

An Investigation into the Portrayal of Women on Camera and Gender Balance in Drama Series

Jiayi He

Veritas Collegiate Academy,
Shenzhen, Guangdong, China

zhangyujie@xjtu.edu.cn

Abstract:

With the continuous development of film art, the image of female characters in film works has also undergone many stages of change. This study aims to explore in depth the issues surrounding the representation of women in front of the camera and the balance of gender representations in television drama. By analyzing a large number of film and television works, the study finds that the construction of female images in film has undergone a complex historical evolution. In early films, women were often portrayed as traditional and subservient to male-dominated society. Over time, however, they have gradually become more diverse, independent, and intelligent. However, gender inequality still exists in the film and television industry, and the objectification of women's roles in films and the male gaze is still prominent. The image of women is also facing new challenges under the influence of commercialization, and the commercial representation of their consciousness has had a certain impact on the portrayal of women's image.

Keywords: Feminism; gender equalization; film

1. Introduction

The gaze of the film camera is that means of visual expression rich in meaning and multiple layers of interpretation. In films, the gaze is often used to depict the emotional relationship and psychological state between characters. When the camera focuses on a particular character and shows his/her gaze, this visual expression can often reveal the character's inner emotional fluctuation, thought process, or subtle relationship with other characters. In some films, the male character often plays the subject of the gaze while the female character becomes the object of the gaze, which not only reinforces the power position of

men but also exacerbates gender inequality and discrimination.

In the creation of art forms such as film, the image of women is often influenced by patriarchal consciousness, and the portrayal of women by male creators often unconsciously reflects a 'male gaze'. This gaze objectifies women, taking their bodies and images as the main elements of narrative and expression, and sometimes even exceeding the exploration of their personalities and inner worlds [1]. This form of representation not only reduces women to passive objects but also inadvertently deepens the consumption and exploitation of women. Even when the female

characters in the story can determine their destiny, their existence, and success are often still based on male standards of evaluation, which is undoubtedly another form of suppression of female subjectivity.

The analysis of the image of women in front of the camera contributes to an in-depth understanding of the construction of gender roles, identity formation, and power relations, and promotes the development of gender studies. As cultural carriers, the study of gender equality in film and television will help to reflect on the phenomenon of gender inequality in society, reveal gender issues in culture and social consciousness, and promote critical thinking about gender culture and cultural progress.

2. The Historical Evolution of the Construction of the Female Image in Cinema

2.1 The Construction of the Female Image in Different Historical Periods and Social Contexts

In traditional societies, the image of women is often limited and shaped by several factors. For example, in some cultures, women are defined as weak, kind, and dependent on men, and their main work is considered to be taking care of the family and having children. Such images are more common in ancient literature, art, and social concepts. Sociocultural factors, such as traditional gender concepts, have had a profound impact on the construction of the image of women.

With the development of time and the progress of society, the status of women has gradually changed and their image has been constructed differently. In some periods, women began to show work-loving and capable qualities, such as playing an important role in national construction or labor production. The image of women in this period emphasizes their contribution to society and their ability to work [2].

In modern times, especially under the impetus of the women's liberation movement and changes in social attitudes, the image of women has become more diversified and personalized. They have pursued their development and demonstrated their talents and values in various fields. The media and cultural works have also begun to show more images of women with an independent spirit and a sense of autonomy.

2.2 Evolution of the Role of Women

2.2.1 Zeitgeist

Women in early cinema were often portrayed as traditional and subservient to a male-dominated society, such as

Ruan Sao like the prostitute in *The Goddess*, representing the traditional image of a woman of patience, sacrifice, and obedience, whose destiny and choices were often limited by established social frameworks and cultural perceptions. TV dramas also often portray women as gentle, virtuous, and dependent on men, taking on traditional roles such as housewives [3].

In the 1980s, there were new images of women who had a sense of femininity and contributed to society. Like Wu Qionghua in *The Red Detachment of Women*, she was a warrior and spiritual leader, breaking the traditional category of female roles. Zhu Chunhua and Xing Yuehong in *Sisters of the Stage* showed women's struggles and self-redemption. At that time, the images of women in TV dramas also gradually began to show active participation in social construction. The emphasis on women's social roles and personal values, no longer limiting women to family and personal feelings, reflects the importance and promotion of women's status, women have become an indispensable force in the construction of the country and society, motivating more women to achieve their success in their respective positions, and to some extent promoting social thinking on gender equality and women's rights.

