but become” [7]. The idea of gender construction emerges from this. Even placed in a binary gender perspective, the construction of the male-female image in *Titane* is quite interesting. In the first half of the movie, the protagonist as Alexia is a “woman” but breaks a lot of stereotypes about women, such as that she has low empathy, being cold and unsympathetic, refusing to get along with people, and she kills people indiscriminately. In particular, her desire to kill is not the classic “avenging woman” against the patriarchy, but a kind of chaos and ruthlessness without morality. She ignores all the ethics, not to mention social norms for women. On the flip side, in the second half of the movie, when the main character becomes Adrien, being a “man” in society, she behaves weakly and even senses emotions (rescuing a grandmother, being close to her stepfather) though. The comparison between the two is very dramatic, and the traditional gender temperaments can be seen to be completely reversed in the movie interpretation. Not only is such construction part of the setting of the work, but the contrast of the same character under different genders is actually the director’s way of mocking and breaking through the social gender norms.

Also worth mentioning in the film, related to the theme of breaking down traditional gender stereotypes is actually the portrayal of the main character’s stepfather. The male character is extremely masculine, a firefighter captain who won’t allow his authority to be questioned, but secretly being so afraid of his physical deterioration that he takes hormone injections every day, having an emotional breakdown because he can’t do pull-ups, longing for someone to filled the hole in his heart for “son”, but expressing his love only by forcing the protagonist to be a “real man”. He’s been scarred by his efforts to maintain “fatherly authority” on small and large scales. After the bubble of alleged masculinity had been disillusioned, he ended up with only three decaying mirror images of himself in pinkish-purple light with bulging veins and sagging skin. *Titane* creates such a traumatic image of masculinity, revealing and parodying the pervasive oppressiveness and harmfulness of the patriarchal logic of domination over both men and women, giving it a sympathetic glance in the cyborg’s story.

3.2. Gender Performances

Titane’s protagonist is physically female in the first half of the book, but plays herself as male in the second half in order to impersonate Adrien. In such a setting, true and false identity performances overlap. The protagonist dances twice in the movie, with similar dance moves, but with different identities. The first time as a woman, she has a group of fans who are attracted to her. While the

second time as a man, the audience clearly does not know how to react to her moves, which suggests that society is unable to accept that men show feminine “temperament”. When the protagonist and her stepfather look through old photos together, they realized that Adrien also wore a dress when he was a child, which shows that children’s perception of gender is open-ended, and that it is entirely up to them to guide them as to which gender they should display which kind of “temperament”.

Gender performance is the idea that gender is something inscribed in everyday practice, learned and performed based on cultural norms of femininity and masculinity. Philosopher Judith Butler popularized the idea that gender is performance. “The point of gender performance is that neither sex nor gender is completely natural, both are expressed and naturalized over time: the way we act, walk and talk solidifies the notion of ‘being a man’, or ‘being a woman’ [8].”

The stepfather’s care for the protagonist does not come from her gender identity, but rather a bond of family and affection. At the same time, it is interesting to note that they maintain a lie that they both know in their hearts for the sake of their common interests, that they are needy of each other and are attached to each other. To this point, she no longer needs the hairpin, no longer needs to take power. While the movie shifts from the patricidal to the oedipal dimension, the boundaries between the genders once again dissolve. The underlying logic of queer theory is that everyone is on the spectrum of gender fluidity, even a person or a relationship defines a gender. And when the breakdown of the stability of the classification of subjects and genders becomes inevitable when the assumed heteronormative cognitive mechanisms are revealed to be merely producing and concretizing these ontologically false classifications [9].

4. The Significance of Postmodern Cyborg, Feminism and Films

4.1. The Necessity of Cyborg Literary Practice

“Literature is a social practice that uses language, a social creation, as its medium” [10]. With the postmodernist perspective, literature is no longer just a mirror of society or a pure imitation and reproduction of life. McLuhan’s media theory anticipated all this. Fictional stories, whether novels, movies or any media texts, can be the best carriers of this constructivity, and that’s exactly what *Titane* does.

Although Cyborg relies on the support of science and technology in its production practices, yet in literary fictional discourse, it directly breaks through the absolute definition of truth and fiction, subverts all the “origins” and “destinations” claimed by traditional Western poetics, and possesses an unprecedented significance in the construction of symbolic imagination [11]. It can be seen as part of an anti-traditional Western poetics, but Cyborg’s greater significance is that of “reconstruction”. Although the Cyborg settings of the theoretically elevated and avant-garde give the impression of breaking down any boundaries of concepts at any cost, in fact, it is still constructive. In the midst of this, the necessity of Cyborg’s literary practice is brought to the fore.

Liberation, as described in the *Cyborg Manifesto*, rests on the construction of the consciousness, the imaginative apprehension, of oppression, and so of possibility. “The tools are often stories, retold stories, versions that reverse and displace the hierarchical dualisms of naturalized identities. In retelling origin stories, cyborg authors subvert the central myths of origin of Western culture” [12]. This is exactly the same as pointing out the way to liberation clearly. It is only through literary practices such as *Titane* that human beings will be able to make better use of the “stories” as “tools” to give a glimpse of the infinite possibilities of human civilization.

