

Feminist Consciousness and Imagination in Contemporary Chinese Film Criticism

-- A case study of "poor things"

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Abstract: This article takes different viewing experiences inspired by "poor things" in Chinese and western contexts as the starting point, by analyzing the core issue "body liberation", as well as taking the western viewing experiences as comparing objects, the article seeks to clarify the significance of the film criticism from three perspectives of the Chinese audience. Building upon this, it further explores historic context to understand the production and circulation of feminist consciousness in contemporary China, then uncovers the new challenge and dilemma that Chinese women are facing.

Keywords: Film Criticism; Feminism; Feminist Consciousness; Poor Things.

1. Introduction

In the history of international film, the incorporation of gender concepts into film criticism and criticizing based on women's views is thought to have begun in the 1970s. It has always been in a triangular relationship among female audiences, female images and feminists during its development. In the 1980s, when female-conscious film criticism sprouted in China, its relationship with women's real situation also received attention. One point suggests that the soil generating feminism in China is different from the West, then 'the grasp of Chinese women's materials should be according to empirical rather than conceptual categories.' 'However, the precedence of Western feminist theory forces us to recognize the transmutation of Chinese women's consciousness from a comparative perspective.' [3]

In contemporary Chinese cultural context, especially in the field of film and television, the expression of women is becoming various, and the development of internet has allowed historically "silent women" to gradually express their own voice. The controversial film "Poor Things" released last year, has received very different evaluations from Chinese and Western women, whose feminist consciousness is embedded in their viewing experiences, and has presented a different appearance. Against this background, this paper takes the differences in the reception of the film in China and the West as a starting point, and tries to understand the reasons for the "differences", and then to re-examine the historical contexts and paths of women's consciousness in Chinese film criticism behind the critical landscape. In order to have a deeper understanding of the real production and historical evolution of women's consciousness in the context of popular culture, this study does not focus on feminists, but on the category of women in practice as a whole.

2. How to Watch Film: "Poor Things" and Body Liberation

Adapted from Alasdair Gray's novel of the same name, the "Poor Things" focuses on the film's journey of self-growth of its female protagonist, Bella. Due to the setting of Bella's

female body and the portrayal of female's sexuality, the film has a strong expression of gender implications. Sexual pleasure is the beginning of her growth, which seems reasonable as the first step, yet once Bella begins to experience knowledge of economics, history, etc., the film is still interspersed with numerous sex scenes. Ironically, the moment that the film finally gives Bella 'humanity' is the time when she witnesses the eternal suffering of society and weeps like a 'human being'. This scene makes the emphasis of sex liberation pale in comparison. Sex is abundant but irrelevant, because it fails to help Bella's growth, and is constantly excluded from the narrative as its starting point, which reveals the film's own dilemma.

However, the inherent failure is precisely the success of film's expression, the unexplained crack in the text is captured by audiences. The fact that the film is considered pornographic by Western audiences does not prevent it from being evaluated as a 'radical feminist story'. Behind the film's typecasting and conceptualization is the projection of idea, pornography is essentially sex for sex's sake, characterized by excess, and that is 'written by the body' [2] In other words, Western audiences believe that although there are too many sex scenes, it's still a part of Bella's upbringing.

The body and sexual liberation are also the key of Chinese audiences' film criticism. The difference is that the overall picture presented by Chinese female audience film criticism denies the possibility of body and sexual liberation in the film itself. By collecting and collating data from three mainstream film review platforms, namely Douban, WeChat, and Weibo, we can see that there are three aspects to the overall denial of the film's body and sexual liberation. The most popular and representative review from Douban is 'Why a woman can only explore the world and herself through sex', revealing the lack and emptiness of the construction of female subjectivity in a confusing way, while the guiding public magazine article focuses on analysing how the film creates fake feminist consciousness in the name of 'sexual liberation', which is still a product of the patriarchy. [6]. If the former exposes the barrenness and manipulation of women's imaginations by patriarchal ideology, there is another type of film criticism that reflects on and turns to the way out of women's dilemma

after recognising their situation. On 2 March 2024, a film blogger 'Silk Tail Season 2' published a review of the film on 'micro-blog platform', in which the author not only pointed out that 'endless sexuality is rooted in finitude, and that the world is dominated by the history of the body and language, a history that cannot be denied.' [7], but also reveals that it is the transcendental emotion and the intuition that Bella lacks. It is worth noting that the author uses 'Barbie' as a comparison when discussing Bella's lack; both films have been evaluated in China as commercial films in the guise of feminism, but have received very different evaluations from the film blogger, due to the fact that Barbie has images of feeling nature and people in tears, but Bella has no such moments of spiritual growth or emotional experience. Most of the comments under the film review agreed with this.