The image of women in 21st-century films has become more profound and complex, focusing not only on women's roles and challenges in society but also exploring in depth their aspirations for personal growth and self-realization. Films such as "Send Me to the Green Cloud" and "B for Busy", for example, vividly depict the emotional changes and self-development of contemporary women in their lives, at work and at home, and the image of women is no longer limited to external social roles but focuses more on internal self-knowledge and self-realization [4].

Contemporary films show women's independent thinking and choices in a variety of social contexts, revealing the autonomy and self-confidence of modern women in their pursuit of personal happiness and self-realization, and promoting in-depth public reflection on gender equality. Television dramas also pay more attention to depicting women's diverse values and sense of autonomy and explore gender equality more deeply and broadly, reflecting the increasing diversity of concepts in society in the process of rapid political, economic, and cultural development. With time, images of women on screen have become richer and more diverse. Television dramas have also gradually deepened their exploration of gender equality. From reflecting the constraints imposed on women by traditional gender concepts to showing women's independence, autonomy, and equality, to exploring women's inner needs and overall development. All these are closely related to the development of the times, social and cultural changes, and people's increasing awareness of gender equality.

2.2.2 The diversity and complexity of women's roles

In today's society, TV dramas and films with realistic themes have gradually become one of the mainstream forms favored by the audience. Based on the basic principle of "self-existence and self-activity", these works have successfully created a purer space for women's existence by portraying rich and bright female images and femininity. The image of women on the screen in this period has truly broken through the male discourse with a completely new expression and is no longer the "big female lead" projected by the male mirror image. The diverse women in the dramas have gone beyond purely contradictory relationships, and the construction of the female image has been rationalized [5].

For example, in the drama 'I'm Fine in Another Country', the audience is shown the value of women's independence through the narration of the simple and true life landscapes of the four female characters. Hu Jingjing struggles with the complexities of the times, supported by the power of traditional female values, which eventually turns into an irreparable tragedy.

On the other hand, Qiao Xichen, Xu Yan, and Ji Nanjia are like the continuation of Hu Jingjing's life, and they gradually begin to examine themselves. In the face of social discrimination, workplace strife, and other problems, they grow individually and help each other, women work together to help each other and construct their self-system. By subverting and eliminating the male-centered rules, it turns into a bond between female relationships [6]. This is women's subjective identification with their gender, manifesting strong female power and life. In these works, female characters are no longer subordinate to men but become subjects with independent personalities and thoughts. Through these works, audiences can see that the status and role of women in society are gradually rising and that they are changing the world with their power.

3. Problems and Analysis of Causes

3.1 Issues

Although there is an overall trend of diversification and autonomy in the portrayal of women's roles in cinema, there is still the problem of gender differences in the portrayal of women on camera.

3.1.1 Characteristics and meaning of women's roles

The role and problems of characterization are mainly manifested in the following aspects: homogenization and stereotyping of character types. In traditional family dramas, the main role of female characters is to take care of their families and do the housework, lacking self-expression

and career development, which reinforces the subordinate status of women in the family and neglects their ideas and talents. For example, in some early ethical family dramas, the female characters revolve around their husbands and children throughout their lives, with no independent life space or value to pursue [7]. In some film and television productions, women are overemphasized in terms of appearance and body shape, becoming 'vases' that attract attention, with their roles lacking substance and depth, existing only as a kind of visual adornment, and other aspects such as their intelligence and ability being ignored or weakened. In some commercial films, for example, the female characters are only used to show off their beautiful appearance in the scenes, without any substantial role in advancing the plot or revealing their personalities [8].

In some works, women's careers are more often used to complement the success of male characters, becoming tools or supports for the men's career progression. And their professional values and achievements are neglected. For example, in some plots about business negotiations or competition in the workplace, the female characters may only provide some information or emotional support, and the real decision-making power and success often belong to the male characters. And the film can make female character traits emotional and vulnerable. Women are often portrayed as overly emotional, sensitive, and vulnerable, prone to crying and breaking down when faced with problems, and lacking in rational and strong qualities, while men are portrayed as more rational, calm, and strong, a contrast that reinforces gender stereotypes. For example, in some emotional dramas, female characters show extreme pain in the face of emotional setbacks, while male characters are relatively easier to get out of the predicament [4]. In addition, female characters often seem to lack initiative in decision-making and action, relying on men for guidance and help. These clips do not fully demonstrate their leadership and independent thinking. For example, in some adventure or action films, female characters often wait for male characters to rescue them or make decisions at critical moments, making it difficult for them to take the initiative to control the situation.