4.2. The Anti-Traditional Poetics of Genre Films

Titane is undoubtedly an erotic, thrilling genre film, standing in opposition to traditional Western poetics. Ironically, the “genre” of genre films was exactly transformed from the literary theories of

classical poetics. Aristotle, as the founder of traditional Western poetics, categorized literature into two types: tragedy and epic. Then according to Thomas Schatz stated, a genre film is defined as a film work with a fixed program of creation, appreciation and reaction [13]. From its definition, it can be seen that genre films are closely related to the industrial system, and the categorization of genre films is also the result of the public's expectations and selection.

When genre film has become a fixed classification, it's also in danger of becoming "normative", that is, of having preconceived notions of what genre cinema should look like. In fact, the best way to use genre is to see it as a discursive resource and a springboard for creativity. In this way, a given director can elevate the status of a "lowbrow" genre, popularize a "highbrow" genre, inject new energy into an exhausted genre, infuse traditional genres with state-of-the-art content, or parody a genre that deserves to be parodied. or to parody a genre that deserves parody [6]. In this way, the film industry can transform genres from static categorizations into active, changeable operations. At this time, the emergence of *Titane* was important for genre in the movie industry. This is precisely what Julia Ducournau actively practiced in *Titane* and *Raw*, beyond the integrated assembly-line production, using the strengths of genre film, that is, the mass entertainment, for postmodern deconstruction and reconstruction in a way that is not preachy but fun. In this way, the genre film industry, which was born from classical poetics and designed to satisfy the "myths" of the popular imagination, Ducournau's *Titane* practiced a postmodernist, anti-traditional narrative about the satirical political myths of the cyborgs, retelling the story that reverses and displaces the hierarchical dualisms of naturalized identities and western traditional poetics [14].

4.3. The Diversity of Film Culture

Sexism in cinema is as varied as sexism in the real world: it is possible to idealize women as morally superior, to subordinate them to a depersonalized and genderless group of people, and to exaggerate women as very scary and deadly serpentine figures, envious of their fertility or afraid of them as the embodiment of nature, age and death. Films confront women in a dilemma. "In the celluloid brothels of cinema, goods may be viewed constantly but never purchased; a balance is struck between the tension between the adored feminine beauty and the denied (source of beauty and considered immoral) sexuality [15]." Given that the camera itself is accompanied by unequal power relations of peering and gazing, and the history of cinema and the film industry are still full of masculine narratives, feminist creators and feminist film critiques are urgently needed and indispensable [16].

Under the dominant Euro-American film inheritance and communication hegemony discourse, film has had a profound impact on the theoretical discourses of identity of worldwide audience as a capital-related textual form. Nowadays, Hollywood film is still in a dominant position in the film industry, but it is surprising to note that works created and pioneered in third world countries are breaking down Hollywood-centered constructions or formulaic expressions more often than not [17]. Time will tell whether such representations are just "celebrations" and appeasement of rebellion in hegemonic discourse systems, or another powerful strike against the high wall of essentialism.

Film theory is always a kind of "historically situated utterance" [18]. Film theory, like analytic philosophy, is only good at dismantling things, not at identifying similarities and relevance, nor is it able to analyze film as a medium for the most intuitive aesthetic pleasure. The fact that theory is often transmuted and arbitrary does not prevent a feminist from using "deconstruction" as part of the analysis of a text. Feminist, psychoanalytic, post-structuralist, post-colonial, and other theoretical, political elements can be intertwined in a media text, only then will "the fourth wall" between the film and reality be "truly" bridged.

5. Conclusions

This study is a multidisciplinary analytical practice that uses a postmodern perspective to combine the film text of *Titane*, film theory and the *Cyborg Manifesto* as well as a range of feminist theories and manages to explore an avenue for a descriptive, comparative and integrative digestive analysis. As a comprehensive and cross-applied study of theories from various disciplines, it reviews past research theories and projecting them onto specific film works in order to analyze their narrative approaches and narrative meanings.

Haraway's cyborg theory revalues everything, pushes back and reconstructs all categories, provides theoretical weapons and perspectives for the pluralistic construction of the postmodern, and closely guides the infinite possibilities of this cross-boundary integration in practice. *Titane*'s narrative is of great significance to the current film market and to the integration and reconstruction of film thresholds. Researching and interpreting the narrative and meaning of *Titane* is in itself a secondary empowerment of the film. Only by truly valuing works like *Titane* which break boundaries and explore pioneering issues, and by exploring a framework that returns from research back to application, will we be able to generate a virtuous cycle system between postmodern theory and contemporary literary practice.

Due to the pioneering and disorienting style of Julia Ducournau's image language and aesthetics, instead of audio-visual linguistic analysis in dissecting *Titane*, more emphasis was placed on its plotting and metaphorical concepts. As Haraway's ideas and writings are complex, unconventional and full of metaphors, it is also difficult to analyze it in a practical way but investing in the critical Cyborg concepts presented within it. Single case studies and literature review methodologies may not be sufficiently representative of new architecture. However, there is hope that such research is slowly bridging postmodern theory and practice. Future research may build on this study to meticulously analyze and categorize a more diverse and rich array of postmodernist works, or even propose a theoretical structure to guide this literary practice in multiple ways. In this way, the circulation of practice and theory can truly be promoted.

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