The difference in the film viewing experience between the West and the East refers to the different ways and paths the audience takes to watch the film. From social practice to the academic system, Western feminist film criticism is a product of the convergence of film theory and the women's movement. When the female audience surfaced on the surface of history, 'what women can identify with in a film' caused a shift in the focus of women's film criticism, [5], then it becomes a discursive path for audience. At this point, it is possible to understand the Western audience's approval of the movie, which shows Bella's lack of shame and suggests Bella's 'unconscious' identification with body pleasure and sexual liberation—an expression that is accepted by Western female viewers. The extension of Chinese feminist film criticism from the academic system to popular discourse, and the nearly opposite path of dissemination has led to a change in women's consciousness and way of thinking, 'from what women in the film can identify with to what they can identify with women in the film.' [1]. The pioneering nature of 'Poor Things' lies in the fact that Bella has no sense of sexual shame and fully demonstrates women's desires, but it lacks a realistic call to action, and the viewers are not able to emulate Bella, which is why they are confused and dissatisfied with the single way of exploring the world and women themselves, and spontaneously turn to the search for new possibilities for action, namely, the call for emotion. This 'emotion' is not just a reference to the reality of a individual woman's mind, but also includes the connection between women, it's a telepathic recognition through 'emotion'. Just like Barbie's tear, it is when she sheds a tear and reveals her emotions in front of another woman that she is accepted by the audience as a real woman. Such viewing experiences and the women's consciousness embedded in them are connected to the process of constructing their social identities, it is necessary to return to the social and historical contexts to ask how different experiences are generated in the performance.

3. Female in History and Contemporary Society

The modern concept of 'women' in China emerged during the period of "Wu Si", when the women's liberation was isomorphic with the destiny of national liberation. This means even though women were no longer subordinate to men, but subordinate to a larger national collective together with men. In front of this collective, she was no different from men, but she was also erased from gender and individuality, and became a neutral 'human being'. [4] Until the founding of New China, women's liberation became an irrefutable

historical fact and institutional reality. Unlike the women's liberation movement carried out in the West in realization of women's exclusion from public voices, political and economic discourses, Chinese women's liberation in the modern sense was not a movement premised on a spontaneous gender awakening, and before women developed their own gender consciousness, the state proclaimed women's liberation by granting them a series of political and economic rights equal to those of men, such as equal pay for equal work; and they did not enter the new China as a gender group. In the face of the mainstream ideology that has been formed with great difficulty after many crises, the lack of women's own significance and references has finally become a relatively permanent and structural lack. Such a deficiency has stretched across the vein of New China's development, and even continues to this day. Nonetheless, there are still women who speak out about the plight and reality of women, and we can see the difficult emergence of women's consciousness in both literature and film. Contemporary feminist film criticism in China has developed along this line. If in the 1980s and 1990s film criticism with a strong sense of femininity was still concentrated in the academy, today, the boom of women's themes in film, television, publishing and other cultural industries, as well as the 'women's voices' everywhere in social media, all represent the trend of a full-scale sinking of 'women's consciousness'. Chinese women in today's society attach great importance to gender identity and the construction of subjectivity under that identity. Their film criticism inherently possesses a strong power of cultural and historical reflection.

As the audience cries out with strong power, about how we construct the female subject beyond sex, it not only rejects women as the empty Other, the rhetoric of history and the repetition of dilemmas, but also calls out, imaginatively and expectantly, to women's own experiences, their emotions. In "Poor Things", Bella's upbringing from physical exploration, to book knowledge, to capital misery, all of this follows the logic of history, which is dominated by patriarchy. After realising that the exhibition of women's bodies in the film is not female growth, but rather a symbol of patriarchal imagination and commercial cinema, the audience turns to seek for the truth of the heart, then the process of anti-mystification of women themselves already has a starting point. Language and knowledge are products of history, and they are controlled by men. In a time when the body is consumed, only the truth of the female mind is not in the hands of men, and cannot be exploited or consumed, but can be identified and recognised by individuals who are also women. Unlike the sensational approach of the movement, they are pursuing a quieter approach to change, and perhaps it can be argued that this is the prelude to a belated women's movement in China. Although the development of internet technology has led to a crisis of labelling women's discourse, it has also made more and more women realise that they are not alone in facing everything. In contrast, throughout Chinese history, women's voices have been solitary and individualised. Structural deficiencies have isolated them from the group experience of women, and they have no way to reveal their voices to another woman, but can only embed their own situation in a lonely creation, even though it is a common situation for women.

Historically speaking, the female consciousness presented in the viewing reviews of 'Poor Things' represents progress. But it also reveals a deeper dilemma. As mentioned earlier,

the audience, represented by the film blogger, calls for women to identify women through ‘telepathy’, bypassing language, knowledge, and history while avoiding the male subject and the male world; the reality of the mind is not articulated, and in the process of anti-mystification it unconsciously re-mystifies women, ‘If the unconscious reality can only be imagined as female, it is because the unconscious reality can only be imagined as female’. [5] when women try to fight against history and imagine more storytelling modes, they inevitably feel lost and bewildered because they do not have their own language. And this vacuum between history and women's discourse still needs to be constantly explored by women.

4. Conclusion

Taking the different viewing experiences of Chinese and Western audiences inspired by ‘Poor Things’ as a starting point, this paper examines the ways in which Chinese and Western audiences view film criticism and the paths through which it is generated. On this basis, Chinese audiences emphasise the turn towards ‘emotion’, longing for telepathic identification between women, and rejecting the plight of the historically empty Other. In film criticism for contemporary audiences, women are constantly deconstructing the patriarchal incorporation and discourse of women, using their own experiences and emotions to illustrate what it means to be male and what history has always been dominated by males, while at the same time constantly searching for themselves. In this process, however, there is another dilemma: the development of Internet technology has given

voice to the ‘silent women’ of history, appearing as a gender group but unable to speak the truth of their own hearts. The emancipation of women in China is still facing historical and practical challenges. What exactly is the independent narrative of women who are not ‘the second sex’ of men and patriarchy? Perhaps this is the next question that women should think about and explore.

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