3.1.2 Gender inequality

First, there is an inequality in the number and type of male and female characters. In many drama productions, the number of male characters exceeds the number of female characters. Especially in male-dominated subjects, female characters are often relegated to supporting roles. For example, in some historical or war dramas, female characters exist mostly as accessories to male characters, and they often lack independent storylines and character development. In some emotional dramas, female characters are also often confined to themes such as love and

marriage, with relatively little portrayal of their careers and ideals, which makes the image of female characters seem less three-dimensional and rich [9].

Second, unequal opportunities for career development. Television dramas often show men with more opportunities for development and higher status in the workplace, while women face many restrictions and obstacles. For example, in some workplace dramas, male protagonists are more likely to have access to important projects and promotion opportunities, while women may be discriminated against or sidelined because of their gender. Even when a woman achieves something, it may be portrayed in the plot as having been achieved through special means or luck rather than through her ability, reinforcing the notion of gender inequality in reality [10].

Third, the unequal distribution of family responsibilities. Many television dramas still perpetuate the traditional concept of the family, with women taking on most of the family responsibilities, such as looking after the children and doing the housework. Men are less likely to take on these responsibilities, or when they do, they are portrayed as an extra effort or a laudable behavior, while women's contribution is taken for granted. This unequal perception of the distribution of family responsibilities not only affects the status and development of women in the family but also limits to some extent their participation and achievements in society.

3.2 Analysis of Causes

The gender inequality of feudal traditions is deeply entrenched and influences creators to portray women, often unconsciously following gender roles and placing women on an unequal footing. In patriarchal societies, men dominate the discourse and use power resources to marginalize women. This has led to the dominance of male perspectives in the cultural and artistic fields, and camera expressions have been influenced by patriarchy, creating a specific female gaze. Gender inequality in social reality, such as discrimination in the workplace and unequal division of labor in the family, also affects creators, who tend to portray women by traditional gender roles to satisfy audience perceptions and exacerbate gender stereotypes. To change this situation, it is necessary to eliminate the concept of gender inequality at a cultural and social level and to encourage creators to portray more equal and diverse images of women.

3.2.1 Objectification of female characters in films

There is a long-standing tendency in the film and television industry to objectify women by overemphasizing their appearance and sexual attractiveness. The film camera often deliberately dwells on women's bodies, reducing them to a visual spectacle and ignoring their multidimen-

sional qualities as a complex individual [11].

In *Ju-on: The Grudge*, directed by Takashi Shimizu, Gakko is objectified by her husband, Tsugio Saeki, in their marriage. Tsugio's love for her is more possessive and conquering than truly caring. This phenomenon is particularly common in film and television, where creators tend to fulfill the audience's expectations of traditional female characters by portraying them as gentle, submissive, and dependent. However, this practice has undoubtedly exacerbated the solidification of gender stereotypes, making it difficult to genuinely improve the status of women in society.

3.2.2 The male gaze

Feminist cinema highlights the male perspective that dominates most mainstream films. Women are often portrayed as passive objects of the male gaze, with the camera's perspective aligned with that of the male character [12].

In an industry that has long been dominated by men, the portrayal of female images and roles often becomes a form of cultural submission and pandering to patriarchy. Film, as a powerful visual medium, often takes a controversial approach to depicting the qualities of female sexuality. Regardless of the form or perspective through which they are presented, they demonstrate a particular stance that determines how women should be viewed and understood by the viewer.

3.2.3 Commercialization

Creators may use stereotypical images of women such as sexiness to attract viewers and boost the ratings or box office of their works, but they neglect to portray women as equals and in-depth, focusing only on superficial effects and financial gains.

In society, the female body and image are often consumed and marketed as a commodity. To attract consumer attention, the media and advertising make extensive use of visually striking images of women to stimulate consumer desire and buying behavior through the gaze. This commercial interest in focusing the gaze on women in dramas about external images and sexy elements ignores the intrinsic value and diversity of women. Issues about the image of women and gender inequality in film and television can attract audiences and generate widespread discussion, increasing communication and influence on social media. High topicality can be translated into traffic, which has commercial value for media platforms and producers, such as increased advertising revenues and profits from copyright sales. At the same time, it can increase the visibility and financial gain of the practitioners involved [9].

To achieve capital's purposes, the film and television industry will be influenced and driven by capital to a certain extent. In the process of creation, it may be more inclined

to choose content themes and presentation methods that can generate topics and attract viewers, and sometimes even to overly pursue topicality to the detriment of the artistic quality and social value of the works [13].

For example, some film and television productions may deliberately create gender conflicts or exaggerate the image of women to attract audience attention and ratings, rather than exploring the issue of gender equality in depth.

4. Revelations

Film and television creators should strive to portray a more diverse image of women and break traditional stereotypes. Instead of limiting themselves to the traditional feminine traits of gentleness and kindness, they should show the multi-faceted character of women such as bravery, wisdom, and strength in different fields and situations [13]. For example, works can be created featuring female scientists, entrepreneurs, artists, etc. to show their achievements and challenges in their professional fields. The production of television dramas should focus on gender equality and ensure fairness in the distribution of roles and career opportunities. For example, male and female protagonists in workplace dramas should compete for positions based on their abilities, and gender should not be a determining factor. Film and television productions should promote the concept of gender equality and encourage a change in social attitudes. By criticizing gender inequality, they can promote women's self-confidence and encourage them to pursue their dreams, actively participate in social activities, and strive for equality.

5. Conclusion

Early films and television dramas portrayed women as mostly traditional and submissive. Modern women in film and television show independent thinking and autonomy, and television dramas explore gender equality in greater depth. As society has progressed, the image of women in film and television art has been enriched and diversified, reflecting the development of the times and society's improved understanding of gender equality. However, there are still limitations in the development of female characters.

In film and television, women are often portrayed in one-dimensional and stereotypical ways, for example in traditional family dramas, where women are mostly the caretakers and lack personal aspirations and career development. In professional scenes, female characters

are often used to complement male success. In addition, female characters are often portrayed as emotional and vulnerable, lacking rationality and strength. They appear hesitant and dependent on men for decisions and actions, making it difficult for them to demonstrate leadership and independent thinking. Gender inequalities in television drama, such as unequal roles, unequal career opportunities, and unequal distribution of family responsibilities, can make female viewers reflect on their situation. For example, the superiority of male characters in the workplace in TV dramas may make female viewers aware of the unfair treatment they may face. Such reflection can stimulate the awakening of women's self-consciousness, prompting them to pay attention to the issue of gender equality and to strive for equal rights and development opportunities. Women may reconsider their career plans and family roles, and actively participate in social actions to promote gender equality. The phenomenon of gender inequality in TV dramas will also stimulate social discussions, raise awareness of the issue of gender equality, and promote changes in social attitudes.

References

- [1] Bu W. Media and gender. Jiangsu People's Publishing House, 2001.
- [2] Liu L, Zeng D. China media, and women development report. Communication University of China Press, 2010.
- [3] Guo Y. The portrayal and dissemination of women's image in TV dramas. China Radio and Television Press, 2015.
- [4] Tuchman G. The symbolic annihilation of women by the mass media. In G. Tuchman, A. K. Daniels, & J. Benet (Eds.), *Hearth and home: Images of women in the mass media*. Oxford University Press, 1978, 3-38.
- [5] van Zoonen L. *Feminist media studies*. Sage, 1994.
- [6] Dai J. *Film criticism*. Peking University Press, 2004.
- [7] Kraidy M. *Hybridity, or the cultural logic of globalization*. Temple University Press, 2006.
- [8] Mulvey L. Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, 1975, 16(3): 6-18.
- [9] Baehr H, Gray A. (Eds.). *Turning it on a reader in women and media*. Arnold, 2001.
- [10] Gill R. *Gender and the media*. Polity Press, 2007.
- [11] McRobbie A. *The aftermath of feminism: Gender, culture and social change*. Sage, 2009.
- [12] Lotz A D. *Cable Guys: Television and masculinities in the 21st century*. New York University Press, 2014.
- [13] Hooks B. *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. South End Press, 2000.